

DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to Moose, Ferg, and Spike. Without you, this would never have been.

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PREFACE: NERVOUS TREMORS

“Varan?”

At the mention of its name, the reptile-headed humanoid in the black and silver robes stirred from deep thought. Its large, circular eyes regarded the other fantastical beings gathered around the quartzite boulder in the night.

“Friends of this assentage,” said Varan, “the recounting of our success is accurate. Yet my thoughts remain incomplete. On the state of the unknown, I notice a discord we have yet to take seriously.

“Despite our accomplishments, the drought continues. Instead of regaining our strength, we wither past the point of non-existence. Some of us here are now the last, with no recourse to return should Grand-greatest pour her pipkin anew.”

A discomfort moved through the listeners. The translucent humanoid made of fire played with the red-orange opal at the end of its hard, silvery necklace.

Varan said, “Skilla shared with me an alarming knowledge. She heard the ripples of a lost dream say that Talam Island had risen out of the Adraric Sea. How long has that frightful castle lurked above the depths, that we should hear of it now?

“Consider also the testimony of Prosla. She sighted a star-stranger in the Seltan neighborhood of Nerham. Masked like a clown, a ghastly bearing surrounded this figure. She was unable to regard him further, so slippery

was his hiding. What is the star-stranger's message? Is this being a bearer of light...or a creature of destruction?"

The translucent humanoid spoke with a light voice that smelled of wood smoke. "Are you suggesting we attempt to close the Faithless Looking Glass? The Nightmare Stick is worse than ever. Without our labors, what will become of the unknown?"

Varan said, "Assuming we could, the prospects for a discourse remain grim. We are still rejected and their minds have grown dangerously one-sided."

"It's as if the distance between the twins has become an unbridgeable crack in the world. The pursuit of our grudge may have trapped us in a dead-end. I suspect Grand-greatest has already made her move."

CHAPTER 1: A LAST REVEL

Rordan, a teenager with brown skin and pale hazel eyes, sat on the arm of the green wool couch. He took a gulp of coal-nectar from a white ceramic mug. As the tart flavor of the oily black beverage rippled across his tongue, he listened to his guests talk. Their gossip revolved around the recent fire.

His foster-brother Fikna, taller and stouter, smelled of faint cinnamon. This teenager was also brown-skinned, but with dark brown eyes. He wore a snowy cotton shirt with a gathered edge at the neck, along with short tan trousers over mud-colored tights.

Fikna sat on a chair at one long side of a rectangular pine table. He spoke with a clear voice. “I conversed with Elder Ofen only last Sunday. I find the notion of his passing away in such a manner difficult to accept. Are the patrollers certain he perished?”

On the other side of the table sat Abrafo, a teenager with dark brown skin and deep mulberry eyes. The side of his neck bore a raised welt. He wore the same kind of shirt as Fikna, but with sky blue short trousers and grey blue tights.

“Yeah, no doubt about it,” said Abrafo. “I barely got out of there alive. Didn’t want to help with the bucket brigade. But that’s what I get for being in Foda’s bad graces.”

Emphasizing the ‘mister’, Fikna said, “Mr. Foda survived, didn’t he?”

Abrafo smirked. “Yeah. Too bad for him though. I’d have preferred he go up in smoke.” He snickered to himself.

Fikna chuckled once. His eyebrows furrowed and his lips formed a thin smile. “Surely you jest.”

“When it comes to Miss-ter Fo-duh,” said Abrafo, “never.”

Amusement crossed Fikna’s face. He looked over at Loban Gretlah. “Where were you while this occurred?”

Loban sat to the right of Abrafo. The teenager had brown skin and a cotton eye patch over his left eye. On his right sat Lewinna Gretlah. She wore a simply cut, rose-colored dress with full sleeves. Holding back her straight, dark brown hair was a plain hood. Her wrists were bandaged.

“My class was first in line of the fire,” said Loban. “I was freaked out. It wasn’t until the tutors got the secondary-bucket line going that I ran into Lewie. She was fine of course.”

Lewinna stopped nibbling a fingernail and smirked at her younger brother. She glanced at Fikna and made a shy smile.

Rordan clenched his teeth a little and looked away from her. He took a gulp of his beverage and the tart aftertaste numbed his discomfort.

“I did the volunteer thing,” said Loban. “Stuck around to help the barrel brigade do clean-up. Then the

patrollers came in and moved all the volunteers off the grounds. Talk about a huge bummer.”

Fikna and Abrafo each took a fruit cookie from the brown ceramic plate on the table. Abrafo chomped down his cookie in two bites.

Loban said, “It’s a disgrace. The way the patrollers turned everyone away and made the place off-limits. We’re all pupils there. That should count for something.”

Fikna nodded. “I’m certain they meant well. Probably prefer to discourage any spongers who might pick through the rubble. There were a number of relics worth taking, I think.” He bit into his fruit cookie.

Abrafo looked at the shuttered and barred window. “Speaking of spongers. Where’s that big-chested sweetheart of yours, Fikna?”

“Hey,” said Lewinna. She puckered her face at Abrafo while Loban chastised him with his good eye.

Abrafo smirked and pretended not to notice them.

Rordan said, “Tora’s coming. Maybe her dad is holding her up again.”

Fikna shrugged. “She’ll arrive eventually. Tora’s always tardy—not too on the ball.” He wiped his lips free of crumbs with a new silk handkerchief.

Loban mumbled to himself. “She’s a decent girl.”

“Of course,” said Fikna. He downed the last of his coal-nectar from a thick, wide glass. “Rord, another round is in order. Loban?”

“No thank you. Lewie?”

She stole a glance at Fikna and picked at a hangnail. Lewinna maintained a blank face and shook her head.

Fikna beamed at Rordan. “For myself and Abrafo, if you please.”

Rordan stood up and left his mug on the shelf of lessons facing the couch. He made his way with care through the narrow main hall. Hanging on the walls and from the ceiling were large old tools, framed portraits arranged in bunches, and scavenged pieces of junk—among them a broken third of a rusted iron plow and a cracked wooden wheel from a cart.

His father Faru and mother Len were in the cramped kitchen. Faru’s rough hair had tangles in it and he still hadn’t shaved. Len wore a sleeveless gray blouse, a long skirt and a laced red apron.

Faru sat at his desk next to the wall. He smoked a pipe and read the latest *Nerham Gazette*. Len rolled out dough on the counter. They shared an open bottle of cheap white wine from a small glass on the tall central table. The kitchen smelled of leathery smoke and burning cedar.

Len moved a glass bowl of sautéed, chopped vegetables and herbs aside, then rolled the dough from another angle. She had the stove going and was running short on wood.

The threat of a chore to fetch more fuel loomed in Rordan’s mind. He decided to make his retrieval of the nectar quick.

Her bright hazel eyes spotted him and she smiled. “How’s Prince Pancake?”

“Hey Len,” said Rordan. “Fikna’s doing all right. Gulping down coal-nectar and fruit cookies like nobody’s business.”

Len said, “I’m making veggie pockets for your guests. Be sure to offer some to the Gretlahs.”

He knelt and opened a trapdoor in the floor. “I always do. But they never seem to want anything.” His hand reached into the floor space and pulled out a new bottle of coal-nectar.

Faru looked up from the gazette and took his pipe in one hand. “Is Abrafo behaving himself?”

Rordan closed the trapdoor and stood up. “Not really. He’s teasing Fikna as usual. Got to go—later.”

His father gave him a puzzled look.

Rordan returned to his room. He struggled to open the bottle.

Abrafo said, “I told Abeni, ‘Hey, the school burned down on the day you skipped school.’ She looked blankly at me and asked if Foda burned up. I told her ‘No, but Ofen did.’ She shrugged and said she didn’t care. I laughed, but I was like—whoa, girl.”

Loban muttered to himself. “Your sweetheart is odd. Mr. Foda isn’t that bad.”

Fikna tilted his empty glass and glanced inside. He frowned. “Mr. Foda certainly knows mathematics, and he diligently upholds the rules. However, I find him

unpleasant. He acts with unnecessary strictness toward us.”

Rordan pulled the cork free. He refilled Fikna’s glass and Abrafo’s dull-white mug, then left the bottle on the table. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Lewinna and his bro’ exchange a glance while she pretended to look at her fingers. He realized she wore the rose dress for Fikna’s benefit.

A knock sounded at the front door.

Fikna smiled and his eyes lit up with relief. “I’ll wager that’s our Tora. At last, we may proceed with the pamphlet-slam.” He gestured at his foster-brother and took a sip of the freshly poured nectar.

Rordan left the room and maneuvered down the hall. He unlocked the front door and opened it. A nimble teenager with pale skin and gray-blue eyes waited on the large front step. She wore a short, ruby linen shirt over a girdle that gave her figure an overt feminine accent. Her tiered skirt was burnt orange and her shin-boots were canary yellow. Around her neck were seven necklaces of polished tin and bright, rainbow-colored beads.

He couldn’t get over how troglodytes dressed after school. If it weren’t for her denim transient jacket, with the runic snake patch on the shoulder and wooden loyalty buttons on the inside he might not have recognized her.

“Hey you made it,” said Rordan. “Come in. Everyone else is here.”

Tora stepped inside and embraced him. Rordan recognized the sweet smell of her clothes and the subtle

freshness of her skin. She released him and he smiled at her.

“Sorry,” said Tora. “Forgot what time it was and my pop didn’t remind me.”

Rordan beamed. “I’m just glad you’re here.”

She looked at a thin piece of wood in the shape of a cow’s head that hung near the ceiling and down the hall. A printed image of a friendly cow had been glued to the flat surface on both sides. The cow’s eyes were painted in a way that gave its gaze the illusion of following the viewer.

“There’s that cow.”

Rordan glanced at the image he believed protective. “I know, it’s silly. But I get a kick out of seeing my guests’ reactions.”

Tora pushed her shoulder-length, fleecy white hair away from her face and smiled. “You’re strange.”

He chuckled at her. Rordan said, “Come on” and headed down the hall.

She followed him. Tora glanced at a set of large rusty saws on the wall and did a double take. At the doorway to his room, Rordan stepped aside to let her take a seat on the couch.

Abrafo turned around in his chair and faced the two of them. “Is Tor-uhh here?”

“I’m here Abra-foe.” She sat down on the couch and bounced once on a cushion of soft purple wool. “I can never get used to this couch.”

A look of affection crossed Fikna's face. He opened his mouth to speak, only to close it with a sigh.

Abrafo made a point of staring at her chest. He smirked at Fikna and shook his head.

"Hi 'Tora." Loban waved at her.

Lewinna made a subdued wave. "Hello."

Tora smiled and waved back at the Gretlahs. "Hi. Sorry I kept everyone waiting."

She bounced on the cushion and looked at the couch with uncertainty. The cushion sank a small amount, then cradled her firmly. Tora giggled.

Rordan rested his right hand on the back of the couch and patted it with his fingers. He hoped the Puff Couch wouldn't miss him and Fikna too much. If the piece of furniture he believed magical grew lonely, it would sadden him.

He decided to honor the Puff Couch with everything he had. Rordan eyed Fikna and said, "Bro' we're all here. It's time to start slamming."

Fikna sipped his drink. He leaned his head forward and widened his eyes as the liquid went down.

"Most agreeable. Ever since Abrafo and I started the tradition two years ago, the Hearth Bunch pamphlet-slam has become a revel of great substance.

"I have insisted that we meet, despite this tragedy. Not because I expect us to enjoy one last revel before Rord and I depart. We have already celebrated my approaching venture to Ciriceval."

Abrafo chuckled with good humor. “Yeah, those chocolate chokers ruled.”

“Indeed,” said Fikna. “What I intend is to utilize this occasion for a speech. An expression I pray shall communicate my affection for you in a suitable manner. You represent my closest and dearest friends. So it is with immense pleasure I announce tonight’s festivities. Rord, you may proceed.”

Rordan glanced at everyone’s face. His guests all held the expressions he expected of them; Abrafo looked amused, Loban showed distraction, Lewinna worried, and Tora appeared thoughtful.

He faced Fikna and Abrafo. “*Sworder of Fate?*”

Fikna gave his best smile.

Abrafo grinned at Fikna. “Cool.”

Rordan walked over to the space between the Puff Couch and his bed. He took off his brown linen vest. The front of his red shirt bore a stylized, black-and-white serpent of Dimmurian design.

Tora wriggled her nose at his shirt, then her shoulders slumped.

He went over the story of *Sworder of Fate* in his head and considered the characters. Rordan decided to make the outsider villain a dryad picaroon from the Borracha Lowland of Faria, and play on his guests’ fear and envy. A pang of discomfort moved through his insides. He puzzled over his reaction for a second, then began his performance.

With gestures and speech, Rordan reenacted scenes from the story. He recited lines and inflected them with the character of his movements and voice. At select points, he solicited the next line from any one of his guests. Rordan improvised a response that preserved the main plot and ending.

On their turns, Fikna and Loban enjoyed repeating the actual lines. Abrafo perverted the words into cheap jokes when his turns came up. Lewinna and Tora always declined their chances to say a line.

Rordan understood. The girls weren't slammers. Despite his disappointment, he decided to let them be.

The scene in which the picaroon killed the sworder's tutor approached. Rordan indicated to his bro' that the next line was his.

Fikna repeated the real line. "You're late again, you stupid brute. Took too much time dangling your crawlies?"

Rordan reenacted the picaroon's retort and chase of the old man around the cottage. He portrayed the villain with the expected mixture of comical blundering and mindless savagery most hostile dryads displayed in stories. The moment where the picaroon caught up to the old man arrived. Rordan indicated to Abrafo.

"Dying time, Loban."

Loban squeaked.

At Fikna's stern look, Abrafo snickered.

Rordan missed Lewinna and Tora's reactions. He kept the traditional plot and described the picaroon's kicking the old man—and Loban by association—down the well to his death.

Abrafo cracked up.

The next scene told of the villain's unsuccessful search for the key to the coal bin. Rordan decided to give the next line to Loban for payback.

He played the picaroon with Abrafo's mannerisms during the search. Lewinna's face strained with anticipation. Rordan gave her the indication instead.

“Wah, wah, wahh.”

Fikna whispered to her. “Good form. Way to stick up for your brother.” He gave her a smile.

Rordan contained his surprise at the wicked grin she returned at Fikna.

Loban rocked his head and smiled. “Thanks Lewie.”

Abrafo smirked. “Nah, he doesn't need the key. He'll bash the bin open.”

Rordan reenacted the discovery of the old man's body in the well by the sworder. He offered Lewinna another line, but she passed.

The story progressed. Abrafo linked the Gretlah siblings with characters killed by the picaroon. Rordan noticed this trend at the edges of his attention and improvised Abrafo's responses back to the main plot of the story.

He noticed Fikna's frown. Rordan guessed his bro' couldn't decide between calling out bad behavior and accepting a friend's love of jest.

An idea flashed in his mind. Rordan wondered what would happen if he left the safety of his performance boundaries. He saw himself as a talented enough rustic to wow his audience within the rules. The temptation to break them made him nervous. A longing for freedom stirred within him.

He decided to cross the line. Despite his misgivings, he would let Abrafo's actions change the story. Rordan let the choice sink in and lost himself in the performance.

He reached the scene where the picaroon boasted to the sworder. The correct line sprang from memory and Rordan ignored it. His hands gestured to Abrafo. A tremor passed through him as he realized his friend had been handed a perfect opportunity.

Abrafo stared at Rordan for a split second. "Loban's dead in the well, and Lewinna's parts are going to follow." He snickered at the Gretlahs' surprise.

Rordan took the part of the sworder's responses. He transferred the picaroon's stupidity onto the sworder and handed the sidekick's line back to Abrafo.

"He's won," said Abrafo. "You can't stop him from harming Lewinna. You won't rescue Loban's body either."

Loban stared past his rustic host.

Despite the look, Rordan held back a laugh. Abrafo's double disrespect seemed both mean and alive to him. It was hard to believe he'd let Abrafo do it. From Fikna's shocked look, he guessed his bro' couldn't believe Abrafo had managed it.

The next scene required his attention and he upheld the results of the changes. While Abrafo smirked, his guests muttered to themselves.

Fikna said, "Most unlike either of them."

Rordan gave his friend permanent contributions to the story all the way into the final scene. The sworder's dramatic speech changed into a weak remark of how he had failed to save anyone and would spend the next story goofing off. He gave Loban the sworder's final words.

The true line resonated from the back of Loban's throat. "You never helped me prepare for bad manners, you wretch."

A daze came over Rordan as he recited the dead tutor's last words. After his bow, he looked at the lamp behind Fikna. Two hours had passed, which matched his guess.

Fikna stood up and said, "Abrafo, I dare say you were an immensely poor show. I imagine you are proud of your efforts. You ought to be ashamed, wrecking our enjoyment by besmirching Rord's guests."

Abrafo refused to apologize. "I had a good time."

Loban glared at Rordan with his good eye. "I can't believe this. You were horrible. I wanted to say

something but you never gave me a chance. You zipped by the scene where the girl runs from the villain. She isn't supposed to die. Killing me and Lewie like that, it's your fault."

"Yoh. Looks bad for you, Rordan." Abrafo snickered at his friend's guilty face.

Tora said, "Rordan gave him what he wanted."

Abrafo pointed at her and said, "Hey, no peanut gallery from the girls with big...brains." He ignored Lewinna's sharp look.

Rordan concealed his distaste behind a puzzled face. He glanced at Loban. His friend appeared to have missed what Abrafo had said.

Fikna dismissed the incident with a wave of his hand. "He's in a slump because of what happened yesterday. Now would be ideal for an intermission. Particularly if anyone needs to take care of their business. Afterwards, the wounded parties may choose the next pamphlet. I recommend a selection where turnabout is fair play."

Abrafo's eyes were distant for two seconds. He smirked and said, "Bring it on."

Rordan guessed his friend expected to heap more of the same on the Gretlahs. He didn't think that would be an option next time.

Fikna scowled at him. "In the meantime Rord, send in a replacement of fruit cookies and another round of coal-nectar." He picked up the empty bottle and shook it for emphasis.

Rordan left the room behind and made his way down the hall. His daze gave way to a weight of foreboding. Abrafo's relentless jests bothered him. The slam had been tiring at the end as he had expected. But he also felt tarnished, which he hadn't counted on. His decision exposed his thoughts like a crack in a wax seal.

He believed the slam had changed from fun into a sign of things to come. Anxiety over tomorrow's voyage came over him. Rordan decided the slam reflected the Hearth Bunch's sadness at being apart.

His thoughts turned toward the group's energy level. Tora and the Gretlahs weren't drinking any coal-nectar. They would probably run out of steam after the second slam and go home. The others might make it through a third before even the coal-nectar would fail to keep them awake. He got the feeling this wouldn't turn out to be one of the long nights.

In the kitchen, Len pulled out a heavy iron dish of veggie pockets from the oven. She rested the dish on top of the stove, then closed the oven door with a sigh. Faru looked through some lessons on the central table. He took a sip from the shared glass of wine and cleared his throat. Rordan recognized their subtle signs of winding down for the evening.

The time loomed in his thoughts. The bell tower had burned down along with the chapel. Rordan imagined the lack of an official curfew meant that most pupils would stay up late tonight.

He let go of his daydreaming and eyed the dish of veggie pockets. The need to be a proper host gave him the strength to resist his hunger.

Len said, “There’s a bowl of sauce to go with the pockets. And there’s a second plate of cookies if you want it. I hope it’s enough, because we’re going to bed. Things going okay in there?”

Rordan said, “Everything’s great. One slam down, one to go. Abrafo’s being a jerk, but I’m having fun.”

Len said, “What’s he up to?” She used an iron spatula to detach the veggie pockets onto a plate. Steam rose from small cracks in the pocket crusts.

“He’s being mean to the Gretlahs. He’ll probably stay over, but I’m betting the Gretlahs and Tora will leave after the last slam.”

Faru said, “Abrafo is sad because his two bestest friends are going away. He’s going to be stuck with his unstudied life. It’s the end of an era.”

Rordan’s heart quickened. He grabbed both plates and the bowl. “Be back for another round of coal-nectar.”

As he reentered his room, the gossip returned to the fire. Rordan placed the plates and the bowl down on the table, where everyone but Tora had easy access.

Fikna acknowledged the delivery with a brief nod. “Are you certain of that?”

Loban said, “Why would Elder Dohtig lie? And Mrs. Cutha isn’t one to make things up. If she told him she saw a stranger, I believe her.

“She said she was going to check him out, but Elder Ofen showed up going the same direction. So she figured he was on it. Next thing she knows, she smells smoke and leaves her office to see what’s going on.

“Then Elder Coinim is running from where the stranger had gone. He has a crazy look on his face—runs right past her and starts yelling. That’s when the cry of fire was raised.

“Mr. Foda shows up coughing and wheezing. Mrs. Cutha saw the smoke pouring out along the ceiling at the intersection. She helps Mr. Foda out because he’s having trouble.”

Abrafo looked at his host and said, “Meatless, right?”

Rordan nodded.

Abrafo grabbed a veggie pocket. He dropped it back on the plate and shook his hand. “That’s where I came in. Coinim let us out of detention class and got us fetching the buckets. By the time we got lined up, fire and smoke were pouring out of the new wing. From the bottom. We were throwing water, but it was like nothing.”

Fikna said, “No one saw Elder Ofen?”

“Yeah,” said Abrafo, “the chapel archive was next in line. Once all that old paper caught it was ‘whoosh’.” He sulked.

Lewinna said, “Poor Elder Ofen. He was a sweet man.”

Fikna said, “My thoughts and prayers are with him. He was a splendid balance between piety and worldly outlook. His good humor, his anecdotes, and his performances will be missed.”

Rordan thought out loud. “There was a lot of pride in him. I’m not sure he was that great a person. He always had a sore spot in him about the stage. As if by becoming a minister, he’d cut off a piece from his life.”

Fikna said, “A fair analysis, I suppose. You knew him from a performance angle because of your experiences. However, I refuse to think of anything but decency in the man.”

“I know,” said Rordan. “There was an aspect of that in him too. He just never impressed me. Something about him seemed off.”

Abrafo eyed Rordan. “He gave you the creepies, huh?”

Lewinna said, “You don’t think he started the fire, do you?”

Rordan squirmed under her urgent gaze. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. What about the other guy? The stranger. Loban?”

The teenager spoke in a muddle. “Elder Dohtig didn’t have any details. And you know how roundabout he can be when getting to the point. But I got the impression Mrs. Cutha saw a plain-looking grownup.”

“And he wasn’t a picaroon?” said Abrafo.

Loban said, “No, dummy. Maybe he was a cleaner. If he’d been going the other direction she wouldn’t have thought it odd. How else would he have gotten in?”

Fikna said, “Precisely. What was that suspicious fellow up to? How did Mr. Foda and Elder Coinim get there ahead of him? If the stranger started the fire, then how did he manage it? There were probably three people nearby within shouting distance of each other. Most peculiar.”

Tora said, “Maybe it wasn’t a stranger at all. Maybe it was a visitant.”

Rordan turned to stare at her. She held one of his lessons from the nearby shelf. He lightly clenched his teeth and fought back annoyance.

Abrafo made his eyes roll upwards and raised curled hands toward Tora. “Ooh, here comes the Bugbear Man.”

Fikna glared at Abrafo and put a finger to his lips. “I thought you called it the Grackler. Anyway, I hardly believe in ghosts. However, I do think there are demons.

“The new wing hadn’t received the benediction yet. Elder Ofen’s vigils for pupils kissing out may have had a more serious purpose. Perhaps he perished fighting an infernal plot. Frights, what a terrible fate.”

They all fell silent.

Abrafo drooped his head and stared hard at the carpet under the table. He clutched at the welt on his neck.

Rordan left the room and walked down the hall.

His friend's dejection touched him. He felt his forearms itch and scratched his skin. Rordan considered the possibility that the stranger was a transient firebug or other complainer; that they were all just being scaredy-cats. His feelings rejected the thought.

In the kitchen, his folks both read from lessons on the central table. All the lamps were doused and a pair of large, lit candles remained on the central table to provide light. The bottle of wine stood empty and a freshly opened bottle rested beside it.

Faru held the new bottle and refilled the glass. Len took up her own pipe and lighted it with a wick. She no longer wore the apron.

Rordan left his parents alone and knelt down. He opened the floor space and grabbed a bottle of coal-nectar. The sound of embers popping and cracking in the stove gave him pause.

An imaginary state came over him and he opened the fuel door of the oven. Rordan reached into the searing embers and pulled free a heavy onion. He pushed the fantasy out of his head and made his way back to the hall.

As Rordan passed the doorway to the lavatory, a figure jumped out at him.

“Mwah!”

Rordan flinched and yelped. For a second, he thought he faced a person wearing a monster mask. He blinked and saw Abrafo.

“You churner! You got me again.”

Abrafo doubled over and laughed. He pointed at Rordan and said, “You bungler.”

Len called from the kitchen. “Keep the noise down, guys.”

Abrafo stifled his laughter. He looked at Rordan’s serious face and snickered with a hand on his mouth.

Rordan relaxed his tight grip on the bottle and walked past him.

As they entered the room, Abrafo repeated his scare in a muffled voice and a slower burst of movement. Rordan failed to hold back a flinch.

Fikna said, “Enough mischievous antics, Abrafo. As you can plainly see Rord, your decision to assist your guest has not rendered you immune. Your actions have returned to haunt you as well they should.”

Rordan watched Abrafo sit down. His eyelids tightened and he felt an urge to kick his friend in the shin.

Abrafo snickered to himself as he grabbed a veggie pocket.

Lewinna eyed him and said, “You’re mean.” She picked at a reddened fingertip.

Loban slapped Lewinna’s hands and said, “Stop it.”

She turned away and folded her hands out of reach. “No.” Lewinna stuck her tongue out at him.

Rordan opened the bottle and dropped the cork next to his mug. With his back to Fikna and Abrafo, he

poured a little coal-nectar for himself. He righted the bottle and turned to face the group.

Tora pretended not to notice.

Fikna moved a hand through his short, dark brown hair. “Has anyone heard how services will be handled?”

Loban said, “Probably be held at the mart hall. We’ll have to go to Parcwod for obligations again. That’ll be a pain. The new chapel was supposed to make those trips unnecessary. Our return is going to be viewed as bad news.”

Fikna pursed his lips. “The situation troubles me as well. Of course, we shall be welcomed back. However, people will continue to grumble in private.

“My sentiment shall contain much nostalgia for the chapel. A multitude of good memories have vanished forever. Those pews were marvelous to sit in.”

Loban said, “I know. Study hall was always so much fun. And the stage they built in front of the altar was great too. I’ll bet your brother misses it already.”

Rordan pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth. Conflicted feelings kept him from comment.

Fikna waved his finger at him. “Rord, you ought to have seized more opportunities for performance. Outdone that dolt Trenus. I always thought you allowed him to embezzle your thunder.”

A flush came over Rordan’s tightened face. “He could have the stage. It just wasn’t fun anymore. Too many rules.”

Abrafo said, “Those shows were bent anyway.” He finished off his veggie pocket.

Lewinna said, “They were not. If only I’d seen Rordan perform *Uncle Ghost*.”

Loban said, “Yeah. When are we going to see some more of your talent?”

Rordan put on a smug look.

Fikna raised his right hand up. “A moment’s patience Rord. It is my expectation that we discuss our approaching voyage. There are matters I must attend to.”

Abrafo’s face grew serious. “That’s right.”

Fikna edged his chair back and stood up. His clear voice had a solemn edge to it. “There are two matters I believe necessary for me to mention. As you well know, at my insistence Rord has decided to pursue a study of alchemy. He will attend the Academy of Regol Coros in Ciriceval, specifically to become a sage by trade. I have given him my recommendation and assured him of the necessary papers. It is the least I could manage for my foster-brother of many years. I aspire for recognition of his kindness and patience.”

A sharp twinge of fear seized Rordan’s stomach.

“Ciriceval holds no small attraction to me as well. I intend to insinuate myself with the society there and make my fortune. I regret leaving you while this crisis resolves itself. Take some small comfort, for we promise to return. In such time as Rord’s studies and my social life

allow. Thanks to his daubing, we shall not lack for likenesses of you to remind us of what is good.

“However, I feel in no small way I have failed to appreciate you enough these several years. Therefore, in the event I have never made my intentions clear, I would first like to declare my loyalty and devotion to you. My grand friends, your absence shall grieve me sorely until we meet again.”

Loban sank into gloom. “Why Ciriceval? That’s far to the east of here.”

Lewinna said, “It’s a long way.” She stared vacantly into the closet on Fikna’s left.

Rordan considered what she might think about the contents. The boxes of toys, piles of old lessons, and sportsman equipment hung on his memory. A sense of vulnerability came over him. He wanted to like her.

Fikna looked at him with curiosity. “The distance is not quite as far as you think. We shall be closer than you realize.”

Rordan studied Abrafo. His friend nodded to himself once. He supposed his bro’ must be right about a slump.

Fikna said, “As to our reasons, the moment has arrived for the two of us to step beyond our neighborhood. We require a chance to witness the world from a fresh perspective.” He gave the Gretlahs a satisfied look.

Tora said, “There’s still a lot of wild maidenland there. It sounds like a nice place to go exploring.” She looked through Rordan’s collection of lessons and illustrations.

Abrafo said, “Except for all the picaroons.” He smirked.

Fikna waved his hand. “Nonsense. The dryads of Faria have been soundly beaten back and under control for nearly a century now.”

Abrafo said, “Well, have fun in Ciriceval Fikna. Or wherever it is you’re going.”

Fikna said, “I appreciate your sentiments my friend, wrapped as they are in a package of humor. Which delivers me to my second point.

“You see, I became possessed by an uncanny sense of guilt after graduation. I know not from whence it sprang. Thoughts of failure and inadequacy came over me. I think there is a deficiency in me for which I cannot make up for now.

“What you are unaware of is that on the afternoon of the fire, I almost visited the school. I intended to speak my personal goodbyes to the place. However, as I departed a cool breeze blew past my face. I smelled the delicate fragrance of wildflowers and an invisible presence lent me strength. I swear it.”

The serious look returned to Abrafo’s face.

“As a result, I did not venture forth on that day. I wonder now if some guardian messenger sent me a sign to change my intention. The means of unraveling my

soul's confusion are outside my grasp. However, I decided I would acknowledge my shortcomings and the missed opportunities, whatever they may be.

“Therefore, I would like to apologize for any mistakes I have made during the years we have known each other. I beg your forgiveness for whatever indiscretions I may have committed against you unknowingly. There. What say you?”

Lewinna picked up her line bag and opened it. She pulled out a large leather wallet. The wallet was embroidered with a red, stylized rood. She handed the wallet to Fikna and he accepted it with a tender expression.

Fikna unfastened the wallet and opened it for everyone to see. Inside were four rolls of bandages, four dressings, two razors, and four small glass containers.

Lewinna's eyes shone with pleasure as she smirked.

Fikna said, “Thank you, Lewinna. I suppose if it's as rugged as Tora suggests, a mercy kit shall prove useful. Rord? Add this wonderful gift to our supplies.”

He re-fastened the wallet and tossed it over to his brother.

Rordan caught it and placed the wallet next to a backpack under his bed.

Tora put aside the lessons and sat up. She dug into her jacket and pulled out a dozen folded lessons. Her gaze rested on Rordan, then she handed them over to Fikna. “I got you some funnies to read on your trip.

And I doodled some pictures next to them to make you laugh.”

Fikna accepted the gift with a bow of his head. He glanced at the first three pages.

Rordan came over to peer at them. He recognized the work as a popular dauber he had seen in the gazettes. The funnies were usually of an ironic sort, having to do with the absurdities humans and animals had in common.

“A worthy gift,” said Fikna. “Thank you, generous Tora. Your doodles are well meant and I appreciate the intention. I shall not spoil the surprise by reading them now.”

Lewinna’s narrow-eyed glance at Tora made Rordan shiver.

Tora smiled at Fikna’s praise. She bumped against Rordan as she returned to the Puff Couch.

Fikna sat down and pulled his chair up. He had a steady drink of coal-nectar and pursed his lips together at the taste.

“I have visited the mart, purchased for myself traveling gear suitable to my station. In addition, I have equipped Rord to tend to my needs. When I arrive in Ciriceval proper, I shall acquire myself the services of a footman. I prefer to avoid distracting Rord from his studies.”

Lewinna nibbled at a fingernail with a thoughtful face.

Loban said, “Lewie and I will write you. But it won’t be the same without Amazing Fikna around. You should

have stayed in Nerham.” He looked downward and his shoulders slouched. “I’ll be bored.”

Abrafo glanced at Loban, then stared at Fikna. He snickered.

Fikna gave his friend a look of disapproval. “Yes, there shall definitely be less excitement. Rord, are you prepared for the next slam of the evening?”

“Yep.” Rordan took his mug and brought the bottle of coal-nectar over to his bro’. He downed the contents of his mug and put it on the table. The cool tartness of the liquid washed away the fatigue of his throat.

With a flawless imitation of Fikna’s mannerisms and speech, Rordan bowed to the Gretlahs. “Esteemed guests, I think you have the honor of this slam’s selection.”

Fikna laughed. “How do you do it, Rord?”

“He’s the greatest rustic in the world.” Abrafo’s voice was serious and his face was reserved.

The words pierced Rordan with fright. He stifled the fear and took his place between the Puff Couch and the bed.

Loban withdrew a series of pamphlets from Lewinna’s line bag. He offered them to Rordan. “I copied these for you from my own collection. You might forget your lines with all that studying.”

Rordan stepped forward and took the pamphlets. He glanced at them. “*Sworder of Fate*, *Devilkins World*, and *Witch-killer Witch*. Good choices. This will be nice to

have, thank you. I know how long it must have taken you.”

Loban flashed a warm smile at him. “You’re welcome. And you’d better do a great rendition of *Bewildered Girl* for me.”

Rordan stared at the pamphlets in his hand. His friend’s consideration touched him. “Yes.”

Abrafo said, “Nice favor, Loo-ban.”

“Oh, be quiet already.”

Fikna chuckled at Loban’s chide. “An excellent choice of words, gifts, and a slam. Let us part on pleasant cheer and not distraught feelings.”

Abrafo smirked. “I guess I’m going to be the bent fantom trying to capture the princess.”

Lewinna said, “No. You’re going to be the curse of flatulence during the final battle.” Her voice held a sly edge.

Abrafo appeared untroubled. “That’s cool. I’m ready to go. Okay, let’s do this.”

Rordan looked over at Tora. She had placed his copy of the lessons of Doctor Skulky to the side while continuing to look through his collection. He felt unsure if she should expose herself to those writings. To talk about it in a group might prove awkward. Abrafo knew about it and thought Doctor Skulky a good gag, but Fikna and the Gretlahs might take offense.

“Don’t get stage fright on us now,” said Abrafo.

With a feigned look of exasperation, Rordan stashed the pamphlets in a wide outer pocket of his backpack. He composed himself, then went over the major scenes and characters in *Bewildered Girl*. His thoughts dragged.

He assumed the part of the princess during her secret performance before an imaginary audience, then recited the introduction.

Distraction clutched at his mind. His enthusiasm for the material refused to show itself. A scene he enjoyed came forward, yet he failed to coax his motivation out of its shell. Rordan gave a good line to Fikna and found himself unable to improvise a reaction to his bro's response.

He gave the musical numbers a passable performance. His interest avoided every effort at motivation and his singing sounded flat to him. Rordan thanked his familiarity with his guests and the pamphlet. The slam would have already faltered without them.

The scene where the hungry body parts chase the princess came up. He gave most of the opportunities for lines to Loban and skipped the heathen refrains. Lewinna didn't crinkle her face in distaste and her brother appeared content. Rordan breathed a mental sigh of relief that no one had noticed his lack of energy.

He noted Abrafo kept responses to the humorous. Rordan decided to give his friend the lines of Busard during the creature's comical attempts to betray the princess.

His bro' followed the portrayal of the fantom Slipkyn. Rordan made a note to pass most of those line opportunities to Fikna. He needed to stay afloat, even if it meant a cheap out.

He passed a good Slipkyn line to Fikna. Rordan lightly clenched his teeth at the shame of taking it easy.

The line came out with fervor, but unchanged. "Go to sleep my deadly bride," said Fikna, "the dreams of children are such a comforting fancy!"

Rordan glanced at Tora. She studied his doodle pad of popular heroes in poses of readiness, ghouls seeking flesh in humorous scenes, and arcane symbols in different states of development.

He decided to ignore her all the way and knew he had officially cheaped out. The thought that he couldn't even try to include her anymore depressed him.

Rordan moved on and the scene of the final battle arrived. Lewinna used a line to link Abrafo with the stench that came from the ogre babies attacking the princess.

Abrafo sneered.

With failing strength, Rordan performed the battle's culmination. He gave Busard's line at the end to Abrafo.

His friend hammed it up, but left the line unchanged. "Nothing worse than a smart girl."

Rordan performed Slipkyn's departure and the princess' discovery of her maturity without passing any lines. He bowed with a sense of relief.

Exhaustion clutched at him. He couldn't believe he'd done a total cheap out. His guests appeared to have gotten pleasure out of it, for which he felt grateful. Rordan stretched his arms up over his head.

Fikna gave him polite applause. "Excellent show. I never tire of your efforts. And a wise move Abrafo, receiving your lump with grace."

"Heh, it's a classic. Those ogre babies are awesome."

Loban said, "Yuck, I hate them."

Lewinna scowled at Abrafo.

Rordan thought his friend's payback had been less than what was deserved. He contemplated the performance. Loban and Lewinna had both been given plenty of lines. They had let Abrafo off easy for some reason.

He couldn't explain the Gretlahs' love for *Bewildered Girl*, or Fikna's enjoyment of the heathen performances. Rordan chalked it up to the humorous way the author Goll used fantastical creatures.

The empty dishes came to Fikna's attention. "Rord, clean away this mess will you? Anyone desire a dash of nectar?"

Loban said, "We have to get going. It's dark out and I think it's almost curfew."

Fikna stood up. "Then this revel is adjourned. Guests, I shall escort you home at your request. Rord, fetch the lantern. Tora? Will you also be heading out?"

“Not yet.” Tora continued her study of Doctor Skulky’s lessons. She strained to read the erratic script and entered a state of dull shock.

Rordan hoped no one would notice the lewd doodles and illustrations mixed with the text.

Fikna frowned. “You are welcome to stay, though I entreat you to consider yesterday’s incident. The patrollers might be more inclined to treatment of curfew dodgers.”

Abrafo whispered in Fikna’s ear.

Fikna picked up his jacket and placed it over his arm.

Loban shook his head at Abrafo. “I don’t know what you said, but watch it. You’re going to get in trouble one day.”

The teenager smirked. “Bring it on. Hey Fikna, maybe there’s still a peddler at the mart with sugar-sticks. Let’s make a stop.”

“Yes, I think your suggestion has merit. Perhaps during the return trip.”

Rordan gathered up the empty plates and bottles. He walked past his standing guests and through the hall. In the kitchen, his folks had left a lit candle on the central table. Rordan left the plates in the washtub for his father and the bottles in the donation bin.

He picked up the night lantern from his father’s desk and checked the level. Rordan lit the wick from the candle. He blew out the candle, then admired the lantern’s thin metal frame and clear glass lenses. As the

lantern's light grew to illuminate the kitchen, Rordan believed he saw a green flare in the flame. He wrote it off as a trick of the light and ignored it.

Fikna, Abrafo and the Gretlah siblings reached the front door. The guys donned their jackets while Lewinna put on her outer gown and felt hat.

Rordan said, "Bro', you want Trad's knife?"

Fikna said, "I'm certain our safety is assured. Abrafo can broil with nearly anyone. And considering the fire, I doubt many would struggle with pupils at this juncture."

Rordan handed the lantern to Fikna. "Be careful anyway. When you guys get back, you want to slam some more?"

Fikna donned his Deep Uirolec loyalty hat. He adjusted the wide, black felt cap on his head at an angle, so that the tilted white flag symbol on the front was upright. "We've done enough slamming. I think we'll indulge in some ranc."

Abrafo said, "See you in a few, Bungly Man."

Loban exchanged a firm handshake with Rordan. "Have a safe voyage. I'll miss you most of all."

Rordan said, "I'll write."

Loban raised his eyebrow at him. "You better."

Lewinna hugged Rordan. "You take care of yourself little Rordsie. And watch after Fikna for me. Keep him out of trouble."

Her soft touch moved him, despite his dislike of her. He found himself in envy of his bro's charm. "I promise. And I'll write you too."

She smiled at him and adjusted her hood.

Rordan opened the front door for his guests and stood aside. The late summer breeze carried a slight chill.

Fikna took the lead, followed by the Gretlahs with Abrafo at the rear. The group left the light of the streetlamps behind and disappeared into the side streets of the neighborhood.

CHAPTER 2: BUNGLED ROMANCE

Rordan stared into the street and breathed in the night air. The last few days of cooler weather were unsettling. He closed the door and locked it.

A thrill coursed through him as he moved through the darkness of his home. He knew every step by heart and maneuvered with the briefest of touches. Rordan grinned with his lower jaw. He enjoyed how an intruder who moved through the clutter without light would make noise and risk injury.

Rordan checked the supply of coal-nectar by touch and found one bottle. He thought it would last. They were in the home stretch of the evening and soon the nectar would crash everyone out. He grabbed the last bottle and brought it back to his room.

Tora giggled to herself. Rordan remembered she had gotten into his Doctor Skulky lessons. He placed the bottle beside Fikna's mug and contemplated her discovery.

The material in the lessons qualified as marked. Rordan found the comedic techniques useful and didn't want his secret learning to get out. The writer's mockery of the Seltan heartland and Empyreans would get him on a griller list.

Tora looked up at him and said, "You have to pay to learn how to think?"

He smiled at the line. Rordan knew what chapter she read from. “If you can’t pay, you don’t get to know anything.”

Tora giggled. She read a different section of the lesson. “Are you different? Are you a human being?”

Rordan knew it by heart. “That’s too bad, because everyone hates your guts.”

“Wake up, you’re out to lunch. The owners want to keep you working for the machine.” She glanced at him and waited.

Rordan said, “Stop the press. Refuse the yoke. Toss the boot.” He sat beside her on the arm of the Puff Couch.

Tora said, “Where’d you get this? It’s a riot.”

Rordan said, “Feldtun. There’s a dawdler colony there. I first picked up a lesson in a mart stand, along with some funnies. I found the whole series in the chapel archive a few years back.”

He paused, and comprehended how many marked lessons had gone up in the flames. Rordan would miss that smut manual he hadn’t the courage to open.

“Once you get past the initial hooks you’re reading, the stuff gets really hard to understand. I still don’t get a lot of it.”

Tora went through several pages at once. She glanced at the lewd pictures and chuckled. “There’s a chapter on cramming called the final battle.”

Rordan tightened his face at her profanity. Tora could be herself again. “Yep, pretty rude stuff. How’s your dad?”

She sighed. “He’s okay. Always asks me what I’m doing here. He thinks I’m kissing out with you guys. Probably wants me to get hitched and move out.”

Rordan said, “Do you?”

Tora tapped the lessons against her palm. “Maybe someday. But there’s so much out there to do. I want to have fun. I want to go to Ciriceval with you...and Fikna.”

Rordan lowered his head and frowned. “How’s your brother?”

She shifted around on the Puff Couch. “He’s chasing an eatery attendant who’s an airhead. My pop thinks it’s great. He’s giving all the attention to Ruben and it’s driving me crazy.”

He pushed aside his pity for her and said, “Thank you for the funnies. Fikna and I will need stuff to read on the voyage.”

Her gaze rested on a doodle and she uttered a single giggle. A line of smiling farmhands stared forward, while a monstrous demon picked them up one at a time and ate them in a single bite.

He smiled. The doodle disturbed him.

Tora said, “Can I take this with me? I want to read more about the backmonkeys and drudgets in my life.”

Rordan shook his head. “No way. Your dad finds that and I’ll never get it back from you. Hold on a second.” He reached into his stack of lessons and pulled out one illustrated with Doctor Skulky’s surprised face. He handed it to her.

“Take this. It’s the original lesson I got and summarizes the first two chapters. It’ll give you an idea of where Doctor Skulky was coming from.”

Disappointment showed on her face. She took the lesson and put it into her inside jacket pocket. “Was?”

“Yep. According to Doctor Skulky, he died a few years ago. I believe it was faked. His last big word was he’s dead and it’s up to you the reader to carry on. If you mess up, then the bad guys win. Only you can do the ridicule of Deuce-uno, Stick-boy, and his machine-men.”

Tora sputtered with laughter. “That’s making fun of Deiвос and Emphyreans!”

He put a finger to his lips and widened his eyes. “Yep, bad news if anybody finds out. That’s why you should keep this quiet. It’s bad to own stuff like this.”

She pouted. “Fikna wouldn’t like it if you called him a machine-man.”

Rordan frowned. “He’s not a machine-man. That’s his thing. Doctor Skulky is talking about people who say they’re Emphyreans, but just use it as an excuse. The drudgets and the backmonkeys use it as a cover to take your brainjacks. Then they train you to become like them.”

Tora's face lit up with excitement. "That's what it feels like. The drudgets are stealing my brainjacks. I need more brainjacks."

"I know. I always feel like people are sucking them out of my head. That's why I use the Dunser arts of laughery and foolpoots to confuse them, allowing me to get away."

She laughed.

He laughed with her, enjoying how simple honesty played across her face. An urge to kiss her crept into his thoughts. Fear of missing her even more terribly when he left held him back. For now, in his room he could forget about Fikna's lark. The Hearth Bunch remained together for a little while longer.

Rordan sat with her and lost track of time. They read and laughed at the catch phrases of Doctor Skulky.

He heard the sound of the front door unlock. Rordan checked the lamps and guessed nearly an hour had passed. Fikna and Abrafo were back from dropping off the Gretlahs.

A flash of regret passed through him. He felt an opportunity had passed him by and he would never know what it was. "Looks like they're back. We're going to play some ranc and be guys for a while. If you want to hang out, go ahead. I know fortune games aren't your thing. But if you want to join in, you can."

She made eyes at him. "I'll sit here and read more of the Doctor."

“Yep, go for it.” He hid his bafflement at her strange look behind a smile.

Fikna walked into the room with a scowl on his face. Behind him followed Abrafo, who looked pleased with himself.

“Rordan you missed it,” said Abrafo. “Your brother ticked off a yokel and got chewed out. It was hilarious.”

Fikna sat down in his chair and put Faru’s lantern on the table. “Yes, an enormous laugh of epic proportions.”

Rordan gave his friends a puzzled look. He got up and opened the bottle of coal-nectar.

“The big clown here...” Abrafo cracked up with laughter.

Fikna said, “Enough, you scoundrel. I shall relate the tale. We entered the mart after having escorted the Gretlahs. Abrafo asked me to wait for him at the overhang while he obtained the sugar-sticks. Naturally unsuspecting, I followed his direction.

“Shortly, a churlish man rudely berated me for blocking the way as he pulled a cart through the street. I attempted to move aside, to no avail. The yokel became angry and berated me.”

Abrafo laughed at his friend while Rordan gaped in disbelief.

Fikna waited for Abrafo’s laughter to subside. “I finally moved aside and he passed me. However, by then I’d entered a most disagreeable state of mind. Abrafo

returned with the sticks. With a look of pretended innocence, he asked what was the matter.”

Abrafo said, “I didn’t think the guy would still be doing deliveries at this time, but it was worth the chance. You should have seen how mad Fikna was.”

Rordan admitted to himself Fikna looked annoyed.

Without looking up Tora said, “You were ambushed by the drudgets and lost some brainjacks.” She giggled.

The conversation stopped and Rordan froze in place.

Abrafo said, “You didn’t actually let her read any of that, did you?” He shook his head solemnly.

Rordan looked guilty and rolled his eyes to the side.

Fikna said, “Never mind what she said, my aggravation is the main point. What an embarrassment to be treated so poorly. If I hadn’t been surprised, I’d have given the yokel a reproach.”

“You should have tossed the boot.” Tora chuckled to herself.

Fikna looked at Abrafo and Rordan in confusion. “What could she possibly refer to? Toss what boot?”

Abrafo gave his host a stare.

Rordan said, “Uh, okay Tora. That’s comedy stuff. Maybe you should read to yourself, okay?”

She eyed him for a second, then continued to read.

Fikna shook his head. “You manage a peculiar sense of humor at times, Tora. Now then, break out the ranc cards and let’s attend to business.”

Rordan grabbed a small wooden box from his shelf of lessons. He handed the box to Fikna and pulled up a stool. Fikna took a deck of cards from the box and shuffled them. Abrafo emptied a small paper bag of reddish, jellied sugar-sticks into a pile on the table. He divided them out evenly into three groups. Rordan refilled Fikna's glass and Abrafo's mug with coal-nectar, then poured himself some.

Tora held back a giggle. She muttered to herself. "Knowledge costs money."

Fikna said, "Take your booty piles, gentlemen."

Each of the players grabbed a pile of sugar-sticks. Fikna dealt the first hand.

Rordan took up his cards and examined them. The classical illustrations of Magi Star, Awakening, Moon Damsel and Bungler stared back at him.

He puffed. "Bungle." Rordan put his otherwise strong hand into the central discard pile.

Abrafo said, "Yoh. Looks like you're on your way to being the Bungly Man already."

Rordan gave up a sugar-stick to the stakes pile and sulked.

A steady, muffled series of rings sounded outside.

Fikna said, "They utilized the central archive bell, then. How regrettable; it's such a dingy sound. I hope they recover the chapel bell or this will be an eccentric autumn."

Abrafo said, “You want to talk zany, how about that Gretlah family? The mother wanted to talk your ear off. I bet she wants you to marry Lewinna.”

Tora said, “Share juices with the smut object of your dreams.” She giggled uncontrollably.

Rordan pursed his lips together and resisted the urge to wince. He regretted his decision to let her look through his Doctor Skulky lessons.

Fikna stood up and said, “Tora, that’s quite enough. Would you please control yourself or I shall request your departure. You are becoming unsettling.”

“I can’t help it, this stuff is funny.”

Abrafo spoke before Fikna could respond. “Yeah, yeah. Rordan writes some rude stuff for his routines. But we’re trying to play here.”

Someone made a series of knocks on the window shutters. Fikna ambled over to the window and said, “Songster?”

A hushed voice replied. “Shocking the Deuce.”

Fikna said, “What’s the request?”

“A bite and a snooze.”

Fikna looked at Rordan, who stood up and joined him by the window. They lifted and moved the bed close to the Puff Couch. Rordan kicked his things back under the bed. He moved the old, broken bolt aside and opened the shutters.

A young man holding a guitar case stood outside the window. He bowed in greeting.

Rordan said, "Welcome. Come inside."

Fikna and Rordan helped the songster climb in through the window. Rordan closed the shutters and carefully replaced the broken bolt.

He glanced at the young man's face. If the guy turned into a poor guest, or the patrollers found out, it would be a bad scene. Rordan decided his guest was okay. Tora was here and besides, the fresh music couldn't be beat.

He decided to be very polite. "Rordan's fire is bright."

The songster said, "It's Nenne you see before you."

With a slow nod, Rordan pretended to regard him with a skeptical look. The young man wore a transient jacket similar to Tora's. He was dressed in a sky blue, long-sleeved crop top and denim trousers that ended above the knee. His sandals were bright green.

Nenne exchanged a brief conversation with Tora. Rordan didn't speak their language. He guessed by the songster's voice that the young man was scoping the situation. Rordan understood. The risk cut both ways.

She looked at Rordan and replied to Nenne.

Nenne said, "The fire's warm." He clasped Rordan's hand.

Fikna seated himself. "Rord, obtain for your guest a stool and some sustenance. Refreshment too, if it can be managed. Say there Nenne, are you capable of playing Deep Uirolec?"

The songster nodded.

Rordan grinned. He seized Faru's lantern and let his friends finish their hand. His guest needed to be provided for right away.

In the hall, by the light of the lantern, Rordan's thoughts returned to last spring. He'd first heard songs by the songster from East Kgotla at a pupil hangout with Fikna. The songs they'd heard were already several years old and had blown both of them away.

He wondered if his guest knew any of the new Deep Uirolec. Rumors had spread that the songster party had compiled a fifth set this year.

Rordan knew Abrafo couldn't stand them. His friend preferred the dark and depressed music of Central Kgotla. He didn't mind. Rordan identified with the gloom too.

He entered the kitchen and gathered together a tall earthenware cup and a plate. His search of the cupboards revealed half a loaf of bread and some butter.

"Dang it."

His mother's kitchen skills mystified him. She seemed capable of summoning food by magic, for he could never find anything but containers in the cupboards. Unless she left food for him on purpose, he had to scrounge.

Rordan sliced four uneven pieces of bread. He buttered them and put them on a plate.

Somebody bumped into a picture frame in the hall. Rordan brought the lantern over and spotted Tora.

“What’s up?”

Tora said, “They kicked me out.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth and nodded. “Need an escort? It’s past curfew.”

Tora said, “I’ll be okay. I’m going down a few streets to Abeni’s. The mains will gimmie enough light.”

She gave him a strong hug and he felt the protrusion of her knife in its ready location. “Don’t be sad. I’ll see you tomorrow before you go.”

He opened the door and watched her sneak out into the street. Rordan made a silent prayer for her safety. Reluctantly, he closed the door and locked it.

He returned to his room to find Nenne had acquired his stool. The new guest accepted the empty cup and plate of buttered bread.

“You can sleep on the carpet under the table when we crash,” said Rordan. “Bed goes to my bro’ Fikna here. Couch goes to my friend Abrafo. I’ll sleep on the floor over there by the door. You’ll have to bug out early in the morning before the folks wake up. That cool?”

Nenne agreed. He ate a nibble of crust and put the plate next to him on the bed.

“I’ll get you a pillow and a blanket so it won’t be raw.”

Nenne looked inside the empty cup. “Got a drop?”

Rordan said, “Wait a second.” He put down the lantern and poured his guest a full cup from the bottle of coal-nectar.

Disapproval showed on Abrafo's face.

Nenne took a short sip and nodded. He nudged the bread over and placed the cup on the plate. With focused confidence he tuned his guitar.

Abrafo trounced Fikna in the current hand and collected the booty in the stakes pile. He gathered up the cards.

Fikna groaned and shook his head. "Nenne, Deep Uirolec please."

Abrafo frowned. "No more than two. Then some Pounder Otieno. Hey, can you play Otieno?"

Nenne said, "Sure can."

Fikna scowled. "If you insist. Rather unsettling subject matter this late at night. Rord, you in or out?"

"I'm in." He closed the door to the room and lowered the thick curtain hanging above it. The faded white fabric had been imprinted with lively Dunser patterns and caricatures of management figures. Satisfied, he grabbed another stool and joined his friends.

Fikna shuffled and dealt out the cards.

Abrafo grinned.

The anthemic chords and lush lyrics of Deep Uirolec, played at a low volume, filled the room. Rordan immediately recognized *This Witness Wanders* and smiled. It came from Uirolec's fourth set and told a story about a lost soul finding its way home.

He studied his hand and took a gulp of his beverage. A collection of lesser cards this time and The Bungler stared him in the face again. His favorite card, the Cup Kid, made the bad luck personal. Irritation clouded his face.

Rordan said, “Bungle.” He discarded and tossed in his stake.

Abrafo covered his mouth and cracked up. His eyes widened as he stared at Rordan’s discarded hand.

Fikna smiled. “I declare, not your night.”

With an exasperated look, Rordan stood up and went over to his shelf of lessons. Tora had put the Doctor Skulky lessons back in disarray. He settled onto the Puff Couch and worked on putting them back into order.

Abrafo said, “I’m telling you Fikna, you’ve got to dork that Tora girl of yours. She needs to get dorked.”

Fikna scoffed.

“I’m serious. I want to hear how big those doobers of hers really are. And while you’re at it, get going on that Gretlah girl. She’s also got big doobers. How do you do it?”

“Do what?” Fikna contemplated his hand.

Rordan gave up on his lessons and sat back. He listened to his friends. The girls were gone and the time had come for the usual talk about them. He sucked on his tongue. The nectar aftertaste had turned sour to match his thoughts of the current topic. The crashdown loomed.

Abrafo said, “How do you sit there without staring at their doobers? Both of them are stacked.”

Fikna said, “I’ll agree they are both blessed, especially Tora. But such physical attributes are not the reason I associate with them. They’re only friends. I never think about their appearance in the manner you are accustomed.”

Abrafo looked at Rordan and eyeballed in Fikna’s direction. “Your brother is nuts. How about you? While we were gone, what did you and Tora do?”

At Rordan’s blank look, Abrafo rocked back in his stool and shook his head. “What? You didn’t dork her? You didn’t do anything? You were alone with a girl ready to go. What in ruination is wrong with you?”

Rordan opened his mouth to speak and nothing came out.

Abrafo snickered. He trounced Fikna with a strong hand led by The Deucers. “I’ve got to get you two eunuchs a panderer.” He took his booty stakes and bit one of the chewy candies in half.

CHAPTER 3: THE MIRTHY MERMAID

Rordan flipped open the top of his backpack and stuffed Fikna's weatherproof coat inside. Tora watched him from the far corner of the kitchen. She sat in Faru's chair by the tobacco shelf and pulled her transient jacket close around her. The stove had yet to drive away the cold of an overcast morning.

He paused to look at his folks. They listened to his bro' go over a checklist of items in the backpack. Fikna wore a new pair of frontier guard boots and forester pants he had bought for the voyage. Rordan had to admit his bro' looked good in them now.

Fikna said, "Warmers, changes of clothing, soap, beerskin, and preserved meat. That's the lot." He smiled with satisfaction.

Rordan nodded. "Sounds like everything." He checked the mercy kit. His mother had provided extra bandages, aloetic for bites and burns, and chewbies for pain. He closed the wallet and put it in a side pouch on the backpack. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Tora stare at him with a sullen pout.

Len shoved a chopped piece of wood into the stove and pushed it onto the fire with a black iron tong. She checked the status of the water in the billycan. Sausages and oily chopped potatoes sizzled in an iron skillet.

Faru rubbed his eyes and considered the luggage. "You think you're carrying enough with you Fik-so? Don't go too light."

“Oh, before I forget.” Len pulled out a heavy, Seltish stoneware tankard from a cupboard and placed it on the central table. “This is for you Fik-y. You’ll need something to eat and drink from on the voyage.”

Fikna folded the checklist and put it in his trouser pocket. He glanced at the food Len cooked, then took the tankard. “Thank you Lensy. Your gift honors me. And thank you for the ride Faroo. Your assistance shall save Rordan considerable effort in transporting the complete set. I am certain he would manage. However, I would not have him exhausted by the effort. I shall be relying on him for company.” With a smile, Fikna passed the tankard over to Rordan.

Faru said, “Don’t mention it. Anything your dear old Rord can do for you.”

A scowl crossed Rordan’s face. All signs pointed to a job as porter once they got going. His face softened. Fikna needed him to take care of things. He found room for the tankard in the backpack.

The water in the billycan boiled. Rordan watched Len prepare a hot beverage. Her actions manifested as a strange series of movements and implements. He caught glimpses of an hourglass-shaped container of thick glass and the rapid laying out of plates and mugs. His mother’s skill awed him.

She scooped the food onto the plates in steaming, crispy piles. “Breakfast is ready. Who wants hot crow?”

Rordan shook his head. He didn’t understand why people liked the stuff.

Len poured the crow into an earthenware mug for everyone but Rordan. Faru took his plain and let it steam in front of him. Tora asked for sugar in hers. She slurped the beverage without care, thoughtful as she peered at the unshuttered window. Fikna graciously asked for a heavy dose of sugar and cream. He drank fast.

Everyone but Len took a plate and grabbed utensils from a jar on the central table. They breakfasted together to the crackling of the fire inside the stove.

Rordan ate his portion in small bites. He burned his tongue on a scalding hot sausage and sucked air between his cheeks.

Faru said, “Where’s Abrafo?”

“He departed this morning,” said Fikna. “Ran out of steam after crushing us in ranc.” He placed his empty mug on the table and grabbed Rordan’s daypack. “Thank you for the crow Lensy. As always, your cooking is extraordinary.”

Len smiled. “You’re welcome. Did you say your partings to Esa and Crovan?”

Fikna nodded. “I related my intentions to the parents yesterday, before the revel. They send their regards.”

Faru smirked at Len. “It’s a little early for them to be up to see him off.” As he chuckled, his face lit up with humor.

“Quite so I’m afraid.” Fikna opened the front door and breathed in the air. A drizzle of rain fell.

Rordan watched his bro' go outside and took this as a hint to load the wagon. He scarfed his hot potatoes down, then went over to the pile of luggage. His hands throbbed as he heaved the chest off the ratty carpet and carried it out the door. Behind him, Faru lifted the backpack while Tora put aside her mug and stood up.

Squinting against the pinprick drops of cool moisture, Rordan walked to a wagon parked outside the cottage. He rested the chest in the rear of the wagon and slid it forward, next to the daypack.

Fikna stood a few feet from the wagon, his hands clasped together and face raised up toward the sky. He completed his silent prayer and stood with both hands in his pockets.

Rordan searched the empty street for signs of people. The lack of activity reassured him. He guessed a combination of the weather and the declared holiday kept people indoors. The neighbors still had to be peeping, however.

The cottages and trees of adjacent Cariole Street blocked his view of the chapel grounds. The thought of never having to walk to school with the local muttonheads again made him smile.

He turned around. Tora joined Fikna in standing about. Rordan remembered Abrafo's words and tried to imagine his bro' courting her.

A sinking sensation dragged at his heart. He heard a faint voice inside him going on about a lack of connection, that his bro's inability to connect with girls

was because of what had happened in the past. Rordan ignored the voice and it went away.

Holding Faru's mug of crow, Len came outside and stood beside the wagon. "I love the big day off." A sigh escaped her lips.

Faru loaded the backpack into the wagon. He took the mug from her and drank a large portion. "I'll get Fintain."

An impulse seized Rordan. He went back inside and entered his room.

His thoughts returned to the vivid dream from last night. He had been exploring a hall with many rooms. The layout reminded him of the school hall where the fire had started, before last year's renovation. Unlike the school hall, this one had been made of an old, dark gray stone. Polluted moisture leaked down the walls and collected in thin pools on the floor. Grime covered the dry patches. The hall had looked empty and forgotten.

A diseased girl from another heartland appeared and pursued him through the hall. He ran out of rooms to explore and she had forced him to lay down on the dirty floor with her. A voice had said, "Listen." Rordan had woken up and felt marked.

He put the dream out of his head and examined the dimly illuminated room. His gaze took and held in his heart all the illustrations, knick-knacks and furniture that had come to symbolize his school existence. He imagined the presence of fantoms and decided to say something to them.

Rordan said, “Fikna and I are going away for a while. I don’t know for how long. But look after my folks and my friends. We’ll be back.”

A ringing filled his right ear for three seconds. Rordan looked slowly around his room. He strained to understand what the fantoms might have said.

Rordan looked down and said, “I haven’t a clue what I’m doing. I hope it all turns out okay.”

His eyes rested on a small, rough piece of quartz next to Fikna’s illustration of Empyreon, the Heir of Deiws. The brief ringing filled his right ear.

“Okay, my lucky stone comes along.” Rordan took the crystal and tucked it in his pocket. His gaze rested on the couch.

“Puff Couch, I’m sorry we’re going away. You’ve been a soft and caring friend these many years. Please don’t be upset. Wait patiently for the day when you can give us comfort again. There’s no couch like you, anywhere.”

Rordan squeezed the couch’s arm. The soothing odor of the wool rose up to meet his sense of smell. A dull ache pounded in his chest. He turned and walked out of the room.

His father harnessed Fintain the horse to the wagon. Rordan watched him handle the agreeable old nag with confidence and experience. He admired his father’s carter skill. The display reminded him of his mother’s uncanny ability to cook.

Faru said, “Finally. What were you doing in there, filling the pot?”

Rordan said, “I was making things right in my mind.”

His statement earned him a puzzled look from Tora.

Len said, “And are they?” She finished off the crow in Faru’s mug.

Fikna said, “How could anything remain unorganized? We’re about to embark on a grand adventure to the furthest reaches of the Heartland.”

The horse and wagon were ready. Faru climbed onto the driver’s seat and everyone else but Len climbed into the back.

Faru gave Fintain a light click of his tongue and a touch of the lash. The wagon shuddered forward and they headed down the home street.

Len waved at them. “Have a safe voyage. We’ll send packages by post after you get there.”

Fikna and Rordan waved back. They watched her grow farther away. The wagon entered the main street and meandered downslope to a mart by a lakeside. Tora and Rordan glanced at each other, while Fikna watched the cottages and buildings go by.

They left the main street and moved through the mart. Rordan spotted a few school pupils he recognized but didn’t know hanging out near the Loughside Grill. The lake and the haven at the edge of the mart came into view.

Faru halted the wagon before the haven office. He climbed down and tethered Fintain.

Everyone else disembarked. Fikna waited while Rordan unloaded the backpack and chest from the wagon. Tora carried Rordan's daypack for him.

A pair of men in dark red, protective leather clothing came out of the haven offices. They were followed by the haven master in his gray and brown uniform.

The men in leather bore brass badges at their right breast and were armed with short, thick-bladed swords at their belts. Their clothes had eight pockets, all stuffed with gear. Both were sturdy, robust men with close-cropped hair under their leather caps.

Faru said, "Good morning patrollers. Hi Brioc." He gave Fintain a brief rub down and low-spoken words of reassurance.

The haven master adjusted his thick felt cap. "Good morning Mister Mannlic. Heading out today?"

Faru said, "Nope. Just these two. Going off to academy in another neighborhood."

Rordan pulled out his papers and let Brioc examine them.

The haven master gave Rordan and Fikna a glance, then stamped the papers. "Rordan Mannlic and Fikna Somor. Here you go. Getting a little late to make it that far overland in time for class. These patrollers will inspect your luggage before you go. Have a safe voyage."

Brioc nodded to the two patrollers and returned to his office.

The massive one said, “Good morning. I’m Patroller Elvod, and this is Patroller Molloy. There’s been an arson in the neighborhood and all traffic going out and coming in has to be checked. We’ll only take a moment.”

Faru said, “Go ahead and look. We’ll wait.”

Rordan unlocked the chest and stepped away.

Patroller Molloy searched the backpack and daypack while Elvod rummaged through the chest.

Patroller Elvod said, “You kids go to Nerham Chapel?”

Fikna said, “We received our official certifications one month ago. Most of our friends get theirs next year.”

Rordan nodded.

“You going to miss them?”

“Terribly so. The whole affair has unsettled us, having to leave at a time like this.”

Patroller Elvod pulled free Rordan’s doodles of the Hearth Bunch from their waterproof case and examined them. “I see one of you is a dauber.”

“That’s me,” said Rordan. “I’m going to be studying alchemy, but I want to keep my skills sharp.”

The patroller nodded. “You’re good, Rordan.” The rain smeared the topmost doodle.

“Thanks. But please watch the rain. That’s got to last us while we’re away.”

Patroller Elvod put the doodles back and returned the case to the chest. “Judging from the doodles, you kids are friends with a lot of outsiders.”

Fikna said, “I make an effort to be charitable as does Rord. We’ve maintained friendships with them for several years now.”

Patroller Elvod stood up and looked at Tora. “Which one of these fine Seltish gentlemen is your sweetheart?”

Tora said, “Rordan, patroller.”

A surge of anxiety moved through Rordan.

“He’s a lucky kid.” Patroller Elvod approached her. “I’m afraid I’ll have to search you for cutting.”

Tora stuck out her tongue for the officer, then let him examine the backs of her ears.

Patroller Elvod looked at his partner, who walked over to him with a look of boredom. “All right, have a nice trip. Thanks for your patience.”

The two patrollers returned to the haven master’s offices and disappeared from view.

Rordan closed and locked the chest. He slung the disorganized backpack onto his shoulders and picked up the chest. Ignoring the offer in his father’s inquiring glance, he made his way down the stone steps to the pier. There were six boats tethered along the sides. The drizzle continued and a low mist had formed on the surface of the lake.

Fikna stood at the top of the stairs. “Which vessel are we taking?”

Faru came up beside him and looked out at the pier. “The one with the girl at the tiller, down at the end.”

Fikna descended the steps and passed his foster-brother, who struggled to keep up with him.

The boat at the end had a weathered appearance, with the faded paint a combination of drab brown and rust red. A goat skull hung from the top of the boat’s stem. A cabin lay in the middle and took up a third of the length of the boat.

Rordan thought it odd how the cabin only took up two thirds of the width of the boat. A raised, railed walkway allowed outside traversal of the other third. The inside of the cabin would be cramped.

A mast stood straight up out of the center of the cabin and a small stovepipe gave off smoke out the side, opposite the walkway. The glass of the cabin portholes had weathered chips and scratches. On the sides of the boat were small decorative shields, braided rope bundles, and small animal skulls.

A cotton line hung from the front of the cabin to a mooring pin near the stem of the boat. Draped over the line and tied to the sides of the cargo hold was a leather canvas acting as a makeshift tent.

Rordan thought the boat had an unsavory, yokel quality to it.

A young woman stood with her arms at rest on the tiller. She wore a waterduster and a rider hat against the drizzle. A tiny friendship braid of hair tinged with red dye hung down past her shoulder. Her expression gave

Rordan the impression of seasoned competence. He felt awkward in her presence and looked away.

Fikna strode up to the side of the boat. “Is this the boat to Ciriceval?”

Her stocky body moved with confidence and strength. She walked up to Fikna and smiled. “Yes. This is the Mirthy Mermaid, bound for the neighborhood of Ciriceval. I’m Huna, the Skipper. The booty’s inside having his crow.”

Rordan lowered the chest to the pier and rubbed his hands. He caught a glimpse of a goat-knife under the Skipper’s waterduster. Rordan hoped his brother could take on this hard-core yokel woman in a struggle.

A hulking, bearded man with short hair dyed dark brown emerged from the cabin. The man wore an outfit similar to the Skipper’s and also possessed a goat knife. His pale skin had been tanned in the sun and his body looked hardened from travel. Rordan wondered if the crew was too rough to travel with.

The man said, “Hello everyone. I’m Vidar, booty of the Mirthy Mermaid.”

Faru and Tora joined the gathering.

“Nice to meet all of you” said Faru. “Mind if I have a look around?”

The Skipper said, “Be my guest.”

Faru boarded the boat and gave it a cursory inspection. He examined the hold and made a mock cough. “Twenty for the two numbskulls.”

The Skipper's countenance grew stern. "The going rate is thirty-two."

Faru wheedled. "Oh come on, a hold full of sneezing and a rainy voyage, that's a discount right there."

The Skipper sighed. "Twenty-nine then, but you're robbing me."

Faru said, "How about the two numbskulls help with the poling? That's got to count for something. Twenty-two."

The Skipper glanced at Fikna and chuckled. "If I get any work out of that young rooster over there it'll be a miracle. Your boy in the drab clothes looks like he'll help. You're a mean driver though. Poling's hard labor where we'll be going. Twenty-six and that's the limit."

Faru clicked his tongue and made an odd noise at the back of his throat. "Sure, sure. But you're getting a bargain. That foster-son of mine there's got the strength of two men. You'll get him to do something useful. Twenty-four and you're getting it easy."

The Skipper laughed. "You're ripping me off."

Faru waved his hand and said, "Oh, come on. You'll make up the difference fleecing the next bunch of pushovers who come on board."

The Skipper said, "All right. Twenty-five."

Faru opened his vest and counted out two tenners and five onesies. The Skipper studied each bill before she jammed them into a neck pouch under her own vest.

The Skipper said, “Okay you numbskulls, welcome to the Mirthy Mermaid.”

Fikna said, “Thank you for your courtesy, Skipper.” He came aboard.

Rordan picked up the chest and stepped onto the boat. He set the chest down by the hold, then moved aside the canvas. Rectangular wooden crates covered the bottom. He smelled a peppery odor.

Faru helped him put the luggage in the hold. Rordan staked out a sleeping position in the middle, favoring the half closer to the fore of the boat. Fikna paced and fidgeted, while Tora watched with a sad face.

Finished, Rordan climbed out of the hold while his father disembarked from the boat. The air grew hazy with light fog and the mist on the lake thickened.

“I guess this is it,” said Rordan. Anxiety clutched at his insides. “Take care Faru. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Fikna put his hand on Rordan’s shoulder and smiled. “Quite correct. All shall be exquisite. Adventure, excitement, and good fortune of the highest kind. This voyage is the moment of our destiny.”

Faru said, “Good-bye. Don’t forget to write.” His eyes twinkled with mischief.

Rordan stepped off the boat and gave Tora a hug. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

She rocked him back and forth. “I’ll try.” Tora took hold of his wrist and placed a rolled envelope in his hand.

She closed his fingers around it and whispered close to his ear. "If you get in trouble, my good luck will help you. Don't let the backmonkeys steal your brainjacks."

Rordan put the envelope in his pocket and looked at her suddenly wild eyes. "I'll be careful."

Tora whispered, her eyes downcast. "Thanks."

He returned to the boat. His father and Tora left the pier, then exchanged partings. She wandered off into the mart. Faru untethered Fintain and led the wagon away until the light fog obscured him.

The Skipper regarded Rordan and Fikna. "Do as you please for now. I'm expecting more passengers shortly. Butty, how are those figures coming along?"

The butty said, "Almost done." He bowed slightly to Fikna and Rordan. "A pleasure to have you on this voyage." A grin emerged on his face and he returned to the cabin.

Fikna said, "What an agreeable fellow."

The Skipper looked around at the growing fog. "Oh, don't get too excited your lordship. Make no mistake, both of you will be helping out. It's going to be tough with this weather. And you're going to help fight if we run into any boat-ruffs. Unless you'd prefer to swim for it in these nix-infested waters."

Fikna made a face of stunned alarm.

She chuckled at his reaction. "Don't worry, your lordship. You'll eat and sleep too. And there might even be some fun if you're lucky."

Rordan said, “Isn’t mermaid a little heathen for the name of a boat?”

The Skipper said, “Are you a traditional Empyrean?”

He swallowed. “No, but Fikna here is. I don’t mean any offense. It’s just not much of a blessed name.”

She nodded. “Maybe Saint Aith’s Lake is not as scary this near to the Chief, but things start to change once you leave the protection of the capital. Steersmen south of here call it Fearful Lake. By calling the boat the name of a stronger water monster, the nixes might leave us alone.”

Rordan said, “But what if you meet with a bigger water monster, say the deucefish?”

The Skipper shrugged. “It’s a chance we have to take. There are lots of nixes, but not many deucefish.”

“Really? Is it because Grampus eats them?”

The Skipper chuckled. “Or they eat each other.”

Rordan cringed. He let the conversation drop.

Fikna glanced at his clothes. He wiped his face with his new silk handkerchief. “Rord, would you be so considerate as to break out the weatherproof clothing?”

Rordan nodded and entered the hold. He raised his voice. “What else do we need to know? You mentioned boat-ruffs. Are you serious?” After a brief search, he pulled from the backpack both Fikna’s coat and his own.

The Skipper said, “I was being serious. They’re gangs of thieves. Sometimes with what you would call Farian

outcasts or Dimmurian fugitives among them. 'The river guards aren't always around when you need them.'

Fikna puzzled at the Skipper. "I thought you were being humorous about boat-ruffs. They sound suspiciously like peryahs. I thought those days had vanished some time ago."

The Skipper shook her head. "No. The boat you're on belonged to peryahs. It was seized by the river guard. The peryahs escaped using their tricks. So they still exist."

Fikna looked skeptical.

The Skipper said, "Suit yourself, your lordship. It's not likely we'll run into either of them, but you should be mentally prepared for the chance."

Fikna shrugged and took his weatherproof coat from Rordan's outstretched hand. He took off the Deep Uirolec loyalty hat, then slid the coat over his head and onto his body.

Rordan said, "What will we fight them off with? I've got a knife, but that's it." He donned his own, less impressive weatherproof coat.

The Skipper said, "We've got boat hooks and crowners. Unless your lordship has leave to carry a longblade, we have to look tough and hope they think twice." She lent a hand to Rordan and helped him climb out of the hold.

The fog passed by in sheets and the drizzle became a misty spatter. Smoke rose from the cabin stovepipe.

Rordan took a deep breath and relished the damp air mixed with the smell of burning wood. He looked at the Skipper and now felt glad she looked as capable as she did. “Have you ever fought any boat-ruffs?”

The Skipper said, “No. And luck willing it’ll stay that way.” She paused. “If you work during the voyage you’ll get regular meals. Six or seven people can sleep in the hold, depending on luggage. The rest of you will sleep on the floor of the cabin or on deck. We’ll set up a line tent for those on deck if it rains. If there’s any argument we draw straws. Relief is in the chamber pot over there next to the cabin. You’re responsible for your own cheek-rags.”

Fikna stuck his tongue out. “No privacy? What about the fairer side?”

The Skipper chuckled. “Modesty is something you’re going to learn to live without, your lordship. This is the wilderness. But if someone has a strong objection, we can all look the other way while you donate to the fishes.”

Fikna opened his mouth and stared in shock while Rordan held onto his laughter.

The booty emerged from the cabin. He held a pair of squat, ceramic mugs filled with steaming crow. The Skipper took the wide, gray and white mug from the booty while he kept the rust red one for himself. Together, they sipped their beverages and watched a pair of young women approach the boat.

The new arrivals wore shabby shirts and pants. Both slung a line-bag under their hooded coats and a side-bag over their shoulders. Rordan looked at the taller one first.

She had straight, soot-chestnut hair and piercing dark brown eyes. Her body looked lean and athletic. The way she carried herself gave him the impression she was armed.

The shorter one had a pleasant face and kind, cool eyes. Her alert posture suggested to him that she was also armed.

The Skipper said, "I'm Huna, the Skipper of the Mirthy Mermaid. This is my butty, Vidar. You headed to either Sangham or Ciriceval?"

The tall woman with the piercing eyes said, "Yeah, to Ciriceval. I'm Kea and she's Dalla. We're traveling together."

The Skipper said, "Voyage is thirty-two for the two of you."

Kea said, "Make it twenty-four and you've got a deal."

The Skipper and Kea discussed the price. They finally agreed to twenty-eight. Kea reached into her line bag and pulled out enough bills to cover the cost. The Skipper welcomed the young women and they stepped aboard.

Rordan noted that the Skipper didn't check their money as carefully as she had his father's.

Fikna took a bow before the two new passengers. "I'm Fikna, a local resident of this neighborhood. And

this is my foster-brother, Rordan. A pleasure to meet you.”

Rordan thought his bro’ laid the charm on a bit thicker than usual. He hoped Fikna would spare them his best smile.

“I’m Kea, from Hylcap up north. This is Dalla, also from Hylcap. We’re freeloading together right now.”

Fikna puzzled over the two of them. “Isn’t transience a little...err...hrm.” He hesitated. The two young women looked at him as if he were about to say something ridiculous.

“Unworthy of the fairer side? We’re not all pioneers anymore.”

Kea and Dalla guffawed.

The Skipper said, “You mean colonists. And yes, we’re still colonists. Ask any outsider.”

While Fikna gaped in embarrassment, Rordan’s stomach did a somersault.

A sly grin appeared on the Skipper’s face. “Not everyone wants to be a settler, either. As of right now Fikna, you’re a transient. Even if only for a little while.”

Chastised, Fikna regained his composure. “I apologize for offending anyone. I am not used to...err—I am ignorant of these matters and I ask your forgiveness for any offence.”

Kea muttered to Dalla, who lent her ear with a look of skepticism at Fikna. “What, does this guy think he’s

some kind of champion or something?” Both women giggled and approached the hold.

Dalla climbed inside. “Pepper?” She made a mock sneeze as Kea climbed down after her. Rordan watched them deposit their luggage next to his and stake a claim closer to the aft of the boat.

Two teenage guys approached the boat and the Skipper moved to greet them. The first had a rugged physique and a reserved demeanor. The other walked with awkwardness and stared about with wide, pale-gray eyes. His hair had been dyed black with streaks of pine green.

They negotiated separately over their fare and ended up paying fifteen each. The Skipper took their money and welcomed them aboard. They acknowledged Fikna and Rordan with nods, then plopped their luggage in the hold with designs on the space closer to the fore.

Fikna searched the deck. He sat down on a covered coil of rope at the fore of the boat. Rordan assumed a comfortable pose with his arms crossed and a foot on the edge.

“I favor Kea,” said Fikna. “Do you think she fancies me?”

Rordan couldn’t believe it. He spoke softly to his bro’. “Are you jesting? She looks older than you. Guessing by her reaction she thinks you’re an idiot. You shouldn’t listen to Abrafo’s boasts.”

Fikna sighed. “I’m flustered. The Skipper made little sense to me. I fail to understand how she could equate me with a freeloader.”

“We were freeloaders, remember? We lived in a wagon like Dunsers, remember?”

Fikna snapped at him. “Don’t talk to me like that.” He lowered his voice again. “Refrain from such utterances. Those days were a lark that has passed. My family had a place they lacked the interest to claim.”

Rordan grew cross and fought to keep his voice down. “What? Your life with me doesn’t count now? My family doesn’t have a place? This isn’t chapel, with settlers all happily thinking troglodytes are a problem that’s going away.”

Fikna grew terse. “I’m aware of the problem. I don’t disparage them like Abrafo does.”

“No, but you’re afraid of them ever since you got beat up by one.”

Fikna glowered at him. Rordan felt a foul mood descend between them.

The rugged teen climbed onto the deck and joined them. “Got a smoke?”

Rordan shook his head.

Fikna said, “Sorry good traveler. We avoid such matters.”

The rugged teen shrugged. “I’m Noss. There’s room below for all of us. Want to hang out? Doesn’t look like we’re going anywhere in this weather for a while.”

Fikna smiled. “That is an offer we shall definitely accept.”

The three of them retired to the hold and found places to sit. The openings at either end of the canvas allowed enough light in to see general features. Rordan noticed the crate he sat on made a slight sound of glass tinkling together when jostled.

Kea and Dalla pulled out their thin bedding pallets and lounged on top of them.

The pale-skinned teenager with black and green hair went through his backpack. He found a floppy, Flamejar Bernt loyalty hat and put it on. A smile appeared on his face. As he sat down hard, the crates creaked a little. “Call me Codal, brothers and sisters. What’s everybody’s story?”

Rordan studied him. The teenager’s mannerisms were full of manic vigor and he had an easygoing way of speaking. His name was Seltish. He strained to understand the mixture of Codal’s traits.

Fikna said, “My name is Fikna Somor. My father’s a beaux and my mother’s a dame, both living on an income from the family’s interests in printing. This is my foster-brother, Rordan Mannlic. He will be studying alchemy at the academy of Regol Coros in Ciriceval. I’m accompanying him to make my fortune in society there.”

Kea said, “R.C.? That’s where I got my secondary papers; I went with scribner.”

Noss nodded. “I’m going to learn a trade there. My father’s a handyman in Parcwod.”

Dalla said, “Rordan, you don’t look like a sage.”

Rordan said, “I’m not. Not yet, anyway. I’m a rustic.”

The group made murmurs of satisfaction.

Codal said, “Brother, can you do any unallied pamphlets?”

Rordan assumed a harsh voice and jerky movements. “Dark-smith metal-tooth of bones! Tell mommy I’m ready to kill—and kill again-again.”

Codal hooted with laughter. “I got some material for you brother. How hard-core can you get?”

Rordan switched to his thrash persona. “Rumpcheek nutzoid veggie mouse chewers from planet eight!” Codal and Rordan slammed into each other and fell over. They got up and repeated the activity.

Codal chanted out a litany of phrases. “Big women—in my bed! In my pocket—bad bread! Back-patters—on my head!” He flailed on his back while Rordan jerked about.

Kea and Dalla laughed. They gave each other a look of amusement.

Noss shook his head. “Looks like a couple of real rude humor types.”

Codal and Rordan calmed down and sat up.

Rordan said, “If you get bored let me know. If I know it, I’ll do it.”

Codal said, “I’m with you, brother.” He looked at Dalla. “What about you, sister? Tell us your tale.”

She wiped her forehead with the right hand and cleared her throat. “I’m traveling around. I have a lot of transient friends—going from place to place and sponging. I tried being an attendant for a while like I was trained, but it got boring. So I ran into Kea and hung out with her at R.C. When she went looking for work, I stuck along.”

Rordan had the feeling Dalla held something back. He wondered if she were a panderer. She probably wasn’t, but if she were it would make things interesting. He could think of several questions she might be able to answer.

Fikna said, “Anyone here traditional?” Noss and the young women shook their heads.

Rordan felt sorry for Fikna. A boat of nonconformists on this trip would make his bro’ feel isolated.

Kea said, “You’re not going to preach us to come back, are you?”

Fikna shook his head. “No, I’m not devout. Only curious.”

Rordan had an insight into Fikna’s next statement and he tensed.

Fikna said, “Rord here is an unbeliever. Never received first blessing.”

Noss chuckled. “Man, that means witches can use your bones to make storms.”

Kea arched an eyebrow at Noss, then laughed to herself once.

Rordan beat back a wave of dread. “Yep, and fly on their brooms using my fat.”

Noss said, “You’ve never been to chapel, man?”

“Sure, lots of times. Just never been blessed. Folks didn’t get around to it. They were Dunsers when they were young.”

Noss said, “That’s some story, man. How’s that work in with your brother there?”

Rordan said, “Fikna and I traveled a lot together. But his family made sure he was taken care of.”

Codal said, “Far out, brother. Far out. You levied though, right?”

Another wave of dread came over Rordan. “Nope, never served. Can’t handle or shoot anything.”

Codal grinned. “Brother, what did you do with your free time?”

Rordan said, “I spent a lot of it daubing, dawdling, going to performances and watching slams. Not much else to do when you’re moving from place to place.”

Codal looked at Fikna, “Brother, what about you? You look like a handler.”

“You have discerned the truth.”

Codal and Fikna stared at Noss.

Noss returned a trained calm. “Shooter. Girls? Cook, clean or sew?”

Kea scoffed. “Clean. Same for Dalla.”

Dalla nodded. “Seems like little girls school was eighty years ago. All that junk hasn’t helped me at all.”

Kea said, “It’s not supposed to help you. It’s wife training.”

Fikna said, “Martday class is about teaching your place.”

At a familiar gesture from Rordan the group said, “Know-your-table!” Laughter coursed out of everyone.

Kea said, “Fikna, not that I don’t want to shack up with a guy. But I want to do something that requires some thought. I’ve got papers, but all the neighborhoods only want to hire attendants. I’ll find an archive or a steward-hall that needs someone. Then the foreman is usually some traditional who thinks we’re baby-makers.”

Dalla laughed. “You guys should try cleaning and scrubbing as a fallback trade. Great for the back and makes your hands smell like flowers.”

Codal pulled a smoke from his shirt pocket and fiddled with it. “Hey sister, I hear you. But it ain’t easy for anybody. It’s a rump-squeezing pile out there. Jobs don’t grow on trees because I got an extra limb, sister.”

Dalla sneered. “No, but if you don’t have that extra limb you get a penalty.”

Kea said, “Yeah, the extra limb means you start on equal footing with the rest of the guys. At somebody else’s expense.”

Codal shrugged.

Rordan took the teenager's gesture as an admittance of defeat in the argument. He felt irritated bafflement at the two girls.

His bro' rubbed a temple. Rordan dug into the backpack for the mercy kit. He chuckled to himself. The kit looked like it would be needed after all. The boat hadn't even left the pier yet.

Part of the canvas moved aside and a teenager poked her head in. She dressed in a traditional style with heavy layers, a long dress, and a tight hood.

"Oh," she said. "Hello, I'm Fais. Little crowded in here. I gather we're all going to Ciriceval then?"

Codal said, "Sit right down sister and take a load off. You're in time for some laid back chitter-chatter."

She stared at him with repulsion.

Fikna helped her place a light side-bag in between Kea and Dalla. Introductions were shared, though Fais took only a passing interest in everyone.

Space in the hold vanished. Rordan found himself bunched close enough to Kea to smell her stale tobacco breath. A slight sigh escaped between his lips. He pulled the mercy kit and beerskin from his backpack.

As he predicted, Fikna motioned to him for relief. Rordan passed his bro' the beerskin, along with two chewbies from one of the glass containers.

Fikna swallowed the tiny dough balls and washed them down with beer. "Thank you Rord. Good thinking on your part."

The Skipper poked her head in. “Okay you ballast rats. I’m expecting to pick up more people in Sangham, so I’m not going to take any more here. The booty’s going to need some help with the stove.” She studied the group.

“I’m breaking out some tea and hardtack while we wait to see what the weather does. If it clears out enough, we’ll make our way to the lock at Roiast. That’s where we’ll anchor for the night. Now, I expect everyone to work on this trip. It’ll go faster if you lend a hand. And I’ll be in a better mood when you mess up something.”

Fais volunteered to help with the stove. She disappeared into the cabin with the Skipper. Rordan watched Codal and the other two young women follow them inside.

Noss went aft and waited with his arm on the tiller. He looked up at the steady moisture beading down from the clouds and adjusted his cap. Fikna stayed in the hold.

Rordan decided to stick with his bro’ and sat back down.

Fikna rested his lower back against the travel chest with feet towards his brother. “Rord, these unusual people are wearing me thin. I would welcome a nectar.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “Mart’s not open today, remember? Besides, the tea will cheer you up.”

Fikna sighed. “Of course. I understand the relief of chewbies is never immediate. Would you be so kind as to fill my tankard? If anyone asks, tell them I’m availing myself of a brief respite.”

Rordan nodded. “Sure thing, bro’. You take it easy. It’s going to be a long voyage.” He took Fikna’s new tankard from the backpack and clasped his bro’s shoulder. With a heave, he raised himself up and ducked out from under the canvas.

CHAPTER 4: NIXED

Rordan squinted at the thick fog and faint rain. He puffed. His bro' wouldn't be excited to learn the boat had become fog-bound.

Codal, Noss, Kea and Dalla stood outside on the aft deck. They chatted, exchanging a smoke amongst themselves. Rordan decided to join their group and made his way to the side aisle.

A hand snagged his right foot by the toes and he fell forward. His hand rammed the tankard against the edge of the solid railing and he twisted onto the narrow strip of deck. Pain surged from the big toe.

“Damn it!”

He turned against the cabin and tried to right himself. For a brief instant he believed he saw a pink, scaly humanoid creature staring at him from the side of the boat. Rordan leapt to his feet while his insides went numb.

He rushed toward where he had seen the monster and shouted in a booming voice. “No! Scram!”

A slight wave washed against the side of the boat. The pier creaked.

Rordan stared at the surface of the water. His senses returned to him and he became aware of his rapid breath and tight grip on the tankard. Weakness crept into his body. He heard people approach him and imagined their stares of alarm on his back.

Fikna emerged. His clear voice pierced the air. “What—Rord are you injured?”

Rordan didn’t look at them. “Something tried to get on the boat. I scared it off, but it got me.” He looked down at his feet. The right shoe had a clean cut in the leather and his toe stung with pain.

The Skipper came forward and looked over the side. She stared at the water. The butty waited on her with expectation in his eyes. The passengers watched in confusion. Fais remained in the cabin.

Noss said, “Sounded like you fell.” His voice had an edge of nervous alarm.

Rordan said, “I did. The thing tripped me up. My foot hurts like crazy.” He examined Fikna’s tankard. The rim had been smashed. Pieces of it lay on the deck.

He made a sad face at Fikna. “I’m sorry, I broke your tankard. It’s ruined.”

Fikna said, “Never mind such matters. Are you unharmed? Sit down and let me examine your foot.”

Rordan pushed off his shoe with the other foot. His big toe bled from a thin cut. The fabric of his hose was stained red along the edges of a cut in the fabric.

Fikna said, “A razor sharp injury. I notice nothing like a nail you might have stubbed your toe upon.”

The Skipper said, “Rordan didn’t stub his toe. He ran into a nix. The beast tried to throw him overboard where it could drown him.” She stared at the water. “Vidar, get

me the mineral salts. We're going to make sure the boat is doubly protected tonight."

The booty disappeared back into the cabin.

Codal took a drag of his smoke and tossed the stub into the water. He exhaled and made a besotted leer. "Dang."

While his bro' retrieved the mercy kit and beerskin, Rordan collected the broken pieces. He put them in his coat pocket.

Fikna returned. He tore back the hose around Rordan's big toe and splashed beer on the cut.

Rordan winced as Fikna dressed and bandaged his toe.

The Skipper accepted a small pouch from the booty. She took pinches of a black, granular substance from the bag and massaged it onto the wood of the boat's edges. Under her breath she muttered a prayer.

Rordan noticed the misty rainfall had abated. He peered up and spotted a trace of blue sky. The fog slowly separated into banks. The change startled him out of his weariness.

Fikna completed his work on the bandage. "Are you comfortable?"

Rordan checked the bandage for tightness. "Feels snug. Not bad, bro'. Thanks." He pulled his ruined hose back forward and rolled the end under his toes, then put on his shoe. "I guess I could use some of that tea now."

The Skipper pointed to the cabin. “It shouldn’t be long. Go to the front of the line. We’ll stay on deck and make sure there aren’t any more surprises.” She shook the fingers of her right hand and tossed them to her left in a practiced gesture.

Fikna frowned at her. “Are you a pastoral?”

The Skipper said, “Used to be. Seems like the weather’s turning, eh butty?”

The butty stared at the clouds and made a nod of agreement. “Looks like. Sooner we get going the better.”

Rordan stashed the tankard and kit. He handed Fikna his own earthenware mug and they made their way aft.

The Skipper carried a tinder-case and a rusty iron brazier on a tripod out of the cabin. She placed the brazier and case between the tiller space and the cabin.

Kea gave Rordan a look. “Hey. Don’t trip here, okay?”

Dalla chuckled. “Yeah, don’t hurt yourself. It’s only tea and biscuits.”

Rordan grouched. “Watch out. It was worth breaking my brother’s new tankard over.”

Fikna rubbed his temple. “You managed a terrific blow on it, Rord.”

Noss glanced at Rordan’s limp. “How’s the foot?”

“It hurts, but I’ll be okay.”

Fais opened the cabin door and said, “Hot water’s up.” She stared at Rordan for two seconds, then closed the door.

The other passengers all moved toward the cabin.

Kea brushed past Rordan and said, “Look out Ror. Don’t spazz out on us.”

He ignored her and watched the Skipper fill the brazier with tinder from the case, followed by charcoal from the deck bin. Rordan studied her every move. His father had a firemaster’s touch and he’d always been envious of the skill. The process eluded him no matter how much he watched his father perform the trick.

Her actions were clear to him and he committed every step to memory. The coals responded to the Skipper’s breath and crackled to life. They spread heat and smoke as they turned into tiny tongues of flame.

Rordan said, “You’re amazing.”

The Skipper smiled at him. “The secret is patient resolve.” She climbed onto the top of the cabin and wrapped her arm around the mast. Her stare searched the water and examined the weather.

Conditions continued to improve. Townsfolk walked through the mart and crewmembers emerged from the other boats at the pier. The patrollers stood outside. Their gaze landed on the Mirthy Mermaid and they talked amongst themselves.

Rordan watched the other passengers reassemble aft. They carried with them their own earthenware mugs, except for Dalla who carried a moss green cup.

The booty and a sullen Fais exited the cabin. The teenage girl carried a large, hot kettle in a padded hand. The booty offered an unsealed, open tin of hardtack to everyone.

The tin came within Rordan's reach. He took a piece and munched on the crunchy, sweet biscuit. The hardtack went down dry. He wished he hadn't broken his bro's tankard now.

Codal addressed Fikna and Rordan. "Hey brothers, you're from this neighborhood right? What's up with that fire? I heard it was the chapel."

Rordan elbowed Fikna.

"Unfortunately," said Fikna, "there isn't much to relate. I'm certain you've all heard, either through the neighborhood yelper or by means of chatter. The chapel burned down two days ago. You may have witnessed the affair from wherever you were staying. Far or near the spectacle couldn't have been missed."

Fais poured him a measure of brewed, close leaf tea.

"Thank you, Fais. Anyway, the matter is too recent for a solid explanation. The headmaster of the school burned to death. The entire chapel and most of the school are gone. Right as the school year was starting."

"Dang, brother. That's a buccaboo of a thing to happen." Codal exhaled and shook his head.

Rordan believed he saw a look of sad familiarity in the teenager's eyes.

Noss said, "The patrollers have any leads?"

Fikna shrugged. "If they do, word hasn't passed into the public chatter yet. A stranger was witnessed before the fire broke out. Perhaps they have already identified a suspect." He blew on his tea and the steam rose up out of Rordan's mug.

Kea's eyes burned with curiosity. "A stranger?"

Fikna said, "No word. Rord and I only know about it because we heard from someone who heard, if you understand my meaning."

Noss pursed his lips. "Right. Sorry to hear about it. My respects on your loss." The man stared past his mug and took a nibble of hardtack.

Kea said, "The stranger could be here. Maybe even on this boat, trying to escape treatment."

Dalla peered at her companion.

"Maybe he was a peryah and once we're away he'll cut our throats. Then flee with the boat for a peryah cove."

Fikna took a small sip of steaming tea. His face creased and he pressed his hand to his temple. "The Skipper mentioned this boat belonged to peryahs."

A series of utterances escaped from the group.

Codal said, "Dang, brother. Going on a voyage as cover for peryah firebugs to escape. Yeah!" He hooted with laughter and danced in place.

The Skipper said, “I’d like it better if it was a broken lamp in this story.” She ambled her way off the cabin.

Fais tensed up. “Is that a jest?”

The Skipper put one hand on the tiller and the other hand to her hip. She spoke with openhearted concern. “I heard about the fire. I’m guessing it was an awful, regrettable accident. Rumors turn simple explanations into complicated ones. Don’t let what happened to Rordan frighten you either. Chances are we won’t even hear of any peryahs downriver. Finish up your tea ballast rats. We’re almost ready to cast off.”

The Skipper helped herself to a piece of hardtack. She raised it in salute to the butty and took a bite. The butty saluted her back and smiled. He closed the tin and retreated to the cabin.

Kea said, “Hey Fikna, there been any dog-piling yet?”

Fikna had a mouth full of hardtack.

Rordan said, “The neighborhood is probably still too shocked to take any action like that. At least I hope so. Usually, it’s spongers who get treated.”

Dalla looked at her companion and said, “Good thing we’re leaving, huh?”

Kea uttered a terse sigh. “And this neighborhood looked like it had such promise. Couldn’t find a job here either.”

Rordan said, “Did you try the central archive? My mom works there. Hard, horrible place but regular money.”

She shook her head. “Nothing but yokels. I stood out like a sore thumb.”

Fikna washed his food down with the last of his tea. He passed the mug to Rordan.

Rordan said, “Yep. A lot of farmhands send their kids there. There’s an attitude. But that’s what’s here.”

Fais poured Rordan some tea and he slurped a little down. She grimaced and turned away from him.

The Skipper said, “Okay, anyone here have any experience steering?”

The passengers shook their heads or answered in the negative.

The Skipper pointed at Noss. “You’re strong looking. We’re going to get ready. The booty will show you what you can do to help.”

Noss said, “Sure, I’ll lend a hand.” He emptied his mug over the side.

The booty exchanged a look with the Skipper.

Fais returned to the cabin, and Kea and Dalla followed after her. The Skipper and Noss put away the line, then strapped down the canvas along the hold. Rordan huddled near the brazier with Fikna and Codal. The coals had turned gray and gave off searing heat up close.

Codal grabbed a fresh smoke from his pocket and used the brazier coals to light it. His eyes tensed wide open and he hastened to place the smoke between his lips. He shook his hand and grinned at Rordan.

Fikna snatched the half-eaten biscuit from his foster-brother's grasp.

Rordan glared at his bro', who ignored him.

"Brother," said Codal, "I completely believe you had an encounter there. Brothers and sisters from other worlds visit us in flying bowls of fire using the power of ancient gods. There's all sorts of things brother. Things that the people in charge don't want us to know."

Fikna said, "Absolute nonsense."

Codal said, "Maybe it is brother. Maybe it is. Your brother's the one that had the encounter. Only a thing, brother."

Rordan shrugged at his bro's stare and slurped down a gulp of tea. Fikna started on the stolen biscuit.

"Forget it brother. We're heading out and it's going to be one freaky trip." Codal took a long drag of his smoke and exhaled into the damp, afternoon air.

The Skipper took command of the tiller. The booty cast off, then poled the boat from the pier with the help of Noss.

Rordan watched his neighborhood drift away as the lake's currents grabbed hold of the boat. The mist had retreated to the lakeside. The haze descended and Nerham's tower loomed into view. The settler manors, lined up on either side of the tower's base, took shape.

He imagined the retired founder of Nerham had a great view from his quarters at the top. Even the former chapel failed to match the tower's height. The idea of a

non-devotional building having such size made him uncomfortable. He didn't believe the story of the Tumbling Tower from the Tablets, but the eleven-story structure forced him to recognize similarities.

Fikna finished the biscuit. He stared with longing at the manors. "Finally, Rord. We shall live our lives in the correct fashion. I'll find my fortune, get settled, and we'll free ourselves of the mediocrity of Nerham."

Rordan swallowed the last of his tea. "I guess. I'm not sure either of us knows what we're doing. But I think this is the right thing to do. At least, I feel that it is."

Fikna smirked. "Quite a novelty Rord, you thinking."

He scowled at his bro', who smiled to himself.

The butty struggled to get the sail ready. Noss took instruction from him every step of the way, but the two of them coordinated their efforts poorly. The boat drifted with the current and moved out into the lake's open expanse. The Skipper steered to avoid a guidance buoy, shaking her head. She glanced at the brazier and frowned.

Rordan decided upon an explanation for his accident. A vicious fantom had turned the weather bad and played a trick on him. His shout had scared it off and the sky had returned to normal. He guessed they would reach their first stop today. The weather continued to improve and plenty of daylight remained.

His bro' left him alone and entered the cabin. Rordan figured he'd been ditched so Fikna could practice his charm on Kea. Pursuit of the gallant code made his bro'

prone to romantic situations. The amazing gift Fikna had for attracting girls made him envious.

Rordan sighed to himself. His bro' never seemed to get anywhere with them, though. Despite himself, he hoped Fikna would someday soon.

“Okay, brother. What really made you fall?”

Rordan luxuriated in the air that blew past his face. He answered without looking at Codal. “I don’t know. I thought it was going to come aboard—kill or eat us or something.”

The Skipper listened in.

Codal finished his smoke and tossed the smoke-stub into the water. “Hey brother, that’s a pair of lungs you got there. I thought somebody had gotten into a struggle. Freaked that Fais girl’s tangles out.”

“Really?” Rordan showed puzzlement.

The teenager grinned and turned his mug upside down over the side. A few drops of tea fell into the water. “Maybe what that nix brother needed was some tea to calm himself down.” Codal chuckled to himself. “Maybe brother heard about tea time and was mad he wasn’t invited.” He slapped the bottom of the mug like a drum while making a comical face.

A brief chuckle escaped Rordan. He stared at him. “You are one crazy guy, you know that?”

The teenager moved his face in close to Rordan’s. “Rump salad sandwich.” His breath stank. He turned away and entered the cabin.

Rordan caught a glimpse of Fikna's monopoly of the conversation inside. The cabin door closed and he turned his attention to The Skipper. She steered the boat with a practiced technique.

He peered out at the shore. The outskirts of Nerham were a series of cooperatives. Rordan thought about the farmworks and the volunteers who managed them. He'd heard Elder Ofen refer to them as freebers. People with too much spare time refusing to give official service to the Heartland.

The minister's last pulpeteering had been about the rise in volunteerism as a threat to everyone's place. Rordan failed to understand Elder Ofen's point of view. The freebers helped keep everyone fed and repaired everything for nothing.

The booty came over and dumped the brazier coals into a chimney-bucket, throwing up a number of sparks. He carried the bucket and the brazier into the cabin. Noss waited for him outside the door.

Rordan looked at the Skipper and said, "It's not far to Roiast. Are we going to pass through the canal and then wait before heading downriver?"

She nodded. The Skipper kept her concentration on the steering and her body in firm control of the tiller. "We'll anchor for the night on the other end. If there are any passengers available we'll take them on. How's your toe feeling?"

Rordan shuffled his foot. “Hurts. I’ll be okay. I’m just mad I ruined my shoe. I’m not even sure I saw what I saw. It happened so fast. Have you ever seen a nix?”

Noss listened in while he waited.

The Skipper wrinkled her face and pursed her lips. “No, I’ve never seen one. But I’ve been in many situations where their work was obvious. They can change the currents and slow you down. Or call in a fog so you can’t see. They can even hit your boat with invisible waves from the deep, try and knock you overboard.

“Actually, I’m not a steerswoman by trade. I’m a spotter, so land navigation is my specialty. The booty and I are operating this boat part-time for the academy’s expedition partnership. As the Dimmurians get pushed off their lands, we come in and survey it for future prospecting.

“They’re short-handed and we’re the most experienced people they have right now. The partnership is between expeditions and trying to bring in an approved steward. They have equipment like this boat. We bring in revenue so they keep making money on the books.”

He blinked and let her words sink in. “You sound like someone who belongs in a steward-hall.”

The Skipper nodded. “A lot of what I do is stewardship. It pays the bills, but I won’t be in this long. I’m more interested in being a forester for my neighborhood. I’d like to preserve the natural resources there from unplanned development.”

Rordan nodded. “Sounds like a great idea. Hey, I’m going to be studying there. Maybe I’ll see you.”

She smiled. “My office is in the community hall. Drop by anytime. The butty and I run a lot of small jobs. Tell your brother to come along. I can always use gallants willing to explore areas for settlement.”

Rordan nodded. “Sure. He’s looking to make his name in society, but he loves adventure and fun.”

The Skipper strained for a moment with the tiller. “He’s not actually from any money, is he?”

He measured his response with an awareness of the presence of Noss. “My bro’s an upper-cruiser. But his folks are on hard times and he’s hoping to do his part to turn things around.”

The Skipper said, “Good luck. Society in Ciriceval is territorial and stiff. He’d have more luck in the north, where amenity is valued more.”

He cringed inwardly. “This is his idea. Get as far from the neighborhood as possible, so what he does stands out more.”

“Sometimes fighting battles closer to home is what gets you more respect.”

Rordan puffed. “He can’t stand the rest of his family and they pretend that he doesn’t exist. I don’t know how far he’d get trying to impress them up close. I believe that’s kind of the point. That he do something they’ll pay attention to.”

The butty exited the cabin with a pair of life preservers in his hand. He offered one to Noss, who took it and placed it over his head and onto his shoulders. They made their way towards the fore of the boat.

The Skipper watched the butty and Noss tie each other's life preservers on. "Is studying at the academy his idea too?"

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. "Yep. He didn't want to be alone and I seem to be good at alchemy. At least I was in school. Maybe if I get some papers I could do observatory work or something. Recover lost secrets of the Eagle Empire."

She made a crooked smirk. "You don't sound convinced. I know you have to stand by your family, but don't do anything you'd be unhappy with. You'll only resent your brother and that's worse."

"I'll keep that in mind. Skipper, how does the butty feel about these expeditions, being a...um, Dimmurian?"

The Skipper said, "He needs a job. And maybe he can influence how things turn out."

He sensed she held back on him.

A distant thunderclap sounded to the north.

"Great. A north-fronter," said the Skipper. "That's going to make things fun for us downriver."

Kea exited the cabin and stood beside Rordan. She held a lit smoke of the same make as Codal's. "Any more slip ups Ror?"

He gave Kea a blank stare. Her nickname for him registered and he disliked it. “No, I’m done.”

She studied him. “I was afraid you were going to get hurt back there. You made a loud thunk when you smashed poor Fikna’s tankard.”

Rordan looked into her dark eyes and liked their intensity. Kea’s height and the way she carried herself made him nervous. He glanced at her thighs and found the experience pleasant. The girl’s overall appearance made him understand Fikna’s interest.

“What’s your sign?”

Kea said, “What, are you a stargazer? You into that?”

He scrutinized her reaction. She seemed worldly and self-assured to him, with a hint of danger in her voice. “No, it’s a hobby of mine. I do a lot of reading and I find the concept of star charts fascinating.”

Kea said, “Can you read my future?”

Rordan said, “No, I don’t do anything like that. I just like to know people’s signs and see if anything matches up. It makes for good chit-chat.”

She took a drag from her smoke and looked away. Kea exhaled, then slowly returned her gaze to him. “I’m a Scorpio. Is that bad?”

“No, it means you’re passionate and intense. You like dangerous pursuits. You’re able to know things just by knowing them. And you’re not one to be crossed lightly.”

Kea looked at him with amusement. “Do I look dangerous to you?”

Rordan laughed softly. “No, but Scorpio is a master of self-control. People never know there’s a volcano lying under the surface until you get mad.”

She laughed. “That’s me, volcano waiting to go off. What are you?”

He had a sensation of being put upon. “I’m a Pisces.”
“A fish?”

Rordan said, “Two fish, one swimming upstream and the other swimming downstream. We have choices, to take it easy or to work hard and find inner peace. We’re empathic, artistic, friendly, and wishy-washy.”

Kea took a drag of her smoke and exhaled. “Be careful, I might scoop you up with my scorpion claws.”

He hid his discomfort. “Maybe. It depends on what kind of Scorpio you are. A golden spirit, a gray ghost, or a bitter shade. A golden spirit flies high and is a noble protector. A gray ghost sits around and mopes all the time, and a bitter shade wounds people out of resentment.”

“Wow, you know quite a lot about it. What’s Fikna?”

Rordan strained to remember what he had learned about Libra and how to paraphrase it. People tended to be interested only in the fun aspect of discovery about themselves, or the people they knew.

“He’s a Libra. Fair, charming, and a leader. He’s a cardinal sign, so he starts things. Pisces goes along for the ride.”

She finished her smoke and said, “Come inside and tell everyone about their sign. I want to know about Dalla.”

Rordan followed her into the cabin, nearly tripping on the step down. His first impression of the cabin’s character was pleasant mystery. The warm, cramped quarters assaulted his senses with a multitude of rich ambiance. He saw polished brass, brightly painted woodcarving, and detailed lacework. The wealth of details overwhelmed him and he turned his attention to the passengers.

Everyone clustered around the hot stove. Along the port bulkhead Codal, Dalla, and Fais sat on a long, built-in bench that doubled as a trunk for storage. Fikna sat on a stool and bore no sign of his headache. A lantern hung above the stove and provided a steady flame-light.

Kea stood near the stove.

He maneuvered past her and waited beside Fikna.

Dalla said, “Here comes tripper.” Her voice carried a playful tease.

Kea said, “Hey, he knows everything about us. Tell him what your sign is.”

“Yeah?” Dalla’s eyes brightened at Rordan. “You into telling futures?”

“I know a little about stargazing. Enough to be interesting at hoots.”

“I’m a Capricorn,” said Dalla.

Rordan said, “That means you’re ambitious, reserved, and dignified. You’re also a little stuck up because you try to uphold a certain amount of standards.”

Kea laughed.

“Standards?” Dalla pondered the word.

Rordan said, “You were put here to remind people of the importance of advancing and improving yourself.”

Kea said, “Am I improving?”

“You’ve got a long way to go I’m afraid.” Dalla laughed.

Her laugh struck Rordan as wholesome and appealing. He reminded himself how Pisces was supposed to get along with Capricorn. Rordan resisted the temptation to flirt with her. She looked too attractive to be interested in him anyway.

Codal said, “Brother, I hate to tell you this, but that’s all doggity doo-doo brother.” He made a nasty sound with his tongue and squatted as if he were going to the chamber pot.

Fikna said, “What are you, then?”

“Libra. Go on, brother. Tell me about myself.”

Rordan said, “Libra is fair, harmonious, thoughtful. They’re an air sign so they love debate—”

“—Fair? Harmonious? That’s me.” Codal popped his eyes wide open and squeezed his lips tightly together. “Do I act harmonious to you brother?”

Rordan stared evenly at him. “You’re represented by the scales, so you tip one way and the other. Back and forth as you think about things. But when you make a decision, it’s weighed carefully.”

“If you put it that way, I guess it suits me. I’m full of air.” Codal did another squat and made the noise again.

Dalla said, “What are you, Fikna?”

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “I am a Libra also. I hesitate to place much stock in what Rord says. He is knowledgeable in numerous subjects. If only he’d put some of his studies to better use.”

Dalla looked at Rordan and said, “Fikna and Codal are nothing alike. That sounds to me like a flaw in your stargazing.”

Rordan heard the Capricorn in Dalla putting his statements to a practical test. “You have multiple signs. There’s one for your emotions and one for your thoughts. What people think of as their sign is just general stuff. It’s like saying ‘That guy’s from Parcwod’. You can make basic traits fit the person, such as they’re business-like, aloof, and so on.”

Codal whistled. “Dang, listen to that brother talk. He can say all sorts of doo-doo about it.”

Dalla nodded. She gazed at Rordan. “And you, Rordan. What are you?”

“Pisces. We’re friendly, artistic, wishy-washy, and the trashcan of the stars.”

Kea expelled a burst of laughter. “Trashcan?”

Rordan said, “We’re such nice listeners that we pick up on everyone’s troubles. People talk to us and say whatever’s bothering them.”

Codal said, “Right on, brother. Listen to this.” He squatted and made the noise again.

Fikna frowned.

Fais got up and went outside.

Kea took over her seat. “What was that about?”

Codal shrugged, “She’s wound up.” He rubbed his chin and peered at Kea. “What are you, sister?”

She smirked. “I’m a dangerous volcano that might explode.”

Codal nodded. “I guess we know who set that fire now, don’t we? I think it was you who tripped up brother Rordan here.”

Kea scoffed. “That’s me.”

He eyed her. “Okay sister. I’m not going to force you to confess. You must have your reasons.”

Dalla looked at Kea and said, “No, really. What are you?”

Rordan said, “She’s a Scorpio. Intense, passionate. They deal with complex issues like mortality.”

“Dang.” Codal laughed and slapped his knee. “See, I knew it sister. You are intense. Now listen to my

passionate sounds.” He made his squat and noise routine.

Kea squinted her eyes at him. She fluffed her hair forward into a tangle. Her hands extended toward the stove and a rattle grated in her throat.

Codal sputtered and put his hands up. “Whoa, what the buccaboo?”

Kea’s whisper rumbled. “There’s a nobody here.” She searched the cabin with her gaze and her hands followed the direction of her eyes.

Rordan watched with clenched teeth. He recognized Kea’s performance style and her actions appalled him.

His bro’ smiled in amusement. “Would you explain what this nobody is doing on the boat, then?”

Kea shook her head vigorously and her hands trembled. “Hiding.”

Smirking, Fikna raised an eyebrow. “Hiding from what, I might ask?”

“From self-discovery.” Kea broke out of her trance and smiled at the stares she received.

Dalla yowled. “That was amazing. How did you do that?”

Kea shrugged. “I don’t know. I never tried pretending before. I didn’t know I could act that well.” She looked smug at Rordan.

Codal slapped his thigh and grinned. “Dang, brother. With an act like that, you’re going to have to squeeze hard.”

Fikna nodded. “Marvelous. An amazing performance.”

A smile masked Rordan’s dread. He hadn’t been mesmerized by her spiritualist display, though she seemed to have wowed everyone else.

His memory went back to a rustic transformation he and a friend had tried and he shivered. He had read about how Scorpions enjoyed the thrill of risky pursuits. Rordan hoped she wouldn’t perform such a dangerous routine again.

Kea reached into her line bag and retrieved a cedar comb. She combed her hair back into shape and said, “Boom.”

CHAPTER 5: CLOSE CALL

Rordan failed to stay asleep. He opened his eyes and peered about the hold. The canvas above had been disturbed and not closed all the way. Enough daylight came through for him to see the sleeping forms bunched together around him. He didn't hear the sound of rain anymore. Kea rested her head against his left shoulder. Between and facing them, Fikna slumbered in a pair of soft warmers and a thick dryad-weave. Codal's bedding lay open and empty.

He nudged Kea away from him and inched upright. Cold air seeped over his body as soon as he disturbed his own warmers and weave. The muscles of his arms and lower back ached. The slow drudgery of yesterday's poling through the lock canal returned to his thoughts. He remembered how every passenger had been dog-tired at the end.

The needs of his body required attention. Rordan rolled his bedding against the backpack. He pulled on his coat and grabbed his mug. With a soft groan, he stood upright and climbed from the hold.

From the deck, Rordan took in his surroundings. The boat lay at anchor on the other side of the long canal, along the side of the Hopinfam River. A two-person sailboat bearing the name Cornel was anchored twenty feet away. Bold symbols and bright colors decorated the wood. The window on the side of the tiny cabin was curtained. A rusty lantern hung from the mast and wasted fuel.

On the riverbank, the canal worker from last night inspected the first lock. Rordan cringed at the memory of the man's putrid breath and yellowed teeth.

A pair of drivers sat on the stone wall of the canal gate and drank from their beerskins. Their tethered horses idled near the lock cottage. Rordan recognized the body language of the drivers and understood they noticed him, even as they ignored his presence. He imagined they made fun of him.

Smoke rose from the cabin chimney. Rordan smiled at the possibility of a warm drink and the smell of something meaty to eat. Codal stood beside the brazier and enjoyed a smoke. The brazier held a new pile of ignited coals.

The guy noticed him and waved. "Hey brother, I see you slept like a log. Come on down and hang with a brother, brother."

Rordan said, "Just a second." He used the chamber pot on deck to take care of his business. The morning cold seeped into his body more. He looked up and saw an overcast sky.

Mindful of his injured toe and the water below, Rordan made his way aft.

Codal took a drag from his smoke and offered it to him.

Rordan refused with a wave of his hand. "I don't smoke."

Codal said, "You ever try one?"

“Nope.”

“You are something else, brother. Once we get going, I’ll need the tobacco high. The Skipper was talking to the drivers over there. Word is there’s a clogger in the river today.”

“What’s a clogger?”

Codal said, “Dang if I know, brother. Sounds bad, whatever it is.”

Rordan stamped to get the cold out of his system. The coals clicked and smoked, still short of the point of noticeable heat. He clutched the mug close and huddled his arms.

Codal said, “You should let Dalla give you a rub down. She gives good hand, brother.”

Rordan smiled at him. “I saw. My bro’ was a little shocked to see her give one to you.”

“Yeah. Your brother is a tight one, brother. He needs to free his mind and let loose.”

Rordan said, “He’s all right. I’ve never seen anyone give a massage before. I thought it was something you went to a panderer for. I guess I don’t see anything wrong with it. It looks harmless enough.”

Codal chuckled. “Brother, your neighborhood is one blocked up rump.” He took another drag and blew smoke upwards. His manic eyes followed the cloud as it diffused through the cold air.

Rordan ignored the rude statement. “Your name doesn’t sound Dimmurian. What’s the story behind that?”

Codal said, “When a brother has a Seltish name, a lot of paperwork goes easy. And easy is the way I roll, brother. How you feeling after all that polling yesterday?”

“I feel like blazes. Poling stinks. This boat must weigh several tons.”

Codal pursed his lips together and nodded. “I hear you brother. Looks like Noss is up. Hey brother, come on down and hang.”

The teenager joined them. “Hey man. Got one to spare?”

Codal simpered. “Always got a spare for a brother, brother.” He produced a smoke from his pocket and passed it along to Noss, who lit it off of Codal’s with a practiced motion.

Rordan found the number of smokers on the voyage an annoyance he could do without.

The cabin door opened and the Skipper came outside. “Good morning. Noss, get everybody up if they aren’t awake yet. It’s getting late and we have to waste some time checking out a water hazard. Crow for anyone who wants it. Sausage and eggs with hardtack leftovers for anyone who feels like working.”

Noss went back to the hold.

Rordan hadn't seen a coop or any peddlers. He was glad of the Skipper's consideration. She'd claimed to be a spotter, after all.

He caught a glimpse of Fais in the cramped quarters. She cooked the group's meal with practiced timing. The booty poured himself a tankard of fresh crow from a billycan. The sight of a serious breakfast in its final stages pulled a grumble from Rordan's stomach.

Codal placed his smoke on the edge of the brazier and clutched his mug. "Time to strike, brother." He walked into the cabin.

Rordan followed after him. The two of them each grabbed a piece of hardtack from the tin on the shelf. They used the surface of the flat biscuit as a dish to hold their hot eggs while they both scooped up a pair of sausages from the ready-plate. The sausages were wolfed down.

Fais snapped at them. "Leave some for everybody else."

The booty gave Fais a weary look. He poured Codal some crow and hung the billycan from a polished brass hook over the stove. He then brushed past Fais and left the cabin.

Codal followed, closing the door behind him.

Rordan sat down on the bench and ate the rest of his breakfast. Fais looked haggard to him. He puzzled over why the girl traveled alone. She'd insisted on sleeping in the cabin.

“Any tea?” He rubbed greasy fingers on his coat.

Fais huffed. “In the round tin, but you’ll have to take it loose.”

Rordan said, “Sure, sounds good.” He located the tin and dumped a measure into his mug. The dry, aromatic leaves received a pour of steaming water from the hot kettle. Rordan returned the kettle to the stove hook and managed to burn the side of his right wrist on the metal.

“Ow.” He hugged the wrist to his chest.

Fais said, “Be careful. Everything’s burning hot.” She scooped the current round of eggs and sausage into the ready plate and started another round.

The noise of people stirring and bumping about came through the bulkhead. The recognizable sound of someone using the chamber pot followed.

Fais said, “Gross. I could hear it every time someone went last night.” She struggled with a stuck piece of ruined egg.

Rordan said, “That’s probably Noss. Give him that egg.” He smirked.

Fais gave him a confused look. Her expression changed into a reserved smile. “Your brother isn’t sore at me, is he?”

“For what?”

She looked surprised. “For turning down his offer. He didn’t tell you?”

Rordan shook his head. “He doesn’t tell me everything. We’re foster-brothers, not best friends.”

Fais said, “I see. He offered to be my escort, but I turned him down.”

“Believe it or not, he really is a gentleman. You could totally trust him even though he’s a complete stranger.”

Her face stiffened. “I’m moved. But I have to do this by myself.” The grease in the pan splattered and she flinched.

Sadness moved through Rordan. He found her attitude baffling. “What are you striving for?”

Fais turned and flared her eyes at him. She radiated rage at him so strongly he felt afraid. He gazed at her eyes in suspense.

She turned away and stared at the sizzling food in the pan. “Some gratitude.”

Rordan said, “For what?”

“For doing what I’m told.” She moved a leaden hand and kept the breakfast round from burning.

He clasped both hands on his mug. “We all have to submit, that’s the rule.”

“Then why am I the one cooking everyone’s breakfast? While you get to dodge the levy and skip even the easiest level of worship?”

He flushed. Rordan couldn’t believe his life details had spread so quickly. A twinge of anger towards his bro’ added to the heat he felt on his face.

The door opened and the other passengers crowded in.

Rordan edged out the door and returned to the brazier. The coals gave off a steady blaze of heat. An unexplainable sense of shame came over him.

He blew on his tea and relaxed a little. His toe, sore muscles, and the cold air made him want to take a doze. The prospect of more poling repulsed him.

Rordan caught pieces of talk as everyone enjoyed breakfast. His bro' listened to the two transient women talk about their travels. Codal rambled on about music to Noss. The Skipper and the booty discussed going ashore.

Focus eluded his attempts to coax it. A sense of dread crept into him and he fought an urge to hide. Fais' words had put him out of sorts.

A voice inside him said, "She doesn't see that you're in blazes. You're ashamed because you don't know it yourself yet."

The dread turned into a mild panic. He wanted to be back home. All the excitement and exposure to people he didn't understand brought on a sensation of helplessness. The panic subsided and the dread returned.

He glanced at his bro'. Fikna had bumped into a few social walls yesterday. Now he seemed to enjoy himself. Adventure stimulated his bro', so maybe everything had been so different it had taken Fikna a day to adapt.

A thought struck him. Maybe this trip represented an ordeal to survive. He resolved to get through it and keep his bro' in one piece. Fikna needed his protection.

He gulped the steaming tea down, then handed the empty mug to his bro'. Fikna smiled at him and entered the cabin.

Rordan noticed Kea staring at him intently and looked away. His thoughts returned to his dream before the voyage. He decided he was reading too much into her attentions and spaced out.

Fikna rejoined him. "Most agreeable. It is a pleasure to acquire a steaming drink on a chill morning such as we find ourselves."

"Yep. You sleep okay, bro'?"

"Not particularly well I'm afraid," said Fikna. "The cramped quarters, combined with the odor and damp do little to agree with me." He blew on his tea.

"No jesting. Codal's feet stank. If I hadn't been so tired, I don't know if I could have gotten to sleep."

Fikna chuckled. "I appreciate your attempt to emphasize Rord. However, I refuse to be fooled. We are both in full knowledge of your ability to sleep anywhere upon command."

Annoyance crept into Rordan. "True, but it helped that I was tired."

Fikna said, "Insist upon your way then, Rord. I shall refrain from pressing." He caught a glance of Kea staring

in their direction and smiled at her. She smirked back at him.

The Skipper motioned for attention. “Now that you’ve all had some fuel, I have the latest news. Because of the rain last night, a clogger has formed downriver. In the traffic lane. We’re going to have to avoid it if we don’t want to wreck. The booty and I are going to go ashore and spot the best route past the hazard.”

Fikna raised his hand. “Pardon me, Skipper. Would you explain to us what a clogger is?”

The Skipper said, “A strong river current twisting into a circle. It sucks down anything that gets too close. Whenever there’s a storm they show up afterwards. It forces everyone to go around or wait it out.”

“Why don’t we wait?” said Rordan.

“That could take up to a week. You want to stick it out on this boat that long?”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth.

The Skipper said, “Unless the way is completely blocked, we’ll make a try. But we need everyone polling hard—no taking it easy. After this, you’ll all be in great shape. Plus, I’ll have a nice reward for those of you who gave it their best. Finish up your breakfast. Noss, grab a pole so we can dock.”

Noss wolfed down the last of his meal. Codal finished off the last of the eggs, greasy fingers juggling the hot food between two halves of a hardtack. Fikna finished off his tea.

The booty raised the anchor and the boat was poled towards the small pier. The stern fenders creaked with the shifting of the boat against the wood. The water level had raised enough to bring the side of the boat almost level with the platform.

Rordan watched Fais rinse the pots and pans with the last of the hot water. She scrubbed them vigorously using a rough cloth. Her hands swelled and her face reddened with the effort. His sense of shame returned and he felt faint.

Fikna handed the empty mug back to Rordan. “I declare, this river travel business is a great amount of work. We ought to have chosen the coach instead.”

Rordan frowned, keeping to himself an urge to grumble. “You didn’t make the plans in time. And it would have been just as crowded.”

Fikna sniffed. “At least we wouldn’t be involved in concentrated labor.”

“Look at it this way bro’. We’ll still be in one piece when we get there. All those coachers will be out of their minds from being through the meat grinder.”

Fikna put his hands in his trouser pockets and sighed. “I suppose you are correct on that score. One probably shouldn’t complain too much. However, it falls short of my expectations.”

The Skipper said, “Noss, stay and watch the boat. Everyone else, feel free to come with us.” She disembarked and the booty followed her.

Noss put a foot up on the side of the boat and crossed his arms. Everyone else followed the Skipper up the pier stairs.

At the top, Rordan took a moment to get accustomed to the damp ground of the horse trail. He saw smoke rise from the triple chimneys of a copyworks further in the trees. The thump and grind of tools at work reached his ears. His memory failed to recall the structure the last time he was in Roiast.

Down the canal path walked two teenage girls in gray work dresses. The unkempt one laughed and talked loudly while the comely one giggled and looked mischievous. They headed past the canal cottage and into the woods toward the sound of the tools.

Rordan grew embarrassed. His thoughts reeled at the reality of yokel girls really copying goods. He noticed the Skipper looking away from them with a tense look of emotion on her face.

She returned her attention to the passengers. “This way everyone. Don’t fall behind.” The Skipper walked the horse trail in the direction of downriver.

Fikna said, “Come along now, Rord. Let’s not hesitate further.”

The two brothers followed the group. The wide trail led away from the canal lock and in a slight descent ran close to the side of the river.

Rordan marveled at the large amount of late summer growth. It intruded onto the path from countless angles. Trees grew above his head and leaned over the river.

Enormous boulders and fallen trunks attracted collections of river flotsam. Shiny blue dragonflies hunted above the surface of the water. Yellow butterflies with black splotches on their wings fluttered past. His worries faded.

Yesterday's rains had swelled the river. The vigorous water moved fast and awed Rordan with its strength. The river possessed a line of rapids he estimated to be a mile long. The water leapt and churned in huge waves about hidden rocks. A way past the stretch of water hazard ran along the group's side of the river.

His folks had taken Fikna and himself to Roiast for a retreat three years ago. Rordan remembered playing along the rocks and making his mom nervous. Fikna had availed himself of the sandwiches.

He didn't recall the river being this swollen the last time he'd been here. Rordan tried to imagine the force behind the river and failed. The surface of the water moved so rapidly he soon lost any sense of volume.

Fikna elbowed him. "The current only appears terrible. Cultivate some optimism Rord."

Rordan made a glum face and said, "We haven't seen the clogger yet. Even the rapids over there look bad. The Skipper just wants to make her schedule."

Fikna gave him a curious look. "To what schedule do you refer? I'll wager she understands the river like the back of her hand. Wouldn't manage much distance if she didn't."

Rordan noticed through the morning haze that the sun had cleared the tree line. He imagined the damp air would soon grow warm. “She isn’t a steerswoman, bro’. She told me herself that this is a side job for her and the booty. I believe she knows what she’s doing. But I wouldn’t say she has the knack for it that someone who’s done it all their life would.”

Fikna frowned. He took off the Deep Uirolec loyalty hat and wiped his greasy hair back. “I pray all proceeds in our favor then. This is substantially more dangerous than I supposed. Perhaps we ought to have gone coach after all.”

As they walked, a watery din came within range of hearing and grew louder. Codal spouted random lyrics as if he were drunk. Rordan couldn’t make out what the guy said.

After ten minutes, they stood on a rocky area of the riverside. The trail continued over a rise of broken terrain and disappeared behind the top of the slope. Between a huge boulder and the rocky riverside, at the bottom of a small drop in the river, churned a whirlpool.

The roaring of the twisting water grated on Rordan’s nerves. He believed the whirlpool strong enough to grab their boat and drag it under. His dread returned.

The Skipper and the booty scrambled up a thick finger of rock jutting up and over the river for a better view. Rordan admired the athletic way they both reached the top.

Codal shouted at him. “Looks like a big rump sandwich, brother!”

Rordan nodded. He watched the Skipper and the booty talk and point amongst themselves.

Kea and Dalla sat on one of the rocks together and tossed pebbles at the riverbank. Fais stood by herself and stared at the water flowing past.

Two people wearing ‘tread-me-not’ loyalty caps came up over the rise of the trail. Both were geared for fishing and carried knives openly on their belts. A countryman bulldog followed them. The large-bodied canine had a short, silvery coat and turquoise eyes.

The bony, middle-aged man had lost the part of his left arm just below the elbow. A wooden prosthesis was attached in its place. He had a long greasy beard and a bulbous face. The stocky teenager had a withdrawn expression. They made their way past the group without a glance, the bulldog at their heels.

The appearance of armed yokels made Rordan feel exposed. He had thought the neighborhoods of the Heartland were more closely connected. It struck him the Heartland lacked the development he’d imagined. The Skipper’s talk about boat-ruffs returned to his thoughts.

Fikna said, “Didn’t the Deuce’s Road pass through here? I appear to recall a lesson of yours going on about that.”

Rordan said, “Yep. The advanced road system of the troglodytes. But it had fallen into ruin about the time of the first pioneers. I’m sorry, colonists. The Kgosians

wrote stories of parts still being in use somewhere, but it's all legend now. Just like the Deuce's Candle and Idol Island. The Troglodyte Prince's gold and the Fountain of Good Life. It's all a mystery."

Fikna studied the wide trail, flattened down by long use. "The path displays remarkable stability. Maybe we traverse the Deuce's Road now. Great Welkin, I dislike the sound of that."

Rordan smiled, snorted to himself. "The Kgosians looted it for the stone. By the time our people came around all that remained were the trails."

"Truly? I wonder why such matters were never revealed in history class."

"I don't know," said Rordan.

Codal took a seat with Kea and Dalla. Rordan studied them and noted how everyone was well into the grime of travel. Pretty soon, clothes would take on a duller shade and hair would stiffen. He looked at Fais and tried to fathom what went on inside her head.

Fikna leaned closer and said, "What is your opinion of our lone female traveler, Rord? She maintains an unfriendly face."

Rordan turned toward his bro'. "I don't know what to make of her. She's pretty self-absorbed. She also feels bad about refusing your offer."

Fikna said, "Fais mentioned the matter to you?"

Rordan said, “She hoped you weren’t upset. A conflict is going on inside her. It’s like she has to prove herself.”

“Most peculiar. I certainly consider myself rebuffed,” said Fikna. “I shall honor her decision, and I hope you shall do likewise. You are now a confidant.”

Rordan rolled his eyes. His bro’ had entered romance territory again. “Hey, doesn’t her rebuff count as a virtuous refusal?”

Fikna pursed his lips. “Don’t be ridiculous. My offer was no declaration. I possess no interest in Fais. My actions were simple politeness.

“Now Kea, I find favor with. Divulge to me your beliefs concerning her. What have you learned, my confidant?”

Rordan made a grimace. “She looks like trouble bro’. Attractive, but there’s a distance there that doesn’t seem like it wants to be bridged.”

Fikna nodded. “Exactly. These qualities make her intriguing to me. Unfortunately, I haven’t any idea of how to get her to notice me.” He glanced at Kea and smiled.

Rordan could tell his bro’ was undecided. Fikna would probably make a dummy of himself, trying to figure things out. The guy never knew how to act when it came to romance, even though he had the rules memorized. Rordan felt helpless to aid him. He didn’t know anything about girls either, and worried if he ever would. His protection of his bro’ had limits.

“Just talk to her,” said Rordan, “find out what she likes. What she wants to do. But don’t get all crazy over her. She’s older than you, and something about her doesn’t sit right with me.”

Fikna thought Rordan’s words over. “Splendid advice.” He walked towards and stood beside Codal, pretending to be interested in the teenager’s conversation.

Rordan thought no good could come of this.

The roar of the clogger drowned out his attention and he let his imagination wander. He sensed the presence of the fantoms. They probably watched him with curious expressions on their faces. His imagination conjured up the kinds of creatures that might live in the river, no matter how preposterous.

He thought of mermaids, the water monsters with hooked claws and needle-like teeth that dragged travelers to their doom beneath the water. They were like the nixes, but worse. Mermaids pulled whole boats down to a watery grave. Rordan felt an encounter with the clogger might end up just like in the ghost stories. Drowned or bashed against the rocks like so much wreckage.

The dread raced back and he fought against panic. His thoughts clung to the comforts of home. He regretted coming with Fikna on this voyage.

The Skipper and the butty descended the rocky outcrop. They returned to the group.

As everyone gathered in close, the Skipper spoke loud enough to be heard above the din. “Okay everyone, we have it figured out how we’re going to get by. We’re

going to steer to the left and have all of you poling so we don't hit the big rock or run aground on the bank."

Fikna said, "Why not utilize drivers along the side? It appears to me such a course would be safer, if slower."

"Because that costs money."

Fikna stared ahead in stunned silence.

The Skipper said, "Okay ballast rats, let's go. This is where you earn your discounts."

The group returned the way they came and the noise of the clogger receded.

Fais put her hands to her mouth and said, "Oh, my."

Attention focused in the direction of her stare.

Rordan spotted a large gray lump stuck in the tree roots by the river. He recoiled, knew the lump would turn out to be a dead body.

A hush overcame the group. With caution, the Skipper and her booty scrambled down to the riverbank and examined the body up close. After a minute, the two returned.

The Skipper said, "It looks like a Seltish man. I don't see any obvious signs of foul play. A local will notify the canal worker eventually. There's nothing more we can do."

Fikna said, "Our duty is to report the matter."

"That'll only slow us down, and we don't know anything. It's okay Fikna, this happens all the time."

Indecision clouded Fikna's expression. "Very well, but I protest this dodging of responsibility on your part."

The Skipper said, "Noted. Come on, let's not hang around."

Without further conversation, the group returned to the pier.

Noss stood with one foot on the edge of the boat, leaning with one arm over the rear of the cabin. He spoke with the two people who had passed the group on the trail earlier. The bulldog rested on the pier beside the stocky, withdrawn teenager.

The middle-aged man approached the Skipper. "This young man tells me you're going to have a go at that clogger today. You planning on using any drivers?"

The Skipper said, "Nope. We're going to pole it.

The man said, "You're going it cheap, huh? Eh, good luck to you." He shook his head.

"Stick around for the show. You've got nothing to lose."

The man laughed. "You got that right."

She bid the two of them a good day with a gesture and boarded the boat. The booty and the passengers followed after her.

Noss said, "Going to try for it?"

The Skipper nodded. She climbed to the top of the cabin and untied the extra poles. Everyone but the Skipper and the booty received one.

The middle-aged man and the stocky teenager left the pier. The bulldog got to its feet and followed them up the pier stairs. They joined the drivers. The middle-aged man talked with them; he pointed at the boat and shook his head. The drivers shrugged.

“Fikna, Rordan, Codal. You pole at the fore. Noss and Fais, you get the port aft side. Kea, Dalla, you work the starboard aft side. The butty is going to spot for us at the mast. I steer.”

Fais gawked at the Skipper. “Are you goating me? I can’t do this.”

“Face your fears, Fais. There’s no one here to judge you but yourself. I’ll lend you my preserver. Butty, why don’t you lend yours to Codal?”

While the life preservers were brought out and exchanged, the passengers took their assigned places. The Skipper poured the dying brazier coals into the chimney-bucket while the butty secured loose items in the cabin. The two of them then double-checked the securing of the mast and sail together.

Rordan waited on the Skipper’s direction. He remembered last night’s awkward teamwork and slow progress through the canal. The stiff and slow movements of the passengers told him they hadn’t recovered.

At a word from the Skipper, Noss cast off and the boat was poled away from the pier. The butty climbed the cabin and tied his waist to the mast. The boat left the safety of the canal space and entered the river’s course.

The current took hold and pulled them downriver. Rordan bent his knees and waited. The Skipper struggled to keep the boat as close to the bank as possible without stranding her. Kea and Dalla poled the riverbank a little, their arms pulsing with exertion.

Rordan's toe recognized yesterday's pressure of long standing and protested with throbs of dull pain. He frowned. The strain of poling hadn't even started and already his toe bothered him.

A rock lurked just out of the water near the shore. The boat had reached the rapids.

The booty shouted, "Fore push to the right!"

Codal and Fikna jammed their poles against the hard, immobile obstacle and helped move the boat away. The Skipper strained with the tiller and kept them on course.

The roar of the clogger became audible and the boat picked up speed in the churning water. The booty strained to see what lie ahead.

Rordan watched in alarm as the water bounced and splashed in muddy white bursts against the boat. The strength of the river surrounded him with fear.

The boat struck a sudden wave surge and the front of the boat bucked upwards. The two brothers and Codal tumbled onto their backs. Fais make a shout of surprise as she and Noss staggered to their knees.

The booty strained to stay on his feet. "Rock to port! Fore and aft push to the left!"

Fikna pulled himself upright and seized his dropped pole. He braced his foot on a mooring pin and pushed the pole against a rock that the bow approached. The fore of the boat moved past the rock with a quick grinding sound. Fikna whooped and hollered.

Rordan struggled to right himself. He caught a glimpse of Noss and Fais on their feet with poles at the ready. The rock scraped the boat once more, then passed behind them.

He looked ahead and saw the boat swerve towards the space between the boulder and the riverbank where the clogger waited a few feet beyond. As the noise grew louder, Rordan flailed on the deck. The pole had become stuck and his limbs were tangled.

Codal staggered upright and steadied himself. Another tremor shook the boat and the booty lost his footing. Fais' hood came loose.

Fikna jabbed his pole at an angle against a smaller, submerged rock. The boat twisted sideways and the starboard side of the boat moved to slam into the boulder ahead. Codal rushed to Fikna's side and added his strength against the small rock.

The Skipper strained to steer the boat to the left side of the boulder.

The booty hollered. "All push to the right! All push to the right!"

The entire aft crew moved to the starboard side of the boat and used their poles against the submerged rock as it passed. Kea and Dalla hit it solidly as one.

“Fore poles push forward and right!”

The roar of the clogger paralyzed Rordan with fear.

Fikna whooped, his voice piercing the noise. With Codal’s help, he pushed against the boulder. The boat slid by the immense obstacle with a scraping sound and away from the clogger. The current seized the boat and shot it past the twisting water with a burst of speed.

Rordan thought he heard a raw cry of outrage through the clogger’s din.

The noise faded and the river entered a dull stretch. The booty pulled himself upright and resumed his spotting. While Codal caught his breath, Fikna chortled with elation.

Rordan untangled himself from the pole and regained his feet.

The Skipper wiped her brow and blew out a breath. “That was close,” she said. “I gave us a fifty-fifty chance of capsizing there.”

Everyone grew quiet. Fikna looked sideways at the Skipper.

Fais re-tied her hair and put the hood back on properly.

Rordan thought she looked prettier without it. He wished traditionals weren’t so strict.

Kea and Dalla rested their arms and heads on the cabin top. They watched Fikna. Noss sat down on the side of the boat and stared at the deck.

Codal said, “Fikna brother, I thought you were going to go crazy back there.”

“Yeah,” said Kea, “you were on a rampage. I thought you were going to jump in and swim your way through.”

Fikna said, “You were all counting on me to do my utmost. I couldn’t disappoint you. However, the excitement seized a hold of me and I apologize for my outburst.”

Rordan caught Noss glaring at his bro’. The teenager resumed staring at the deck.

Fikna said, “Now that the worst has passed us by, I’m certain the remainder of our voyage shall be a supreme outing.”

Codal shook his head.

The booty said, “Look alive, people.”

The conversation ceased. Rordan helped the boat maneuver past a block of debris and a stretch of mild rapids. His fear of the water came and went in surges.

The boat entered another lull in the course of the river. Rordan rested against the cabin with his weight off his right foot. His toe had turned numb and his arms felt like thickened clay. Fikna’s excitement had diminished. His bro’ still looked better off to him. He noticed the sun had broken up the clouds.

The Skipper passed along a beerskin. Everyone took a drink.

Codal pulled a cotton hat from his back pocket and put it on. The brim separated into two flaps like a mouth.

A red piece of cloth stuck out from between them. He looked at Rordan and said, “Hey brother, how about some of your rustic rhyme to pass the time?”

Rordan cast a tired look at him. “What did you have in mind?”

The teenager shrugged. “I was hoping you could jump us up with a routine or a bit. But if you ain’t got one brother, that’s okay.”

Fikna said, “Do you appreciate Deep Uirolec?”

Codal snorted. “Those guys are soft. Blackcap Tuan and Flamejar Bernt smash their pose.”

Noss chuckled. “That’s not exactly a folk favorite bunch.”

“I’d love to see them get famous and sung more than those Uirolec humpers,” said Codal. “Everybody’s wanting to hear them play. It’s sad to see songsters reduced to playing that doo-doo. Especially when there’s a lot more sideways unallied loyalty out there.”

Rordan said, “You don’t think Deep Uirolec is perilous?”

Codal laughed. “Brother, those guys have sold out for big peers to settler management and could care less. The Blackcap and the Flamejar deserve it more because they make better songs.”

Noss said, “Then they’d be exactly like Deep Uirolec and you’d be pushing some other party.”

Fikna said, “I have a rich fondness for Deep Uirolec. Their music is emotional and inspiring. They represent

peril with a conscience. One has only to listen to their earliest music. They've matured, I venture. They might make less perilous music. However, I find their last direction greatly moving."

Rordan nodded, "Yep, have to agree. Those songs from their fourth set sent me places I'd never been before."

"And where was that brother?" Codal put his front teeth over his lower lip and stared at him.

"Places inside my head. Feelings get stirred that become so strong I can see visions."

Kea laughed. "Visions? I never got that hearing a songster perform them. They always seemed average to me."

Dalla said, "Hey. If he saw visions, that's cool. I never see anything when I hear my favorite music. Rordan, what kind of visions do you have?"

"Stuff. Things that happen far away, or that might happen. Sometimes I see secrets long buried that nobody remembers anymore. They just come to me, but I don't know what any of it means."

Kea scoffed. "Are you sure you're not a stargazer?"

Rordan shrugged. He regretted his revelation about visions to the group.

Fikna narrowed his eyes at him. "Rord, you would have made a splendid minister. I think you missed your calling."

He gave his bro' a sour smile. "I should have been a performer. That was my calling."

Noss chuckled. "A performer?"

Rordan nodded. He gazed out ahead and hoped for a river hazard to distract people's attention. "I tried to be one for a while, but the whole business got to be no fun. So I quit."

Fikna said, "Elder Ofen, the minister who passed away in the fire, started an Empyrean performance group for the school. Rord joined up and did a number of parts. He quit because the director for the last one, the minister's pet, always gave him difficulties."

Kea turned serious. "Rordan had a reason to dislike the minister?"

Fikna shook his head. "Hardly. Elder Ofen was a decent man and I thought Rord was fairly good. He allowed other people's opinions to persuade him into giving it up. A mistake, if I do say so myself."

Kea said, "That doesn't mean your brother didn't feel resentment. Do you know how Rordan felt about the minister? Maybe he left for some other reason."

Fikna gaped at her. "What is your meaning? Are you suggesting Rord was forced out? He never mentioned such a story to me."

Dalla looked at Kea and said, "It sounds like you're saying Rordan had a reason to set the fire because he was chased out."

Rordan hoped someone with some sense would change the subject. Hysteria started with these kinds of talks and it always ended with a dog-pile, or a griller.

Fikna said, “That’s a rude insinuation to make Kea, if that’s what you mean. Explain yourself.”

She laughed. “It’s nothing. I’m just curious to know what Ror’s story is. It seems strange that you’d be leaving the neighborhood right after a tragic fire. Your brother talks about visions and yells at imaginary monsters.”

Noss chuckled once. “She’s got a point.”

Fikna looked at his foster-brother for guidance.

Rordan couldn’t speak. He sensed his bro’s next words were of great importance.

“I realize there may be circumstances of unusual appearance to you, who do not know Rord and myself. I knew Elder Ofen and I considered him a respectable minister. He enjoyed Rord’s attendance in his shows. I have a difficult time thinking he forced Rord to quit.

“And I understand my foster-brother well. If I thought for a moment he was responsible for arson, I wouldn’t hesitate to refer him for treatment. Regardless of family.”

For a moment, Rordan feared Kea would press the matter. He sensed her getting close to a sore spot with his bro’.

She laughed. “No need to get excited. I find it odd, that’s all.”

Rordan relaxed. He found he could speak again.

“I was never fond of Elder Ofen. But even if I hated him I’d never hurt him. I left because the showgroup was turning into work. Everyone was taking it so seriously and I just didn’t. I was doing it for fun. The only reason I signed up was because this girl Fikna liked was angry at me for not joining.”

Codal chuckled. “Your brother got you hooked into one of his schemes to scope out a sister, eh brother?”

Rordan nodded.

Fikna said, “Dianan was an interesting girl. With you working the play I could pass backstage and have a reason to mingle. It worked well.”

“Except you never courted her,” said Rordan.

Fikna was taken aback. “I was unable to consider it. How does one approach a worldly girl when one is so reserved as I?” He sighed with a flourish of expression.

Kea arched an eyebrow at him. “Fikna, I get the feeling you haven’t any clue about women.”

Dalla said, “Well, he better find someone to teach him fast. I nominate you, honey.”

She shook her head. “Dalla, you and I are too far past breaking in the young bucks. They’d better learn to catch up.”

The two young women guffawed.

Rordan chuckled. They spoke the truth about Fikna. But he knew he sat in a similar, if not the same boat as, his bro’.

CHAPTER 6: AN ODD COMPANION

Rordan took a drink from his beerskin and cleared his throat. He studied Sangham's haven. On the pier where the Mirthy Mermaid was docked, a seated fisher wearing thick trouser-boots untangled her line. Aboard a boat beside the Mirthy Mermaid, a steersman smoked a weathered brown pipe and cleaned his waterproof bags with a rough cloth.

Next to the steersman, a carter lifted a large wooden bucket by the handles onto a wheelbarrow. Brown eels swam in the murky water of the bucket.

Up the hill, beside the haven master's office, the Skipper and the buttly still waited in line to declare their manifest. Kea and Dalla stood nearby and bought from a street peddler.

The sun lowered behind the tree line. The last of the clouds gave way to a clear and cool night. The Mirthy Mermaid creaked against the pier to the ceaseless current.

He glanced about the boat. Codal and Noss sat on the deck in stunned exhaustion. Fais leaned against the cabin with her sleeves rolled up. Patches of sweat stained her off-white and soft gray clothes dark. A teenager with the dyed amber hair of an errand runner turned away from Fikna and sprang onto the pier.

Rordan handed his bro' the beerskin.

With slow effort, Fikna squeezed a squirt of warm beer into his open mouth and swallowed. He took a breath. "I had no idea the sun would burn so brightly late

in the afternoon. It's official, Rord. I am unhappy with this traveling experience. Find a songster and have him sing away my suffering. I am finished."

A tremor of warmth passed through Rordan. "I'm done too bro'. All this poling has made me sore all over. I'm going to nap like there's no tomorrow. And so will you."

Fikna nodded. He sniffed in the direction of the cabin's stovepipe. "Quite correct, Rord. I envision a hot meal for our pleasure, which shall speed our descent into slumber."

"Just relax, bro'. This is the hard part. And if I get my wind back, I'll do some bits for people."

The young gallant made the effort to smile. "I look forward to your talents. Do you envision my side of the family making an appearance?"

Rordan pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth. "I don't know. The errand-runner might take a while. You stick it out here. I'll see if I can't find a peddler selling some nectar. Maybe some snacky cakes too."

Fikna's spirits lifted a little. "That would be a refreshment worth idling for."

Rordan put away the beerskin. He grabbed his coat and pulled it down around him. "I'm going to go grab a nectar for my bro'. Anybody want something?"

Codal stood up and said, "I'll go with you, brother."

“Come on, then. Let’s grab something other than hard biscuits and dried fish.” He smiled and waved the teenager over.

They disembarked and walked the maze of piers. The two of them climbed the wharf stairs and found themselves surrounded by dirty warehouses and run down riverside establishments.

They passed the Skipper’s group. The peddler that Kea and Dalla had dealt with was already gone.

“We’re grabbing some snacks. We won’t be far off.”

The Skipper said, “Be careful. It’s getting late.”

Rordan waved and the two of them pressed on. Codal located a peddler down the street and flagged him down. The middle-aged, pale-skinned man had crooked teeth and wore drab, red and brown clothes.

The peddler refused to go lower than seven pawns for two bottles of coal-nectar. Rordan thought the price a little steep for such a disposable luxury. Libras needed regular comforts and his bro’ followed the norm. He decided to accept and forgot about the snacky cakes. A bottle ended up in each of his deep coat pockets.

Codal bargained with the peddler for three packs of smokes and failed to get the man lower than eight.

While the guy paid for his smokes, Rordan looked to his side. He noticed a teenage pauper in an alley beside an eatery.

The girl crouched on huge feet beside a pair of refuse crates. Her large, wide hands clutched at her chest. From

the cracked lips of her unattractive face came a regular, low whistle.

Rordan saw only a teenage boy. He swallowed hard and a rage seethed inside of him. Tears welled up in his eyes and poured down his face. All fear in him vanished before a sudden need to destroy the cause of the boy's misery, even if it meant death.

The girl felt Rordan's gaze and crawled toward him. She made low whines and short whistling noises as she moved.

Codal spotted the pauper and saw only a teenage boy. He bobbed his head with a jerk. "Whoa brother. Time to split." He moved away with his gaze on Rordan, then fled back toward the haven offices.

The peddler saw a dangerous-looking teenage boy. He gaped at the pauper and stood paralyzed.

Rordan acted without thought. "The jar of sardines. How much?" His voice had a lethal edge.

The peddler stared at him. Hysteria crept into his voice as he said, "Take it. You can take it."

"How much?" Rordan drew out his money pouch and kept his livid eyes on the man's throat.

The peddler trembled. "Two...two. Take it."

He placed the bills in the peddler's neck tray. Rordan took one of the two small jars next to the wrapped snacky cakes. "Thanks."

The peddler backed away. He disappeared around the corner of a closed eatery.

The pauper clutched at Rordan's leg. She made a deep whine from the back of her throat.

Rordan flung his money pouch to the ground and kneeled. He grasped the jar ring and his face twisted in a silent, clenched snarl. A savage burst of strength seized him and he twisted the ring free. Rordan used the edge of the ring to pry the sealed metal lid off with a pop. Greasy yellow oil spilled over his hands. His vision blurred as he offered the jar to the pauper.

She scooped a bunch of the oily fish from the jar and consumed them.

A surge of heat rushed through Rordan's chest and he knew the boy would survive. A fresh round of tears dripped from his eyes.

A series of low hums emerged from her throat. She grasped the jar with both hands and Rordan released it. The teenager lay on her back and dripped the remaining contents into her wide mouth. She rolled back and forth sideways, then rested still. The pauper held the jar to her chest and stared at the sky.

Rordan wiped his hands on the backside of his trousers and retrieved the money pouch. He considered leaving the boy behind. If he gave some money or more food, his conscience might be clear. His mind resisted making a decision.

He returned to his senses and looked around. The shadows lengthened. People must have stared at him during his fit of madness. Now they paid a kneeling teenager and deformed pauper no mind.

His decision refused to be put off. He agonized over it for a minute. Nothing could be more obvious, yet the burden made him hesitate. He would have to defend his decision forever. No matter what he chose. His knees ached.

The pauper sat upright and left the jar on the ground. She crawled over to Rordan and pawed at his coat, leaving greasy smears on the oiled canvas of his coat. Her clothes smelled like a moldy blanket.

Tears streamed from Rordan's eyes again. The boy's actions seemed to him a form of gratitude. "Okay. You're coming with me. To Ciriceval. On the boat. I don't care what happens. Come with me. Will you come with me?"

The girl clasped Rordan in her arms and uttered a series of long, deep whistles.

He accepted the gesture in a daze. Rordan put his arms on the pauper's shoulders and felt transfixed by his decision.

"Okay buddy. You can be my other foster-brother."

His body twitched and the pauper startled. Rordan found his arm grasped at and a head rubbed against his shoulder. He got to his feet in a crouch and stood upright. His head and knees pulsed with agony.

Rordan took his new charge by the hand and said, "Come on. I have to get Fikna his nectar. Come on." He limped his way back to the haven-pier and the pauper accompanied him.

She stumbled at first. Once they reached the stairway down to the pier, she shuffled on her own. A thin smile appeared on her cracked lips.

Back at the boat, the Skipper negotiated with a young woman. With her was a three-year-old child. Two new guys, a teenager and a young man, waited behind the mother and child. The brazier was filled with ignited coals and nearby stood Fikna, Codal, and Noss.

Codal enjoyed one of his new smokes. He spotted the pauper and exhaled a puff of smoke. “Dang, brother. You brought that tramp here?”

Attention focused on Rordan and his new companion. Everyone saw a teenage boy. Noss sneered and made a soft chuckle. Fikna put his hands on his hips and frowned. The Skipper rested her arm on the roof of the cabin and peered at Rordan’s face.

His bro’ stepped onto the pier and faced him. “What in Welkin’s name happened to you Rord? Codal said you were accosted by a destitute. Is this disagreeable fellow the culprit?”

For a moment, Rordan didn’t recognize his bro’. He addressed the Skipper. “I’m taking this person with me to my destination. If anyone has a problem with this, let’s hear it.”

Fikna gawked. A stunned silence took hold of Rordan’s audience. The pauper cowered behind him. Kea and Dalla emerged from the cabin and joined the other staring passengers. They too, saw only a teenage boy.

The Skipper said, “He’ll sleep topside and away from everyone else. You’ll have to pay the fare.”

Rordan said, “I’ll pay. And I’ll stay with him on deck.”

The Skipper approached him and said, “That’s going to be sixteen pawns.”

Rordan nodded and opened his money pouch.

Fikna trembled. “That’s your academy money. Are you going to waste it feeding and clothing this excrement?”

“Shut. Your mouth.” Rordan squeezed a bunch of bills in his hand. “He’s my problem.”

“How can you take responsibility at a time like this? You’re supposed to be studying. He appears retarded—probably carries disease. Allow him to wander away on his own.”

Rordan shook his head. “He’s coming. Skipper, here’s your money.” He counted out sixteen in three bills.

The Skipper said, “Are you sure of this Rordan? If he becomes a problem or gets in trouble we might not be able to help you.”

Fikna said, “Give him a donation Rord. Release him from your concerns. You can’t assume responsibility for a destitute.”

Kea joined the attempt to dissuade him. “Why do you feel the need to help this boy?”

Rordan felt buffeted by the spoken and the unspoken. Her stare and stale tobacco breath irritated him. He stared back at her. “I had a vision, and the vision said I should take care of him.”

She laughed with a guarded look. “Are you sure you aren’t going crazy?”

Rordan recognized the same questioning Kea had used on Fikna earlier. In the fading daylight, her face looked rotten. Kea’s eyes burned into his commitment like tiny pools of black acid. His thoughts raced. He believed he glimpsed the real Kea, a drifter who meandered through life at the expense of other people.

“I’m taking care of him and he’s coming with me. I believe it’s important.”

Kea adopted a nicer tone. “Okay, your friend can come with us. But we both know that’s going to be tough on you and on us. Don’t you think we should have a say in this?”

Noss stood beside Kea. Rordan understood this act to mean the guy meant to join her side. He believed his next words would prove important.

“I won’t force you to take me along,” said Rordan. “But if I have to walk to Ciriceval on my own, I will. You have more than enough people. You don’t need me.”

Kea laughed once and crossed her arms. “You’re a strange one, Ror.”

Her dropping of the matter relaxed him a little. He held out his hand and passed the bills to the Skipper. “I’ll

stay topside with him.” As soon as he said those words, Rordan felt a sensation of relief move throughout his body.

The Skipper said, “Welcome aboard, Rordan’s new friend.”

He boarded the boat by the hold. With a slouched posture, the pauper skulked close behind him.

Codal walked up to Rordan. He turned around, bent over, and discharged a sharp toot from his rear end. “That’s what I think of that, brother.”

The guy stomped aft and entered the cabin. Kea, Dalla and Noss followed him inside. The sounds of nervous laughter emanated from within.

The Skipper motioned her hand at the new passengers. “Okay ballast rats, enough with the free show already. Let’s finish getting your fare settled and luggage stowed. Looks like there’ll be room for two of you in the hold now. Or are you still going to stay below, your lordship?”

Fikna shook his head. “I’ll be staying with Rord. Topside.” He boarded the boat and stood beside his foster-brother. His face showed blank surprise.

While his bro’ watched, Rordan moved their luggage onto the area of the bow. He secured the travel chest to a mooring pin with a spare strap from his backpack, then took out the beerskin and his dryad-weave.

Rordan offered her the beerskin. She looked at it, then at him. With a sigh, he demonstrated how to drink from it.

She took it from him and mimicked his movements. The beer made her pucker at first, then she drained half the skin. The youngster turned drowsy and yawned without a sound.

The pauper let Rordan wrap her up in the folds of his dryad-weave. She lay down and rested her head on the backpack. A nasal hum emanated from her throat.

Rordan stood up and gazed at his companion's face. Only large-pupiled, black eyes were visible past the edge of the weave and through her long, unkempt hair.

She closed her eyes and emitted tiny, regular snores.

The Skipper finished her bargaining with the new passengers. She came to stand beside the hold with her arms crossed.

The young woman and her boy loaded their luggage into the hold and took over the empty spots. Rordan liked her lush mane of hair and soft eyes. She had a lazy stride and wore an abundance of Dimmurian bracelets, necklaces and rings.

The young woman noticed his stare and beamed a friendly smile at him.

The child had brown hair and brown skin. His body was strong and his hazel eyes gave Rordan a magnetic stare without flinching.

The booty helped the two new guys stash their luggage aft. The teenager was lanky and wore a knee-length white outer robe, with shirt, hose, and shoes of dark colors. He gave Rordan a curious glance.

The young man caught and held Rordan's attention. He had haunting gray eyes and several days' growth of beard. His brown hair was stuffed under a rider hat with the rims pinned up on the sides. A tattoo of a fantastical horse could be seen beginning on the back of his neck. He wore a black, long-sleeved crop-top and denim trousers that ended above the knee. His rider boots were dark brown.

Rordan realized the child and the young man were mengans. Conversations from school came back to him about the ones called berserkers who loved to get drunk and start fights. His thoughts froze up and he felt awkward.

Fikna pretended not to notice them. He whispered close to Rordan's ear and said, "A poor choice of behavior earlier on that troglodyte's part. Most sordid and uncalled for, if I do mention it myself. I'm with you, Rord. Did you obtain the nectar?"

Rordan pulled a bottle from his coat pocket and twisted the cork free. "Here you go."

Fikna waited until Rordan had opened his own bottle. He toasted him. "To your good health."

They took long gulps.

The sweet, pungent beverage burned down Rordan's throat and washed away some of his fatigue.

His bro' said, "I apologize for my earlier behavior Rord. Besides, I ought to have known better than to attempt to convince you in that manner. Your actions are worthy of any gallant."

Rordan said, "It's okay. I'm not sure I'd have acted better if it had been you in my place."

The Skipper eavesdropped on the two of them.

Fikna frowned at her presence. "Have you a name for our new friend?"

"I hadn't gotten that far. He seemed pretty far out of it to be telling me his name."

The young gallant stood in thought. He took a long slug of nectar. "I comprehend. How about Borus?"

Rordan licked his teeth and sucked at the tangy aftertaste on his tongue. "Yep, that sounds right."

Fikna said, "You want to inform me of the details concerning your first meeting with Borus?"

Rordan stared at the soundly sleeping youngster. "I don't know. I felt this burning pity for him. I couldn't walk away without walking away from myself. I can't describe how angry I felt."

Fikna said, "Were the fantoms responsible? Did they persuade you to adopt him?"

"Whatever I went through was mine alone. They were miles away, I believe."

Fikna said, "It unnerves me to consider that there are still paupers roaming the streets in this day and age. How

could this fellow have avoided notice by a commissary trainee?”

“I don’t know. I wonder about my sudden attack of good will. I’m just not cut out for it.”

The Skipper said, “Rordan, if charity struck you tonight that isn’t a bad thing. I’ll take your friend to Ciriceval. But try to keep him from getting in the way. Fair enough?”

Rordan nodded at her. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

The new passengers approached the two brothers and exchanged introductions with them. The young man presented himself as Mungo. The young mother called herself Ivixa. She traveled alone with her child, who was named Eogan. The teenager went by the name of Bov.

Rordan found it hard to believe the coincidence of two women traveling alone. He couldn’t help but think about whether the mengans were safe to travel with. If the boy had a tantrum he might stab or bite them.

Mungo said, “That was some scene back there. But I respect your choice to bring the tramp along. The Skipper told me you’re a rustic.”

Rordan nodded. “Yep.”

Eogan stared at him with curiosity.

Mungo said, “That’s great. I’m an amateur songster. I can sing a few tunes, maybe even give you some background music.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “Sure, that’d be cool.”

Bov said, “Hey, what was all that about, anyway? What’s the big deal?” He fidgeted with his hands and pulled a piece of dead skin off his left palm.

Fikna said, “Good fellow, the explanation is lengthy. However, suffice it to say the last two days have been overlong. In these cramped quarters we will only continue to get on each other’s nerves.”

“It gets that way sometimes,” said Ivixa.

Bov pursed his lip. “Where are you guys from?”

Fikna finished off his coal-nectar and handed the empty bottle to Rordan. “We hail from the neighborhood of Nerham. I’m traveling to Ciriceval to make my fortune, and Rord here is planning to study at the academy.”

Mungo grinned. “Sounds fun. I’m working my way around the marts. Finally saved up enough for a ride to the next neighborhood. Heard the scene up in Ciriceval is pretty good.”

Rordan swallowed the last of his own coal-nectar. He grimaced as the bitterness burned his throat.

Ivixa smiled at his reaction. “You should stick to tea. That nectar will rot your teeth and stomach.”

Fikna said, “Perhaps. However, in the meantime we depend on the beverage to keep us refreshed.”

She smiled warmly at Fikna and shook her head. Eogan clasped at her leg and looked away from Rordan.

Bov looked up from his hands. “Wait a minute. The academy? You mean Regol Coros? Hey, I’m going there

to be a scribe. What are you going to study...Rordan is it?"

"Alchemy." Even as he said it, Rordan realized he had lost all interest in the subject as a study. He no longer wanted to be a sage. Rordan jammed the two empty bottles into his backpack.

Bov said, "Hey, that's different. I'm only planning on learning enough to get my secondary papers. Get an archive job or a steward-hall desk."

Fikna said, "A splendid idea. My foster-mother has managed a decent living for herself at the central steward-hall in Nerham."

"I'll be back," said Rordan. He walked onto the pier and away from the boat. His gaze rested on a wooden corner post in the shadows twenty feet away. He sat against it with his back to the group. The responsibility for Borus, combined with talk about his life plans, was too much. He looked out at the haven-pier and wished he wasn't so overwhelmed.

The sounds of the river came to his attention. He heard boats strain against their moorings and the faint sounds of conversation behind closed doors. On one pier, he spotted four fishers head toward a waterfront barrelhouse. They passed a patroller trustee lighting a streetlamp near the riverbank.

His attention turned to the evening sky. The stars came out strong and bright through the scant wisps of cloud. His entire body responded to the sight with an

unexpected sensation of euphoria. Strong feelings flooded into him and submerged his reason.

Rordan whispered to himself. “Maybe Kea’s right. Maybe I really am going crazy.” Sadness burned inside of him. “What’s happening to me, and what does all this mean? I feel empty inside, it’s all so weird.”

His body absorbed the evening cold and his limbs curled inwards against the onslaught. Rordan’s toe and sore muscles throbbed with pain at the position he assumed. He wanted to cry out, but only a damp choke emerged from his throat.

Rordan determined the feelings came from within him, not without. An image of a crack appeared in his mind, out of which flowed the feelings. A change in him had grown and broken open his life. He didn’t know whether to shriek or dash his head against the post. The temptation to lose his mind and stay in a state of timeless sensation pulled at his heartstrings. He could exist here forever and vanish from the world.

He pulled himself away from this mental state by degrees. “No, I’m not going to drop into nut-land. I’m going to walk away from this passion for now. I’m going to interact with people again. I don’t know how to talk to them, but I’ll try.” The feelings subsided and he returned to his senses.

Rordan believed the reprieve temporary. A premonition of no going back passed through his thoughts. He would have to face the madness again. His

cold body moved out of its stiff posture and he stood upright.

The buttly lit a pair of lanterns. He hung them from hooks at the end of removable poles, on either end of the boat.

The light reassured Rordan. He heard the Skipper's voice from inside the cabin. The smell of broth reached his nostrils and he noticed his hunger. His mind acknowledged its own mental exhaustion. He imagined his weariness as the result of a battle he had fought, in which he had only now noticed his wounds.

The buttly opened the coal bin in the floor and placed some fresh charcoal from it into the brazier. Fikna and the new passengers noticed his efforts and headed aft.

Rordan boarded the boat and stood next to his bro'.

Fikna said, "I dare say Ivixa, your story about the Dimmurian husking sounds most intriguing. You suppose there might be any in Ciriceval?"

Ivixa smiled. "I don't see why not."

He clenched a fist before his chest and pursed his lips in a lopsided smirk. "I can imagine it now, the brutal rhythms and strange delight of unleashing my burdens to the music."

The buttly held back a laugh. He mouthed a long "No" to himself.

Ivixa shook her finger at Fikna. "They aren't brutes, nor are they strange. Their huskings are how they socialize. They can be themselves without us telling them

what to do all the time. If you receive an invitation, do it to open your eyes.”

Fikna nodded. “Of course. The experience of seeing for myself would be exhilarating.

“Say Mungo, you wouldn’t happen to play any husking loyalties by chance?”

The young man shook his head, “I’m all about mellower and less rolling tunes.”

The booty said, “Any song would be welcome. Once we have our meal for the night, how about sharing your gift?”

Mungo put his hands in his trouser pockets. “Sure. I’ll do that.”

The Skipper exited the cabin. She carried a small ceramic jar half-filled with water and an iron tong.

From the serious faces of the people inside, Rordan understood she’d given them a lecture.

“Food’s almost ready,” she said. “Chicken noodle soup and some more hardtack. With a surprise treat at the end if you all play nice.” The Skipper put the vase down by the brazier and used the tong to move the coals around.

She reached into the jar and withdrew a handful of wet plant clippings. The Skipper tossed the clippings onto the hot coals. As they slowly heated and burned, the plants gave off an acrid, sweet smoke.

Rordan watched in awe. “What’s that?”

She shook her hand of water. “Rosemary. If you use a grill, the smoke flavors whatever you cook on it. But this is only to clear the air and scare off nixes.”

Fikna gave Rordan a look of expectation.

He nodded and made his way to the backpack. Rordan grabbed his mug and dug out a spoon. His gaze rested on the sleeping pauper.

He studied Borus’ face and shivered at the boy’s appearance. His new companion seemed both untamed and familiar to him. “Sleep, little one. Sleep.”

His bro’ came over. Rordan passed him the mug and spoon.

Fikna said, “We shall brave the deck together Rord. Though the cold chill my bones and the insects devour my life’s blood, I shall persevere with you.”

Rordan accepted his bro’s devotion in his heart and bowed his head. “Stick together.”

They slapped each other’s right hands.

“Always,” said Fikna.

Rordan moved his bro’s bedding out of the hold.

Fikna’s expression slumped. He lowered his voice and said, “Rord, no one paid their respects.”

“You can never tell with your side of the family. I guess they’ll visit tomorrow, if at all. Hopefully, we’ll be here.”

“They could easily claim responsibility to an earlier appointment,” said Fikna. “Most distressing, for I’d

hoped to experience the delight of beholding Alston and Cottia again.”

Rordan stretched his arms out and yawned. “They’re still too young to go off by themselves. Just wait it through. They have to send some word; they’re family.”

Fais opened the cabin door. “Supper is ready.”

While his bro’ joined the cluster around the stove, Rordan waited outside.

The passengers crowded onto the aft deck of the boat and shared their meal together. The Skipper and butty disappeared into the cabin, closing the door behind them.

Fikna returned and handed Rordan a piece of hardtack. “You appeared to be starving. Therefore, I brought you an appetizer.”

“Thanks bro’. You’re right.” Rordan savored the hardtack as he munched on it. He watched Fikna stir and blow on a serving of hot soup. The smell made his stomach tingle with awareness.

Kea stood close to him and ate with disinterest. Noss hovered next to her and asked about her family. She evaded his questions and got him talking about himself.

Rordan tuned out the conversation. He hoped it wouldn’t take long for his bro’ to get a clue. Romantic rivals always got the better of Fikna. He only wanted his bro’ to avoid getting hurt.

His gaze took in everyone’s activity. Dalla stood aloof against the railing and stared at Borus. He wished he

could read her mind. Ivixa handed her soup to Eogan and the boy took it with a practiced motion.

She started a chat with Fais. Rordan heard her mention a cave exploration and Dimmurian pre-colonist worship practices. Fais reacted with blank-faced strain.

He guessed she listened to Ivixa out of politeness. The child ate behind his mother's back and studied everyone in glances. Rordan didn't know what to make of the kid. He was too intense for his age.

Fikna finished his meal and passed the spoon and empty mug to him. "All yours, Rord."

Rordan maneuvered past Fais and entered the cabin. He took in the rich interior furnishings and tried again to make sense of them. His sight feasted on rag rugs tied to the floor, gleaming metal knobs and handles, and tin utensils resting above the portholes on tiny recessed shelves of stained dark wood. He saw paintings of roses and romantic landscapes, with the occasional stargazer symbol for the moon, stars and sun.

The butty tidied up the area around the black lead stove. He unlocked a cabinet and pulled out two tins. One had bright red and green labeling, and the other had a yellow and orange background on which black cats frolicked. The Skipper tossed some rosemary clippings into the stove and moved to the other side of the cabin.

At the far end, a pair of nets hung from polished brass hooks in the ceiling. The nets had been fashioned from bone white rope and tied with small, bright red rope tassels. They held changes of clothing, towels, and

washcloths. A folded hammock hung from a hook in the corner.

The Skipper unlocked a drawer under the far bench and secured the jar. Inside the drawer sat two wax-sealed green-gray jars and one open, reddish-white jar. Next to these ceramic containers was a small, reinforced coffer with gray-brown iron bands and rounded bolts.

Beside the coffer, Rordan spotted an oval picture in a dull glass and polished silver frame. The picture showed a family of pastorals in their black and gold colors. A father, mother, and two girls who wore white accents were depicted. His curiosity ached to know what secrets might be concealed throughout the cabin.

The odor of rosemary pleased him as it filled the cabin. He approached the soup pot and grasped the hot ladle by the kerchief-wrapped handle. As Rordan filled his mug, he glanced at the Skipper. “Is all this nice decoration your touch?”

She closed the drawer and it locked with a click. The Skipper regarded him and stood up. “No. The peryah who ran this boat was probably an actual steersman. I liked the style and maintained it.”

Puzzlement played across his face. “I thought peryahs were crazy people. It’s hard to imagine a member of nut-town keeping such a nice setup.”

The booty pulled out a folding table from the wall around the mast. He placed the tins on the table, then worked at pulling them open with his fingers. The Skipper sat down on the other side and took a small metal

flask from her inside vest pocket. She opened it and took a swig of what smelled like sweet-rum.

The Skipper licked her lips and rubbed her eyes. “Steersmen are a proud folk. The peryah may have been crazy but unable to let go of old habits.”

Rordan nodded and let the matter drop. He exited the cabin and resumed a place beside Fikna. His appetite took over and he had a spoonful of hot soup. The consistency resembled sludge and burned as he slurped it down, but the soup hit his stomach the right way.

He noticed Kea wore a monster mask. At first, he thought the mask a brief trick of the light. Rordan glanced around at the group. Nobody appeared to notice her unusual appearance.

His eyes caught another glimpse. A metallic strap held the mask to her face. The front portrayed a pallid yellow hag. The mask had an otherworldly, reflective light to it that made him uncomfortable. He couldn’t tell what it was made of.

He lost his appetite, but the urge to eat remained. Rordan nibbled at his biscuit and it lacked taste. The comfort of food had vanished. He decided to stay calm and see what happened next.

Kea turned to face him. Her voice sounded lifeless to him. “You all right, Ror? You aren’t spazzing out again are you?”

The sight of her eyes and lips moving from behind the mask disturbed him. He made a tiny shake of his head.

Noss said, “You don’t look so good, man.”

Rordan said, “I’m tired. It’s been a long day.”

She scoffed at him. “I hope you aren’t upset about what happened. We’re not used to your strange way of doing things.”

Noss said, “That’s for sure. Your brother, I can follow. But you, man. You don’t get out much, do you?”

Rordan considered what was behind the guy’s actual intent. “No, not much. What was that you were going to Ciriceval for again? A trade?”

Noss shifted his feet and switched his mug from one hand to the other. “I’m learning business. How to be a shopkeeper.”

Rordan aimed his words at what he guessed was Noss’ vulnerable spot. “So you’re going to the academy to learn how to be a practical?”

Noss shrank back a little and his voice lost confidence. “At first, yeah. But later on I’ll organize my father’s whole business.”

Rordan crinkled his face in thought. He let the expression sink in for a few seconds. “How does a handyman own a shop?”

Noss said, “My father will be the foreman and I’ll be the practical. We’ll hire...Dimmuriens to do the work.”

A nasty retort almost passed Rordan’s lips. He held the words back and nodded as if he were considering Noss’ answer. Rordan intuited his words had been Kea’s.

She must have been influencing him to make fun of Noss.

He stuffed the last of the hardtack into his mouth and looked around. Nobody had noticed her mask. Rordan thought he might be the victim of a prank, except Fikna didn't participate in group jests. His bro' left pranks to Abrafo.

Rordan remembered he'd seen Abrafo in a monster mask. His friend had scared him and for a moment, he'd thought he saw a mask on Abrafo's face. He hoped the two incidents weren't related.

Kea said, "Don't look so excited, Ror. You said you were studying alchemy. Have you always been good with formulas?"

He avoided eye contact with her. "Not really, I was just good in a few of my classes. And that was because I took the basic course. My tutors were disappointed that I decided to do that, but I didn't want to sweat anymore. I did very poor in my advanced arithmetic class. I fell behind and I vowed never to do lessons late into the night just to scrape by with a pass."

Rordan huffed. "I didn't study for the final exam and I failed it. I was so happy to be rid of that junk."

Noss fretted with his shirt collar.

Kea said, "Why didn't you study?"

Her questions distressed Him. Rordan didn't want to answer a young woman with a monster mask on. Her attention compelled him to speak.

“It was a waste. No matter how much I worked out the equations my numbers never worked. The tutor just let me fall by the wayside after a while. I was staying up late every night. I got to hating it and I felt betrayed. I took it only because my stupid tutor said I was so good I should challenge myself. I went from an easy study to a hard one and it stunk.

“So when Elder Coinim—my alchemy tutor—asked if I wanted to take the advanced course, I said no. He was disappointed in me and tried to get me to change my mind, but I didn’t budge. It was an easy class and I was around people sweating the mixtures. But I was happier.”

Noss parted his lips. He shook his head.

Kea said, “You don’t have to sweat in the academy if you don’t want to. But no tutor will try and convince you of anything. They won’t care.”

Rordan considered her statement. “That’s fine with me.”

Kea said, “Then why are you studying alchemy?”

“I don’t know. I had to have an interest and I was good at it.”

She smirked at him. “You were good at the basic class. This is going to be academy level study. Don’t do it if you can’t handle it.”

Rordan ignored his lack of appetite and finished the soup.

The Skipper came out of the cabin and motioned for everyone's attention. The booty stood behind her with the pair of opened tins in his hands.

She said, "Okay, ballast rats. Now that you've all had something to eat, here's what's for dessert—crackypuffs."

All the passengers cheered.

The Skipper withdrew a small rectangular tin and a handful of hardened wooden skewers from her vest. She pulled off the lid. Inside were squares of chopped chocolate, which she passed out to everyone along with a skewer. The booty gave everyone a pair of crackers and a puff from his tins.

Rordan joined in the line to get his allotment of treats. His turn came and he roasted his puff over the brazier. He put the burnt, sugary confection between two crackers, on top of the chocolate. With the enthusiasm of a starved bear, he wolfed it down in defiance of his fear of Kea.

He watched the young woman take her turn. Curiosity nagged him as to how she would eat with the mask on. She would have to force her treat through the mouth slit to eat.

A chill ran down his spine as she ate the crackypuff without incident. The act of eating happened as if he were in a dream. She just did it and no real world rules appeared to be violated, except they must have been.

Rordan feared he might be going mad. Or someone had slipped him a dispensary. He searched the pier with

his gaze. The place looked colder than it felt and radiated a mild fear he hadn't picked up on before.

His gaze turned toward the boat. The light shined brighter on his side, even though the lanterns were the same type. He looked out at the river. At the edge of the light's radius, a pair of large and glassy eyes stared back at him from the water. The creature sank its head beneath the surface and disappeared. Rordan decided to rinse his mug in the morning.

He sucked on the remains of the chocolate stuck to his teeth. His thoughts went back to the earlier mishap on deck. He'd felt a monster had tried to get on the boat. Now he knew for sure.

Ideas formed in his head and he peered over at Borus. The pauper must be magical and thus allowed him to see hidden things. He found it hard to believe, but Kea must really be a witch. Rordan strained to recall what he had read on them.

He remembered the nicer a witch appeared on the outside, the worse she would appear on the inside. Using changes to their appearance, a witch could work evil without anyone finding out.

His new sight revealed the truth in the form of a mask. Kea looked pretty on the outside, but she used her witchcraft to spread bad feelings between people. Unfortunately, a griller wouldn't view his seeing as evidence. Chances were, Kea's fast talk would get him roasted instead.

The conversation around him took on a weary undertone. Rordan nodded to himself. He imagined everyone's tired muscles and their stomachs filled with good food worked against wakefulness. His guess was the passengers would go to sleep soon. Probably after Mungo sang for them.

Rordan left the group and walked to the fore of the boat. He put away his mug and Fikna's spoon, and unwrapped his dentifrice.

While he scrubbed his teeth, he considered the sleeping arrangements. His bro' would probably insist on sleeping away from Borus. He decided to sleep in the middle and hoped he could help his friends if they were attacked.

A sense of guilt came over him. Rordan reminded his conscience of the monster in the river and of the witch on the boat where he hoped to sleep. A voice inside him mentioned his propensity to sleep through anything. Between the demands of his tired body and the self-preservation of not closing the eyes when threatened, he grew sleepy.

CHAPTER 7: TWO BREAKFASTS

Rordan opened his eyes to the morning light. His coat had slid partway off his face and Trad's unsheathed knife now rested under his right arm. His legs were still arched over the travel chest. He heard a person move about inside the cabin, followed by the sound of pots on the stove. Nobody stirred in the hold. Judging by the conversations last night, space had been tight.

His limbs resisted attempts to move. Between the mosquitoes and the hard deck underneath, Rordan felt beat. He managed to pull the coat off the rest of the way and looked about.

On his left sat Borus. The ragged boy slouched on the weave and stared at him. He found the youngster's ugly face uncomfortable to look at.

Rordan turned away, remembered the dream he'd had last night. Borus had stared at him intently while he slept. The full moon had silhouetted Borus' head while bathing the ground in hazy, enchanting moonbeams. He'd felt the boy waited for something from him, but he couldn't know what that was because he had to stay asleep. Rordan didn't remember what happened after that. He recalled only feelings of surprise and later, fear.

To his right slept Fikna. His bro' had jostled him several times during the night. Mosquitoes seldom bothered Fikna. Yet the way he had thrashed about, Rordan believed his bro' must have been darter dry.

The young gallant slumbered with hair flattened about in greasy mattes. Rordan smirked. His bro's handsome looks had dropped a notch in quality.

He took a sniff of his own armpits and realized he stank. His clothes were officially used now. They had a familiar mangy quality of having absorbed his sweat for several days. Rordan looked at the backpack and contemplated changing clothes today. At the least, the ruined hose should be changed.

His gaze rested on the town. He weighed the hassle of locating a shower station against how much it would cost and whether he had the time.

The cabin door opened and the Skipper appeared. She rested an arm against the cabin and smiled at him. "Good morning, Rordan. Ready to rise and shine? We've got another exciting day of poling for you and your brother."

A fake grin appeared on his lips. "Will we reach Ciriceval today?"

She shook her head. "Not until tomorrow. I have to buy a few more supplies before we head out. Then we head downriver until we reach the edge of Sebry Bay. At which point, I'll have us dock at an island I know. It has a good place to camp."

Rordan acknowledged her plan with a nod and struggled to his feet. Borus looked at him from her seated position for a few seconds, then staggered upright.

Borus' outfit caught his eye. The boy's clothes were faded and tattered from long use, but still identifiable as a

tracker's outfit. An insignia patch appeared to have been pulled off the front of the tunic, damaging the fabric. The leg ends of Borus' knitted stockings had unraveled. He wore a weathered leather strip around his neck, tied on with a tight knot.

He whispered to Borus. "Are you from the maidenland? Is that why you can't speak? You lost your mind out there?"

The pauper stared at him without comprehension.

Rordan remembered he could see hidden things and looked around. He saw nothing he thought unusual.

Borus whistled at him.

"Great, you really can't talk." Rordan hesitated. "I don't know your name. That's Fikna, my foster-brother over there. We're going to call you Borus. Is that cool?"

Borus gave him a blank stare. She took a soft breath and smiled.

A grumble passed Rordan's lips. He pulled on his coat and put away his bedding. The knife ended up sheathed and in his coat pocket. A memory of receiving the blade from Trad, his folks' best friend, came back to him. "Where's Trad when you need him?" He sighed and stepped onto the pier. Borus followed him with an excited step.

Rordan wandered the pier and searched for a peddler. He saw one and waved for the wizened man's attention.

The peddler wore a fisher's cap and sported a red and brown Sangham pattern sweater against the brisk

morning air. He had a packed line bag at his side and a sturdy tray of goods hung from his neck.

Rordan said, “Can I have a dried fish packet? And do you have any bread?”

The peddler reached into his line bag and produced a large roll. He chose a wrapped package of dried fish from his tray and said, “That’ll be three pawns.”

Money changed hands, and Rordan received the roll and package. He unwrapped the paper and handed the fish over to Borus. The girl knelt on the pier and wolfed her meal down. Rordan jammed the paper into his coat pocket and broke the roll into halves.

Borus finished her fish and received a half. She chomped at the bread until only crusts remained on the pier. A grin appeared on her face and she uttered two soft whistles.

“That’ll be for the birds, I suppose.” He broke his half in two and took a bite. The bread smelled fresh and tasted of sesame seed.

The peddler meandered all the way down one line of the pier and returned to start another. Rordan chewed his lip. He’d forgotten to get something for Fikna. His attention shifted in the direction of the boat and he saw the young gallant walking toward them.

Rordan said, “Good morning, bro’.” He extended the remaining quarter piece of roll to Fikna.

His bro' accepted the offering and made a slight bow. "Yes, thank you. I see you've attended to your friend's needs as well."

Borus batted at the crusts with her hands. She looked around the pier, then stared at Rordan and cocked her head. The girl stood up.

Fikna said, "He does present an unwholesome odor. However, no worse than any animal. Still, we ought to ensure he manages some manner of shower. Indeed, I myself could use some assistance on that matter." He adjusted his Deep Uirolec loyalty hat and examined the wrinkles of travel in his clothes.

A mosquito bite on Rordan's knuckle acted up and he scratched it. "Yep. Bro', how about we walk around the pier for a bit. Let the others take care of any chores the Skipper puts on them. I have some things I need to tell you."

"A peddler resides over there by the stairs," said Fikna. "Let us acquire a measure of coal-nectar for ourselves. Then we may discuss matters while we partake. What say you?" He produced the two empty bottles from his coat pockets.

Rordan nodded. "Way to think ahead." He looked at Borus and said, "How about it Borus? Want to come with us for a little bit?"

She uttered a hum and looked around in confusion.

Rordan put a hand on the pauper's shoulder. "Let's go."

The three of them walked down the maze of piers, toward the stairs at the base of the haven. Fikna waved the wizened peddler down and negotiated for two bottles of coal-nectar. He ended up trading the two empty bottles and five pawns for them.

The foster-brothers sat down together on a rotten wooden beam by the steps. Borus stood in front of them while they uncorked the bottles.

Rordan said, “Bro’, what I’m going to say will sound really weird. But I believe in what I’m saying. While I’m still not exactly sure what’s happening, we should be careful.”

Borus sat down on the wooden boardwalk and stared into the distant trees on the other side of the river. She listened hard for a minute.

Fikna took a sip of his coal-nectar and grimaced.

Rordan said, “Ever since we went on this trip, I’ve been getting funny feelings. Last night, I started to see things that were really weird. I saw Kea and she was a scary witch. She means everyone on the boat harm.”

Fikna took a drink from his bottle and waited.

Rordan stared at him.

“I will grant you, some peculiar things have occurred recently. However, Kea a witch? Where’s her familiar? Her interest in magic appears non-existent. She scoffs at your stargazing, your speech about visions, and the like.”

“Do you scoff at them?”

Fikna sighed. “There are moments you make me extremely uncomfortable Rord. You have an over-active imagination and daydream more than is healthy. Such quirks normally make you an outstanding rustic.

“However, you haven’t presented any of your routines on this voyage. I’m terribly surprised at you. Are you certain you aren’t letting your imagination wander further than is healthy? Perhaps you could perform tonight? Such a gesture would mend feelings after last night’s embarrassing scene.”

Rordan said, “How do you feel about Kea?”

Fikna smiled. “She’s pretty, her bosom is ample, and she matches my height. I can imagine what getting my hands on her might be like. In short, I’m drawn to her.” He took a sip of his nectar.

Borus turned to look at Fikna. She hummed at him.

“Bro’ if she’s a witch then she’s just charming you. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was charming every guy on the boat.”

Fikna gave him a peevish look. “What causes you to mention such a thing? Have you witnessed other suitors showing an interest in her?”

Rordan nursed a sip from his bottle. He frowned at the taste and said, “Yep. That Noss guy. It’s obvious that he has the hots for her.”

Fikna sniffed. “That detestable yokel? He possesses a brain scarcely above that of a...” He noticed Borus’ stare. “Ahem. I mean he appears not too bright. I’m

unconcerned with regards to his interest. The Skipper and her booty appear to be involved. Codal is too unbalanced to have any interest in the fairer side. Mungo and that Bov fellow remain to be seen in action. I fail to discern a great deal of competition here, Rord.”

Rordan took a long drink from his bottle and swallowed with a gasp. The acrid liquid burned his throat and hit every nerve going down. “Look, she’s bad news. I don’t know why you’re interested in her. You’re not looking to get married yet, are you?”

“Hardly. However, the time has arrived to gain worldly experience. As I seek my fortune, I am obligated to pursue romantic adventures.”

Disbelief played across Rordan’s face.

Fikna said, “How is it you regard me with such an expression? I am expected to become a man one day. The matter is best resolved sooner rather than later. Kea appears to be the sort of girl who might educate me.”

Rordan rolled his eyes around. “Are you goating me? You’re traditional. Are you just tossing that out the window now? When did this change?”

Fikna smirked. “See here Rord. It’s not as if I’m taking advantage of a virtuous maiden. A girl like Kea is already experienced. She’s nonconformist. I’d prefer to understand a thing or two to teach my wife when I do get married. It’s my responsibility as a man to take care of this aspect of my upbringing.”

“Now who’s daydreaming?” Rordan shook his head. “You and I both know you won’t get anywhere with her.”

You're afraid of girls, period. How long has your group of admirers at the chapel been waiting for you to court them? You put it off with this pretense of friendship. Is that your idea of becoming a man? It's fantasy."

Borus studied the young gallant's reaction.

Fikna narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. "You are skilled at driving the verbal dart home. I desire some form of romance during my search for fortune, is that too much of a request?"

Rordan softened. "I'm sorry. I know you just want to have a sweetheart. Me too. I don't know why we're such a bunch of losers. You bring 'em for miles but can never take advantage of that. I always run away. Maybe we're cursed."

The sun broke the horizon of trees and Fikna squinted. He finished his coal-nectar and handed the empty bottle to Rordan. Fikna rubbed his wrist with his thumb.

"What you mention is accurate, Rord. I often contemplate that turn of phrase. Cursed. I desire a normal life where I may earn a decent living, raise a family well, and earn enough honor to be proud of. I'm frightened, Rord. What if I become a failure? My thoughts are brought down by the weight of my family. My responsibilities seem insurmountable. I flounder over what I think is expected of me. The competition between myself and my cousins is wearing my nerves thin."

An ember of rage at his bro's burdens flared inside Rordan.

Fikna said, “Last night, I experienced an unwholesome slumber. I dreamt I was unjustly imprisoned in a mountain castle. A frigid wind blustered through my open window and I was without sustenance. My predicament was known to none. I sank into dejection and remorse, and felt a hundred imps torment me with sustained aches.

“I awoke, or at least I believed I did. I found myself casting glances about the boat in the middle of the night. Everyone remained asleep and the lanterns had gone out.

“Despite the darkness I knew there was an unholy creature lurking on the pier. This cruel demonic horror had been the source of my torment.”

A shudder passed down Rordan’s back.

Fikna said, “I managed the sign of the rood and the creature snarled, or perhaps I perceived it as such. The creature flew away in a harsh gusting of wind. I had the thought that the unwholesome thing had attempted to board the boat and I had prevented this. The only matter I could contemplate was the People’s Prayer, which I repeated until I returned to sleep.

“An unseen hand placed my covers over me again. The touch was familiar. However, I failed to place to whom it belonged. I heard a voice say, ‘Accept.’ I tried to open my eyes to find out who spoke. I awoke for certain this time, only to find you and Borus had departed.”

Rordan said, “Sorry about that. It sounds like you know some of what I’m talking about. What happened

with me the first day when I fell down. I felt something trying to board the boat too. But I stopped it and the thing went away.

“Bro’, something is messing with us. It’s real. We have to keep our eyes open and not let it get us, or get on the boat, or whatever it is that it wants. We have to stop it.

“I believe Borus here allowed me to see things last night. He must be blessed because he’s an innocent. Maybe he’ll help you see it too and we can fight it. And I’ll bet Kea is involved. We have to watch out for her.”

Fikna slumped his shoulders and looked down. “I ache in all possible ways, Rord. A melancholy confusion has put me out of sorts. I fear our only recourse is to pray to be left in peace.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “I’m not going to sit and let this thing take bites out of us bro’. Maybe all we can do is resist it. Let’s not give it an easy ride.”

He looked at the pauper. “Right, Borus?”

The girl turned to look at him. She looked down at her tattered clothes and fiddled with them.

Rordan put his bottle down and took out Trad’s knife. He approached the pauper, who cringed. “It’s okay Borus. I’m going to cut you free of that strip. Here.”

He unsheathed the blade and tugged at the strip around Borus’ neck. The youngster squirmed and made it difficult to maintain a good grip. Rordan cut at the leather, but the material turned aside his blade.

“Hey, what is this? It’s not leather, it’s slippery like grease.”

Fikna grew confused. “What are you trying to accomplish?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m trying to cut off the strip around his neck.”

Fikna said, “Have you lost your mind? You’re poking his tattered clothes.”

Rordan dropped his arms to his sides. “Great, so this is magical too?”

He closed his eyes and with a sweep of recollection came to the place in his mind where he kept scraps from his studies. He needed to remember. A phrase he had once read came forward: “If you are meant to break the spell, then the way will reveal itself to you.”

Rordan opened his eyes and gave Borus a sad smile. “Okay, I guess this is something I’m just going to have to wait out. Don’t worry. If I’m meant to help, I will.” While his bro’ stared, he sheathed the knife.

Fikna grew excited. “You mean to say he’s under the influence of a malicious enchantment? His appearance presents a pauper.”

Rordan grabbed his bottle and stood up.

Borus stood with him and expectation brightened her face.

“Maybe he isn’t a pauper. Maybe he’s really a sovereign or champion. Though I don’t know, he may just be some poor soul. That’s why Kea was trying to talk

me out of taking him with us. He must have been cursed by another witch and she was just protecting that coven's work."

Fikna rose to his feet and struggled with his thoughts. "You mentioned his assistance in helping me glimpse the unknown. For the moment, I'm blind to anything extraordinary."

Rordan said, "Maybe it takes time. Or maybe you just have to believe, I don't know. It could be it's only me Borus helps, because I'm the one who agreed to help him. But we have to watch out. Kea is a witch and that means there might be more witches."

"Are you referring to Dalla? The two of them are companions."

Rordan shook his head. "No, I don't get any bad feelings from Dalla. And I haven't seen anything to make me doubt her. She might just be someone to travel with, to keep people from getting smart. Though I don't see how anyone would unless they could see that darn mask."

Fikna said, "What mask do you refer to?"

Rordan squirmed. He took a swig of coal-nectar to focus his nerves and decided not to mention Abrafo. "When I saw Kea last night, she was wearing a witch mask. Yellow and scary. It was magical. Like when she ate, the mask let her do it without having to take it off."

Fikna said, "Are you serious?" His eyes grew wide with bafflement.

“Yep, I’m totally serious, bro’. You and I are on a real adventure now. Invisible monsters, witches disguised by magic spells, and a cursed guy. Still think Elder Ofen’s death was an accident?”

Fikna blushed. He took two deep breaths.

“Of course, I assumed criminal intent in the matter. Yet how might the situation we find ourselves in be related?”

He turned solemn. “Rordan, lend me Trad’s knife. If there is any possibility of a struggle, I’m the one trained to handle arms. Remember?”

“I know,” said Rordan. “Though honestly, I believe prayers might be better. You have your rood, right?”

Fikna pulled aside his shirt collar and exposed a leather cord hanging around his neck. “I never thought I’d hear you express such a sentiment.”

Rordan grinned. He slapped hands with his brother. “Stick together.”

Fikna smiled. “Always.”

Borus uttered a low whistle and extended her hands toward them.

Rordan lightly slapped the pauper’s hands. “Yes! Borus, you’re in this too. We’re together.”

She looked back and forth at them, then made a slight hum.

Fikna laughed. “Splendid, what a magnificent bunch of fellows we shall be, on an adventure at long last.”

The two foster-brothers chuckled while Borus stood and looked up the stairs.

A deep voice called out to them from the stairs above. “Fikna? Could that possibly be you?”

Fikna and Rordan looked to the right and upwards.

A middle-aged, big-bellied man descended the steps. The man wore two gowns over his clothes, the inner lined with fur and the outer patterned with silk. He glanced at Borus and saw only a boy pauper.

Delight shone on Fikna’s face. “Uncle Osgar! I can scarcely believe my eyes. Are the others arriving as well?”

A warm thrill unfolded inside Rordan.

Osgar said, “I’m afraid I alone am your official delegation. The rest of the family sends their regards. Catigern and Sulicena in particular extend their best sentiments for your success.

“Such an exciting time for you, making your way to the unsettled neighborhoods of the Heartland. It seems proper Rordan should pursue a knowledgeable trade while keeping an eye on your activities.”

He pretended to examine the pier for a moment. “I gather you’ll be heading off in good order. A pity there is not a more agreeable location nearby. Let me offer to buy you a meal. An eatery stand at the top of the steps is selling fish and chips.”

Fikna bowed. “Your kindness is admirable, uncle. We would be delighted to have a moment of your time. I

haven't visited since I was young. It brightens my day beyond words to finally see you again."

Rordan noticed Osgar almost crack a smile. The man maintained his emotional distance and turned to re-climb the stairs. The two brothers followed him, with Borus falling in behind Rordan.

Osgar said, "Your father wrote to us, saying you would travel this way soon. It was most kind of you to send an errand-runner to fetch us. We might have missed you entirely. How are you managing the voyage?"

Fikna said, "As you can see, with the decline in one's personal appearance attendant to such endeavors."

Osgar said, "Indeed, it is a pity you lack time. We would offer you some hospitality. Patience—you haven't far to go now. The voyage shall become easier."

At the top, the man took a moment to catch his breath. "Whoo. That's quite an ascent. Follow me." He led them down the street and over to a booth with a wide counter. At the top front of the booth was nailed a wide, wooden painting of a hungry man with a serious face. The man ate fried fish patties and sliced, fried potato strips.

Rordan recognized the place. He had passed the eatery stand yesterday, but it had been closed. Now a young woman attended behind the counter. The attendant had a blemish on her upper lip and reeked of sour sweat. An older, muscled woman with her hair tied in a bun tended the kitchen in the back of the booth.

The aroma from the kitchen smelled good and stimulated his hunger.

Osgar ordered two sets and paid out four bills from his pocket. He stood off to the side and waited.

The attendant made rude gestures at Borus. “Get lost boy. Go on!”

Borus flinched and hid behind Rordan.

Fikna moved up to the attendant and faced her. “The pauper attends us on our charity, young lady.”

She glared at Fikna. “Keep him out of sight then. He’ll scare the customers off.”

With a wave of dismissal, Fikna joined Osgar.

Rordan put a hand on Borus’ shoulder. “It’s okay, just stay here. I’ll pass you some food from my share.”

Fikna said, “Where is Kent? Does your footman enjoy the good fortune of a respite today?”

“Faithful Kent is no longer employed in our service.” At Fikna’s look of surprise, Osgar said, “His departure brought us great sadness. We are compensated only by the thought of his transferal to a new opportunity.”

“I add my sadness to yours, dear uncle. For Kent to leave you after so long a service seems almost a slight. He shall be missed.” Fikna sighed. “How goes the business?”

Osgar cleared his throat. “All goes well. Sulicena and I continue much as we have in the past. My eldest daughters are attending socials in search of prospects. My

youngest is pursuing private studies. Sulicena's children are still in school. Your father and mother are fine, I trust?"

Fikna smiled. "Crovan is well, and Esa also. Crovan pursues his usual reading, antique hunting, and wine tasting. Esa attends performances when she isn't organizing the household."

Osgar nodded, "That is excellent news. Certainly more promising activities."

Fikna's response was interrupted by the attendant, who served up a pair of fish and chips in stiff paper trays. While Fikna decided on the splash of vinegar, Rordan chose the sticky glob of tartar sauce as a condiment.

The young gallant assumed a pose of disinterest and held off on eating his portion. "You mentioned your youngest daughter pursuing a private study. What subject is she being tutored in?"

Osgar said, "I intended her to study conversational topics. Unfortunately, she insists on being a sportsman. Has it in her head to become a tutor herself. I have yet to figure out how to get her to behave. No doubt, this attitude is due in part to Rordan's mischievous influence the last time you were present as guests."

The comment chafed. Rordan pretended not to have heard. He took the two pieces of cooked fish and broke them lengthwise in two.

Fikna ate in measured amounts.

Despite a desire to chow his food, Rordan followed Fikna's example. The tartar melted in his mouth and the fish tasted fresh. The food burned his tongue and the roof of his mouth, but he didn't care. He tried a chip and found it crisp and tender in all the right places.

He handed Borus half of his fish. The youngster gobbled it down. Rordan smiled. If Borus were returned to his former self and turned out to be a sovereign, he might reward them. Fikna's relatives would have to change their attitude.

He shook his head of daydreams and jammed a chip into his mouth. Rordan ached for his bro's family, yet all he had to offer existed in his imagination. Reality kept turning up a big zero. Borus had to be just some unlucky kid, probably a run-off who had fled a sick home.

Fikna said, "Once your daughters are all married, what are your plans?"

Osgar considered an answer. "A celebration would be in order, I suppose. Your aunt-in-law desires to travel by ship on a luxury adventure. Perhaps we shall choose The Orirot. The birthplace of our people is a worthy endeavor. Buziba Sound is also a possibility."

Fikna said, "I envy you, then. The Orirot possesses many significant experiences and the coast of Kgotla is known for lush resorts."

Osgar said, "I daresay, the moment is still many years off. By then, who can say what shall have become of you? After that, your younger cousins will have their

chance to enter the world. Although, marrying Cottia will prove no small feat. She is as lively as my youngest.”

Fikna said, “I have every confidence she will find a gentleman worthy of her. She cultivates many fine qualities.” He took a bite out of a chip.

Osgar said, “I declare; we agree on that point.” He waited while his guests ate their meals.

Rordan watched the passers-by in the street go about their business. The trickle of pedestrians had grown into a regular stream and the noise level had risen. He offered Borus a chip and the pauper pushed it away without a glance.

The increasing mass of people rattled Osgar. He glanced at the sky and wiped his face of sweat with a silk handkerchief. “I imagine by now your skipper is concerned for your whereabouts. I shall refrain from detaining you any longer.”

Fikna handed his portion to Rordan. He wiped his hands with his own silk handkerchief and said, “Of course. I am saddened to be parted from you so soon. Thank you for the pleasure of your company and the hospitality of a meal. Your gesture has lifted our spirits considerably.”

Osgar shook hands with Fikna. “Think nothing of it. The least I could do for family since you were passing through. Nice to see you again Rordan, you rascal. Goodbye.”

Rordan frowned and stopped trying to free up a hand to offer. He watched Osgar maneuver through the crowd

and out of sight. His foster-uncle's sudden departure made him uneasy.

Borus stared in the same direction the two brothers did.

The young gallant took his portion from Rordan and gobbled down the remaining chips. Rordan joined him and finished off his own chips with a voracious will.

A difficult, last swallow forced Fikna to grimace. He rubbed his stomach and took a breath. "You witness that? They acknowledged me. What a stroke of good fortune. I haven't seen him in a terribly long time. I was worried we might miss them entirely."

Rordan ate the last chip from his helping. "Mm. Yep. It's good to see family. We've missed a whole branch living in different neighborhoods."

"I quite agree, a definite loss. If not for the meetings at the family estate in Suthlinc, we might not have even seen the younger cousins."

Together, they tossed their empty paper trays in the nearby waste heap. Borus' eyes darted back and forth excitedly at the brothers.

Fikna said, "When I make something of myself, they shall realize how mistaken they were to snub my father."

Rordan hoped his bro' was right. "Come on, let's go. The others are probably getting ready to ditch us."

Fikna said, "Yes, I expect we must. I had hoped we might locate a shower station and recover a little of our appearance. However, it appears Divine Regard has

intervened. Before we return to our wretched transport, lend me Trad's knife."

Rordan handed over the knife and sheath. Fikna inspected both and attached them to his belt. He tested the arrangement and made an adjustment to the sheath. "There, that ought to function properly."

The three of them set off for the boat. As they descended the stairs, Noss approached them from the pier.

"There you are. You're holding us up."

Fikna said, "Our apologies. We encountered some family and had to pay our respects."

Noss took a moment to stare at Fikna's knife. He frowned at Borus. "The Skipper's ready to go. Hurry up."

They followed Noss back to the boat.

The hold had been tied down and the lanterns put away. Rordan noticed their bedrolls were packed and their luggage secured. He guessed the booty was responsible. The passengers sat or leaned in wait.

The Skipper stood up and rested an arm upon the tiller. "There you are. We were about to dump your gear and continue. Let's head out."

Codal leaned with his rear end against the railing of the cabin walkway. "Welcome back, brothers." He blew a pair of smoke rings and smiled.

Rordan resisted an urge to punch Codal in the face. He reminded himself the guy was bigger than him and

might be able to broil like Abrafo. A busted nose or limb wouldn't help his achy toe.

They boarded the boat. Noss cast off and leapt on board while Bov and Mungo polled the boat away from the pier. The Skipper steered the boat clear of traffic and on its way downriver.

Rordan sat down on his travel chest and Borus sat next to him. Fikna went over to the Skipper and started up a conversation, but Rordan couldn't hear what they said to each other. He studied Kea and Dalla. They stood and leaned against the front of the cabin facing forward. Kea didn't have the monster mask on. He imagined she must rest between fits of mischief.

Codal said, "Where'd you all go, brother?"

"Relative. Fikna has family here. One of them came to see him."

Kea said, "Is your brother okay? He looks tired." Her concern drew an intense look from Noss.

"Mosquitoes. We got eaten alive last night. Plus the hard boards of this boat. He's not used to it."

Codal said, "What did your brother's relatives say about your new friend?" He took a long drag of his smoke and made a clownish face.

Rordan crossed his arms and said, "Nothing. Poor people don't exist to them."

Laughter and smoke burst out of Codal. "Dang, brother. I guess you didn't have to explain anything to them then. All aboard the charity war! I've got a fist in

my pocket—for a popper in the socket—of a draggin’ shab who betta hop it—outta sight before I stomp it!”

Noss chuckled. “Good rhyme. Who’s that?”

“I don’t know, brother. Some un-Deep killjoys I heard in the pit.” Codal took a drag and feigned illness. Smoke leaked out of his mouth and nose.

Rordan organized his thoughts. “Codal, what’s your goal in Ciriceval? I don’t recall you saying anything about what you’re doing or where you’re going.”

The teenager pursed his lower lip over his upper one. “I don’t have any destination brother. And I don’t have any goal. I’m floating through life with no intents or purposes.” He grinned and took a long drag off his smoke.

“You’re a freeloader too.”

Codal blew smoke out his nostrils. “You got me there brother. Wandering the paths of this desert in search of beer and smokes.”

Rordan peered at Kea. “Is that what you’re in search of, beer and smokes?”

She rolled her eyes and looked at Dalla, who chuckled at her. Kea glanced coyly at Rordan and said, “That’s me, a beer and smokes kind of woman.”

Dalla shook her head and pushed Kea. “Liar. You’re a wine and tokes kind of woman.”

Codal’s eyes expanded and he grinned. “I hear that sister. Taking a toke from the smoke. Hard-core

breaking it to you on the spark!” He did a series of random dance moves in a burst of expression.

Dalla reached behind her and pulled a rider hat into view. She settled it on her head and smiled at Rordan. “And I’m a shots and tokes kind of gal. Heeyah!”

Both women laughed and Rordan chuckled with them despite himself.

The sound of a few notes off a guitar came from the aft side of the boat. Mungo rose his head above the cabin and said, “Who’s up for some music? I’ve got old party Griever Rogelio. How about it?”

There were murmurs of agreement from those on deck. The young man moved to the front part of the boat. He took a seat at the bow near Rordan and faced everyone. Mungo tuned the guitar to his satisfaction, then did a series of vocalizations to himself. With a focused will, Mungo went straight into a song. The wide-open space absorbed his music.

Rordan recognized the popular song about a violent encounter with a griller. He’d heard it many times over. His folks had been big fans of the Griever before he became famous with the mellow loyalty crowd. At last, he could stop talking to people and keep to himself.

The terrain around the river changed from forest and hills to scrub and rocky terrain. Ahead, the course of the river flowed through a tall ravine. Rordan knew the music would resonate better when they reached the sheer stone cliffs.

Noss took a break from poling with the butty. He stood next to Kea and took in the view. She checked him out with a glance and looked smug.

Rordan considered how many more points Fikna had fallen behind in the courtship race.

Mungo paused between songs to take in the sights. He bowed his head at the applause he received.

Off the port side and up ahead was a patroller boat. From along a riverside towpath, a team of four horses and two drivers towed the boat slowly forward against the current.

The Skipper and the butty pretended to ignore the boat.

The Mirthy Mermaid was not stopped for inspection and passed the patroller boat by. The wall of the ravine rose up over them on the starboard side.

Rordan found the view invigorating. He made out boats anchored in eddies and near small islets, from small one-man canoes to boats as large as the Mirthy Mermaid.

The Skipper pointed Fikna at a small shore on the side of the river to their left. “Look, there’s an eagle.”

Rordan spotted the bird. The creature perched on a gnarled tree and surveyed the area. As he gazed upon the eagle, the sound of the water and the fresh savor of the air moved him. He’d never seen a wild creature before in such a vast expanse of outdoors.

The eagle’s gaze turned towards him and he shivered a little. The wild bird stared at him with what he imagined

was resentment. He hoped the bird wouldn't decide to attack. The talons looked strong and dangerous to him all of a sudden.

A voice inside him said, "The conceit of people grows anger in beasts."

Borus took an interest in the bird. She crawled to the port side of the boat and stared at the avian creature with longing. The perched eagle passed out of sight upriver and Borus relaxed.

Mungo played a new Griever tune, this time about questions of love and the capacity to return it.

Rordan struggled with a mixed feeling of attraction for and fear of the eagle. He had heard the voice before. His mind lost focus under the struggle and he stared into the wilderness.

A river convoy passed them by, made up of three long barges loaded with cargo. Teams of polers pushed the barges slowly up the river to a rendezvous with drivers on the riverbank. The towpath veered inland as the ravine rose in the direction of downriver.

Rordan imagined the sorts of luxuries the triple convoy might carry. The Chief's palace probably needed them to stay in operation.

The sun burned away the last of the morning haze. Rordan remembered Fikna's bites and dug around in the backpack. He pulled out the mercy kit and took out a container of aloetic.

Rordan held the container and stared. He came to the conclusion that something of importance would happen soon. This part of the voyage had just been the long haul before the moment of action.

He rolled around in his thoughts how he could possibly know this. The premonition came to him as if it were recognition of a path coming into view. Rordan needed to get his thoughts down on paper. His dauber materials were locked away in the chest. He would only draw attention to himself if he wrote now.

The Skipper had mentioned an island for tonight's camp. She could still be a peryah or in league with peryahs. She'd talked about boat-ruffs, which may have been a slip of the tongue or a diversion to allay suspicion. He wondered about her.

And then there was Kea, the monster-masked witch. Rordan thought she represented the greatest danger and would make her move on the island.

He exposed his foot and removed the bandages. The cut had turned red and sore. Rordan wrapped his toe in a fresh set from the mercy kit, then took the time to cover his foot again.

Impatience and dread tugged at him. He could do nothing until someone made a move and by then it might be too late. Life had a way of dropping a struggle on you from nowhere. Perhaps his magic sight would give him a warning. Or it might give him all the more time to see and fear the inevitable.

The sense of helplessness grew overwhelming. Borus touched him on the arm. Rordan withdrew from his introspection and smiled at the youngster. He made a silent prayer, modified from one he'd learned in school. It never hurt to have all your bases covered.

CHAPTER 8: DANGEROUS ISLAND

Rordan hugged his arms close to his sides and waited. The river stretched wider and the breeze smelled of salt. The ravine gave way to steep, wooded hills on either side of the river. A mountain range dominated by a wide, snow-capped peak loomed in the distance to the southeast.

Islands dotted the river's course and the Skipper steered the boat toward a large one. At her command, the butty and Noss disengaged the sail.

The island had enough size and soil to support a small forest of mostly pine. The tree line's shape suggested an enormous hill in the middle of the island. The ground varied between dense undergrowth and a pine needle covered detritus.

The boat cruised easily into an inlet. There was a pier of huge stone blocks fitted together, surrounded by posts of grey wood pockmarked with tiny holes. Short, thick stone pillars jutted from spaces between the blocks; they were all broken off at the top.

Bov and Fikna used poles to guide the boat against the pier. With line in hand, Noss stepped onto a block and used a broken pillar to secure the boat.

The pier connected to a beach of rough gray gravel and coarse dark sand. The beach extended all the way to a slanted cliffside. A promontory of rock stretched out to the water on the left. Straight ahead, a dirt path sloped up the cliff and into the forest. On the right, the cliff gained height and steepness. The cliffside joined the

water where the beach ended. At the end of the beach was a climbing trail up the steep cliff.

The Skipper said, “Stretch your legs, ballast rats. The booty and I have some chores to finish before it gets dark. Those who want to lend a hand cutting wood and starting a fire, I like you already.”

Noss and Fais volunteered. The other passengers went about their own wishes.

Codal tapped Rordan on the shoulder and said, “Hey brother, lets go explore.”

The teenager’s offer caused Rordan to open his mouth and move his eyes about, struggling with a response.

Fikna said, “An excellent proposition, good fellow. I could use an excursion to refresh myself.”

Borus bounded onto the pier and made for the cliffside. She ascended the sloped path and looked back at the boat. A dull smile emerged on her face.

Noss said, “Looks like he wants to live here.”

Codal disembarked and followed the path Borus had taken.

Fikna said, “Come along, Rordan. I am of the mind all will unfold well.” He followed after the teenager.

Rordan grabbed the mercy kit and stashed it inside his daypack. He slung the daypack over his shoulder and stepped onto the pier. His stomach churned with worry as he kept a wary eye on the forest.

Borus turned to the left and made her way onto the promontory. She crouched forward and strained to hear something.

Codal ascended the sloped path and reached the spot where Borus had stood a moment earlier.

Fikna said, “Our companion certainly perked up once we docked, wouldn’t you say?” He climbed the sloped path.

“Yep.” Rordan climbed up after him and managed to get a pebble in his shoe. He shook his foot until the pebble settled to the side of his foot.

At the top, Rordan saw an old campsite. A space had been claimed from the forest and stamped flat from regular use. A rotten log lay close to a shallow fire pit. Paths diverged from where he stood. To the left, a path skirted the cliffside and passed by the promontory. Ahead, a trail passed through the campsite and directly into the forest. The path to the right hugged the cliffside and then turned sharply into the forest.

He turned around and took in the view. He watched the Skipper make plans with the butty and Noss. She carried a long maple toolbox in one hand and a wood-axe in the other.

Codal indicated the path to the right. “Hey brothers, how about we see where this path leads?”

Rordan said, “Sure, you first.” He waved at the pauper. “Borus! We’re going this way! Come on!”

The girl remained on the promontory and stared at him.

Fikna said, “Let our companion stay behind, Rord. He’ll manage well enough, provided he remains in a single location. Perhaps he prefers to be alone for a while.”

Rordan looked at the youngster and felt a twinge of anxiety. “I guess.”

Codal shouted from down the path. “See you brothers!”

Fikna clasped Rordan on the shoulder. “Linger at camp if such is your preference. However, I require a walk. The confounded knots in my upper back will benefit from a change of pace.” He hiked after the teenager.

A sigh escaped from Rordan and he shrugged. “Okay Borus. Stay there! We’ll be back.” He pursued Fikna up the path of the cliff. The path led along the edge of the island as it entered the forest.

He caught up to Fikna and they hiked after Codal. The terrain turned rocky and slowed their progress. Rordan felt relieved to be free of the close quarters on the boat and all the drama he’d endured. The natural setting renewed his spirits.

The two of them found Codal. He stood near the edge of a sheer drop and looked down at the water three stories below.

Codal said, “Brothers, I’m sure glad to get away from those boat-drones. Let’s search this island and see what’s

here. Maybe we'll run into some peryahs and have a hoot."

Rordan stopped to catch his breath.

Fikna said, "What meaning do you intend? I thought you approved of everyone on the boat except for us."

"Don't mind my rump-noise, brother. Somebody had to wake those drones up. Looks like they didn't get who I was pretending to be. That Kea character is a real cold plate. And that Noss guy can't wait to get into her briefs. I say kick 'em both overboard, brothers."

Fikna put his hands on his hips and shook his head.

Codal eyed Rordan. "This trip has been a freaky one, brother. What you did back there with the tramp was hard-core. You slam, you thrash! Only the strong survive."

Rordan recognized the catch phrase and smiled.

"I don't know brother. If I were you, I'd forget those wiener salad sandwiches and move on. Boring, stupid Griever doo-doo. Just point me in the direction of the beer and toke-sticks. It munches that I didn't bring any. Maybe we'll get lucky and run into a peddler who deals. Then we can hit it hard-core."

Codal set off again. He bounded down the path and pushed aside foliage.

Fikna laughed. "To the chamber pot with this, I'm heading back. I hesitate to follow this unhinged troglodyte through the woods."

Rordan chuckled. “So do I, but I admit I want to explore now. You sure you don’t want to come?”

His bro’ took in the wilderness around them. “Yes, I’m certain. The island is more immense than I thought. Night is falling and we brought no lantern with us.”

Disappointment allowed Rordan only a nod.

Fikna said, “Mind yourself. I’ll maintain an eye on Borus.”

A sense of resignation twisted inside Rordan. “And Kea too.”

His bro’ smirked. “I most certainly shall.” He bowed, then hiked back the way they had come.

Rordan found himself alone in the woods. Memories of other solo walks in the forest came back to him. He stared down at the water and watched it flow past. The current conveyed an impression of deep strength to him and he smiled.

“If only strength was the answer for me.”

He turned and walked the way Codal had taken. Along the path, Rordan came across skids in the dirt and crushed plants. The broken terrain required rapid descents and climbs within a few feet of each other. Rordan believed there might be a cave nearby, most likely closer to the center of the island.

In the distance, Codal spouted off a series of rude exclamations. Rordan paused and listened. From the guy’s progress, Codal had to jump and bound up and down the rocky slopes like a madman.

Rordan noticed a lack of any birds, insects, or movement in the undergrowth. It occurred to him he stood alone in the woods on an isolated island, under threat from a witch and maybe peryahs or boat-ruffs.

He imagined eyes on him. Rordan stared into the woods and up the hillside. If anyone were watching, the profuse undergrowth concealed them well.

His curiosity got the better of him and he walked off the path. Tremors passed through his muscles as he pushed onward. The tremors turned into warmth and spread throughout his body.

Huge, bright green ferns and thick, jumbled brambles covered the hillside. Tall, thick-stemmed plants with soft violet flowers swarmed with honeybees and smaller winged insects. Rordan stopped to watch the tiny creatures hover, glide and cavort about on their business. They moved with unusual quiet.

He stepped through the undergrowth and the pebble in his shoe shifted back under his heel. Rordan stopped. He stood on the other foot and pulled off his left shoe.

A sharp pain shocked his left foot as it set down on the ground. Rordan hissed and raised his foot. He saw a honeybee fly off from the vicinity of where he had stepped. The bottom of his foot felt numb in the middle of the arch.

Rordan said, "Great. Stung by a queen bee, of all things. What luck." He rested his left toes on the ground and wobbled off balance.

The pebble fell from his upside down shoe and he limped over to a tree. Rordan rested against the trunk and felt his foot again. The sting swelled with pain. A frown creased his face as he put his shoe back on.

Rordan exhaled a deep breath and continued deeper into the undergrowth. The brambles scratched at him through his shirtsleeve and forced a dirty word from his mouth. He pulled up the sleeve and looked at his forearm. The tiny thorns had drawn small beads of blood from a series of small ragged scrapes. Rordan rubbed his arm briskly, then pulled his sleeve down and stomped his way around the brambles.

He passed between a jagged rift in the hill and heard wind chimes. Rordan searched for them, but they hung out of sight somewhere inside a thick bramble bush. A stab of uncertainty forced him to pause and consider what he intended. His gaze landed ahead of him and he walked through a tall curtain of ferns.

Before him was a huge crater. Around and above, thick undergrowth and a near-canopy of trees created a sense of privacy. The lessened daylight revealed details to him in soft impressions. A pool of turquoise-blue water rested in the center of the crater. The color drew an extended breath from Rordan. His teeth chattered for a second.

A path wound around the circumference of the pool from the entrance where he stood and over to a cave mouth two stories in height. Near the entrance stood a chopped stone obelisk four feet tall and a smaller,

naturally flat stone. From within the cave came the glow of firelight.

The walls of the cave were covered in vulgar, fantastical paintings. The artwork extended all the way inside as far as he could see. Rordan couldn't make out any individual details from where he stood. By the vivid colors he guessed they were splendid to behold up close. His heart raced and a tingle pulsed down his back.

He paused to examine the crater more closely. The grounds supported a massive garden. Plots rested in raised lumps of soil covered in rotting material and bordered by stacked stone. Colorful wildflowers grew beside crops of tomato, corn and pepper. Herb bushes flourished in clusters surrounded by bright blossoms of orange and yellow. Insects, mostly bees, roamed at will throughout the garden.

Wonder tugged at his heart and he walked down the path. A flood of sensations sped past him as his viewpoint changed. He spotted a cluster of carved wooden beehives. They rested in a rocky niche not visible from the entrance.

A sundial of polished stone came into view, and then two large wooden tubs of rainwater, each with a small fish inside. The decorative artistry of the tub and sundial suggested outsiders had crafted them, though he didn't recognize the style. The symbology of the faces and patterns were unfamiliar.

Closer to the cave and on the left he saw enormous grapevines. The vines grew up and across a canopy of

carved driftwood pieces tied together, beyond which another concealed niche teased a glimpse. The stink of rotting flesh issued from that direction.

Rordan reached the cave and the paintings came under his scrutiny. They struck him as grossly heathen and beyond his wildest imaginings. There were erotic depictions of animals with people. Heroically rendered women with red skin and black hair slew multitudes of ferocious, dark-skinned male fighters in gruesome detail. Human and animal crossbreeds, dressed in pageantry, dispensed arcane symbols to masses of bare-chested women in colorful, dyed sheets. Monsters harassed, captured and tortured grand-seeming officials. At the end, these humiliated heads of state had their guts ripped out and stuffed into fanged female unmentionables.

The overt depictions of carnal and murderous passion caused Rordan's heart to beat like a drum. His face flushed and he felt faint. He put a hand to his temples and struggled to remain conscious.

The human bones came to his attention. They lay in neat stacks on the floor of the cave to the height of his shins. Most of them looked old and brittle, but a small number looked recently acquired. All of them were picked clean of flesh. A path in the middle of the stacks led deeper into the cave at a steady descent to the right. Airy silence radiated from within.

The dauber in him appreciated the immense dedication and amazing skill it took to render the cave

paintings. Rordan knew he had seen a style like this elsewhere, but the memory eluded him.

He took a close look at the obelisk and the flat stone next to it. A dark stain discolored the top of both the obelisk and the flat stone. The sacrificial purpose of the stones became clear to him. He'd stumbled upon a forbidden grove of heathen outsiders.

An urge to run burned in his stomach. He stepped down the path and into the cave.

The depictions grew somber in their use of pigment. Scenes of lethargy and isolation took hold of the women portrayed. He looked on one wall and saw a scene unfold in which a heated dialogue took place between tall, wise-seeming women and a younger woman. She wore a long over-cloak of soft blue and a glowing pendant in the shape of a pearl-gold, six-pointed star. Her hand gestured toward a gargantuan fish in the distance.

The paintings changed into nightmare scenes of brutality. Grim, brown-skinned men on horseback erupted onto the scene. Their stylized weapons toppled monuments and destroyed entire villages, with lines of miserable captives led back to camps. The humiliation the captives endured brought Rordan to hot tears and he looked away.

A different stretch of wall on the other side showed a group of monsters in a village of pioneers. They grabbed the people and devoured them. Behind the scene spread a desolation of stillbirth, dismemberment, and affliction.

Thin, mummified beings with eyes sewn shut presided over this affair from the heavens.

The hopelessness of the work washed over Rordan and his skin beaded with cold sweat. He fought back a sensation of nausea and forced himself to resume his study of the depictions.

On his right he saw a solitary, dirty woman with severe injuries and wearing a velvet, sky blue cape topple a town monument with a shove of her arm. An explosion of violent color followed. A horrific, red and black monster-woman with a bulbous tongue burst from the earth in a shower of lightning, fire, and smoking debris. The thunderstorm that accompanied her destructive path buried the landscape in a luminous flood. The pigments sparkled with flecks of mineral in the light. The paintings grew obscure due to the glare and Rordan stopped to look forward.

The firelight came from a living quarters carved out of the rock. The cave and its pile of bones stopped at a main hall with a smooth floor. Alcoves, windows, and hallways connected to the main hall, separated in some cases by heavy wool curtains. The floor revealed a mosaic of a rose, surrounded by a dozen other kinds of flower he didn't recognize. The faded smoothness of the mosaic testified to the accumulated tread of many steps.

Rordan limped into the hall and gaped.

Dozens of fragrant beeswax candles cast primordial light throughout the hall. Gemstones, many as big as his hand, hung from the ceiling by silk threads. Others were

arranged on shelves or furniture pieces, along with piled gold adornments.

He saw rings, bracelets, buttons, and many things that seemed familiar but of which he could only guess at the use. All the colors of the rainbow in the solid bounty of the hidden earth dazzled him. Tears streamed from his eyes and he uttered a choked cry.

His senses returned to him and he caught his breath. He wiped at the wet trails on his face and sniffled. Drowning in mystery, he studied the gemstone hall again.

The hall ended in a curtain, embroidered with gold thread and set randomly all over with what looked like polished diamonds the size of thick blackberries. Splashes of orange fiber wove through the deep red fabric. The stonework suggested the hall continued past the curtain.

The windows and hallways on either side had been made so one could peer into other rooms from where one stood. He saw a storage room filled with shelf after shelf of thick rolled lessons, a workshop cluttered with primitive but clever and functional tools, and a kitchen with a large pantry of many barrels and casks. Shelves filled with stoneware cups, pitchers and jugs shared the walls with tapestries. It reminded him of his own parents' clutter back home.

He'd been to the observatory in the capital and seen many artifacts in the display cases. This place went beyond any collection the Chief's sages could muster in the name of research.

Rordan walked over to a burnished desk of cherry-colored wood and admired the contents. He saw a pile of illuminated papers, a selection of brilliant watercolors and dense inks, and a range of writing implements. The dauber who possessed such an array of tools might create almost anything. His mind attempted to imagine the possibilities and turned numb at the strain.

Curiosity urged him on and he turned some of the papers over into a new pile. His own skill vanished in comparison. The illustrations of dream images humbled him with their artistry.

It occurred to him he had trespassed into someone's home and broken hospitality. Even if the head of the household were heathen, it was still a grave error. He had broken the rules before. Rordan felt torn between his upbringing and his past.

He heard the faint splash of water beyond the curtain. His upbringing lost the battle and he made his way toward the end of the hall.

"You violate into the jaws of death, fool." A woman's voice with a heavy, unfamiliar accent came from the other side of the curtain. The voice held a menace that commanded attention.

Rordan backed away a little and swallowed his fear. "I meant no harm. I was curious." His voice sounded cracked and broken to him.

He heard many beads skitter over each other.

The woman's voice growled with suppressed fury. "Your stupidity causes harm and your search is offensive."

His eyes strained to see indications of movement beyond the curtain. "Who are you?"

"I am the horror of this holy place."

Rordan blinked. "What makes you that?"

A long pause hung in the air. "The mindless sacrilege of people."

He discerned an edge of madness in the tone of her voice, yet he spoke his mind. "I don't believe you're really horror; you're sorrow."

A sound of creaking stone came from behind the curtain. The woman's voice hissed at him. "I will do bad things to you."

Conflicted feelings ran through Rordan's heart and he strained to understand. "Let me sing for you. I know a song by this group called Deep Uirolec, about longing to return home. You might like it."

No answer came forth. Rordan decided to give it a try. He knew the words, but had no songster talent. Maybe the hall would help him sound better.

Rordan raised his arms and stepped backwards. In the middle of the hall, he hummed to warm his voice up. He'd seen songsters do exercises of this kind.

A thought tugged at the back of his mind that his life hung in the balance, but he refused to fear. This task moved him with the strength of a deep compulsion. He

clenched his hands together and relaxed his arms. This particular song required softness.

Embarrassment tugged at his heart. He believed the song said something personal and vulnerable about his secret self.

Rordan put his soul into his version of *This Witness Wanders*. The lyrics told of a vague struggle through a storm to reach a nameless destination full of hope. His awkward, off-key human voice resonated within the hall filled with treasures beyond his imagination, illuminated by the multi-colored light of many candles.

He finished the song and bowed.

The woman spoke in a wearied, venomous voice. “I will turn my heads away from you this once. Out of respect, take with you the paper from the bottom of the pile you admired. Leave this place and never come back. Or I take my time eating you alive.”

Rordan stared at the curtain in awe. “I’ll come back and I’ll find a way to help you.”

The woman said, “If you come here again I will eat you whole. There is no shield against my teeth.”

Rordan said, “What about humility?”

The woman said, “Little fish, humility is running away from this place.”

He accepted the reality of his dismissal. The heavy paper from the bottom of the stack went into his daypack.

Rordan bowed. He departed the hall.

At the mouth of the cave, he stopped and stared at the pool of water. The tranquil waters beckoned to him and he approached.

Despite the rashness of it, he knelt and tested the water with his hand. Rordan considered the extreme cold versus his irrational need to swim in the pool. He stood up and fretted with a hand at his hips.

His daypack came off, followed by his clothes. He looked back to see if the woman could see him. At the cave mouth he couldn't see the hall any more, just the light from the candles.

With the woman's last words on his mind, he stepped onto the pool's edge. Rordan clenched his teeth and plunged feet-first into the water.

He surfaced in a shocked rush of painful cold. Holding back gasps and sputters, Rordan tread water with a furious will. In the fading daylight, he noticed his surroundings had changed. He blinked to be certain his eyes saw properly. The crater no longer appeared as it had.

The flicker of the candles, the magnificent paintings, and all signs of the garden had vanished. No sign remained of the splendor he had witnessed.

Rordan heard the wind chimes and a fright seized him. He imagined a ritual needed to be performed to enter the crater—that the chimes were a way to announce your coming. Like a stupid brute he'd walked right into a sacred hall and blundered in every way possible. He understood now what a dummy he'd been.

Kea, Dalla, and Ivixa passed through the curtain of ferns and entered the crater from the rift. They carried their daypacks with them and spoke amongst themselves in a language he didn't recognize. He heard Ciriceval mentioned.

They spotted him soon after they entered. Kea and Ivixa peered at him with discomfort. They each took a side of the pool and circled it toward his pile of clothes. Dalla looked concerned. She followed after Kea and kept her eye on him.

Their reaction puzzled him. With a splash he waved at them. "Hi, I found a secret hiding place."

Kea laughed in a sardonic manner, "Well done, Rordan. How's the water?"

He shivered despite his vigorous activity. "Cold as a shrew's teat." The vulgarity slid out of him naturally.

"Funny," said Kea.

He flirted. "You want funny, just wait until you meet my jolly little monkey."

She reached his pile of clothes and studied him.

Rordan shot a teasing smile back at her. He found himself acting as if he needed to make her like him.

Kea looked around the crater and sighed. She set down her daypack and removed her clothes.

He averted his eyes.

Ivixa watched Kea for a moment, then did the same. Dalla crossed her arms and smirked at him.

Kea said, “You don’t need to look away. We aren’t offended. Clothing is something the clumsers invented to hide behind.”

She pulled out two brown and black accessories from her daypack, then put them on. One was a tight cotton harness over her chest and the other was a fine wool sash around her waist.

He swam back to the edge and grabbed a hold of the stony edge. With a practiced heave he climbed out and let the water drip off of him. “It’s just unusual to me, that’s all.”

Ivixa smiled at him as she rummaged into her daypack. “Unusual, and yet you were swimming without trunks. Don’t be afraid, we aren’t going to reject you. It’s sweet how wild a pup you are.” She put on a similar set of accessories. The harness and sash were dark brown with light brown highlights.

Kea and Ivixa each took out a pair of forearm bracelets made of red leather and slipped them on. They checked each other’s harnesses, tightening them in some places and loosening them in others. Dalla set her daypack down and undressed. Her accessories had a mottled gray color with some white streaks on the edges.

Rordan felt the entire situation improper and uncomfortable. He reached back and grabbed his shirt. “I didn’t know you were coming. I thought I had this place to myself.” He pulled on his shirt.

Dalla frowned. “Looks like he’s leaving.”

Kea nodded. “Women are too much for pups.” She began a series of stretching exercises.

He pulled on his hose and breeches, barely outracing the effect of their attractiveness on him.

Ivixa helped Dalla adjust her harness. “Don’t tease him. It’s adorable that he’s shy.”

Rordan said, “Where’s your kid?”

She gave him a lewd face. “My son is unattended like any young animal. We don’t need to guard our children against life like the clumsers.”

A recognition shot through Rordan. Her words struck him home and brought back memories of his own wanderings as a child.

He stole a furtive glance at them. All three of them were fit, with small scars on their arms and shoulders. Dalla had only one scar, on her shoulder.

The front of Kea’s right hip and side of Ivixa’s left thigh had small tattoos. He supposed they were the marks witches were said to possess. Their locations made them easy to conceal under clothing. He looked down and knelt to put on his shoes. His toe’s cut had sealed up. The sole of his other foot felt numb.

Kea said, “Don’t be shy, it’s not like we’ll laugh at you if your tube is tiny.” She reached into her daypack and pulled out a pair of objects wrapped in red cotton. Kea unwrapped them, revealing two hand axes—one made entirely of wood buffed smooth and the other a real axe made for fighting.

Dalla laughed. “Yeah, we aren’t going to say ‘Wow, that thing is small. That’s it, I’m outta here.’”

Rordan said, “Sorry. This is all too weird for me. I need a break.” He picked up his daypack and walked toward the rift. The giggles and snorts of the women faded behind him. One of them whistled at him.

He passed through the rift and maneuvered his way back to the path. The humiliation he felt lessened and a dull exhaustion took hold of his body. Rordan leaned against a tree and sighed.

His second wind came forward and he opened his daypack. Rordan spotted the paper he’d taken; a light thrill traveled through him.

Mindful of the water still dripping off his skin, he examined the thick, old paper. It featured an illustration of a maze rendered in the manner of a stylized map. He marveled at the richness of the inks and the shiny decorations that enhanced the look. Numerous thin metal doors and solid objects had been attached to the map.

For a moment, he had thought the experience imaginary. Now he was sure he could see hidden or invisible things. Borus wasn’t here, but the magical sight might have something to do with being the boy’s first friend.

Rordan replayed the encounter with the women in his mind. They had acted immodest, yet he had also stripped down and jumped into the pool as if he were an outsider. He remembered when he had first entered school, how

wild he had been at first. His folks had settled, but their Dunser choices were his true roots. That side of him always came out at the weirdest times.

Now that he thought about it, he had been out of his mind for most of his visit inside the crater. He wouldn't forget the rich details of what he had experienced.

Kea's monster mask hadn't shown itself. Rordan suspected he saw things when they were important. The garden and all its wonders had vanished from sight, so perhaps it hadn't been relevant any more. If Kea were a witch, then it followed Ivixa might also be one. The two of them had Deuce-marks. Dalla hadn't been marked, but he felt suspicious of her now too. She must be an apprentice.

Their arrival at the crater confirmed it as a heathen site for him. He wrestled with whether or not they could see the garden. On the one hand, he imagined they were there to pay their respects to the woman in the cave. On the other hand, they might have only gone to a secret meeting place to talk shop.

Rordan chuckled. He imagined the three of them discussing the best methods for flattening beer or giving someone the trots.

His thoughts turned to home. There were also male witches known as warlocks. The stranger at the scene of the fire could have been one. The thought of a coven in his neighborhood made him nervous. He might even know someone in the coven and would never have suspected it. Hopefully, his friends were still safe.

He studied the map. The path of the maze was marked along the way with small, boxed illustrations and tiny paper doors, such as those from a prize calendar, marked with arcane text. The paper doors moved on miniature hinges of gold, attached to the map by means of an adhesive.

The box nearest the entrance to the maze showed a group of friends around a table. One of the figures had an upside down bowl of fire over its head. He traced his finger past the box to the first door. His finger rested against a paper tab on the side. Rordan pulled at the tab and the door opened. Behind it was an illustration of an island with a six-headed monster standing in the middle. A line of arcane text had been written on the inside of the paper door.

The woman had said something about turning her heads. Rordan found it hard to believe she was a monster. The map and her words must be symbolic.

One of the boxed illustrations in the maze showed a path through the middle of a forest, blocked by an iron gate. He recognized the gate from an outdoor hike with his folks when he had been little. The memory went so far back he could hardly remember it and stirred up longings he couldn't place.

Rordan supposed the woman behind the curtain wanted him to find buried treasure or a lost place. The map required further study before he could make anything of it. He placed it back in his daypack with care.

Later, he'd make the time to examine the map where it would remain dry and undamaged.

His gaze rested on Tora's envelope. He took it out of the daypack and examined it. The contents felt like a folded strip of paper. Rordan guessed she'd practiced Hellirism to make him a good luck charm. His bro' wouldn't approve.

He stood up and peered at the sky. The sun had fallen below the tree line and twilight spread in its wake. Rordan decided not to be caught in a wild forest at night with three witches about. He adjusted his hose, then walked back to camp.

The boat came into view. Smoke rose from the cabin's stovepipe and a campfire burned on the shore. Bov sat on a small empty crate and fed the sizzling flames from a pile of firewood. The Skipper split a small pile of logs into smaller chunks. Noss and Mungo used a saw on a small tree trunk to provide logs for the Skipper. They didn't have much further to go before they were done.

Rordan spotted Eogan below him. The child had climbed up the steeper cliffside trail six feet. His small hands pulled at a rock in the dirt.

He shifted his attention to the promontory. Fikna had moved the backpack over there and slept on his bedroll. Borus sat beside him and stared at the river.

The sight of his sleeping bro' pleased him. He thought Fikna had worked hard today and needed the rest to maintain his Libra balance. With a weary smile,

Rordan moved along the cliffside and down toward the promontory.

Borus turned her head and spotted him. She stood up and trotted across the promontory to meet him.

“Hey there buddy. You miss me?”

The pauper looked at him with expectation. Rordan felt the weight of his responsibility return.

“Goodness. You’re probably hungry. I’ll see what I can turn up for you here.”

He dug into his daypack and pulled out two strips of jerky from a wrapped bundle Len had packed him. Borus chewed the strips whole and let them flap around the edges of her mouth.

Rordan noticed Codal hadn’t returned yet. This surprised him. The crazed freeloader had tromped along the path at a furious pace.

He walked over to Fikna’s makeshift camp with Borus right behind him. In the middle of the promontory was a flat, slightly sunken area, covered with steppable moss. Fikna’s deep slumber proved the area was perfect for a camp. Rordan pulled out his bedroll, warmers, and dryad-weave. He unfolded the weave and offered it to Borus.

She rolled it around herself with a whistling sound. Borus stared at him through the end of the tubular passage she had made for herself.

Rordan said, “You wouldn’t believe what I came across today.”

He sat down on his bedroll and wrapped the warmers around him. Rordan looked up at the sky and took several long breaths of the salty air. The brightest stars had become visible in the sky. They made him think of the curtain inside the hall with all its diamonds. Except the curtain struck him as an inner sky instead of an outside expanse.

“Boy am I tired. Today’s poling and that crater adventure really knocked me out. You sure have it easy Borus.” He yawned, stretched, and lay back.

The girl opened her mouth and no sound came out. Her large, dark eyes regarded Bov, who approached them.

The lanky teenager sat down with them. “You going to sleep already?”

Rordan sat upright and faced him. “I sure feel like it. My bro’s already passed out. And Borus here’s looking ready to throw in the towel.”

Bov pressed a patch of moss with his hand. “It’s pretty nice. No wonder you guys are all the way over here.” He chuckled to himself.

Despite his weariness, Rordan made an effort to chuckle with him. “Borus picked it out. Good instincts, I guess.”

A wide smile appeared on Bov’s face. He looked at Borus in the rolled-up weave and said, “Noss told us all about the argument at the haven yesterday. You got a soft spot for the guy, huh?”

Rordan rubbed his face and itched his forearms. “Let’s just say I heard a voice saying to take care of him and leave it at that.”

Bov sat back and rested on his hands. “Hey man, it’s cool. I’m curious, that’s all.” He looked around. “Where’s Codal? Didn’t you and Fikna go off with him?”

Worry tugged at Rordan’s thoughts. He looked back at the campfire. “Fikna ran out of steam and I got distracted. Codal went on ahead of us and I haven’t seen him since. Wow, I hope he’s all right. Soon it’ll be impossible to see without a light.”

“What got you distracted?”

Rordan said, “I ran into Kea and her friends. They aren’t back either. But you know, I’m betting they all show up when Fais is done with that food.”

“Yeah, she’s making cabbage soup. Doesn’t seem to do much but cook and keep to herself.”

“You noticed that too? She’s getting on my nerves.”

“Eh,” said Bov. “I won’t see her again after this, so I don’t care.”

Rordan mulled over the teenager’s words. “I admit, I hadn’t thought of that. By this time tomorrow, we’ll be in Ciriceval and I’ll be going to the academy.”

Bov cracked a smile. “Noss said you knew stargazing stuff. I’m a Libra. Can you say anything about me?”

A light laugh slipped out of Rordan. “Wow, a lot of you scales on this voyage. Libras have a nice smile. They’re handsome and smart. You’re concerned with

fairness and balance above all. You like music and the arts. And you love debate.”

Bov grinned. “The first and last part sound right. I don’t know about the middle part.”

Borus fell asleep. The girl wheezed a little as she breathed out her nose.

Rordan said, “It fits people a little. There’s more to it than your typical sun sign. You actually have about a dozen signs, all of which make your personality.”

Bov shifted his weight forward and crossed his legs. “Sounds complicated. Noss said you were a rustic, but you hadn’t done anything yet. That so?”

Guilt forced a small nod from Rordan. “I haven’t felt like my usual self for some reason. I’m hoping I can do something for all of you before this trip is up.” He rubbed his face again and felt tiny pieces of dead skin peel under his hands.

Codal tromped out of the forest path opposite the one he had originally taken. He shouted loud enough for everyone to hear. “Fat women—love my gut! I bark loud—like a mutt! Got to have a smoke—a smoke and a smoke-smoke-smokity-smoke!”

Rordan and Bov watched him pass the promontory. The crazed teenager made his way over and down to the fire.

Noss motioned for Mungo to stop with the saw. “About time you got here. I was beginning to think Rordan had done you in.”

Codal pulled out a smoke from his front pocket and sat near the fire. “Not a chance, brother. I was walking around this dumpsite and leaving a keepsake.” He did his squat routine and made the usual foul noise to accompany it.

Bov got to his feet. “Nice talking to you Rordan. See you when it’s time to eat.”

“Sure thing.” Rordan watched the young Libra leave and return to the fire.

A change came over him and his weariness turned into dull mania. He stood up and his warmers fell to the ground. Rordan walked to the edge of the promontory and looked down at the water. The space between the edge and the water’s surface seemed a safe distance to him. He still felt the nix might leap up and try to drag him down.

Rordan held back his fear and looked out over the water. The cool breeze blew soft against his face and no mosquitoes troubled him. In the distance, four scattered lights indicated other moored boats or camps for the night.

His attention moved up toward the darkening sky. The sound of the river against the stone of the promontory, the slight whisper of the wind in his ear, and the feel of the cool air on his skin intoxicated him. Rordan felt doused in the starlight as if it were a mysterious rainfall.

He closed his eyes, and put his hands forward and up toward the sky. Rordan imagined his gesture reached the clouds and reflected back the feelings he went through.

Worries stirred up in the pit of his stomach. Fear warned him the night would push him into the river while his eyes were closed. He trembled with the need to open his eyes and save himself as the fear grew.

A wave of water struck the side of the promontory with a slosh. He felt the impact, even though the rock lay solid all the way down below the bottom of the river. His hands curled close to his chest and he opened his eyes.

He looked up at the stars. They burned brighter and softer upon him than normal. His wide eyes watched the water shimmer with a transcendental light. He felt as if he had strained his eyes open to see the world for the first time.

The fear returned with lightning speed. Rordan expected the water to rise up in a tidal wave and sweep him away. His fear changed into a sensation of heat. The breeze passed over him with a crackling sound. Sweat beaded on his skin and he looked at his hands. A feverish, ultramarine glow came from inside of them. The glow spread up his arms and over the shoulders.

His limbs shivered. A flood of images danced before his eyes and a fervent passion swept through him. Rordan intuited a great power beheld him for the first time.

The glow covered his entire body and he shook once as if a gigantic landmass had jolted within him. A vision

of a crack in the earth passed before his eyes. A blast of heat blazed at the base of his skull.

Rordan fell into a state of quiet calm. His body grew tender and a voice inside him said, "More will arrive." Tears welled up in his eyes as he wobbled on his feet. At the back of his mind and in his bones he sensed a permanent change. He believed a strong, indescribable power had changed him.

His limbs shook as he turned to look at Borus. The weave around the breathing teenager reminded him of a pulsing cocoon. Understanding came to him in a splash of intuition. His companion had needed a refuge and he had provided it. The pauper's conditions had changed and now Borus was changing.

Rordan looked over at the steaming silhouette of his sleeping bro'. In an instant he saw Fikna had also changed. The changes continued even as he observed his bro', then Borus. He looked at his hands and saw a continuous stream of force issue out of his entire body through his hands. The sight of it went beyond his ability to observe without going mad and he looked away.

A pressing ring filled his ears and he clutched at his head. An attack of dizziness threatened to overwhelm him. The sensation of heat returned and he feared he might die.

Worry that he would be noticed acting strange forced him to his knees. He took slow, silent breaths. The feverish glow appeared again and spread from his body to the stone and the moss. Rordan grew aware of the great

power once more. The power couldn't possibly exist, yet his experience of it intruded upon him. He fought against the truth that the power was real.

From nothingness, an invisible shine appeared.

Rordan gazed upon the impossible and accepted the dumbfounding mystery. The shine held the shape of a girl before his mind failed to keep up. He intuited his failure came from a limited comprehension.

The shine shared a secret with him and his world spun around. He stayed upright without knowing how. The secret grew inside his body and he felt a part of him fall away. The exposure of loss gave way to a naked anticipation. He understood that he had received a knowledge meant for him.

Somebody tugged at his sleeve. His normal vision returned and he saw Borus. The pauper clutched at him with wide, misshapen hands. Rordan felt the secret inside of him unfold like a flower and reveal itself. Because of his caring nature, the great power had become part of his body. There existed a sacred trust he would have to live up to. He intuited a need to listen to the voice inside him and help out.

He took hold of Borus by the arms. At once, he heard a strange and continuous sound. The sound turned familiar and Rordan realized he'd heard it all his life. He had only ever half noticed it, or thought the sound belonged to him. His imagination cast it as a song of nature, a music that belonged to beasts. The song had always been present.

Rordan's mind grew weary and the sound turned faint. He intuited a need to stay alert or risk losing the song. His body felt as if parts he hardly ever used were in motion.

Borus pleaded with her eyes and made an excited chattering.

He choked up. Rordan cleared his throat and said, "Borus, do you hear it? Do you hear the song of nature that I'm hearing?"

She made whistling noises at him.

Anxiety sharpened his mind and he opened himself up to the song. His tender body hurt with soft pain as he listened. Rordan heard a slight flaw in the song at times, as if nature herself faltered in some way.

The pauper clutched at his arms and the strength in the youngster's grip gave Rordan a scare. He closed his eyes and imagined the answer came to him. Insight floated at the edge of his grasp and he decided to coax it out with speech.

Rordan found it hard to talk above a strained, hushed whisper. "I must be able to do something. I hear the song of nature now; it's so clear to me. I thought it was my own daydreams, but it's been there and I share in it. Maybe it's because I'm an animal too, one with the right skill. Borus, you must be closer to animals, because you're trapped. You hear it and you know something's wrong."

She whined and bumped her head repeatedly against Rordan's chest.

The struggle to stay sane overcame his focus and the song faded again. “I wish I knew what to do. I’m sorry I’m so dumb. Darn it, what am I supposed to do?”

Rordan repeated the last question to himself while exhaustion crept into the back of his head. The soft pain was overtaking him.

“A glow appeared in me and spread. Maybe that’s what I have to do, glow for people.”

He clasped Borus’ wide, calloused hands and put his head against the youngster’s. His pained body cramped.

Borus grew agitated and a deep groan escaped the back of her throat.

The sound unsettled Rordan and his tears splashed on the moss. He clenched his teeth and turned wildly lucid. The song of nature grew stronger for a brief moment.

“I’m going to do this.” His voice came out hot and choked.

Rordan closed his eyes and drew in a long breath. To open to the song of nature required a vulnerability he hadn’t any practice with. The song grew in strength to his ears and he willed the glow he had seen in himself to Borus. A tremor ran down his spine and back up to his stomach. He experienced a moment of blackout, where a bright flare of white-hot light danced past his mind’s eye.

They looked up at each other. Rordan saw gentleness in his friend’s eyes. Borus relaxed and sat down as if nothing had happened. A lively, whispering chatter emerged from the pauper’s lips.

The soft pain faded. Rordan felt cleansed and a peace spread throughout his tired body. “I hope that did it. I’m so tired. What a weird day.”

The three young women returned from the forest. Their hair was damp and they wore a fresh set of Seltish clothes. Kea lighted their way with a small candle lantern. The people on the beach shouted or waved greetings at them.

Rordan wiped his face with a sleeve. He decided to socialize. With difficulty, he got up and made his way over to the beach. Borus tagged along behind him.

The Skipper finished splitting wood. She carried the wood-axe and box of tools back to the boat, while the butty and Noss arranged her efforts in two organized piles. Mungo now tended the fire.

Noss said, “Hey you three, glad you could join us. I was about to go looking for you.”

Kea blew her lantern out and set it down. “Yeah. With crazy Ror running around without pants and Codal shouting filthy words, we were in a lot of danger.”

Bov glanced at Rordan, then at Kea. “Rordan streaked? I want to hear this one.”

Borus chirred at Kea and the young woman started as if she had been bitten. Rordan found the sound frightening.

Kea said, “Hey! I was only jesting.”

The girl hid behind Rordan, with her eye on Kea as if she expected trouble. Kea stared at the campfire and retreated into herself.

Dalla smirked. “Looks like you have a new protector.”

Rordan said, “That’s right. He’s my new friend. So you’d better be nice to me or you’ll get the creak.”

She chuckled. The young woman’s poise suggested to him she had no fear of Borus.

Noss said, “Well he better not creak at me. You make sure he doesn’t do anything he’ll regret, Rordan.”

An undercurrent of threat in the teenager’s words cowed Rordan. He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets. “So when’s supper? Is Fais still imprisoned in the cabin?”

Ivixa took offense. “She’s not a captive Rordan. She’s doing a nice job of making sure we all get something to eat.”

A flush warmed Rordan’s face. Anger and embarrassment followed the surge of red to his cheeks.

Her statement bemused Mungo. He poked at the fire with a stick and said, “Nobody said she was a captive. But she is doing hard work, and I don’t see anyone else helping her out.”

Ivixa said, “By anyone else, you mean us women.”

Mungo sneered. “No, I mean anyone else. We all had to pole today, but I still found time to give a free performance. And I helped Noss saw the wood. I didn’t

see anyone raise a finger to help Fais with lunch today. Rordan daydreamed, Codal sat on his big behind making smoke, and you regaled us with stories. All about your upper-cruster vacation with people who actually know something about captivity.”

Ivixa appeared stung.

The butt watched the group with a wary eye.

“Hey man,” said Noss, “what Rordan said was uncool. Ivixa was pointing that out.”

Mungo nodded. “Yeah, it was. But he said it after you busted his chops.” With a toss, the stick went in the fire. “The whole thing started with Kea taking a cheap shot at Rordan. I’m tired of hearing her jab at him.”

Kea came out of her trance. “Would you prefer I took a jab at you?”

“Come on, Rordan running around with dropped trousers?” Mungo scoffed. “It only stirs up bad feeling. Where you coming from with that?”

A puzzled expression appeared on her face. “Don’t you think you’re over-reacting?”

Disdain resonated in Mungo’s voice. “Patronizing as well as devious.”

Codal guffawed. “On that note brother, I’m going to go see what’s taking the old maid so long. I’m ready to eat and she’d better serve my big behind up with some grub. Grubity-grub hard-core!” He tossed his smoke-stub onto the beach and left for the boat.

Dalla said, “That’s our Codal, always a barrel of unfunny jokes.”

Mungo gave a dismissive gesture with his hand. “I’m surrounded by clowns.”

Rordan hid his feelings of discomfort behind a phony smile. The awkwardness of the group called out for a friendly laugh. He thought up an improvised mimicry of Codal’s mannerisms and speech, with emphasis on the word “brother” as a centerpiece. His motivation failed to manifest.

Borus exhaled a chattering breath.

CHAPTER 9: BAD FEELINGS

Rordan stood before a maze made of waist-high green grasses and weeds in flower. Iron gates blocked off some of the passages and a field lay in the center of the maze. In the middle of the field stood a famous songster called Angelic Rascua. The man waved at Rordan and sang to him, “I hope there’s hope for you.”

The dream passed from view and Rordan drifted awake. He opened his eyes and remembered sleep had happened the moment he pulled the warmers over. Cold night air had forced him to wear his jacket and waterproof coat. They clung to him with oily tightness. The bedroll and moss had proved a good combination. Though stiff, his back otherwise felt fine.

Against his right side lay Borus, curled within the dryad-weave for maximum warmth. Fikna faced away from them on Rordan’s left. He envied his bro’s two kinds of covers. The need to help Borus had drawbacks.

Rordan sighed. He elbowed himself upright and took in the surroundings. A mist hovered in curtains over the surface of the water and a haze obscured the sky.

He remembered last night’s argument and the way it had separated everyone over safety. The people in the campsite at the edge of the forest still slept. Smoke rose from the remnants of the fire on the beach. The butty sat on a log segment beside the fire and stood guard. From the angle of his head he appeared to have dozed off. No sounds emerged from the boat.

Rordan stood up and contemplated how he felt. His cut toe and stung foot throbbed with soreness. A number of inflamed mosquito bites itched and his muscles were stiff. However, his mind felt refreshed.

He put on his shoes and walked to the edge of the promontory. The water level surprised him; the river had sunk several feet and exposed sections of the island to view. Purple starfish, bundles of olive green kelp, and packets of mussels were exposed to the air. They had moored closer to Sebry Bay than he thought.

His fantastical awareness had vanished. All the details of last night stood out in his mind when he recalled them. He supposed his special sight only lay dormant and might reappear at any time.

Rordan sat down on his bedroll and took the map out of his daypack. The reality of yesterday's crater adventure encouraged him. He took a moment to study the map in the morning light.

Some of the boxes in the maze were blank. Others only had the arcane text in them. The central part of the map, where the maze seemed to go, had a locked double door of paper framed in gold ink and small gemstones. Past the double door was the center of the maze, which was blank.

The depicted symbols, people, and scenes made no sense to him. They had been rendered in miniature, with a fine calligraphic script. His fingers stopped presently over a box illustration of a figure in a forest, crouched with its hands on its head in distress. The details amazed

him. If only he had a magnifying lens. He hoped the map had magic powers. What happened to him yesterday had seemed magical.

He turned the map over. A paragraph of large arcane text had been scribed in one corner. The text had been penned in vibrant black and outlined in ink mixed with gold.

His bro' stirred. Rordan put the map back in the daypack.

Fikna turned onto his back and looked at his foster-brother with a dazed expression. "Rord, you awake?"

"Yep. How you feeling?"

Fikna closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "I think I'm much improved, thank you. My bites have passed into the less immediate stage of, 'itch me every minute'. And it would appear the rest of me is mending to match this challenge."

Rordan said, "A lot of weird stuff happened to me last night."

A frown appeared on Fikna's face. He knuckled eye boogers from the edges of his eyes and said, "How remarkable. Meanwhile, I'm resigned to the short end of the draw. The prospect I was set upon has chosen a lesser man. I'm of no mind to make sense of your inscrutable escapades, Rord."

"What do you mean?" A sense of alarm seized Rordan and pushed aside the last of his drowsiness.

Fikna sighed. “While locating a suitable place to attend to my business, I spotted that disagreeable yokel Noss with Kea. They were kissing out. Of all the most wretched indignities I’ve had to suffer, observing that was surely a low point.”

Rordan picked at his own eyes for a moment. “At least you won’t have to chase her anymore. Good riddance. Maybe she’ll leave us alone.”

The sound of a bump came from inside the boat cabin. Rordan guessed their voices had stirred someone from sleep.

Fikna put his hands behind his head and lay back. “I suppose such an outcome is for the best. A witch is not the healthiest of romantic pursuits.”

“That’s sour grapes if I ever heard it.” Good humor replaced Rordan’s worry and he chuckled.

A smile returned to Fikna’s face. “So what were these unusual happenings you experienced?”

Rordan kept his voice low. “After you left to go back to camp, I went into the woods and found a hidden crater. With a deep pool of cold water and a cave inside. The place was managed like a countryman was living there.”

“Are you certain? This is hardly the location for such a skilled and established farmhand,” said Fikna.

“I’m sure. It was that amazing. I talked to the person living there, some scary woman. She told me to get lost. But she let me take a piece of decorated paper from her

desk and I had a swim in the pool. When I came up for air, all that stuff disappeared. I was in a regular crater.”

He gave his bro’ a chance to say something. Fikna nodded for him to continue. “Just then, Ivixa, Kea and Dalla walk in like they know the place. They all act weird, start taking off their clothes, and make fun of me. I saw Deuce-marks on the bodies of Kea and Ivixa. Then they start putting on these heathen clothes.”

Rordan checked the cliffside camp for activity.

“I left the place and came back here. I found you asleep and Borus sitting around. Then I had this crazy vision and all sorts of stuff went through my head. I really bonded with Borus. I believe he gets that I’m his friend. Anyway, things calmed down after that. I hung out waiting for supper, which was where you came in. Weird, huh?”

Contemplation played over Fikna’s face. “What did the scary woman look like?”

“I never saw her. She hid behind a curtain and gave me lectures with a scary voice.” Rordan decided to keep the detail about the gold and gems to himself.

Fikna said, “She might have been a fantom.”

Rordan nodded. “That’s what I thought too. Except there was nothing there you’d expect. It was really heathen, not homely and proper at all. More like an overgrown clutter.”

“You mentioned the girls behaved strangely. Aside from the undressing part, what exactly were they doing?”

Rordan said, "I don't know, it was like they hadn't expected me to be there. At first, Kea and Ivixa acted kind of blank. They walked around the pool toward me from both ends. Dalla just stared at me. Then, I don't know, they started talking like I was one of them or something."

Fikna sat up and wrapped his covers around his lap. "I think you're fortunate to be alive, Rord. They intended to assault you, but something changed their minds."

"What?"

A subdued smile appeared on Fikna's face. "All three of them walk like handlers. I've noticed the way they carry themselves. They've got the attitude. I've trained with razorgirls like Tora or the occasional daddy's fighter like Lewinna. However, I don't ever recall coming across three Seltish girls who carried arms and were friends."

Bafflement showed on Rordan's face.

Fikna said, "That was careless of me to abandon you like that. I always forget you haven't any training. Your description of their activities sounded like a pincer attack with a backup guard. How did you react?"

Rordan said, "I don't know. I told a few crude lines. They came over and started taking their clothes off after that."

"Most peculiar. They must have remembered your lack of service when you didn't notice their intent. There is a difference in the way we treat unfighters, after all."

The term struck a chord of gall with Rordan. It annoyed him to realize it had been his weakness, not his humor, which saved him.

“Bro’, why do you think they were there?”

Fikna shrugged. “If they are indeed witches, perhaps they intended to meet for a coven gathering. The woman you saw may have been the coven master. She merely spelled you into forgetting the furnishings.”

Rordan shook his head. “I have the piece of paper, remember? She was just hiding from them. The witches probably use the place to meet, but have nothing to do with her.”

Fikna said, “Do you still possess this piece of paper?”

Rordan went for the daypack and produced the map for his brother, who took it and stared at it in bewilderment.

With a sense of pride in his voice Rordan said, “What do you think, isn’t it beautiful?”

Fikna looked at him, and then at the map again. “What’s beautiful? You presented me with a paper containing a number of bright, marbled patterns. Rather formless ones too, if I might add.”

Rordan looked at the map and he understood. “You can’t see the maze.”

“I see only the patterns on one side. Might this be some manner of wrapping paper?” Fikna turned the map around and over.

Disappointment caused Rordan to sigh. He took the map from Fikna and stared at it. “I don’t understand why you can’t see what I’m looking at. I guess there’s nothing to be done.” The map ended up in his daypack again.

Fikna grew peeved. “This wouldn’t be your idea of a jest, would it? Perhaps you ought to destroy the thing. There might be an enchantment to convince you of its value. A version of fantom gold made manifest in a fake paper.”

Rordan sat with his hands on his knees. “Bro’, I know it seems crazy. But it happened, it was real.”

“Then let us investigate this crater. Perhaps the fantom woman will show herself again.”

Rordan shook his head. “I don’t believe that’s a good idea. She was upset I was even there—threatened to harm me if I came back. She might get real mad if I showed up with you.”

Fikna threw his hands up in the air. “Wonderful. You expect me to believe all this fantasy nonsense of yours, which I can’t see for myself. I thought Borus was going to help me witness this incredible world of yours.”

Rordan looked down at the moss and frowned. “I’m sorry bro’. I really am. Just forget it for now. I’ll figure this out.”

He received an angry look from Fikna.

“Put away my things, Rord. I’m going to investigate whether some tea might exist in my immediate future. I was hoping for a magnificent adventure. However, it

appears I'm going to watch so-called witches snuggling up to mindless yokels. Meanwhile, I am situated with pondering if I'm allowed to make progress."

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth.

Fikna put on his shoes, vest and hat. He pulled Rordan's mug from the backpack, then walked over and down to the pier.

Both sets of bedding took time for Rordan to fold and load. He decided to get the weave when Borus woke up and packed the weatherproof clothing next. Rordan drank a cool splash of flat beer from the beerskin and noticed the beer was almost all gone. He slicked back his greasy hair with his fingers, then left the beerskin and daypack beside Borus.

With the backpack slung over his shoulder, Rordan returned to the boat. He passed the forest campsite and didn't see Noss or Kea. Dalla sat upright and awake on her bedroll, with a warmer wrapped around her. Fais and Ivixa were already dressed and packing their things. Eogan slowly pulled on his shoes, a dazed stare on his face.

Ivixa wore a monster mask. The visage displayed an orange, waxen ghoul. The mask otherwise shared the same characteristics as Kea's.

The revelation irked him. To see this kind of thing all the time, or even some of the time, would get old fast. He imagined himself in a neighborhood mart with dozens of people wearing monster masks. The thought of large numbers of witches everywhere increased his displeasure.

He waved at the camp members with forced cheer. “Good morning, everyone.”

Eogan gawked up at him.

Dalla moaned. “What’s good about it? I hate waking up. Let me sleep some more.” She lay back and pulled the warmer over her head.

Fais grumbled. “I look for a place to sleep in comfort and all I get is a rock in my back.”

Rordan chuckled. “That bad? But it beats being inside with a tooting bunch of guys.”

Fais grimaced and wrinkled her nose. “That was so gross. Taking turns teasing me. Yes, a rock in my back was better than all that gas in the cabin.”

He admired her matter-of-fact way of speaking as she explained herself. Her reasons for traveling alone and putting up with so much hassle intrigued him. “Yep, I couldn’t take that.”

At Ivixa’s smile, Rordan’s skin crawled. He intuited the witches had given Fais their own version of teasing.

Dalla peeked from under her warmer. “How was Camp-Borus?”

Rordan chuckled once. He let the backpack down and massaged his shoulder. “Not bad. After everything that happened yesterday, I went right to sleep.”

She stared at him. A little too personally, he thought.

A haggard Kea showed up. She dragged the ends of her bedroll and a warmer on the ground.

Dalla reached into the side-bag next to her. “You left this lying around last night.” She tossed a plum colored undershirt at Kea.

He caught a glimpse of a nasty bruise on Dalla’s shoulder. Fikna sometimes had similar injuries after levy practice. His bro’s words crystallized in his mind. These women were fighters.

Kea caught the shirt and tucked it under her warmer. She made a laugh at Rordan. “You didn’t see that.”

A mischievous urge seized him. “Where’s the lucky dog? Did he bark for you last night?”

Kea said, “Hush, Ror!”

Fais stood up and grabbed her luggage. “Glad somebody had fun.” She took off in a huff.

Dalla made faces at Fais behind her back.

Ivixa said, “Some people have a hard time accepting others.” She played with the ties on her pack.

Eogan got up and followed after Fais.

Dalla puffed. “She’s traditional. We’re freeloaders. There’s no winning with her.”

“Fikna’s the same. Rordan, your brother afraid of real women too?” Kea’s voice carried an invasive tone.

Rordan shrugged. “He’s a gallant. Weird stuff interests him. And Fais has her own way of doing things. I wouldn’t discount them just because they don’t like how you attend services.”

She stripped off her garments and pulled on a new set of clothes from her pack.

He remembered these witches had no modesty. Rordan caught a closer glimpse of her Deuce-mark and saw it was a stylized badger.

“Who do you recognize, Ror?” She packed her bedding.

Kea’s glance gave him the willies. He studied her and tried to figure out what he should say next. She didn’t have a monster mask on, but her movements reminded him of the way his cousin sleepwalked.

“I don’t recognize anyone,” said Rordan.

Dalla said, “Innocent as a pearl.”

“So you say.” A chuckle escaped from Ivixa. She hoisted her luggage over a shoulder and winked at Rordan. “Don’t pay them any mind. They’re reckless and haven’t any patience.”

A witty retort flashed in Rordan’s mind, but he held it back. “I guess.”

Ivixa looked at Dalla and said, “Hurry up, sprout. You’re going to miss the sour tea and stale biscuits of our host.”

Kea picked up her luggage and joined Ivixa. The two young women descended the cliffside and walked toward the boat.

Rordan said, “Sprout? Is that your nickname?”

Dalla rubbed her eyes and nodded. She gave her side-bag a disagreeable look and sighed.

Curiosity bugged Rordan. “Did Kea lie down with Noss?”

She gave him a curious look. “Does that bother you?”

He considered his answer. “It bothers my bro’. He likes her.”

“She doesn’t want him and he wouldn’t want her either.”

Rordan blinked. “That’s a weird thing to say.”

Her stare burrowed into him. In a hushed voice Dalla said, “I know a girl and she’s sick. She doesn’t care about whom she spreads her sickness to. Be careful, Rordan.”

The concern she showed him melted his sudden fear. “I like you Dalla. Thanks for telling me.” He took up the backpack and turned to go.

Dalla said, “What you said about Kea being a Scorpio. Some of that is true. Watch your step with her.”

Rordan looked at her over his shoulder, but she ignored him. Dalla pulled the side-bag over to her and went through it.

He had dozens of questions about witches, but didn’t want to put her on the spot. She’d been kind to him. “You be careful too, Dalla. Don’t hurt yourself.”

He stepped sideways down the steep path of the cliff. As Rordan walked across the beach and onto the pier, he caught a closer glimpse of the low water level. Russet-

brown urchins clustered in crevices with the kelp and starfish. The sight of it brought a smile to his face. He couldn't wait to ditch these witches and get away from trouble.

On the far end of the pier, Fikna hung out with the male passengers, minus Noss. His bro' had obtained some hot tea and appeared pleased with himself.

The Skipper and the butty passed by him on their way to the beach.

Rordan said, "Good morning Skipper."

She smiled at him. "Get it while it's hot."

Bov and Mungo made way for him as he boarded the boat. The chore of securing the backpack occupied his attention. Satisfied with the results, Rordan headed aft.

Eogan sat on the side of the boat with his hand in the water. Rordan's mouth gaped as he struggled to act before the nix grabbed the child.

The boy removed his hand from the water and stared at him. "You're not tame."

"What does that mean?" Rordan found himself unsettled by the boy.

Eogan said, "She's hunting you."

"Who?"

The boy broke eye contact. "Never mind."

Rordan turned away and entered the cabin. The warmth of the stove enveloped him. A billycan hung from a polished brass hook. No breakfast appeared in

progress. Fais had stashed her backpack in the far corner and sat on the nearby bench. She had a stunned look to her.

Her voice sounded resigned. “There’s tea in the billycan. The hardtack is over on the shelf.”

Rordan said, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. The Skipper told me to take a break. Everyone gets to fend for themselves today.”

Last night’s strained conversation about chores came back to him. The booty must have made a full report to the Skipper. “Maybe I can make the breakfast. You can tell me what to do.”

Fais said, “No, Rordan. I need this.”

Her firm reply erased his sudden eagerness and he stood still.

“Okay.” Rordan lightly clenched his teeth and his thoughts wandered.

He realized he was tired of not having a mug. His roaming eyes spotted a tin cup hung from a hook, under one of the shelves. He took it and poured the cup two-thirds full. Rordan spotted the hardtack and decided he wasn’t in the mood. He left Fais alone in the cabin.

The thought of no warm breakfast dampened his mood. Mungo had been right. They’d all taken her cooking for granted. This was daily travel, not a luxury outing. As he walked back to the promontory, Rordan realized he didn’t want to depend on scullions anymore.

If Fais felt burdened by her training, how many others felt the same?

Borus still slept. Rordan stood at the edge of the promontory and watched the sun come up over the bay. He sniffed the tea and thought about what Dalla had said.

As far as he could tell, the witch had meant “sick” as in mental illness. It might have been a double play on words, meaning both spiritual and bodily sickness. He doubted he could do anything for Kea. She must be empty inside. The sooner he and Fikna got away from her the better.

She had focused her attentions on Noss, but he believed she meant to get her claws into all of them. Noss was just the first victim. The guy struck him as not too bright and an easy target.

He watched Dalla board the boat with her luggage. She had turned out to be a witch too. Rordan didn’t understand her reasons for confiding in him. Maybe she could still be saved.

Borus stirred and Rordan smiled at the youngster. “Wake up, sleepy head. We’re leaving soon. Then it’ll be Ciriceval time. Hope you’re ready to hang out with me.”

The girl turned over and resumed her slumber.

Rordan uttered a light snort. He sipped his hot tea with relish. The dull spice pricked at his tongue and the warmth reminded him of home. Rordan sat down and looked at the creatures revealed by the withdrawn tide.

An otter caught his attention. The animal floated on its back and used a small stone to smash open an urchin. The playfulness of its antics delighted him. He closed his eyes and listened for the song of nature.

The song revealed itself to his efforts, but he could barely hear it. The sound lulled at him like the faint roar of the ocean in a tunnel. He opened his eyes and watched the otter with reverence.

The animal tapped the urchin open with its stone, then pulled off pieces of the weakened shell with a crunch of its jaws. It munched on the morsels of flesh inside and Rordan chuckled.

Suddenly, he realized the urchin's life had ended before his eyes. Its fate moved him to silence. The display took on a tragic element to him and the playfulness of the otter's antics now disturbed his peace of mind.

"Is that the flaw in the song of nature?" he said aloud. "Creatures eat one another?" Rordan thought of the beef jerky in his daypack. Now he understood Borus had snacked on the meat of a killed animal.

What the scary woman had said about eating him came back to his thoughts. "Humans get eaten too." Rordan bowed his head and grew sad. He realized humans and animals gathered at the same table and ate each other.

He sipped his tea, then held the beverage in his mouth. Rordan recognized the herbs the water took its flavor from had once been alive. The water contained

germs that had died in the heat of boiling. The taste of the tea turned to stone in his mouth.

Rordan swallowed with a grimace. “The song of nature is cruel.”

All the times he and Fikna had been mean to small animals and bugs came back to him. A sense of shame at the memories burned in his thoughts.

A scene appeared in his mind of young Fikna. His bro’ tried to cut the claws off a large praying mantis and plucked the helpless insect in two. Rordan watched it happen and cried out in disappointment with the other boys at Fikna’s mistake.

The voice inside him said, “He ripped his own guts out on that day and you cheered.”

The memory vanished and a new one took its place. Young Rordan came across a sickly mouse in the yard and he crushed it under his feet.

The voice said, “The bones you heard crunching were your own.”

Rordan recognized how profound the woman’s words had been. He stood guilty of stupidity. In gross ignorance he had blundered into her home like a mindless picaroon, no better than an outsider.

He poured his tea onto the rocks and said, “How sad. Life is horrible and I’m horrible.”

Borus made a hum. She sat upright and stared at him expectantly.

“Good morning, Borus. Welcome to horrible.”

The girl stood up and stretched. She rubbed at her greasy, tussled long hair with her left hand. Borus picked up the beerskin and drained its contents, then uttered a small burp.

Rordan felt an urgent need to leave the island and start his studies. “Come on Borus. Let’s get out of here. Before any more horrible things happen.” He grabbed his things and carried them back to the boat. Borus shambled after him, peering about and blinking.

He moved past the chatting passengers on the pier and over to the fore of the boat. Borus sat on the deck and watched him. Rordan set down his burdens. He took a key from his vest pocket and unlocked the chest.

With his body in the way of everyone but Borus’ view, he put the map and Tora’s envelope in the waterproof case. Rordan closed and locked the chest. He nodded inwardly to himself. The map ought to survive whatever trouble remained. At this point in the trip, he didn’t anticipate any hazards. He hoped the patrollers wouldn’t open the envelope during a search.

Rordan spotted the Skipper and the booty. By the way they gestured to the boat and the river, he intuited they discussed moving on. He realized he had better relieve himself before they got going. Borus had gone in the bushes during the night, so the boy should still be okay.

He gestured with an upraised hand at Borus. “I’ll be back buddy.”

Codal saw him make for the shore and said, “You going to dangle, brother?”

Rordan nodded. “Last chance to go before we get going.”

The teenager took a drag of his smoke and came with him. “When a brother’s got to go, a brother’s got to go.”

They went up the cliffside and into the forest. Out of sight from the others, they each chose a tree trunk and took care of their business.

Codal’s lips held his smoke tight while his hands were otherwise occupied. He muttered between puffs. “I sure hope brother Noss wakes up before we leave his sorry behind.”

Rordan said, “Yep. Kea probably ran him out of fuel.”

Codal finished up and took his smoke in one hand. “Is that so? Well those two can smell my rump dump.” He did his squat routine for what Rordan guessed was the millionth time.

He groaned to himself, the guy needed new material. Rordan chuckled as he realized the same could be said for his own acts.

A tired Noss walked into view. He came down the path with his side bag packed and slung across his shoulder. Noss wore his rider hat and workshirt.

Codal said, “Glad to see you didn’t fall down too big of a hole, brother.” He took a drag, then offered his smoke to Noss.

The rugged teenager walked up and accepted it without a pause. He took several heavy puffs of the smoke, then passed it back to Codal, who finished it off.

Rordan held back a laugh, finished up.

In a tired voice Noss said, “I don’t know where the time went. Nobody woke me up or made much noise. I wasn’t far from here.”

Codal looked droll. He flicked the smoke-stub over the cliffside and onto the shore, then sprang down the path like a madman. “Big women! Big women!”

Noss shook his head and gave the bag a shift to his other shoulder. “Guy is as crazy as you man.” He took a slow pace back to the boat.

Rordan pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth. He disliked knowing this jerk had gotten somewhere with a girl, even if it was one he didn’t like.

On the beach, Fikna chatted with Kea and her two witch friends. Rordan joined his bro’ to see what they talked about.

Kea said, “The thing is, there aren’t any good men out there.”

Laughter spattered from Dalla as a sticky pink aura oozed out of her.

Rordan cringed inside.

Dalla said, “I know. You can’t find any guys out there who know how to be nice. All that romance and chivalry stuff is junk.”

The sourness in her voice confused Rordan. He hoped she hadn't entered a Capricorn ruthless streak.

Fikna pouted. "That is decidedly untrue, good Dalla. There still remain gentlemen of honor and integrity out there. Champions exist in the world who uphold the highest standards of behavior and conduct. Courtesy is not dead. Nay, say rather it lives even as I live."

Kea laughed. "What? Are you saying you're a champion? You, of all people, are saying you belong in the Chief's court?"

Fikna hesitated.

Dalla said, "There are no real champions. Only a bunch of military boys repressing people for the sovereigns. What are you doing about that, Fikna? Where are you when women are being treated poorly?"

Rordan tensed.

Ivixa smiled through her ghoul mask and waited.

Fikna said, "Where are women being treated poorly? Show me a specific example and I shall remedy the situation immediately."

Kea smirked. "He thinks he's a champion."

Dalla giggled. "Yeah, a gentleman who can't get the nerve up to pursue anyone."

Rordan's heart stung. He knew his bro' had been hurt.

To his surprise, Fikna said, "Please excuse me for a moment." His bro' left the conversation and ambled towards the boat. Kea and Dalla continued to giggle.

Kea said, "There goes that champion."

Dalla said, "You mean chumpion. Buh-bye."

In horror, Rordan watched a wound appear on the back of Fikna's neck. The small, jagged bite mark did not bleed. A stain of blood appeared on the mouth of Ivixa's mask, then spread across in the shape of Fikna's wound.

Rordan felt a sharp chill in the air. He guessed she used magic to drink Fikna's blood. When he considered their talk with his bro', he saw a thirst for blood behind the words. His special sight had allowed him to see how the witches performed their mischief.

The bleeding onto Ivixa's ghoul mask stopped. Her mask absorbed the blood and the stain shrank from view. As the last of the blood disappeared, the mask grew indistinct and faded away. Her pupils grew larger and she broke out in a cold sweat.

The three women looked paler than Rordan remembered. Their lively activity repulsed him.

He choked out his words. "Why did you say that to him? Didn't you find that mean?"

Kea settled down while Dalla giggled on.

"Oh please," said Kea. "He was trying to tell us he was some kind of gentleman or something. All that fake upper-cruster talk, it's too much."

Rordan said, “That’s part of who he is. Is that what you’re about? Hurting people’s feelings?”

Dalla said, “Are you a chumpion now?”

He didn’t know how to make contact with them. Fear constricted his mind and the cold sank into him. Rordan intuited that by not standing up to the witches, his bro’ had given ground on something important. He walked past them, cold seeping into his body.

Kea said, “These chumpions sure come and go.”

Dalla giggled. “I know what you mean. No staying power, always withering away when the pressure’s on.”

Rordan boarded the boat and sat beside Borus. He felt an intense desire to be unsociable and retreated into himself.

CHAPTER 10: REGOL COROS ACADEMY

Rordan sat at the bow of the boat and watched the water surface split aside at the boat's keel. He glanced towards Borus, who slept beside him. The youngster lay with one arm under her head while the other dangled over the edge.

Fikna helped the booty with the sail. Rordan guessed his bro's sudden interest helped drown out the earlier embarrassment on the island.

The witches played a game of hearts for petty stakes in front of the cabin, despite the breeze. Eogan slept in the hold. Noss and Codal sat on the walkway and sunned themselves.

Rordan thought about Fais' request to repair his damaged shoe. She had taken both shoes and retreated to the cabin. He flexed his toes and hoped she would return with them soon.

The boat kept close to the southern shore as it sailed through the greater part of Sebry Bay. The amount of water traffic increased. Ciriceval's farmworks came into view as they rounded a bend in the hills. Near the shore, a team of six freebers worked on a drainage channel to the waterside.

The tiered pastures up in the hills looked well organized to Rordan. He realized the cooperatives of Ciriceval were larger than that of Nerham.

His gaze moved outwards from the limits of the neighborhood. The mountain range stood out clear and

detailed against the sunny sky. He found the view pleasant and smiled to himself.

Kea stood up from a reshuffling in the game and approached him.

“You aren’t still mad are you? Dalla’s sorry.”

Rordan hesitated. He struggled to understand what she meant. “You stomped on my bro’. Then you made fun of me for saying something about it. That’s not nice.”

She scoffed at him. “I’m sorry you’re upset. You need to get over it pup.”

Borus awoke with a start and glared at Kea. She tensed like a spring and raised her wide palm as if to strike the young woman. A series of unfriendly, guttural utterances came from the back of her throat.

Kea stepped back. “I’m out of here. You can go be moody by yourself pup.” She rejoined the game. Ivixa eyed Kea while Dalla chuckled at her.

The youngster lowered her hand. She stared at Rordan with a look of disappointment.

“That was awesome. Way to get rid of her.” He smiled and playfully pushed his fist against Borus’ shoulder. “Good job.”

Borus looked around. She stared at Rordan again and smiled.

Noss got to his feet and came over.

Rordan felt an imminent menace.

The teenager rested a foot on the travel chest and supported both arms on his knee. He adjusted his rider hat and said, "If your boy lays a hand on Kea, I'm going to have to settle his account."

Rordan sat upright and considered the threat Noss put forward. He knew he couldn't stand up for himself in a gnarring standoff, so his only option was to back off. "Then you tell Kea to stay away from me and my friend. And to stay away from my bro' too."

Noss jeered at him. "Kea is one of them free spirited girls. You're going to have to give her some room to flutter around."

Borus peered uncertainly at Noss.

"You keep him on a tight leash and I won't have to hurt him. Or you."

Noss made his threat sound polite, thought Rordan. The guy had a size advantage. No doubt existed in his mind who had the greater strength. He wanted to wring the jerk's neck, but he could do nothing but chicken out again.

Fikna abandoned his post and approached. He meandered around the hold and joined Rordan and Borus. Noss stood up and the two of them faced each other.

"You know how to handle your blade, shooter?" Fikna's hand rested on Trad's knife and his stance suggested carefree readiness.

Rordan knew his bro' hoped Noss would step on up, and the guy had to be calculating the odds. He grew tense, waited to see if the gnarring between the two would become a struggle.

The passengers all sat or stood upright and watched.

Rordan couldn't see how the Skipper reacted. He saw the booty gesture at her.

Noss said, "Only making sure your brother's buddy doesn't stoop to hitting the fairer side." His body turned slightly away from Fikna.

The young gallant's voice carried a cold dismissal. "Thank you for your concern. You may move along now."

The teenager looked sideways at Rordan and Borus a little too long. With Fikna's eyes on him the whole time, he walked around the other side of the hold and moved aft.

Rordan worried the gnarring had been delayed, not settled.

A look of disgust crossed Fikna's face. "Is it impossible to expect you to stay out of trouble? A single day off from your antics would be welcome."

Rordan said, "Thanks for coming to my side."

His bro' sat down on the chest and faced him. He used a snooty tone of voice. "You're my family. If anyone's going to beat you senseless it's me, not some churlish dirt digger from up north."

A snicker escaped Dalla.

Fikna gaped once at what he had said. Silence hung between them. Rordan looked away and caught a glance of Ciriceval. He rubbed at his shoulder as a memory threatened to surface.

A plume of black smoke in the neighborhood caught his attention. Dread came over him; he hoped the fire wasn't another chapel. The passengers saw the smoke now too. They pointed at the black clouds rising upwards and talked about it. Rordan ignored them as his fears grew to include the chance of a burned academy and a wasted voyage.

Fikna looked at the column of smoke and frowned. He leaned forward and spoke softly. "For Welkin's sake, Rord. We haven't even landed at our destination and matters are already looking out of the ordinary.

"Perhaps you should focus on your studies and not involve yourself with nonsense about visions and witches. This adventure has been most unsatisfactory. I thought we would be fighting evil-doers and saving cursed souls." He looked at Borus, who relaxed and gazed out at the water. "Not this sordid drama of playing fairer side intrigues."

Rordan noticed Fikna's insect bites had almost healed.

"Are you paying attention Rord? Cease daydreaming and begin working. This is your duty. You must renounce living in fantasies and start meeting our responsibilities. We are going to be ordinary, doing regular and normal things. I'm growing tired of

apologizing for your behavior with these people. Those girls think we're a laughingstock."

Anger simmered in Rordan. He held his voice low and even. "They make fun of us behind our backs as well as to our faces. And Kea lay down with that jerk Noss last night. That's why he was over here doing her dirty work."

The revelation silenced Fikna. His face showed disappointment.

Rordan said, "What? You weren't still thinking you had a chance with her? Wake up and smell the dump, bro'. Those girls are dog-droppers. Forget about them. You want an ordinary life, go ahead. But you aren't ordinary to me. You're my bro' and that's what matters.

"You're smart when you stop and think. There's that gift you have with people that I don't have. You walk into crowds and get people to listen to you. Unlike me, you can defend yourself. There's your faith. You've got all those things and you really care about them. Stop stooping down to blend in.

"Plus your family comes from Orirot blood. You're not in the club now, but you're still important inside. Honor, money—that's all noise. Just because the rest of your family thinks it's all that matters doesn't mean that it does. Your family was tough and lucky before they came here."

His passion came out of him before he could think about it. Rordan froze his thoughts in fear and regretted speaking out.

Fikna looked down at the deck. “Your manner of speaking astounds me Rord. Is it possible for you to explain why Deiwos punishes me? For what reason does he torment me with demands?”

“I never wanted to be anyone special at all. I notice everyone walking around and living life. Meanwhile, I am trapped pondering upon the ingredients I’m missing. How do I formulate an explanation as to why my life refuses to begin? What crucial error do I commit?”

Rordan took a tight breath. “How do you know you’re doing anything wrong?”

Fikna rubbed his face with his hands. “Bad fortune falls upon those who deserve it. Deiwos doesn’t punish innocent people. I recite my prayers. I attend chapel. I study the Tablets. And I practice courtesy. Nevertheless, in some way I fail to comprehend a fundamental truth.

“I understand we are imperfect and that temptation is our lot, yet my mind refuses to rest. The headmaster keeps his pupil after school and scolds him for not understanding a verbal declension. This conundrum torments me.”

His bro’s words took Rordan by surprise. He hadn’t realized Fikna suffered so deeply. The voyage must have revealed shortcomings in his care. Rordan felt a vulnerable spot in his heart had been uncovered.

“Bro’, maybe Deiwos isn’t punishing you. Maybe it’s the Deuce. Maybe you really are a good person and he’s the one holding you back.”

Fikna shook his head and stared at Rordan with confusion. “If that is so, why does Deiws not protect me? Does he allow his faithful to suffer at the hands of wickedness if they are innocent?”

Rordan said, “Then maybe he’s got some plan for you and this is part of that plan.”

A puff of air escaped Fikna’s lips. “You repeat the words of Elder Ofen. After the last services, I visited him with a number of these questions. He answered much the same as you. Deiws has a plan for us all and that my suffering was part of that plan. I needed to have faith and manage. I would get by if only I continued to hold on.” Fikna massaged his wrist and winced.

“However, doubts remain and my faith turns to weakness. I am crumbling inside, Rord. I prefer to avoid disrepute and the invoking of evil upon others. I only ask for the strength to make my life in this world.”

He saw no sign of the bite wound on Fikna’s neck, but Rordan noticed a scratch on Fikna’s wrist. He thought it ought to be extremely painful for his bro’, yet Fikna didn’t seem to notice it. The symbolism of the scratch pained him.

The voice inside of him said, “He never had any faith. This is what he is starting to understand.”

Dread at the voice’s words moved through him. “Fikna, what if Deiws was punishing you for trying to be ordinary? What if he’d chosen you for some special purpose and you were denying that by trying to be a regular guy?”

Fikna's face recoiled. "You mean, become a minister? I possess no gift for the robes. No calling resounds within me."

Rordan shifted his cramped legs and scowled. "Look, you're good with people. You have a strong sense of right and wrong. Your manners are great. Doesn't it make sense to you that your calling might be right in front of you?"

"Give up women and live in chastity? That prospect does not interest me."

"Only if you keep your oath of Sacred Homage."

"Leave the tradition and declare myself nonconformist? My family would be outraged."

Rordan said, "Okay, you only have one choice then. Is that so bad? Look, are you getting any favor from the girls? The last time you had a sweetheart was years ago and look how that turned out. You let it slide."

Fikna stared at him as thoughts raced through his mind. "I lack the desire to be a minister, of either sort."

With a sigh, Rordan threw up his hands. "It's an honorable thing to do. Your family is really religious at heart, so they'd accept this as a good move. Plenty of upper-crusters prepare their children for the chapel when they can't make it for themselves. Or won't inherit anything. You don't want to go through the service, so maybe you'd have more luck as a commissary with the dryads."

Fikna gave his foster-brother a troubled look. “Such a destiny is not my preference. I have no other way of making myself clear. What you mention strikes home with some accuracy. I recognize that it’s a match by every reasonable measure of the requirements. Perhaps such outlooks explain why my family is so distant, in that they see the obvious while I remain oblivious.”

He spoke his thoughts openly to Rordan and Borus. “What am I supposed to do, Great Liege? What is my purpose? Give me a sign that I can understand and use to guide my path. My soul is in your hands.”

His head bowed and he clasped his hands. Other than the dance of water against the boat and the talk aft, no sound could be heard.

Rordan grew uncomfortable in the presence of his bro’s act of submission. He intuited a conflict of great importance resided within Fikna. His thoughts stirred with sadness for a moment, followed by an intense, sharp fear. The guardianship of his bro’ slipped from his grasp.

Borus’ eyes drooped shut and she snored.

Fikna stood up and said, “It appears we are almost to the haven. I had best resume assistance with the sail.”

“Maybe the Skipper will let you steer again,” said Rordan. “You should ask her to let you bring us in.”

His bro’ attempted a smile and headed aft.

“Libras,” said Rordan with affection.

He turned his attention to the boat’s progress. The neighborhood had come into full view and the haven was

now visible. Just beyond it, the long span of Saint Domhar's Crossing joined the south shore with the north. The dark grey stone of the old bridge impressed him with its enormity. It saddened him that such marvels couldn't be duplicated anymore. The open sea was not visible from here. The bay must continue on a little ways further.

An abundance of towering, profuse trees surrounded the walled neighborhood of Ciriceval. Groves of smaller trees grew throughout the interior and in some places filled several blocks. He could make out another wall beyond a thick expanse of one such long grove. The stone of both walls had been painted white with navy-blue and gray trim.

Another multitude of trees obscured the source of the smoke. He heard a chapel bell and the sharp whistles of the barrel brigade. Rordan hoped they had the flame under control, or else the entire neighborhood might burn down.

A building he took to be the local shrine stood atop an enormous hillside. The design of the architecture eluded his attempt to identify it. The wide, snow-capped peak stood out in the distance as a backdrop for the shrine. He found it a magnificent choice of location.

The mountain seized a hold of his attention. He heard the voice inside him say, "You have returned." A thrill of anxiety churned in his stomach and the deck beneath him trembled.

Borus sat up suddenly and stared at him.

He stared past the youngster and repeated to himself what the voice had said. The reality of a voice inside of him finally sank in and he worried. It sounded to him like it was living inside his body. He considered what the voices crazy people heard might sound like. Rordan looked at the mountain and felt a powerful attraction to it. The attraction made him shiver.

His gaze turned back towards the bridge. Pennants flew in the breeze all along the span, and in the middle a pair of wooden drawbridges allowed larger ships to anchor near the neighborhood. He saw a dozen caravels and two service galleys, along with a dromond flying Farian streamers.

A stone tower at the other end of the bridge was also painted white with navy-blue and gray trim. The neighborhood banner flew beneath the Heartland banner. Rordan made out a densely packed camp around the outside of the tower.

The Skipper steered the boat into a docking approach. Fikna and the booty secured the sail while Noss and Mungo stood ready with poles. The stern fenders of bleached rope were down.

With luggage in one hand and Rordan's shoes in the other, Fais emerged from the cabin. She made her way through the flurry of activity and then dropped the shoes by his feet.

Rordan pulled out of his trance. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He examined the repaired shoe. The cut had been sewn shut with crude, but effective skill. “How did you do it? I didn’t know you were a cobbler.”

Fais looked at the approaching pier with relief. “I was a summer attendant for one and picked up basics by watching. The stitch I used took me a few times to learn—” She stopped herself. “That’s how.”

Rordan put on his shoes and tested the fit. He thought she’d done a good job. “Good work, thanks. This means a lot to me.” He marveled at the nostalgia he already felt for the voyage.

“Oh hush already, you dingaling. I didn’t do this for you, I did it for me.” She made a mild laugh and shook her head.

The Skipper said, “Ballast rats, this is where we part ways. Maybe I’ll see some of you again. But if not, may brightness and blessings move before you.”

The boat came to a rest beside the pier. Fikna and the booty secured the boat to the mooring ballards. The Skipper disembarked, walked down the pier and out of sight. The passengers unloaded their luggage onto the pier.

The prospect of carrying a chest, a backpack, and a daypack drew a sigh from Rordan. He realized they had reached Ciriceval just in time. The voyage had cut it close with the schedule of his classes, but they had made it. He smiled a little.

Codal put on his backpack. “Brothers and sisters, it was a good trip. But I’ve got to head out.” He gave Fais a bear hug.

She accepted the indignity. “Take care, cloud-buster.”

Rordan said, “Be cool, hard-core. Remember to get the jump on the backmonkeys and drudgets.”

Codal made the sign of peace at Rordan and said, “See ya late-ah bru-tha!” He walked away and disappeared into the crowd of people on the pier.

Mungo said his farewells and followed.

Thoughts held Fais still. She regarded Rordan and Fikna. “Thank you for your company, and your kindness. I suppose it’s my turn to say goodbye. Goodbye then.” She grabbed her luggage and departed.

Fikna said, “My word, that was indisputably abrupt.”

“Yep,” said Rordan. “I hope she’ll be okay.”

Ivixa exchanged hugs with Kea and Dalla. “I’ll see you two again real soon. You know where to find me.”

She opened her arms towards Rordan and Fikna.

Fikna accepted the hug. “May good fortune accompany you, warm-hearted Ivixa.”

Rordan dodged behind Fikna. He couldn’t help but think it nuts to hug a witch who had drained his bro’s blood.

Ivixa pouted at him. “I might see both of you again. Kea and Dalla will be staying at the academy for a while. And I’ll want to visit them. Until then, farewell.”

Fikna bowed. “I would consider it an honor to meet you again. It has been a privilege to make your acquaintance.”

She curtseyed for him. Ivixa departed, her son’s hand in hers.

The Skipper returned with the haven master, a well-groomed man of middle age in a gray uniform. Instead of the usual boots he wore sandals. While the man made an inspection of the boat, she approached the two brothers.

Rordan took the tin cup he had borrowed from his daypack and returned it to her.

She accepted the cup and faced him squarely. “I like you. I hope you’ve come away from this knowing a thing or two. I only have two requests. That you remember to protect the spark of your own true nature, always and ever. And that you refuse to bow down to the trials of your life. If you do this, I assure you that you will outlive your enemies.”

Her words pleased him. “I’ll remember.”

She gave him a strong and vigorous handshake, which he accepted and returned.

The Skipper shook Fikna’s hand. “You took to this pretty quick today. If you ever need a job, we make this run regularly. We’re always in need of someone to help us make expeditions.”

Fikna bowed. “I shall give your offer much consideration, Skipper. And now I must bid you fond

farewell. I shall recall your hospitality whenever I am in need.”

Kea shook her head at him. She hoisted her luggage and said, “Come on, you champions.”

Rordan looked at Kea and Dalla with skepticism.

The two young women shared a look of mischief with each other.

Kea said, “We’re staying with some friends at the academy. It’s that thing called sponging. When you’re a freeloader you live off your friends. I have a lot of them there whom I haven’t seen for a while.”

Noss adjusted his rider hat and smirked at Rordan.

“A suitable arrangement,” said Fikna. “Your company and any guidance you provide shall be much appreciated.”

The thought of the witches in the academy irritated Rordan. Noss and Bov being there didn’t bother him. He could ignore them. But the witches had given him a real kick in the trousers by coming along. He’d hoped to ditch them at the haven, despite what he’d heard about Kea’s connection to Regol Coros.

Fikna looked around for a moment. “Unbelievable, I forgot. Skipper where are the patrollers? Shouldn’t we be inspected?”

The Skipper said, “Different neighborhood, different rules. My manifest covers you.”

Fikna showed his exasperation to Rordan. “I declare. This is an unusual development. We’re near the borders, think of the safety issues involved.”

Rordan shrugged. “Maybe it’s safer than we thought.”

Bov said, “You need help with that chest? Fikna isn’t going to make you carry it by yourself, is he?”

“Yep, unless we catch a wagon. It’s okay, I’m used to it. But if you’d help me carry it some of the way that’d be a big help.”

A cheery smile appeared on Bov’s face. “Sure. Hey maybe we’ll be in the same hall, or even bunkmates. That’d be great.”

Rordan found Bov’s sudden enthusiasm off-putting. He donned the backpack, then hefted up the daypack in one hand. Bov helped him heave the chest upright and they carried it together.

The group walked down the pier to the edge of the haven, where the mart began. Borus kept close to Rordan and gawked at everything that came into view.

Rordan found the character of the people on the streets different from his old neighborhood. He took note of how the locals wore a lot more color and accessory. They carried themselves with more ease. His guess was it must be a result of the dryad influence and the fact that this neighborhood had been settled only near the end of the troglodyte wars.

The group stopped at a street corner. Fikna signaled a wagon over and negotiated with the smelly, muddled

carter for a ride to the academy. He paid the old man three pawns and motioned for the group to join him.

Noss opened his wallet. He stared inside the empty bill flap and frowned. His gaze searched the crowd for a few seconds, followed by a silent profanity.

Fikna accepted the words of thanks for his generosity with a reserved smile and a nod. The group loaded their luggage into the wagon and climbed aboard. Rordan found himself jammed next to Kea, with Dalla and Noss across from her.

The old man got the horse going. He directed the wagon onto a street that went up a steady slope and into the neighborhood hills. Borus withdrew into herself and stared downwards.

As the wagon passed through the mart, Rordan caught a number of delicious smells. Everywhere he looked he saw brightly painted stone buildings, each different from one another. Often they were separated by wild-looking gardens. He spotted an amphitheater up the hillside and down a different street. His own neighborhood had nothing like this.

They stopped to let crossing traffic move past. Kea's stale tobacco breath wafted past Rordan and he pretended not to notice.

Fikna said, "Driver, could you enlighten us as to the fire?"

The old man answered in an easy-going voice. "That's the trash mart. Some firebugs probably set it. Been

going for an hour. Barrel brigade's on it. When they catch the rascals, bottoms will ring. Mark my words."

The carter's words didn't reassure Rordan. By the look Fikna gave him, he could tell the feeling was mutual.

He decided to make conversation. "Kea? Since you know so much about the academy, how about telling us some pointers?"

She looked up from her thoughts and glanced at him sideways. "What do you want to know?"

Rordan assembled his questions. "I've got to go to the steward-hall and do a reference exam. What can you tell me about that?"

Kea laughed to herself. "Oh that's nothing. They have you fill out the paperwork and see what test you'll need."

"Is the study-up for tests hard?"

She eyed him. "Not usually. But no one's going to make you do your lessons. If you get too much into the Depressing Club, your lessons will slip up. The tutors will cut you no breaks."

Her look gave Rordan the impression she didn't think he was ready for the academy. He considered her words. "What's the Depressing Club?"

His bro' listened.

Dalla interrupted Kea. "Pupils have the most unusual life. You're free from your head-of-household junk, but you aren't working either. You're in between, and you're free to do anything. Some people can't handle it and

drop out. But the whole thing creates this atmosphere where everybody's doing something sideways."

Rordan heard her trying to connect with him through her words. He didn't want to forgive Dalla. The scene with the blood drinking gave him the creepies.

"You'll see what she means," said Kea. "That's why I have so many friends here. We all did a lot of Depressing Club together while I was studying. But everyone can get on your nerves. So after I got my secondary papers I took some time off. Now I want to bring Dalla into it since she's heard all my stories."

Noss said, "Should be interesting."

The guy's statement indicated to Rordan the end of the conversation. He turned his attention back to the neighborhood sights. They had left the mart behind and entered a townsfolk street, with trades advertised by pageant boards.

He saw a dozen paupers walking the streets, from teens to older adults. Some begged for money outright, others employed a scam. He saw an old man in dingy clothes play a cheap recorder loud and out of tune. It struck him as comical and tragic at the same time, which he believed might have been the point.

Statement-hangings littered the walls and corners. Rordan saw artwork of a kind only seen in the shady street of his own neighborhood. He didn't see anything smutty, only a style associated with lowlife vulgarity. The open practice seemed to lend vitality to the

neighborhood. Rordan liked the character that Ciriceval revealed to him.

The wagon's route transported them out of the center of the neighborhood and into the outer streets. They climbed a steady hill rise. As the group rode above the neighborhood center, Rordan thought the effect on their view pleasant. He wouldn't describe Nerham as flat, yet his home lacked any kind of real elevation.

From here he saw the fire a little better. Smoke covered a street section and he caught a glimpse of a wisp of flame. The flames didn't spread, which made him grateful.

Rordan took in the weather. The sun shone on a clear blue sky, so no rain for the brigade today. Ciriceval's climate felt dry to him. He took the air to be the influence of the nearby sea. In Nerham, one could really swelter during the summer. He found he preferred the dry heat to the damp one.

Kea pointed out a warehouse-like structure down the street. "That's Distaves, the local mart post. You can get a counting-house account there and buy food and goods. It's the closest thing to the academy. It'll save you the trouble of having to go into the mart itself every time you want something.

"And over there next to it is Astragal's, a tavern that serves good Farian food. Your only other option close by is to hit the Hideaway Grill. That's the local academy tavern, but their choices are pretty limited."

The wagon continued to climb, then passed through the inner wall and crossed a bridge over a wide gully. Cottages lined the cobblestone street on the other side. Rordan spotted the occasional townsfolk outside doing chores. One churned butter on the porch while another fed a chubby pig in a wooden pen. He thought everyone looked a lot more neighborly and open than the people on his own street.

They rode past a cemetery and rounded a bend. An enormous wild forest dominated the view to their left. A row of cottages on the right appeared more in line with what Rordan expected.

Everyone remained indoors. The cottages had been secured against prowlers and beasts. He saw stained glass pastoral hangings on the windows. Wreaths of twisted sticks and flowers were tied onto the gateposts. The canopy of the forest extended over the street and dampened the sun. The place painted an eerie picture for him and he shivered.

The forest gave way to a large estate of tended gardens and cultivated trees. The shrine Rordan had spotted earlier rested at the top of the grounds while nearby an intricate manor house lay at a confluence of stone buildings.

Kea said, "That's the original colonist manor of the Director of Ciriceval, Greatheart Dugald Pugfrons. He donated it to the academy foundation back when the place started. The steward-hall is behind it. That pillared building next to the manor is the archive, and past that

are the classrooms, apothecary, and academy amphitheater.

“Over there’s the sanctum, a nonconformist style built with Dimmurian counsel. That blocky building is the community hall and the center of pupil life. Past that, where you see those long buildings? That’s the dormitory hall complex. The rest are all small functions cottages. You’ll get to know them soon enough.”

The wagon drew up to the community hall and stopped. Everyone disembarked and unloaded their luggage. Fikna thanked the driver and gave him a pawn. The carter tipped his hat to the young gallant and directed his wagon back the way he had come.

Rordan took in the grounds. He saw mostly teens his age walking back and forth along a central cobblestone path. Most of them carried daypacks. The scene reminded him of being back at school without the uniforms.

The dress seemed proper at first glance, but then Rordan spotted pieces here and there of unusual hairstyles or accessories.

Fikna gave his best smile. “What excitement. Here at last, after all the bothersome rot of travel. Where do you need to arrive Rord? We shall walk there together.”

Rordan unlocked the chest and searched through his papers in the waterproof case, careful not to let anyone see the map. He came up with the admissions document that authorized him to travel and attend the academy, and

his instruction letter. He locked the chest, then looked through them.

“It says here that there will be a pupil leader. Waiting for me at Boant Oak Hall. Kea, you know where that is?”

She nodded. “That’s where my friend Manissa is bunked. Maybe we’ll even be staying on the same floor.” She pointed to the closest dormitory building.

Noss dug into his pack and Bov did the same. They were housed in a Dorus Elm and an Ardan Pines. They each received rough directions from Kea.

“I’ll ask for help if I get lost,” said Bov. “See you all on the grounds. Bye Rordan.” He picked up his backpack and headed off in the direction Kea had pointed him toward. His path took him through some trees, toward a structure Rordan could barely make out.

“Later people,” said Noss. “Kea, I’ll drop by once I’ve settled in.”

She laughed a little. “I’ll let my bunkie know where to direct you. I have no clue where I’ll be tonight, so ask for Manissa’s room. It’s probably still on the second floor.”

With a nod, the rugged teenager grabbed his luggage. “See you later.”

As Noss walked away, Rordan felt instantly relieved. He had a suspicion at the back of his mind that the jerk would show up again. For now, he intended to forget about the guy. Rordan put on the backpack.

Fikna said, “Guide us Kea, if you please. We shall follow.”

She gave the gallant an amused glance. With Dalla beside her, Kea walked toward Boant Oak. Fikna slung the daypack as if he were a pupil and followed after her.

It occurred to Rordan he would still have to carry the chest some distance. He lifted it and took a moment to steady his grip, then walked after his bro’.

Borus kept up beside him. The girl gaped about and received an occasional stare from passers-by, who all saw only a teenage boy.

Rordan trailed behind Fikna for a minute. He let the chest down and caught his breath. His bro’ and the two young women increased their lead on him.

He hoisted the chest again and crossed a street. After half a minute up a slightly sloped path, he let the chest down and looked up. He had lost sight of them.

Borus looked at him funny.

Rordan said, “If only you could give me a hand with this. But it’s looking like this is all me.”

A monstrous pink humanoid charged out of the nearby bushes. The creature pounced on Borus in a blur and knocked her to the ground.

Paralysis seized Rordan. He watched as the hideous thing moved to bite Borus on the throat with triangular, serrated teeth.

The girl bounced out of the creature’s grasp, snapped upright, and used her huge hand to smack the creature on the side of its head.

The creature shrieked under the terrific blow. It attempted to swipe at Borus with the sharp, tapered fingernails of its right hand.

Borus moved faster. She smacked the creature hard on the head with each hand in rapid succession. The creature crumpled onto its back and appeared to have been killed.

Rordan refused to believe his eyes. He hadn't guessed the boy possessed such vigor. Borus' feat reminded him of Fikna's understated strength.

He studied the creature in detail. It had bubbly, pockmarked pink skin the texture of melted wax. The creature's face was frozen in a wide-eyed grimace, which struck him as odd.

The body dissolved into a puddle of pink grease before his eyes. Borus jumped backwards. She glanced at him, then stared at the puddle.

Rordan looked around. While their own behavior attracted a few glances, no one seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. He looked back and the grease had vanished. A patch of wilted brown grass and a wisp of fading pink smoke remained.

He looked up at the building. At a second-floor window he saw Kea with her monster mask on. The witch backed away out of sight and Rordan realized the creature had been her doing.

To his relief, Borus had proved stronger than Kea had guessed. One could easily underestimate him based on how wretched the boy looked. He remembered the

youngster's strong grip during his vision on the island. The pauper possessed an animal-like fierceness he hadn't suspected.

"Come on Borus. Time to get busy." Rordan let the encounter slide for now. Nothing more could be done. No one would believe his word on what had happened and Borus couldn't tell anyone.

He reached a side entrance in the building, surrounded by tall bushes. Rordan took another rest and massaged his hands. If Fikna had kept going straight ahead, he would have come through here.

"There you are."

Rordan looked up. His bro' leaned out an open window. The same window he had seen Kea behind a moment before.

"Hurry along Rord. Your bunkroom is located here. There's a pupil leader named Stroma waiting to make your acquaintance. And Kea will be staying adjacent to us. Wait until you behold your exciting accommodations."

Fikna's news dampened his spirits. Rordan muttered to himself. "Great, right next door. How does that not surprise me?"

He opened the door and lifted the chest for what he hoped would be the last time. Rordan climbed a set of stairs back and forth through a square, columned stairwell that linked the different floors.

The building was made of solid brick with plaster covering the walls on the inside. A stained, well-worn red carpet covered the floor. Statement-hangings he didn't recognize decorated the walls. Rordan noted the presence of a third floor, probably an attic converted for use.

A side passage led in the direction of the window Fikna had hailed him from. Rordan turned a corner and faced a hallway of doors. In the middle of the hallway Fikna spoke with a young woman wearing a pupil leader's jacket.

She wore eyeglasses and around her neck hung a traditional Empyrean rood of wood. Her smile gave him a comfortable feeling inside. At once, he felt safe with her.

Rordan put down the chest. He waved and said, "Hi, I'm Rordan. And this is Borus, my friend. Uh, are you the P.L.?"

"Yes, that's me. I'm Stroma; go ahead and call me by my name. Your brother here has been telling me about you. Your room is ahead on your right. Number eight."

Her voice soothed his nerves. For a moment, he relaxed and spaced out.

Fikna said, "Not much farther, Rord. Quicken your pace."

Rordan jerked back to attention, then dragged the chest behind him and toward the door indicated by Stroma. Along the way, he passed a room with an open door and saw Kea inside. She dug through her side-bag

while talking to an unseen occupant. He heard Dalla laugh.

At the door to his room, he saw a square living space with two walk-in closets attached. There was a pair of beds and desks with a chair, split between opposite walls.

Borus entered the room and went up to the window across from the door. She stared through the glass and her face tightened.

Stroma said, “Take whichever side you want. Your bunkmate isn’t here yet. A guy named Stig. About everyone else is here though. We’re going to have a meeting in the snug later tonight. You’re all welcome to come.”

Rordan heaved the backpack off of his shoulders and onto the bed at his right. His shoulders tingled with numbness. He dragged the chest over to the desk by the bed he had chosen. His arms tingled; he moved them around, looking forward to a return of some feeling.

Fikna watched his efforts and trembled with excitement.

Rordan pointed at Borus. “Don’t mind him, he doesn’t talk. He’s a pauper I picked up. Uh, I hope that isn’t a problem.”

Stroma said, “I’ll admit it’s pretty unusual. But as long as he doesn’t misbehave, it’s fine. You’d be surprised what we tolerate around here.”

He nodded. “What else do I need to know?”

She reached into the pile of folded papers she carried and gave him a brass key. “This is your room key. You get settled. I’m down a door from you on the other side. When you’re ready, come by and ask me any questions you like.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. And also, welcome to R.C.” She took her leave.

“A nice gal,” said Rordan. “What a stroke of luck.”

Fikna took a seat at Rordan’s desk. “I completely agree. She’s a splendid lady of obvious, outstanding character. Certainly make our stay here a good deal more pleasant.”

Rordan closed the door. He spoke in a low voice. “Bro’, I find it really weird that Kea is staying in a room next to mine. Just tell me you’ll be careful.”

His bro’ pursed his lips at him with tight-eyed regard. “You may rely on me to be cautious and discrete. Now, let us be certain to locate a shower station and clothing for Borus. Surely he can wear something of yours until we acquire an outfit suited to his measure.”

“I’m guessing we hit that mart-post and shop for him,” said Rordan. “I’ll have to see about a credit account at some point. What are you going to do?”

Fikna assumed a relaxed poise in the chair and bit his lip. “I suppose I ought to introduce myself to everyone. I’ll be staying here until I can manage quarters of my own.

And I shall have to locate a manner of employment to support my activities. My allotment is limited, after all.”

Borus entered the closet diagonally opposite from the bed and looked displeased. She seated herself and looked for a place to rest her head.

Rordan gathered up his bedding and laid them on the floor of the closet.

The girl smiled and wrapped herself in the weave. She curled up and laid her head down on a bundled warmer.

“Well, at least he’s happy.” Rordan chuckled to himself.

Fikna puffed. “I’m astounded you picked him up. I’m surprised they are allowing him to reside here. And I’m also surprised to find boys and girls bunk on shared floors.

“Not that I’m complaining. However, it’s highly irregular. I had assumed a segregation of some kind. I even saw a troglodyte in the hallway. Higher education for troglodytes? I had no idea the Director of Ciriceval was taking such liberties.”

Rordan wrestled with the thought of it. “I hadn’t thought about it. They do have the rights now, so I guess if they have the money it’s possible.”

Fikna nodded. “I assumed it was going to be all Seltans and a few upper-cruiser Kgosians. However, it appears there are still traces of Dimmurian influence on the Heartland.”

A pale-skinned, skinny teenager with silvery-blond hair walked in through the door. His ears and tongue were pierced with studs. He carried a pack and two line bags.

Rordan waved to cover his shock at the piercings. “Hey there. You my bunkmate?”

“You sure you got the right room?”

The question irritated Rordan. “Yes, the P.L. herself put me here.”

A look of annoyance flashed on the teen’s face. He dropped his luggage on the other bed.

“I’m Rordan and this is Fikna, my foster-brother. In the closet is Borus, my friend. I’m afraid it’s going to be a little crowded for a while.”

The teenager ignored Rordan’s outstretched hand. “I don’t shake. Name’s Stig. Only just got in. Travel is impossible. That fire has you brownies squirting into your pots.”

The put-down made Rordan nervous and he laughed. “Sorry. It’s kind of a downer for us. The chapel burned down in our neighborhood right before we left.”

Stig said, “No crap?”

Fikna started at the profanity.

Rordan had forgotten how much Dimmurians could swear. Codal had been so different. “Yep, no jest. So what neighborhood you from?”

Stig unpacked at a rapid rate. “I hate that word. It’s so weak and avoids the truth. I hail from the last stronghold, out east. You call it Wulvil. I don’t know exactly what I’m doing here. I’m supposed to study history. But I don’t know if that’s what I want to be doing now. This place is such a big let-down.”

Fikna peered at him sideways. “Your impression confuses me. I find the grounds of this establishment quite pleasant and the people all full of fascinating possibility.”

Stig looked at Fikna, shook his head. He unpacked a dozen rolled shirts. “Wulvil is the greatest place in the entire Dominion to live. I can’t get over how bitched my people are up here. All this stupid joint effort crap. From your reactions, I’m guessing wherever you’re from it’s worse. Am I right?”

“We’re from Nerham,” said Rordan, “near the capital.”

Stig puffed. “Yeah, it figures you’d be near the Chief. Everyone is reduced to the level of a freeloader over there. Pretty sad. Spunk that.”

Rordan sat on the bed and tried to figure Stig out. “I’m guessing this is going to be a living setup where you give us crap for being brown.”

Stig glanced at him while he unpacked a case of papers. “I don’t care if you’re brown. I don’t know how far I’m going to get here. There are going to be so many brownies and peacocks breathing down my neck.”

The Dimmurian expression for Kgosians reminded Rordan of the old wars between the two. He felt embarrassed.

Fikna said, "Then explain your reasons for traveling here. If your home is incredible, what would you leave it for?"

"I thought this place would be fun. I didn't realize how mixed up it is here." Stig pulled out some rolled statement-hangings and a writing kit. "I'm waiting to hear the word troggie to see what I do. Down home, you brownies wouldn't dare use that word. But I'm betting up here it's common. Am I right?"

Rordan swallowed. "It's true. Some of our friends use that word." His bro' glared at him.

"See, that's what I mean. That crap shrine with local carvings is still a stupid kneeler place of worship. It's for people who are playing ball with you. I wonder if I can even go to a greftrun here without papers. Down in Wulvil, I can go anywhere and it's my people's land, even though we have a shrieve from your court. It's occupied, but not taken. You're the minority and I never have to apologize for anything."

Rordan wrestled with his bunkmate's point of view.

Stig said, "Anyway, I don't mean to stir you up. I only want you to know I'm not going to listen to any troggie jests or put up with any 'pull the wool over the troggie' crap."

Fikna said, “Well spoken, Stig. We will extend you every courtesy it is in our power to produce. It is my fond hope you will welcome us during our stay together.”

The sincerity in Fikna’s voice made Stig chuckle. “You are too much. Okay, I’ve got to run. Got to go take care of some paperwork before business hours wrap up. You brownies have messed-up notions of time. See you around.”

He got up and left. Strewn about were piles of clothes and accessories half-unpacked.

Fikna looked at Rordan and laughed. “Good Welkin, I suppose you had better catch up on unpacking. I confess I haven’t ever seen one of the silver-haired ones before. Tora’s white hair is no longer a novelty I’m afraid. Still, I hardly know what to think. Sleeping in the same room with someone who openly worships in a skeleton mound?”

The concept struck Rordan as eerie. He watched his bro’ take off the loyalty hat and play with his hair.

“Now would be a good moment to avail myself of a tour. This building must possess a shower station somewhere. I would enjoy a lengthy dousing. May I borrow your key?”

Rordan shook his head. “Nope. I’m the pupil here. You’re the one who’s the guest. We’ll see if we can’t get a locksmith to copy it later. But until then, I keep the key. It’s bad enough you’re going to make me sleep on the floor.”

Fikna waved his hand and got up. “Never mind then. I’ll return shortly. Afterwards, we would do ourselves a service by locating the meal hall. I’m pining for sustenance.”

“Same here. But I need to get my papers out and put some stuff away. I can’t believe I’m here after all that poling.”

Fikna stood in the doorway and made a gesture of disgust. “Enough. Let us never mention poling again.”

Rordan said, “I don’t know. You looked like you were an eager learner there at the end. The Skipper was ready to offer you a job.” He smirked.

His bro’ left and closed the door behind him. Rordan took the opportunity to open the chest and take out his writing kit, doodler kit, illustration pile and lesson collection, his ranc cards, statement-hangings, small knick-knacks, and pamphlets.

He took over the desk and organized all his favorite things. They were put in order so the framed illustrations of his friends and his knick-knacks could be seen in plain view.

Dominating the collage was a sketch of his offbeat friend Brica. She’d allowed him to capture her profile when she had been in a good mood that day. Her smile warmed his heart.

Rordan studied the sketch he’d made of Abrafo reading a demerit slip. His friend’s nonchalant expression made him smile. He had tried to get Abeni to pose with Abrafo on that day, but she had dodged his request.

Rordan shrugged. His friend always seemed to have a sweetheart of some kind or another. Abeni was just another passing fancy to Abrafo.

He looked at his sketch of Tora and wondered if she were safe. Rordan wished he had gotten more news on the investigation of the chapel fire. A nagging feeling tugged at him that the fire here was related.

His attention switched to her gift. He held it up and strained to see through the thick, parchment-like paper of the envelope. Rordan tore open the top with the thin handle of one of his ink pens.

Inside was a foot long, rolled strip of creamy white vellum pressed flat by his travels. Judging by the neatness of the type, he believed the strip came from a press, probably an unlicensed one. The strip had been stamped with violent scenes in pink ink. A series of dark, rust colored stains had been spattered across the strip.

Rordan trembled with discomfort. Tora had done some cutting for him. The thought of her drawing blood on his behalf made him nervous. He knew troglodytes were skilled at hiding their cuts and the tools they used. The officers hadn't found anything in the obvious places. They hadn't searched her clothes, probably to avoid offense to his pride because she had claimed to be his sweetheart. Abrafo always said they were still savage.

His attention returned to Abrafo's sketch. Rordan thought about the monster mask he'd seen on his friend. It hadn't looked like a witch, more like an animal with bared teeth. He didn't believe his friend was a witch.

Such a thing made no sense, no matter how he approached it in his thoughts. After Fikna and his folks, Abrafo was his closest friend.

He put the strip back into the envelope and the envelope in his daypack. If Fikna saw the strip, his bro' would not approve. Rordan wondered if he'd ever known who Tora was and what she was about. It dawned on him he hadn't understood she wanted him. He had ignored her. Now he wished he'd asked Ivixa about her experiences.

“Great. More bungling.”

Rordan took out his official papers and studied the course listings. He examined the academy guide-map and located the office of the tutor who would guide his academic plans. After a few brief glances, he noted the requirement to finalize his registration at the counting house in town. Registration with the patrollers could be worked into the trip. He liked the idea of knocking out two chores in one day.

His impression of Stig had been a poor one. He decided he didn't like his bunkmate very much. Rordan bet his bro' would be friends with him in short order. Fikna had a talent for winning people over with his charm.

He looked at the window and decided to make sense out of the attack on Borus. Rordan opened up his doodler kit and made a series of rough sketches of the creature, its face, and skin.

The doodles he made didn't ring any bells. He wished his whole lesson collection were here. Only the essentials had fit. He made a few more sketches and tried to remember every detail.

In a flash of remembrance an image came back to him. He recognized the creature's resemblance to an illustration in a collection his parents owned. The collection called the thing a bugbear, an evil spirit that caused trouble. Its bite was supposed to turn people into bodysnatchers, but his memories failed him on that part.

He had never believed any of the stuff he had read in that collection. Rordan had just assumed it a bunch of fantastical topics mixed with a little common sense to sound useful.

The bugbear had been real. And Kea had been watching, so she knew. The witch must have summoned it to try and get the jump on Borus. He'd noticed Borus watching over him. Ever since the island vision after he passed light along to the boy. And Kea had retreated from the boy each time she'd come along to work her mischief.

Rordan thought about what had happened to Fikna with Ivixa's monster mask. The witches must be bloodsuckers who used making fun of people to get their fangs into people. If Borus kept him safe from that by scaring them off, then that made Borus a threat.

How Noss fit into the picture, Rordan couldn't guess. He had threatened Borus twice and each time gotten more serious. Were the witches using the guy to drive

Borus away? Rordan couldn't figure it out. Wouldn't it be better to just go after easier prey? He didn't look forward to meeting these bloodsucker witches again. With Kea staying next door, Rordan saw no way of avoiding them. It wouldn't help that Fikna still hadn't clued in enough.

He shook his head and placed his hands on his face. "For Welkin's sake." An exasperated chuckle consumed him for a moment.

Rordan made another attempt to put the pieces together. Borus had seen the bugbear, so at least the two of them could watch out for each other. The witch also must have brought the nix and the creature Fikna had seen in his dream. If Kea could summon monsters, they could get jumped at any time. Hopefully, it was a power she couldn't do at will. He'd just have to hope he was awake when things happened. There wasn't much else he could do.

Rordan put away the bugbear doodles. He pulled out the map and stared at the beautiful renderings. The script looked old. Probably only a sage would be able to make sense of it. The trouble was, he'd have to explain why it was in his possession; he lacked the authority to possess a work of art like this.

Then again, it might just look like a blank sheet of paper to anyone he took it to. For better or worse, he was the person who would have to translate it.

He noted the boat resembled the kind of caravel the early pioneers had come across the ocean in. Rordan

corrected himself and mentally replaced pioneer with colonist. In the water underneath the caravel swam a fish with metal skin and gemstones for eyes. He looked closely at the caravel. Rordan thought the masthead looked like a mermaid.

The boat the Skipper had piloted went by the name of the Mirthy Mermaid. It couldn't be a coincidence. The boat had belonged to peryahs. Maybe the boat had been named after this vessel as a kind of tradition. He hadn't searched the boat with any effort. If Fikna got a job on board, he could come along and give it a closer look. His new magical sight might spot something others couldn't see.

He put the map away with a smile. Rordan opened his door and peeked down the hallway. Kea's host had closed the door. He guessed the witch had left with her friends, off on whatever they were going to do for the Depressing Club. Now would be a good time to speak with Stroma about his duties.

Rordan grabbed his pupil papers. He checked to make sure Borus looked comfortable, then closed the door on his way to Stroma.

CHAPTER 11: NEW FRIENDS

Rordan followed Stroma out of her room. His thoughts noted with satisfaction the things he'd learned. He now knew where his mentor's office could be found, where he would be signing up for his exam, and the location of the meal hall.

She pointed to a small room at the end of the hallway. "That used to be the attendant waiting room. You go there to get away from it all and study. On the other end of the floor is our snug, where we have floor meetings and revels. The meeting tonight will take place there."

He took this in with a nod of his head. Stroma led him downstairs to the basement level.

"There are four levels to Boant Oak," said Stroma. "This is Radix Trow. The three floors above are Lower, Middle, and Upper Trow."

Rordan noted the foundations of the building were of an old, dark grey stone. The stone reminded him of his dream the night before he left home.

"What's up with this stonework?"

Stroma said, "The manor and its original buildings were built over an old Dimmurian lodeshaft. There's still supposed to be tunnels under some of them. But it's expulsion if you get caught trying to enter."

Rordan perked up. "Are you serious? Which buildings?"

Stroma gave him an unamused look. "Don't go getting yourself expelled. You're my responsibility now."

She crossed her arms and said, “Rumor has it the manor, community hall, sanctum, archive and Boant Oak are all supposed to be linked by tunnels the Director had his servants use.”

He took a moment to consider what she had said. “I keep hearing the word sanctum. What is it?”

Stroma said, “Oh, that’s what the shrine is called. The Dimmurians wanted a different name when the place was commissioned.”

She made quote marks in the air as she said the word ‘official’. “That’s the official name, so nobody gets offended. The archive was done in the same style. The community hall, Boant Oak, and observatory are all done in nonconformist style though.”

Rordan looked at the academy guide-map. “It says you have an amphitheater here, but I saw one near the neighborhood mart. Who pays for all this?”

“There’s big money in the reserves,” said Stroma. “Lots of sovereign families send their kids here secretly, to give them a non-conventional education. Everyone else is window dressing. You’ll hear rumors that service agents get training here, or printing press stewards learn their craft. Very traditional.”

The revelation dumbfounded him. “So my admission here is just to pad the student body? So a few rich kids can get their closet papers?”

Stroma nodded. “You bet.”

He chuckled. “I feel so special.”

Stroma said “Spe-shal”, with a lisp while making quote marks in the air.

They both laughed.

She led him halfway down a long hallway and slid open a thick wooden door on the left. Rordan smelled the rotten egg stench of sulfur.

“This is the highlight,” said Stroma. “The Dimmurian ancestors had an indoor bathhouse here. The academy builders restored them with the help of consultation from the Dimmurian Trust. Our commissaries at work. There’s a hot springs not far from here. The baths take the water and mix it with a reservoir in the park next door. Those four baths and eight stations can fill up quick. It’s first come, first served around here.”

Rordan studied the sophisticated stone and cedar apparatus that worked the water system. The steam-filled layout had a primitive quality to it he found appealing. The open arrangement made him pause. He tried to place what made him hesitate and failed to identify it.

“Oh yeah,” said Stroma. “The water carries germs, so don’t get any in your nose. Every few years a pupil catches flame-brain and dies. Usually because they were drunk.”

Rordan laughed once. “Wow, thanks.” He continued down the hallway with her.

“Down this hall...and past that second stairwell is the hang-out. As you can see it’s a personal amphitheater. We hold pamphlet slams here.”

The possibility of his own personal stage made Rordan smile. “Cool, I’m a rustic. Slams are my specialty.”

Stroma gave him a look of appreciation. “Like a real rustic? There are only two others in the academy. Things should be a lot more entertaining around here.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. The thought of other rustics brought out feelings of competitiveness. The old saying about the only way to offend a rustic was to be another rustic passed through his mind. He knew it was only typical for rustics to be territorial, but he couldn’t help it.

The basement hangout had tiered steps centered in an L-shape around a small, raised section of the floor. Windows near the ceiling at the outside ground level provided some light. Rordan pointed at a solid iron door in a corner. “Where’s that go?”

Stroma said, “Oh, that? It’s a door to the dorm hearth. When it gets real cold, they shovel in the fuel. Try and keep the place from freezing. But that’s only down the line. Come upstairs and see the main lounge. It’s got a fireplace and kitchen. And it’s where meetings are held when the dormitory esquire wants to set a policy.”

“There’s a dormitory esquire too?”

“You bet there is,” said Stroma.

She led him up a different flight of stairs. Rordan saw the front doors, a foyer, and a large room to the side he supposed was the main lounge. The lounge contained a fireplace and a number of well-worn, plush couches. A

kitchen could be seen beyond the lounge and behind the fireplace.

Stroma went down a side hallway and Rordan followed. She came to a carved oak door decorated with announcement flyers and knocked. Beside the door, a message kit hung from the wall.

A middle-aged woman with a serious demeanor answered. Beyond the door was a cluttered quarters of good size. The sound of children at play could be heard in an adjacent room.

“Hi Stroma. This one of your new recruits?”

“Sure is, Daalny. His name’s Rordan. He told me he’s going to study alchemy. He’s also a rustic.”

Daalny extended her hand and he shook it with a vigorous grip.

“Pleased to meet you Rordan. Hope you enjoy your studies here. You’ll find as long as you respect the rules in spirit, we’ll back you up. When the Depressing Club finally gets a hold of you, chat with me about anything.”

Rordan chuckled a little. He liked Daalny immediately. “Yep, I’ve heard about it. Can’t wait to be a member. But wow, you have a really neat-o place here. I lucked out big time when I landed Boant Oak.”

She smiled and gestured them inside. “Won’t you come in?”

Stroma and Rordan followed in after her. Potted plants filled a long windowsill, a few of which had small plush dolls sitting in them looking out the window. Wool

hangings covered the walls in a variety of warm browns, and rich red and violet patterned rugs covered the floor in overlapping layers. A pile of wooden toy blocks and a dozen painted clay figures littered a section of the floor. Rordan felt a family atmosphere at work.

Daalny searched a thick wooden shelf. She moved aside a carved wooden owl and several piles of lessons. “How was your travel here?”

“A bit rough, but me and my bro’ made it here in one piece.”

“You came here with your brother?” She looked around the room and crossed her arms.

Rordan said, “Yep. I came here with my foster-brother, Fikna. He’s here to make his fortune in society. I’m putting him up until he can get his own place.”

Daalny came to the desk covered with papers and decorative toys. She dug into the left drawer and pulled out a bound journal, which she handed to Rordan.

He flipped through the blank pages. They were made of a thirsty, durable paper.

“Thank you. Is there a special purpose for this you’d like me to keep in mind?”

Daalny said, “It’s a custom. I give a journal to new pupils I like, or who ask. They can record their experiences here; use it as a sketchpad. Whatever. Most keep with it for a few days and then forget about it. Some end up as communal journals in the main lounge. Whatever suits them. You look to me to be made of

good material. And I've seen them all here. I hope you find it useful during your stay here."

Her generosity touched him in a quiet, shy part of his heart. Rordan said, "I hope that I prove worthy of your gift. Thank you."

Daalny gave him a smile he felt had a thousand years of hard trekking behind it. "You're welcome. P.L., you may continue with the tour."

Stroma said, "Thank you Esquire. Rordan? Last stop: The attic that is Upper Trow."

He made a slight bow, then went with Stroma down the hall.

She pointed at a side passage down the hall on the first floor. "The attendant quarters and laundry chamber is down that way. It's first come-first served and can take a few days. The pupils on this floor have an advantage as you can see. Try to be nice to them. Otherwise, you might find your clothes having issues."

Rordan said, "Are we going to meet them?"

"They don't like to be disturbed. You'll meet them soon enough."

Stroma led him upstairs to the top floor. The construction appeared newer than the rest of Boant Oak he'd seen so far. The main hallway ran under the arch of the roof. A pair of garrets big enough for one person to dwell in lay at either end of the hallway.

Stroma said, "This used to be the attic. It was re-built to accommodate additional pupils. The garrets are study

turrets that were converted to single rooms. They're given out by lottery at the end of every year. The snug on this level has an incredible view of Mount Coaming, the nearest peak."

He repeated the name to himself. The snug looked comfortable and the view of the peak from the window was breathtaking.

They passed by an open door to a bunkroom. Rordan noticed a teenage girl inside, reading a pamphlet with a cover he recognized.

"Hold on a second Stroma." He knocked on the door and looked inside the room. The ceiling followed the slope of the roof and gave the room a subtle, claustrophobic feel.

Her eyes came into view above the pamphlet sheet as she lowered it. For a moment, she stared into the depths of his being. Rordan recognized in her a kindred quality he'd never experienced before. He struggled to imagine what she might be seeing; he didn't know himself what lay within.

She reclined on her bed and read the first volume of the fantasy pamphlet *Doomdy-gloomdy*. Rordan considered it a lost classic. The printed covers were all distinctive and hard to miss, but the series could be difficult to find. He had obtained and read them all, though he felt the first three volumes the best.

The girl wore a soft gray dress. Her eyes were large and expressive, and the wavy strands of her fine dark hair came down to her shoulders. A thin chain necklace with

a sun at the end, both made of copper, hung from her neck. On her left wrist was a small bracelet of woven sky blue and dark blue strings. A knot had been woven near each end.

“Hi, I’m Rordan. I uh...noticed you’re reading *Doomdy-gloomdy*. Great pamphlet. Sorry to intrude like this, but I’ve never seen anyone reading it before.”

Her amused puzzlement showed. “I’m Glenys. And it’s okay. I left the door open as an invitation. I thought the same thing—that I was the only one who knew Subsio’s pamphlets. Now I feel like my secret has been uncovered.”

Rordan pursed his lips and tensed his eyebrows. “Sorry about that. I mean, I love the series. But I hope you aren’t offended if I share it with you.”

Glenys giggled. “I always knew other people were reading. But as long as we didn’t actually meet each other, you know—it was okay. Now I’m ruined.”

He assumed a look of horror. “Oh no. I didn’t mean to ruin you, I mean the series. Just pretend I’m a madman going on who hasn’t really read the thing.”

Stroma peered at him with sly understanding.

Rordan said, “Who did you like the most in the story?”

She pondered with a forefinger to her chin. “I always wanted to be the daughter. Tragic girl who went out with a bang, but I would have done better.”

Rordan nodded with the middles of his lips pressed together. Her every movement brought a thump of blood to his skull. “I always liked the monk. He made it all the way through. And he carried the artifacts to the castle at the end.”

Glenys gave him a weird look and pouted. “The monk broke all his vows and lost his faith. He died of old age, but was he happy?”

He had a sense of having given a wrong answer. “I felt he was the only one who understood the main character. Besides the clairvoyager, that is. And the daughter knew that. She made her last speech to bond the two of them together.”

Glenys looked down and buried her face beneath the pamphlet. “I’m still ruined.”

Rordan cleared his throat. “Um, got to go. Tour and everything. But I live here now. Room eight, second floor. Feel free to drop by, or maybe I’ll run into you between classes. See you later.”

She waved goodbye and watched him leave.

Rordan followed Stroma down the hallway. He heaved a long breath.

She smirked back at him. “Already flirting. You don’t waste any time, do you?”

Rordan gulped and tried to appear innocent. “I don’t know about that. I uh, just had to meet her.”

Stroma nodded. “Mm-hm. That’s how it starts. I’m going to have to keep an eye on you.

“Now, out this door is the fire escape down to the field behind Boant Oak. People play sports out there. Everyone uses this stair-ladder as a shortcut. Past those trees is the next dormitory. You can make out the roof from here. And this is the other singles garret.”

Rordan looked out the door and noted the steep decline of the iron stairs that descended to the ground below. He shivered, not appreciative of the height.

“That’s the tour,” said Stroma. “You’ve got all of the next day to get your exam taken and your classes assigned. I’d talk to your mentor first. Don’t hesitate to call on me if there’s a problem.”

Rordan nodded. “Sounds good. I believe I can handle it.”

They returned to their floor and Rordan went back to his room. Borus continued to sleep in the closet. He eyeballed the travel chest and realized there was still work to do.

His bro’s damp towel and old clothes had been tossed in a corner beside the desk. The backpack had been opened and rummaged through. A smile played across his face. Fikna had found the shower stations and taken advantage of the luxury.

With rising excitement, he grabbed his own towel and soap jar from the backpack, along with a fresh pair of clothes. Rordan returned to the shower stations and found them deserted. He had a quick, private rinsing and wash to his satisfaction.

Rordan put on the fresh pair of clothes and returned to his room. His body felt much better with most of the layers of travel grime removed.

He hung up the towels in the closet and stashed the old clothes in a laundry bag. Rordan unpacked the rest of his bro's everyday clothes and put them in the top two drawers of the closet dresser. He hung his bro's surcoats and jackets on the hangers above Borus, who slept through all the noise and fuss.

Rordan unpacked Fikna's personal effects from the chest. He put away his bro's shoes, undergarments and accessories. Fikna's various soaps and unguents went into a cabinet above the dresser. He unfolded his bro's daypack and hung it by the straps from the back of his chair. By the time he had finished, the daylight outside was failing.

He wondered what his bro' could be up to. It couldn't take all day to introduce one's self to everyone in Boant Oak. Rordan hoped the witches or a bugbear hadn't gotten him.

His own things needed organization. He decided to finish that chore before he looked for Fikna. Rordan supposed he'd have to see about some temporary clothes for Borus from his own selection. Fikna would grow upset at having to volunteer any gallant outfits. He unpacked his clothes and put them into piles. They could be gone through later.

Rordan frowned; his Deep Uirolec loyalty shirt hadn't been packed. He could have sworn it had gone in with the rest of his favorites. A puff of air escaped his lips.

He assessed the bedding situation. The weaves and warmers would need to be washed. He'd brought pillowcases, but a walk to the mart-post for pillows would be necessary. Used clothes would have to do as stuffing until then.

A knock at the door interrupted his chore and he went to answer. Stroma waited in the hallway.

"Dinner is being served," she said. "If you want to see how bad the food is, now's your chance."

Rordan threw up his hands. "Sure, why not?" He grabbed his papers and daypack.

Fikna showed up in the company of two young women. He wore a fresh set of slightly wrinkled clothes. Under the Deep Uirolec loyalty hat, his damp hair hadn't dried all the way.

"At last I locate you Rord. I've spent considerable time with a pair of fine and cultured ladies. To our good fortune, they dwell on this very floor. Nyah, Eshe, please meet my foster-brother Rordan."

Nyah had a plump, shapely frame and bushy, reddish-black hair held back by a bow. Her mouth showed an overbite.

Eshe maintained a stately poise and had very short, frizzy black hair. She wore hose under her knee-length skirt and a pair of broken-in, outdoor travel boots.

Rordan clasped their hands lightly in politeness. “I welcome you. So, has he bored you yet with his charm?”

Nyah rolled her eyes and did a mock impression of Fikna. “Why yes, I so declare. I am knocked out by his well-groomed hair.”

She then spoke with a shrill voice. “And I’m sending him straight to blazes the lousy scum!”

Rordan cracked up.

Eshe made a reserved smile. “Fikna’s your live-in, eh? We all have one at some time or another. Let’s sit together for dinner.”

“That would be great,” said Rordan. “I want to see what our meal plan is going to be.”

Nyah looked at him with mirth in her eyes. “Tonight’s dinner will be slop soup, bug biscuits, and dreg dumplings.” She did an impression of someone vomiting.

He found the performance good enough to make his own stomach nauseous. Rordan decided to join in with his spastic Poop Dunce routine. He depicted a well-refined and bawdy character with an endless bout of explosive, painful trots. “Oh my, Poop Dunce alert. Slop soup gut agony. Here comes the outhouse donation, aiee!”

The routine mortified Stroma. The other young women laughed.

“Wicked.” Nyah stared at Rordan with crazed delight. “Fikna, you didn’t tell us your brother was so talented.

I'm going to have to tweak your paps as punishment. After I throw up again."

Fikna laughed into a bow. "As it pleases you, good lady."

"Eek, I forgot my handkerchief!" Rordan shrieked, widened his eyes, and made rude gestures with his movements. "It's going to spray onto the carpet and I can't stop it, oh no." His routine concluded with a long array of realistic toot noises.

Stroma's face grew flush and she held a hand to her mouth.

Stig came around the corner from the stairwell and entered the hallway. With indifference he said, "Who the hell is going to the crap-house?"

Rordan raised his hand. "That would be me. I've been eating the food here and my buttgut has come loose."

His bunkmate looked nonplussed for a moment, then laughed lightly at him. "It's a good thing we're going to get some more of it to eat then. You all hitting the food track? Okay, then I guess I'd better get my papers."

Rordan showed his own papers to Stroma. "This, right? Can I sneak in Fikna?"

She nodded, dabbed at her teary eyes with a cotton handkerchief.

Nyah said, "Have him go through the side door. They only check if you go through the line."

Fikna patted his stomach. “Excellent. I’ve eaten little save trail fare these past few days. I’ve yet to manage a proper lavatory visit—oh! Rord, your routine is rubbing off on me to my detriment.”

Eshe slapped Fikna on the arm. “Don’t worry. This slop will have you loosened exactly like Poop Dunc in no time.”

Stroma pouted. “I don’t believe you guys.”

Nyah grinned and fluttered her eyes at Stroma. “Don’t you love our disgusting way of talking? Aren’t we foul? But you love us, right P.L.?”

Composure returned to Stroma. “Do I have a choice?”

Nyah screeched in mock anger, “No, you don’t!” She laughed, her grinning face radiant with mischief.

Rordan laughed along with her. “You’re a marvel.”

“Thank you Rordan,” said Nyah, all sweetness. “Now let us go eat...slop.” Her eyes turned wistful.

Stig returned with his papers and they all walked together out of Boant Oak. The loose group headed toward the community hall structure.

Eshe and Nyah spoke in Kgotlan amongst themselves, about something that sounded serious. Rordan wished he could understand what they said. He thought Eshe behaved like a proper Kgosian girl, but didn’t dress the part. Nyah did dress properly, yet her outrageous behavior went past normal Kgosian boldness. Intuition told him the two women were more than they seemed.

The community hall consisted of a two-story stone structure built with a mixed architecture. Rordan found the columns and walls made to familiar styles. The ornamentation and layout looked like old Dimmurian to him.

Nyah directed Fikna to an exit door on the side of the hall. “That door leads to the meal hall. I’ll let you in once we’ve passed through paper check.”

Inside, a small line of pupils waited at an open doorway while a custodian examined their papers. A sour meat odor came from the meal hall. The group meandered to the back of the line and waited.

Rordan produced his papers first. The middle-aged, thick-necked practical stamped them with an ink mark. The man stamped Stroma next, then glanced at the rest of the group’s papers and waved them through.

They passed into the meal hall. Nyah opened the exit door for Fikna. While the young gallant reserved a table, the rest of them got in the mess line.

Rordan picked up a wooden tray and some utensils from a nearby pile. He studied the available choices. The food consisted of a bland mix of options, with only some parts recognizable as a slice of meat or a piece of carrot.

He decided on the gray-brown shreds of meat covered in clumpy tomato sauce and took two helpings. A short attendant passed him a wooden cup of warm beer. Her pale skin was covered in a mixture of sticky sweat and tiny globules of grease.

His thoughts went back to Fais and a sense of tightness clutched at his breathing. He offered her his beerskin and she refilled it.

“Thank you.”

She ignored him and served the next person in line.

Rordan snatched up two hard pieces of bread from a bowl and made his way over to the table. Behind him came the others as they were served.

Fikna received his portion and the cup of beer from Rordan. “Thank you Rord. No doubt this will disappoint my palate. However, the mere act of sitting down to dinner is enough to begin my recovery.”

“No jest.” Rordan passed his bro’ a pair of damp utensils. He watched everyone take a seat.

Stroma said, “Stig, where are you from?”

The teenager had chosen a lump covered in sticky cheese sauce. His face showed contempt as he cut at it with his fork, revealing a meat-pie with grainy brown sauce for a filling.

“I’m from Wulvil. My father was a trawler. My mom is a homesteader. My sister works at the lodeshaft in the neighborhood. We both might work on cutter boats if I get back for a break. I played a lot of ranc at home with my buddies. I own a trained dog at home named Guts and a prospect named Carina. Whom I think the world of. How’s that?”

“That’s great. Your turn, Fikna.” As she listened, Stroma cut the meat on her plate into smaller pieces.

Fikna stood up and took a small bow. “Please excuse my still despicable appearance. I have yet to fully settle in from a long voyage. My name is Fikna Somor the Third and I have arrived from Nerham.

“My parents are traditionalist Emphyreans. My father was in the printing press business. I’m Rord’s foster-brother and have been close to him since we were children. I have arrived to make my fortune in society. Therefore, I am staying here until I can manage my own quarters. The rest I leave to my talented brother to relate. Thank you.” Fikna sat down.

Nyah clapped politely and made an uppity face.

Rordan picked at his food. The mess on his plate looked like an attempt to bread a steak and cover up the failure with stale tomato sauce. Everyone stared at him.

His attention snapped back to the group. “Oh, right. Thank you bro’. I’m Rordan and I’m a rustic. Yes I do pamphlet-slams. I’m here to study alchemy. My mother is a scribe at the neighbor...uh, local archive. My father right now is a carter for a warehousing shop. I’m not a traditionalist like my bro’. And uh, that’s all.”

Stroma looked over at Nyah and Eshe.

Nyah held up her hand and said, “Pick me. Oh please, pick me.”

Stroma said, “Okay, go ahead.”

Nyah fluttered her eyes. “I’m Nyah Jelani. I already have my secondary papers. My parents work in the iron

business. I live in Ciriceval, I like clang-clang loyalties, and I'm a dawdler."

Rordan said, "You too? What's your dawdle?"

She looked demure. "Rainbow coal-sticks and ink-paints."

An image of the mediums appeared in Rordan's mind. He nodded. "I dig it."

"Only one person left," said Stroma.

Eshe sighed and her shoulders slumped. "I'm studying literature. No real interests aside from reading and fortune games. Oh, right. My name is Eshe and I'm from Sangham. My father is a beaux who made his income in fashion. My mother is a dame. And that's all." She made a forlorn smile and nibbled at her meatpie.

Stroma finished her warm beer. "Thank you for sharing your stories. We have a great floor this year. I'll bet we'll have lots of fun together."

Curiosity tugged at Rordan. He wanted Stroma to volunteer some details about her life. Her slight authority over the rest of the group seemed to dissuade anyone from asking.

Stig gave up on the meat pie and tried his bread. He watched it crumble in his fingers. "What's the story on your tramp friend in the closet?"

Rordan swallowed a bite of his food without chewing and grimaced. "Oh, that's Borus. I picked him up in Sangham. I had a vision that told me to take him with me." He noticed Fikna make a face at him.

Nyah's mouth gaped and her eyes widened. "A vision? Cool, so you toke?"

Stroma said, "I don't want to hear this, lah lah lah."

Nyah rolled her eyes. "I meant, I see visions too when I'm studying hard."

Fikna peered at Nyah. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"No, nothing like that," said Rordan. "I mean an actual voice in my head kind of thing. So I took him along and he's been a great friend."

A cunning look crossed Nyah's face. "Is he retarded? Does he have a disease? Is he an escaped outcast? Is he a smut offender? Because those would be cool if any of them were true. Especially if they were all true."

Stig scoffed and shook his head.

Rordan squished a piece of green bean with his fork. "I believe he's deformed. He can only say weird noises. I suspect he's simple-minded, but not stupid."

Eshe said, "Which means the floor now has a streetside idiot." She popped a scrap of bread into her mouth.

Rordan uttered a laugh. "I suppose he is. But he's a good friend. I'm hoping to get him cleaned up and wear better clothes. He knows how to relieve himself in the bushes. So far, he's stayed out of the way for the most part."

He pursed his lips. “Anyone here know a girl named Kea? She’s staying with whomever lives next to my room. She was on the boat Fikna and I took here.”

Nyah said, “That freeloader who showed up, right? ”

Stig’s lip twitched.

“Yeah, she was on our floor last year. Got her secondary papers and took off. Doesn’t talk much. Never hung out with her. Why, do you like her?”

Rordan put up his hands. “No-no-no. I was just wondering, is all.” He looked at Stroma. “Who’s she staying with?”

“The room belongs to Manissa,” said Stroma. “Friend of Kea from last year. Manissa gets her primary papers this year.”

Stig squirmed and shifted in his chair. “So where do you go around here for kicks?”

Nyah said, “What kind you after? Eats, dancing, sweetwater, what?”

Stig said, “What’s close?”

Nyah said, “The Hideaway Grill is the nearest thing if you want eats. They have songsters sometimes. In fact, we’re heading over there tonight to see a friend who just got back. You’re welcome to come.”

“What else?” said Stig.

“The best drinks and pamphlet slamming are at a barrelhouse called Sitric’s Croaker. Best tavern is Pasty Hamlet. You can go there after dancing at The Scintilla.

The Bread Closet makes some good cooking if you like Sulian's recipes."

"The Bread Closet?" said Rordan. "Is there one in Ciriceval?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "There's talk of one, but if it exists nobody knows where. Lots of locals will tell you a story for the price of a drink. Usually about how they or someone they know found it and lost it again. The tavern is only cashing in on the name."

He looked at Stig and said, "Do you know anything about a bread closet around here?"

Stig said, "Rordan, I'm lucky I can still remember my real name. Let alone what's left of the Dominion and where. You brownies and peacocks didn't leave a whole lot standing."

The table grew quiet. Stig sighed and pushed his plate away. "I guess I'll have to check things out myself. Don't they have an amphitheater in town?"

Nyah watched Stig with interest. "Sure do. A clang-clang loyalty is playing there in a week. Crunch Crotus."

Stig performed a series of violent gestures. "Smash it down! When?"

Nyah said, "In a few weeks. Want to go with my bunkmate and me? She's a big Crunch loyalist."

Stig got up and said, "That's all the way. Count me in." He waved to everyone. "See you around." His dishes remained on the table where he'd left them.

A demure expression appeared on Nyah's face. "Isn't he cute? Like a little monster. I could eat him right up."

Eshe said, "With hot sauce?"

"And pickle-dickles," said Nyah.

Fikna tried to dissect his meal further, then gave up. "Unbelievable. This sustenance reveals itself as disgusting as is possible to identify. Rord, I am astounded you are paying for this offal." He looked at Stroma. "Is the Hideaway Grill any better?"

She swallowed her current bite of food. "It is. But you have to pay for it. That's how they get you here. Pay tuition and get lousy food. Or not eat it and pay extra for edible food. But the choices there are limited. It's all Kgosian—gulpers, sugar discs and milk bursts."

Rordan burped. "Ugh, I'm really going to become Poop Dunce after this swill."

Nyah guffawed. "Can I be your poop girl?" She smiled at him.

"You sure can," said Rordan. "How about dibs on my chamber pot? I'll top it off for you."

Stroma stood up. "Oh-kay. I'm so glad I could introduce you. I'll leave you to your own talk about poops."

She added Stig's dishes to her own and maneuvered her way to the dish drop.

Nyah noticed Fikna's concern. "She's fine. Stroma pretends to be stuck up, but she really gets it. You two are here for the duration? Neat. We all need to hang out.

Once you're done with the cheek-rag paperwork, I want to see you drop by every day."

She drew out a pair of smokes and passed one to Eshe, who accepted it with a nod. Nyah lit her smoke with the table candle and Eshe did likewise.

Fikna protested. "You aren't allowed to smoke in public. The rules forbid such behavior."

Nyah said, "The rules can bite my bum! Now that we have that out of the way, I now formally welcome you into the Depressing Club. You both look like fine additions." Her voice became shriller and more agitated as she spoke on. "I want you to get an early start, churning your academic career into a handy disposable napkin!"

Fikna gaped with shock.

The profanity made Rordan laugh. "I'll be jumping a move on that one. But I haven't even started my studies yet. How can I get depressed so soon?"

Nyah said, "Eat your slop froggie. I was saying. As of now, your careers will be spent wasting time with us. And washing any studies you have into the dumper! The time to start is before any nasty assignments arrive and keep you from sliding."

Eshe said, "That's where the depressing part comes in. Your grades go into a depression, a slump. You know, a long string of low numbers?"

Fikna chortled. “My word, I’m dumbfounded. What about myself? I have no plans to participate in any study, therefore I shall possess no grades to depress.”

Nyah shook her head and exhaled a huge plume of smoke at Fikna. “Don’t worry. We can still use you to bring the real pupils into the club. Kind of like a role model.”

Fikna said, “I understand.” A slight smile appeared on his face.

Nyah puffed a cloud of smoke over toward Rordan. He pretended to cough. “Your first show of good faith to the club is tonight,” said Nyah. “You shall accompany us to the Hideaway Grill.

“Forget about the stupid floor meeting, that’s for losers. Nobody but the greenies will be there. At the Grill we will listen to our friend play girlpower folk.”

Nyah dismissed them in a sudden, harsh tone of voice. “That is all!” She cackled to herself, then got out of her seat.

Eshe stood up and blew the two brothers a kiss. She joined Nyah in heading for the dish drop.

When they were out of earshot Fikna said, “My word, Rord. Quite an exceptional group of gryphons we’ve fallen in with, wouldn’t you say?”

Rordan nodded. “Yep. They both seem well off. Maybe they’ll help introduce you to someone.” He touched the unappetizing mess on his plate with his forefinger. The meat had reached room temperature.

Fikna smiled. “Superb, a capital idea. In order to make a fine impression on them, we must escort their fair personages.”

“Sounds like a plan to me bro’. I’ve got time to kill until tomorrow, so why not? You done there?”

Fikna glanced at his dish and utensils. “Quite. Shall we?” He got up.

Rordan also rose, then gathered up their dishes on the tray. Together they made their way to the dish drop, where they encountered Glenys.

“Hello, good to see you again.” Nervous elation crept into Rordan. He motioned with a shaky hand towards his bro’. “Glenys, this is my foster-brother, Fikna.”

She deposited her dishes in the holding tank, then curtsied to the young gallant. “It’s very nice to meet you. I met Rordan earlier over a discussion on a mutual interest.”

Fikna bowed. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my dear.”

Rordan put the dishes away and deposited the trays. “We were going to go to the Grill with a bunch of friends tonight. See a friend perform. Want to come along?”

He sensed Fikna cringe.

She flashed Rordan a honeyed smile. “No thanks. I was going to take in a bath and fold some laundry before I go to bed. But if you like, I’ll drop by and tell your future.”

A look of surprise crossed Fikna's face. "You're a stargazer? What splendid luck, so is Rord here."

Glenys smirked. "Rord? How cute."

An urge to hide came over Rordan as he shook his head. "I just have an interest in it. Not much more than that."

"We can still talk shop if you like. I have all the best lessons and insider secrets."

Her response emboldened him and he nodded with nervous excitement. "That would rule."

Fikna said, "Enough light banter, you two. Let us return as a group to our esteemed quarters."

The three of them walked out of the meal hall together and into the night darkness of the academy grounds. There were streetlamps along some of the major paths, but the trees blocked light in most places. Some of the paths were dimmer than others. They crossed the street and made their way along the main path toward Boant Oak.

Rordan said, "You ever hear of Modwenna?"

Glenys gave a soft laugh. "Of course. She's a top sage in the art. Which lesson collections do you have?"

He gulped. "I didn't know she had more than one."

A light chuckle escaped Fikna.

Glenys said, "Her best work is the Romance Collection. In it, there's about every point she ever wanted to make. And she references all her other

collections. I'm guessing you have the Stellar Collection. That's the one most disciples know about."

"Yep, that's the one."

They approached the door to Boant Oak. Across the field on their right, Rordan noticed a luminescent pink, towering figure shamle into view. The light of the streetlamps revealed the figure to be a shriveled and bony corpse.

Rordan pointed at the figure and said, "What the blazes is that?"

Fikna and Glenys looked over in the direction of the figure, then back at him in confusion.

The young gallant grew aggravated. "Very inconvenient, Rord. You aren't having another of your visions, are you?"

Glenys struck a serious tone of voice. "Visions? Rordan what do you see?"

"Glowing pink corpse. Coming toward us like it just woke up. Uh, really scary and doesn't look friendly."

She looked right at the figure. "Where? I don't see anything."

Rordan said, "Nobody can see it but me and Borus. It's getting closer. Fikna, give me Trad's knife."

Glenys shook her head. "Wait." She pulled a small pouch from her dress pocket and undid the drawstrings. Inside were some grayish-brown mineral salts. "Take a handful of this and throw it onto the thing. Might banish it."

Rordan held out his hand and she filled his palm with a half portion. He approached the corpse with Fikna and Glenys a little behind him.

“Try not to get too close to whatever it is,” said Glenys.

The corpse made a constricted grimace. Its eye sockets were empty. The glowing pink body lacked clothes and the legs moved with an unsteady tread.

It uttered a choked shriek at him. Of the few pupils who passed by to and from the meal hall, none reacted to the sound.

The outpouring of emotion sounded like desperation to Rordan. He fought back an urge to panic and flung the salts.

The corpse took a direct spatter from the chest to the face. Where the salt hit, it stuck to the tight, shriveled skin and pink smoke erupted with a hiss. The thing cringed, uttering a dry rasp from the back of its throat.

Rordan intuited a clutch of fear in the noise it made.

Glenys put her right hand to her mouth and the other hand close to her chest.

Fikna’s eyes bulged and his breath grew quick. “Something! By Welkin, what is it?”

Rordan backed away from the creature and said, “Okay, you sound like you know something here. What do we do? What is this thing?”

She mastered her surprise and came to attention. Glenys strained her eyes and said, “It’s a demon. Fikna,

your knife should be able to destroy the body. Hit it a few times. Demons are vulnerable in this world.”

Fikna readied Trad’s knife. He moved ahead of Rordan and Glenys.

The demon recovered from the discomfort of the salt toss. It jerked a shriveled hand toward Fikna’s throat.

The gallant ducked his slower opponent. With a brief dash of footwork, he moved behind the demon to land a solid thrust into its lower back. Dark pink ooze squeezed forth from the wound.

The demon turned to keep up with its attacker.

Fikna readied himself for another strike. In that moment, Glenys emptied the rest of the pouch onto the creature’s back. The demon immediately collapsed into a pile of rotten flesh and slimy pink bones. A rancid stench exploded forth. All three of them were knocked backwards to the ground by the smell.

Rordan felt a thin string of puke rise to his throat. He swallowed furiously while his eyes watered.

Fikna covered his face with the bend of his right arm. “Deiwos, a monster!”

Glenys waved in front of her face as tears streamed out of her eyes.

The air cleared and the remains decomposed into a pile of glowing pink filth.

Rordan thought at this rate there would be a lot of stained areas of grass. He took in a few ragged gasps of air and blew out his nostrils. The stench had gotten up

inside his nose and hung there. Snot beaded at the edges of his upper lip. Aches and pains moved throughout his body.

A pair of teenage guys came over. The gangly one wore a loyalty shirt Rordan didn't recognize and the shorter, raggedy dressed one had cut all the hair off the sides of his head.

The gangly one said, "You guys all right?"

Fikna waved them off. "Only a bit of performance practice. Sorry to alarm anyone."

Glenys got to her feet. "Yes, I think we overdid it." She giggled to herself.

The two guys glanced at each other.

The gangly one said, "Okay, but be careful okay? We thought you three had been in an accident."

"Don't worry. We got carried away is all," said Glenys.

The gangly one nodded. The guys waved and went on their way towards Boant Oak.

Rordan scrambled to his feet. He rushed over to his bro' and offered a hand.

Fikna got to his feet with his foster-brother's help. "Yech. That experience proved foul beyond measure. I feel doused by the contents of an outhouse." He picked up Trad's knife and checked it. "Difficult to say in this meager light. However, it appears none the worse for wear, with no trace of gore."

“Good. I was worried there for a second.” Rordan turned toward Glenys and said, “That was some nice stuff you had there. I hope you have more.”

She stuffed the empty pouch back in her pocket. “Old recipe from mom. I’ll have to make another batch, which will take time. I hope we don’t run into the Stinge again. Whoa, and here I thought I was going to be a bored little pupil.”

Rordan said, “The Stinge?”

“The demon’s name,” said Glenys.

Fikna stared at Rordan with wonder. “I daresay that was uncommonly real. Only a blurred figure presented itself to me. However, the figure felt solid when I stabbed it. Glenys, I implore you to elaborate on the contents of that pouch.”

She shrugged. “It’s just an old wives’ charm. Supposed to drive off evil, not reveal it. Rordan saw the demon in enough detail to get a sure-shot. You ought to explain that one to me, dear.”

Embarrassment took hold of Rordan. His gaze rested on the brown, flattened area of grass where the Stinge’s remains had vanished. “Ever since Fikna and I started our voyage here, weird stuff has been happening. I can see things that aren’t there.”

Glenys studied his face. “Like what?”

He looked down. Her full attention stirred him in ways he couldn’t explain. “I see these monsters everywhere. I see people who look differently from how

they seem. I sometimes see places that aren't really there."

She crossed her arms and lost herself in thought.

Glenys said, "You have, for some reason or another, been gifted with a third eye. The third eye allows you to see the hidden world of the fantom lands. Most of us can sense these things only in rare moments, or in small ways. I've read there are sages who have developed the third eye with long study. And there are sometimes people born with the third eye. But most of the time it's a gift given to people by fantoms."

Fikna sheathed Trad's knife. "What enabled us to notice this rancid demon, then?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know. I've read tales of catching the fantoms by surprise and making them visible. Once their trick is discovered, they can be seen. But that doesn't make sense here."

Rordan smiled. "I'm glad you were able to see it too. But how were we able to beat it so easily?"

A shiver passed through her. "Lets go inside. I feel unsafe out here. We can all sit down and talk."

The three of them returned to Boant Oak and took over the Upper Trow snug. Fikna and Rordan sat down while Glenys closed the door. She sat with them, holding a hallway lamp for light.

Glenys said, "The Stinge is a demon sent here to murder people. It has great strength and kills by choking

you to death. Only the souls of really evil people get to embody this demon.”

Fikna assumed a glum face and rooded himself.

Rordan said, “How did it get here? And how do you know so much about it?”

Sadness came over her. “I’ve studied many corners of the occult. You can’t seriously study stargazing without getting near marked knowledge.

“As I understand it, demons are always being sent to this world for harm. Most are not as dangerous as the Stinge, though some are worse.

“Their bodies aren’t real like ours. Even a small bruise or the right thought can banish them. I didn’t think of it at the time Fikna, but your sign of the rood might have also worked.”

The young gallant nodded. “A handy piece of knowledge to have.” He noticed a grass stain on his trousers and bit his lower lip.

Rordan looked at the carpet. “But how do they enter this world? Are they summoned by witches?”

Glenys looked at Rordan in surprise. She faced him with a look that made him uncomfortable. “Every time a person curses another person, it opens up a doorway. Some sages know how to make that doorway a little wider and send demons on a specific mission.”

“Kea,” said Rordan. “She sent that bugbear against me and Borus earlier.”

Glenys said, “You mentioned Borus before. Who’s Borus? And you said a bugbear? This isn’t the first time you were attacked?”

Rordan said, “That’s a long story. There’s this girl named Kea who was on the voyage with us. And ever since we started hanging out with her, bad things have been happening. When Borus was attacked earlier, I saw Kea in the window of our room watching us. Then she walked away.” He looked at his bro’.

Fikna stared ahead. He held a naturally formed, mineral rood at the end of his leather necklace between thumb and forefinger.

Glenys looked intently at Rordan. “Is there anything you may have done to make this person angry? Angry enough to curse you?”

He thought back to the events of the voyage. “I don’t know. She just seemed crazy from the moment we met her. Kea started off by making fun of us and got meaner. Maybe she’d sent something after us before. But the bugbear was the first time I knew for sure.”

She nodded. “A bugbear is another demon. Your common variety harm-causer. Repeated visits can be fatal, though their bodies don’t cause harm the way we might expect. How did you know what it was?”

Rordan smiled. “I’ve done some reading too. I’m not totally useless.”

Glenys smiled at him with softhearted concern. “I’ll help you. I don’t know what I can do, but the two of you

won't be alone in this. The Stinge was meant for all of us and that means we'll be better off together."

"Sounds great Glenys. Goodness, I was lucky to run into you."

Fikna returned from his thoughts and nodded. "Yes, quite correct. Although why you should be in danger is a mystery to me. We only recently made your acquaintance."

She shrugged. "It might have been whoever was with you on general principle. I've read demons can be hard to control."

Rordan stood up, "Borus. I'd better go check up on him."

The three of them left the snug and made haste to Rordan's room. They found Borus sound asleep.

Glenys saw a teenage girl. She kneeled down and touched her on the shoulder. "Is this your friend?"

Rordan said, "Yeah, he's been here all day. Maybe the bugbear drained him?"

She held still for a moment. Glenys chuckled softly to herself, then stood up and faced them. "Meeting the supernatural can be hard. The bad ones always swallow the energy around them. I feel tired myself."

Fikna nodded to himself. "Such an explanation sheds light on my sudden fatigue."

Glenys said, "I'll fetch my cards. We can do a reading of this situation. Then we all stay here tonight. You can

fill me in on more details about your voyage. I might be able to remember more useful information. Agreed?”

Rordan gave her the ‘thumbs up’ sign. “Sounds good to me.”

CHAPTER 12: A WINNING HAND

Rordan followed Glenys back to her room. Inside, a teenage girl with a cheerful expression lay sideways on the opposite bed. She read a lesson by lamplight.

Glenys waved at her and said, “Hi Sinna. This is Rordan. I’m spending the night with him and his brother. Second floor, room eight. I’ll be back in the morning.”

Sinna waved back and smiled. She studied Rordan’s face. “Okay. Have fun.”

Glenys pulled a travel bag out from underneath her bed and opened a side pouch. She drew out a wrapped item Rordan took to be her fortune cards. Then she grabbed her line bag, followed by a pillow, a blanket and a small stuff-friend bear.

His interest in the bear caught her attention. “His name’s Nuzzler.”

Rordan said, “Cute. I have a bear too. His name’s Tedder.”

Glenys shot him a wry look. “Original.”

They returned to his room and rejoined Fikna. Borus remained asleep.

Fikna adjusted a lighted lamp on Rordan’s desk. “There we are. Rord, we promised to escort those girls to the Grill tonight. You might say we are caught in a bind.”

Rordan sighed. “Dang it. We’re going to have to flake on them or something.”

Fikna huffed. “Unfortunately, that would be exceptionally rude.”

Glenys watched the two of them fret. “You can keep your thing with them. I can still do the cards. The Grill has a side room we can use.”

Fikna motioned toward Borus. “What about our sleeping friend? We can’t abandon the poor fellow here, all alone.”

Glenys laughed softly and shook her head. “Obviously then, you’ll have to wake your friend up.”

Rordan nodded. “I’ll do it.” He approached Borus and nudged her. “Borus, wake up. We need you to come with us. Wake up.”

The girl stirred and opened her eyes. She peered with a sleepy daze at the three people who looked in on her. Borus studied Rordan for a moment, then got up. She stretched and yawned in one elongated motion.

The four of them spread out into the room. Glenys dumped her things on Rordan’s bed and sat down next to them. Borus took a seat beside her. Fikna assumed a dignified pose upon the desk chair.

Rordan remained on his feet and crossed his arms. “Okay. Glenys you said something about using the cards to see what’s going on. What would we be doing, exactly?”

She unwrapped the item she had brought with her and revealed it as a pile of fortune cards. She shuffled them with ease. “Guidance. We might find out why Kea is out

to get us, or how to solve this problem without getting hurt.”

Rordan looked at the cards with interest.

“Those don’t match the appearance of the cards we play ranc with,” said Fikna. “They appear reclassicist in their design. Where did you obtain them, if I might ask?”

She cut the cards and shuffled them again. “There’s a bookman at the mart who sells them. He gets all kinds from all over the Heartland.”

Fikna said, “And you think they might be employed to tell our future? I find this usage an uncomfortable prospect, not far removed from the witchcraft of our opponent.”

She stared ahead for a moment. “I don’t know. I always find that it helps me unwind. If you don’t believe in the cards, think of it as an exercise. It clears the head and lets us think of things we might not otherwise. The best thing you can do before a struggle is relax.”

Fikna said, “I agree, that’s sound advice.”

Borus moved her gaze from person to person.

“Okay, why not?” said Rordan. “But first bro’, we need to tell Glenys our dealings with Kea so she is up to date.”

Fikna said, “Yes, such an exchange would be in order at this point. I shall speak first.”

The young gallant provided Glenys with a general account of how he and Rordan had met Kea, their interactions with her, and what they had seen her do.

Rordan felt his bro' meandered a little.

Glenys arched an eyebrow at Fikna and chuckled to herself. "I'm sorry things didn't work out with her like you'd hoped. She sounds like a bad person. It's doubtful you could have had a long-term relationship with her. That guy Noss doesn't sound so nice either."

She listened to Rordan give his side of the tale. He kept the bloodsucking incident and the detail about the wealth in the grotto to himself.

Fikna said, "You certain you didn't embellish that a little?"

Rordan pursed his lips and stared at him.

Glenys handled the deck of cards in her hand absently. "If I hadn't seen the Stinge with my own eyes, I'd swear you were putting me on."

Rordan said, "Do you want to see the map?"

She shook her head and her hair bounced lightly across her shoulders. "I probably wouldn't see anything either. That woman meant it only for you. So pay attention to whatever you see there. Whoa, this definitely shoots down my plans to be an ordinary pupil."

Glenys stared into his eyes.

Her scrutiny seemed curious and playful to him.

The moment vanished as Fikna blurted out his thoughts. "What I fail to perceive are the reasons for Kea's behavior. It eludes me how we could inspire such effort as she has expended."

With a jerk, Rordan shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Maybe she doesn’t need a reason.”

Fikna said, “I find that absurd. Why would anyone want to cause a magnitude of trouble for no reason other than pure malice?”

“Because she can,” said Glenys. “Kea began her activities on you from the start. She sounds like she has a special dislike for Rordan, maybe because she sees how different he is. It only makes her angrier with each failed attempt to harm him. What confuses me is why she didn’t finish you off when she had the chance.”

Fikna stared at the floor and shifted uncomfortably in the chair.

She gazed out the window, then stared ahead in thought. “Hurling curses is a dangerous thing to do. I’ve read it’s hard to stop once you start; you always end up paying a steep price. It might be something she’s lost control of. Maybe she isn’t acting out of malice at all.”

Fikna looked up at her. “You mentioned earlier our opponent was bad.”

She frowned at him. “I said she sounded bad. But even so, bad is good tormented by its fate. Unless you’ve been in a dark place yourself, don’t judge those who are lost.”

Fikna clenched his fists. “We decide our actions. If this girl commits wickedness, she is guilty.”

Glenys glared at him. She used a firm voice. “I can’t help it. I don’t mean anyone harm, not even enemies. If

I can't stand in their place and say 'I deserve this', I have no right passing sentence.

"You should remember that she's a human being and might be hurting inside. If she's in pain, then she's lashing out as a means of coping."

Rordan said, "I agree. We shouldn't be so quick to judge. We should be fair in our decisions bro'."

Fikna sat back and gaped. "I prefer to avoid unjust positions. Yet, how can we remain inactive? If not us, then another innocent will be harmed. And while we stand here debating we become responsible for idleness."

Rordan smirked and opened his hands in a gesture of revelation toward Glenys. "That, dear bro' of mine, is why she's here with the cards. So we can brainstorm and get some ideas."

She smiled, waving the cards in her right hand at Fikna for emphasis.

The young gallant burst into laughter. "You two ought to form a stage act."

The three of them laughed together, with Borus appearing baffled.

The door unlocked and Stig walked in. He looked impatient. Behind him came two unfamiliar teenage guys. They stood and waited while Stig searched his backpack.

Rordan overcame his surprise and introduced himself to the newcomers. The beanpole with darting eyes gave his name as Dag and the hefty, reserved guy with the eyeglasses went by the name of Mosi. They

acknowledged Fikna and Glenys when Rordan introduced them.

Stig pulled out a truncheon, a narrow dagger with a thin blade, a black handkerchief, and a small wallet of deep red leather tied shut. He slid the dagger into his boot and the wallet in his back pocket. “And I’m his bunkmate by the way. Name’s Stig. Hey Glenys. Sorry, can’t stay. Going out.”

Rordan said, “Where to?”

Stig smiled and gave a careless shrug of his shoulders. “How the damn crap should I know?”

The three guys hurried out of the room and Stig slammed the door behind them. Glenys arched her eyebrows at Rordan.

Fikna went over to the truncheon. He examined the weapon and tested its balance. “A crowner? So he’s a handler then. Bit of a broiler also, by the look of his bearing. He’s studying history? Rather unlikely, I say.”

Rordan puffed. The guys had left before he could introduce Borus. “His friends sure didn’t have much to say. What a bunch of brutes. I don’t like it.”

Fikna said, “The gryphon had a service stripe on his jacket. I would wager the tall troglodyte carries some manner of concealed arms.” He sat down again.

Rordan stared at the weapon. His bunkmate’s visit had set him on edge. “Stig said his father was a trawler. Probably a roughneck yokel.”

Glenys shivered. “He has disturbed energy. Brr. Be careful with him.”

The conversation stopped. Borus snapped to attention and looked at his friends’ faces one by one.

Glenys took in a deep breath and exhaled. “Those three are up to something serious. Whatever it is, it’s left a bad wake in this room.”

Fikna slumped and looked at the floor. “I agree with your assessment Glenys. I’m not myself, all of a sudden.”

She looked up at Rordan. “What does your third eye see?”

Rordan stared back at her. “I forgot all about it. I feel so weak right now. I don’t even know if I can try to use it.”

His attention shifted suddenly to the daubings of the Hearth Bunch back in Nerham. The faces of his friends were covered in a faint smudge of gray color not related to the water damage. The smudge rendered his depictions of them lifeless and sad.

Glenys followed his stare. Fikna looked up and saw the two of them stare past him. He turned around.

Rordan said, “I see our friends in trouble. That’s what I see. There’s a cloud over them.”

He watched Glenys put her head down and glower to herself, a dormant power building inside of her.

Fikna turned forward and looked at him. “Are you certain of your observation? Abrafo couldn’t possibly

have fallen into trouble, could he? Lewinna? For Welkin's sake, what misfortune might they be enduring?"

A dread took hold of Rordan and he lowered his head. "I don't know exactly. I just have a fear our friends aren't safe."

Glenys spoke in a low voice. "I have a big mouth sometimes. I'm sorry, Rordan. That was thoughtless on my part. If you use your gift, you have to be ready to know what it shows you. I have a father and a brother to worry about. If they're in trouble that makes me furious."

Borus slid closer to Glenys and placed a palm on her arm. She uttered nonsensical chatter at her and made a funny face. Her large, dark eyes shone with excitement.

A wave of warmth passed over Rordan. He watched a vivid pressure and pungent aroma of earthy colors emanate from Borus' mouth as the boy spoke. A formless, heavy cold was driven from the room in a sudden blast.

Rordan realized the cold had gained a foothold in the room on the heels of Stig and his friends. He saw that this cold was immense in size and extended across the Heartland, then he lost hold of the vision and returned to a normal view of the room.

Glenys smiled at her. She put her free hand on the girl's and said, "Oh, Borus. You are so kind to think of me, as confused as you must be. I hope Rordan finds a way to help you."

Borus squeezed Glenys' arm. She bounced her rump on the mattress and chattered. Her friends all laughed.

Rordan found his mood suddenly improved and it looked to him like Fikna had recovered. The gloom that had hung over them a minute ago had disappeared. He felt safe again in the light of the lamp.

“Borus is a guardian and a protector. He drives off the backmonkeys and drudgets—helps us toss the boot.”

Glenys puzzled at him and half chuckled. “That last part made no sense. But you're on the right trail. If there's anything we can do, lets start tonight.” She wrapped up the cards and stashed them in her line bag.

Fikna said, “You may count on my agreement. I suggest we pay a visit to those two young ladies now. Perhaps we may investigate the possibility of an early start.” He stood up and checked Trad's knife.

Rordan waited for everyone to gather outside the door, then he blew the lamp out.

His bro' led them down to the end of the hall to Nyah's open door. The floor snug stood across from her room. She played a card game with Eshe. They both enjoyed smokes.

Fikna said, “Knock, knock. Ladies, may we step inside?”

Nyah said, “Get your cheeks in here.” Her eyes had a manic gleam as she grinned at them.

Rordan followed Fikna inside, with Glenys and Borus close behind.

The furniture had been arranged for several people to sit around a medium-sized, square table in the center of the room. Rordan noticed Nyah's interests in statement-hangings and banners leaned toward the occult. Her interests lent her choices of dark colors with light outlines and melodramatic themes an unfamiliar ambiance.

He recognized the acrid background odor of unlicensed dispensaries and noted a water pipe in the corner of Nyah's desk. Rordan hoped Fikna wouldn't make an issue out of her negligent lifestyle.

Glenys and Borus were introduced. Nyah and Eshe saw only a boy when they looked at the youngster. Rordan sat next to Nyah and Fikna assumed a seat next to Eshe. Glenys sat between the two brothers. Borus stayed on her feet and studied the expressive decoration.

Nyah eyed Rordan with an unhinged leer. "What a nice surprise to see Poop Duncie here. We thought you were going to flake on us and ditch the show."

Rordan smiled at her. "No way. You're pretty neat. What are you playing?"

"It's called Negligent," said Nyah, suddenly low-key. "You try and get as high a hand as possible. Without getting busted by the other players. And right now, Eshe is being a real trull."

Eshe took a long drag off her smoke and exhaled while speaking. "Thank you, sweetie." She gestured toward the cards and said, "It's a game that works better with several people. Two people can only mess with each other. There's no third wheel to bug-hump."

Nyah said, “And you can trade cards, which makes for even more front-stabbing.”

Shock turned into excitement on Fikna’s face. “I never heard of a game whose premise involved the gathering of dispensaries. How irregular.”

Eshe giggled a little. “I have the impression you don’t make much contact with gryphons.”

Fikna waved the suggestion off. “My best friend happens to be a...err...Kgosian. However, we enjoy ranc, not this sort of amusement.”

Nyah took the cards and shuffled them. “Oh I see. You’ll play a game about capturing booty captives. But you’re afraid of a little exposure to suggestions of being a negligent?”

Glenys said, “I’ll play.” She looked at Rordan.

He felt her hopes that he would play too. Rordan zoned out for a moment, then looked at Glenys and did a double take. “Oh right, me too. Why not? When do we go to the Grill?”

Eshe said, “We have a little less than a mark before our friend is supposed to play. Enough for a quick game. Or we can leave our cards here and come back.”

Fikna smirked. “A splendid idea. While I find it disagreeable in subject matter, it has the advantage of being original and interesting.”

Nyah grinned like a lunatic. In a childlike voice she said, “You won’t be sorry you played with us.” She distributed cards to everyone but Borus, who stood

behind Rordan and watched the cards as they moved around.

Eshe started the hand. She summarized the rules to them.

Rordan strained to listen and understand, but no strategy jumped out at him. He resolved to wait.

The cards appeared to have been illustrated by a negligent. He found them bawdy and abstract. The mature themes were strongly suggestive of pursuits associated with that group.

He looked at Fikna. The image concepts appeared to tickle his bro's fancy. Rordan breathed an inner sigh of relief. He could never tell how Fikna might react, even though skirting the edges thrilled his bro'. Their Empyrean friends liked the image of Amazing Fikna. But Rordan guessed they would be shocked if they knew his bro' really took on the thrill sometimes.

He muttered under his breath, "Libras."

Nyah fluttered her eyebrows and smiled at him. "Yes, Rordy?"

"Oh, Libra. My bro's a Libra. I'm into stargazing. It's a hobby. But Glenys is really the expert around here."

Glenys pretended not to have heard.

Nyah said, "Can you guess what I am?"

Rordan shook his head. "No, I don't guess. I just read about it. For talk purposes at revels, you understand."

She made a sigh of disappointment. With a sweet voice, Nyah said, “I’m Cancer the crab.” She stared at Rordan with rude expectation.

Eshe started the game and Fikna watched what she did.

Rordan said, “You’re moody, deeply maternal, and a weird moon girl. You enjoy good humor and have a hard outer shell, with a soft inside.”

Nyah puckered her cheeks inward and looked around comically. She cackled a little. “Awesome.”

“You remind me of this guy on the boat I took up here,” said Rordan. “He was really outgoing too.”

Nyah boggled her eyes. She stared at Eshe, who had finished a hand and was explaining it to Fikna. “Ethie baby, what’s your sign?”

Eshe looked up and said, “Huh? Oh, that jargon. Aquarius.” She doused her smoke and waited for Fikna to make a move with his turn.

Rordan nodded. He mulled over what he could remember. “Analytical. Unconventional. The individualist of the stars, and very smart.”

Eshe said, “That does sound like me. But that could also be lots of people.”

Rordan noted the cool mental answer of an air sign and looked at his hand again. He still didn’t understand what he could do.

Glenys looked over at him. “That’s not bad. You understand the basics of each sun sign. I’ll have to

remember to let you borrow my lessons from the Romance Collection. It has an excellent summary of all the signs, both positive and negative.”

Nyah looked at Glenys with pretend suspicion in her eyes. “What about you, honey?”

She eyed Nyah and answered in a low voice. “Leo.”

“Aw. How cute, a kitty cat.” Nyah shifted around the cards in her hand.

Glenys said, “I like it.”

Nyah smirked at her. She turned to Rordan and used a shrill voice. “It’s your turn!”

Rordan shook with surprise.

Eshe said, “He jumps well. We’ll have fun with this one.”

Nyah raised her eyebrows and nodded. “And what sign are you Rordy honey?”

Rordan caught his breath. “I’m a Pisces. Dreamy, reticent, and imaginative. Oh, and wishy-washy.” He played a card he thought might be good.

Glenys said, “You’re not wishy-washy; you’re sensitive.”

“Mrm-hrm. Well, that only leaves your handsome brother here. And what does Libra do?” Nyah drew a card with a look of amusement.

Fikna shook his head in annoyance. “Oh, come now. Can’t we concentrate on the game and not get drawn into

repeated nonsense about birth signs. Stargazing is all a bunch of superstitious guess work.”

Glenys looked up from her hand. “That’s why the Prince Elder of the Classis knows it.”

“That is decidedly untrue,” said Fikna. “I never heard of such a thing.”

She nodded. “It’s true. All senior elders have to study stargazing as part of their training.”

Fikna said, “That doesn’t mean he practices it. It pays to be a sage in all matters relating to superstitious beliefs, particularly for one as holy as His Sacredness.”

Nyah played a weak card with a sideways glance at Rordan. Eshe followed up with an equally lackluster play.

Glenys looked slyly at Fikna and said, “You can’t study stargazing seriously without practicing it to some degree. The sacred archive contains uncounted volumes on the subject. Hardly the sign of something regarded as superstition. You don’t see those learned men studying Hellirism, do you?”

Fikna noted the cards in play. “Continue to profess what you like; the matter still sounds unlikely to me.” He played his turn out.

Rordan watched Glenys’ reaction. He had read in Modwenna’s Stellar Collection how unstoppable Leos were. They could overcome any obstacle because of their royal power.

Unformed thoughts stirred in his mind. He fashioned a realization out of them and came to a conclusion. In

this room he sat among friends. The comradeship was not unlike back home when his friends in Nerham gathered. Surrounded by good people, he played a game of chance different from the one at home, yet not so different. He and his bro' did what they had always done, but this time they learned and grew.

He became conscious of the end of Glenys' turn. The group's attention focused on him. Rordan drew a card and studied his hand. He observed Glenys out of the corner of his sight. Her eyes showed interest and she inclined her body toward him slightly. His intuition told him she wanted to know more about him.

Rordan cowered internally at the revelation. The reality of their mutual attraction scared him. He felt uncomfortable with the worthiness to like and be liked in return. It stirred depths in him where a part of him he didn't want to wake slumbered. Leos didn't make good matches with Pisces either. Fire and water. She could crush him so easily.

All of a sudden, he knew he would open himself up to her. Depths or not, he would take a chance with his feelings. His head swam with dizziness at the absurdity of it, to throw safety to the wind and allow himself to enjoy her effect on him.

He heard a crackle behind him that sounded like the crunching of bone. He turned around and looked through the window. The formless cold lurked outside. It shimmered with stagnant pink sparkles he imagined were ice crystals in the air.

Borus watched him, her eyes wide.

The cold fled from his gaze and disappeared from sight. He faced the table again, struggled against an uncomfortable intuition forming in his mind.

The voice inside him said, “The chill cannot withstand your commitment.”

His thoughts returned to the game and he played a card. The moment he put the card into play, Rordan had a mental premonition he would win the game. He discarded.

“Hey Glenys, what do you think of that? Pretty good amount of dispensaries for a Pisces, eh?”

She gave him a coy look.

Nyah popped her eyebrows up and down. She cackled to herself and discarded.

As Eshe contemplated her move, Glenys said, “Dispensaries are bad for Pisces. It’s easy for them to get lost in addiction.”

Rordan said, “A little addiction isn’t a bad thing. All in moderation.” He flashed an excited smile at her.

She pretended not to notice. “Depends on the addiction. Fish are vulnerable to temptation.” Glenys shifted in her chair and drew a slight, nervous breath.

Eshe discarded with a groan. “Looks like my hand has gone bad.”

Fikna played a card against Rordan. “Nuts to all that Pisces nonsense. I’m putting the downer on you with Patroller Search.”

His bro’s sudden vehemence surprised him. Rordan heard the crunching sound of the chill return outside. He studied Fikna and noticed a doubt that hid behind a need to matter. The doubt burned inside Fikna like a bright light, yet his bro’ smothered it in a whirlwind of distraction.

Despite the revelation, Rordan let his bro’ struggle. “Looks like I have to get out from under the stick.”

Nyah sneered at him. “That’s right. Eat the stick.”

Rordan looked at Borus. The boy stared back at him and he knew Borus thought about their friendship. For a brief instant, he intuited a growing comprehension between them.

Glenys pulled his attention away from the youngster with a downer card she played against him. “And while you’re getting the stick, here’s some Girl Trouble too.” She giggled at him.

Rordan looked at the lewd picture. It suggested he had become distracted by carnal pursuits and thus unable to enjoy his negligent ones. “Great, I see who the third wheel is.”

Glenys giggled some more.

Nyah said, “You’re getting it both ways Rordan.” Her voice grew forceful. “Now draw a card froggie!”

He jumped in his seat, then hurried to start his hand. Rordan drew a Completely Toasted card, which he played to free his dispensary heap from all downer cards in play.

Eshe grinned. “Looks like he got out from under that bug-hump.”

Nyah nodded. She scowled at Rordan.

Borus looked out the window and took a breath. She whistled a series of notes to herself with longing.

Rordan sat up and joined Borus in looking out the window. A ponderous, grey-black lizard stared back at them from the field. The creature was nine feet tall and stood upright on two legs. Its huge, glowing white pupiless eyes regarded him for a moment, then its gaze returned to Borus.

In the darkness beyond the light of the streetlamps, he spotted the cold moving through the grounds, only wisps of its edges visible.

The lizard opened its enormous jaws and issued a throaty rumble. Borus made a long series of grunts. The lizard turned away and departed into the night, its thick tail moving back and forth in opposite tandem with its steps.

Fikna said, “Rord, stop wasting time and pay attention to the game.”

Rordan sat down, stunned at what he had witnessed.

Borus plopped down on the bed of Nyah’s bunkmate and chattered to herself.

The game continued and Rordan's heap acquired a string of high point cards. Nyah and Eshe came in behind him with a mixture of high and low point cards. Glenys managed a pair of mid-point cards. Fikna discarded three turns in a row. Despite his poor luck, the young gallant studied the gameplay and asked Eshe for an occasional explanation.

Downer cards from Rordan's hand went on Nyah and Eshe's heaps. They had the right cards to remove the downers and continued to gain on him.

Fikna drew a card and Eshe laughed at him. His bro' shrugged and discarded a different card.

Glenys put a high point dispensary in her heap and pushed past Nyah's score.

The Duffer card came into Rordan's hand. He used it to discard Eshe's highest rated dispensary.

She sighed, shaking her head.

The sanctum bell tolled once. Rordan remembered what Eshe had said about his Skidaddle card. He played it and ended the game early. The card depicted a negligent skipping town with his ill-gotten goods, presumably to idle in a stupor out in the countryside until the next game. He drew some sour looks before everyone put down their cards and declared him the winner.

Fikna said, "Most treacherous to end the game in that manner. However, good timing regardless. It's not often you are victorious at cards, Rord. I played poorly in your

place, although I admit I learned a great amount. Next time I shall offer a more worthy opposition.”

Eshe pulled on an improper lace jacket over her dress. The jacket had a number of alternative loyalty patches on the back and sleeves. “He made some good points there. But this is a long-term game. That strategy doesn’t always work.”

A satisfied grin appeared on Nyah’s face. “Maximum cool. Rordan kicked us in the teeth. It’s what we deserve for playing like beetleheads.”

“Speak for yourself, sweetie.”

Nyah stuck her tongue out at Eshe.

She curled her lip at Nyah. “Girl, does your mother know where that tongue’s been?”

Fikna said, “Ladies, ladies. Let us maintain some manner of civility here. Save the effort for our next game, where I trust no holds shall be barred.”

Nyah pretended to be chastised. “Whatever you say, sir.”

“Silly girl,” said Fikna. He shook his head at her and stood up. Everyone followed his example and stretched their legs.

Rordan said, “When’s curfew around here?”

“Ten, but there’s no curfew on Fridays,” said Nyah.

Fikna said, “Truly? A supremely unusual arrangement. How do the patrollers manage such a lawless night?”

Rordan stared blankly. He found the concept both appealing and worrisome.

Nyah said, “The director started the curfew free Fridays a few years ago. I wouldn’t get too excited though, all it means is you can’t be treated for staying out late.”

Eshe said, “Or up. We can talk more about the possibilities later. We should head out.”

As they all exited Nyah’s room and made their way downstairs, Borus fell in beside Rordan. She moved with a bounce in her step and smiled to herself.

Rordan furrowed his brow at the boy. The giant lizard had looked dangerous to him and Borus must have seen the chill. His mind drew a blank at how the youngster could be so happy.

He remembered they were all under threat of attack by magical creatures. The game had been so much fun he’d forgotten about Kea’s efforts.

His thoughts turned to Fikna and Glenys. He wanted to know how they felt about the threat. His bro’ entertained Eshe and Nyah, so he approached Glenys.

“Hey, what’s on your mind? You thinking about Kea at all?”

She shook her head. “I’m fuming over my debate with your brother. I only wish I’d come up with a better defense of stargazing to him. I feel like I should have known that subject better. I’ve read it a dozen times but I

couldn't think of it that time. I wasted so much time trying to remember that I let the conversation slide.”

Rordan watched her self-confidence twist inside her. He intuited she carried a secret fear that she wasn't up to the challenges of her life. The crunching sound in the darkness sounded, making him shiver. He wondered if she weren't giving the chill strength. He felt sympathy for her and decided to take her side against his bro'.

“Well, he's traditional. You aren't going to convince him overnight. Libras like to think things over.”

She smiled at him and touched his shoulder with her hand.

He smiled inwardly and a thrill passed through him. Rordan could hardly believe how many things had gone on today. The soft touch of her hand made everything feel insignificant by comparison.

CHAPTER 13: MAGIC AT THE GRILL

Rordan stood in line with his friends at the counter. A hearty smell filled the Grill. Pupils carried away large portions on wooden trays. Beyond the counter, he saw a young woman in a scullion apron make flour fry-breads, which were then stuffed with tomato sauce, cheese, and herbs. He decided they looked delicious. Rordan felt a bubble of gas move around in his gut and realized how bad his meal had been earlier.

He examined the inside of the Grill. A series of lanterns set with warm-colored lenses hung from the walls. They provided an illumination rich in cozy shadows. On the walls hung cheap statement hangings and genuine paintings of an abstract loyalty. Wall leaflets announced a songster. He couldn't make out the face because the print job had been botched. Most of the small wooden tables and stools were occupied. Small groups of people sat on a tier of carpeted steps along one wall.

From where Rordan stood, an empty stage a foot higher than the floor dominated the far side of the Grill. Behind the stage, a closed door at floor level granted backstage access. At his end, a counter with a sliding window allowed access to the adjacent kitchen. Next to the counter was a large rubbish bin and table of used trays. An open door beside the bin led into a Dorus Elm hallway. The entrance door of the Grill was in the opposite wall.

His eyesight didn't spot Kea or any of the other passengers from the voyage.

Borus whistled at him.

"It's okay," said Rordan. "We're safe here. This place has got good energy."

Rordan caught Glenys smiling at him. He bathed in the sight of her and smiled back. His insides tensed and tingled at the same time, then turned into butterflies of dizziness.

Out of his depths rose a passion of wild love for Glenys. The passion seized a hold of his heart and a piece of him cracked. The shock of an icy stream flowed into his body. The sudden cold and pressure hurt him and he shook with the ache of a body part dying off.

The ache became a blinding light, accompanied by a deep roar in his ears. The flood of sensation poured out of a dark nothingness at the back of his mind and marked him with a painful cut. From the pain of that wound came a vision of his nature.

Inside his body lived a fearless desire to give and receive without reservation, to take good and bad no matter what the consequences. The mere sight of a loved one moved him to accept despair and experience bliss in the fires of suffering.

Rordan marveled at the mystery he beheld and awe overcame him. Through his love for her he beheld both damnation and salvation. His lips kissed the rotten face of death and tasted the honey of life at the same time. The expanding beauty and horror of his injury burned

with furious sparks and he stared back at the nothingness from which it had come.

The nothingness returned his gaze and an echo resounded beyond his knowledge.

Rordan came out of a stunned trance that might have lasted a few heartbeats or an eternity. He hadn't known the depths of his feelings until now. Every crush, every lustful desire, each and every secret wish had been ripples on the surface of fearsome currents. Rordan realized those currents could pull him under at any time. They could injure his soul and scar his spirit forever.

Glenys' brow creased. "Are you okay? You looked strange for a second."

He cleared his throat and answered her on the second try to speak. "I'm just really hungry all of a sudden. I'm starved so bad I could eat anything right now."

Glenys said, "You poor dear. Don't worry, you'll eat soon." She laughed at what Rordan believed was a secret joke.

He intuited his body expressed the shock as hunger. The wounds on his feet and the scratch on his arm had exchanged soreness for stiffness. His body felt weighed down.

The line moved forward. Rordan stepped up and made an order for a gulper, which Fikna paid for. He noted his bro' had a frown of deep thought on his face. Nyah had grabbed a table near the entrance and was gathering stools.

While Fikna and Eshe made their orders, Rordan saw a pair of untaken stools in the far corner by the stage. He went for them and Borus followed after him. As he bent forward to pick them up, he noticed a look of recognition in the youngster's eyes.

A vision flashed in his head of a sleeping kitten on a pillow. The image belonged to a statement hanging he'd seen on a toll depot many years ago when he was young.

Borus nodded.

Rordan said, "You see as I see, don't you?"

Her eyes widened and she stared hard at him. The girl moved her lips but no sound came out.

"It's okay," said Rordan, "I know you can't talk yet. I don't know how, but I feel I can continue to send you light to guide your path."

Rordan closed his eyes and strength passed between him and Borus like before. The sudden flash of light passed and he knew the bond between them had grown stronger.

The voice inside him said, "All the way back to the beginning of time."

A question formed in Rordan's thoughts. The voice answered him before he could articulate it.

"Your friend knows a secret too."

Borus put her hand on his shoulder.

He nodded. “Cool, you understand. When the time comes, we’ll talk.” Exhaustion crawled forward from the back of his mind.

Borus made another attempt to talk and lowered her hand. She made a small nod.

Rordan believed he saw kindness in the youngster’s eyes. “I’m so tired. I know I should ask you something, but this stuff is so hard to do. It makes me weak.”

She picked up a stool.

He gaped at her with a slight smile. Rordan took the other stool and they returned to their friends’ table.

Fikna said, “Finally Rord, you return. What were you accomplishing over there? Attempting to communicate with our mutual pauper?”

“Something like that.” Rordan placed his stool and sat down. He watched Borus imitate his action and take a seat beside him.

Eshe said, “Did you get him off the street?”

Nyah laughed. “Ethie don’t say that, it’s impolite.”

Eshe shrugged her shoulders. “I’m sorry. I have to ask or I’ll never know.”

Fikna gave a brief explanation of how Rordan had brought the pauper with them on their voyage.

“That was a kind thing you did,” said Glenys.

Eshe shook her head. “Yeah, it’s a just deed. I know there’s no way I could do that.”

Nyah took out a smoke and lit it on the table candle. “It’s awesome. There’s more to our little Rordy than meets the eye.”

The pupil who had taken their order appeared in the window and announced their food was ready. Rordan got up and delivered the trays to the table. Everyone had ordered a gulper, which turned out to be the flour fry-breads Rordan had seen earlier.

Fikna said, “If I might venture to ask, where’s this songster of yours? I thought our tardiness would prevail. However, it appears she will be the one who misses the appointed time.”

Nyah shrugged. “These things happen.”

“Vacía is never on time,” said Eshe. “She might even flake. But it’s worth the chance to hear her play.”

Fikna said, “What are her loyalties?”

Eshe said, “She sings girlpower folk. Mostly Brave Mocuxsoma and some Blue Iamicilla. But she has her own formula and it’s good. If you’re lucky she’ll share some of it.” She handled her hot gulper with ease and slurped in a hot bite.

Nyah raised her eyebrows and nodded.

Rordan took her reaction as a sign Eshe made an understatement. “Does she have a hight?”

“Smoldering Vacía,” said Nyah.

Fikna pulled small utensils from his inside pocket and started on his gulper. He took a bite and stared while he rolled his lips back and forth.

Nyah chuckled.

Glenys said, “May I have a bite?”

Rordan beamed. “Sure, go for it.”

She plucked a stray piece of molten cheese from his gulper and popped it into her mouth.

He noticed Borus’ hungry stare. Rordan tore open a piece of the bread and burned his fingertips. “Yeow!”

Nyah laughed at him. “Rordy, gulpers are served molten. Give it a chance to cool before you perform anything crazy like breaking it up.”

Rordan borrowed Fikna’s knife and cut the gulper into pieces. He handed a hot piece to Borus, who wolfed it down with a loud sucking sound. She smacked her lips and licked the grease from her hands.

The door to the Grill opened. Noss and Dalla walked in. They had washed and changed into clean clothes. Both of them wore their rider hats. Noss had shaved.

Their improved appearance stunned Rordan.

Noss spotted his stare and came over. “Looks like you’ve made some friends already. Glad to see you’re fitting in, man.”

Fikna answered for Rordan. “You’re looking well. How’s Kea?”

Noss smirked and glanced quickly at Eshe and Nyah. “I wouldn’t know. Haven’t run into her since we all got here. But I’m sure I’ll see her again. Once she’s through

hooking up with all her old friends. I'll mention you were asking about her."

"No need to trouble yourself, I wasn't asking out of interest. Merely curiosity as to whether you were still in one piece." Fikna cut himself another bite of his gulper.

Rordan watched Dalla chuckle to herself behind Noss' back.

"Thanks for caring. When you grow up, I'm sure you'll be able to handle a girl too." Noss tipped his hat to the women at the table and got into line at the counter. He steered clear of Borus, who watched him with a guarded readiness in her posture.

Nyah and Eshe looked at each other and nodded in unison. They both said, "Dong warrior."

Rordan laughed. "That's some word."

Nyah said, "That's some creep. I'll bet his papers even say dong warrior on it."

Eshe said, "You sure know how to make friends. What's he sore about?" She took out a smoke and lit it.

Fikna swallowed his current bite of food and grimaced at the heat. "We both pursued the same prospect and he got the better of me. The miscreant is merely rubbing it in."

Eshe took a long drag. She exhaled and said, "That munches. Look at it this way; you're still free and in the clear. He's become a complete back end. Imagine it. You could be a dong warrior like him and not sitting with the cool people."

Her self-satisfied grin pulled a smile out of Fikna. “What you say resonates with truth. I rather prefer your view of events.”

Nyah adopted a voice of jest and patted Fikna on the hand. “We’ll take care of you, Fikky-honey. We love you very, very much.”

Glenys eyed Dalla out of the corner of her vision.

Noss and Dalla placed an order, then went to sit on the tiers with a group of people. Rordan didn’t recognize anyone in the group. He saw a husky mengan guy and two young women. The short, sturdy woman was restless and talked a lot. The soft-eyed, cool mannered woman wore a large rider jacket and had long hair.

Rordan considered what Abrafo had said about mengans of Kgosian parentage. His friend had called them gaifs and said they were simple-minded weaklings. Looking at the large guy now, Rordan believed Abrafo must have been talking about something else.

Nyah noticed Rordan’s interest in the group. “The long-haired one is Manissa. She lives across from you. Kea’s staying with her. The short one is Ulidia, kind of out of it. She lives in one of the singles garrets on Upper Trow.”

He pursed his lips and considered how many friends his adversary might have. Avoiding trouble would be hard if Noss was ready to get in his face at every chance.

Rordan finished off his meal. His tongue and the roof of his mouth felt burned. He stood up and grabbed

everyone's empty trays. While he put them in the pile next to the rubbish bin, Dalla approached him.

She had a serious face. "Kea has gone crazy. All she can talk about are your problems. Stay away from her." Dalla left before Rordan had a chance to say anything.

He felt a clutch of panic. His head raced with unformed thoughts. The Stinge might have done worse, but crazy people went on rampages. He had no idea how to stay away from Kea when she lived right next door.

Rordan sat down at the table again.

Glenys whispered to him. "What happened? I saw an exchange go down."

He whispered back. "Dalla warned me that Kea has gone nuts."

She gritted her teeth. Glenys stood up and grabbed him by the sleeve.

As she drew him away, Rordan said, "We'll be right back."

Nyah cackled at him.

She led him through the open door and into the hallway beyond. They went up some stairs and into a central lounge. Glenys sat Rordan down on an armchair, beside a well-supplied hearth that crackled with a low fire. She moved the wire screen and placed a pair of sectioned logs onto the flames. They were alone.

Glenys said, "I say it's time we did a reading and got an idea of what's after us. And you especially." She took out her fortune cards and shuffled them.

Her low tone of voice surprised Rordan. She sounded commanding to him. He realized his understanding of her was about to deepen.

Glenys separated the deck into three piles and said, "Choose the pile that feels the strongest to you."

He decided on the rightmost pile and she took three cards from it in quick succession, face up. Rordan considered the illustrations as Glenys looked at them intently.

The first card depicted a woman sitting at a table outside a cottage with a man standing next to her. The pair looked sinister to Rordan. On the table were four gold coins the size of dinner plates. The woman held the fourth coin upright to face the viewer like a mirror. She sat locked in thought while the man whispered into her ear.

The second card revealed six swordsmen with blades drawn. They moved in two straight lines toward the sea where a rowboat waited. The two men closest to the boat pointed at it, the two men closest to the viewer put up their hands as if to bar the viewer from going any further, and the two middle swordsmen were split between the two groups of two. One looked at the farthest group, the other at the closest.

The final card bore the title of Mountebank. Rordan identified it as a form of the Bungler card. The Mountebank traveled toward a mountain castle in the distance with a knapsack over his shoulder and a small

mongrel leading the way. He headed into rough terrain, but his face suggested someone drunk or witless.

Glenys sat back and closed her eyes.

Rordan waited.

She opened her eyes and looked at Rordan directly as she spoke. “The card with the coins on it is in the past. Two people are deciding how best to manage the coins they have before them. Coins are physical. They represent things you have to deal with in the real world. Time, money, appointments, chores. The woman in the card must be Kea and the four coins represent us. Me, Borus, you, and your brother. We’re problems that have to be dealt with.

“The coin the woman is holding upwards is probably you. There seems to be a personal connection between the two of you. This man isn’t the guy we just ran into. In the card he seems to be a power behind the throne, convincing the woman to take action. Since she’s sitting at the table, she’s the one who has to deal with us. He’s standing and free to move on elsewhere, which makes me think there’s someone behind Kea’s actions. Maybe that’s why she’s going nuts.”

Rordan swallowed. Her skill at stargazing made him nervous.

She pointed at the next card. “This is in the present. The two people in the coins card have already made their choices. Here we have six people. I’d say that this is the same number of people as in our group now. The four of us, plus Eshe and Nyah. Some of us want to run away,

some of us want to stay and fight, and some of us don't know yet what we will do. We're all on the same side, but not of the same mind. Whatever threat is causing this orderly, yet undecided meeting is unseen. It must be dangerous for everyone to have drawn their weapons out like this.

"Blades represent thoughts, ideas, and mental states. Decisions, knowledge, and understanding are a part of their symbolism. I wonder if the danger to us is going to appear soon. At least it will happen while we're together. We'll have to make one or more decisions."

She repressed a smile. "I know which one I am. I'm near the front. I'm saying, 'come and get it.' No running for me."

He marveled at her bravery. Rordan knew he'd flee for the boat. "What else is in the card?"

She studied it again. "That boat looks awfully small. It couldn't hold more than two people. So whoever escapes, the others will be left holding the bag."

Rordan said, "Or they could all face the danger together."

"Or the danger might finish them all off. Better that two people escape than none." Glenys fixed her eyes upon Rordan. "I'd stay behind to make sure you and Fikna escaped."

He sighed and sat back. His gaze rested on the cards without focus.

Glenys said, “The last card is major. It gives us a hint at the future and what to expect. The Mountebank is a traveler and a performer. A freeloader. He’s always the one who does the unexpected.

“You and the Mountebank share something in common. You’re a rustic like he would be. You’ve come a long way through travel. You’re far from home and looking for your goal. Whatever happens, you’ll do something surprising. Maybe that’s why you are on Kea’s mind. Whatever plan she has, you might be the one to change it.”

She looked at the card up close and squinted, then nodded to herself in satisfaction. “At least, that’s what I see. We’re in a real pickle.” Glenys looked up at Rordan and her eyes blinked at him.

He gazed at the cards and took in their meaning. “Maybe with my third eye I’ll be able to see a solution. A way out that will guide us at the last minute. Or maybe I’ll get another vision of something fantastic that will help us.”

Glenys said, “I sure hope so. Because if things get bad you’re getting on that boat.” She eyed him.

Attraction and worry mixed in his heart. He wanted to kiss her and he didn’t want to be rejected.

They heard cheers downstairs at the Grill.

Rordan said, “I guess that means this Vacia has shown up. Do you want to go back? Or do you want me to row out of this?”

She looked at the front doors of the dormitory. “Let’s see what happens.” Glenys gathered up the cards and stashed them in her line bag.

They stood up and returned to the Grill, which now held a sizable crowd.

Fikna waved at them. “By Welkin, seat yourselves in these stools. It’s become a chore to preserve them.”

Glenys and Rordan sat down.

“Thank you for being so considerate,” said Glenys.

Fikna smiled. “You’re welcome. I was wondering if you would return. However, if I had investigated I risked losing my seat also. I did promise to escort these lovely ladies.”

Eshe took a puff of her smoke and said, “Thank you Fikna. You’re a fine gentleman.”

Rordan noticed the lanterns not by the stage had been dimmed way down. A young mengán woman—a berserker—sat on a stool onstage. She wore songster clothes and a brand new rider jacket. The jacket had buttons on the inside. She tuned her guitar and made small talk with the crowd in front.

Fikna tugged at his sleeve and leaned in close. “Kea showed up shortly after you two departed. She’s over there with her group of admirers.”

“Got it. Glenys and I did the stargazing. It was really cool. All six of us are probably going to be involved in something tonight, so be ready.”

Fikna placed his hand on Rordan's shoulder for a second.

Vacia played her guitar and sang without a warm-up.

Rordan watched Nyah and Eshe listen with the fondness of friends. He sank into enjoyment of her talent. Her chords and voice soothed him into a state of relaxed awareness.

In a trance, he spotted a teenager wearing a dry, brick red ogre mask. She sat down with a pair of male friends. Annoyance flashed through Rordan at the approach of more visions.

He looked at the people in Kea's group. A cold, pale pink haze hung on them. Ivixa and Kea had their masks on.

The short and sturdy Ulidia wore a reddish-white ghoulish mask with cracked skin. She moved with difficulty. Her breaths came in slow gasps and she pulled at the skin of her arms on and off.

Noss' skeleton glowed with a rancid brown light through his flesh. His movements were sluggish and weak.

The husky mengans wore a wolf mask of yellow and brown colors. Droplets of crusted blood stained the fur in places. The rims of the eye sockets glowed orange.

Manissa and Dalla both sat as if they were pulling away from Kea. Neither looked like they belonged and the haze hung on them as if it were losing its grasp.

Rordan hoped they would pull free. In Dalla he noticed a mighty, hidden passion and a willpower of solid iron. He admired her.

Dalla's mouth tightened at something Kea said and the haze frayed about her in a scattering of misty tendrils. The tension became too much for Rordan to witness and he looked away. Dalla's tenacity for life unsettled him.

Rordan returned his attention to Vacia. She sang about devotion in a relationship. One of the lines compared her to a champion defending a ladylove from harm. Rordan froze in fascination. His thoughts shot back to his studies.

He had read mentions of women champions in his lessons. The Kgosians honored a female champion as one of their local heroines. But usually such figures as Prophet Oluchi were unthinkable in today's Heartland. As dangerous as it could be to sing about them, the presence of it here didn't surprise him. The permissiveness of the academy seemed natural.

Could there be gentlemen-in-distress, then? He'd read some interpretations of sovereigns-in-waiting that lent credence to the idea. The prevailing attitude would be, in the words of Abrafo, 'bent'. Rordan frowned.

He considered what Glenys had shown him in the cards. The thought of a villain behind his adventure with Kea hadn't crossed his mind. Now that he knew of the possibility, his troubles made a certain amount of sense. Somebody must have made sure Kea had always lurked nearby. That person must also practice witchcraft. If

witches were real, he was sure the male witches known as warlocks were real too.

The vision of friendship around the table he had experienced earlier came back to him. He understood his personal insight applied to this larger group gathered in participation of a shared ritual.

Rordan turned his head to look at Borus. The boy enjoyed the togetherness of people in this place. He sensed his friend felt at home based on a feeling of safety, warmth, and food. His intuition told him the boy's experience stood closest to the truth. The combination of Borus' comfort and Vacia's talent resembled the sacredness of what Rordan believed a chapel ought to bring forth. He bowed his head in weary admission of a mystery beyond his mind's eye.

The voice inside him said, "Belonging may strike at any moment, even to the lonely outsider."

By the rubbish bin, he noticed a tall humanoid figure with a reptilian head and enormous, phosphorescent eyes. The figure was swathed in a wine red, hooded cloak and wore a monk's robe underneath; black with silver trim and of a design Rordan would expect a dryad fanatic to wear. The reptile-man stood unobserved as he watched the people in the Grill.

His mouth held rows of shiny, small teeth and his skin was a layer of tiny scales the texture of sand. He smoked a short-stemmed clay pipe that gave off a pungent and leathery aroma. The inside rim of the pipe glowed a golden red.

The reptile-man directed a keen gaze at him and said, in a voice that shook Rordan's mind with worry, "Who is there?"

The voice carried through Vacia's music and Rordan measured the reactions of everyone in the room. Only Borus and he heard the reptile-man.

The girl stared at the tall figure and snuffled.

"Me, Rordan."

The reptile-man considered Rordan's answer. "What do you want?"

"I don't know," said Rordan. His insides tingled.

A puff of smoke issued from underneath the hood of the reptile-man's cloak. "How is it you don't know?"

Rordan gulped. "I hadn't thought about it. I didn't know I needed to want anything.

"You are a fool, then. Would you like to know what you want?"

Rordan cringed inwardly. A hint of danger lurked in the question and he feared a trap. "I'll find out on my own, thanks."

The reptile-man made a small laugh. "That's more painful and a risky prediction to make."

The sound of the laugh made Rordan feel small and insignificant. He cleared his throat and struggled for words. "Who are you?"

The reptile man made a short bow. "Among those who do not know me, I am called Varan."

“Pleased to meet you Varan. My name is Rordan. This is my friend Borus.”

Varan spoke through a cloud of smoke. “The pleasure is all mine.”

An awkward silence formed between them. Rordan forced himself to speak. “How is it that we speak, but no one else can see or hear us having this talk?”

Varan said, “People see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear. Right now people don’t want to see or hear themselves. You and your companion are different.”

Rordan committed Varan’s words to memory. “You mean—because Borus and myself want to see and hear ourselves, we can see and hear you?”

The reptile-man puffed on his pipe. In the shadow of the cloak, his phosphorescent eyes glinted with golden fire. “You are correct. It is hard work to listen and learn. Sleepwalking through the darkness is much more comforting than seeing the truth about yourself.”

Rordan shuddered. The depths within him could erupt any moment.

Varan said, “You grasp a little of what I am speaking of. Imagine each person in this room carrying secrets within themselves like yours. Life is an abominable burden. People would rather someone else carry their rood for them than walk with their eyes open.”

Madness oozed into the back of Rordan’s mind. Despite his weariness he resisted, then decided he would

let it into his head. “I want to know things. I want to know myself. I don’t know what Borus wants. I can’t speak for my friend.”

Surrounded by smoke, Varan felt for an object underneath his robes. He produced a piece of paper, then stepped forward and presented it to Rordan.

He accepted it from Varan’s clawed hand. The piece of paper was a page of illuminated vellum with an illustrated cover sheet that flipped upwards. The page’s backing had a small silver stud in the middle. The surface of the coversheet gave off a sharp, musty odor.

Varan said, “An ingenious artistic creation for self reflection. I warn you; it is dangerous. A tool is only as useful as the knowledge of its wielder.”

Rordan felt he’d been handed something lethal and valuable at the same time. “Thank you. I don’t understand why you decided to give this to me, but thank you.”

Varan said in a low voice, “You won’t be thanking me later, should you choose to look inside.” The reptilian face regarded him with hungry anticipation.

“No. I’ll be thanking you later Varan. Maybe not now. Maybe not for a long time. But I feel it. I’ll do something for you, somehow. To show that I do care about this.” Madness bubbled into Rordan.

Varan’s expression became unreadable. He touched Borus’ shoulder. “I will take my leave now.” He departed out the entrance door of the Grill.

Rordan felt the exit significant. He didn't think Varan had been offended. Their exchange had been deeper than he understood. He looked at Borus. The boy held a glum expression.

"Sad to see him go? I believe we'll see him again."

Borus bowed her head and nodded once.

He took in the activity of the people around him. "Was this what he meant?" Rordan turned his head to look at Borus. "This must be what it's like for Varan. To be pushed off into some other place where no one notices you or pays attention to what you say. To be ignored or forgotten. It must be lonely.

"You know what, Borus? I'm starting to believe there's a whole bunch of these characters walking around that nobody knows about. You and I are the only people who can see them. I'm not convinced you just look at yourself, though."

He examined the multi-layered paper. The jagged, uneven edge suggested a page torn from a book. Reflective decorations and metallic inks highlighted the penmanship of the cover page. The style reminded Rordan of a crier-poster.

The scene depicted an enormous tent, painted wagons, and tall poled-pennants in a breeze. A tripe-covered butcher held the tent's entrance flap open and beckoned with a finger he thought resembled a bloody sausage. The butcher stood on a cement block sunk partway into the ground. On either side of him stood a Seltish attendant in a lewd outfit.

Rordan raised the page cover. The attendants were displayed near the edges of the internal page in scenes of torture. He averted his eyes and glanced at the arcane script along the top and bottom of the inside page. The characters and style matched the text on his map.

The centerpiece consisted of an illustrated gambling-wheel with a window cut in the paper at the top. The silver laminated window displayed a miniature painting of Glenys in her underclothes.

A sweet, fervent odor invaded his senses. The madness soaked his mind and immersed him in unconsciousness. Borus watched him lose his marbles with a look of curiosity.

CHAPTER 14: THE COUNCIL

Rordan came to his senses in the Grill and found himself still seated with his friends during Vacia's performance. The illuminated wheel page remained in his hand, but the cover sheet had fallen back over the picture of the wheel.

Borus peered back at him for a moment, then resumed her rapt interest in Vacia's music.

Rordan gazed in Glenys' direction. She picked up on his stare and turned her head to flash him a smile. He nodded at her, then turned his attention to Kea's entourage. They looked oblivious to what had occurred.

His eyes returned to the illuminated page in his hand. He sighed and put the weird encounter with Varan out of his thoughts.

He remembered going crazy and blacking out. Rordan realized the madness hadn't stopped. A tingle at the base of his spine traveled up his back and into the base of his head like a wave of water. The tingle moved into his face and came down his chest and stomach, where it spread throughout his entire body and submerged him in a new sensation.

Rordan perceived the sensation as a gigantic emptiness around him, which contrasted with the rich ambiance of the people in the Grill under an unspoken purpose. The emptiness stirred him to sadness and elation at the same time.

Suddenly, he felt himself plunge through the emptiness at incredible speed and his body prickled as if he were covered in humming bees.

Raw cold surrounded him and the song of nature came forward. In the emptiness, the song sounded vast and lonely. His awareness sank into the tingle throughout his body.

He imagined his flesh and blood as a vessel filled with a fertile energy that collected from nowhere. An image formed in his mind of a subterranean river of mysterious fire, impossible to contain or control. This river teemed with the seeds and nutrients necessary for life. He visualized himself as a partner with this creative force.

A roaring fear rose up out of him and struck the images from his mind, pushed him back into the cold and emptiness. Rordan neither resisted nor despaired. He embraced the emptiness and delighted in the cold, fear giving way to awe as he watched the source of his fear dance above his outstretched hands in a ball of brilliant flame.

The voice inside him spoke in a resonant din that shook him like a tremor in the earth. “The song of nature calls out to you to destroy the wasteland you behold. A new life is being born.”

Rordan rejected the voice’s revelation. Feelings of inadequacy disturbed him and he shrank from the burden into a mental ball.

Cracks like wounds stung his body. The invisible shine appeared within him and out of this shine came a

calm. The tingle of his body subsided and his fears were lifted. The reason of his mind regained a foothold.

The calm receded and left behind the knowledge of another secret the shine had shared with him. He had only to think of it and he would understand.

The tumult of madness pulled back inside of Rordan and he returned to his senses. In the wake of the madness came sensations of exposure and vulnerability. He heard a chord in the song of nature and recognized it as his own.

The voice within him said, “Your ideas and wishes spring forth from the depths of your blood and bones. You exist to pour your life into the world.”

Rordan knotted inwardly as if he had been dealt a severe blow. He thought, “Impossible. It isn’t true. It’s not the way it is.”

The voice said, “There is more for you to know. But you reach your limits.”

The song of nature grew faint and the voice withdrew back into the depths of his being. Rordan became aware of the fact the performance had ended and people applauded. He clapped along with them while his heart beat a quickened pace.

The crowd dispersed. Vacia mingled with two girls in their late teens that Rordan guessed were friends. She grabbed a smoke from the pocket of her rider jacket pocket and used one of the lanterns to light up. A rapid series of puffs emerged from her mouth. Nyah and Eshe stood up and waved at her.

Fikna said, “Would it be possible for us to be introduced?”

Nyah smiled sideways at Fikna and beckoned him with the crook of her finger. “This way.”

Rordan stood up and stretched. He noticed a loss of strength in his limbs. His guess was surviving the madness had cost him.

Kea and her friends stood up and made ready to leave.

He offered the illuminated wheel paper to Glenys and said, “Hey, can you keep this for me until we get back to my room?”

She took it from him and smiled. “Sure dear.” Glenys regarded it with a look of curiosity, then put it inside her line bag.

Rordan followed Fikna after Nyah and Eshe, with Glenys and Borus right behind him.

He took a long look at Vacia. She had tangled hair colored dull crimson and a malleable face. Her shirt was a black, long-sleeved crop-top. She accentuated her outfit with rings and belts that came across to him as a harsh loyalty to claim.

Vacia waved at Nyah and Eshe. “Hey Brass, hey Orchid.” She offered her hand to Fikna, which he accepted. “I’m Vacia. How’s tricks?”

Fikna bowed. “All is well, thank you for inquiring. I am Fikna and he is my foster-brother Rordan. This is our mutual friend Glenys. Last but not least is Borus, who does not speak but is quite trustworthy.”

The young woman chuckled. She shook Rordan's hand and her familiar, haunting gray eyes peered into him. "Yeah, I saw you in the back. You looked like you were having the mother of all boners."

Rordan waited for the laughter to subside. "I was. But I'll bet you get that from all the guys."

Her eyes went wide open and she grinned. "The ladies too."

Nyah fanned herself with her hand. "Oh Vacia, you make me so hot."

She grinned at Nyah. "Get in line girl. You better take a few classes first while you're waiting."

Nyah used a bitter voice. "Trull."

"Yeah, they all say that. Usually after." Vacia took a drag of her smoke.

Nyah cackled.

Vacia assumed a serious look and said in a low-key voice, "So what's everybody doing tonight?"

Eshe produced a smoke from her linebag and assumed a pose. "Well, we could all come back to Nyah's place and churn ourselves."

The songster guffawed a little. She glanced at Rordan and Fikna. "Break the new blood into the Depressing Club, eh?" Her eyes danced with a mischievous glint. "Can't have Boner and Bounder walking around without training." Vacia appraised Glenys. "You can come too, because you're damn fine looking."

Glenys made a pretty laugh. “Thanks.” She smiled as if she were amused.

Vacia waved at Borus, “Hi Borus. You can come too. Only keep your hands off my girl.”

Fikna laughed as if she ran a comedy routine. Rordan wasn’t sure she jested.

Vacia became serious again. “Never mind. Come if you want. The Depressing Club becomes a full time job if you don’t watch out. It takes a while. But soon you’ll be meeting people and getting to know them. Then you want to hang out all the time. Next thing you know, you’re skipping classes and sleeping all day.”

Eshe said, “And you have fewer bottles of wine than when you started.”

Vacia looked stern and pointed her finger at Eshe.

A pleased expression came over Fikna. “Sounds like a superb idea. The night is young and I would definitely enjoy a further distraction in the Depressing Club. It occurs to me I have yet to become truly depressed.”

Vacia grabbed her guitar and rider hat off the stage. “Cool. I’ll drop by after I make some rounds. Your room Brass?”

Nyah nodded and said, “See you there.”

The songster headed out the stage exit and left a steady trail of exhaled smoke behind her.

Rordan said, “Some woman.”

Nyah purred. “We like her very much.”

Rordan turned toward Fikna and said, “Bro’, can we stop by our room on the way back? I’d like to put a flyer in with my stuff. It’s uh...err...cool.”

Glenys giggled.

Fikna shrugged. “Sounds acceptable to me Rord. Though I daresay we need to start carrying our daypacks regularly. I see many here who have already adopted this custom.”

The six of them went out the front door of the Grill and made their way back to Boant Oak. Intermittent streetlamps lighted the path. The immensity of the trees swallowed up the light not far from the path. Up ahead, half a dozen teenagers headed opposite the way they came.

Borus stopped walking. She made a series of deep-throated grunts.

Rordan took a second look at the six of them. They were clothed in a phony layer of cloth as if they were dolls that moved like people.

“Look out,” said Rordan, “they’re not people. They’re monsters.”

The six teenagers’ faces grimaced and they shrugged off their layer of cloth. The teeth, claws, and huge eyes stood out against the pink of their bodies.

Fear clutched at Rordan’s stressed mind.

Borus dropped into a wide-armed crouch. A low, shuffling growl emerged from the back of her throat.

Nyah and Eshe turned toward Rordan with confused looks.

Glenys said, "Playtime."

Fikna drew Trad's knife and readied himself with an indecisive stance. "I can't take all of them."

Rordan stared, unable to move or make a plan.

The bugbears closed the distance and charged.

Fikna gambled on a first strike and cut the nearest bugbear with a powerful stroke. The creature squeezed Fikna's shoulder with a clawed fist and tore a squeal of agony from the young gallant. Fikna made a reflexive thrust as a follow-through and the bugbear released its grip. The creature stumbled backwards off Trad's knife, then collapsed and fell limp.

Borus moved forward with a rapid stride and shoved a bugbear backwards several feet into the underbrush. The creature howled in pain as it fell to the ground with a skid, throwing up dirt.

Glenys assumed a grim countenance. As a bugbear ran past, she produced a shiv from her line bag and sank it deep into the creature's side. The creature staggered. It uttered a snarl of rage and gripped her collar with a claw. She uttered a faint grunt of pain through clenched teeth. Her shiv traveled sideways and out of the bugbear's vitals. The creature let go of her and crumpled to the ground.

The other three bugbears rushed past Nyah and Eshe to surround Rordan.

One of them spoke with a hollow-sounding voice. “We’ve been messing up your friends back home real bad.”

Rordan let the frightful statement slide past him. He remembered what Glenys had said about these things being vulnerable and imagined the vision he’d witnessed in the Grill.

The violent force of destructive creativity inside of him came forward in an instant. The creatures shrank back and withered in the face of a blast of heat and light that moved out of his body. They evaporated into foul-smelling pink smoke without a sound.

For a moment, Rordan stood there stunned. The power coming out of him shrank back inside. He blinked to keep his eyes from losing focus and staggered back and forth.

His vision and balance returned. He noticed the other bugbears had also been defeated.

Fikna pressed his knife hand against his shoulder and stared at Rordan with a strained expression. Glenys knelt and clutched her collarbone. Their clothing looked undamaged and neither of them bled.

Rordan guessed their injuries were spiritual instead of physical.

Borus stood near where her opponent had fallen. The bugbear had disintegrated into a small pile of smelly pink grease. She slumped her shoulders and frowned at the pile, then peered into the dark between the trees.

Rordan watched the youngster with a half grin. The boy was a fierce broiler.

Nyah and Eshe overcame their shock.

Glenys put the shiv back in her line bag. She staggered upright and wiped tears from her cheeks. “Grr. That was fun. Can’t wait to do it again.” She laughed through her pain.

Fikna searched the ground. “They’re gone. No bodies. But I saw them. Got one. He got me. Feels cold.” He rubbed his shoulder and a grimace played across his face.

Nyah sputtered out her words. “Where the butthole did those guys go? Did you scare them off?”

Rordan nodded, trying not to worry about Fikna’s sudden lack of gallant speech. “Yep, I guess so. I’m just glad they didn’t hurt us worse than they did.”

Eshe’s face went blank. “Gotta call the patrollers. Guys like that might hurt someone else.” She took a smoke from her jacket pocket and fumbled with it.

Rordan said, “We should get inside and talk about this over a game.”

Everyone looked at each other, then walked together back to Boant Oak. Collective shock clutched at them as they walked towards Nyah’s room

Nyah drew a stubby candle from her pocket. She lit it off the hall lamp by Stroma’s door, then used it to light two lamps in her room. Borus collapsed on the bed of

Nyah's bunkmate and fell asleep. The rest of them sat in their old seats around the playing table.

Eshe lit her smoke at last and took deep drags with her eyes closed. Nyah dug into the line bag on her bed for one of her own. She lit hers with a practiced motion off the lamp.

Rordan found himself unable to speak. He felt out of ideas and motivation.

Eshe exhaled with a shudder. She shook her head and said, "Okay, somebody explain what happened. To make sure I'm not going crazy. We did all see six people jump us and then vanish without a trace, right?"

Fikna rubbed his left shoulder. He clenched his left hand shut with difficulty. "I will attempt an explanation. Rord and I ran into a witch during our voyage here. The witch's identity is Kea. She is staying in the room adjacent to Rord's and down the hall from you. Kea has been summoning demons to harm us. Presumably in the pursuit of some grudge."

The young gallant noticed the knife in his hand and sheathed it with difficulty.

"However, her motive might be solely for the mere enjoyment of spreading misery. We were already assaulted earlier this evening. Those six creatures were demons disguised as people. Rord is able to perceive them as they truly appear."

Nyah tittered. "Whoa. That is hard-core."

Eshe took a deep drag and forced smoke out the side of her mouth. “You mean demon, as in the damned souls who inhabit blazes?”

Fikna nodded.

Eshe said, “They looked like ordinary people to me. Okay, they all seemed a little eerie on second thought, but I didn’t see any horns or forked tails.”

Fikna sighed. “Eshe, I’ve been in struggles before. My dance partner grasped me with the strength of an animal. Its fingers were like talons. I find not a mark on me, yet my shoulder aches as if I have crookybone. I dealt the fellow two solid strikes, yet there is no blood of any kind.”

Lines of concentration appeared on Eshe’s face. “I hear you. I have a hard time thinking demon when I go over what I saw. Maybe they were jinn and not demons at all.” She shrugged and took another drag. Her fingers trembled.

Nyah looked at Rordan. Her bulged eyes were slick with shock. “Jinn or demons, what’s the difference?”

Eshe said, “The severity of the lesson, remember?”

Rordan shrugged his shoulders and looked down. He had no heart to speak. His mind refused to summon up any of the things he’d read about the spirits of Kgosian myth.

Fikna said, “Rord, I thought I overheard one of them speak to you. What words did it relate?”

He raised his head and gave Fikna a worried look. “They’d all been messing up our friends back home really bad.”

Glenys spoke in a hoarse whisper. “This is crazy.” She plunged back into her inner thoughts and stared at the table.

Fikna rubbed his wrist and looked down at the floor. A pained scowl puckered his face.

Rordan noticed the scratch on Fikna’s wrist oozed globs of fluid. A muddy pink shadow clouded his bro’s injured shoulder. The shadow writhed under his gaze and radiated a numbness which dulled his senses a little.

He turned his attention toward Glenys and saw a similar shadow on her injury. She gave off an acute odor of metallic fear and her body tensed with pain he could literally see. Rordan wanted to express horror at these sights, yet knew he had nothing to give. He cleared his throat of phlegm and swallowed hard, twice.

Nyah said, “Rordy, what did you see when those six people jumped us?” She poked him with her index finger and took a drag of her smoke.

Rordan drifted out of his weariness. “Pink monsters. They had long sharp claws and huge, circle-shaped eyes. A gaping oversize mouth with teeth like a shark. Their bodies look like melted candle wax, with bubbles and cracks and craters everywhere.”

Nyah exhaled smoke and said, “Do they have dongs?”

The group sputtered with groans and low laughter.

Rordan shook with release and smiled. "It's hard to tell. They're lumpy all over. I wasn't looking, to tell the truth. I was scared out of my wits."

Nyah nodded. She sat back and pouted.

Eshe stared at her.

Nyah said, "What? I want to know if they have equipment. You got a problem with that?"

Eshe giggled once and stamped her smoke out in the ashtray on the table. "No, be my guest. It's not the first thing I would think of when being attacked by my imagination."

Nyah shrugged. "Nobody ever asks these questions." She rolled her eyes sideways and smirked at Rordan.

Eshe took out another smoke and lit it. She had stopped trembling. "You know this Kea?"

Nyah said, "No, not really. I saw her around a lot last year, but she hangs out with a different crowd from us. She's popular with that group. So she's got plenty of alibis."

Eshe sighed. "You guys have any proof of witchery? Any evidence that we could bring to the head of pupil relations?"

Rordan shook his head.

Fikna exhaled in frustration. "We possess nothing to formulate a case upon. Only Rord's word and the experiences we've undergone. I think she's too clever to allow us a handle on anything concise."

Eshe chuckled. “Then you realize you’re humped, right? She keeps summoning demons with shrunken dongs and you eventually get taken down.”

Glenys said, “That won’t happen.” Her tone of voice resonated in Rordan’s ears and his guts tightened.

Eshe turned her attention toward Glenys. “You could take matters into your own hands. And you might get the griller to accept self-defense. But you’re talking lock up. You might still squeeze.”

Rordan said, “We don’t even know if Kea is the true menace. She might be working for someone.”

Fikna looked up and said, “What produces that line of thought?”

“At the Grill. When Glenys and I left you guys for a bit, we did a stargazing. One of the things we learned was that somebody else is pulling the strings. Kea is being manipulated by someone else.”

Nyah extinguished her smoke.

Eshe said, “I love that stuff, but again it’s only guesswork. You have nothing but a hunch, based on doubtful practices. Where are you going to end up with that?”

An insight came to Rordan. “She used them. Her friends. She used them to curse us. Glenys, how often can something like that be done?”

She looked at Rordan and shook her head. “I don’t know. As often as they’d let her?”

He nodded. "They got together at the Grill and she was able to talk bad about us. Point us out to them. There were five of them there with her. She must have milked that for extra curse power. Maybe she was in the meal hall too and we didn't see her. She could have had friends there she hit up for extra curses. That's why the three of us were attacked then."

Fikna angled his head at him. "What, are you suggesting she's been using her connections?" His face lit up. "Of course. She must have exhausted her power tormenting us on the voyage. The sudden increase in attacks is because she's reunited with old friends. She has been capable of utilizing that resource."

Eshe narrowed her eyes and nodded. "If what you are saying is true, then you could look at it that way. According to that logic, once she runs out of friends she'll be out of action."

Fikna said, "Yes, I concur. Therefore, how long will her supply of friendship last?"

Eshe smiled. "How long can you trash talk someone with your friends before they grow tired of hearing it?" She tapped her smoke on the ashtray.

The line of discussion pushed Rordan along despite his weariness. "We might have some breathing room then. That last attack must have been her big bet. Anything else would have to be smaller or less effective."

Eshe said, "You hope."

Rordan felt diminished by her realism. He nodded slowly.

“If there is a possibility we have obtained the advantage, then we should press forward,” said Fikna.

Rordan waved his hands in negation. “Bro’, I’m all out of the show here. I blasted those last three bugbears and it took all I had. This running out of power goes both ways.”

Nyah and Eshe gave Rordan questioning looks.

“Glenys says the demons are called bugbears. Those kinds anyway. Yeah, I blasted them. Don’t ask me how. Or ask me, but I don’t know anything. It’s a long story. I can see them. Now I can blast them. Or at least I was able to that time.”

Glenys peered at Rordan. “You blasted them? I wondered how you managed to take on three attackers. How’d you do that?”

He felt everyone look at him with a variety of expressions. Part of him didn’t want to relate the unexplainable to people over and over.

Rordan took a long breath and sighed. “There was a fire at our chapel right before Fikna and I left home. We took a boat voyage to get here and Kea was one of the passengers. Then we get here and there’s a fire in the junkyard. That’s weird.

“In fact, ever since I left home weird things have been happening. I’m changing somehow. I have visions. Things that aren’t there tell me clues about the world. It’s all confusing and kind of scary. But I feel it’s important that I see this thing through. Glenys calls it a third eye.

“Maybe Kea doesn’t want me to see things. If there’s another world—a secret world that no one can see but me—maybe that’s important. I don’t believe it’s a coincidence that she came with us on the voyage.

“I don’t have any answers. I just try what seems right and so far Kea has failed to kill us. I believe that’s what she’s trying to do. But in a way that nobody will be able to trace back to her. We’ll just look like we had an accident, or got sick with the bumps or something.”

He gestured at Fikna. “You should see what I see bro’. You look infected to my third eye. And Glenys looks the same. But they meant to finish me off. They skipped Nyah and Eshe because they didn’t know anything. But me, three on one? Bro’, isn’t that the death number?”

Fikna nodded. “Unless one is incredibly good or lucky compared to his attackers, three on one odds will finish off anyone. They fight with the strength of animals, which makes them especially dangerous.”

Rordan nodded. “It looked like they got you and Glenys with surprise dying blows.”

Fikna sighed. “The reach is the issue. This knife isn’t enough. I need a longblade or a pigsticker to dispatch them safely.”

A shiver played up Rordan’s spine. “Fat chance of getting those. And that blast took it out of me. I don’t know if I could manage any kind of defense against those things again. I’m not even sure the two of you aren’t at risk now. Those things dealt you nasty hits.

Glenys closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Oh, great. It gets better.”

Fikna rubbed his shoulder. “How would you describe what you witness?”

Rordan squinted his eyes. “I see a kind of cloud over your wounds. It doesn’t look like it’s spreading, but I wouldn’t risk another dose with those things. I believe you’re fighting it.”

Nyah blew out some smoke and uttered a light laugh. “Whoa. This is too much. You are all out of sight. Eshe, I feel we need to seriously let them in. I’m cool with them.”

Eshe nodded and put her smoke out. “I agree, they’re cool.”

Fikna and Rordan gave each other a look of surprise. Glenys arched her eyebrows.

“What are you suggesting by that, exactly?” said Fikna.

Eshe folded her hands together. “It means that Nyah and I are members of the super secret Mesdames Council. We think you’d make good candidates for membership.”

Rordan intuited this would flatter and thrill his bro’.

Fikna leaned forward and said, “Tell me more about yourselves.”

Eshe said, “The Council has been in existence on and off since the academy was founded. Its membership has always been composed of pupils of the academy, mostly women but men have been members in the past. The guide of the council is nearly always a woman though.

“One of our charges is to keep watch for prowlers from the outside and stalkers on the inside. Another charge is to bear witness to what we find out. To make sure the academy officials are aware of any problems. Our last charge is to make demands for action if they do nothing.”

Fikna put his good hand to his mouth in thought for two seconds. “You’re an unofficial settler’s committee. What do the patrollers think of you?”

Eshe said, “We have ties with them and they’re behind us. We have connections with the academy as well, so we’re taken seriously here.”

Fikna chuckled. “You aren’t terribly secret then, are you?”

She shrugged. “We’re a name that’s out there. But most pupils don’t know who the members are or what they do. It’s enough for them to know that they can drop an anonymous note in a box and we’ll look into it.”

Rordan said, “What made you choose us? And what do you expect us to do?”

Eshe said, “Our credibility is always on trial. There are some officials who would like to see us minimized. If there’s a supernatural threat to pupils, it’s going to be hard to convince the staff to take action.

“I see something dangerous going on here. Something new we should take seriously. It looks like you’re already in the middle of this. We want you on our side, keeping us informed in case there’s action we might take.”

Fikna gave his best smile. “Very well. Rordan? Glenys? I am satisfied they represent a worthy cause. Shall we join them?”

Rordan nodded his head. He didn’t know what else to say.

Glenys said, “Of course. I’m in.” She smiled with delight and her eyes shone with pleasure.

Eshe grinned. “I’m glad you could join. You are now junior members. Right now, keep us informed and we’ll help you where we can. After a certain period of time our guide will confer with us. If we all agree, you’ll take the super secret oath and be full members. The only rule is that you never betray our mission. We have a supreme penalty for that.”

“What’s the supreme penalty?” said Rordan

Eshe said, “That would be revealing too much, sweetie. All you need to remember is it’s supreme. I don’t think any of you will betray our mission, so it’s not an issue.”

He looked at Borus. “Sounds good to me. Uh...I guess Borus would join, but he’s sleeping right now.”

Eshe said, “That’s fine. The only requirement is that you not be a danger to the pupils of the academy. I don’t think Borus is one.”

Fikna rubbed his hands together and winced as his shoulder gave out on him. “Oh! Err, ouch. Anyway, superb. This development is fantastic news. And an enormous honor.”

Glenys said, “This is too cool. I feel all special now.”

Rordan melted inside at the delight on her face. It felt good to see her smile again.

The door burst open and in walked Vacia. “Boys and girls—I’m home for the holidays.” Borus stirred awake and looked at her with sleepy annoyance.

Vacia closed the door and grabbed a seat between Rordan and Nyah. “How’s tricks Boner? Hi Bounder. Glenys. I never forget a pretty face. Where are the cards? Don’t tell me you’ve been churning yourselves the whole time?”

Nyah said, “They’re all junior members now.”

Vacia issued a throaty chuckle. “Damn. But I guess we need the extra hands, beginning of the year and all.”

A flash of understanding came to Rordan. “You’re the guide of the Council, aren’t you?”

She pretended to be surprised. Vacia smiled and her eyes narrowed with cunning. “He’s good. Okay, he’s in. Now deal out the cards Brass. I want to catch up to Orchid’s running total and wipe these young bloods off the list.”

Rordan found he liked Vacia. She seemed familiar to him, though he couldn’t quite place where he might have seen her before.

He watched Nyah dig out a writing kit and ledger with a running total of figures on it. While Eshe shuffled and dealt, Nyah filled in name slots for himself, Fikna, and

Glenys. Rordan spotted the names Klara and Tiabhal in addition to those present.

Fikna peered over Nyah's shoulder. "You keep score, then?"

Nyah said, "Yeah. Right now the person with the most negligence is Eshe. Vacia and I are trying to keep up. Everyone else is blown away."

Fikna sat back in his chair and put his good hand to his chin.

Rordan considered whether or not to catch Vacia up on what had happened tonight. He came to the conclusion Nyah and Eshe would let her know when the time came. His strength couldn't take going over it all again.

He played without interest or concentration. On the other hand, his bro' handled the game with a smiling face and an easy banter.

Vacia leaned toward Rordan and said in a low voice, "He's a ladies' man, isn't he?"

Rordan noticed a statement button on the inside of her jacket bore a witty phrase that would be offensive to settlers. He answered back quietly. "Yep. It's just the way he is."

Vacia said, "I'll bet he's only a tease."

He snickered. "Kind of. He never follows through on anything."

She played with her cards for a bit. "Does he prefer men?"

Rordan peered at her eyes and struggled to read her intent. “I don’t believe so. He’s just really insecure.”

Vacia said, “Nice recovery. Do you prefer men?”

“Not that I know of. Do you?”

She smiled and said, “Your turn, Boner.”

Rordan tried to get a grip on what his strategy should be. Vacia’s personal questions disturbed him. He played another low points card. Nyah and Fikna played downer cards on him.

Fikna said, “Oh—ho, Rord. Appears that you have the double downer.”

Nyah and Eshe both chuckled to themselves.

Rordan said, “Glad I could take the heat for all of you. Grumble, grumble.”

Glenys giggled. “Wow, that wasn’t nice at all.” She played a third downer card on his stash, covering his last card. “Sorry dear.”

Vacia added an out-of-turn Embezzlement card to his stash. She broke into a grin.

Eshe whistled. “Absolute zero.”

“Anybody else like to dog-pile on the rabbit?” Rordan discarded.

Eshe chuckled once. “I would. But it looks like you’re out of cards I can put the downer on.”

Rordan understood. Bungled again, just like back home.

On Eshe’s turn, she played a downer card on Vacia.

Vacia said, “Munch it.”

Eshe wriggled back and forth in her chair.

Rordan’s thoughts drifted away from the game. He contemplated the illuminated wheel page. Varan had said it was dangerous. There couldn’t be more than five or six paintings on the wheel. The chances of Glenys posing for one painting in her briefs, let alone several, were awfully slim.

The page must possess some magical quality, then. The possibility of seeing Glenys without her dress presented a strong temptation. The danger might be to obsess over what the wheel revealed.

Varan had also said the page was for looking at yourself and was only as good as one’s understanding. The painting that appeared must be indicative of something inside him. He didn’t know enough about Glenys to understand how she might give him a clue about his own self. He only knew he had strong feelings for her.

The spooky reptile man had said something about looking at yourself and you would see things. There must have been a point at which he started looking.

“Rordan.” Glenys touched his arm.

He realized his turn had come up again. His voice stammered as he said, “Sorry, I was daydreaming.”

Fikna chastised him with a look. “Seize the iron, Rord. Time for the big time. Cease lollygagging about and play your best.”

Vacia said, “And put your mind back in your pants where it belongs.”

Rordan said, “All right, I hear you.” He drew a useless card and discarded. Focus shifted to Vacia and he mentally drifted back to the illuminated page.

He decided Glenys had shown up in the picture because she had made an impression on him. The choice to let his feelings free couldn’t be taken back. Those feelings had told him he loved her and now he knew. He would have to tell her, which would be embarrassing. They had only just met. To make an overture to her now would be sudden and forward.

Fikna played a Big Bonus card, followed by a high points card to his stash, then ended the game with a Skidaddle from his hand on the extra turn.

Nyah totaled the negligence points and recorded them in the register. She looked at Rordan’s stash and chuckled. “Rordy, that’s negative points you have there.”

He puffed. “What a surprise.”

Eshe examined Fikna’s stash. “Not bad.”

Fikna said, “Thank you. I don’t understand the particulars. However, you appeared unable to muster any decent cards there. I’m of the mind poor luck did you in, fair Eshe.”

She shrugged. “Luck’s part of the game. But sometimes it’s in the strategy. Putting the downer on your brother there convinced everyone to do the same. That kept your own stash safe. Good job.”

Rordan grimaced. "Thanks."

Vacia guffawed a little. "Don't worry. Now we know who the real player is. He'll get squashed by us in the next hand."

"Good. Bro', I hope you're ready for the bug-hump."

Fikna smiled. "Of course. I am enjoying the challenge of taking on such a diverse array of opponents. Don't maintain such a glum look Rord. I shall display good sport and apply my strategy to every player."

Nyah gave Fikna a sly leer. "You talk some serious bluster, mister."

Rordan said, "He's a master of it."

Vacia said, "Easy to talk tough after one round. Lets see what kind of package he has for the next go-around. Us girls are just getting warmed up."

Fikna smirked. "Certainly. I possess the wherewithal to go all night if necessity requires it."

Glenys scrunched her face at Fikna. "Okay, that was way too much information."

Fikna bowed his head. "My apologies, sweet Glenys."

Vacia clapped her hands. "I got it! Finally. Your name is Brambles."

Glenys said, "Took you long enough."

"I'll bet long enough is not a word you use often," said Vacia.

A rascally smirk appeared on Glenys' lips. "It's width I care about."

Fikna cracked up.

Rordan said, “Oh, for goodness sakes.”

Vacia said, “Easy Brambles. Now you’re making Boner nervous.”

“A woman needs standards. Nyah, where’s that deal?” Glenys eyed Vacia evenly.

Nyah dealt another hand, cackling to herself.

A number of rude routines sprang to Rordan’s mind. The flirtatious tone of the conversation interested him. His body refused to take up the opportunity and he drifted into passive thought. A premonition of exhaustion flashed before his eyes.

He observed the group dump negative cards on each other. Glenys stayed out of it and grew her stash.

Rordan drew a low points card and put it into play. He passed his turn to Vacia with a discard.

Glenys said, “You look tired, dear.”

“I don’t feel tired,” said Rordan. “Instead I feel like a big, empty nothing.”

“You should sleep anyway. It’s been a long day for you.” She reviewed her cards.

Vacia said, “There’s that long word again. Get a room you two.” She removed a downer from her stash and discarded a Skidaddle card.

Rordan opened his mouth to speak and found he had nothing to say.

“Oh look, he’s speechless,” said Nyah. “I’ll bet two pawns he’s a cherry.” She eyed Rordan with contained amusement.

Fikna grew agitated.

Glenys tilted her head at Nyah and chuckled once.

“I’ll bet you a fiver they make a love bed in two weeks.” Vacia grinned.

Fikna said, “For Welkin’s sake, let’s remain civil here.”

Eshe contemplated her next move. “Love bed. Heh, cute.”

Vacia said, “Which one of you two boys is older?”

Fikna said, “I’m older, by five months.”

“Then Fikna, you have to face facts that your younger brother is about to become a man.” Vacia watched Rordan’s facial twitch.

“That’ll be the day.” Fikna huffed.

Eshe finished her turn. “Don’t worry sweetie. Your day of manhood will come. We still love you.”

Fikna drew his card and put another downer on Vacia. “Take that, then. To the dumpheap with your love bed.” He discarded a Booty Bribery card.

Vacia guffawed.

Glenys drew a card. She looked smug as she put down a high score card and ended the game with a Skidaddle.

Nyah said, “You rat.”

Eshe examined Glenys' stash. "That's a pretty good score. Underestimating the new blood here."

Fikna tossed his hand on the table and sighed. "I dare say. There's more to this game than I first took notice of. A re-match, sweet but sneaky Glenys?"

She glanced at Rordan. "No. Your poor brother looks barely alive."

"I'm fine, really." He nodded repeatedly to the circle of looks from the group.

Vacia elbowed Rordan. "Get going on that love bed. We'll take care of Bounder here."

Fikna said, "Yes, bedtime for the boys while the men attend to business."

Nyah said, "If you can still talk, you haven't taken care of any business with us."

Eshe giggled to herself.

Vacia said, "I'm not waiting anymore for Fikna to get his package ready. It's going to be us three playing with each other, like usual."

Eshe wriggled around in her seat. "Promises, promises." She produced a smoke and lit it. Vacia grabbed a smoke from her own jacket and did likewise.

Glenys stood up and tugged at Rordan's arm. "Come on. I'll watch over you. Our problems will still be here in the morning."

Fikna said, “Good night and pleasant dreams Rord. I haven’t forgotten our predicament. We shall be together for our next encounter, I assure you.”

Eshe and Nyah shared a look.

Vacia said, “Goodnight you two love birds.”

Rordan rose from his seat and let Glenys lead him out of Nyah’s room. Borus stirred. The girl stretched, then followed behind them.

The door to Manissa’s room was closed. He unlocked his own door and stepped inside, with Glenys and Borus right behind him.

Stig’s half-unpacked baggage hadn’t been moved. Rordan sat on the bed and realized his clothes smelled like smoke. His tired eyes watched Borus retire to the closet and lay claim to the bedding. He sighed. In the light from the hallway, Rordan jammed some unused clothes into a pillowcase.

Glenys took the lamp on his desk into the hall and returned with it lit. She set it down and dialed it lower. “There now. What are you doing?”

Rordan looked up from the floor. “I’m getting ready to sleep. Fikna gets the bed.”

“No. He doesn’t.”

Rordan sat on the bed again. “What are you going to tell him when he comes in?”

Glenys said, “Shush. You let me worry about that. Here, take Nuzzler. Where’s Tedder?”

He accepted the stuff-friend. His arms dragged as he pushed off his shoes and shrugged off his vest. “Still packed. I didn’t get everything out yet.” Rordan rested his head on the makeshift pillow and pulled his waterproof coat over him.

Glenys snatched the coat off and tossed it on the desk chair. She spread her own blanket over him and said, “Stop doing whatever Fikna wants. Take my blanket and get some rest. You’ll need it.”

“What will you use?” Rordan found her resolution a reassurance and he relaxed. He noticed the woven string bracelet on her wrist and concluded he didn’t like the limits they represented to him.

She tucked him in. “I’ll take one of Fikna’s. Something tells me he could use the discipline. And I mean it; I’ll keep watch over you.”

Her presence brought a dull ache to his next breath. He wanted to confess to her so much. “I didn’t know you could fight. You cut that bugbear good.”

Glenys lowered her head and the lengths of her hair fell over her face. “My father taught me. I didn’t ever think it would come in handy.”

“You know all kinds of things. You’re so handy and clever. I’m glad you’re on my side.”

She closed her eyes and basked in his praise. “You’re like a dispensary.”

A wave of pleasure passed through his pride. Her words moved him.

“I hope my father and brother are okay. Demons are liars,” said Glenys. She raised her head up and took a worried breath.

Rordan said, “I just don’t know how people can defend against a monster they can’t see. I have to hope they can open their eyes and fight.

“I know my best friend Abrafo is tough. Then there’s Tora; she can take care of herself. Loban’s smart. His sister’s easy to underestimate. My folks are pretty slippery and Fikna’s can be nasty in a corner.”

He closed his eyes and took in the scent of Glenys’ blanket and stuff-friend. They smelled like her and soothed him into semi-consciousness.

Glenys took the illuminated paper from her line bag and placed it on his desk. “You’re lucky to have so many friends and family. I haven’t got as much as you back home.”

“You made a lot of friends today.”

She breathed out. “You’re the only one I feel comfortable with.”

Rordan said, “I didn’t say everything that happened on the voyage. There’s other stuff.”

Glenys said, “I know. You’ll talk about it when you’re ready.”

A warmth enveloped Rordan and he sank into unconsciousness. His last thoughts were of a negative score on a ledger, a mediocre hand, and secret closets in the bathroom that everyone knew about but him.

CHAPTER 15: LAST WARNING

Rordan shambled through a decrepit hall and looked for the office of his mentor. His bed hair had been combed back and he wore a fresh set of clothes. He carried his daypack on the left shoulder and his papers in the right hand. The growth of several days' worth of beard gave his young face a slight fuzz.

He bemoaned his lack of sleep and leaned against a wall. His thoughts recalled Stig's return. The guy had taken over conversation in the room for hours with tales of his family's strength.

Fikna had probably found the boasts of interest. Rordan hadn't cared for it. He kept coming back to Stig's mother with the broken arm in a snowstorm or the father fighting off wolves with a walking stick. At least Glenys had been there, sitting close beside him.

Rordan tamped his hair with a finger. The thin strands tangled into small crimps and spurs. He fumed over his lack of sleep and wished people would just leave him alone sometimes. His sense of self found no relief.

The hall smelled dry and dusty. A lamp provided some light. He noticed countless dings, scratches, and cracks in the paint and plaster of the walls, none of which looked new. Framed awards printed on cloth hung on the walls. The wooden frames were stained dark brown and appeared well maintained. Rordan admired the faded gold and sepia inks of the lettering and pageantry, in particular a stylized figure in thin black ink on one award.

A sense of anxiety came over him and he stood upright again. He didn't like the hall or the awards. They reminded him of trail markers on the border of a dangerous place.

He looked at the stamped tuition receipt on his papers and pressed on. A trio of doors appeared out of the shadows at the end of the hall. Scraps of paper and announcement hangings adorned the doorframes. Embossed nameplates were affixed to the wall on the right of each door.

Rordan knocked on the door with the nameplate of Master Dunlin Beag next to it. An imperious man answered. He wore an oversize gown that drooped on the ground and reading eyeglasses hung low on the bridge of his nose.

With a slight bow Rordan said, "Hello. I'm Rordan Mannlic, a new pupil. My papers say you're my mentor."

Master Beag shook Rordan's hand. The man's grip was cold and strong. "Yes, I've been expecting you. Please come in and have a seat."

Rordan entered and shut the door behind him. He sat down on a chair across from the man's desk. Light entered the small office from a quartered window to the right of his mentor. The panes were made of thick, old glass. Shelves crammed with lessons took up most of the wall space around them. Rordan didn't see much in the way of personal touches, so he guessed his mentor did little else but read.

Master Beag said, "Please show me your papers."

He handed them over and let the daypack slide to the floor.

The man examined them closely. “Yes, I see. All verified. Okay, I’ll recommend you for a basic alchemy class. It’s packed, but I’ll make sure you get in. We have a requirement that all first year pupils take a research class as part of their core requirements. No problems there. I see here you crossed out your choice of a formulas class and replaced it with a performance class. Would you explain that?”

Rordan nodded. “I changed my mind. I want to do something that’ll keep my rustic skills in practice.”

Master Beag stared at him. “That’ll depend on the examination. It’s a test of arithmetic. If you don’t do well, you’ll have to take formulas to satisfy a core requirement.”

A frown creased Rordan’s face. “I didn’t know that. I guess we’ll have to see how I do before that gets decided for sure, right?”

Master Beag looked the papers over a second time. He signed a few parts with a pen from his writing kit. Rordan noticed the kit had a Farian inlay. Master Beag let the ink dry, then handed the papers back to Rordan.

A silence hung between them. Rordan expected his mentor to say something.

The room grew frigid and a stale smell filled the air. Most of the lessons disappeared from view and were replaced by jars filled with dead animals or golden ooze. The remaining lessons now appeared dusty and silverfish-

eaten. Tiny impurities multiplied in the glass of the window and plunged the office into dull shadow.

Rordan had the sensation of being lowered deep into the ground. Stillness came in at him from all sides and paralyzed his ability to move. Claustrophobia gnawed at the back of his chest and he struggled to remain calm.

Master Beag pulled a rusty iron mask onto his face by means of a rapid and automatic sleight of hand. The pitted and jagged visage displayed a vampire's face. His limbs and features shrank until he looked starved and bony. The man's movements and speech acquired a vigorous strength.

The cold bit into Rordan and nausea churned inside his stomach. He waited for horrible things to happen to him.

Master Beag said, "Since you insist on acting like a mindless savage, I will explain the facts of life to you. You are here for only one reason: to eagerly and without question allow me to squeeze the life out of you. You begin by obeying the course laid out for you by your betters."

The man's wide-eyed stare burrowed into Rordan's personal space.

"Your enthusiasm, your joy, and your freedom flow into me. Every time you fail to obey you are stealing. Every time you refuse one of my collections, you are wasting my valuable time. Your brief career as an ungrateful, crapless traitor is over. The next time I crush

your throat for some cruor you will cough it up. Or there will be an accident.”

Rordan hurt all over, his body trembling against the tight paralysis that held him.

Master Beag said, “I have nothing further to say to you.”

The man’s dismissal stung Rordan like a slap in the face, dispelling his paralysis. He grabbed his daypack and left the office with a heavy fear in his heart.

Rordan exited the steward-hall and returned to the warm daylight. The numbness of the cold office refused to let go of him. He walked over to a nearby oak tree and sat down on the grass with his side against the ridged bark. His feelings raced around inside of him as he took pained, shallow breaths.

He hadn’t seen any wisps of breath in the cold. Rordan decided the office must be under an evil enchantment.

The things he had just seen and heard convinced him he’d been doused in evil. Everything his mentor had said reeked of wrong.

The stargazing of last night came back to him. He had learned the identity of the person behind Kea.

The man had worn a vampire mask. Rordan understood now where Fikna’s blood had gone. The witches sent the vampire blood from their victims. That must have been what the horrible man had meant by cruor.

The numbness faded and Rordan grew angry at having been talked down to. The man's threats made no sense to him. He didn't understand how Master Beag could expect anyone to sit back and let themselves be hurt.

Rage smoldered inside his chest and he imagined a kick to Master Beag's face. His hands trembled and he took more shallow breaths. A tear fell from each of eyes. He fought back memories that cried out for him to remember them.

A ghastly voice hissed at him. "Oh, look. The bungler is crying like a sissy."

Rordan snapped his head up and stared in shock. Two bugbears stood on the lawn in front of him. Their large eyes froze him in fear. They went unnoticed by the pupils walking nearby.

The bugbear on the left hissed. "Did you wet yourself little boo-hoo bungler?"

The other bugbear said, "I have an idea for a pamphlet slam you could do. It's called *Bungler On The Grounds*. What do you think?"

They laughed at him.

Their laughter sounded overwrought to Rordan, but he still trembled.

The bugbear on the left turned fierce. "Stop your crying! After we finish this run we'll come for you and your phony brother. Then we'll make you really cry!"

With nervous laughter, the two creatures bounded down the field away from him. They disappeared behind the steward-hall.

Rordan took a breath and stared at the grass for several minutes. His body shivered in the warm sun as he struggled to regain his thoughts.

He still clutched his papers in one hand. Rordan smoothed them out and examined them. His mentor's signature consisted of a stylized letter B. He resisted an urge to tear it in two. The papers ended up stuffed back into his daypack and he dug out his academy guide-map.

The printed leaflet showed a black and white illustration of the academy grounds. He searched the small lettered locations and matched them with the text of the side index. The guide-map indicated a slight hill near Ardan Pines as the location for the exam registration.

Rordan considered what he might report about his tutor to Vacia. He intuited Master Beag as one of the officials behind efforts to minimize the Council. A yawn came over him; he realized his body wanted to sleep in response to his recent brushes with evil. He grabbed his daypack and headed in the direction of the community hall.

“Stupid chores.”

He entered the large building. A regular flow of pupils passed him by as his course took him through the community hall. He walked by a post facility, then left out the other side of the building. Rordan stopped to

examine the guide-map. He walked uphill and turned left toward a downhill path surrounded by dense forest.

A row of small cottages came up on his right. Wooden office signs were posted outside their doors. The undergrowth tended to conceal the signs and made them difficult to read. Small groups of pupils chatted on the path.

Through a gap in the trees, Rordan spotted the path where last night's bugbear attack had taken place. He watched pupils walk along the path and wanted them to know how close they were to danger. Invisible monsters could attack them at any time without warning. He realized how impossible his wish was. Only a handful of people saw what nobody wanted to see.

A whiff of cold air moved past him and he shivered. The sound of crackling ice reached his ears. In the trees near the path, a miasma of pink cold rose out of the ground. The formless cloud was larger than he remembered it being. It drifted away in small spurts of movement past several pupils and down the path, where it disappeared from his sight.

His mouth peeled open as his jaw dropped. He whispered to himself. "What is going on?" A sense of foreboding crept into him and he stood still for a minute, afraid of the cloud and unsure of what he should do.

Rordan stepped slowly around and searched for the exam office. He approached a sign, then pushed aside the fronds of a large fern from the inlaid letters. The sign

confirmed the cottage in front of him as his destination and he went inside.

A dozen pupils waited in line before a pair of large desks staffed by adult, uniformed practicals. Rordan resigned himself to wait and sat at a long bench beside the line.

He placed the guide-map back into his daypack. Rordan cast a wistful look at his new journal. He glanced about. No one took notice of him. He withdrew the illuminated paper Varan had given him from between the pages of the journal.

Rordan stared at the cover page and admired the fine stain of the ink on the paper. The text was done in an antiquated style. The reflective borders and accents along the edges had a dull luster. He examined the colors used in the illustration of the circus. The ink contained both texture and depth.

He glanced at the line of pupils, then at the door. His hand shook as he let the cover page drift up and back. The painting of Glenys, the scenes of torture, and the text were still present. The surfaces of tiny polished gemstones absorbed the daylight. Rordan ran his finger over them and across the inked scenes. He felt the smooth surface of the paper race by and slow only when his finger crossed the grooves of the ink.

His attention drifted toward the illustrations of torture. He believed the text gave explanations of the scenes and might be a morality lesson. The male attendant rode a spiked wheel impaled on his back while

in chains. A monster turned the wheel with one appendage and maintained a fire underneath the wheel with another. The attendant's face headed right for the flames.

Meanwhile, the female attendant stood in a glass iron maiden impaled by the short spikes inside. A different monster maintained a fire underneath the iron maiden with one appendage and held a key in the other.

A paper wheel had been set into the back of the page and attached by the silver stud behind it. The wheel could be rotated by means of a flat silver arrow attached to the top of the stud. To view the impossibly thin wheel mechanism, Rordan would have to ruin the paper. Part of him had no qualms about doing such a thing, but he remembered you didn't always learn something.

He stared at the painting of Glenys. She had longer hair dyed a shade of wine red. Her playful expression made him smile. The room in which she reclined had been painted in colors suggestive of moonlight. He didn't recognize the room, but the slight feminine touches convinced him she lived there.

Curiosity got the better of him and he turned the wheel counter-clockwise. The painting of Glenys moved to the left and out of sight as another painting came into view. Rordan hesitated, then tried to move the wheel clockwise. The wheel met with solid resistance. He resumed his turn of the wheel in the proper direction and the next painting depicted Dalla.

She sat naked on the ground of a dark forest with a wide-bladed dagger in her left hand and a fighting axe in her right. Her entire body had been dyed midnight blue and decorated with intricate brown designs. Rordan couldn't tell if the designs were body paint or tattoos. She had blood red hair.

The colors glowed at him. He looked up close at the painting and realized the use of vibrant pigments created the illusion of luminescence. The mastery of color distracted him from her suggestive form for a minute.

Dalla's eyes were at ease and she smiled. Her naughty details were covered by the pose of her limbs. His heart raced.

He replaced the cover sheet and put the wheel page back into his journal. Rordan placed the journal over his lap and thought about what he'd seen.

The line moved forward. Rordan slid over on the long bench while Dalla walked into view from the front of the line. A young woman he didn't know accompanied her. Dalla spotted him and they stared at each other.

"How're you doing?" said Dalla.

Rordan said, "I've been better."

She smiled a little. "Rordan, this is Saba. She's getting the last requirements for her primary papers done."

"How do you do?"

Saba smiled and waved at him.

Dalla's face grew serious. "Saba, I need to talk to Rordan for a moment. Will you wait outside a few?"

Saba said, “Sure. Nice to meet you Rordan. Good luck on the exam.”

Rordan smiled. “Thanks.” He waited until Saba exited, then faced Dalla. “What do you want?”

She sat beside him on the bench. Her rider hat was in her hands. Dalla faced him with a personal, focused stare. “You see them, don’t you? The specters?”

He strained with thought. “I see what you and Kea are sending my way.”

Dalla said, “I was okay with it at first. Not anymore. Not after last night.” She moved close to his face and spoke in a quiet voice. “What has Kea got against you? What did you do to her?”

Rordan’s throat tightened and he straightened his shoulders. “I never met her before the voyage. She’s been hurting me and my bro’. And anyone nearby just because she can. Actually, I learned she’s doing it for some crazy guy. Part of some stupid plan to crush people and make them miserable.”

Dalla briefly narrowed her eyes at him. “What guy? Noss? He’s only her chump.”

Rordan shook his head. “Forget him. I meant my mentor, Master Beag—he just laid down the law. Next time Kea sends her bugbears, I’m to bend over and take it up the tooter. Know anything about that?”

She crinkled her face. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“What, you witches don’t work for guys or something?”

Her face grew hard. “Don’t use that word. It’s offensive. We’re people, not scarecrows.”

“What do I call you then?”

She leaned close enough for Rordan to smell her sweat and his blood sped up again. “You could be my pet. I’d protect you. Run with me.”

He gazed into her eyes and perceived open want mixed with anxiety. An ache pulsed in his chest. He looked away and lowered his head. “I can’t. I’m sorry. You’re so wanton. I’m not up to it. To you.”

She fumed. “You dumb pup.”

Rordan said, “What? You don’t get it. How can I trust you? You scare me.”

Dalla said, “How did you find the grove on the island?” Her voice held a hint of frustration.

He watched her eyes search him for an answer. “I followed my visions. You wouldn’t believe what I saw there.”

Her eyes widened and she seized his hand. “Don’t speak of it, no matter what. You have enough problems.”

“Too late. But nobody believes me anyway so what does it matter?”

Dalla said, “Rordan you dumb pup, I’m serious. It’s a holy place and speaking about it is a grave offense.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll keep quiet about it.” The line moved forward and Rordan slid over. She slid with him and held onto his hand. Her grip warmed his skin.

Dalla said, “What do the specters look like? The ones Kea sent after you?”

He frowned. “Scary. They look like monsters out of a nightmare. And when they get their claws on you it hurts. Is that what you and your friends are about? Hurting people?”

She glanced around. “It’s complicated. Talking about it might not be safe for you. You already see more than I judge you should. You’re scared of me?” Dalla made a soft laugh. “I don’t see why. I’m not a puncher like Kea.” She smiled at him.

Her hold made him feel faint. He spoke in a growl. “I want to fall under your spell. But I’m deep inside a calm pool of water right now.”

Dalla let him go. Her face took on a mixture of confusion and impatience. “Oh, shut up you crazy pup. Jolly wing!”

Rordan watched her get up and leave. He clenched the straps of his daypack tight and frowned, ignoring the stares of those close by. “Darn it, why do I always have to be such a total loser? What’s wrong with me?”

A grumpy mood came over him. He stared at the wall and waited for his turn to come up. More pupils arrived and got in line behind him.

He looked into himself and imagined the deep pool of water he had blown Dalla off with. In his mind, he asked why the blazes he had turned down a carnal encounter with a hot young witch. Or whatever it was they called themselves. He concentrated on the dark and cold depths of the pool.

The voice inside him said, “What’s wrong is you are afraid of abandoning your bro’. You fear the river inside yourself will take you away from him. Rest easy. Sometimes the choice is not yours to make.”

For a long while, Rordan sat on the bench in depressed silence and strived to understand the voice’s words.

A person peered through the window on the opposite wall. Rordan looked up and stared. Outside stood a teenager. Her black hair had been dyed with two long streaks of light gray and her dark brown skin had been painted with fuzzy splotches of the same color. She wore a short black tunic with bell-shaped sleeves over long, dark-grey tights. Her tunic sparkled like a multitude of tiny crystals.

He waved at the girl. She moved out of view with blinding speed. Rordan stared at the window. He imagined she must have been a magical creature who had flown in on a breeze and drifted from view.

At the front of the line, he noticed the scarf one of the practicals wore had changed color. The scarf had gone from a brown-based pattern to a green one. Rordan

chalked it up to another inexplicable event in the hidden world. He put his journal back in the daypack.

When his turn came, he stood up and had his papers looked over. He decided to take the next available slot, a little over a mark from now in the archive classroom.

Rordan left the office. He glanced about for a sign of the weird, quick-moving girl. A heavy, sweet perfume hung in the air. He put his papers into the daypack and wandered downhill to the main hall. His choice of direction turned him toward the Hideaway Grill, down the same path where he had been attacked last night.

At the location of the ambush, the tread of numerous pupils had removed signs of the bugbears' demise. Only a spot of withered brown vegetation marked the location where Borus' foe had fallen. He saw no sign of the cloud of cold.

Rordan headed further down the path. He passed the Grill and made his way toward a bridge over a small ravine. A few pupils used the bridge to and fro, going about their business.

The surrounding tree trunks were several stories tall and spread their canopy over a wide area. Thick undergrowth filled in the ravine. He heard the steady gurgle of a stream beneath the undergrowth. On either edge of the ravine was a path. Both headed from his level to deeper in the woods.

The bridge had been constructed from thick iron supports and gray-brown beams of wood. A wooden railing reinforced by iron bars was on either side.

The amount of iron in the bridge impressed him. Remembering Stroma's mention of the wealth behind the academy, he crossed the bridge. When Rordan reached the other side, a shiver of fear went down his spine.

He stood in a large, circular courtyard paved with cobblestones and surrounded by trees. Two cobblestone streets and a dirt path led away from the courtyard. The street straight ahead of Rordan led into a tended garden of stone alcoves, walls and fountains. The traffic of pupils walked back and forth along this street.

The voice inside of him said, "You are in danger here."

Rordan said, "What do you mean? Who are you?"

The voice said, "This place is beyond you. Get out of here."

He chose the street on his right and walked down its length, further into the forest. The artificial twilight of the trees generated an eerie quiet. A small dirt path that led off the street and into the forest became visible and Rordan took it.

The path descended past enormous ferns and nests of brambles twisting into one another. The sound of the creek grew louder.

Rordan said, "Who are you? You keep talking to me for some reason."

The voice said, "I'm your mascot. I'm supposed to talk to you."

"What's your name, then?"

The mascot said, “You’re still too ignorant. If I told you now, you wouldn’t listen.”

Rordan felt embarrassment. “How do I stop being ignorant? I don’t want to be a bungler.”

The mascot said, “You’ll always be a bungler. Until you learn your lessons, that’s all you’ll ever be. You can be more. Try harder and see what happens.”

Bafflement stopped Rordan in his tracks. He felt his mascot retreat within him and its words replayed in his head. Eyes watering, his breathing came in fearful gasps. Rordan clenched his fist and walked on.

He came to a fork in the path. To his right, one path crossed the stream at the bottom of the ravine. To his left, the other hugged the steep hillside and turned sharply away from the creek.

His intuition moved him to take the path away from the creek. He tromped along the small and irregular trail with difficulty. The fronds of ferns brushed against his arms.

Rordan stopped and took in his surroundings. The earthy air smelled rare and fresh. Neither animal nor bird made a sound. The purity of the forest comforted him. He closed his eyes and opened himself to the song of nature.

The song echoed throughout the forest and flowed through his body as if it were a strong breeze. He heard his own chord in the song. A sensation of calm deafened his senses and submerged his mind into deep nothingness.

Vibrant colors danced before his eyes and an image of a black marble door appeared before him. The door was set with gemstones in a circle around the image of a willow tree. At the top of the circle, above the tree, was a black diamond. He saw the inscribed outline of a snake eating its own tail and a solitaire ring, both merged with the circle of gems. The diamond served as the gem set in the ring and a crown above the snake's head.

The well cut, black diamond glinted with fire from a light source behind him. The colors dazzled his eyes and he became aware of a buried longing within him. The longing matched how his chord in the song of nature made him feel. His head ached with strain and he lost the vision in a haze of bright colors.

He opened his eyes and saw a dirty boulder beside the path. Rordan sat down on it and put the daypack by his feet. His thoughts and gaze wandered free. He imagined the presence of friendly fantoms surrounding him, with hostile ones lying in wait nearby.

Rordan said, "I guess you're real. I'm starting to see you now. I had started to not believe. Even though now I see how certain things were signs you were there."

He sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I have to make a choice. Looks like I've been making them since I started this adventure. But this one seems important. Am I going to do what I'm told by the vampire? Or am I going to do my own thing and hope I make it out alive?"

Rordan studied the forest and lost track of time. He found pleasure in the many shapes and sizes of branches, the brilliant green of the moss on the trunks, and the vibrant green of the enormous ferns.

“In this quiet place of safety and power, I believe I’m going to give it my best shot. See if I can’t outsmart that vampire somehow. And if I bungle and I’m a loser, then that’s how it goes. But I’m not giving up.”

Rordan felt a puff of wind on his face. He took a deep breath and enjoyed the sensation of light-headedness it gave him.

“Maybe that’s what this is all about. Making it through and surviving what comes after. I really do want to see myself and be more than a bungle. But I’m scared of what I’ll find out. I just hope I can handle it.”

The flaw in the song of nature came to his attention and he became sad.

Rordan said, “Okay. Whatever. But I’m doing this thing wherever it’s leading me. I don’t get what’s going on, but maybe I will if I don’t wipe out.”

A faint tink of metal on stone caught Rordan’s attention. He strained to hear more, but only the silence of the forest reached his ears.

He grabbed his backpack and stood up. “See you next time I guess.” Rordan continued on his way.

The path left the ravine behind and curved around the slope of a steep hillside. The song of nature grew distant. He came across a fork where another path continued

straight down the hillside. Rordan passed it by and continued on ahead. His efforts took him around the hill. The ground leveled out and he found himself on one side of a smaller ravine.

A makeshift bridge of scrap lumber crossed the ravine. The path forked away from the bridge and up the hill. At the top of the hill the trees gave way to the steward-hall. Rordan repressed a shudder at the thought that one of the windows might belong to his foe and pressed onwards across the bridge.

On the other side, the dirt of the path mixed with gravel. Another path forked upwards from the one he followed. Rordan avoided the upward path and wound his way out of the ravine. He reached a sloped hillside and had to slant himself against a tumble into brambles below him.

He stopped and looked through the intertwined limbs of the thorny growth. His gaze spotted a small dwelling in a tree. The brush and canvas-covered dwelling appeared large enough for one person, or two cramped together. There wasn't enough of a view to see how one approached the dwelling. Rordan took note of the location and continued on.

The path wound upwards and Rordan emerged on the far side of the academy. He stood in a small field near the observatory and amphitheater. To his left, the paths and streets of the academy grounds began. On his right, a small path led into a larger and wilder forest than the one he had exited.

Rordan told himself he would investigate the larger forest later. He turned back to the academy grounds and walked toward a sundial in front of the amphitheater.

According to the sundial, he still had a mark to go before his exam. Rordan meandered up the path beside the observatory, then over toward the archive.

The classroom adjoined the massive stone structure of the archive. Inside, the layout had been constructed along a slight incline encircling a flat circular space. Dozens of wooden chair-desks were arranged in a half dozen rows of semicircles. The rows were oriented toward a tutor's wooden desk and chair. In the floor by the desk was a large metal grate.

Rordan walked into the empty classroom and took a seat in the back. He tried to remember his arithmetic formulas and equations, but only the day of his final exam came back to him. His thoughts throbbed hot in his head.

"Great. Do it again and this time the results count." Rordan glared off into space and waited. He had the sensation of being watched by a familiar, but freaky set of eyes.

A plump, bearded tutor arrived. The man unloaded a pile of papers from his line bag and set them on the desk in front of him. He took out a folded sheet of paper, a writing kit and a square sandglass. The sandglass had an orange sun stained into the glass on the side.

The man noticed him and waved. Rordan waved back.

The first pupils arrived and took seats. Rordan dug his writing kit out of his daypack. He set up his ink and pen, then resumed his wait.

Stig showed up. Rordan gave him a wave. His bunkmate took the seat adjacent to him. The teenager slumped back in the seat and stared.

“Spunk this,” said Stig. “Oh hey. Did you know your brother was looking for you Rordo?”

Rordan shook his head.

Stig said, “Yeah. He was hoping you were all right and staying out of trouble. I don’t know why. You look like the least likely guy to get into anything.”

“Yep, that’s the way he is,” said Rordan. “Always worrying about me.”

Bov arrived. He took the seat in front of Rordan. “Hey. Fancy meeting you here. How’s the rustic business?”

Rordan gave him a rueful smile and said, “Horrible. It’s looking like I’m out of action on that front for now.”

Bov nodded. His face showed disappointment and confusion. “There’s a rustic on my floor. He’s fantastic and he’s also super smart.”

“I guess I’ll have to go check him out then,” said Rordan. He pushed aside competitive thoughts and used his anger to focus on the exam.

A wave of pupils filled all but two of the remaining desks in the classroom. The tutor went up to a pupil and examined her papers. He marked his records and gave

her an answer booklet. The tutor continued this process with every seated pupil. He returned to the desk and rapped on the surface with his kit.

“Attention. Attention, please. If you are not here for the noon qualification placement exam, please leave now. I’m sure your friends will be fine. They can do without the distraction afforded by someone not worried about their grade.”

Several pupils chuckled and the man smiled.

“You have a mark to complete the test. Answer as many questions as you can. Incomplete or unanswered questions will count against you. It is in your interest to at least make an attempt on every question. I will now distribute copies of the test. Do not open the test booklet until I say.”

The tutor pulled at the front of his collar and rubbed his fingers. He distributed a copy of the test to each pupil, then returned to the desk.

“The test begins...now.” The tutor turned over the sandglass. The tiny beads of sand fell through the narrow opening in the middle to accumulate at the bottom.

Stig said, “Good luck Rordo.” His voice held an air of indifference.

Rordan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his eyes again and stared at the test booklet. The panic at the back of his thoughts paralyzed him. Tears welled up in his eyes and he bit his teeth down on his lower lip. Rordan opened the booklet and wrote his name and number in.

The first set of algebra questions proved easy, and Rordan answered them without losing much time. The next set gave him a little trouble. He noticed a steady creep of harder theorems and formulas into each successive problem. Rordan slowed down and grew more worried with each new question.

He glanced over at Stig. His bunkmate was deep in concentration.

Rordan pushed himself to return to the test. He came across a problem he had no idea how to solve. Thoughts danced in his head. He recognized that he had hit upon the first in a vein of advanced questions. Rordan worked out an answer by guesswork. His stomach tensed as he moved on to the next question.

A string of easier geometry problems came up next. Rordan took his time to double-check them. He hoped he hadn't been taken in by trick questions. The back of his mind noted his underarms and unmentionables had built up a layer of sweat.

Rordan gritted his teeth. The pit of his stomach felt a raw tang of agony. He had traveled back in time to the advanced arithmetic final in school, only this time he cared about the result. The free-floating sensation of helplessness and panic he had thought over with had come back to him in a flash.

He stopped and stared at the current question. Rordan took a series of slow breaths and psyched himself up for a renewed effort.

The exam leader turned over the sandglass. “Half a mark to go.”

Rordan focused on the question he had blanked out on. His mind grasped at a solution and imagined a useful equation he could apply. He worked out the process on his lesson booklet and settled on an answer.

The next question matched the previous one in difficulty and Rordan felt his time eaten away as he struggled for an answer. The agony in his stomach gave way to a dry mouth and dull nausea. He managed to work out an answer he believed correct and moved on.

Rordan found himself faced with another, similar question and he lightly clenched his teeth. His intuition told him he had almost run out of time. He ignored his panic and concentrated on the steps. Rordan scribbled in an answer and prepared himself for a brick wall.

The next set of questions involved triangles and ratios. Rordan frowned as he remembered the many hours spent struggling at home for solutions to similar questions, only to get burned later in class. He hated these kinds of problems.

Rordan forced himself through each question with a grimace on his face. He stared at the lesson booklet and realized he’d finished with the test.

His gaze moved over to the sandglass. He still had a little time left. Rordan got up out of his chair and gathered up his exam materials. He walked on unsteady knees to the tutor’s desk and handed in the materials.

His voice choked with disbelief. “Is that all?”

The older man smiled through his dark beard and adjusted his large eyeglasses. “That’s all there is.”

Relief flooded into Rordan and he nodded. He walked back toward his seat and noticed Bov give him a sad smile. Rordan waved his hand briefly at the teenager. Bov returned to his test with a frown.

Stig reviewed his answers page by page. Rordan wished he had been as methodical as his bunkmate appeared to be. He stashed the writing kit in his daypack and walked out of the classroom.

The last of his discomfort subsided and left him numb. Rordan realized the violence would arrive no matter what class he ended up in. He had refused to submit to the vampire.

Rordan walked up the hillside toward Boant Oak. He imagined a struggle with Master Beag or Kea. His mentor had the advantage of size. And if his bro’ were right, Kea would make steak cutlets out of him. He didn’t think he had the guts to kill either of them anyway, even in self-defense. His only option would be running. Rordan wished he had kept up with his sportsman days.

Dalla’s talk about specters didn’t make sense to him. Whatever the things were, he was pretty sure they weren’t alive. Rordan suspected he had been lucky and sighed. He didn’t know enough about them to be afraid and he had committed himself against their master.

“Hey mascot, how about some help here. What do I do?”

Rordan sensed a block in his thoughts and received no answer.

“Great, that’s helpful. A mascot that’s never around when I need it.”

The mascot said, “I’ll be the judge of when I’m needed.”

Excitement pulsed through Rordan’s body. “You came after all.”

“Of course I came,” said the mascot. “A point needed to be made. Don’t take me for granted. That state of mind weakens me and might make me leave you.”

The insecurity of being a bungler seized Rordan. His spirit sank.

“No need to sulk. Our friendship moves both ways.”

Rordan said, “I’m sorry. But I’m scared.”

The mascot said, “I’m scared too. That vampire means business. Welcome to the world.”

“How do I fight him and his witch?” Rordan spoke aloud, but the pupils who walked past him heard nothing.

“Do you want to fight them?”

Rordan said, “No, but they’re coming to get me.”

The mascot said, “Then don’t let them get you.”

“How? Run away?”

“What’s wrong with running away?” said the Mascot. “Works for a great many creatures in this world. Your enemies expect you to struggle because that’s what most people do in this world.”

Rordan said, “I can’t run away forever. I’m a bungler, I’ll make a mistake.”

The mascot said, “Or they will. Chasing after victims is dangerous too. The vampire had better hope you’re still just a bungler when his number gets drawn.”

Rordan considered his mascot’s words. “I can’t fight. So running away is my only option. I guess I thought I could think of a plan or something. But I’m just too dumb for that.”

The mascot said, “There’s no magic recipe for every life experience. Running away is sometimes the wrong thing to do too. The only thing that works is what worked at that moment. Fikna could tell you a thing or two about that. You are in big danger. There’s no study-up for this. Our instincts will prove true or they won’t.”

“I don’t know if I can live up to that,” said Rordan. “I’ll take your advice and try. What you’re saying is so hard to understand, though.”

He felt his mascot withdraw back inside of himself. Rordan passed by the place where he and Borus had first been attacked. The grass the creature had fallen upon remained withered and brown.

Thoughts buzzed inside his head. Rordan felt his mascot’s departure held significance. He decided the proximity of the withered grass had been used to make a point.

“I get it. The moment you sense trouble coming, stay away.”

Rordan thought about how Borus had been able to fight off the bugbear. He couldn't hope to match the youngster's strength and speed.

His thoughts turned toward the Mountebank card Glenys had drawn. If Borus could surprise Kea, then he could too. The figure in the card had been accompanied by a mongrel. He recognized his resemblance to the figure in the card and how his mascot resembled the role of the mongrel.

His mascot's name and identity intrigued him. He imagined the mascot must be an animal that ran away or hid from danger, such as a deer or a bird. Fikna's possible reaction worried him. The mascot would have to be his secret for now.

At the side door to Boant Oak, he paused. Rordan realized all the sweating he'd done had begun to stink. "Yuck. Time for another shower," he said.

Rordan entered through the side door and climbed the stairs to his hall. He passed by Manissa's open door and caught a glance of Kea inside. His hand fumbled in his pocket for the key to his room.

Kea said, "Hey Ror. Come look what your friend did to me."

Rordan uttered a profanity under his breath.

He approached to the edge of the open doorway and looked inside. The mattresses in the center of the floor were at right angles to each other. The desks were bunched together against one wall. Loose clothes, papers and bags of clothing covered the floor. Kea sat on a

mattress while Manissa sat across from her in a chair and applied a small bandage to her right hand. He recognized the treatment as part of recovering from an injury suffered during armed struggle.

Kea looked over in his direction and said, "I won't bite. I only want you to see what kind of brat you're hanging out with."

Manissa said, "Hold still."

Rordan decided not to argue. "What did my friend do?"

A look of self-satisfaction came over Kea. "She scratched me. I was talking to her about you and she went berserker on me."

He stared at her. "I doubt it. You must have done something."

Kea said, "Yeah, that's me. Always looking for trouble." She made a light laugh.

Manissa finished her adjustment of the bandage.

Rordan said, "You've been sending nothing but specters my way since I met you. Who knows what you said or did to get her to claw your arm?"

She glowered at him and he felt a stab of fear. Her face returned to a softer visage. "What can I say? I'm a mean girl."

He nodded. "You are. What turned you into a monster?"

Kea flexed her bandaged arm and nodded at Manissa. “Maybe I have a mean streak. As I said, I’m a mean girl.” She pulled on a light vest.

His teeth clenched and he squeezed the strap of his daypack. “I don’t believe that’s it at all. You’re just sour because of how your life turned out.”

Her gaze moved around the room and settled on the line bag in front of her. She pulled it toward her and fiddled with the straps on the bag.

Manissa stared at her.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sour all right. Maybe I had strict parents who scolded me all the time.”

Rordan said, “If that’s true, it’s ugly of you to make it a throw-away line.”

Kea dropped her line bag and stood up. She stomped around the room and searched through the piles on the floor. “What do you want from me, some admission of guilt? So you can turn me into the bad woman messing your life up?”

He flinched backward. “I want you to stop hurting other people because you didn’t get what you wanted out of life.”

She stooped and moved aside a bag of clothes. “Wait until you’re a little older Rordan. You won’t be saying that so easily.”

“What? You want to make excuses? You want to make people eat it because you can’t find out what you’ve lost?”

Kea said, "I don't have to listen to this." She dug into another pile of clothes and searched through them.

Rordan said, "When have you ever listened? Or do you do whatever Master Beag the vampire man tells you what to do?"

A tremor ran through her body. She looked at Manissa, then at Rordan. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play me for stupid. I saw him today. He's the guy pulling your strings. How the blazes you came to work for him I can only guess."

Kea barked out a laugh. "What are you talking about? You think I'm munching some guy's dong and it was so amazing that I'm acting under his control or something? Good one Rordan."

Rordan's eye sockets tingled. "Then you don't know at all. You're just his doll and you have no clue what your life is about."

She laughed. "Let me guess, now you're going to save me with your chumpy ways from the evil tutor with the big dong. You need to rescue me, is that it?"

His heart stung. He did want to save her. "Just stop cursing us. You can stop and walk away. Tell him no."

Kea became hysterical. "Yes, that's it. I'll look that dong in the eye and say no way. All because I want to be saved by the chumpion." She scoffed at him.

Manissa threw her roll of bandages against the wall. She grabbed her own line bag and left the room with a sullen expression.

Rordan let her pass. “Dalla said you were sick and now I see what she meant. You’ve caved in like a house of cards.”

Kea shoved aside a pile of papers with her foot. She laughed. “Your pup dong must have been severe for her to say that about me.”

Rordan said, “Will you stop talking like that? You’re a wipe out, Kea. You’re going over the edge, wake up. Before it’s too late. I’m not your enemy, that guy is.”

She uncovered a pouch tied shut with drawstrings and seized it. Kea grabbed her line bag and brushed past Rordan.

“You should let Dalla run you down. She’ll do anything for pup dong.”

Her stale tobacco breath struck him hard and he held his breath for three seconds. Rordan watched her walk down the hall and out of sight. He stared at the door she had left open. He walked inside with a slight effort, determined to find something of use against her. His breathing grew tight and his shoulders tensed.

The room looked like a mess to him. Neither woman showed interest in cleanliness. His memories went back to the boat and he guessed Kea had lied about being a cleaner. Rordan kicked aside a pile of unkempt blankets and stepped over piles of clothing and lesson papers. The place smelled only a little better than he did.

He searched for Kea’s luggage and found her heavy side-bag under a blanket. Rordan opened it and rummaged through the contents. His grin turned into a

snarl. He recognized he had crossed the line into thievery and memories of a previous larceny as a little boy returned to him. Rordan pushed the thoughts away and let his instincts take over.

Inside he found folded travel clothes, a laundry sack with the voyage's clothes still inside, and a number of outsider accessories he consciously ignored. His hands pulled free a large wooden tube wrapped in canvas. The tube rattled when he shook it. Rordan guessed the tube contained a writing kit and maybe some papers.

Rordan came across a large dagger in a sheath. He pulled it free of the bag and examined it. Tough leather wrapped the handle and the pommel had a stylized animal design he didn't recognize.

The reality of axes and an outsider dagger sunk in. His mind tried to work out how she might have smuggled arms past the patrollers when she got stamped clear. She must have just taken her chances. He guessed it was another sign she was close to the edge.

Glancing at the open door, he dug some more in the bag. Rordan found his missing Deep Uirolec loyalty shirt and stared at it. The white shirt smelled and looked dirty. His mind struggled to accept the implications.

The dagger and his shirt went into the daypack. He rearranged the contents of Kea's side-bag so it looked like it hadn't been searched to him. Rordan covered the side-bag with the blanket again and grabbed his daypack. He left Manissa's room and entered his own.

Stig and Fikna were not in. He looked inside his closet. The blankets lay in a heap on the floor. Worry over Borus' whereabouts nagged at him. He'd have to go find the boy. Rordan closed the door to his room and sat at his desk.

He pulled out the shirt. The smell reminded him of mold and incense. There were dark brown stains on the chest area. Rordan considered the shirt ruined and felt mixed about having it back. He wanted to lock up all his things. As he had just demonstrated himself, no safety from thieves existed in the communal quarters of an academy.

Rordan put the shirt back in his daypack and examined the dagger. He pulled at the handle and the wide blade drew free of the sheath. The dagger resembled the one he'd seen Dalla hold in the wheel painting. The blade's leaf-like shape reminded him of doodles he'd seen of ancient heathen weapons. The metal smelled seasoned and the leather of the handle had a strong odor of polish. The edge didn't look sharp, yet Fikna had once told him a blade didn't need sharpness to cut a person open. The dagger made an impression on him as a personal, vicious piece of arms.

The clues he had discovered stirred his thoughts and he considered the situation. Kea had stolen from him, probably to harm him more easily. He wanted to feel angry. Instead he felt guilty. His own actions had been wrong.

Rordan smiled and made a soft laugh. Here he was, a thief angry someone else had done to him what he had done to others. The shirt's theft didn't justify going into Kea's things. They were both guilty. At least now he knew she was capable of it. He'd let Fikna and Stig know what they needed to be wary. Glenys too.

He sheathed the dagger and returned it to the daypack. His thoughts turned inwards. Kea had already threatened his life several times over. Rordan believed she intended to use the dagger on him—probably Fikna and Glenys as well. Without his shirt and the dagger, she might lose the edge. Those were all reasons to keep it out of her hands.

The consequences of doing so entered into his thoughts. If she suspected him, she might get real crazy and send her friends to rough him up. He considered throwing it in the river or down the ravine of the forest. Confusion clouded his decision and he resolved to hold onto it for now.

Rordan walked over to the window. He looked out at the pupils outside, going about their daily business. Fikna's longing to be normal made sense to him now. His own life would be a lot easier without visions and bugbears.

Sadness came over him. Rordan realized he'd failed to run away from trouble and had gotten himself deeper into it. His mascot probably wasn't pleased with him.

He replayed the conversation with Kea in his thoughts and tried to make sense of it. Rordan felt grateful for Manissa's actions. Her departure indicated Kea had lost

some ground and made him feel better about failing to talk.

Her absolute craziness had come as a surprise to him. He believed her reaction to his mention of Master Beag had been genuine. Rordan wished he'd used his third eye to look for signs of outside influence. He hadn't expected the vampire to control Kea without her knowledge.

Disappointment increased his doubts and he shook his head. If she wasn't in control of her actions, he couldn't hate her. He needed to blame Master Beag, but his intuition wouldn't let him. His only clear thoughts were Kea's dangerous behavior and the need to outwit her.

CHAPTER 16: A BROTHER'S ORDEAL

Rordan heard the door open. He turned around and saw Fikna walk into the room. His bro's face was newly shaven and he was dressed in fresh clothes. The young gallant smelled faintly of cedar oil. "You look great. Am I glad to see you."

Fikna closed the door behind him and said, "Thank you. How are you managing Rord? Are you unharmed?"

Delight surged through Rordan. He took his bro' by the shoulders. "I'm fine. You wouldn't believe what's been going on. Are you okay?"

A wide smile appeared on Fikna's face. "Today has been eventful. I dare say I endured. Nonetheless, tell me you are well."

Rordan said, "I'm fine. Is Borus okay?"

"Oh, I think he's around somewhere." Fikna looked over his shoulder and gestured back with his hand. "He refused to stay here and wandered off on his own."

"We'll have to find him then. Bro', the craziest stuff has been going on. Dalla came on to me, I met the bad guy behind all of this, and Kea and I argued. Plus, I found some clues."

Fikna sat down on Rordan's chair and assumed a comfortable position of elegant repose. "One story at a time Rord. Tell me your adventures in brief. Afterwards, I shall relate to you my own encounters."

Rordan cast a suspicious glance at the door. He sat on his bed and spoke in a low voice strained with

enthusiasm. “I went and did my chores to begin my studies. All that went well. I visited my mentor—Master Beag. He signed my papers and gave me advice. We disagreed over one of my class choices. He then turned into a weird guy wearing a vampire mask and said some super scary stuff.”

Fikna said, “Such as?”

The memory of the vampire’s words caused Rordan to press his tongue to the roof of his mouth. “He said we were here for only one reason and that was to give him blood. We didn’t matter and we were to do what he told us or he’d get rough.”

“Good Welkin, what a madman.”

Rordan said, “Yep, that’s what I thought too. It got cold in the office. All his stuff turned into spooky dead animals in jars, and looked old and covered in dust.”

He took a long breath. “My mentor said that the next time the monsters came to hurt us, we were to let them. He said that all our joy and fun were only for him and we didn’t deserve any of it.”

Fikna put his left hand to his chin and furrowed his right brow. “How very unusual. Is he draining us of life then? To what purpose?”

An image appeared in Rordan’s head of Ivixa’s mask, stained with blood. “Yep, that’s something I need to talk to you about too. I believe he sucks the blood out of people using witches as a go-between. Back on the island, I watched Ivixa suck your blood from a distance. After Kea and Dalla made fun of you.”

Horror showed on Fikna's face and he clasped a hand to his rood. "Deiwos protect us! You witnessed this?"

"Yep. I couldn't tell you because I was afraid you wouldn't believe me. We'd already fought over the piece of paper."

Fikna said, "I possess every reason to believe you now Rord. Is my neck besmirched with bite marks?"

"No. The bloodsucking must be what my mentor said—fun, happiness, stuff that has to do with your soul. The other two witches weakened you by putting you down and then she drained the life from you. It was like Ivixa was sucking your blood, even though it was your soul. So that's how it looked."

"Did the blood leap into her mouth from afar?"

"No," said Rordan, "a wound appeared on your neck. The blood didn't drip—it showed up magically on Ivixa's mask as it flowed. Then it was absorbed so there was no sign of it. I'm guessing the witches must have done this more than once. That was just the one time I got to see it."

Memories danced around in Fikna's head. "That day stands supreme as the most humiliating moment of the voyage for me. As I recall, my thoughts were frozen with anger. I couldn't think straight and an overwhelming cold seeped into my body. That was when the Skipper approached and offered me a chance to assist with the boat."

"There's more to her than meets the eye bro'. You should take that job offer. She's a nice person."

“I quite agree on that score. However, getting back to the matter at hand. Assume for the sake of argument these witches transport the blood of souls to your mentor. We return to my previous question—for what purpose?”

Rordan sighed. “I don’t know. If he’s a vampire, then that’s just what he does to go on. I have to say it’s weird that he would need to use servants when he could drink the blood himself.”

“That is precisely what I mean Rord. Perhaps he consumes real blood for his own sustenance. And in addition, he collects the blood of souls. With numerous young pupils and a position of authority, he is assured of a vast supply of genuine blood.”

“Wait,” said Rordan. “He said something about coming to collect cruor. That must be what he calls the blood of souls. The life of people must be cruor. He didn’t say anything about blood. That must be a given for him. What he needs is cruor, so why?”

“Congratulations Rord. You catch up to my manner of thinking.” Fikna smirked.

Rordan made a slight scowl at his bro’. “Glad I could get on your level.” He put a knuckle to his lips. “Think, think. I didn’t see any jars of cruor in his office. Just a bunch of yellowish goo. He must keep it in his secret vampire lair.”

Fikna said, “If we consider the popular plots of your many pamphlets, we may formulate a guess. The obvious answer is he means to employ the cruor in one of two

methods. Either he is saving up for a powerful spell, or he is feeding it to an evil force in order to acquire its services.

“Perhaps that is how he sends demons against us. Kea provides him the necessary ingredients and he uses the cruor to command the demons.”

Rordan said, “If he’s saving up for a spell, then we have to stop him before it’s too late. But I have no ideas on that score. Anyway, he’s the bad guy. No doubt about it. He said I had to obey or die.”

“So you disobeyed,” said Fikna.

Rordan nodded.

Fikna smiled. “I’m hardly surprised. He is ignorant of your shortcomings, unlike myself. You’re truculent, intractable, and unmanageable. The last action he should have undertaken to assure your obedience is to order you around.”

A brief chuckle escaped Rordan.

Fikna said, “Now what happened after your encounter with Master Beag?”

“I left in a state of shock,” said Rordan. “I wanted to take a performance class. But he said I had to take formulas unless I passed the placement exam. I believe he wanted me to fail so I would do what he wanted.”

“Did you manage to succeed with the examination?”

Rordan said, “I don’t know. It was really hard. But I gave it my best shot. I didn’t let him get the better of me. I’ll have to see when the results are posted tomorrow.”

Fikna nodded. “You mentioned an encounter with Dalla?”

“Yep. I was waiting to sign up for the exam when she walked by. She said she wasn’t involved with what Kea was doing. I believe her. Then she started coming on to me. Said if I became her pet she would protect me. I chickened out, which she didn’t like. But I believe she’s going to stay out of this. And Kea doesn’t like her now.”

Fikna said, “What was Dalla doing there?”

“She was with a friend who was signing up.”

A puzzled look came over Fikna. “One wonders what she could possibly mean by her pet. A familiar?”

Rordan shrugged. “The way she said it, she must have meant some kind of lecher. It was like she was talking about things with a totally different view. That’s the other thing. I got the feeling that there’s this whole complicated world with witches. Oh yeah, she said not to call them that.”

Fikna laughed a little. “What should we label them, then? The Deuce’s helpers?”

They chuckled.

“No, dummy. They must have some name for themselves. It’s like they are a huge private society of people, like the pastorals or the mystagogues. She said it was bad to talk about stuff. So I guess there was lots she wanted to talk about, but couldn’t.”

Fikna said, “Unless you agreed to become her lecher.”

“Yep.”

Fikna stared off into space for a moment. “I’m pleased you managed the wits to refuse. Those witches are trouble incarnate. I myself am relieved to have dodged an encounter with Kea. Our enemy Noss likely deserves some sympathy.

“However, it does paint an interesting picture. I think the Deuce’s followers are not as united as the ministers would have us believe. The whole affair makes a certain amount of sense to my suspicions. Being all ruthless fiends, it requires the immediate fear of the Deuce to convince them to act together.”

Rordan said, “If that’s true, I believe Kea is losing good will. When I ran into her next door, she was getting bandaged by her host Manissa. Glenys scratched her up, or so she said.”

Fikna turned incredulous. “Truly? She confronted our sweet darling Glenys and received the cat’s claw? Marvelous. Our Glenys has some uncommon bravery in her. I wonder about her extensive knowledge. She knows more than is perhaps safe for her position in life.”

Rordan chuckled a little. “I don’t know. I have to hear it from Glenys to believe it. We’ll ask her later. But Manissa left when Kea and I started arguing. So I believe she’s starting to run out of friends.”

Fikna said, “What was your argument about?”

“I tried to talk to her and get a reason why she’s doing what she’s doing. I did learn something. The big bad guy is controlling Kea and she doesn’t know it. She’s under his power somehow. So whatever the witches are really

doing, her attacks on us are not part of that. Some of them are starting to think twice.”

Fikna smiled. “Splendid. We might triumph after all. The righteous have each other, while the wicked possess no such shield. Although, now that you have unmasked a tutor as our foe, I daresay things appear more complicated. You mentioned some clues?”

Rordan opened his daypack and pulled out his shirt. “See this? She stole my Deep Uirolec shirt and dirtied it with who knows what. That’s how she’s been finding us.”

Revulsion wrinkled Fikna’s face. “I see the part about needing a personal object is true.”

“I’ll bet it was a big help to her. And I took this.” Rordan showed Fikna the dagger.

His bro’ took the weapon. The young gallant drew the blade with a careful motion and gave it a swordsman’s eye. “Where did you find these things?”

Rordan scratched his head. “In her room, or the room of her host I mean. They left it wide open and I rummaged through Kea’s bag.”

Fikna gave his brother a severe scowl. “You should not have breached hospitality like that.”

“I didn’t accept. I walked through an open door after they were both gone.”

Fikna said, “Don’t shuffle words. Even if she violated your baggage, it’s no reason to reciprocate at her level.”

Rordan tensed his face. “She’s an enemy. Her host didn’t invite me and I refused Kea’s invitation. Look at my shirt. She was using my stuff to hurt us. And look at that dagger. Who was going to get that when they were sleeping?”

Fikna sheathed the dagger and handed it back to him. “A man’s room, cottage or patch of grass is his castle. To break through trust and steal is to violate Deiws’ law. You will suffer for that breach Rord, mark my words. I agree she should not be possessed of such objects. However, the ends never justify the means.”

At his bro’s words, Rordan slumped. He put the items back in the backpack. “I don’t feel good about it. Maybe I will pay for it. But she got me mad. She wouldn’t listen to me. Kept going on about munching dongs and repeating everything I said. Like being in a house of mirrors.”

His bro’ sighed and shook his head. “Rord, you cannot expect to render her assistance. She’s a false heart whose misdeeds will rebound upon her. I’m the gallant here, not you. Release your concerns and let us instead think about survival.”

Rordan felt defeated. “So what did you do all day?”

A smile reappeared on Fikna’s face. “After you departed this morning, I utilized one of the baths and washed up. Apparently there’s mixed access, as in classicist times.”

“What? No way!”

Fikna nodded. “It would display poor manners to notice. The ladies are all dressed in robes anyway. However, each station or private bath is adjacent to someone else’s. I dare say I received a temptation knowing only a stone wall separated me from views of carnal paradise.”

Rordan expressed bewilderment. “Stroma didn’t mention that on the tour. There was nobody around yesterday when I used the station. I guess I’ll have to wash up during peak use and see for myself.”

Fikna said, “The situation is rather permissive. One has to wonder what kind of academy you’ve found yourself attending.”

Rordan said, “Stroma told me it’s for catering to a handful of rich pupils.”

Surprise showed on Fikna’s face. “Are you certain?”
“Yep.”

Fikna said, “I’m beginning to wonder if money truly isn’t the root of all wickedness. In any case, I ended up refreshed and in a clean set of clothes. As a result, my mood improved dramatically. After my brief shave, I thought of myself as properly civilized once more.

“Oh, I recognize how I am getting ahead of myself. I met the most delightful girl there. Name of Blai. Quite a wonderful sort.”

Rordan sneered. “Oh I see. You met a wonderful sort in a robe and now you feel like a million peers.”

“Correct. She’s a sportsman, a sprinter as a matter of fact. Excellent legs I would gather. She appears quite well educated.”

Rordan said, “How about that? Good work, bro’.”

Fikna preened. “Why thank you. Now, after my refreshing encounter I returned to find Borus prepared to depart. And that unsavory Stig fellow had vanished again. As I stated, Borus would have nothing of sticking around and went off. I spent considerable effort arranging my things in the better parts of the closet, which you thoughtfully left for my use.”

Rordan said, “Of course.”

Fikna rubbed his left wrist a little. Rordan saw the scratch had resumed oozing. His bro’ rubbed the right wrist, though Rordan didn’t see anything there.

“I completed my arranging and began to consider my next adventure. Without warning, the door slammed open and in came a leathery, rust-colored monstrosity of a man. With a cry resembling a sick child, he shrieked from a shrunk mouth. Before I could speak two words or draw Trad’s knife, the blasted creature reached me. The demon grasped my shirt with withered hands, its empty eye sockets spewing forth a rotten-smelling mist.”

Rordan gulped. “Yikes. The things can come busting in at any moment, from anywhere.”

Fikna said, “Quite so, Rord. The demon pressed me hard against the wall of the closet and tried to bring its revolting face close to my own. I became rather cross and struggled against it with all my might.

“Then I remembered what Glenys told us earlier. I shouted out with all the conviction and breath I could muster, ‘In the name of Empyreon the Great of Greats I command you to go!’ To my surprise, the demon made an ear-splitting cry and collapsed backwards.

“I pulled my rood from under my shirt. Displaying it with the power of my faith, I yelled ‘Begone, unworthy soul, it is Deiwos who commands you!’ The creature crumbled into a pile of rusty smoke. As I watched, the smoke promptly exited down the hall and out of sight. There. What do you think?”

Bafflement clouded Rordan’s thoughts. “I don’t know. I wonder what kind of demon that was. Are you sure it was rust-colored?”

His bro’ nodded.

“Weird. Well I’m just glad the thing didn’t get the better of you.”

Fikna said, “He intruded without welcome. However, one such as he had long ago rejected salvation. His breach of hospitality was therefore immediately punished. A lesson you would do well to remember.”

Rordan frowned at the lecture. “I’ll do my best. So what did you do next? Was Kea around?”

Fikna said, “No, I checked. Her host’s door was closed and my knocking produced no answer. I listened and was rewarded with silence. Nobody appeared either, despite my calling. Everyone in the hall must have been occupied I suppose. I returned to our room and knelt in a prayer of submission for my deliverance.”

Understanding cleared Rordan's thoughts. "The cool thing is you saw your attacker. That means my third eye must finally be spreading."

Surprise overtook Fikna. "Yes. Yes! That reminds me of what I intended to mention next. Rord, we've been through a great amount of troubles lately. However, to actually witness this creature first hand, by myself. I apologize for doubting you. The fact that such horrid things walk the Heartland freely among us explains a great deal."

Rordan smiled. "This is a good sign. I'm not excited about our enemies attacking us in our own room. But if you can see what's happening now, even a little—it's a help."

Fikna stood up. "Yes, I dare say it's a major improvement. I understand now what you mean about these encounters being a drain. After my victory over the demon I became dull-headed. I shambled into the snug upstairs and watched the clouds about the mountain."

"Did you get any weird feelings? See anything?"

Fikna rubbed his temple. "I scarce have words to describe the fever of reflection I encountered. The most unusual thoughts entered my thinking and for a while I suffered a great pain throughout my entire body."

Rordan looked his bro' in the eye. "What kind of thoughts?"

Fikna rubbed his right wrist and looked down at the ground. "The thought entered my mind that I would never have a normal life. All my hopes otherwise were

folly. My existence was not my own and my fate resided with Empyreon.”

Rordan stared. “That kind of sums up your life. So why does that bother you?”

Fikna said, “Because that’s what I’ve always wanted. A normal life! However, the thoughts inside my head were definitive. They mentioned other things as well. Deiwos was neither merciful nor kind and would tear me to pieces like an insect.”

Embers of rage seethed in Rordan and he turned introspective against them. “That does sound pretty bad.” His memory returned to the island and what the mascot had said.

“The thoughts became a fully realized image in my head. I walked alone in a desert, wearing rags worse than those of Borus’ garments. No fortune lay in my future—no society, no wife, no offspring, and no associates. Even you had vanished from the picture.”

Rordan shook his head. “That will never happen.”

Fikna sighed. “The thoughts told me I beheld what I deserved. I was a lowly worm fit only to grovel in the dust.”

The urge to openly question the source of his bro’s thoughts raced through Rordan’s heart. He wouldn’t put anything past their enemies. His gaze settled on his bro’s face and he saw Fikna described a real experience.

Rordan intuited his bro’ had looked at himself, perhaps for the first time ever. With plans as grand as

Fikna's, anyone would be shocked to see they were really a lonely and pathetic nobody.

He decided Fikna's vision revealed the truth and his anger became harder to hold back. Rordan spoke with difficulty. "I believe you had a real vision bro'. But that's not all of it. You see yourself for the first time. That you aren't what you thought you were. But you'll see more as time goes on. If you keep looking at yourself..." He struggled with the last words, which repulsed him, and said, "...with faith."

Fikna said, "Rord, what I experienced reduced my faith to naught. I beheld a profoundly morose revelation and became weak beyond explanation. These thoughts fly in the face of all I believe. They continued relentlessly, chipping away at my sanity.

"I thought perhaps I might be turning mad. Or that the sickness you spotted last night had gained the upper hand. However, the thoughts kept telling me 'no'. They said, 'You are not going mad, you are seeing the truth.' Such thoughts devastate my composure."

His bro's words shocked him. Rordan looked down and shifted his feet. He gazed at Fikna's shoulder and saw no sign of the sickness from last night. He opened himself up to the song of nature and strained with the weakness in his body.

Fikna said, "What do you perceive Rord? Have I become worse?"

Rordan said, "No, I don't see anything. You must have beaten whatever it was. The thoughts must be

telling the truth. We had a talk about this before, remember?”

Fikna rubbed at his shoulder. “I was rather hoping I might place blame on the influence of last night’s demonic touch. Yes, I remember we had a similar conversation on the boat.”

Rordan nodded. “What I was saying was, maybe your dreams are unrealistic. Maybe you’re meant for something else. All the vision shows you is that you are something that to you seems worthless.”

Fikna said, “What of Deiwos’ cruelty? What of his desire to rend me to bits and consign me to nothingness?”

Rordan put up his hands. “All I’m saying is, maybe he seems that way to you because you aren’t getting what you want. You can be really selfish and bossy. It’s always got to be your way and you get it because you’re a charmer. But you can’t smooth talk your way out of Deiwos’ plan.” He grimaced when he said the last two words.

Fikna chuckled. “To hear you handle my faith seriously is comforting. I must admit, seeing you squirm as you try to reassure me is amusing.”

Rordan said, “I can’t stand religious stuff. But that doesn’t mean I believe it’s false. I don’t know, maybe Deiwos really is going to put you to the test for laughs. If that’s true, don’t you think it’d be better to know that for sure than live a lie?”

Fikna's smile turned serious. "Without my dreams, I may as well be a starving hermit in some desert. Lost and alone."

Rordan said, "Maybe you need new dreams."

Fikna blinked. "Oh, that reminds me. I experienced a dream last night."

Rordan jerked his head forward at Fikna. "What was it?"

The young gallant crossed his arms. "How did it unfold again? Oh, that's right. I found myself in this extremely ancient house made of stone. I remember an enormous granite stairway and a gargantuan hearth. The air smelled fresh and clean. The ceiling had been built low and the space was limited and personal. I was seated at the head of a large, circular table with a group of people.

"Glenys was present; she wore countless precious adornments. I spotted a girl who reminded me of Fais. You sat among us, wearing outsider clothes of a midnight blue. Even Kea had a place at our table, yet she was so changed I almost failed to recognize her. I recall Borus sat with us, except he was a girl for some reason. There were others but I fail now to recollect them.

"We all wanted to eat some delicious food and were waiting for strange attendants to serve us. On the table was an assortment of rotten food and some of the guests were eating it. You warned me to wait. However, I continued regarding the rotten food, thinking a miniscule amount would tide me over until the fresh food arrived.

“Then I found myself restricted to a large, unusual bed. I had caught a burning fever and was starving because the fresh food still hadn’t arrived. I think I had eaten a portion of the rotten food. Girl Borus looked at you and touched your heart with her hand. The two of you discussed a scary adventure you had shared.

“You looked at Glenys and then at myself. I could plainly see you were about to make a decision. I tried to influence you to choose Glenys, because I wanted you to be happy. Yet you pointed at me. Borus walked over and she breathed on my face. The touch of her breath revitalized me and I recovered quickly from my fever. I awoke right as I sat upright in the dream.”

Rordan grabbed his daypack and stood up. He leaned against the windowsill with one hand. “That’s so crazy. I don’t believe it was an ordinary dream. If there is such a thing. Borus must have really helped you. I can’t figure him out, even though I feel a connection with him.”

Fikna placed both hands to his chin and scrunched his eyebrows. “I think the moment has arrived to search for our mutual companion. Too much time has elapsed to allow him further wanderings unsupervised. The danger we face threatens him as well. Besides, he is overdue for a dousing.”

Rordan grabbed the lamp on his desk. He went to the door and opened it. “After you.”

The two of them started their search in Upper Trow and worked their way down. The level of activity in the halls increased as pupils returned for the day and formed

groups to socialize. Fikna smiled and waved with friendly encouragement at the pupils they met.

Rordan watched his bro' at work. He thought of himself as a beginner with people compared to Fikna.

They found Borus laying on one of the carpeted tiers in Radix Trow. She looked up when they entered and sat upright. Her eyes were droopy and her movements slow.

Rordan set the lamp down and sat beside the youngster. He dug out two pieces of beef jerky. The girl immediately reached for them. She held the strips in her large hands and chomped the snacks down.

“Rord, you are kind. How do you manage it?”

Fikna's clear voice opened a vista of limitless space beyond their vision. They had the sensation of a huge force descending upon them, followed by a deafening silence that quickly settled into their hearts.

Rordan glanced over at his bro'. Fikna had a look of struggle on his face. “I don't know. I just am, I suppose. But maybe I'm not kind at all. Maybe I just can't stand to see people suffer.”

Fikna said, “You experience a sense of right and wrong.”

Borus accepted another piece of jerky from Rordan and wolfed it down.

“I believe so. But so do you. At least, I hope you do.”

Fikna held his hands out and looked at them. “I am concerned with such things. Yet that is based on the

Tablets. If not for that upbringing, then where would I get the impetus to do good?”

Rordan pulled out the beerskin from his daypack and let Borus have a drink. Warm beer dripped from the girl’s chin and onto the carpet. “You’re getting into doubt-your-faith territory here bro’. If you don’t have faith in the Tablets, you’re kind of humped.”

The young gallant put his hands in his pockets and paced in a small circle. “Rord, unlike your folks you’re an unbeliever. How do you manage it? How does anyone accomplish right and wrong without belief in something?”

Rordan watched Borus take another drink of warm beer and pondered his bro’s question. “I do have belief bro’. Just a different kind from yours. I believe in the basic goodness of all things. My ‘Pisces nonsense’, remember?”

Fikna said, “Where does inherent goodness come from? How can we need the Tablets if such morals are natural?”

The turn of conversation took Rordan by surprise. He could hardly believe what they discussed. His own words made him feel exposed. “Maybe you don’t need belief or faith at all. Or maybe you’ve got it backwards. People want to do the right thing because they’re people. They come up with some tablets to remind themselves of that.”

His bro’ stopped pacing and faced him with a strained look. “If people are good naturally, then why do they do wrong?”

“I said people want to do the right thing. That doesn’t mean they do. Sometimes doing the right thing means doing something uncomfortable. People are also weak, or lazy, or confused. And not all choices are clear, or even choices at all. It’s never easy, Fikna.”

“You are correct. Making decisions is difficult for me.”

Rordan resisted the urge to tell a Libra line about indecision. “What are you deciding now? Whether or not your faith is a waste?”

Fikna puffed. “Possibly. For the moment, I feel most confused.”

Borus looked sideways at Rordan. She stared at Fikna. Her eyes were tinged with anxiety.

Rordan took the beerskin back from her. “It’s okay Borus. My bro’s just trying to get his act together.”

He watched Fikna shrink in stature and assume a haggard expression. Rordan sensed a change in his bro’ and intuited the experience as deeply personal.

Borus watched Fikna cautiously. She waited.

Rordan looked into the youngster’s enormous, dark eyes and trembled at the potency he saw in their depths. He looked away and felt Borus’ anxiety now, which gave him the shakes. His mind struggled for a second, and then he realized the boy wasn’t nervous, but excited. Borus must understand what Fikna went through and could hardly wait to see what happened.

The girl grinned with a wide mouth of large teeth.

A charge shot down Rordan's spine and he saw in Borus the same capacity for vision as his own. He ached to know what the boy might know or see. Borus' joy for life made a mark on him and he had the sensation of cracks widening throughout his body.

At the edge of his senses Rordan detected an invisible force in the room. Heaviness descended on Fikna's shoulders. The dim haze of light became stronger and bathed them in a harsh glare that baked the air like an oven. Rordan squinted his eyes against the light.

Beside Fikna stood a glowing brown humanoid being with wings like an eagle. The being wore a loose, one-piece gown made of platinum. A silver scarf woven with brilliant, cornflower blue sapphires hung around the being's neck and blinding sparks of white flame danced behind its head. Despite its hands on Fikna's shoulders in a comforting gesture, a frightful aspect surrounded the being.

Rordan guessed the being was a messenger of Deiwos and grimaced. His bro' could only be the recipient of a big message or scary vision from the Tablets. He didn't want to offend the messenger with his mistrust and dislike. Fighting back his protective feelings for Fikna, Rordan waited.

The messenger floated off the ground, then both the glaring light and messenger slowly vanished. Rordan still sensed a presence in the room.

His bro' appeared shaken. Fikna turned toward him with his eyes leaking tears. "How long have you had

knowledge of this?” He held up his wrists toward Rordan. Both had oozing scratches.

“Since the boat. That’s when there was no doubt.”

Fikna stumbled backwards. “What manner of response can I make to this? What am I supposed to do?” He faced his wrists toward his chest and closed his eyes tight.

A sense of helplessness rattled Rordan. He had no answer for his bro’.

“If this overwhelming madness is the world of your visions Rord, I would prefer to stay asleep. This doubt inside me has broken free and polluted my entire being with its corruption.”

Rordan said, “You were always like that bro’, deep inside. You were never a fanatic. You only wanted to believe. Or at least I imagine you still do.”

Fikna opened his eyes. “I possess no faith and I recognize this damning truth. I cannot return to pretending, can I?”

The sight of his bro’ in pain sent shivers through his body. Rordan shook his head against a growing fear of failure. “Would you want to? I’ll never be the same after what I’ve seen. Who knows where it’s going to lead us. You wanted fun. Here it is. Welcome to crazy land.”

He tittered and an edge of hysteria heated the back of his mind. The messenger frightened him over his bro’s safety more than he wanted to admit.

A dozen people sat with them now. Borus grunted and scrambled to the other side of Rordan. The people all watched Fikna with an air of expectation.

The young gallant studied them. “Where did you appear from? Identify yourselves. What is your intention?” He waited for an answer. “Rord, do you witness them?”

The people had a sleepy quality to them Rordan couldn’t figure out. He felt comfortable with their presence and nodded. “Yep. I do, and so does Borus. They seem okay to me. Every time I see something, I come across some magical being and we have a talk. Maybe it’s the same for you and Borus, or maybe not. I don’t know, but it’s personal to you.”

Fikna stared without focus. “It’s hardly fair, this development. I find myself at a loss. How can one be expected to deal with such a fate?”

Rordan said, “You can do it, bro’. I’m here. Borus is here. You’re not alone and you’ll make it through this.”

“What does it matter?” Fikna faced Rordan and made wild gestures with his hands. “None of my plans matter. We’re all insignificant motes of dust. Pushed and pulled at the whim of Deiws. There’s no protection from him—no justice you can appeal to. He has made an example of me. Dashed my hopes to a thousand ruins and shown me a miserable expanse of lowly suffering to dwell in.

“Inside, the twin poles of doubt and need tear at my conscience like raging beasts. Shall I see the unseen now

at every turn? Will my suffering manifest itself now as bolts of divine lightning? To strike me down, whereas before I would be ignorant of the fantastic and miraculous sights bearing down upon me? From what unnamable source springs my doubt? Where did this sickness first manifest itself? I am nothing of account.” His body slackened and he stared at the floor in a mania.

An impulse seized a hold of Rordan. He moved to his bro’s side and grasped him by the upper arms. “Stop it! If you’re so filled with doubt, then doubt the horrible thing you’ve just seen. The vision you’ve had might not be what you think.”

The two of them exchanged sorrowful glances. Feelings passed between them and tore at Rordan’s heart.

Fikna said, “How can anyone doubt what they’ve witnessed with their own sight?”

“Easy. You do it. Don’t take everything you see at face value. Don’t discount it, but neither should you obey it without question. If Deiws just delivered the message, ask him to explain it.”

Fikna thrust his wrists at Rordan. “Explain this! I’m not anybody. I understand not the first thing about sacred matters. Except it means my life’s ambitions are in the chamber pot and I’m expected to live as some kind of hermit or worse.”

Rordan held his bro’s arms and glared at the scratches. He spoke with a husky growl. “You don’t know what it means. It could mean anything. Or even if it means you’ll be going around as some goody-goody, maybe it’s

what you make of it. Look at it without judgment. Maybe bearing Empyreon's mark of disgrace is exciting and fun."

Fikna laughed once.

Rordan chuckled as he segued into an improvised comedy routine. "All right. Check this out people, time for high adventure in the Empyreon shop of horse-hair rags and wild honey." He accompanied his routine with a mimicry of Fikna's voice. "I say, I've hit the jackpot now. The eligible maidens shall flock to my side in droves."

They snickered and stumbled about. Borus watched them with a pleased look on her face.

Fikna said, "Rord, you are a welcome jester. Very well, I shall endeavor to understand my plight with more consideration." He studied the people. "They present a puzzle, would you agree? Old and young. Men and women, even outsiders. I wonder as to their appearance. Have they followed me during the entirety of my life?"

Rordan shrugged. "Maybe. Hard to say. They must want something; probably from you. But I have no idea what that is. I'm guessing you'll figure it out if you're meant to."

"That's not terribly helpful Rord. If they manage no dialogue, and you witness nothing special, how do we progress?"

Rordan said, "Hey, you're part of the third eye club now. I'm out of ideas. If I see something I'll let you know. But keep in mind I haven't been doing this long

enough to give good advice yet. Look how long I've been waiting to figure out Borus."

Fikna looked at the closest person, a pale skinned girl around eleven years of age. She had long, blonde hair and her garment consisted of a one-piece nightgown of plain blue cotton. She wore thick black boots too big for her.

The girl looked anguished to Rordan. He thought her skin seemed paler than normal, almost corpse-like. A thought struck him. Before he could articulate it, Fikna came to the conclusion first and spoke out.

"They're people who have passed away," said Fikna. "They're ghosts." His hands came close to his chest, thoughts passing through him faster than his face could articulate.

Rordan let his bro' come to the conclusion on his own from there.

Fikna said, "Maybe they require laying to rest. How might this be accomplished? I'm no minister. I possess no authority for official blessings even if I had the learning. What right do I hold to officiate for those outside my faith? They deserve better than my incomplete knowledge." A moment of anguish crossed Fikna's face. He wrangled his hands together and trembled.

Rordan watched his bro' decide, then approach the girl. She took in a breath and reached out. Fikna took her in his arms and exchanged a hug. For a ghost she looked solid to his eyes. The two separated and regarded

each other. Fikna made the sign of the rood and said what sounded like a personal prayer to Rordan.

The girl transformed before his eyes. She wore a bright, sunset red dress and a necklace of tied daisies. She smiled, then disappeared with a blink into what he could barely conceive of as an infinite inner space. Rordan couldn't tell if she had flown to Welkin or evaporated like a puddle of water into oblivion.

Fikna looked back at him. "This matter overwhelms me. She was dead, yet I touched her. She is beyond peace and suffering. This surpasses my way of thinking."

The iron door to the furnace became outlined in a crackle of yellow-orange light. The door unlocked with a loud snap and slid open. A wave of savage heat flooded the room. The doorway revealed a large room beyond, filled with violent flames and a roaring conflagration.

Some of the ghosts cringed with looks of fear while others bowed their heads in sadness or looked on in shock. Rordan stiffened. His face turned severe and he remembered what he was capable of for those he loved.

One of the ghosts got up and shambled toward the door with a face full of dread. He was a man of about fifty, with a deeply lined face and a pallid quality to his brown skin.

Rordan said, "Do something bro'!"

Fikna looked at him, then rushed over and seized the man. He pulled the ghost around to face him. "How is it this door to the gate of damnation opens? Answer me! What crimes are you guilty of?"

The old man gaped and stared. His eyes and mouth were dry.

A voice issued forth from the furnace and filled the minds of the living. “Deiwos demands a sacrifice. Who are you to question his will?”

Borus recoiled from the voice as if dealt a blow. She looked away and her breathing came in shallow gasps.

A spasm ran through Rordan’s body and he staggered back onto a carpeted tier. He trembled with shock and had trouble seeing through the haze before his eyes.

Drool beaded at one edge of Fikna’s mouth and his face grew flush. He strengthened his grasp on the old man. “I question! What wrong has this man committed for his soul to be consigned to everlasting torment?”

The voice answered with an irritated tone. “Can you set yourself against the might of the All-mighty Power? Do you see into the heart of the deepest ocean and behold the farthest shores of space and time?”

Rordan felt his bro’ weaken. He slid to the floor and crawled toward Fikna. His heart beat fast while tears ran down his numb cheeks. The heat grew uncomfortable. He looked up at his bro’ and blinked several times. The strong arms of Borus seized him by the waist and he fell to his side.

The girl held Rordan tight and pulled him toward the exit. Her overwhelming strength cowed his struggles and he fought against blacking out.

Fikna looked away and squeezed the old man to his chest. He shouted over the din. “Is this justice then? Is this goodness? How is it you do not answer? Perhaps you are some darker force masquerading as the Great of Greats!”

The voice said, “Who is Deiws answerable to? Are you wise enough to see every corner of the world and judge right from wrong? There is no other but the Almighty Power, who renders the day and the night, tending the eternal and the perishable without equal.”

Fikna continued to shout. “Then take this man from me! If you are Deiws, then I cannot stand against you! And if you are something besides, then Deiws shall save us from you if it pleases him!”

The voice hesitated. “Deiws has received his sacrifice.” The door slid closed with a resounding grind, followed by a clack. The heat of the flames became stuffy warmth.

Borus stopped, but held a firm hand on Rordan’s chest.

He rubbed his eyes clear of tears and tried to focus on his bro’.

Fikna released the man and looked him in the eyes. Through strained gasps for air he said, “Rest in peace, old man. The Deuce has been driven away. If Deiws does not object then I bless you. In the name of the Great of Greats, Emphyrean the Heir, and the Spirit of Welkin. Your wrongs are removed if it is the will of Deiws.”

A mild odor of sweet incense filled the room. The smell of it comforted Rordan and he found the trauma of the voice lessened. He thought of the censers in the chapel back home and how they smelled when not in use.

His eyesight cleared and he noticed the room had acquired a soft, indistinct light. The stone of the walls had a smooth, appealing look to them and the tiles of the floor absorbed the noise of his crawling about. The flames of the lamp they had brought burned without a flicker. The sunlight that came in through the window slits on the far wall had a brighter character.

Rordan felt holiness enclose him. He raised his arms up and out, enjoying the peace that filled the room.

Borus sat back on her hands and looked satisfied. She chirped once to herself

Fikna said, "This display speaks volumes to me. I think you are indeed removed of wrongs old man. Forget the life of wickedness that may have plagued you and put on the robes of the Welkin host."

The man stared at Fikna in confusion. He searched his pockets for a moment. A thought played across his face and he sighed. The man nodded at Fikna and at Rordan. The sun emerged from behind the clouds and shone on his face through the window.

Rordan thought he looked a little less burdened.

The old man's clothes changed colors to earthy red and brown tones, and reverted in fashion fifteen years. Then he vanished out of existence in the blink of an eye.

Fikna knelt on the floor and prayed in the sunlight.

The rays of the sun changed from direct to indirect. Rordan knew the fantastical scene had changed back to normal. The ghosts were no longer visible, but he still felt their presence. With difficulty, he crawled over to Fikna and knelt beside him. “You okay?”

Fikna bowed his head. “Rord, I understand the reasons for your behavior. Stick together?”

Rordan smiled. “Always.” He slapped his bro’s hand. They stood up as one.

Fikna looked around. “Are they still here?”

“I believe so,” said Rordan. “The vision comes and goes. I really hope we aren’t going to have to help every one of them. This is hard work.”

“I concur. I am motivated towards nothing more than the rendering of assistance to them all. However, as I mentioned I’m not anyone special. I think this flock of ghosts is safe for the moment.”

Rordan watched Borus shuffle over to them. “Yep, there’s a fated aspect to this. You show up for the important parts like it’s a pamphlet-slam. But it’s tiring.”

Fikna said, “The moment has arrived for us to seek out Glenys. Therefore, I shall speak a prayer on behalf of the ghosts’ safety. And I shall place my trust in the refuge they find with us.”

Rordan nodded. “Borus, I guess we’ll have to get you in that shower station next time.”

The girl looked up at Rordan and peered at him with curiosity.

Fikna clasped his hands and said a silent prayer. Then the three of them left the room together.

CHAPTER 17: NIGHTMARE TREE

Rordan followed Fikna upstairs and Borus trailed behind. They knocked on Glenys' door and went inside at her acknowledgment. She sat upon her bed, against the wall, and held a mug of what smelled like root-stock tea.

Fikna said, "Hello Glenys. Say, you seem distracted. Are you well?"

She gave them a warm smile. "I'll manage. Had a run-in with that Kea character of ours, so I'm simmering on that."

Fikna said, "Yes. Rord had his own uncomfortable experience with her. She's been getting around, I fear." He placed Rordan's lamp on her desk.

Glenys crinkled her face at them. "I'm not surprised. Kea's not all there."

Rordan sat at the foot of her bed while Fikna remained standing and Borus sat on Glenys' desk chair.

Fikna said, "Rord discovered the identity of our real enemy. A tutor of this institution is the villain behind our troubles. His mentor as a matter of fact. Kea answers to his evil power."

Glenys turned her eyes to the side. She sat upright and slid to the edge of her bed. "How did you find this out?"

Fikna said, "According to Rord, he paid a visit to his mentor for getting papers attended to. The meeting started off agreeable. Then the tutor changed into a

madman wearing a vampire mask. Declared our happiness belonged to him. We were to allow his demons to collect our delight next time without interference.”

Glenys took a swallow of her tea. “Interesting. How is he controlling Kea?”

At Fikna’s glance Rordan said, “He went on about his agents and that we were stopping them in some way. If we didn’t just take it, there would be problems. I assumed Kea was under his control because of the card reading we did and because of something I saw Kea do to Fikna.”

“What did you see Kea do?”

Rordan said, “When we were stopped at the island, I watched Kea and Dalla weaken Fikna with some kind of witchcraft. Ivixa stepped in and magically moved blood from Fikna’s neck to her mask, which then disappeared. I saw this with my third eye. My bro’ and I had just had a fight, so I couldn’t bring it up.

“My guess is that these witches are under my mentor’s power and don’t know it. When I confronted Kea over this, she didn’t know what I was talking about.”

He watched Glenys move her mug about, swishing the tea inside. She appeared lost in intense thought. “Kea said you scratched her up. I saw her getting her arm bandaged by Manissa.”

Her expression revealed amusement. “Is that what she said?”

He nodded.

Glenys said, “I ran into her at the pupil affairs office. I was looking for a job and she came up to me. Started asking all these questions about you.”

Fikna said, “About what?”

“Mostly about my relationship with Rordan. At first I tried to be nice, but she started laughing at me. So I told her to leave me out of her problems. That’s when she started telling me I didn’t realize how crazy you were. I excused myself and left.”

She smiled. “Later, she sent one of her buddies to threaten me. I ran into him at lunch.”

Fikna said, “Would you describe him? Was he one of the people at the Grill the other night?”

Glenys nodded. “He was the big guy with the large muscles.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “What did he say to you?”

She gave him an intense stare and laughed to herself. “That I shouldn’t get involved between you and Kea. He left me alone after that. Oh, and I found a job as a practical in the archive. That’s been my day.”

“That’s splendid news on your employment,” said Fikna. “However, this matter needs to be brought to the Council’s attention. They ought to know a pupil has been threatened. Did anyone witness what happened between you and Kea?”

She shook her head. “It was empty in the hall where I met her. And at lunch, only words were exchanged. It was so noisy there that I doubt anyone heard us.”

Rordan frowned. “We should still tell them. Bro’, if only you had some arms and a shield.”

Fikna looked glum. “Carrying those on the grounds is out of the question. We must utilize our current resources. If they begin a struggle, we can always claim self-defense. All the more reason to let the Council know.

“I’d keep your shiv readied Glenys. You were remarkably useful with it last time we had trouble. Most extraordinary. Your father train you?”

Glenys nodded with a smile. “He used to train me a lot before my mom cheaped him. I kept up with a friend in school.”

Fikna said, “I apologize. I intended no disrespect.”

She smiled at him. “It’s okay. My mom’s a sore subject, but I’m learning to deal with it.” Glenys faced Rordan. “What was the uncomfortable encounter you had with Kea?”

Rordan said, “I was going to my room after some really crazy stuff and the door to her room was open. She was there getting bandaged up by her pal. Started talking to me before I could duck out.”

Glenys said, “Did you see a wound?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t go inside even after she tried to get me to come in. She said ‘look at what your friend

did to me' and 'do you know how messed up she is'. I told her she was full of dump and she went nuts, walking around repeating everything I said. It was crazy."

She took another sip of her tea, then put the mug on her desk. "I'm sorry you had to see that dear."

He shrugged and rolled his eyes. "Yep. Not much I could do. That's when I brought up her being my mentor's agent and she didn't know what I was saying. Her friend got sick of her and walked out. I tried to get her to admit she was nuts and she just kept spouting off."

Fikna gave him the eye.

Rordan sighed. He pulled out the ruined shirt from his daypack. "Kea took off and left the door open, so I went inside and searched through her bag. I found this. My shirt, with stinky stains all over it."

Glenys narrowed her eyes. "Don't bring that near me. I can smell it from here, yuck. Now we know how she's been able to get a hold of you so easily. But you shouldn't have broken her host's hospitality. That was very bad."

Fikna smiled. "Exactly what I told him. I'm pleased to know I haven't taken leave of my senses."

Glenys said, "Rordan, I'm surprised at you. Was it worth it to get your shirt back?"

"I don't know how these things work. But it gets on my nerves that she stole my shirt and ruined it. That's not all I got a hold of." He put away the shirt and pulled out the dagger. Rordan held it in both hands and showed

her. “I also took this. Is this a witch weapon or what? Might even be a sacrificial blade.”

Glenys stared for a moment, then shook her head. “Oh, dear. You stole her dagger.” She laughed. “This is getting so confused.”

Fikna said, “Does the dagger hold any meaning?”

She placed a hand to her face. “The dagger’s a private object between friends. She’ll want that back. I don’t know if I’d return it though. I...never mind.”

With a puzzled look, Rordan put the dagger back into his daypack. “I figure she’d want it back. Maybe this will give us the edge and make her magic weaker.”

Glenys said, “Even though she’s not being kind, you shouldn’t steal. And breaking into her host’s home? That’s wrong.”

“I know it is. But I had to do it. Some part of me just got mad at her complete stupidity.”

She looked away. “It was still very, very bad.”

Rordan clenched his teeth lightly. He regretted his actions and hoped his bro’ or Glenys wouldn’t start to distrust him. “What’s our next move, bro’?”

Fikna put his right hand to his chin. “What I proposed earlier. We report this matter to the Council. They should decide how to proceed from here. If your tutor has threatened us, the situation has become serious. However, I still find it difficult to consider an academy official attempting a struggle with pupils.”

Rordan said, “Are you jesting? After what you saw earlier? How do we know this guy wouldn’t just grab us and throw us in an invisible dungeon somewhere?”

Glenys said, “What do you see?”

Fikna puffed and turned to look away. He paced the room.

Rordan slumped forward. “We had a crazy vision together. I believe it’s catching. Maybe you’ll have one too in a while. I don’t know.”

She looked at Fikna with an intrigued smile. “You mean you can see what he sees now? How exciting!” Her eyes flashed with interest and she bounced on the bed once.

Her reaction pleased Rordan. He liked that side of her better than her disapproval. “I hope you’ll see this stuff too. But what I meant was that an idea came to me. All the tales of getting lost in fantom lands I’ve read about. What if the beings of the invisible world can pull us into their world, so that we can’t be seen by people? Maybe that’s what my tutor meant by accidents.”

Fikna turned to face them. “Certainly appears a possibility now. Either way, struggle or supernatural kidnapping, we would come to harm.”

Rordan stood up. “Let’s get going then. We need to drop a line on our Council friends. Get things going. If we disappear, at least they’ll know who to suspect.”

Fikna said, “I concur. Glenys, are you strong enough for a stroll? I prefer not to upset you if you are strained by your experiences.”

Glenys looked resolute. “Oh, I’m in. Pass up a chance for adventure? Not on your life.” She grabbed her line bag.

Borus stood up with a look of excitement. She made a whistling sound.

The young gallant took Rordan’s lamp and led them downstairs to Nyah’s room. He knocked on her door and she answered. “Esteemed member of the Council, we possess information of interest to you. May we come inside?”

She peered at them with a smirk. “Sure.”

Nyah shut the door behind them and everyone but Borus sat down. The girl stood by the window and stared at a tree on the other side of the open field.

Fikna said, “Nyah, we have arrived to update the Council on what we have discovered. We have reason to believe we are in danger and may disappear. Therefore, it is imperative a record exists upon which to form the beginnings of a proceeding.”

Rordan realized he’d have to relate his thievery again. His shame would become general knowledge soon—a fact he didn’t approve of.

Nyah took out a smoke from her desk drawer. She lit it off her lamp and exhaled a puff of smoke. “Let fly with what you got.”

Fikna assumed a refined poise. “To summarize. Master Beag, Rord’s mentor, threatened him with violence if Rord did not obey his desires. Specifically, in the matter of Kea’s witchcraft upon our person. His command was that we offer no resistance. To allow whatever demons she unleashed upon us to act unhindered.

“Meanwhile, Kea confronted Glenys and harassed her. Glenys ended the conversation and left. A friend of Kea’s visited her at lunch and threatened her to stay away from Rord.

“Kea then proceeded to harangue Rord about Glenys’ behavior. She made up a story about being attacked by Glenys. Rord has informed me he has no intention of surrendering to this tutor’s demands. It is likely, given deteriorating relations, the tutor shall be forced to make good on his promise.”

Nyah raised her eyebrows. She tapped out ash from her smoke and took another long drag. “Man, that’s heavy. I’ll pass the word along. Rordy, you haven’t been here more than two days and already people are fighting over you.”

Rordan chuckled. “I know. It’s weird.”

Fikna said, “There is one other matter. After Kea harangued him, she departed. Rord entered Manissa’s room in breach of hospitality. He went through her bag and found a shirt she had stolen from him. Likely used for witchcraft purposes. Also a sacrificial dagger. He has both items in his possession.”

Nyah sputtered. “Rordy you bad boy!”

Glenys said, “That’s what I told him. Very, very bad.”

Rordan watched Borus stare out the window. He started when he realized everyone looked at him. “Oh, sorry. Yes it was not a smart thing to do. Here Nyah; check them out.” He opened his daypack and showed her the two items.

Nyah laughed at the shirt. “That’s pretty nasty. Nice shirt though.” She took a drag and blew smoke out the side of her lips.

He smiled. “I know. I’m mad to lose it. What a load of dump.”

Fikna leaned forward. “Therefore, as you can plainly see the affair is growing serious. I do not envision how anything might be accomplished. If you would advise us it might prove most helpful.”

Nyah leaned back. “What’s going to happen next is one of us—well two actually—will try and talk to the parties involved. Get a dialogue started. Figure out why the people making threats are doing it; what their side is.”

Rordan said, “What happens if they don’t talk?”

“If they don’t talk to us it’ll look bad for them. But they’ll talk. Might make something up, but it’ll happen.”

“And what if while they’re talking they attack us?”

Nyah said, “Rordy, if they do anything bonkers like that the patrollers get involved. I don’t feel they’re that nuts. More likely they’ll get you to do something. Like breaking into somebody’s stuff.”

Rordan scowled. He felt stung. “So that’s how it works. Provoke us. Clever.”

Nyah nodded. “She’s a real trull, your Kea. But sounds like she’s calling the shots.”

Frustration and disappointment pulled at him. Rordan got up and looked out the window.

Fikna said, “What has you so distracted Rord? What are you and Borus witnessing?”

Rordan saw a blight nested beneath the bark of the tree. A pair of blazing, muddy eyes opened in the trunk while a vertical maw of spine-like teeth peeled open below the eyes. The maw spilled a drool of decayed black pine needles and the eyes beamed menace at him and Borus.

He shied back. The menace felt hard and invincible. His intuition told him the tree had been ruined. He imagined the taint of it erupted outwards in this display of horror.

Fikna stood up and looked out the window with them. He gasped. “By Welkin, what a monster.”

Nyah and Glenys came over to the window.

Rordan said, “That tree. It’s gone bad, or is sick somehow. It’s occupied by an evil creature.”

Nyah said, “I want whatever you guys are on. I don’t see anything, but I do get bad ripples from that tree.”

Glenys glanced at Rordan. “I don’t see anything.”

Fikna backed away from the window.

Rordan grimaced. “Hey, cheer up bro’. At least you can see it now.”

“I cannot manage this,” said Fikna. “It’s madness. This entire situation is impossible.”

The tree trunk split open at the base near the ground and yawned wide. Out stepped a young man with a sportsman’s figure. His clothes blended him in with most pupils. The young man gave no sign that he saw them. He walked down the field and around to the front of Boant Oak.

Rordan said, “Come on, let’s see where that guy’s going.”

Glenys said, “What guy?”

“A guy came out of that evil tree. We have to see where he’s going.” Rordan went out the door with Borus close behind him.

Fikna said, “Excuse us Nyah.” He went after his foster-brother and Glenys followed.

Rordan rushed down the stairs and out the side door. Borus kept up with him. He ran down the path to the street in front of the community hall. The young man came up the path on his right. There were several academy pupils walking about on their own business.

He blocked the young man’s path. “Who are you?”

The young man’s voice had a plain quality to it. “Someone who will mess you up bad, bungler.” His eyeballs were literally flat and the pupils darted about in a nervous fashion.

Borus chirred from the base of her throat and hid behind Rordan.

“Don’t make me blast you,” said Rordan. He felt unsure about his ability to do so and hoped the man wouldn’t call his bluff.

“You pathetic loser,” said the young man. “You couldn’t blast a chamber pot.”

Fikna and Glenys appeared. The young man waited until they caught up.

Fikna said, “What’s going on here? Your name, if you please?”

The young man said, “I’m the guy who’s going to beat both of you senseless.”

Fikna said, “Look here. If you insist on rudeness, we shall turn you in to the patrollers.”

The young man moved in an instant. With one hand he pushed Glenys several feet backwards and she tumbled sideways on the gravel path. Her line bag rolled with her and came to rest at her leg. His other hand grasped Fikna by the throat and bent him backwards.

The young man said, “I know you Fikna. What happened to you can happen again, only worse. I can even look like her to make it extra exciting for you.”

Fikna’s face turned an unhealthy shade of red and his eyes pulsed to bloodshot. He appeared on the verge of passing out.

Horror paralyzed Rordan. He watched Glenys draw out the shiv from her line bag and stand upright into a ready stance. Her eyes looked focused and alert.

The young man watched her approach. “Hello Glenys, still fighting with half a heart?”

With precision strength she stabbed the young man in the wrist holding Fikna and cut along the length of the man’s arm to the elbow. No blood came out and his grip on Fikna never faltered. She readied a stab at the side of his abdomen.

“Hey Fikna, watch this.” The young man caught Glenys’ hand with his left in mid-thrust and squeezed the weapon from her grasp. He shoved Fikna to the ground and caught the shiv in mid air.

Fikna collapsed sideways with a loud gasp. He rolled forward and coughed phlegm onto the ground.

Glenys twisted her hand against his grip, eyed Trad’s knife at Fikna’s belt. She readied for a stomp at her attacker’s knee.

The young man released her and she stumbled backwards. “Give it up fly-speck. You should have brought the real thing.” He bent her shiv into a right angle and dropped it with a laugh.

She steadied herself and fought against the shock of her injured hand.

None of the passers-by took notice of the violent scene unfolding not five feet from some of them. Rordan found the absurdity of it terrible.

The young man looked at him and said, “They can’t see what I do. No one ever wants to see the kind of things they let happen. But you can, bungler. And you’ll see every detail as I perform my specialty on Glenys. Watch me crush her dreams into cruor for the bugbears—”

Glenys moved for Trad’s knife.

Borus rushed forward. She smashed her fist into the young man just below the ribcage with a dull thump. Rordan felt himself grow weak.

The young man staggered backwards. He regained his feet, then ran away in the direction of the woods by the manor house. His speed matched that of a horse at full gallop.

They watched their assailant disappear from view.

Glenys said, “Nice one Borus. We live to fight another day.” She held her injured hand to her chest and gave herself a visual examination.

Fikna struggled upright. He held a hand to his throat.

Rordan rushed over to his bro’s side and extended a hand. Fikna took it and pulled himself to his feet. The pupils who passed by glanced at them with curiosity.

The young gallant retrieved Glenys’ ruined shiv and studied it. He said with a hoarse voice, “Demon has a rough set of hands.”

Glenys gave him a gentle look. “Dear, you’re hurt. Don’t speak.” She retrieved her line-bag and examined it.

Rordan envied his bro' the look. He decided not to discuss what the young man had said. His mascot's advice came back to him and regret at his stupidity took over his thoughts.

Fikna whispered in Rordan's ear. "Come now, Rord. Let's return Glenys to her room. I think she requires rest." He coughed once.

Rordan nodded. He didn't agree with his bro's assessment. Glenys looked better off and had put up a bigger fight. He helped Fikna back toward her room while Glenys and Borus came up behind them.

Fikna said, "Next time, I'll immediately begin stabbing with Trad's knife. No person wields such strength." He cleared his throat.

Rordan said, "I don't believe it would do any good. You saw how he ate Glenys' shiv for breakfast. And I really don't want to lose Trad's gift."

"I quite understand." Fikna coughed to himself for a minute.

They reached Glenys' room. She crouched down with clenched teeth and pulled out an earthenware bowl from underneath her bed.

Fikna became confused. "Anything we may acquire for you?"

"Some chewbies if you have them. My knees and elbows hurt almost as much as my hand."

Fikna said, "I'll retrieve them from our mercy kit. Lend me your key, Rord."

Rordan dug his key out and handed it to Fikna. He watched his bro' depart. "I guess if the fairer side is involved, he's happy to be the attendant."

Glenys placed the bowl on her desk. "He's a good brother. You should be proud of him." She went into her closet.

Rordan said, "Except when he argues with me. We fight sometimes."

"All siblings do." She brought a large earthenware pitcher and a washcloth over to her desk. She looked at Borus with respect and smiled.

The girl smiled back.

Glenys said, "Thank you for saving us. That was a good thing you did."

Borus sat down on the foot of Glenys' bed. She made a series of whistling sounds.

Rordan said, "What are you going to do?"

Glenys said, "I took a fall in some gravel. I need to clean my cuts and scratches or germs will take root. And my hand could use some cool water to ease the pain."

"Are you okay?"

She regarded his concern. "It's nothing. I'm more worried about your brother. Chokeholds are nothing to sneeze at."

Rordan felt guilty. "You heard what that demon said, didn't you?"

"Yes. I caught every word."

He glanced at the closed door. “We’ve never told anyone this and don’t tell my bro’ I told you. When we were kids, he was beaten up in front of me by a family member. I’m saying this because I trust you. And because I want you to be okay if that demon says anything else.”

Rordan looked down. “I don’t know how that demon could know, but he made me feel like I was back in that time. My bro’ took it rough, I know he did.”

Her expression softened. “I’m sorry dear. Talk to me.”

Rordan tried to smile. He felt uncomfortable. The way the demon had harmed Fikna struck too close. He had thought the past far enough away to maybe let his bro’ go. Now he was unsure he would ever see Fikna healed.

“It’s okay to feel messed up about what happened. Remember it’s not your fault and it’s not Fikna’s either.” She extended her good hand to him.

He took hold of it with both hands. “I know.”

“Next time there’s a demon that looks like a person, let’s follow it instead.”

“Yep. That was a mistake. I thought I could blast him or something. I didn’t think he would be so tough, that he could kick us around. Thank Welkin Borus drove him off.”

Glenys shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known what would happen. If he said

some bad things about us, it's only what we haven't dealt with yet. You may be right about the third eye being contagious. Being with you is changing the way I look at the world. I don't regret being there because I got to fight a withy demon."

Rordan marveled at her. He thought about what the demon had said about her and half a heart.

"What's withy mean?"

"Powerful. Not easy to break." She smiled to herself and growled.

His bro' came in with the kit and the lamp they'd left with Nyah. Fikna dug out a pair of chewbies and handed them to Glenys. She chomped on them and swallowed, then drank the last of her cold tea.

The young gallant handed the key back to Rordan. "Have you any information concerning the demon we faced together?"

"I'm afraid so." She placed her injured hand over the bowl and poured water from the pitcher onto it. Her breathing quickened and she winced in pain.

Her anguish struck Fikna dumb and he stared.

Rordan swallowed.

Glenys repeated the process and a fierce determination showed in her eyes. Her face grew flush as her breathing grew tight.

She took a moment to rest. "It's a powerful demon called the Huncher. They're called to terrorize an entire neighborhood."

Fikna looked at Rordan. He cleared his throat and covered the front of his neck with the heels of his palms.

“Don’t look at me bro’. I don’t know anything about these things. But from what I saw, if scaring the academy is its purpose that demon will be good at it.”

Glenys placed her injured hand in the bowl of water and exhaled through clenched teeth. “It’s worse than that. The Huncher gets into your head and talks you into giving up your dreams. Women are its preferred target, but it’ll go after anyone.”

Rordan puffed. “That’s just great news. How do we stop it?”

“There’s supposed to be a written agreement with an illustration. That agreement gives the Huncher permission to stay in this world.” She dropped the washcloth into the bowl.

“So destroy it and the Huncher has to go.” Master Beag’s office came to the forefront of Rordan’s thoughts. He tried to remember if he had seen anything like an agreement with a picture.

Fikna said, “Not a single thought of breaking the hospitality of our enemy Rord. Even to go searching for this agreement. Your mentor won’t be so thoughtless as to leave it on his desk.” He coughed twice.

Rordan frowned.

Fikna said, “It occurs to me the appearance of this demon fits my theory of a major spell. I am afraid the villain has succeeded in saving up enough cruor.”

“Yep.”

Glenys said, “Cruor? Details, guys.”

Rordan said, “The witches steal fun for Master Beag. The fun looks like blood to me, probably because it’s life to people. My mentor called it cruor and has been saving up this fun for an evil spell.”

She nodded. “I follow your logic. It explains the Huncher’s appearance.”

Fikna said, “What springs to mind now is how Dalla and Manissa fit into our predicament. Are you certain in your belief they are against Kea?”

Rordan said, “I’m pretty sure, yep.”

Fikna said, “I find the possibility of regular witches and crazy witches a little hard to consider. I thought they were all dedicated to destruction and misery.”

“I know, weird isn’t it?” Rordan scratched his head. “But my talk with Dalla and the way Manissa acted. They make me believe there’s a difference.”

Glenys said, “You talked with Dalla? When?”

Rordan slapped his forehead. “It must have slipped my mind. While I was waiting to sign up for my exam I ran into her. She was with a friend. We had a quiet talk where she basically threw herself at me. Said if I shacked up with her she could protect me.”

She gave Rordan a look. “Aren’t you sly. Causing trouble everywhere you go.”

He smiled at her. “She said there were things she couldn’t tell me and that I shouldn’t call her kind witches. She also said she hadn’t been involved with last night. I got the feeling she was jumping ship.”

Glenys nodded. She rolled up her sleeves and examined her elbows. They had taken a beating and lost some skin, but didn’t appear dirty.

Fikna said, “I think you uncover the truth with your earlier comments Rord. Perhaps what we’re dealing with is a secret society. Similar to the pastorals, only more insular.” He cleared his throat.

Rordan said, “Seltans are insular too bro’. There’s just more of us so we don’t stick out like they do.”

“Quiet Rord, I’m thinking. Hmn. Maybe Kea should be considered the real witch. That would make the others merely members of a secret society of heathens living amongst us. The shepherd kings captured entire tribes in the old days. It isn’t impossible some of them managed to blend in.”

Glenys listened while she examined her knees.

Rordan said, “Or their beliefs were adopted. The shepherd kings weren’t Empyrean originally.”

His bro’ paced around the room. “Which means we have yet to obtain a glimpse of the coven itself. Kea and Master Beag might be the only ones we’ve seen.”

Rordan said, “No, I don’t believe it. Master Beag is the big cheese. I’ve read that covens can be as small as

two. Maybe they start recruiting once the Huncher gets going. Evil attracts evil.”

Glenys said, “Where did you read that?” She squeezed out the excess water from the washcloth and cleaned the wounds on her elbows. Her body shivered with each application of the washcloth. She maintained a stone-faced expression against the pain.

The display disturbed Fikna and he looked the other way. “Rord is extremely well read. As a rustic he does research for routines. However, lately I’d say he’s gone into retirement.”

Rordan grimaced at his bro’s comment. “I have some lessons that go into arcane subjects. I don’t know how much of it’s true. A lot of it seems like old wives’ tales. But I fish out the bits that seem useful or sound true.”

Glenys said, “What are you going to do?”

Fikna sat down on Sinna’s bed. He clasped his hands behind his lower back and stretched. “Oof. The Huncher sure inflicted a knocking about on my person. We’ve spoken with the Council. I’d venture our next step is to wait for them to draw our enemies into negotiation.”

Rordan said, “What about the Huncher? Glenys is a sitting duck here.”

Glenys said, “I’m a sitting duck anywhere. Unless Borus can drive him off again, I don’t see what any of us can do.”

Her confidence puzzled Rordan. He looked at Borus. “Hey, will you stay with her? Glenys might need your help.”

The girl’s attention shifted to him. She stared at Glenys, then nodded several times in rapid succession.

Rordan gaped at her.

Fikna said, “By Welkin, he understood! Rord I must say I am impressed by your progress with this youngster.” He covered his throat with the heels of his palms again.

Glenys said, “You have any bandages in that?”

Fikna handed her the mercy kit. “Help yourself.” Relief showed on his face.

She opened the kit and gave it a careful examination. “Nice. I like a kit that sees use. Now all I need is a friend to bandage me up too.” Glenys cast a teasing glance at Rordan.

“Sorry, I’m no physic.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

Fikna said, “Hmn. I fancy a test of this third eye I’ve acquired. I think I’ll go investigate the sanctum.”

Rordan got up. “Sounds good. Let’s go.”

Fikna said, “No Rord, this is private. You remain here. I think you’ve had enough excitement today. I recommend you pay a visit to the baths downstairs. We shall meet again later.”

Rordan became crestfallen.

Fikna smiled. “Cheer up Rord. Once I’m satisfied, I shall search for you here or in our room.”

Glenys said, “Be careful. And if I were you I’d get a real look at your throat. The academy physic lives on the grounds and has an office in the community hall.”

Fikna said, “I shall endeavor to make a stop there. And careful shall be my watchword.”

Rordan watched his bro’ bow and take his leave.

Glenys shook her head. “Gallants.”

A sense of shame came over Rordan. “Do you think romance is dumb?”

She stopped unrolling a bandage and stared at him as if he had been improper. Rordan watched her fight back emotions and compose herself.

“Romance is life itself for Leo. Have you ever been in love?”

The question pierced Rordan’s heart. For the first time, he realized he’d never had any more than a crush that had worked out poorly for him. Emptiness surrounded his feelings and drove his thoughts to failure.

Rordan realized his bungling extended to matters of romance and Abrafo’s mockery became clear to him. The shame constricted his vision.

He returned Glenys’ gaze and her eyes numbed his insecurity. His vision of wild love for her came back in a torrent and he knew he had fallen in love with her. A steady pressure throbbed in his head. Rordan intuited the rest of Glenys’ unspoken question with a thrill of insight.

“And lost it?” He choked on the words. His intuition told him he would know what she knew about love and he could do nothing to stop it. He had given love permission to enter as surely as if he’d invited a vampire into his house.

Glenys put the bandages back on the desk and sat down on the side of her bed. “Oh. Dear, I’m sorry. You know what it’s like. I had no idea. I keep thinking I’m the only one. My Leo selfishness”

She looked at him and he stepped backwards.

“It’s okay,” said Rordan. “I just...I mean. You sounded like you were making fun of my bro’. He takes it seriously.”

Glenys said, “I know. But I don’t need a gallant looking after me, putting me on a pedestal.”

“What do you need, then?”

Her face grew sad. “A miracle.”

Rordan heard Abrafo’s laughter and saw a bungler card flipping upright over and over. “Borus, keep an eye on her. I’ll be back.” He took the lamp and turned to walk away.

“Rordan.”

His face turned toward her. “What?”

“I don’t think romance is dumb.”

Borus stared at him, then at Glenys.

Rordan saluted them and walked away. In the hall, he thought about checking the poisoned tree. The risk seemed too great to him and he decided against it.

At the top of the stairwell he spotted Kea walking out of Middle Trow. Rordan stayed out of sight with a silent tread, the lamp held away from the doorway. He imagined the nighttime shadows of his cottage in Nerham concealing him.

Her face was awash in sincere worry. “What’s happening?” she said to herself. Then she passed from his view and range of hearing.

Rordan returned to his hall and passed by Manissa’s closed door. His thoughts of sneaking in to replace the dagger were crushed.

He entered his room and closed the door behind him. Rordan noticed Stig’s clutter had expanded to fill half the room. He sat at his desk and set down the lamp, then took out his writing kit and the new journal.

His talk with Glenys replayed in his mind as he stared at the wall in a trance. He twisted open the ink jar, assembled his pen, and peeled open the first page of the journal. Rordan wrote about his conflicted feelings.

A jumbled mess of emotions poured onto the page by his hand. Half-remembered quotes were put on paper to get his feelings into context. He strained to express a number of half-formed impressions about Glenys.

His exercise finished, he read his entry. The words were earnest and confused to him. He’d written about how the song of nature had broken him beyond repair.

One passage told about sensations of being watched by a person just out of his sight.

Rordan took out the illuminated map and studied the details. The map had changed since last he looked at it. In one box he had thought blank there now existed a scene of two people talking. One figure untied the other's hands of a thick rope.

A paper door had sprung up past it where there hadn't been one before. His finger plucked it open and behind the door he saw an illustration of a fearsome, robed monster holding a torch. The torch appeared to be made of human bones taken from another figure.

A spiral with an arrow pointing inwards at the line where the spiral began to coil hovered above the human figure. The display had been well crafted with colored inks. A tiny spot of gold had been glued to the central part of the spiral. To the side, a richly crafted brush stroke had created what appeared to be a plant stalk beside the human figure. The rainbow colors dazzled him.

The brush stroke had been accomplished through a heavy-handed use of ink at the right moments to mimic the natural segments of a plant stalk. Rordan guessed the ink held a solid mixture to give it more texture than normal. The result made the plant look more realistic and gave it a three-dimensional quality.

He closed the paper door. As Rordan marveled at the magic of the map, he noticed a lengthwise illustration of

an ocean seabed at the bottom. A mixture of icons and objects littered the sand beneath the waves.

Some were half-visible while others remained inscrutable. He made out an elaborate silver key inside a cratered moon, a bolt of brilliant lightning in the form of a spear, a splintered rood with a flower bursting out of it, and a sun with a feminine eye in the center.

Rordan put away the map and pulled out the illuminated wheel page. The cover sheet hadn't changed. He readied himself for a shock and raised it.

The scenes of torture had changed. The figures were all absent and the engines of torture were empty. The colors had changed into subdued hues and the painting of Dalla had been replaced by a framed message in the same arcane script as the rest of the wheel page.

He chuckled. "Come back later." There must be a limit to how much you could look at yourself in one day. He put the page away and his journal back in the daypack.

A knock sounded at the door. Rordan stood up and answered it. Stroma stood before him.

"Hello Rordan. May I come in?"

He smiled. "Sure, come right in. What's up?"

Stroma closed the door behind her and took a seat at his desk. "I hear you've been having some troubles with Kea, Manissa's guest."

He ran his hand through his matted hair. "Yeah, we aren't exactly getting along. She seems to have it in for me. I admit I'm having trouble putting up with it."

Stroma said, “Have you tried talking out your differences?”

Rordan realized this was an informal hearing and he eased into the mask of a reasonable person. “Yep. There seems to be some basic break between us. It’d probably take a third party to put out some common ground. I sure don’t know how to resolve it.”

Stroma nodded. “Is there anything you might have done or said that would have upset her?”

“I did a lot of funny things on the voyage here. Any of those might have upset her. I’ve already tried to talk to her about it and she went nuts. She even went off on my friend Glenys.”

Stroma said, “I heard. Maybe she’s insanely jealous of her.”

Rordan pulled up Stig’s desk chair. He sat down and said, “Jealous? Of what?”

Stroma said, “You’re a handsome guy who comes across really unusual. That can be intimidating to a girl. Especially if she likes you.”

His mind blanked at this concept.

Stroma smiled. “I bet you don’t even notice the effect you have on others. Your brother might be an obvious charmer, but you have a quieter gift of attraction. People want you to like them.”

Rordan said, “You’ve got to be jesting me.” He laughed, both flattered and confounded.

She gave him a warm smile. “You know I’m right. Try to be a little less strange and a little more attentive.”

“Kea already has a sweetheart. Some guy named Noss she met on the voyage.”

Stroma said, “Maybe that was to get your attention. Girls do funny things to make a guy notice them.”

He clenched his teeth lightly. Stroma’s counsel twisted the situation in a way he hadn’t counted on. “I guess. But that doesn’t make much sense to me. Why not just be upfront about things?”

“To you maybe. Imagine you’re attracted to a guy for reasons you can’t explain. And he’s strange! That can be hard to be upfront about.”

Rordan said, “I guess. That just seems weird to me.”

Stroma said, “Exactly. It seems weird—to you. Think about it. I’ll try and see if I can’t find out where she’s coming from. You might have some common ground after all.”

“Hey, anything you can tell me to make sense of this would be great.”

Stroma got up. “That’s what I’m here for, Rordo.”

He smiled. “Thanks for dropping by. I really appreciate it.”

She smirked at him. “Oh, and don’t think I didn’t notice your absence at the floor meeting. The next one will be mandatory.”

A sense of mild embarrassment came over him. “Sorry. My bro’ and I kind of had Depressing Club duty. I’ll make sure we make the next one...or something.”

Stroma peered at him. She departed and closed the door behind her.

Rordan decided he liked her a lot. She was kind and firm at the same time. He found a lot to admire in her.

He had a sudden attack of discomfort and turned around. A bugbear scrambled through the window, having swung in from the roof.

The bugbear spoke with a bitter, strained voice. “I thought that do-gooder prune would never leave. Time to pay up bungler.”

A flood of heat welled up in Rordan and he stretched his arm out toward the bugbear. A snap of brightness enveloped the room and the bugbear hurtled backwards. The demon managed a shriek before it evaporated mid-air into oily pink smoke.

Satisfied, Rordan said, “How about a blast instead?” It occurred to him his decision had become final. The bugbear had been on a collection run. He had told Master Beag to get lost and it would go to the next level of ugly from here.

CHAPTER 18: INTO THE WOODS

Rordan lowered himself into the hot water of the bath. His skin bristled at the sting of the immersion while his muscles tensed. He sank up to his neck in the water and the extreme heat worked its way all over his body. The steamy air stank of rotten eggs.

The bath had been built out of a smooth, grainy silver stone. He believed the stone was thick granite. The bath was four feet deep and wide in the pale, blue-gray tiled floor. It was walled in stone from the floor to the ceiling, creating a private niche.

A small wooden changing room adjoined the niche of the bath, with a worn latch-bolt on the door. His discarded clothing, a towel, and a folded pile of fresh clothes lay on a wooden bench in the changing room. He had placed his soap jar on the edge of the bath. Next to the jar was a wooden bucket.

He couldn't believe he had put this off for so long. The hot water brightened his spirits and reminded him of his playful, carefree years as a child. A week of grime melted off of him and his skin felt increasingly refreshed. Rordan stared off into space and let his worries lessen in a world of steam and wetness.

His thoughts came forward in a free association of contemplation. The blasting of the bugbear had weakened him. He recognized a pattern in his encounters with demons. They drained his energy and made it harder to act. Rordan decided there must be limits to how much a person could deal with demons and expect

to resist them. His inevitable struggle with Master Beag and Kea were more than he could handle.

He no longer considered Kea evil. She had lost control of herself and couldn't be reached. Rordan pondered if Master Beag were also evil. His mentor's threat had been evil and the things Master Beag and Kea had done were wrong. Rordan felt he must be missing a greater picture.

In his mind, Master Beag and Kea were crazy. He doubted if they were capable of truly evil intentions. Rordan acknowledged his stealing had been on purpose. According to his own people, theft was evil. He didn't know how to place his actions in relation to what he faced. His feelings matched the conflicted jumble of the first journal entry he'd made.

The noise of pupils in the hall stirred him from his inner reverie. The thought of new people to meet pleased him. He knew he had to be patient, but he still wanted to be part of the community of Boant Oak. When the noise of meet and greet died down, he resumed his private thoughts.

Rordan considered Dalla's offer and realized he had yet to churn himself for some time. He had been so overwhelmed by the voyage, his new school, and the forces of the hidden world that the need had slipped past him.

His mind let go of the thought and he washed his hair with the soap. He rinsed with the wooden bucket and reveled in the feeling of being clean.

The hot water turned his relaxation into weakness as sweat leaked out of him. Rordan faded into a deep meditation and imagined a solution to his dilemma. His intuition told him he couldn't plan the unexpected.

The heat became too much to bear and he stood up out of the water in a daze. Rordan leaned against a wall and recovered his thoughts. Steam rose from his body and the wetness of the bath mingled with sweat from his skin. He lifted the wooden plug and watched the water drain away.

His feelings turned toward Fikna's speech at the last revel of the Hearth Bunch. He tried to recall what his bro' had actually said. The theme of Fikna's speech had sounded like a plea for forgiveness. Rordan grew angry and confused. His bro' had no reason to apologize for anything.

He remembered how Fikna had not visited the school that day. The wind that had changed his bro's mind must have been otherworldly. Libra was an air sign, so the wind must have been a personal warning. It might have been that messenger, which he wouldn't have been able to see at the time.

The thought of the messenger helping his bro', but no one else, disturbed him. Couldn't another messenger have warned Elder Ofen? Varan's words about seeing what one wanted to see came back to him.

A faint ache moved through his body. He had a sensation of being the one who ought to have apologized.

His mind muddled about through a fog of unknowns and half-formed questions.

His mascot said, "It's okay. You were afraid."

"What was I afraid of?"

"Of failure."

Rordan hesitated. "What did I do wrong?"

"You pushed your work onto your foster-brother. He wasn't strong enough."

An ache ran down Rordan's back. "Is the fire my fault?"

"You are guilty and you are innocent."

"Why am I both?"

"We'll have to take this up later," said the mascot.

Rordan felt his mascot grow quiet. He made his way to the wooden bench and sat down. On the wooden wall opposite him were carved character designs of a Dimmurian nature. Tiny colonies of green algae grew in the weathered nooks and crannies.

He felt comforted by the presence of this small revelation. The muffled sounds of pupils lent a sanctified quality to the atmosphere. Around him, the antiquity of the ruins rose to life.

His attention focused on graffiti carved into the wood by a modern outlook. The vandal had scraped into the wood with a pointed instrument, 'I hate you wall. This wall munches!' Rordan stared. The absurdity of the words moved him.

Rordan towed himself from wet to damp, then examined his cut toe. The wound had healed over and no longer looked swollen. His bee sting had shrunk to a tiny red dot and itched.

He looked at his repaired shoe and felt grateful to Fais for her efforts. He hoped she was okay. His intuition told him he would see her again. An image of a huge sun made of stone and an arch of thick quartz blocks flashed through his thoughts.

His mascot said, “You’ll probably need her help to realize your destiny.”

Rordan said, “What’s my destiny?”

“There’s no way I can tell you that while you are alive. If you look into the future you are choosing a point of view. All I can do is help you in the short term.”

“You just told me about Fais,” said Rordan. “That means you know things I don’t. How much do you know?”

His mascot said, “I see what you see but do not notice. My job is to assist you in your journey by pointing out the details. You had a hunch Fais meant something to you, but only now did you think about her. Now you notice the connection the two of you shared. The image in your mind comes from a far away time in response to your need. I guessed you were struggling to hold onto the connection and I lent you a word of encouragement.”

Rordan said, “What does it mean? Will I see Fais again?”

His mascot said, “You’ve seen the stone sun before in one of your lessons. I don’t know what connection it has with you or Fais. You want to see her again and her secret friend thought it would probably happen. The forces of linked destiny have a powerful attraction.”

Rordan felt a sudden thrill. “Wait a minute, her secret friend? Does she have a mascot too?”

“Everyone has a helper sent from nowhere to help them in this life. The details are as varied and as similar as people are.”

“What else did her secret friend say?”

His mascot said, “This is a good time to bring something else up. You have a strong talent for seeing more than most people. The secrets they hide from others or themselves come to you naturally. A lot of these secrets are none of your business and can hurt if brought out at the wrong time. Be careful and take responsibility for what you see.

“Her secret friend said what you already guessed, but didn’t recognize. You noticed you made a strong impression on her and she fixed your shoe because she wanted to help. From that you harbored a secret thought that she might help you in the future—that this small exchange is the seed of greater things. But there’s no telling if that seed will grow or not.”

Rordan said, “Wow. Okay that makes sense then. Thanks. Hey, does Glenys or Borus or my bro’ have helpers?”

“Yes. Helpers have to agree to be seen. Or you have to find their hiding place, which is usually impolite.”

A moment of fear clutched at Rordan.

His mascot said, “Yes, even Master Beag and Kea have helpers. Everyone is called and everyone is accepted if they listen. The disease of their souls has sickened the well their helpers drink from.”

Rordan said, “Do I have a well?”

“You have a pond. Yes, I drink from it. Our friendship is a mutual exchange.”

Another question came forward. Rordan held it back. “Maybe you’re right, I should be careful. I’ll let them tell me if they find out. Secrets are holy things.”

His mascot said, “Good, you’re listening. See you next time.” Rordan felt his mascot disappear into what he guessed was its hiding place.

He pulled on the fresh set of clothes. His body moved slow. The sound of two young women outside distracted him. They talked about a musical loyalty he didn’t share. Rordan had the feeling there were many personal tidepools throughout Boant Oak. He imagined he would come to know some of them in time and many more he would not.

Rordan left the bath niche behind and entered the hall. A middle-aged attendant woman with pale skin and gray hair walked past him. She carried a mop and a bucket. Her face looked weary and distant to him. He felt a sense of discomfort and looked past her.

He returned to his room. His bath things had just been put away when he heard a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

Fikna came inside and closed the door behind him. He carried his own daypack with him. His throat bore a pair of darkening bruises. “At last I locate you Rord. From your appearance I gather you enjoyed the bathing facilities. Magnificent, are they not?”

Rordan gave his bro’ a weak smile. “I feel like a wet noodle. How was your walk?” He used the towel to dry his hair a little more.

Fikna sat down on Rordan’s chair. He took a deep breath. “I am at a loss to describe my adventure. I visited the sanctum. Partly to familiarize myself with the layout and partly to pray for guidance. The sacred architecture is a splendid affair. The mixture of styles does a shrine great justice. We have nothing like it in Nerham.”

Rordan straightened out his hanging towel. “What did you see bro’?”

Fikna looked at his wrists. The scratches had scabbed over. He grabbed his knees and stared ahead in confusion. “I met a most unusual girl from Kgotla. She wore a nonconformist minister’s robe, only the robe resembled a free-flowing dress. Her features were uncommonly beautiful, breathtakingly so. She appeared around my age. Yet, I reeled in awe of her as though she were timelessly ancient.

“While she stood there, a subtle and ethereal music played on the pipe organ. However, I could discern no players. There blew a fresh draft as if the doors were open. Yet they were obviously closed. The breath of wind was rich to my senses. Much like full blossoming, late summer flowers.” His eyes closed and he took another deep breath. He smiled and opened his eyes again.

Rordan ran a hand through his damp hair and sat down on his bed. “Did she say anything?”

Fikna said, “She did. The girl approached and greeted me by name, even though we hadn’t been introduced. I asked her to excuse me, for I was praying for guidance. A long conversation between us followed. Her voice sounded pleasant and her speech well mannered to my ears. However, I have a difficult time remembering everything we discussed.”

Rordan peered at his bro’. “Try. Hold onto it and remember. It’ll come back to you.”

Fikna said, “You speak truly. When I concentrate, I recall fragments of the whole. She mentioned I didn’t need guidance. I needed to guide others to find my way. She pointed out my marks and said they were my signposts. I should trust in my own doubts to lead others to the correct location.”

“Did she give you anything? Tell you to do something?”

Fikna said, “Yes. That was an odd occurrence. She mentioned it was my birthday, which I assured her was

incorrect. However, she insisted. Said today I had been born for the second time and it was a call for celebration.” He shook his head.

“And she gave you a present?”

“No,” said Fikna. “I asked her what I should do. She said that perhaps the question isn’t what I should do but what I might do. The girl directed me downstairs, to a meeting room.

“Down in that room waited an enormous lion in a cage, larger even than the stuffed lion in the Parcwood observatory. In front of the cage, within reach of the lion’s paws, was a stacked pile of presents. The sheer variation of different types of artistry in those presents was breath-takingly beautiful.

“The lion spoke to me then, in a voice like the rumbling of an earthquake. He said it was seldom those he marked ever returned to him. I asked when he had marked me and for what reason. The lion said this action had been performed a long time ago, so that he might return to me what was entrusted to him. In a holy daze I reached forward and took a present.”

Rordan shivered.

Fikna said, “I returned to the girl upstairs. She told me I was valorous to ask and so this time I was given. I would recover what was lost and bring the harmony back.”

“So where’s the present?”

Fikna pulled a wrapped package out of his daypack. The paper was dyed marbled colors of bright red and yellow. Tough twine tied the package together. “Whatever the contents, there is ample weight to this unusual gift.”

Rordan said, “Open it.” Excitement and curiosity played across his face.

Using Trad’s knife, Fikna cut the twine. He tore the paper free and placed it in a pile on the bed. In his hands he held a wooden box. The wood had a dark, flat gray color. There were many cracks in the surface and small pieces had fallen off all along the edges. The box gave off a sharp, cedar-like fragrance. Fikna slid the top of the box off, revealing an object wrapped in a frayed and dirty white cloth.

Rordan’s heart beat with excitement. His eyes strained impatiently at every move Fikna made to unveil the prize within.

The young gallant moved aside the cloth and held up a candle. The candle was ten inches high and four inches wide. It had been formed from a slightly translucent, faded red wax. The room filled with a powerful smell of resin. He held the candle in both hands and examined it. The wick had been burned before.

In a hushed whisper Fikna said, “Rord, is this real?”

Rordan said, “It is. A holy relic. A very special candle.”

Fikna said, “I quite agree. This matter surpasses me. Perhaps the might of Deiws himself is in this candle.”

“Or the mystery.”

Fikna looked up at Rordan with a stunned expression. His eyes stared vacantly. He put the candle back and returned the closed box to his daypack, along with the wrappings. “Rord, you once tried to show me a paper. Might I peruse it again?”

Rordan produced the map for Fikna. His heart beat fast with acute anticipation as to what Fikna might see.

His bro’ examined the illuminated map. “Good Welkin. This paper is wonderful, unbelievably so. Do you comprehend the meaning of the illustrations?”

Rordan shrugged. “Not really, but it seems to be an indicator of what I’ve been going through. I can’t read the script.”

Fikna caressed the texture of the upraised portions. He drew in a breath and exhaled in awe. “Amazing. Has it occurred to you Rord that we have received gifts of incalculable value? To what end?”

Rordan looked away. “I’m aware of the value. The end must be important, whatever it is. It’s really cool to have a special treasure that no one else can see. But I admit; it’s nice to have someone to share the secret with.”

Fikna said, “Allow me to apologize again for doubting you earlier. Behold the fabulous detail. The miniature pen strokes. It’s masterful. I wonder what the map reveals? Could there be a forgotten neighborhood at the end of it?”

Rordan said, “I don’t know. The map changes over time. I wouldn’t be surprised if your candle does too.”

Fikna’s eyes widened. “What you suggest is nothing short of fantastic. How might such things occur?”

Rordan’s neck tingled at the base. “I don’t know. Magic seems too cheap a word. But until I saw your candle, I wouldn’t have thought any of it Divine Regard either. There are pictures on the map now that weren’t there before. Maybe things will appear on the candle too after a while.”

Fikna said, “Now that’s a prospect I dare say is most astounding. Astounding!

“That lion. Despite its captivity, I am somewhat puzzled and disturbed by its presence in the shrine. I think there is a mystery there which requires discovery.”

He studied the map. “You will relate to me what you discover won’t you? It may transpire that we shall both benefit.”

“You know I will,” said Rordan. “Though right now all it is are a bunch of weird pictures.”

Fikna strained at the map. “This man in the forest appears to be screaming in torment or fright. If this is an event on either of our courses, I hesitate to look forward to it. And this island with the six-headed monster reminds me of that blasted island we spent the night on. You didn’t meet any six headed monsters did you?”

Rordan smiled. “No, but the pictures may be symbolic. I haven’t unlocked the secret yet.”

“And look at this boxed illustration of a gigantic spider-woman. Frights, what a monster. Not the sort of creature I’d like to come across.”

The violet and blue shades of the middle-aged woman’s dress impressed Rordan. The spindly legs and mandibles in shadow did not.

Fikna shook his head and returned the map to Rordan. “I am unable to make any further sense of it. It is an unparalleled work of art. A shame you didn’t go into a hermitage. Your daubing skills might have reached such a level of perfection.”

Rordan put the map away. “I don’t know why I stopped daubing so much. I just lost the spark of it one day.” He paused. Explaining his theory would only upset his bro’. “I can still illustrate, but not like that. I’m not even sure anyone alive today could accomplish that level of artistry. For all we know, some fantom did the work.”

Fikna said, “As it would appear. Such miracles make for quite an adventure.”

Rordan said, “Yep. But what else happened at the sanctum? That wasn’t the whole story, was it?”

Fikna started with a bob of his head. “Oh, good Welkin no! I had quite forgotten again. The revelation had slipped my mind and yet enough remains for retrieval. She was indescribably lovely Rord. Her beauty was such that I feared I might swoon with rapture.”

Rordan kept silent and rolled his eyes internally.

“After my encounter with the caged lion, I finally asked if she would introduce herself. She seated herself beside me and said her name was Helod. She mentioned meeting me when I was an adorable little boy. One of her fondest expectations had been to see what kind of young man I might become.”

Rordan said, “Wow, so she knew who you were. That’s more than I got from my fantom friend.”

Fikna said, “I inquired as to whether she was my guardian messenger. She laughed like the ringing of tiny bells. Such delicate laughter!” He sighed.

“Helod said there were many kinds of messengers and that she was a guardian of messengers. Apparently, even the messengers of Deiws need a hand occasionally.

“Because I was a special case, the messengers near me needed extra assistance. She took my wrists in her hands and said I would test the messengers severely. I needed to bear my burdens bravely, for Deiws had great need of me.”

Rordan said, “For what?”

Fikna smiled. “I had become so awestruck I forgot to ask. The last thing we conversed upon was you. That I should always trust your purity.”

Rordan frowned. “You know I’m with you bro’. Always. But what did she mean by purity?”

Fikna said, “Enough tales for the moment, Rord. Let us check in on Borus and Glenys. We shall have the

opportunity to relate our experiences while having dinner with them. My appetite has come forward.”

Rordan nodded and got to his feet. He stretched long and wide. “Yawn. That bath really got me all relaxed. Yep, let’s go see them and get some food. I’m hungry even for slop. We can talk about the rest of this later.”

The two of them made their way out the door. Rordan locked it, then fell in behind his bro’. He gave the door to Manissa’s room a glance and suffered a brief apprehension about Kea’s whereabouts.

The door to Glenys’ room remained open and two lamps generated light. Sinna rested on her bed with a scraggly teenage boy sitting beside her. Glenys sat on the side of her own bed and appeared in better spirits.

Her hand and elbows were bandaged, and she had changed into trousers. Borus lay sideways with her head on Glenys’ leg. The girl had a lazy expression. Glenys stroked Borus’ hair.

Fikna smiled and stretched out his hand in a flourish. “I notice you are much improved, dear Glenys. It strikes me as a blessing to find you so well.”

Glenys said, “A little better. Though now I’m starved.”

Rordan held back a smile. “An appetite is a good sign, or so I’m told.”

“By whom, I wonder.” She rolled her eyes at him.

Sinna and her friend looked confused.

Glenys said, “Fikna, this is my bunkmate Sinna and her friend Coll.”

Fikna addressed them. “I apologize for intruding. We are your bunkmate’s good friends and as such mean her no harm. We intend only to escort Glenys to the meal hall. Pay us no heed and continue about your business if it pleases you.”

Rordan believed the scraggly boy with dyed, light brown hair looked like a negligent. It occurred to him Sinna probably shared the pastime and they would appreciate some time alone to enjoy their preferred activity. “We’ve got things to talk about bro’. Glenys would probably want to be there. Sorry, but we may be a while.”

Sinna brightened up and said, “That’s okay. We weren’t planning to be around. But thanks.”

Glenys looked at Fikna’s bruises. “Did you drop by the physic?”

Fikna looked at her and said, “I thought the wisest course of action would be to see how things progress. I feel much improved.”

“Am I going to have to make a request?”

“Your concern is the only request needed, my devoted Glenys. Are you ready to partake of tonight’s sustenance?”

She patted Borus on the shoulder and the girl sat up. “Of course. Lets go get something to eat.”

Rordan slouched and drooped his eyelids. “Yep, slop is the way to go.”

The four of them departed together. They made their way down the stairwell, then out the side entrance. While Fikna led Borus to the side door to the meal hall, Rordan and Glenys headed to the food line with their papers out.

Rordan grabbed an empty table and guarded it. He watched Glenys let Fikna and Borus inside, as well as two other guests who went off to meet friends at another table.

She accompanied him to the food line. He grabbed an extra helping of meat in cheese sauce with an additional piece of bread and utensils.

“We can get our two spongers more on the second go-around,” said Glenys. She took a mug of warm beer and an extra piece of cake.

“Yep. This should take the edge off their hunger.” He followed her back to the table. Fikna accepted the mug and cake from Glenys with a bow. Rordan passed the extra utensils and helping of meat to his bro’. The extra bread went to Borus.

They fed themselves without conversation. Fikna ate with small, dignified bites and kept his napkin spread out over his lap. Glenys chowed her food with gusto. Borus munched on her bread and spread crust crumbs on the table.

Rordan watched Borus eat. He felt proud of the boy and smiled. His hunger overcame him and he took a bite out of the sliced meat. To his surprise, it had a tasty

flavor. He imagined the meat had come from an animal whose death had not disturbed the fantoms.

Borus eyed Rordan's helping.

"Would you like some?" He offered a piece at the end of his fork.

The girl snatched the piece from the fork and wolfed it down. When Rordan offered her more, she gulped the pieces down without chewing.

Glenys finished her meal and looked at Fikna. "How did your walk go?"

Rordan noticed his bro's awkward twitch. "He had another vision. It was pretty cool."

"I'm falling behind here," said Glenys.

Rordan said, "You'll have one. I feel it. I don't know why, but the four of us are special for some reason. We're meant to be together." He finished off the pulpy innards of a shrunken potato.

Borus gobbled down the last piece of meat on Rordan's plate.

Glenys shut her eyes as if a decision had passed through her. She opened them. "I hope so. I don't want to miss any of the fun. I'm not complaining. These past two days have been jolly."

Fikna said, "You need not worry, devoted Glenys. Your place is beside us. I think when you join the third eye bunch, all four of us shall become a revel of epic proportions." He winked at her and ate his last forkful of meat.

Glenys said, “We’re already a revel of epic proportions. After I get in on this magical adventure I’ll bump us up to legendary.”

Fikna swallowed his food and smiled at her. “Well said. Although I must warn you, there is an uncomfortable element to these experiences.” He stuck a fork into the moist cake before him and took a bite.

Rordan started on his cake as well. “He’s right. Be ready for a shock. Accept what happens, but don’t let it rule you. Stay true to who you are and don’t flinch if what you see is weird.”

“You make it sound like a chore,” said Glenys. “I’ll have to see for myself what’s got you two so down. Until then, I feel like I’m missing out on the excitement.”

Borus looked at their empty plates and licked her lips.

Rordan got up. “How about some more Borus?”

The girl smiled at him and looked expectant.

His hand went up and he closed his eyes for a brief moment. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

He walked up to the start of the food line and got behind a pair of pupils. His turn came up and he got another plate of meat and cheese sauce.

A voice behind him said, “You’re the guy who’s been bugging Kea.”

Rordan turned around. The large menga from the Grill last night stood behind him in line. “You here to scare me too?”

“Whoa, hold on there. My name’s Flann. You’re Rordan, right?”

“Yes, I’m Rordan. What do you want?” He noted Flann’s size and strong build. The man could easily beat him up.

Flann said, “I wanted to meet you, that’s all. See what kind of clumser was getting Kea all excited. And after having met you, I don’t get at all why she’s so off on you.”

Rordan clenched his teeth lightly. “She’s off on me because she’s not facing the facts. And I’m not a clumser, I’m a pup. Goodbye.” He walked back to his table and tried to keep from losing his temper.

Fikna said, “What did that scoundrel say to you?”

“He wanted to meet the guy who was messing with Kea. That’s about it.” Rordan put down his tray. Borus eyed the slices of meat with interest.

An angry frown creased Fikna’s face. He got up out of his chair.

Glenys said, “Don’t.”

Fikna moved to intercept Flann. The young man was on his way to a table of pupils Rordan didn’t recognize.

He got up and followed behind his bro’.

The pupils at the table watched Fikna.

In his clearest voice Fikna said, “I advise you to cease speaking to my brother Rordan, or my friend Glenys, again.”

Flann looked at the gallant with a calm expression. “No need to get upset. I was trying to be friendly.”

Fikna’s eyes clouded with irritation. “Far from it. You are scaring people I care about. If I hear additional stories about you I’ll settle your score. Is that understood?”

The pupils at the table tensed. Rordan could feel the approach of a struggle. He didn’t see how drawing Trad’s knife in here would end in their favor.

Flann shrugged. “Okay. If you want me to stay away I will. Don’t get so excited; it was nothing.” He walked around Fikna and sat down at the table.

Rordan didn’t feel so good. Flann had chickened out, but not in a way that suggested things were over. Added to Noss’ own gnarring, this looked worse than ever.

Fikna walked away. Rordan came in behind his bro’ and back to their seats. Glenys gave Fikna a hard look.

Borus scooped the last of the second helping into her mouth. She chomped and chewed with her mouth open, then gulped it all down. Her chin and lips were smeared with cheese sauce. She looked up at Rordan with a wide-eyed expression of phony guilt.

Fikna and Glenys stared at her. Rordan held back a chuckle and offered her a napkin.

The girl’s stomach made mild sounds of digestion. She looked at the napkin, then at Rordan.

He wiped at her face and she squirmed. Her hands pushed his away.

Fikna recovered from his shock. “I dare say. Borus still has numerous habits to unlearn.”

Glenys said, “Never mind Borus. Was that little show of gallantry worth the risk?”

Fikna said, “I’ve lost patience with these ruffians hassling us at every turn. I’d have shown that gaif a thing or two about Seltish manners. But you can’t act against a coward who slithers aside. Glenys? Rord? If he so much as passes near you the wrong way, you inform me.”

She put her hand on Fikna’s forearm. “No. If he bothers us again we’ll go to the patrollers. I’m not going to play with him.”

Fikna said, “In any event, facing off the insufferable irritant gave me no small amount of satisfaction.”

Glenys said, “Fikna, I mean it. Don’t get yourself hurt. That man’s not worth your trouble.”

Fikna said, “Fear not, Glenys. I’d have made certain the wretched mengan paid for his allotment of fun at our expense.”

Rordan had his doubts.

“I’m not questioning your abilities,” said Glenys. “You almost started a struggle there. Remember what Nyah said. Don’t let these people draw you into a scene. You’re only making things worse. I insist you behave like a gentleman and not act unless they force our hand.”

Her tone of voice struck Fikna still. “Of course. I apologize. I understand I may have erred and am at your service.”

Glenys said, “Your apology is accepted on the condition that you remember yourself. Rordan needs you to be strong and polite for his sake. And my own peace of mind. Are we cool?”

Fikna bowed his head. “We are agreed.”

Glenys said, “Good. Let’s move on. Rordan, what did you do while I patched myself up? I was worried about you.”

Rordan said, “I discovered the baths in Radix Trow. It was mind-blowing.”

She smiled. “I know. It’s a luxury. I like your grubby side, but you look so much happier when you’re clean.”

He chuckled. “Thanks.”

They heard the long, distant cry of a wild beast. Rordan recognized it as belonging to the giant lizard Borus and he had seen.

The youngster’s expression changed to excitement. She stood up and trotted away without them, making a sound like laughter and grunting.

Rordan stared as Borus walked out the door to the meal hall and disappeared from view.

Fikna said, “What transpired? Where is our friend headed off to?”

Rordan played with his fork. Despite his intuition telling him Borus needed to be alone, he felt left behind by the boy. “He’s hearing a call meant only for him. We have to let him go. It might be a fantom she met.”

Glenys said, “Will she, I mean will he be okay?”

Rordan said, “I don’t know. He can’t speak. I can only guess what Borus sees. If he’s having a vision, then this one is his to go through. I only know that I’m with him no matter what happens.”

Fikna steepled his fingers together and sat in thought.

Glenys said, “And if you saw who I truly was? Would you be with me no matter what?”

Rordan looked her in the eyes as if challenged. The raw beauty in her gaze pierced his heart with feelings he couldn’t explain. He looked at his plate and said, “I had a vision that night we were in the Grill. The vision showed me that I had a limitless depth of love for people. That vision scared me, because I never knew what I was capable of until then.

“Now I know there’s a part of me that wouldn’t hesitate to love someone and would bear any burden to experience that love. I looked at you and I saw I would love you forever no matter what.”

He experienced both relief and vulnerability.

Glenys said, “I also love you, Rordan. I love you as a wild berry patch that grows on the side of a volcano’s ashen slope. You shake my life to the core and awaken in me nourishing passions. A firestorm has been stirred up because of you.”

A thunderclap resounded outside. Glenys laughed to herself. “Okay, whatever. I can do this.” She smiled,

touching her medallion with the tips of the fingers of both her hands.

Rordan felt a hot breeze across his face, even though they were indoors. He sat in stunned quiet while Fikna stared at the crumbs of his devoured cake with regret.

The lamps of the meal hall faded to an indistinct light and the conversations of those around them drew further away. A vision they could all perceive pushed through to their attention.

They sat on carved balls of cracked stone at an enormous rectangular stone table, in a field of tall and red-brown grass. Thunderheads darkened the horizon and the breeze blew dust and pollen through parched air. A pair of men twenty feet tall, dressed in elephant skins, stood nearby. They had yellow-brown skin, long dark hair, and flat stocky features. Their expectant gaze was fixed on Glenys.

Her eyes grew glassy and wide. “Rordan, I’m not what I thought I was. I don’t know what I am anymore. But I swear to you, by all I hold close to my heart I won’t let anyone hurt you. Or anyone you care about, no matter what. I would face any spirit or person, no matter the cost. I’ll find a way to keep us safe from harm.”

A powerful sensation of envelopment by a circle of barbs in a hot windstorm passed through Rordan. Her eyes soothed him with their fierce devotion and he welcomed the shockwave she sent through him. Glenys’ potent, lovely feelings buffeted his heart like an avalanche of burning splinters.

She let down her defenses without fear or doubt and allowed them to see what they could. The room transformed into an other world of heat, wind, and flashes of lightning. Fikna turned away from her and bowed his face into his hands.

Rordan felt an instant of worry over his bro's reaction. His sight drowned in Glenys' revelation. A glimpse of a dangerous girl, wise beyond her years and possessed of marked knowledge passed before him. He had an impression of worldly experience, a tremendous sorrow, and a rebellious streak that tormented her. The scope of her strength overwhelmed him.

His sight moved past her outer shell of being and he experienced her innermost soul. He stood on the side of a mountain near the peak and before a small lake of turquoise blue water. A strong wind blew past him and the low sun illuminated a nearby snowcapped mountain range in pink and orange colors.

Glenys sat with eyes closed on a broken piece of boulder beside the lake with her back to him. She wore only a long white and sea blue scarf around her waist, and a gray-white feather in her hair. Her scarf and hair blew in the wind while the sun shone golden orange on her skin.

He noticed scars on her shoulders, arms and thighs. Her body revealed to him the long-term discipline of a sportsman. He realized she had at least the same level of swordsman skill as his bro'.

“I dreaded your coming,” said Glenys. Her potent voice carried through the wind without trouble. “Now I know I can’t hide here anymore.”

Rordan ached to speak to her. His mascot held him still by the shoulder and he endured the temptation.

She stood up and faced the wind with her eyes closed. Her hands held her hair from whipping around her face. “I can’t tell if I’m too late or if I have another chance.”

A voice inside Glenys said, “Open your eyes woman, you aren’t alone.”

She opened her eyes and Rordan followed her gaze to a huge crevice, out of which padded a large and dapple-gray wolf. The wolf studied her with intense interest. Rordan perceived intelligence in the wolf’s eyes and he shivered.

The wolf trotted up to her. Rordan watched them interact together in an arcane, heathen process he could barely grasp. Glenys spoke in a softened voice with a language he didn’t recognize. The wolf sniffed at her and made gruff noises. They strained and struggled against one another in a dance he believed was a test. The wolf’s antics were not tame and he feared for her despite the vigor in her limbs.

Glenys and the wolf reached an understanding and they became friendly toward one another. She hugged the wolf and the beast wagged its tail. A sudden gust of wind blew through and seized the feather from her hair. Glenys watched the feather tumble through the air over the edge of the mountain and out of sight.

The face she made pierced Rordan with sadness.

She looked in the direction of the mountain peak for a moment and clutched at her chest. A look of determination appeared on her face. Glenys retrieved a small line-bag from behind the boulder where she had been sitting. She pulled on a pair of shoes from her line-bag. An outsider's melodic, atonal song sprang from her lips and she marched up the slope toward the peak. The wolf accompanied her.

Rordan intuited the remaining part of her journey would be difficult. He realized how serious and in doubt the outcomes of a vision could be. The extent of his responsibility for the change in his friends had eluded him until now. Rordan felt his conscience bother him.

His sight blurred into a golden light and he slipped into a trance. Rordan lost consciousness for a few seconds, then regained his sight. His legs pressed against the ball of stone he sat upon and he rested his curled hands upon the table before him. Pressure throbbed in his head, sinuses pounding. A wave of fear passed through his stomach as he sank into himself.

Fikna said, "What a transformation of the world the meeting of ourselves must be. I cannot help thinking you will experience exaltation and misery. As for myself, I see little save humiliation."

Rordan looked up at his bro' and recoiled with a silent gasp. Fikna sat downtrodden, without clothes. His skin hung in flaps against a starved body and thin cracks lined

his face. Blank eyes stared from Fikna's skull. He looked like a fresh corpse.

Glenys said, "Fikna, do you want to be a victim?"

Indecision crinkled Fikna's face. "I don't know what I want. What can I want?"

Rage flared into Rordan. He felt a strong urge to attack his bro's problems. The need to destroy caused him to shake and blush. Tears streamed down his face onto the table.

A smile of unrestrained affection shone on Glenys' face. "You're so wild, dearest Rordan. Don't be afraid, I'll watch after your proud brother."

Fikna gaped at Glenys as if he'd been struck. He choked on his words. "Explain yourself."

Her arms curled toward her chest and she shifted sideways to face him. "You want people to look up to you. You want them to like you. Your greatest fear is a lack of respect."

Fikna sat forward and sprawled his arms upon the table. "I'm so disappointed. I don't want to apologize for my life anymore."

Glenys said, "You're being difficult. Don't you know how much it hurts Rordan to see you suffer?"

Anger and sadness overwhelmed Rordan; he lost consciousness. The song of nature carried him along a wave of heartbroken music and he retreated into dark tunnels of half-dream and anxiety.

He opened his eyes to find himself standing in an underground aqueduct with water up to his ankles. A shadowed diamond down the passage bathed him in warm, ultramarine light. Stillness calmed Rordan's fearful turmoil.

A scaly creature the size of a huge dog stared up at him. Its circular shaped eyes glowed with the same light as the diamond. The creature had a long, solid tail and small, clawed arms with sharp fins behind them. It had a large snout and in its mouth were many rows of dark white teeth.

His mascot came out of him and said, "You have never been here before. You see in the dark but you do not understand. The egg cracks and spills its contents upon you. You have been fertilized."

A sensation of filth came over Rordan and he looked at his hands. They were dirty; his arms too. The cool water on his feet relaxed him and he had an urge to lie in the water and rest.

Rordan said, "You're right, I don't get it. What's that diamond over there and what's this monster?"

The mascot said, "The diamond child is a being inside you. The creature is a hungry snapper you must make friends with."

Rordan tensed and considered the snapper. The creature bolted forward and sped off into the darkness of the passage behind him.

He leaned against the wall of the aqueduct. “Mascot, you said something about an egg. What do you mean I’ve been fertilized?”

The mascot said, “The egg is a treasure you found when you were young. The power inside the egg has changed you and now you are growing.”

Rordan said, “I don’t know if I can handle this.”

The mascot said, “I don’t know either.”

Moisture clung to Rordan’s skin and mixed with the dirt to form a thin layer of damp slime. The sensation of impurity bothered him. He walked toward the diamond and the water splashed around his ankles. His mascot padded on four legs behind him.

He picked up the diamond and held it before him in a trance. The song of nature came back to him and thrilled his heart. His own chord in the song came forth and Rordan entered another vision.

The flaw in the song of nature showed itself to him as a crack in the world, out of which poured forth fire and smoke. A deafening clamor echoed from the crack and the earth shook as the crack split in two directions at once.

The vision loomed in size before Rordan and a sense of futility overcame him. He returned to his body sitting at the meal table with his friends. The sound of pupils going about their business came back to his ears. Glenys held Fikna’s hand and sat at ease with herself. Fikna’s eyes were tired and bleary. His shoulders slouched forward.

Fikna said, “I didn’t know I was so empty. So needy, so worthless.” He bowed his head and exhaled a long breath.

The sight turned Rordan’s feelings to ashes. He stood up and said, “I’m going for a walk. Suddenly I don’t feel so good.”

Glenys’ eyes pierced him with heartfelt warning. She stood up and said, “We’re coming with you. It isn’t safe for you to walk around like this.”

“No. I’m going off by myself. I’ll be okay.” Rordan hardly recognized his own voice.

She considered him with narrow eyes. “You’re out of your mind right now. This isn’t the best time to go off on your own.”

Rordan said, “I mean it. I’ll be fine.”

She regarded him. “Be careful, dear. You aren’t alone.”

He left the hall and made his way downhill, along the paths to the amphitheater and beyond.

A stony sharpness punctuated his emptied feelings. Rordan knew he would be cross with anyone who spoke to him. He also knew no such encounter would happen.

His steps returned him to the field he had reached from the forest earlier today. A pair of teenagers threw a disc back and forth to each other and paid him no heed. The sun’s progress touched the tree line. He imagined time still remained for an exploration of the woods.

Rordan believed he should be more tired than he was. With a backward glance, he took the trail into the woods.

Gravel and wood chips overlaid the path. The tree trunks were covered in soft chartreuse mosses and deep emerald vines. He walked into a quiet arboreal tunnel interrupted by thick roots and uneven patches of ground. The trees swallowed up the outside world behind him.

His thoughts unwound and he considered what had happened in the meal hall. He believed Glenys had opened her third eye and somehow been able to share her vision with them. The events in the field and on the mountain came back to him and he replayed them in his head. She stood above them all, he believed.

Rordan sighed. He considered her reaction to his confession a statement of deep tenderness, without overt romance. Glenys had welcomed him into a secret side of her in a way he didn't understand. Her lush inner imagery and complex nature fascinated him. He had to know more.

His encounter with the diamond made no sense to him. The image of a crack in the earth disturbed his feelings. Glenys must have seen him in the aqueduct as he had watched her on the mountainside. He felt vulnerable and hoped she wouldn't hurt him.

Fikna had turned away from Glenys' overture. Rordan guessed he must have remained at the stone table with the two giants. His intuition told him everyone's view had grown beyond easy explanation.

The conversation between Glenys and his bro' struck a chord with him. Fikna had been revealed to be a victim and Rordan flashed back to the horror he had confided to Glenys.

The experience had destroyed his bro'. For a long time Fikna had been fearful of the outside world and of people, especially the ones he knew. Rordan remembered how he had to bring meals for his bro' and clean up after him.

He came to a split in the path. "Damn it. These choices! There's only one way, damn it. Make things better!" His voice sounded harsh to him.

Rordan chose to walk to the left and continued on. He stopped and a savage sound of rage mixed with anguish came out of him.

The memory of his own reaction to the attack came back to him. He had withdrawn into himself and taken to dangerous treks in the woods around his neighborhood. There had been crying. Also conversations with Deiws that had gone unanswered.

He leaned against a tree trunk and fought against a resurgence of hot rage. His bro' had been a victim again and no matter what Glenys said, he blamed himself. Fikna's starved appearance and sad reaction suggested great damage had been done to his bro's self-protection.

"Stop torturing him Deiws! Let him go!"

His intuition told him not everyone should look at who they were. He had believed everyone should have the experience and now uncertainty clouded his mind.

Self-imposed blindness might be a good reaction in some cases.

Remorse poured into his heart. He wished he hadn't been so excited about the prospect of visions for everyone. The correct decision always eluded him.

His mascot said, "The choice is not always yours to make."

Rordan said, "You mentioned that before. This stuff that's happening to me and now to other people. Why should it happen without any chance to fight or refuse that change?"

"Answering why questions is not my job."

"Okay," said Rordan, "let me say that again." He calmed himself a little. "How does this thing work? There doesn't seem to be a way to say no."

His mascot said, "Sometimes you have no choice and sometimes you do. You gave Fikna and Glenys choices and they decided to take a look. Varan was serious when he said this is difficult. You don't know what you'll see when you look into the center."

Rordan said, "I never wanted Fikna to suffer this again. I wanted Deiwos to take my life so that my bro' would be okay."

The mascot said, "I know. I was there when you offered."

Surprise shocked Rordan upright. "How long have you been with me?"

“I’ve always been with you. I told you, everyone gets a helper.”

Rordan said, “I thought I was alone in the woods.”

“Sometimes you were. The fantoms couldn’t stand your grief and I needed a break too now and then.”

Rordan said, “I can’t protect Fikna! I love Glenys, but neither can she. And I can’t help him anymore than I already am. I want him to be okay and fun again...like he was.”

His mascot said, “In your growing light, Fikna has a chance to choose to be an orphan.”

Rordan swallowed. Tears streamed down his cheeks and he struggled over his next words. “What does that mean?”

“Orphans are exploited and victimized because they have no hearth to guide them. They are lost souls. Fikna can choose to accept what he is and transcend it. You can’t carry him anymore. He has to learn to walk on his own and take the risk of being hurt again.”

“I have to go into the woods,” said Rordan.

“I know.” His mascot retreated back inside its hiding place and disappeared.

Rordan continued on his way. Overgrowth narrowed the path. The gravel and woodchips gave way to a dirt trail. The air grew heavy with the smell of damp earth.

He stopped to take in the ambiance and believed the light enough for more exploring. The girl he had seen

through the window of the office returned to his thoughts.

The very same girl stood up out of the foliage and smiled at him.

He uttered a noise of surprise. Rordan could only see her from the shoulders up. Her strong fragrance and the sparkle of her tunic dazzled him.

She said, "I've been hunting for sunshine crystals to wear. They're difficult to find this close to sunset, but are more fair for having survived the day." Her words were alluring to his ears.

The girl took a small bead of moisture stuck to her fingertip and placed it upon the shoulder of her outfit. The bead shone with a starlight blue as it touched the fabric. Then it transformed into a precious stone and added to the gleam of her garment.

Rordan shook his head. He held back a sudden urge to cry out at her supernatural loveliness. "You're a phantom girl, aren't you?"

She wriggled her nose and closed her eyes. A breeze moved through the woods and blew her hair about. She reveled in the sensation, turning her head to and fro.

The breeze faded and she said, "You are unwise to travel these woods so close to sunset. Fearsome creatures and dangerous spirits come out to haunt these trails at night. I like you and don't want to see you harmed. Go back the way you came. Return when you have the day to watch over you."

Disappointment showed on Rordan's face. "Okay. Since you put it that way, I'll leave. Maybe I'll see you again?"

The girl drew up a tiny, blue-violet blossom and inhaled the fragrance. The air filled with the scent of fresh flowers. She placed the blossom in her hair, then smiled at him. In a flash of incredible speed she disappeared.

Rordan chuckled. "She sure comes and goes, doesn't she?" He sighed, then walked back toward the entrance to the forest.

Past the fork in the path, his body froze in fear. Master Beag approached him from up ahead. His mentor walked the same way the neighborhood bullies did right before they attacked.

The bony, shriveled man wore his vampire mask. In his right hand he held a pigsticker of dark brown wood with a grey luster. The end of the shaft terminated in a blade of rusty black iron.

Rordan vanished from his fear and plunged into a roaring din. He grabbed a handful of earth and flung it at the man's face. Dirt and pebbles smacked against Master Beag's mask and the man turned sideways with a jerk. Rordan bolted back to the fork. He took the left turn again and felt the pigsticker land in the ground inches from his right foot.

He hurried down the path, mindful of the obstacles. His thoughts raced in a blur, remembered a passage about

vampires and crossroads. Rordan stopped to check behind him and didn't see or hear the vampire.

His mind struggled to recall what he had read. He remembered vampires were confused by choices in a road and had to return the next day in order to go on. Rordan didn't know if the path qualified or if Master Beag counted as a vampire. He decided to keep running.

The path gave way to the dirt trail once more. He grew tired and paused to catch his breath. Rordan wished he hadn't given up the swimming and ball games of his youth. His sportsman interests would have come in handy now. He chalked it up to another missed calling in life and walked on.

Rordan examined the light and realized the forest would grow dark soon. The trees transformed the last of the day into a subterranean twilight of shadows. The phantom girl's words came back to him and he worried.

CHAPTER 19: THE POISONED KISS

Rordan pressed on. He needed to find a safe way out of the forest. The question of how Master Beag had found him crossed his mind. He pulled his papers out of the daypack. Master Beag's signature glowed like a hot coal and writhed as if it were alive.

“Great.”

He jammed the papers back into his pack and frowned. In order to dodge the vampire, he'd have to lose the papers. Rordan weighed the inconvenience of having his attendance delayed against being tracked. He decided not to toss the papers for now.

The thought that he'd almost been stuck like a wild pig bothered him. Those were the sorts of things that happened to people alone in the woods at sunset. He'd never thought it might happen to him.

Rordan continued down the path with occasional glances behind him. He noticed a change in the character of the forest. The trees appeared older and taller; moss and vines looked thicker and longer. Countless mushrooms, some as large as melons, grew in combinations of brilliant and plain colors. The sound of small animals rustled through the undergrowth.

He spotted short people with lemon-yellow skin going about errands. They were dressed in a variety of green and gray pants and boots. Each of them wore an overtunic, mantle, and conical hat—all of brown felt. He'd only seen such fashions in observatory displays.

A young man carried a net of white, jagged mushrooms on his back. The roots of the mushrooms glowed with a glossy purple light. An old woman led a dozen tawny rabbits by means of a twig with a small radish on the end. The radish also glowed with a glossy purple light. Another young man gathered seedpods from a prodigious growth on the bark of a tree and placed them in an enormous, hollowed out turnip roped to his back. The inside of the turnip radiated the same glossy purple light.

Rordan found the sight mesmerizing. He took a slow breath and the smell of the air intoxicated him with its freshness. The sensation resembled the crisp snap of biting into a fresh vegetable or the sharp thrill of kissing a crush for the first time.

The fantom girl poked her head up from behind a tangle of ferns on his left and peered at him.

He found her lovely to behold in the darkening light. Her vitality had a visibly hypnotic quality to him. The appeal of the fantom girl on guys in stories made sense to him now.

“I didn’t know you were the vampire’s next victim,” she said.

“Yep. I stood up to him and now I have to pay. I need to leave this forest. I don’t suppose you could show me another way out?”

The fantom girl returned a coy smile at him. A ray of sunlight pierced the eaves of the wood and shone on her face for a brief moment.

“There is no going back, you have left childhood forever.”

A sense of disorientation overcame him. “You mean, by coming to fantom land here, I’m an adult now?”

The fantom girl approached him and took his hand. Her firm touch felt like a hundred fireflies landing on his skin. Rordan took her hand in turn.

“You are still a child. It is the safety of childhood you have abandoned. The choice to grow up is upon you. Many people decide never to do so and stay here for the rest of their lives, even when they return to the human world.”

Rordan said, “Will you help me?”

She wriggled her nose at him.

He admired the way the borders of her eyes were adorned with a golden dust and a liner of black powder. The flower in her hair had become part of a hairpiece encrusted with minerals. He heard the sound of a cracked branch nearby.

“Come this way.”

Rordan looked behind him. He nodded. “I’ll go with you. Lead the way.”

The fantom girl led him off the path and deeper into the forest. He remembered the chastisement he’d received from the woman behind the curtain and treaded with care. The last thing he wanted would be to step on any animals or tear through their homes without thought.

He didn't feel good about leaving the path behind. His hope rested on the evasion of the vampire by means of a secret path known only to his fantom guide.

For several timeless minutes they stepped through the undergrowth. The activity of the short yellow people faded behind him. Ferns and drapes of moss caressed him as he walked past. He moved over a fallen tree and through a field covered by twisted vines. A loud noise followed his every step, despite his care. The fantom girl stepped with such agility she hardly made a sound.

The shadows grew darker and he lost the ability to see details. He realized he might not find his way back to the path.

They came to a field of tall, thick reeds. The reeds grew in bunches and sprouted forth leafy branches. She led him through the field to a small clearing covered in thick moss. A dozen flat, rough stones two feet tall were arranged in a triangle around a smaller, irregular rock. A calm, cool air hung inside the clearing.

“Where are we?”

The fantom girl said, “This is where I make my burrow. The ones you call Dimmurians used to come here to commune with Sonia and think disciplined thoughts.”

Rordan said, “Who's Sonia?”

“A goddess of masks and the stage. They abandoned her for unhealthy idols and she has been all but completely forgotten.”

He examined the central rock and found it composed of numerous, extruded quartz crystals. They felt rough and cool to his touch. A small puddle of water had collected in one crevice of the rock, from which sprouted a tiny plant of light colors.

“This is a neat place. Thanks for bringing me here to see this. Where do we go from here?”

The phantom girl said, “Nowhere. When the sun sets, I turn into a giant spider and I eat your insides for my meal.”

A tremor of fear ran through Rordan and he stared at her. She gazed back at him with wild eyes and a parted mouth suggestive of extreme hunger.

“What? I asked you to help me. Now you’re going to eat me? How does that work out?”

The phantom girl said, “Humans are not allowed to step into our lands. I gave you a chance to turn back. Now you must forfeit your life.”

Rordan said, “I couldn’t leave. The vampire was waiting for me. Just show me the way out and I won’t come back.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“Well I’m not waiting around. I’ll find my own way out.” Rordan walked toward the edge of the field. He ran into an invisible thread and fell backwards onto the moss.

The fantom girl moved slowly around the triangle of stones toward him. “You won’t leave. My web has closed around you.”

Panic crept into him. He fought it back and opened his daypack. His hand closed around Kea’s dagger and drew it free. Rordan kept the blade pointed at the fantom girl to his left and got back on his feet.

She laughed. The pleasant sound of it soured his stomach.

“Really now. I’m much stronger and faster than you. Even if you knew how to handle yourself, you’d still end up the same. I’ve eaten better fighters than you many times over.”

Rordan swung the dagger vertically in front of him, where he had met the invisible thread. The blade severed the thread in two and the ends became visible in a halo of soft, white light. They drifted about in the air before fading from sight.

The fantom girl closed the distance between them with inhuman speed and seized Rordan’s arms.

He struggled against her for an instant, then used her unbreakable grip to hold himself up for a kick at her face.

She let go of his left arm and twisted his body in her grasp.

Rordan felt his shoulder give way to a dull pain and his hand released the dagger. He dropped to the mossy ground face down and felt her take firm hold of him again.

The fantom girl lifted him upright as if he were a doll. She pushed him in the direction of the stones.

Rordan flailed with his arms and hit the mossy ground on the left side of his back. He tensed and his sight vanished under a haze of sudden injury.

As the pain lessened enough for his sight to return, the fantom girl knelt beside him. His right arm and shirt were forced away. She sank her teeth into the flesh of his side, below the ribs.

His mind blanked out again and he struggled wildly against her strength. She pushed away and let him flail free of her.

Her voice rang distant in his ears. "I've poisoned you. In a matter of minutes you'll be unable to move. There's nothing you can do."

Numbness spread from her bite. He crawled over to one of the flat outer stones and used it to prop himself upright. The dark stone held many dull-white formations within. Rordan realized they were the petrified bones of tiny sea creatures.

Their presence comforted him and he turned to face the fantom girl with his backside on the stone. "My name is Rordan Mannlic. Your name, please."

The fantom girl said, "Pasiphaea, daughter of Arakhne." She moved toward him with slow ease.

Rordan said, "You invited me to your burrow and I claim the rights of hospitality due a guest."

Pasiphaea paused. "In a moment I won't be bound by that law."

Rordan said, "You attacked me as a person when I tried to leave. You were required to let me leave and then chase me, or ensure my safety while here. You've failed."

Her face twisted in a scowl. "Regrettable, but unavoidable. You crossed over; you're mine."

His eyes bored into her with their gaze. "A local custom. Hospitality is the supreme law of the land. Even fantoms must respect it."

She approached to within an arm's length of him. "It's too late for any of that."

The numbness had spread all over his side. His sweat felt cold and he shivered once.

Rordan said, "That's right. Because now that you've broken your guest's trust, the destroyer bee is going to punish you."

Pasiphaea said, "Destroyer bee? There's no such thing."

"That's what you think! A few days ago, I was stung by a destroyer bee. The bee must have known you were going to do this. And you sank your fangs into it. Looks like you don't have long to live."

Her composure grew uncertain. "Your blood does taste bitter."

"There's only one antidote to the destroyer bee."

Pasiphaea said, "Letting you go, I suppose?"

Rordan pretended annoyance. “No, you’ve got it all wrong. I’m not even sure if it’ll work. I’ll trade with you if you give me something in return.”

He felt her hard look. She licked her lips and made a grimace. “I can’t let you go.”

“Of course not. What I want is a kiss from you. If I’m going to die, I want to get that fantastic fantom girl kiss everyone’s always talking about. You do that and I’ll tell you how to avoid the destroyer bee’s poison.” Rordan shuddered. His chest felt cold.

Her eyes regarded him with irritation. “Very well, but you must tell me first.”

Rordan said, “That hardly seems fair since I’m the one who’s been wronged. But okay. Since I’m such a nice guy, I’ll go first. When the vampire attacked me, I dropped a bag I was looking at. Inside is a charm against bee stings given to me by one of my new friends here. If you carry it, it’ll alleviate the poison.”

She regarded him carefully and smacked her lips. “Oh, all right.”

“Hurry up. I’m already going numb and I want the full effect. A real kiss too, not some measly peck. It’s the least you could do.”

Pasiphaea took his head in her hands and brought his face close to hers. She held a look of slight disgust, then kissed him on the lips.

Her touch tingled like a thousand tiny nettles and she smelled of breeze-blown wildflowers. He wrapped his

arms around her smooth shoulders and felt the phantom cloth slide under his touch with a slight crackle of heat. A sensation of arousal flooded through his body and he drifted in bliss.

She pulled away from him with a firm and determined movement. Her eyes burned with angry thoughts. Pasiphaea turned on her heel and rushed off with inhuman speed.

Rordan fought against the numbness in his chest and stumbled toward the dagger. He reached it and lay on his back. His breathing came in tight gasps.

“I’m going to live. I’m getting out of this.”

He opened his body up to the song of nature and strained to keep his eyes open. His elbow pressed against the bite and he endured a fit of trembling. Rordan’s thoughts drifted to the pleasures of Pasiphaea’s kiss and naughty impulses swelled through his mind.

The song of nature responded to his impulses and filled his senses with an explosion of feeling. Rordan floated on the sensations the song stirred inside of him. He heard his own chord in the song, which resonated in his spirit with a powerful love of all beings.

The river of fire inside his body rose up and caught hold of him with a blaze of passion. The passion set fire to the poison in his blood, searing his senses with a sensation of molten heat and blinding light. His body shook with the force of unleashed personal depths. He sat upright and took rapid breaths.

A wave of nausea struck him and he held back an urge to vomit. Rordan turned sideways onto his hands and knees; he waited.

The discomfort passed. Rordan spotted his daypack where it had fallen during the struggle. He looked up at the forest canopy and estimated he had minutes before he would be unable to see where he went. His hand grasped the dagger and he stood up.

He scooped up his daypack and sat down on one of the outer stones.

Rordan said, "Which way do I go mascot? I don't have much time before she comes back really mad."

His mascot came out of him and said, "Before you go, take the plant with you. It wants to come with us."

The words sank into Rordan's mind. He stood up and moved toward the rock. The now luminescent plant stood out in bright relief from the growing shadows. Rordan picked it up and said, "I hope you don't mind hanging out with a bungler."

A dense sound and thick fragrance overwhelmed his awareness. He fought off a dizzy spell. Rordan placed the wet plant into a pouch on the side of his daypack, then steadied himself.

"Okay, where to?"

The mascot said, "You know who you are and where you are, even if you choose to forget. You will never be lost if you decide to know where you are. Such things are in your blood."

Rordan knew his mascot spoke the truth. A memory of a time where he had found his way home came back to him. After separation from his parents for a long while, he had found them again. He decided on a direction and walked away from the stones.

He chopped ahead of him with the dagger and the threads of Pasiphaea's trap severed before him. The undergrowth of the forest became more difficult to traverse. The roots of the trees tripped him up.

The light had grown so dim he could hardly see where he walked. Rordan wished he could walk the dark depths of the forest like he could walk his own home at night. He forced himself to pick up the pace and stopped his use of the dagger before him. The whisper of leaves being pressed upon made him turn to his side. He saw nothing.

A familiar voice spoke to him in his mind from afar as though projected through a tunnel. "Over here Rordan."

He looked about and spotted a glowing red and white light in the distance through the trees. It waved back and forth. His mind heard the voice say, "If you reach me first, I'll see to it you escape alive."

Rordan stepped with care through the dense underbrush and made his way toward the red light. He pushed aside the fronds of a massive fern from his face. The outline of a figure holding a torch beckoned to him.

The figure said, "Quicken your pace. She is almost upon you."

Rordan recognized Varan's voice. He stepped through and out of the woods, onto a road with cottages on the other side. Smoke trailed from their chimneys and light shone from between the cracks of shuttered windows. A lighted streetlamp was at an intersection a hundred feet to his left and two hundred feet to his right. He recognized he had passed through here in the wagon yesterday.

Varan gazed at him from behind the hooded cloak. He sucked on his pipe and blew clouds of smoke about him. In one clawed hand he held a thin, irregular black torch. The torch flared with a bright, reddish-white flame.

Rordan said, "Thank you. I didn't look forward to finding my way out of there."

Varan took the pipe in his free hand. "There is no need to thank me. I would be a poor lodestar if I abandoned you too soon. That part of the forest is dangerous for humans at night. Hostile, unhuman beings walk there. Look behind you."

Panic seized Rordan and he turned around. A hunting spider as large as himself stared back at him from the forest underbrush. Its fur bristled like spines and its multiple eyes gleamed in the light of Varan's torch. Enormous, wet fangs jutted from the spider's mouth area.

"Good evening, Pasiphaea. It appears this human has outwitted you this night. I shall be taking charge of him from here. Give my regard to your sisters, will you? Until we meet again." Varan made a slight bow.

Rordan swallowed.

Varan said, “You are safe for now. She is not allowed to leave the forest during the night. Come with me and we will talk a while.” The reptile man walked down the road toward the streetlamp at the intersection.

Rordan followed him. His feet felt unsteady, but Varan’s presence made a difference to him. The creature gave him a goal to focus his remaining strength upon. Fighting the poison felt like it had taken all he had.

“How did you know where to find me? And what’s a lodestar?”

Varan said, “Far-seeing is my specialty. I know a good deal of what goes on around here. A lodestar is a fantom who volunteers to be a human’s guide for the fantom world.”

Rordan repeated most of Varan’s words to himself. “Is Pasiphaea really a daughter of Arakhne, the girl turned into a spider by a witch?”

Varan said, “A statement of lineage. All of Arakhne’s descendents must dwell in the darkness at the edges of humanity, unable to form relationships and have an authentic life.”

He felt his heart sink. “Is she really a spider?”

Varan took a puff of his pipe and filled the air ahead of him with aromatic smoke. Rordan caught a whiff of it and coughed.

“Partially. She is one of many people trapped in the phantom realm, without a shape of their own. Cursed to live a life that does not suit them.”

Rordan said, “That’s terrible. Can’t anything be done to help her?”

They reached the streetlamp and turned to the left. The lights of the academy and the silhouette of the sanctum came into view.

Varan said, “Does she deserve help? You are not the first person she’s dragged into her burrow. Pasiphaea would have devoured you without remorse. Her existence might be a well-deserved nightmare. See what happens when you don’t look at yourself?”

A sense of diminishment enveloped Rordan. His feelings drifted into pity.

The reptile-man stopped to turn and face him. “She harrowed you to the brink of death. Poisoned you with venom that you can never be rid of. Touched you with a kiss that will torment you forever. Is that the kind of behavior that merits help?”

Rordan looked up at Varan and said, “She’s messed up and I care about that.”

Varan took a long puff of his pipe. “If you understood the strength and wisdom inside your soul, you might be able to redeem her from her fate. One of her sisters would take over for her.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “I heard you mention her sisters.”

Varan chuckled. “The Tangleprickers. They’ll want a word with you over what happened. There’s a mother too, named Thistlemouth. She walks the academy grounds at night.”

Rordan boggled. “That’s horrible! They eat people.”

Varan said, “Only when they are hungry. The Tangleprickers are usually content to scare humans away from the forest. There is more to them than your sinister image of the spider. Most humans are sleepwalkers and easily turned aside. But the living dead like Master Beag can do harm. They must be driven off if they cannot be righteously defeated.”

“You know about Master Beag?”

Varan said, “He’s one of the local vampires.”

A squeak escaped Rordan’s throat. “There are more of them?”

A puff of smoke curled from Varan’s jaws. “The riddle of evil extends beyond your small torch of vision. There are many ways of not looking at yourself.”

Rordan said, “What’s the deal with humans and the forest? Why don’t the Tangleprickers want them there at night?”

Varan said, “They call the forest Unruly Wend. It is one of a shrinking number of fantom wilds not ruined by your people. The fantoms who dwell within intend to preserve their borders from the harmful influence of humans. Even if it means extreme measures.”

An image of the secret crater came to Rordan's thoughts. "I understand that stupidity causes harm, I just don't see how exactly. Fantoms have special powers. I don't see what humans can do against that."

Varan said, "Human beings and fantoms have been at war with one another for a long time. Your people ignore or pretend us away to nothingness. My people curse yours with madness and misfortune."

"We're at war with each other? That's horrible too. What's the war about?"

Varan said, "A long history of undeserved pride."

Rordan said, "Where do you stand on this?"

"I am against war. There can be no victory, only misery. My people have grown stale and angry while yours have lost the dearest part of themselves."

"What about humans who look at themselves. Could they go into Unruly Wend?"

Varan said, "If they were so inclined. They would likely find only hostility. Pasiphaea is a sentinel, one of many protecting the last fantom wilds from human sleepwalking.

"Ages ago, the sentinels played an important part in the exchange between humans and fantoms. Now there is no relationship. The old friendship has turned sour. She and the Tangleprickers capture and eat those who enter, awake or not."

Rordan said, "Where were her sisters?"

Varan said, “They were present as observers. Pasiphaea is the eldest. The honor to hunt intruders falls to her first.”

Rordan said, “You said I can never be rid of the poison. I know fantom kisses are supposed to mark you in some way. What else do I need to know?”

Varan said, “Your encounter with the fantom world has traumatized you. You could die this very night or you might come away with fantastic abilities. The spirit of life has entered you and even I cannot predict what will come of it. Large parts of you are beyond my knowledge.”

“How did this happen? The seeing things, I mean.”

Varan said, “That is a puzzle I would enjoy learning the answer to. You do not willingly close your eyes. It was inevitable that nature would send you to a fantom wild. You have passed the sentinel’s crossing and left the helpless safety of youth behind. Should you survive this night, the dangerous and delightful fantom world is open to you now. It’s up to you—and ourselves—what to make of it.”

Rordan wanted to ask about Kea. He felt his nausea return and dropped his next question.

Varan said, “Enough knowledge. You are an eager pupil, but a good lodestar does not burn his charge. He cooks him slowly to completeness.”

Rordan felt Varan’s statement implied more danger to come. He refused to dismiss the feeling. “Are you going to try to eat me too?”

The reptile-man smiled a wicked grin and showed his teeth. “Yes, but not today. You have to pay to learn how to think.”

Rordan smiled thinly. “I see you’ve read Doctor Skulky too. Tell me, is he really dead?”

“He was never alive. His creator has turned to stone as Master Beag has. Vampires are petrified humans controlled by the machine men.”

A silence came over Rordan. He recalled his precious time alone with Tora. “Is there any way you could see how my friends in Nerham are doing? I’m afraid of what might be happening, but I still need to know.”

Varan said, “I am unfamiliar with your friends. If you require answers, it is better that I show you how to get them yourself. Let me invite you to my lair. I promise to be more hospitable than Pasiphaea.”

“Okay, sure.”

The two of them continued on. They headed up a hill and past a closed office with a patroller checkpoint symbol outside the door. Boant Oak came into view.

Rordan said, “Thanks for all the stuff you told me. And thanks for saving my life too.”

Varan smiled. “My pleasure.” He took a puff of his pipe. The torch shone brightly without having consumed any part of itself.

Rordan said, “I’ve looked at the wheel page. Really weird stuff. I don’t suppose you could tell me what I’m supposed to do with it?”

Varan said, “It is a training compass for your heart’s desire. Keep up the good work. It’s refreshing to see a human around here asking questions. I’ll see you again Rordan.”

The creature tossed the torch aside and it bounced over the surface of the road. The torch flared once, then became a pile of cinders.

Rordan felt a piece of him had been used up for all time. He watched the creature’s cloak disappear into the darkness of an unlighted side street. The orange glow of Varan’s pipe flashed once. The smell of tobacco vanished.

He continued up the slight hill toward Boant Oak on his own. His body’s aches and pains came back to his attention. Rordan felt his blood buzz with the after-effects of Pasiphaea’s poison. He imagined his experiences had finally caught up to him. The need to find a safe place to crash focused his steps.

Rordan reached the field where he and his friends had fought the Stinge. Halfway across, a wave of poison forced him to his hands and knees. He sat down on the grass and noticed he still held Kea’s dagger. The weapon was returned to its sheath with difficulty. He cupped the small plant into his hand from the pouch. The sprouting leaves and tiny roots looked fine to him.

His eyes stared at the ground. Grief consumed him and he cried without sound for a minute.

By small degrees, he came to realize he had experienced this pain before. When he had been little.

Rordan felt the raw wound of two separate incidents in time, now linked by a common feeling of shock. He had come back from the woods with no answer in both instances and the sting of failure squeezed a gasp from his chest.

His quiet sobs passed. Memories of shame and repentance gave way to a forgotten feeling of resentment. Rordan trembled at the repressed emotion he hadn't felt a right to. It burned its way into his memory again like fire and he realized a part of him had become mean that day. Tonight's bungle had brought it back from the depths of his childhood secrets.

As the remains of the poison traveled inside of him, he imagined his mean streak made him sour and grumpy, or bitter and cruel. The quality felt like it existed as both part of him and not of him. He supposed it must be a semi-separate entity from him and he pictured a wasp buzz around his mind. At times the wasp gained his attention and other times it didn't.

Rordan knew he couldn't ignore this part of him anymore. Darkness lived inside of him. For a second, he believed a person stood nearby, looking down on him with contempt.

The song of nature came to his attention and resonated through him with violence. His mind reeled from the impact and he tumbled about in his head. The dizziness tossed him around dark colors and uncontrolled currents of mindless sight.

He found himself accepting the poison into himself, even as he fought against it. The poison changed him and became part of his being. The nerves of his body trembled with the pain of the struggle.

His lips burned. Regret entered into his thoughts while a gentle bright light doused all his other sensations. A vision emerged from the song of nature and seized his attention.

A long stretch of rocky, forested beach filled his view. The smell of salt and sensation of wet sand beneath him nearly overwhelmed his sanity. He saw Pasiphaea, both woman and spider impossibly as one, grotesque and consuming as well as lovely and strong. Her venom had moved inside of him and his bitter human blood had moved through her. He intuited they had changed each other because of the bee sting.

In pain, Rordan reached out to touch her. His hand strained palm upwards to express a meaningful connection. He touched her on the heart and she closed her eyes while her many limbs buffeted his head. The vision became a reflection upon a surface of water; his hand disturbed the image as ripples moved outward from his touch. He watched her crumble into tiny pieces of moss-eaten stone and the vision went dark.

His face grew flush with sweat. He touched drool on his lips and laughed with a whinny. Rordan knew he couldn't wash the kiss of death out with mere spit. He moved onto his elbows and knees, struggling to keep the

plant in his left hand. Rordan took shallow breaths and convulsed like an animal absorbed by sickness.

A comforting soft note rose up in the song of nature. Strength flowed up from within him like a tide. A wave of water flowed against him, splashing across his arms, legs and face. A sensation of renewal passed through his body and he beheld a shining onion surrounded by flecks of radiant gold. The onion peeled open before his irrational sight.

Rordan stared in awe. Numbness gave way to knowledge and he intuited he beheld a fundamental part of himself.

His mascot said, “Your recognition of your darkness has released your own life. It shines forth for you to behold. This is your quest, your salvation, and secret wish standing before you. It glows in your darkness and you do not understand.”

The song of nature resonated within him once more, then vanished. His own chord sounded, distant and deep in a repressed wilderness of personal desolation, before slipping from his grasp.

Drool dripped from the edges of his mouth as he took a slow breath. Base emotions shook him with their wildness and he cast aside all shame through a rough series of grunts and coughs.

A limitless view of life passed before his eyes and took his breath away. He could destroy and create anything and everything. The insight faded and he found himself gasping for breath on the grassy field.

He blinked as clarity washed through his mind. The impressions of what he had experienced remained. Drool covered his chin and grass stuck to his sweaty clothes.

“I’m a mess.” His voice was a craggy whisper.

The small plant remained in his palm. He rose to his feet and grabbed the daypack with his free hand. Rordan stumbled toward Boant Oak. A dull willpower guided him through the front door. He walked past the eyes of curious and concerned pupils in the hall, then up the central stairwell. His eyes fixed on the door to the Upper Trow snug as he stepped down the hall.

The snug was empty and unlit. He closed the door behind him and sat on one of the plush chairs. His daypack slumped to the carpeted floor. The plant ended up on the table in front of him.

A weak feeling of poison struck him hard. He had no madness or fear to take him through the nausea. Rordan sat with his head bowed down and suffered through a need to mew.

The nausea passed. He sat back and his thoughts wandered. The poison had burned a hole in his stomach. Rordan dug into his daypack and found the last piece of beef jerky. He chomped it down and the snack dulled the edge of his hunger.

The plant spoke to him in a good-natured voice. “Thank you for taking me with you. I was happy when you dropped by. You look like a fun wayfarer to travel with.”

Rordan said, "You're welcome. I'll get you into a pot as soon as I can manage."

The plant said, "That's mighty kind of you. You'll find me a hardy traveler."

Rordan said, "That makes one of us anyway."

The plant said, "Maybe I can help you out and return the favor. That was a pretty sneaky trick you played on Pasiphaea. I'll bet you didn't know how clever you could be."

"Yeah?" Rordan stared at the plant and tried to make sense of the conversation.

"For an instant, everything you said was true. Who is to say there wasn't a destroyer bee or you hadn't dropped an amulet against poison? Your imagination is a strong power. All you need is a token to train it."

Rordan said, "A token?"

The plant said, "Your lucky stone could be that token. It sure would be honored if you chose it for that job. All you have to do now is ask the diamond child growing inside of you for permission, and you could have some power."

A thrill shot through Rordan and he sat upright in a daze. His hand fumbled into his pocket for the lucky stone.

"Thanks plant. I need the help."

"You're welcome."

The crystal was in Rordan's hand. "Hey, I don't know your name. But you've been with me a long time. If you want to do this, well...yes. I couldn't choose a nicer crystal to go on this adventure with."

The crystal shone with a green flare Rordan recognized. The memory of the flare in his father's lantern came back to him and he bristled with goose bumps.

A trance came over him. He perceived an invisible shine move inside and around him. Out of the shine came a secret. Rordan understood he had been granted permission to know how to use his token, or anything he took a mind to honor as a token.

He reckoned on what he had learned from the invisible shine. An insight struck him.

"Am I becoming a magician? Have I always been waiting to become one? Is this journey the way my powers will be revealed to me?"

The invisible shine vanished from his awareness and Rordan faded from the trance. The plant, the crystal, and his own body seemed ordinary to him now. He believed part of his purpose had at last been made clear and he smiled to himself.

CHAPTER 20: SOME SECRETS COME OUT

Rordan made his way back to his room from the Boant Oak kitchen. He carried a cup filled with dirt, in which the plant now resided. The door to Manissa's room remained shut. He tried his own door and found it unlocked.

He opened it and stepped inside. A shapely, tawny-skinned girl stood by the window, outwardly withdrawn but quietly alert. At his desk sat a Dimmurian teenager. She had blonde hair tied back by a bright red cotton strip. Stig sat at his own desk while Vacia stood beside him.

Stig said, "It's a hoot now." He scoffed.

Rordan said, "Hey there." He looked inside his closet and saw no sign of Borus.

Vacia smiled. "Look what the cat dragged in. Hi Boner, how's tricks?"

"I'll tell you in a minute." Rordan entered his closet and closed the door. The cup and daypack ended up on the dresser. He peeled the clothes off his damp skin, then pulled on a fresh set.

Rordan noted he chose to wear his red shirt with the black and white salamander. Thoughts came back to him of the last slam with the Hearth Bunch. His heart ached for their presence now. If Varan were right, he could learn to see if they were okay.

As he combed his hair, he heard snippets of a musical loyalties discussion outside. Vacia's distinctive voice

came through the flimsy wooden door separating them. Rordan decided her voice sounded like a young man's.

With a soft sigh, he grabbed the daypack and exited the closet. Rordan extended his hand to the Dimmurian and said, "Hi, I'm Rordan."

The spry girl gave him a firm shake and said, "I'm Klara. I ran into your friend Borus earlier. Thought I'd see who he was staying with."

He suspected she was the same Klara on Nyah's list of negligent points. "I hope he didn't hassle you. He's struggling with a lack of speech."

Klara laughed softly and easily. "No, he was cool. He heard me singing and hung out. He's a good audience."

Rordan nodded. He extended his hand to the girl by the window, whom he believed was a dryad. Nervousness made his voice sound edgy. "And what's your name?"

Her large, dark blue eyes studied him. "I'm Doncia. I also met Borus, or he met me. Your friend came into my room and disturbed my prayers."

He lowered his hand. "Oh, sorry about that. He's an odd guy, but he means well."

Doncia said, "I keep running into odd guys. Seltish boys don't know how to behave themselves."

Vacia returned Rordan's look and said, "There seem to be a lot of dong warriors at the academy right now."

Doncia said, "This particular example I had to chase out the door."

Embarrassment welled up in Rordan's stomach and his nausea stirred up again. "Hey Doncia, I'm really sorry you were upset. I don't know why Borus bothered you, but it wasn't on purpose."

Doncia gave him an even look. "If there's a next time it gets personal."

He swallowed.

Stig laughed with detached interest. "Nothing like the threat of violence to show us who the feathers are."

Vacia chuckled. "That's why you need several dong substitutes, right?"

Stig shrugged. "Hey, nobody's going to catch me with my fly down. World's full of claim-jumpers."

Klara shrieked with laughter. "Ain't it the truth?"

Stig sang a brief, plainchant melody.

Rordan said, "I got to run folks."

Klara said, "Sure, we can hang out later."

He waved and left the room.

Vacia shouted after him, "Be careful out there Boner!"

He made his way up to Glenys' room. His conversation with Doncia unsettled him. The thrill of meeting a dryad from Faria face to face had soured into a slip-up over Borus. He didn't like it. Rordan decided the argument was a symptom of the gnarring between their two heartlands.

The closed door to Glenys' room gave him pause. He remembered they'd agreed to be elsewhere to give Sinna

some space. Rordan considered the likelihood of anyone still being at the Grill against how much time had passed since dinner.

He secured the daypack against his shoulder and made his way downstairs, then out the front door.

Rordan walked at a brisk pace and considered what he might do with his lucky stone. Work on his creative imagination had been scarce. He'd done hardly any routines or bits since leaving home. 'The realization annoyed him. He had to get slammin'.

His thoughts turned toward the results of the exam. He wouldn't know until tomorrow if he would take performance or a crummy formula class. The thought of seeing Master Beag in his office again scared him. He didn't want to be stuffed in a jar and disappear when he had another mentor meeting.

Exhaustion clutched at him and his insides felt faint. Foreboding came over him. He worried his burdens were too many, too complicated, and too tough for him to endure.

A pair of older pupils passed by him and he returned his attention to the present. The path he walked now was the site of the previous ambush. His eyes searched the darkness of the trees for demons and the chill cloud, but nothing stood out to him.

He reached the Grill. Amateur music played from within. His insides tingled with the suspicion of being watched. Rordan opened the door and peered inside.

A teenager made an attempt at a folk loyalty performance. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat over his long hair, which was dyed green. Rordan lightly clenched his teeth at yet another person coloring their hair.

Glenys, Fikna, Borus, and an unfamiliar teenage girl sat at a table together. He had the sense of studying a rival for his bro's well being. She wore a simple brown dress with full sleeves and had shoulder-length, curled brunette hair under her hood. A long, best-friendship braid of hair fell down from behind her ear to her chest. Her rich, nut-brown eyes looked up at him as he stared.

Fikna waved. "Rord, come forth and be seated among us. We were wondering if you would appear."

Rordan pulled up a stool and sat down. His bro' had rings under his eyes and a drag to his movements. Fikna no longer carried Trad's knife, which worried him. Glenys looked beat. Borus, on the other hand, looked pleasantly invigorated.

The youngster wore a twine necklace. A whelk shell sealed with beeswax and decorated with dabs of red paint hung on the end. Borus' clothes had eight small rips and tears in them. A small bloodstain marked her left sleeve.

Glenys noticed Rordan's puzzlement and shrugged at him.

Fikna said, "Blai, allow me to introduce my foster-brother Rordan. Rord, this is Blai Mageoc. She is studying to be a sage in Chief-speech."

Rordan said, “Nice to meet you. Any friend of Fikna’s is a friend of mine.”

She smirked. “Fikna’s done nothing but brag about himself the whole time. I was hoping you’d give me the real dirt on him.”

Rordan laughed.

Fikna said, “Here now, Rord has only marvelous recommendations to make concerning my character.”

“It’s not his character you should be worried about,” said Rordan.

Blai cackled and Rordan laughed with her. Fikna smiled. Borus watched their reactions with steady interest.

Glenys said, “How are you, dear? You had us worried.”

Fikna said, “Quite correct, Rord. The two of us grew most alarmed for your well-being. We have been involved with adventures concerning our unusual friends, if you understand my meaning.”

Blai said, “You mean you actually have friends?”

Rordan knew what Fikna referred to. “There’s a bunch of people who keep bothering us.” He turned back to Glenys and said, “I’m okay, though I don’t recommend going into the woods alone. Or at night.”

Blai said, “Oh, the Fantom Forest?”

Rordan said, “Are you jesting me? That’s what it’s called?”

Blai looked smug. “That’s what I hear. There’s a Farian next door to me who calls it that. He could probably tell you all about it. He says he goes there all the time.”

Fikna said, “Does this fellow have a name? Most assuredly he might offer up some pointers. If Rord’s going to gallop off alone into hazardous forests at nightfall, advice is warranted.”

Blai said, “Sure, I’ll introduce you. His name’s Tono.”

Fikna said, “Imagine, a dryad gentleman in a mixed dormitory. The situation astounds me.”

Blai said, “Don’t worry, I’ve got a lock on my door. And that’s Farian, not dryad.”

Rordan said, “There’s a...err, Farian girl too. I ran into her with a bunch of other people in my room.”

“Then you’ll need a deadbolt on your door,” said Blai.

Rordan concealed his frustration. He wanted to speak openly with his friends but Blai got in the way. “So what happened after I took off from dinner? Did you come here and wait all this time?”

Fikna shook his head. “After pursuing our own agendas, we reassembled in your room for a while. Our hope was you would venture by on your way to the Grill. Instead, Blai paid us a visit and we decided to come here for a bite without you.”

Rordan finally noticed the used trays at the table. His stomach growled. He felt out of it.

The young gallant stood up. “Blai, permit me to escort you back to your room. Now that you’ve become acquainted with Rord, you can plainly recognize how you may rely upon my judgment. Shall we?”

Blai rose from her stool and extended her hand to Fikna’s. “Of course, I would be delighted.”

Rordan said, “Hey bro’, where’s Trad’s knife?”

Fikna said, “I passed the blade to Glenys’ safekeeping. We shall speak later Rord. Blai?”

“Nice to meet you Rordan. Good evening, everyone.”

The two of them departed together.

Rordan watched the door close behind them. “Are they an item?”

Glenys smiled. “Sure looks like it. I’m happy for Fikna. But tell me what happened to you. I see a great change. You’re giving off all sorts of wonderful, strange energy.”

Borus pushed her empty tray forward and stared ahead.

“Why’d he give you the knife? There are demons around.” Rordan struggled to comprehend.

She smiled at him. “He doesn’t need it. And I’m better than him with it anyway.”

“What?”

Glenys said, “He doesn’t tell you everything, dear.”

Rordan sighed. “Okay. I went into the Fantom Forest, which is also called Unruly Wend. I ran into

Master Beag. He tried to kill me with a pigsticker, but I dodged him at a crossroads. Probably because he really is a vampire.”

She put her hand on his. The gesture soothed him and he smiled at her. “I had to find another way out of the forest because it was getting dark. I ran into all these short fantoms doing whatever they do. And this wacky fantom girl. I asked her for help and she led me farther into the forest. There were these old stones in a triangle, where she tried to capture and eat me.”

The curiosity on Glenys’ face turned into concern.

Rordan puffed. “This is where it gets really weird. She says she turns into a spider at nightfall. I can’t get away because she surrounded the place with fantom threads. I start cutting my way out with Kea’s dagger and she roughs me up pretty bad. Bites me and says I’m poisoned.”

Glenys drew a breath. She put her free hand to her mouth and looked down at Rordan’s side. “That’s not good. Fantom poison can only be cured by a fantom physic.”

Rordan deflated inside. “I tried to appeal to her hospitality, but she wasn’t buying it. My blood must have tasted funny, so I used that to trick her into thinking I’d poisoned her for breaking trust as a host. I told her that in exchange for a kiss, I’d tell her where I’d dropped a non-existent cure. She bought that and I used the time to cut free and escape.”

Glenys pulled her hands to her chest and withdrew into herself, closing her eyes. “Damn it all to blazes, Rordan Mannlic. You can’t go walking blindly into a fantom wild at night. I can’t protect you if you pull stunts like this. You’re lucky to be alive.”

She glowered at him and he shrank from her.

“Do you hate me for doing it?”

Glenys said, “No. But you can’t go through a pass, I mean an ordeal like that and not be majorly changed. I don’t know how to react.”

Rordan tried to recall what he had learned. “I know. It makes me a weird guy and how do you talk to someone like that? But I have to see who I am. I went into the woods because I had to. It’s the way I figure things out.”

She peered at him. “Have you ever thought about what you would do if you don’t like what you are? What if what you see is horrible? What then, Rordan?”

Her gaze unsettled him. He looked away and glanced at Borus. The youngster rested her head upon her folded arms on the table. “I’m sorry about what you had to see in yourself. I didn’t realize what it meant until you had your first vision. Maybe for some people it’s better that they not look at all.”

Glenys’ eyes flared.

He intuited the mean side of him had changed the subject, just because he wanted to see someone else struggle.

Rordan said, “I got to see a piece of myself that I’m not happy about. We can’t go back to being asleep again. I had no right to hope that you would see what Fikna and I see.”

She closed her eyes.

He watched her draw strength from a hidden inner depth.

Glenys opened her eyes and spoke with a determined voice. “You aren’t responsible for me, or my choices. If my problems were your fault, we wouldn’t be talking now. I care about you, so deal with it. I’m not angry with you, but you’ve upset me. I couldn’t bear it if you got hurt and I wasn’t there to help you. You’re so...infuriating!”

She composed herself. “Fikna and I talked about our visions while you were gone. We both see how ahead of us you are on this journey. We feel like we’re standing still. Give us a chance to catch up.”

Rordan experienced a pang of guilt.

She pressed her hands to her chest and closed her eyes. A fluorescent red aura crackled into existence around her.

He found himself aroused and cowed by her at the same time. Her body radiated fiery sensuality and the gestures of her limbs became charged with wanton suggestion.

“What did you do?”

Glenys said, “You aren’t the only one with powers, dear. I can only guess what mysteries have been revealed to you.”

Rordan gaped for two seconds. “I haven’t quite figured out what they’re for. But yep, sometimes I can do things.”

She smirked at him with a coy glance and he felt himself sweat.

“We’ll figure this all out together,” said Glenys. “Don’t worry about me or what you saw. There are things about me I have to do on my own. I still need your friendship; it means a lot to me. Don’t get yourself eaten by spider fantoms, okay?”

Rordan stumbled over his words. “I know I was dumb. But what I saw in you, I needed to cope. I didn’t know it was so horrible in the forest. I’ll be more careful now.”

Glenys said, “Long as I don’t drive you away completely.”

Her words floored him. Rordan found himself wanting her in ways that made him shake. “No chance of that. I felt bad after I watched Fikna go through this the first time. I’ve been having second thoughts. Maybe this change that follows me around isn’t as good as I believed.”

“Don’t feel bad. I have no regrets and neither does Fikna. It’s a good thing that our third eyes have opened. As long as we stick together we’ll make it through this. That’s why we all met each other.

“I know you looked into my private self and you let me be. That restores my confidence. I saw into you too and it humbles me how sad you are without having lost hope.

“Another thing. I first began to see things that night you gave me the flyer. It wasn’t a flyer, was it?”

Rordan felt his throat grow sticky. In another minute he would do whatever she said, get on his knees and beg her to love him. “No. It was this magic page given to me by my phantom friend.”

Glenys eyed him. “You’re going to have to tell me about that one. Is it okay if I see your map and the magic page at some point?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes. Any ideas on how to handle Kea?”

Glenys laughed once. “None that don’t involve committing an offense.”

Rordan grew alarmed, half expected her to ask him to harm someone and not knowing what would happen. “You aren’t thinking it’ll come to that, are you?”

“That’s why I have the knife. I don’t have any other ideas. She’s as much a baffling nemesis to me as she is to you.”

Quietly, Rordan said, “Really? Are you two connected somehow?”

Borus shot to her feet.

Rordan turned around to look at what his friend gritted her teeth over. Two bugbears stood just inside the

front door of the Grill, leering at them with a fierce visage. Rordan recognized them as the ones he'd met earlier.

The one on the right said, "The goose and the simpleton, with mutilated bungler on the side."

The one on the left hissed. "Get ready to pay up losers."

Borus crouched. She dashed at the bugbear on the right and struck the demon's head with a series of rapid smacks. The bugbear uttered a high-pitched shriek and fell to the ground clutching its head.

The other bugbear charged Glenys, its claws extended toward her neck. The aura shot out a reddish-yellow tendril at the bugbear and the creature disappeared in a puff of flaked pink ash on the table. Glenys' aura went out and she slumped forward with a long exhale.

Borus stomped on her opponent, who deflated like a sack of air. The demon's empty skin disintegrated into tiny pieces of dry pink dirt. Borus made a chattering grunt.

Rordan looked at Glenys. "That was some trick. Looks like you can blast them too."

She rubbed her eyes. "Not really; it's more of a boundary thing. I become bad luck to mess with. But it's tiring."

"Yep, it is." Rordan looked about the Grill. No one took any note of what had happened. The songster continued to play awful music. It perplexed him how

easily people stayed asleep. He guessed they remembered only in dreams what they had seen, but refused to admit.

Glenys stood up and stretched. “Dear, lets get out of here. I suddenly feel exposed.”

Rordan got up and grabbed his backpack. “Sure. Borus lets go.”

The three of them made their way back to Boant Oak.

They reached the site of the previous bugbear ambush. Rordan thought they needed to find a new route, even if it took them longer to walk.

He felt a chill at the base of his spine and realized his thought had come too late. They were getting jumped again in the same place as before.

Borus chattered.

Ivixa, Flann, Noss, Ulidia, and Kea stepped forward from behind the trees and out of the shadows. Except for Noss, who appeared ill, they all wore their monster masks. The women were armed with heathen-looking axes while Flann and Noss each held a crowner.

Noss said, “I warned you about keeping him on a tight leash.” He sweated and looked barely able to stand, yet his limbs moved with manic strength.

Rordan watched a faint pink cloud of fog rise up around all of them. He heard the sound of a creature walking out of sight behind the trees.

“Yuck. The masks have got to go.” Glenys opened her line bag and pulled Trad’s knife out. She assumed a

fighting stance, though her bandaged hand had difficulty holding the knife.

Kea said, “Using a clumsier blade, are we?”

Ivixa and Ulidia snickered.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Kea. “You’re all going to vanish and never be seen again.”

Rordan reached into his pocket. His hand found the lucky stone easily and he pulled the token out. He faced Kea and kept his back to Glenys and Borus.

Noss laughed. “Is that your plan? Fight us with a pebble?”

Flann chuckled. “That’s pretty sad, pup.”

Borus’ chatter became a hostile chirring. Tensions rose in the assailants.

Glenys said, “Rordan, scream fire with me.”

Ivixa said, “Nobody’s going to hear you.” She and Ulidia edged closer, their axes in an easy pose.

Kea made a chuckle. “You didn’t think you were going to get away with everything after what you’ve pulled? This is the end of the road, chumpion.”

Ulidia’s eyes showed a sparkle of merriment. “Nighty night.”

Rordan held the crystal tight and recalled what magicians were capable of. A phrase came to his mind—about magicians being able to shape things as they are or might be except their own end.

His intuition told him this didn't count as his end. Varan had said he could have helped Pasiphaea if he'd been stronger or wiser. He wanted to help Kea now and believed she must be the key to this struggle.

Stroma's words came back to him. He opened himself up to the song of nature and listened for the sound of his own chord in the song. The sound of it came to him and the passion of his own river of fire flowed through his weary body like a rising thrill.

Rordan slid into the easy trance of performing a part before an audience. With a measured and rascally voice he said, "You know, Kea. If you like me and want me to notice you, all you have to do is be nice to me."

His actions perplexed the attackers and they hesitated.

He took a quick breath. "Really, all this fuss just to get some attention from me? I know I'm weird and hard to get to know, but it's all my way of showing off."

Kea put a hand on her hip and laughed lightly. She glanced at her accomplices.

Rordan took a practiced breath and conjured out of his speech an image of his version of events in the minds of those listening. His gestures were exaggerated and flirtatious as he edged closer to her.

"I'm sorry if I make you nervous. The truth is, I've never been good at noticing when a girl is trying to tell me she's interested. I'm a little slow."

He sensed his story had to reach a conclusion he could make use of in the next few seconds. Rordan chose

outright flattery and spoke from an unfair observation of the heart.

“Kea, you’re a dazzling beauty with a deep abiding loyalty for your friends. You have an enchanting manner that could soothe crying babies to slumber. No wonder you have so many admirers. Stop pretending to hate me and admit you like me.”

Kea said, “Let me guess, you’re going to ask me out for a date?”

Rordan made a sly chuckle. With a wave of his hand, he said, “Of course. Are you so surprised? Somebody has to make the first move.”

Ivixa stifled a laugh.

As she spoke, Kea’s voice lost a trace of confidence. “That’s the stupidest story I’ve ever heard.”

Rordan shot back, “If my story is stupid then make it smart. Let’s go out and make friends. I’m weird outside, but inside I’m a warm fluffy blanket.” He stared her in the eye with a smirk on his face, placed his hands on his hips with palms pointed outward, and bent his knees in a rooster-like stance.

Kea stared in shock through the eyeholes of her mask.

Her accomplices waited while Glenys breathed rhythmically into a state of readiness.

Kea stepped back. Her voice sounded shaken. “Okay, I’ll let you off the hook.”

Recognition crept into Flann’s expression. “Wait a minute, you’re falling for that?”

Kea said, “He recognizes me. That’s all that matters.”

Ivixa changed her focus and eyed Kea for a moment. “Oh, I get it now. This feud of yours is a dodge.” She glanced at her friends. “She’s coveting.”

Flann laughed.

Noss stared. He shivered, strength leaving his body.

Kea strained to keep a straight face.

Ivixa said, “You made it up. You were really coveting this pup. Specter-shooter Kea, scariest conjurer in Gwanmyne.”

Flann said, “Hoo-boy, what a stoss too. Got you all out of your mind, smooth talked you into admitting it. Oh, I feel like a chump!”

Ulidia giggled. “Somebody’s got a stitch coming to them.”

Flann grinned. “Yeah, after all you made us go through—Dalla especially. This pup’s got it coming to you.” He layered his arms in front of his chest, still holding the crowner.

Kea crossed her arms and looked away. “Fine. I admit it.” She laughed to herself. “Ror, what’s your stitch?” Her gaze turned towards him, burning with curiosity.

Glenys struggled to say something to Rordan.

“I want that date. You and me.” He leered at her.

Ivixa said, “Do not miss Rordan’s date.” She waited for a response that didn’t come, then made a gesture with

her left hand which Ulidia and Kea mimicked. Flann made a slightly different gesture with his right hand.

Kea laughed with a trace of disdain. “Only a pup would let me off that easily.” She turned and walked away.

The cloud broke apart and the others stood around in awkward silence.

Noss said, “What the blazes just happened?”

Flann put his crowner away in his coat. “Later Noss. Let’s blow. If Kea is cool with pebble pup, so am I.”

Ivixa and Ulidia put their axes away under a fold in their shirts. Ulidia said, “Somebody has to make the first move.” They looked at each other and giggled.

The assailants walked away and disappeared into the night after Kea.

Glenys eased her breathing down. “You’re going to have to keep that date, dear. And depending on how far that covet goes, I suggest you be ready to get close.”

Rordan bobbed and made a nervous squeak. “What?”

She stifled a laugh and returned Trad’s knife to her line bag. “She’s been after you in a certain way. And you called her on it nicely. Stealing her dagger isn’t so bad now, nor is her taking your shirt. In fact, it means you’re flirting with each other.”

Borus stopped watching for the return of their attackers. She turned around and listened to Glenys and Rordan talk. Her eyes held a strained look of comprehension.

Rordan said, “I didn’t know what else to do but turn it into a love fest. It’s the only thing that made sense all of a sudden. She’s been crazy for me and this proves it. But she’s still working for Master Beag. I don’t want to get a knife in my back while we’re kissing out.”

Glenys said, “Dear, I know. Coveting never makes sense, but it explains some of how she’s been acting. Your mentor probably wanted her to kill us, but you convinced her otherwise. Hrm. We might be able to use her feelings for you to our advantage.”

Rordan said, “What does that mean, covet?”

“Oh, it means she’s taken by a kind of madness. She has to possess you in some way as an end in itself.”

“What did Flann mean by stoss?”

Glenys lightly massaged her bandaged hand. “That means you tricked her. Got her to admit her coveting in front of everyone by giving her what she didn’t want to admit to herself. By doing that and doing it well, you got the jump on her.”

Rordan suddenly understood what he had agreed to with Kea. “I don’t know if I can do this lechers thing though. That monster mask will get on my nerves.”

Laughter billowed out of Glenys. “Oh please, dear. You’re a guy, I’m sure you’ll find a way to bear it.”

“Very funny,” said Rordan.

Glenys said, “Sorry, this whole thing has had me on edge. I’m only teasing.”

“What’s a pup?”

“An immature boy. It’s not a flattering term. I’m sorry they called you that.”

Her words formed an idea in his mind and he realized Glenys had to be one of them. Rordan touched his lips with his fingers. The sensation of Pasiphaea’s lips on his own returned. He felt his blood heat up.

Borus looked at him funny.

Glenys knuckled Rordan’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll be buying us time.”

He beamed at her gesture. “Time for what?”

“As long as Kea isn’t shooting specters, I mean demons at us, that’s one less problem. I have some things to take care of and so does Fikna. You aren’t alone in all this, remember?”

He shouldered his daypack. “Come on. Let’s go see if my bro’ is free yet. We all need to talk in private.”

The three of them walked the rest of the way back to Boant Oak. As they came to the side door, Rordan noticed Kea’s witch mask on the grass. The strap had snapped in two.

Rordan said, “Hey, check it out.”

Glenys and Borus spotted the mask.

“It’s Kea’s,” said Glenys. “She must have broken free. That’s good news. Yuck, what a nasty thing.”

Borus stomped on it with her foot. The mask crumpled as if it were made of frost. She beamed a wide-eyed smile at Rordan.

They continued into Boant Oak.

Rordan contemplated Manissa's closed door. He entered his room. Stig spoke with a teenage Farian with chestnut hair and an unshaven face. The guy was dressed in a short, light colored outer coat extending to his knees over dark trousers.

He acknowledged his bunkmate first. "Hey Stig." Rordan extended his hand to the Farian. "I'm Rordan, Stig's bunkmate. These are my friends Glenys and Borus."

"Tono." The teenager shook Rordan's hand and regarded him with a reserved expression.

For a moment, Rordan feared Tono had shown up on Doncia's behalf. He sat on his desk chair while Glenys stood near the closet. Borus peered from behind her with a series of curious glances.

"Oh, you're Tono. Okay. Blai told me a little about you, said you were a fan of the Fantom Forest."

Tono said, "Yes, that place gets down. It's filled with lots of cool critters. You have been there?"

Rordan said, "And how. The northern side is pretty nice. The western side is huge though—and scary."

Tono made a faint smile. "That's why they call it Fantom Forest. It's not Happy Fun Forest."

Rordan chuckled. "True. Hey, Stig. You seen Fikna around?"

Stig said, "Haven't seen the mother-scratcher."

A frown creased Rordan's face. He turned toward Tono and said, "That's my foster-brother. He's a gallant."

Tono said, "Then I know where your brother is. I saw him hanging out with Blai at her door. By their talk, I don't think you'll see him for a while." He shrugged.

Glenys said, "So much for catching him up with tonight's latest gossip."

A sensation of losing control passed through Rordan. He wanted to check on his bro', but knew he hadn't the strength. His need to be invincible crumbled inside of him; he found himself feeling unexpectedly okay.

Borus uttered a chattering noise. She made her way into the closet and wrapped herself up in the warmers and weave.

Tono said, "Does he sleep there?"

Stig shook his head in slight disgust.

Rordan ignored Stig and said, "Yep. So far he likes the closet. Makes him feel safe. I'll have to see how that all works out over time." He found himself too tired to socialize and stood up. "I'll be back. Glenys, will you come with?"

She nodded and the two of them left the room. Rordan closed the door behind him.

Glenys said, "Where to?"

Rordan lowered his voice. "Let's hit the Upper Trow snug. We need to chat before I collapse."

They reached the snug and found it unoccupied. Glenys sat down on one of the plush chairs and waited. Rordan lit one of the snug lamps from the hall and brought it inside. He closed the door and the windows, then sat down opposite her.

“Glenys, I’ve been meaning to ask something.”

She looked sideways at him. “I had an inkling. What is it, dear?”

Rordan said, “I know you can’t answer because of super secrets and all that. But you’re one of them, aren’t you? That’s how you knew so much about what Kea was doing.”

Glenys hesitated. “You see so much.” She pouted in thought. “I’ve been struggling with a decision all day. But if you could break Selvage with Dalla and live, then I shouldn’t have doubts.

“Dear, because you are precious to me and because I have a hunch you’re one of us, I’ll talk. Yes, I’m different. We call ourselves Lamians. Non-Lamians, whom we call clumsers, know nothing about us. We’re people going through a major change right now. We often feud with one another. For now, keep what I tell you to yourself. I still need to talk to my sponsor about your situation.”

Her explanation relieved him and he nodded. “Okay. Should I not tell Fikna?”

Glenys said, “I’d avoid direct questions from him, for now. Fikna can’t see us. Anyone who isn’t a Lamian and

finds out, dies. We call it Selvage. It's a rule all non-Lamians have to follow.

"I don't know how your brother fits in with us yet with his third eye. It's better to be quiet in case he's at risk. If you are one of us you will have to learn a lot of rules. So please, keep it to yourself for now unless I say it's okay."

Rordan considered her words. "I'll keep quiet. But he's already guessed a lot of what you've just told me."

"He can guess all he likes. Don't give him any facts. The moment he finds out something real, he'll probably get sick and die a slow death."

"What makes you think I might be one of you?"

A heavy sigh escaped Glenys. "We've been scattered for a long time. Part of our belief is that we'll find each other and be a free people again. So we're always looking for the missing Lamians. They're called spore-flakes.

"I don't know what you and Dalla discussed, but I'm betting it was enough. You do look pretty bad, so we won't know for certain until several days have passed."

She noticed Rordan's look of worry and took his hand. "You'll be fine. The other thing is that you seem to know our ways without ever having been taught them. You know the motheroigne's signs. All that remains is for one of our mooncombs, a kind of spokeswoman, to decide it's official."

Rordan rubbed his temples and yawned. "What a crazy day. Were you and Kea feuding over me?"

Glenys said, “She never explained what the fake feud was about. I’m not part of her group and I’m a guest at someone else’s word. She could accuse me of anything and she’d be right. But now that you’ve revealed her covet and stitched her for a date, the matter looks closed until then.”

Rordan said, “What does that mean, that I’ve stitched her?”

“A stitch is a rule we have to take seriously. Because you bested her, you got to change her life a little. You said she has to go on a date with you. That’s a kind of stitch. She has to do that within a year or die. There are ways around it, but if she’s coveting you I doubt she’ll try. Your consent seems important to her. After that, who knows?”

“Consent?” said Rordan.

Glenys said, “If you’re one of us, to consent means you accept her dominance over you. You agree to do what she says. If you’re not one of us, you don’t get to say no.”

“Dalla said Noss was her chump. What’s that mean?”

She looked sad. “He’s not one of us. She’ll use him until she gets tired of him.”

Rordan frowned. He didn’t much care for her revelations. “I don’t know how I feel about calling my bro’ a clumser. That doesn’t seem right.”

Glenys said, “That’s the nicest name we have. Some of us want to use the term ‘newcomer’ to describe non-Lamians, but it’s controversial.”

“This is so complicated,” said Rordan.

She squeezed his hand. “Our people are complicated. Don’t fret about it now. Kea’s covet is out, we’re still alive, and you haven’t fallen into her clutches yet.

“Think about what you’ve been through this day. I thought your rustic display was sassy and sweet. The mask means you broke Beag’s hold over her. That makes me happy. It’s less specters to fight.”

Rordan said, “Specters? Oh yeah, specters.” He felt himself drowning in knowledge and hoping he could remember it all in the morning.

Glenys said, “I’ve been calling them demons because that’s what you and Fikna would accept. Specters are harmful spirits. They have the power to know things about their victims. Kea’s a spectress, a conjuror who practices in their ways.

“Anyway, we have a rest. Our foe isn’t done for, though. We still have to worry about the Huncher.”

Rordan said, “I know. I’m so tired. You know, it’s weird. It’s like these powers come and go like lighting and putting out a lamp. I feel really dim now. I’m a million miles from where I was when I started this voyage.”

Glenys purred. “It’s like a blazing wildfire for me. I’m all burned out now.”

Rordan shivered. “Oh. I got a very clear image of that field just now, with the blowing wind and overcast clouds above the grass.”

She smiled. “You should have seen what happened afterwards.”

Rordan laughed to himself, joy merging with tenderness in his heart. He remembered his feelings for Glenys and wished he’d asked her out on a date instead. “I wonder what it’s like for Fikna.”

Glenys said, “He described it to me as peaceful, nighttime starlight. Everything grew bright and hot when he felt himself grow weaker.”

Rordan said, “Whoa. Then there’s Borus. I wonder what he saw when he left? If only he could speak.”

Glenys rubbed her eyes and sat back. “I have a feeling your friend will find a way to talk to us soon. He’s learning from us.”

“Yep. Hey, that shell must be his magic present. What treasure did you discover when you saw yourself?”

Glenys said, “You mean like your map, or Fikna’s candle? I haven’t received my magic present yet. I’m itching to find out what it will be.”

Rordan said, “Cool. Will you show it to us when you get it?”

She smirked with mischief. “Yes, of course.”

He gave her a look of naked affection.

She turned her face away from him and clasped her hands together in thought. “It’s so difficult.”

He noticed a sudden tension between them. “What’s wrong?”

Glenys glanced at him. “How we’re going to have to act toward one another. The way you’ve changed my life. How I feel. It’s not going to be easy to sort out.

“Dear, I’m going to see if I can get in my room now. Today has been a thrilling adventure for me. Now I’m ready for a nap. I have a sense that tonight will be safe for all of us.” She touched his hand and rose to leave.

Rordan had a sensation that an opportunity had died out suddenly. He shivered from a chill at the back of his neck as she closed the door.

In the dim lamplight of the snug, he stared out the window. Across the academy field was another part of forest to the south. Rordan decided it looked desolate and sinister.

He heard the sound of crunching bones and crackling ice, and froze into weary fear. Outside, he caught a glimpse of the chill cloud moving through the trees.

This time, a low noise like an oscillation of hungry purpose accompanied it. Rordan watched the stagnant pink sparkles disappear from view and a sensation of smallness surrounded him. His experiences seemed empty and meaningless now.

CHAPTER 21: FEAR OF FAILURE

Rordan stood outside the archive classroom where he had taken the exam. He searched the tacked up papers on a cork bulletin board for his name and the check mark that would say either pass or fail. His bite wound oozed and itched under its dressing.

He mapped out today's chores in his thoughts. First, a sign-up for whatever class he ended up in, followed by the purchase of lessons from the academy supplier. Tomorrow his studies would begin. During his normal activities, he would need to remain watchful for specters and the vampire.

Hunger gnawed at his stomach. He wished the egg pancakes he'd scarfed down this morning had stayed down. Rordan hoped the poison's sudden attack of vomiting was temporary.

He thought about the tiny, pinprick blemish he'd noticed on his upper lip in the mirror. His lips still burned a little. The bruises ached, especially his lower back, but not as much as his whole body when he recalled Pasiphaea's mouth on his.

The Huncher joined him. "Hello, pea-brain. For your information, last night I kicked Kea into a deep well. You know, the kind where the lights never come on. You wasted your time trying to fix her. But better you waste your time than me. She was about used up anyway. Saved me the bother of cleaning up when she burst."

Rordan wanted to give the specter a blast, but knew he had nothing. The light of his inner lamp remained low. He spoke like a mouse. “You killed her?”

The Huncher said, “She’s much better alive than dead, for us. Get more yield out of her that way. She’s in expert hands for as long as her rotten fruit of a body holds up. Which can be a real long time. Thanks to you, her panic is back on the best-of list. Got to hand it to you.”

Rordan felt his empty stomach turn queasy. “I’m going to destroy you and then I’m going to find her.”

The Huncher made a fake laugh. “I’m a spirit who will be around long after your clock has ticked its last. And you will never see her again.”

Rordan’s throat tightened. He struggled against the urge to weep. “Why do you do it? Don’t you ever get tired of hurting people?”

The Huncher said, “You sure ask a lot of stupid questions. No wonder your suffering in blazes is so pathetic.”

Fear sped up Rordan’s heartbeat. His mind flailed against blind panic.

“That’s right. The best part about this moment for me is seeing your stupid, clueless face when I say that. Because I know when you realize you are in blazes now, that dumb look is going to be smashed to pieces. Just like I knocked out most of Kea’s front teeth.”

Rordan's vision blurred and an icy crackle filled his ears.

“And she's only the backstage warm-up I'm giving you the scoop on. The master's got a special hoot in mind for all the little girls' dreams this season. So go ahead and keep looking at yourself. I'll be looking at your buck-toothed grimace as the master crushes every last drop of life from your damaged soul.”

The Huncher turned and left.

Despair and a sensation of freezing cold penetrated Rordan to his heart. He refused to give up. The river of fire within him surged with passion and saved his life. He coughed.

Rordan turned around. He watched the crowd of pupils walk about their business. Despite everything he'd done to solve his problem with Kea, it had ended poorly. He had to get charged up so he could take on this crazy specter before it harmed anyone else.

Stig appeared in the crowd and moved toward him. “Hey man. You pass?”

Rordan croaked a little and shrugged his shoulders.

Stig gave him a curious look. “Man, you look scared. What's going on?”

Rordan cleared his throat. “I can't look. I was getting the shakes.”

Stig snorted. “No crap. Let's see.” He searched the list with a focused stare.

Rordan joined him, his eyes having trouble seeing the names.

The teenager found Rordan's name first. "Looks like you passed." He made a laugh. "I'm surprised. You looked so out of it that day."

Stig saw his own name and said, "Smash! I passed too. See you man." He walked away and towards the observatory.

Rordan spotted his name. He nodded to himself. A performing class it was.

He closed his eyes and imagined the song of nature playing always and everywhere, filling him with the deepest pleasure. But his will to listen lacked strength and the song remained distant.

He opened his eyes. The cold in his chest subsided enough for him to walk. Rordan made his way back to the community hall. The thought of getting his papers approved gave him the strength to keep walking.

A pupil going the opposite way walked into view. She had glitter on her skin and bright, reddish-orange pigtailed like two giant horns above her forehead. The girl frowned and moved with difficulty.

As she passed he saw a bugbear hung onto her daypack, its sharp teeth sunk into the back of her neck. The teeth inflicted a spreading trail of rust-brown rot on her skin instead of gushing bloody incisions. The girl didn't notice the creature's existence.

The bugbear looked up from her neck and said, “How’s that inner chamber pot of yours, bungler?”

Rordan pretended not to hear and walked on. The fact of his limits hit him in the chest and he strained to breathe. He wished Glenys or his bro’ were here.

His walking slowed. If Kea had been taken prisoner, then someone else had summoned the specter he just saw. Master Beag could probably do it. His intuition told him his foe had found another person to continue collections. Depression came over him and he sulked.

Blai appeared, walking the other way. She spotted him and approached. “Hi Rordan. Fancy meeting you here.”

“Hey Blai.”

“How’s it going? Seen Fikna around?”

Rordan managed a smile. “He went to the haven to see about a job. The Skipper we came here with offered him one.”

She grinned at him with a perfect set of teeth. “I got one myself this morning. As a practical in the writing cottage. You better pick one up while you have the chance. Not many left on the job board.”

Rordan hadn’t considered the need for a part-time job. “I guess I’ll check it out then. First, I have to get myself going on this sign-up thing.”

Blai said, “You pass your exam?”

“Yep, and boy am I relieved. It was so close I wasn’t sure.”

Blai smiled. “That’s ace news. I’ve got to go check out my results, so I’ll talk to you later. Good afternoon.”

Rordan waved and continued on his way. She seemed like a nice girl to him. Could he let his bro’ have her? His urge to protect Fikna wrestled with a need to let him go. He entered the community hall and reached the sign-up line.

The wait proved hard. He raced his thoughts around in his head against the shock of his encounter with the Huncher. He had almost died at the hands of mindless, cold-hearted evil. Rordan feared it hopeless to imagine the defeat of such a menace.

His mascot said, “You finally managed to get through to Kea. That had seemed hopeless too.”

Rordan muttered to himself, “So what? After all I went through, she ended up in a well. Like in *Sworder of Fate*.”

The mascot said, “How do you know? You only have the Huncher’s word for it. He tapped into your deepest fear of failure and tried to kill you with it.”

Rordan said, “What about me being in blazes? I thought I heard your voice say something like that a few days ago.”

The mascot said, “Unfortunately, that part is true. If you live long enough, you’ll know what the Huncher meant.”

Rordan said, “Am I really one of those weird Lamians? Is that what the demon meant? I’m a witch and going to blazes?”

The mascot said, “Yes, you’re a Lamian. That’s the reason I’m a mascot. But even if you weren’t, you’d still be in blazes because that’s your destiny.”

“I don’t feel like I’m there. Well, I do feel like blazes, but that isn’t the same thing is it?”

“That’s right. You’ll know it when it happens.”

Rordan said, “Why is that my destiny? I don’t understand.”

The mascot said, “I don’t answer why questions, remember? Talk to you next time.”

With a deep breath, Rordan mentally pushed aside his embarrassment. He hoped he didn’t run into anyone he knew.

His turn in line came up. He got his papers taken care of and acquired the necessary list of lessons. Master Beag’s signature no longer glowed.

Rordan ducked down a less traveled hallway and made his way back to Boant Oak. The buying of lessons could wait. His need to escape to a private place grew urgent. He hoped he didn’t crack up too bad.

He approached his room. Manissa’s door stood open and Rordan peered inside. Manissa straightened up the clutter. She appeared unhappy. The room looked emptier than he remembered.

“Where’s Kea?”

Manissa said, “Took off last night. Said she was packing up, moving out. Left a note for you. Here.” She reached toward a pile of lessons on the floor and picked up a folded piece of paper.

He took it from her outstretched hand. His hands shook as he unfolded the paper to reveal a brief, hastily scribbled note. It read:

Dear Ror. Sorry I was so rough on you. I know you were right about something being done to me. Hitting the road to get some help. Nothing I can't handle. I'll be around in time for our date. Love, me.

Rordan nodded. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Hold on a second.” Manissa opened her desk drawer and pushed a wad of papers aside. She pulled out a small tie bracelet. The bracelet had woven sky blue and dark blue strings. A knot had been woven near each end.

“Take this and tie it onto your left wrist. It’ll let anyone in our force know you’re with us. Anyone gives you sauce, tell them Pontustel wants to see them. That’s my name, by the way. My arcane name, not my clumser lie.”

Rordan let her tie the bracelet around his wrist. Glenys’ bracelet suddenly made sense to him. “I guess this means you’re sponsoring me or something?”

Manissa said, “Yeah. Kea’s covet has everyone confused. I’d like people to cool it. Been driving me crazy.”

Rordan said, “Thanks again; it means a lot to me. I’ll be back.”

“Okay, bye.”

He went into his room. Stig wasn’t there and Borus still slept in the closet. Rordan read Kea’s note again and thought about Manissa’s actions. He placed the note in his journal and stared into space. The expected tears didn’t come. His heart had been hollowed out by the attempt on his life.

Rordan felt like a big dummy. The sweetness of the note moved him. It pained him to think the Huncher had gotten a hold of her, just when he had wised up. His bungle got worse the more he thought about it.

How long would he be a bungler? His father’s words rose out of the dark and clutched at him, “Don’t be a lowlife like me.”

He pulled the ruined shirt from his daypack and examined it. His view of the stains and the smell had changed. Rordan believed there was a story behind them. He thought about Kea’s motivation for stealing the shirt. Part of it might have been a secret desire for a gift. For all her mockery of chivalry, she may have been in need of it.

Fikna was the expert at the rules of romantic courtesy. Rordan decided he needed to ask his bro’ some questions.

Putting the shirt aside, he examined the plant. The stalk had darkened in color and developed a grainy texture. The end of the sprout had changed into a bulb-like swelling. He decided not to disturb it. His limit for conversation with phantom beings had been reached.

Rordan put down the daypack and glanced at his bunkmate's desk. A piece of paper with crude daubings and scribbles caught his attention. He pulled the paper out from under the small pile of lessons.

The paper turned out to be the same guide-map every pupil had received. The crude daubings were crosses, arrows, and crescents located near the archives and the amphitheater. Beside those locations were scribbles in Dimmuric.

He remembered seeing these kinds of symbols in code lessons relating to treasure maps. The exact meaning of the symbols eluded Rordan. Again, he felt the lack of his full lesson collection.

Rordan gathered together his own copy of the guide-map and his writing kit. He duplicated the symbols and what he could make out of the scribbles onto his copy. The thought of Stig catching him in the act made his weary heart pound.

Satisfied with the duplications, he placed Stig's guide-map back where he had found it. Rordan let the ink on his own guide-map dry and sat down.

His mind boggled at the discovery. He needed to know what Stig was doing here for real. The guy must be

looking for buried treasure. If the illuminated map also led to a treasure the two might be connected.

He remembered Stroma had said the manor was built on an old lodeshaft and had suggested the tunnels were accessible. Or at least, enough to have a punishment for being found down there. Master Beag must know about them too. If there was a treasure, Rordan suspected the vampire guarded it.

The Huncher said Kea had been thrown down a deep well. The specter might have meant a section of the lodeshaft. Rordan realized an expedition was in order. The attempt would have to be made at night.

According to Varan, a mother spider walked the grounds at night. She must dwell somewhere during the day. Probably at the courtyard where his mascot had told him to run for cover.

His lodestar had also said to expect a word from Pasiphaea's relatives. He'd first seen Pasiphaea outside the forest. If the whole family could walk the grounds during the day like her, he was in trouble.

He didn't want to imagine what might happen if he ran into any of them. The expedition would have to include plans to dodge spider fantoms.

Rordan tried to recall what the plant had told him. He remembered a diamond child growing within him. His feelings struggled with the concept. He decided it must be symbolic and related to his growing up to leave childhood behind.

The map and wheel page must have more clues he hadn't picked up on yet. Rordan looked at his daypack. Only a blank emptiness came forward.

A touch of poison gripped him and brought on an attack of nausea. He gasped for breath while his body shivered. The thought he might die drowned out all other thoughts.

The nausea passed and he regained some composure. His imagination strained to grasp at meaning. Pasiphaea's poison and kiss worried him. He hoped he could figure out a way to solve those problems before they finished him off. Glenys had mentioned a phantom physic. He'd have to ask her about that.

No matter how he looked at it, his life could only get more complicated if he went on. His journey might last for a long time, which meant more visions and phantoms along the way.

Rordan considered how much further he could look within himself. He didn't know what was humanly possible, nor did he know what would happen if someone stopped. The situation resembled a maze to him, with dead ends and many different twists and turns.

He took out his lucky crystal and held it in his hand. The token reminded him of his change into a magician and the need to practice his imagination. A nagging intuition told him the encounter with Pasiphaea had opened up the door for him. Kea's change of heart had been the result of a skilled act and a display of sincerity. Both had sprung from his rustic skills.

He thought of the invisible shine from which he received secrets. Rordan decided things changed as a result of a power he carried inside. The mascot had mentioned an egg and called it a treasure. He hoped he would find out when and where he had picked up this treasure. The power in the egg had made him a rustic in a weird performance. He intuited the next move would be his to decide.

Rordan gazed at the crystal. The song of nature came forward and a passion seized him. His body felt part of the song, part of nature. A singing voice called out to him from a great distance.

He noticed Borus standing at the entrance to the closet.

She smiled at him with wide eyes and said, “No cry. The woman strong. We find.”

Her powerful voice stunned him. He let understanding sink in. “You’re a girl.”

Borus said, “You smart. Found voice and make talk.”

Rordan said, “Oh, wow.”

She came over to him and placed a palm on his shoulder. “You and I search. Crazy friends.”

He looked up at her and said, “Yep. We’re crazy friends all right. What are we searching for?”

Borus said, “Happy time.”

“What does happy time mean?”

She stretched her arms up wide over her head, eyes shining with joy. “All happy here and there.”

He found her description unsettling and alluring at the same time. “That sounds cool. Let’s do that. What’s our next step?”

A playful grin spread across her wide mouth. “Wait and hear. More song come.”

Rordan agreed with her. There must be a period of waiting involved with how things unfolded. Her own third eye must see along those lines.

“Will my friends be able to hear you talk? See you’re a girl?”

Borus said, “Glenys see me. Fikna closed.”

Excitement pushed Rordan to the brink of exhaustion. “Have you been talking to Glenys already?”

She paused to think, a comical expression playing across her face. “Her ears fast. You slow, make talk.”

Rordan said, “What’s your name?”

She smiled. “Borus. You give name and soul back.”

“Why didn’t I see you’re a girl?”

“Dwarf land sick, I hide. Lone boy safe.”

He considered her answer. “I got it; a girl traveling alone would be noticed. But does that mean you can change shape?”

Borus said, “I hide, dwarfs see false. Tough land, bad food and no talk. I lose name and soul. Trunk go sick.”

“Wait, what do you mean dwarfs?” His head pounded with fatigue.

She made a series of long, drawn out gestures. “You dwarf. This dwarf land. Dwarfs eat ghost land, make more dwarf land.”

“I’m a dwarf?”

Borus nodded, pointed to him and then to herself. “You dwarf. I thing.”

“What kind of thing?” He refused to believe the growing possibility that his buddy was some kind of fantom. The implications were too much for him now.

“Things live ghost land,” said Borus. “Hide and dwarfs see false. I hear song, make well. You help, we search.”

Rordan closed his eyes. “I’m tired. I must be making talk for you. The magic is wearing me out. I’m sorry.”

“No cry. Rordan rest. Dwarfs make soul weak. Things know. You smart now.”

He crawled over to his bed and lay down. Borus placed a dryad weave over Rordan and tucked him in.

THE END