

## CHAPTER 1: A LAST REVEL

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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.