

## CHAPTER 4: NIXED

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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 butty 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 butty. 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 butty and a sullen Fais exited the cabin. The teenage girl carried a large, hot kettle in a padded hand. The butty 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 butty 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 butty 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 butty 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 butty 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 butty 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 Scorpios 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.”