

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, bearskin, 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 Emphyreon, 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 butty’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, butty 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 butty 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 butty 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 butty’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.