

CHAPTER 5: CLOSE CALL

Rordan failed to stay asleep. He opened his eyes and peered about the hold. The canvas above had been disturbed and not closed all the way. Enough daylight came through for him to see the sleeping forms bunched together around him. He didn't hear the sound of rain anymore. Kea rested her head against his left shoulder. Between and facing them, Fikna slumbered in a pair of soft warmers and a thick dryad-weave. Codal's bedding lay open and empty.

He nudged Kea away from him and inched upright. Cold air seeped over his body as soon as he disturbed his own warmers and weave. The muscles of his arms and lower back ached. The slow drudgery of yesterday's poling through the lock canal returned to his thoughts. He remembered how every passenger had been dog-tired at the end.

The needs of his body required attention. Rordan rolled his bedding against the backpack. He pulled on his coat and grabbed his mug. With a soft groan, he stood upright and climbed from the hold.

From the deck, Rordan took in his surroundings. The boat lay at anchor on the other side of the long canal, along the side of the Hopinfam River. A two-person sailboat bearing the name Cornel was anchored twenty feet away. Bold symbols and bright colors decorated the wood. The window on the side of the tiny cabin was curtained. A rusty lantern hung from the mast and wasted fuel.

On the riverbank, the canal worker from last night inspected the first lock. Rordan cringed at the memory of the man's putrid breath and yellowed teeth.

A pair of drivers sat on the stone wall of the canal gate and drank from their beerskins. Their tethered horses idled near the lock cottage. Rordan recognized the body language of the drivers and understood they noticed him, even as they ignored his presence. He imagined they made fun of him.

Smoke rose from the cabin chimney. Rordan smiled at the possibility of a warm drink and the smell of something meaty to eat. Codal stood beside the brazier and enjoyed a smoke. The brazier held a new pile of ignited coals.

The guy noticed him and waved. "Hey brother, I see you slept like a log. Come on down and hang with a brother, brother."

Rordan said, "Just a second." He used the chamber pot on deck to take care of his business. The morning cold seeped into his body more. He looked up and saw an overcast sky.

Mindful of his injured toe and the water below, Rordan made his way aft.

Codal took a drag from his smoke and offered it to him.

Rordan refused with a wave of his hand. "I don't smoke."

Codal said, "You ever try one?"

“Nope.”

“You are something else, brother. Once we get going, I’ll need the tobacco high. The Skipper was talking to the drivers over there. Word is there’s a clogger in the river today.”

“What’s a clogger?”

Codal said, “Dang if I know, brother. Sounds bad, whatever it is.”

Rordan stamped to get the cold out of his system. The coals clicked and smoked, still short of the point of noticeable heat. He clutched the mug close and huddled his arms.

Codal said, “You should let Dalla give you a rub down. She gives good hand, brother.”

Rordan smiled at him. “I saw. My bro’ was a little shocked to see her give one to you.”

“Yeah. Your brother is a tight one, brother. He needs to free his mind and let loose.”

Rordan said, “He’s all right. I’ve never seen anyone give a massage before. I thought it was something you went to a panderer for. I guess I don’t see anything wrong with it. It looks harmless enough.”

Codal chuckled. “Brother, your neighborhood is one blocked up rump.” He took another drag and blew smoke upwards. His manic eyes followed the cloud as it diffused through the cold air.

Rordan ignored the rude statement. “Your name doesn’t sound Dimmurian. What’s the story behind that?”

Codal said, “When a brother has a Seltish name, a lot of paperwork goes easy. And easy is the way I roll, brother. How you feeling after all that polling yesterday?”

“I feel like blazes. Poling stinks. This boat must weigh several tons.”

Codal pursed his lips together and nodded. “I hear you brother. Looks like Noss is up. Hey brother, come on down and hang.”

The teenager joined them. “Hey man. Got one to spare?”

Codal simpered. “Always got a spare for a brother, brother.” He produced a smoke from his pocket and passed it along to Noss, who lit it off of Codal’s with a practiced motion.

Rordan found the number of smokers on the voyage an annoyance he could do without.

The cabin door opened and the Skipper came outside. “Good morning. Noss, get everybody up if they aren’t awake yet. It’s getting late and we have to waste some time checking out a water hazard. Crow for anyone who wants it. Sausage and eggs with hardtack leftovers for anyone who feels like working.”

Noss went back to the hold.

Rordan hadn't seen a coop or any peddlers. He was glad of the Skipper's consideration. She'd claimed to be a spotter, after all.

He caught a glimpse of Fais in the cramped quarters. She cooked the group's meal with practiced timing. The butty poured himself a tankard of fresh crow from a billycan. The sight of a serious breakfast in its final stages pulled a grumble from Rordan's stomach.

Codal placed his smoke on the edge of the brazier and clutched his mug. "Time to strike, brother." He walked into the cabin.

Rordan followed after him. The two of them each grabbed a piece of hardtack from the tin on the shelf. They used the surface of the flat biscuit as a dish to hold their hot eggs while they both scooped up a pair of sausages from the ready-plate. The sausages were wolfed down.

Fais snapped at them. "Leave some for everybody else."

The butty gave Fais a weary look. He poured Codal some crow and hung the billycan from a polished brass hook over the stove. He then brushed past Fais and left the cabin.

Codal followed, closing the door behind him.

Rordan sat down on the bench and ate the rest of his breakfast. Fais looked haggard to him. He puzzled over why the girl traveled alone. She'd insisted on sleeping in the cabin.

“Any tea?” He rubbed greasy fingers on his coat.

Fais huffed. “In the round tin, but you’ll have to take it loose.”

Rordan said, “Sure, sounds good.” He located the tin and dumped a measure into his mug. The dry, aromatic leaves received a pour of steaming water from the hot kettle. Rordan returned the kettle to the stove hook and managed to burn the side of his right wrist on the metal.

“Ow.” He hugged the wrist to his chest.

Fais said, “Be careful. Everything’s burning hot.” She scooped the current round of eggs and sausage into the ready plate and started another round.

The noise of people stirring and bumping about came through the bulkhead. The recognizable sound of someone using the chamber pot followed.

Fais said, “Gross. I could hear it every time someone went last night.” She struggled with a stuck piece of ruined egg.

Rordan said, “That’s probably Noss. Give him that egg.” He smirked.

Fais gave him a confused look. Her expression changed into a reserved smile. “Your brother isn’t sore at me, is he?”

“For what?”

She looked surprised. “For turning down his offer. He didn’t tell you?”

Rordan shook his head. “He doesn’t tell me everything. We’re foster-brothers, not best friends.”

Fais said, “I see. He offered to be my escort, but I turned him down.”

“Believe it or not, he really is a gentleman. You could totally trust him even though he’s a complete stranger.”

Her face stiffened. “I’m moved. But I have to do this by myself.” The grease in the pan splattered and she flinched.

Sadness moved through Rordan. He found her attitude baffling. “What are you striving for?”

Fais turned and flared her eyes at him. She radiated rage at him so strongly he felt afraid. He gazed at her eyes in suspense.

She turned away and stared at the sizzling food in the pan. “Some gratitude.”

Rordan said, “For what?”

“For doing what I’m told.” She moved a leaden hand and kept the breakfast round from burning.

He clasped both hands on his mug. “We all have to submit, that’s the rule.”

“Then why am I the one cooking everyone’s breakfast? While you get to dodge the levy and skip even the easiest level of worship?”

He flushed. Rordan couldn’t believe his life details had spread so quickly. A twinge of anger towards his bro’ added to the heat he felt on his face.

The door opened and the other passengers crowded in.

Rordan edged out the door and returned to the brazier. The coals gave off a steady blaze of heat. An unexplainable sense of shame came over him.

He blew on his tea and relaxed a little. His toe, sore muscles, and the cold air made him want to take a doze. The prospect of more poling repulsed him.

Rordan caught pieces of talk as everyone enjoyed breakfast. His bro' listened to the two transient women talk about their travels. Codal rambled on about music to Noss. The Skipper and the butty discussed going ashore.

Focus eluded his attempts to coax it. A sense of dread crept into him and he fought an urge to hide. Fais' words had put him out of sorts.

A voice inside him said, "She doesn't see that you're in blazes. You're ashamed because you don't know it yourself yet."

The dread turned into a mild panic. He wanted to be back home. All the excitement and exposure to people he didn't understand brought on a sensation of helplessness. The panic subsided and the dread returned.

He glanced at his bro'. Fikna had bumped into a few social walls yesterday. Now he seemed to enjoy himself. Adventure stimulated his bro', so maybe everything had been so different it had taken Fikna a day to adapt.

A thought struck him. Maybe this trip represented an ordeal to survive. He resolved to get through it and keep his bro' in one piece. Fikna needed his protection.

He gulped the steaming tea down, then handed the empty mug to his bro'. Fikna smiled at him and entered the cabin.

Rordan noticed Kea staring at him intently and looked away. His thoughts returned to his dream before the voyage. He decided he was reading too much into her attentions and spaced out.

Fikna rejoined him. "Most agreeable. It is a pleasure to acquire a steaming drink on a chill morning such as we find ourselves."

"Yep. You sleep okay, bro'?"

"Not particularly well I'm afraid," said Fikna. "The cramped quarters, combined with the odor and damp do little to agree with me." He blew on his tea.

"No jesting. Codal's feet stank. If I hadn't been so tired, I don't know if I could have gotten to sleep."

Fikna chuckled. "I appreciate your attempt to emphasize Rord. However, I refuse to be fooled. We are both in full knowledge of your ability to sleep anywhere upon command."

Annoyance crept into Rordan. "True, but it helped that I was tired."

Fikna said, "Insist upon your way then, Rord. I shall refrain from pressing." He caught a glance of Kea staring

in their direction and smiled at her. She smirked back at him.

The Skipper motioned for attention. “Now that you’ve all had some fuel, I have the latest news. Because of the rain last night, a clogger has formed downriver. In the traffic lane. We’re going to have to avoid it if we don’t want to wreck. The butty and I are going to go ashore and spot the best route past the hazard.”

Fikna raised his hand. “Pardon me, Skipper. Would you explain to us what a clogger is?”

The Skipper said, “A strong river current twisting into a circle. It sucks down anything that gets too close. Whenever there’s a storm they show up afterwards. It forces everyone to go around or wait it out.”

“Why don’t we wait?” said Rordan.

“That could take up to a week. You want to stick it out on this boat that long?”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth.

The Skipper said, “Unless the way is completely blocked, we’ll make a try. But we need everyone polling hard—no taking it easy. After this, you’ll all be in great shape. Plus, I’ll have a nice reward for those of you who gave it their best. Finish up your breakfast. Noss, grab a pole so we can dock.”

Noss wolfed down the last of his meal. Codal finished off the last of the eggs, greasy fingers juggling the hot food between two halves of a hardtack. Fikna finished off his tea.

The butty raised the anchor and the boat was poled towards the small pier. The stern fenders creaked with the shifting of the boat against the wood. The water level had raised enough to bring the side of the boat almost level with the platform.

Rordan watched Fais rinse the pots and pans with the last of the hot water. She scrubbed them vigorously using a rough cloth. Her hands swelled and her face reddened with the effort. His sense of shame returned and he felt faint.

Fikna handed the empty mug back to Rordan. “I declare, this river travel business is a great amount of work. We ought to have chosen the coach instead.”

Rordan frowned, keeping to himself an urge to grumble. “You didn’t make the plans in time. And it would have been just as crowded.”

Fikna sniffed. “At least we wouldn’t be involved in concentrated labor.”

“Look at it this way bro’. We’ll still be in one piece when we get there. All those coachers will be out of their minds from being through the meat grinder.”

Fikna put his hands in his trouser pockets and sighed. “I suppose you are correct on that score. One probably shouldn’t complain too much. However, it falls short of my expectations.”

The Skipper said, “Noss, stay and watch the boat. Everyone else, feel free to come with us.” She disembarked and the butty followed her.

Noss put a foot up on the side of the boat and crossed his arms. Everyone else followed the Skipper up the pier stairs.

At the top, Rordan took a moment to get accustomed to the damp ground of the horse trail. He saw smoke rise from the triple chimneys of a copyworks further in the trees. The thump and grind of tools at work reached his ears. His memory failed to recall the structure the last time he was in Roiast.

Down the canal path walked two teenage girls in gray work dresses. The unkempt one laughed and talked loudly while the comely one giggled and looked mischievous. They headed past the canal cottage and into the woods toward the sound of the tools.

Rordan grew embarrassed. His thoughts reeled at the reality of yokel girls really copying goods. He noticed the Skipper looking away from them with a tense look of emotion on her face.

She returned her attention to the passengers. “This way everyone. Don’t fall behind.” The Skipper walked the horse trail in the direction of downriver.

Fikna said, “Come along now, Rord. Let’s not hesitate further.”

The two brothers followed the group. The wide trail led away from the canal lock and in a slight descent ran close to the side of the river.

Rordan marveled at the large amount of late summer growth. It intruded onto the path from countless angles. Trees grew above his head and leaned over the river.

Enormous boulders and fallen trunks attracted collections of river flotsam. Shiny blue dragonflies hunted above the surface of the water. Yellow butterflies with black splotches on their wings fluttered past. His worries faded.

Yesterday's rains had swelled the river. The vigorous water moved fast and awed Rordan with its strength. The river possessed a line of rapids he estimated to be a mile long. The water leapt and churned in huge waves about hidden rocks. A way past the stretch of water hazard ran along the group's side of the river.

His folks had taken Fikna and himself to Roiast for a retreat three years ago. Rordan remembered playing along the rocks and making his mom nervous. Fikna had availed himself of the sandwiches.

He didn't recall the river being this swollen the last time he'd been here. Rordan tried to imagine the force behind the river and failed. The surface of the water moved so rapidly he soon lost any sense of volume.

Fikna elbowed him. "The current only appears terrible. Cultivate some optimism Rord."

Rordan made a glum face and said, "We haven't seen the clogger yet. Even the rapids over there look bad. The Skipper just wants to make her schedule."

Fikna gave him a curious look. "To what schedule do you refer? I'll wager she understands the river like the back of her hand. Wouldn't manage much distance if she didn't."

Rordan noticed through the morning haze that the sun had cleared the tree line. He imagined the damp air would soon grow warm. “She isn’t a steerswoman, bro’. She told me herself that this is a side job for her and the butty. I believe she knows what she’s doing. But I wouldn’t say she has the knack for it that someone who’s done it all their life would.”

Fikna frowned. He took off the Deep Uirolec loyalty hat and wiped his greasy hair back. “I pray all proceeds in our favor then. This is substantially more dangerous than I supposed. Perhaps we ought to have gone coach after all.”

As they walked, a watery din came within range of hearing and grew louder. Codal spouted random lyrics as if he were drunk. Rordan couldn’t make out what the guy said.

After ten minutes, they stood on a rocky area of the riverside. The trail continued over a rise of broken terrain and disappeared behind the top of the slope. Between a huge boulder and the rocky riverside, at the bottom of a small drop in the river, churned a whirlpool.

The roaring of the twisting water grated on Rordan’s nerves. He believed the whirlpool strong enough to grab their boat and drag it under. His dread returned.

The Skipper and the butty scrambled up a thick finger of rock jutting up and over the river for a better view. Rordan admired the athletic way they both reached the top.

Codal shouted at him. “Looks like a big rump sandwich, brother!”

Rordan nodded. He watched the Skipper and the butty talk and point amongst themselves.

Kea and Dalla sat on one of the rocks together and tossed pebbles at the riverbank. Fais stood by herself and stared at the water flowing past.

Two people wearing ‘tread-me-not’ loyalty caps came up over the rise of the trail. Both were geared for fishing and carried knives openly on their belts. A countryman bulldog followed them. The large-bodied canine had a short, silvery coat and turquoise eyes.

The bony, middle-aged man had lost the part of his left arm just below the elbow. A wooden prosthesis was attached in its place. He had a long greasy beard and a bulbous face. The stocky teenager had a withdrawn expression. They made their way past the group without a glance, the bulldog at their heels.

The appearance of armed yokels made Rordan feel exposed. He had thought the neighborhoods of the Heartland were more closely connected. It struck him the Heartland lacked the development he’d imagined. The Skipper’s talk about boat-ruffs returned to his thoughts.

Fikna said, “Didn’t the Deuce’s Road pass through here? I appear to recall a lesson of yours going on about that.”

Rordan said, “Yep. The advanced road system of the troglodytes. But it had fallen into ruin about the time of the first pioneers. I’m sorry, colonists. The Kgosians

wrote stories of parts still being in use somewhere, but it's all legend now. Just like the Deuce's Candle and Idol Island. The Troglodyte Prince's gold and the Fountain of Good Life. It's all a mystery."

Fikna studied the wide trail, flattened down by long use. "The path displays remarkable stability. Maybe we traverse the Deuce's Road now. Great Welkin, I dislike the sound of that."

Rordan smiled, snorted to himself. "The Kgosians looted it for the stone. By the time our people came around all that remained were the trails."

"Truly? I wonder why such matters were never revealed in history class."

"I don't know," said Rordan.

Codal took a seat with Kea and Dalla. Rordan studied them and noted how everyone was well into the grime of travel. Pretty soon, clothes would take on a duller shade and hair would stiffen. He looked at Fais and tried to fathom what went on inside her head.

Fikna leaned closer and said, "What is your opinion of our lone female traveler, Rord? She maintains an unfriendly face."

Rordan turned toward his bro'. "I don't know what to make of her. She's pretty self-absorbed. She also feels bad about refusing your offer."

Fikna said, "Fais mentioned the matter to you?"

Rordan said, “She hoped you weren’t upset. A conflict is going on inside her. It’s like she has to prove herself.”

“Most peculiar. I certainly consider myself rebuffed,” said Fikna. “I shall honor her decision, and I hope you shall do likewise. You are now a confidant.”

Rordan rolled his eyes. His bro’ had entered romance territory again. “Hey, doesn’t her rebuff count as a virtuous refusal?”

Fikna pursed his lips. “Don’t be ridiculous. My offer was no declaration. I possess no interest in Fais. My actions were simple politeness.

“Now Kea, I find favor with. Divulge to me your beliefs concerning her. What have you learned, my confidant?”

Rordan made a grimace. “She looks like trouble bro’. Attractive, but there’s a distance there that doesn’t seem like it wants to be bridged.”

Fikna nodded. “Exactly. These qualities make her intriguing to me. Unfortunately, I haven’t any idea of how to get her to notice me.” He glanced at Kea and smiled.

Rordan could tell his bro’ was undecided. Fikna would probably make a dummy of himself, trying to figure things out. The guy never knew how to act when it came to romance, even though he had the rules memorized. Rordan felt helpless to aid him. He didn’t know anything about girls either, and worried if he ever would. His protection of his bro’ had limits.

“Just talk to her,” said Rordan, “find out what she likes. What she wants to do. But don’t get all crazy over her. She’s older than you, and something about her doesn’t sit right with me.”

Fikna thought Rordan’s words over. “Splendid advice.” He walked towards and stood beside Codal, pretending to be interested in the teenager’s conversation.

Rordan thought no good could come of this.

The roar of the clogger drowned out his attention and he let his imagination wander. He sensed the presence of the fantoms. They probably watched him with curious expressions on their faces. His imagination conjured up the kinds of creatures that might live in the river, no matter how preposterous.

He thought of mermaids, the water monsters with hooked claws and needle-like teeth that dragged travelers to their doom beneath the water. They were like the nixes, but worse. Mermaids pulled whole boats down to a watery grave. Rordan felt an encounter with the clogger might end up just like in the ghost stories. Drowned or bashed against the rocks like so much wreckage.

The dread raced back and he fought against panic. His thoughts clung to the comforts of home. He regretted coming with Fikna on this voyage.

The Skipper and the butty descended the rocky outcrop. They returned to the group.

As everyone gathered in close, the Skipper spoke loud enough to be heard above the din. “Okay everyone, we have it figured out how we’re going to get by. We’re

going to steer to the left and have all of you poling so we don't hit the big rock or run aground on the bank."

Fikna said, "Why not utilize drivers along the side? It appears to me such a course would be safer, if slower."

"Because that costs money."

Fikna stared ahead in stunned silence.

The Skipper said, "Okay ballast rats, let's go. This is where you earn your discounts."

The group returned the way they came and the noise of the clogger receded.

Fais put her hands to her mouth and said, "Oh, my."

Attention focused in the direction of her stare.

Rordan spotted a large gray lump stuck in the tree roots by the river. He recoiled, knew the lump would turn out to be a dead body.

A hush overcame the group. With caution, the Skipper and her booty scrambled down to the riverbank and examined the body up close. After a minute, the two returned.

The Skipper said, "It looks like a Seltish man. I don't see any obvious signs of foul play. A local will notify the canal worker eventually. There's nothing more we can do."

Fikna said, "Our duty is to report the matter."

"That'll only slow us down, and we don't know anything. It's okay Fikna, this happens all the time."

Indecision clouded Fikna's expression. "Very well, but I protest this dodging of responsibility on your part."

The Skipper said, "Noted. Come on, let's not hang around."

Without further conversation, the group returned to the pier.

Noss stood with one foot on the edge of the boat, leaning with one arm over the rear of the cabin. He spoke with the two people who had passed the group on the trail earlier. The bulldog rested on the pier beside the stocky, withdrawn teenager.

The middle-aged man approached the Skipper. "This young man tells me you're going to have a go at that clogger today. You planning on using any drivers?"

The Skipper said, "Nope. We're going to pole it.

The man said, "You're going it cheap, huh? Eh, good luck to you." He shook his head.

"Stick around for the show. You've got nothing to lose."

The man laughed. "You got that right."

She bid the two of them a good day with a gesture and boarded the boat. The butty and the passengers followed after her.

Noss said, "Going to try for it?"

The Skipper nodded. She climbed to the top of the cabin and untied the extra poles. Everyone but the Skipper and the butty received one.

The middle-aged man and the stocky teenager left the pier. The bulldog got to its feet and followed them up the pier stairs. They joined the drivers. The middle-aged man talked with them; he pointed at the boat and shook his head. The drivers shrugged.

“Fikna, Rordan, Codal. You pole at the fore. Noss and Fais, you get the port aft side. Kea, Dalla, you work the starboard aft side. The butty is going to spot for us at the mast. I steer.”

Fais gawked at the Skipper. “Are you goating me? I can’t do this.”

“Face your fears, Fais. There’s no one here to judge you but yourself. I’ll lend you my preserver. Butty, why don’t you lend yours to Codal?”

While the life preservers were brought out and exchanged, the passengers took their assigned places. The Skipper poured the dying brazier coals into the chimney-bucket while the butty secured loose items in the cabin. The two of them then double-checked the securing of the mast and sail together.

Rordan waited on the Skipper’s direction. He remembered last night’s awkward teamwork and slow progress through the canal. The stiff and slow movements of the passengers told him they hadn’t recovered.

At a word from the Skipper, Noss cast off and the boat was poled away from the pier. The butty climbed the cabin and tied his waist to the mast. The boat left the safety of the canal space and entered the river’s course.

The current took hold and pulled them downriver. Rordan bent his knees and waited. The Skipper struggled to keep the boat as close to the bank as possible without stranding her. Kea and Dalla poled the riverbank a little, their arms pulsing with exertion.

Rordan's toe recognized yesterday's pressure of long standing and protested with throbs of dull pain. He frowned. The strain of poling hadn't even started and already his toe bothered him.

A rock lurked just out of the water near the shore. The boat had reached the rapids.

The butty shouted, "Fore push to the right!"

Codal and Fikna jammed their poles against the hard, immobile obstacle and helped move the boat away. The Skipper strained with the tiller and kept them on course.

The roar of the clogger became audible and the boat picked up speed in the churning water. The butty strained to see what lie ahead.

Rordan watched in alarm as the water bounced and splashed in muddy white bursts against the boat. The strength of the river surrounded him with fear.

The boat struck a sudden wave surge and the front of the boat bucked upwards. The two brothers and Codal tumbled onto their backs. Fais make a shout of surprise as she and Noss staggered to their knees.

The butty strained to stay on his feet. "Rock to port! Fore and aft push to the left!"

Fikna pulled himself upright and seized his dropped pole. He braced his foot on a mooring pin and pushed the pole against a rock that the bow approached. The fore of the boat moved past the rock with a quick grinding sound. Fikna whooped and hollered.

Rordan struggled to right himself. He caught a glimpse of Noss and Fais on their feet with poles at the ready. The rock scraped the boat once more, then passed behind them.

He looked ahead and saw the boat swerve towards the space between the boulder and the riverbank where the clogger waited a few feet beyond. As the noise grew louder, Rordan flailed on the deck. The pole had become stuck and his limbs were tangled.

Codal staggered upright and steadied himself. Another tremor shook the boat and the butty lost his footing. Fais' hood came loose.

Fikna jabbed his pole at an angle against a smaller, submerged rock. The boat twisted sideways and the starboard side of the boat moved to slam into the boulder ahead. Codal rushed to Fikna's side and added his strength against the small rock.

The Skipper strained to steer the boat to the left side of the boulder.

The butty hollered. "All push to the right! All push to the right!"

The entire aft crew moved to the starboard side of the boat and used their poles against the submerged rock as it passed. Kea and Dalla hit it solidly as one.

“Fore poles push forward and right!”

The roar of the clogger paralyzed Rordan with fear.

Fikna whooped, his voice piercing the noise. With Codal’s help, he pushed against the boulder. The boat slid by the immense obstacle with a scraping sound and away from the clogger. The current seized the boat and shot it past the twisting water with a burst of speed.

Rordan thought he heard a raw cry of outrage through the clogger’s din.

The noise faded and the river entered a dull stretch. The butty pulled himself upright and resumed his spotting. While Codal caught his breath, Fikna chortled with elation.

Rordan untangled himself from the pole and regained his feet.

The Skipper wiped her brow and blew out a breath. “That was close,” she said. “I gave us a fifty-fifty chance of capsizing there.”

Everyone grew quiet. Fikna looked sideways at the Skipper.

Fais re-tied her hair and put the hood back on properly.

Rordan thought she looked prettier without it. He wished traditionals weren’t so strict.

Kea and Dalla rested their arms and heads on the cabin top. They watched Fikna. Noss sat down on the side of the boat and stared at the deck.

Codal said, “Fikna brother, I thought you were going to go crazy back there.”

“Yeah,” said Kea, “you were on a rampage. I thought you were going to jump in and swim your way through.”

Fikna said, “You were all counting on me to do my utmost. I couldn’t disappoint you. However, the excitement seized a hold of me and I apologize for my outburst.”

Rordan caught Noss glaring at his bro’. The teenager resumed staring at the deck.

Fikna said, “Now that the worst has passed us by, I’m certain the remainder of our voyage shall be a supreme outing.”

Codal shook his head.

The butty said, “Look alive, people.”

The conversation ceased. Rordan helped the boat maneuver past a block of debris and a stretch of mild rapids. His fear of the water came and went in surges.

The boat entered another lull in the course of the river. Rordan rested against the cabin with his weight off his right foot. His toe had turned numb and his arms felt like thickened clay. Fikna’s excitement had diminished. His bro’ still looked better off to him. He noticed the sun had broken up the clouds.

The Skipper passed along a beerskin. Everyone took a drink.

Codal pulled a cotton hat from his back pocket and put it on. The brim separated into two flaps like a mouth.

A red piece of cloth stuck out from between them. He looked at Rordan and said, “Hey brother, how about some of your rustic rhyme to pass the time?”

Rordan cast a tired look at him. “What did you have in mind?”

The teenager shrugged. “I was hoping you could jump us up with a routine or a bit. But if you ain’t got one brother, that’s okay.”

Fikna said, “Do you appreciate Deep Uirolec?”

Codal snorted. “Those guys are soft. Blackcap Tuan and Flamejar Bernt smash their pose.”

Noss chuckled. “That’s not exactly a folk favorite bunch.”

“I’d love to see them get famous and sung more than those Uirolec humpers,” said Codal. “Everybody’s wanting to hear them play. It’s sad to see songsters reduced to playing that doo-doo. Especially when there’s a lot more sideways unallied loyalty out there.”

Rordan said, “You don’t think Deep Uirolec is perilous?”

Codal laughed. “Brother, those guys have sold out for big peers to settler management and could care less. The Blackcap and the Flamejar deserve it more because they make better songs.”

Noss said, “Then they’d be exactly like Deep Uirolec and you’d be pushing some other party.”

Fikna said, “I have a rich fondness for Deep Uirolec. Their music is emotional and inspiring. They represent

peril with a conscience. One has only to listen to their earliest music. They've matured, I venture. They might make less perilous music. However, I find their last direction greatly moving."

Rordan nodded, "Yep, have to agree. Those songs from their fourth set sent me places I'd never been before."

"And where was that brother?" Codal put his front teeth over his lower lip and stared at him.

"Places inside my head. Feelings get stirred that become so strong I can see visions."

Kea laughed. "Visions? I never got that hearing a songster perform them. They always seemed average to me."

Dalla said, "Hey. If he saw visions, that's cool. I never see anything when I hear my favorite music. Rordan, what kind of visions do you have?"

"Stuff. Things that happen far away, or that might happen. Sometimes I see secrets long buried that nobody remembers anymore. They just come to me, but I don't know what any of it means."

Kea scoffed. "Are you sure you're not a stargazer?"

Rordan shrugged. He regretted his revelation about visions to the group.

Fikna narrowed his eyes at him. "Rord, you would have made a splendid minister. I think you missed your calling."

He gave his bro' a sour smile. "I should have been a performer. That was my calling."

Noss chuckled. "A performer?"

Rordan nodded. He gazed out ahead and hoped for a river hazard to distract people's attention. "I tried to be one for a while, but the whole business got to be no fun. So I quit."

Fikna said, "Elder Ofen, the minister who passed away in the fire, started an Emyrean performance group for the school. Rord joined up and did a number of parts. He quit because the director for the last one, the minister's pet, always gave him difficulties."

Kea turned serious. "Rordan had a reason to dislike the minister?"

Fikna shook his head. "Hardly. Elder Ofen was a decent man and I thought Rord was fairly good. He allowed other people's opinions to persuade him into giving it up. A mistake, if I do say so myself."

Kea said, "That doesn't mean your brother didn't feel resentment. Do you know how Rordan felt about the minister? Maybe he left for some other reason."

Fikna gaped at her. "What is your meaning? Are you suggesting Rord was forced out? He never mentioned such a story to me."

Dalla looked at Kea and said, "It sounds like you're saying Rordan had a reason to set the fire because he was chased out."

Rordan hoped someone with some sense would change the subject. Hysteria started with these kinds of talks and it always ended with a dog-pile, or a griller.

Fikna said, “That’s a rude insinuation to make Kea, if that’s what you mean. Explain yourself.”

She laughed. “It’s nothing. I’m just curious to know what Ror’s story is. It seems strange that you’d be leaving the neighborhood right after a tragic fire. Your brother talks about visions and yells at imaginary monsters.”

Noss chuckled once. “She’s got a point.”

Fikna looked at his foster-brother for guidance.

Rordan couldn’t speak. He sensed his bro’s next words were of great importance.

“I realize there may be circumstances of unusual appearance to you, who do not know Rord and myself. I knew Elder Ofen and I considered him a respectable minister. He enjoyed Rord’s attendance in his shows. I have a difficult time thinking he forced Rord to quit.

“And I understand my foster-brother well. If I thought for a moment he was responsible for arson, I wouldn’t hesitate to refer him for treatment. Regardless of family.”

For a moment, Rordan feared Kea would press the matter. He sensed her getting close to a sore spot with his bro’.

She laughed. “No need to get excited. I find it odd, that’s all.”

Rordan relaxed. He found he could speak again.

“I was never fond of Elder Ofen. But even if I hated him I’d never hurt him. I left because the showgroup was turning into work. Everyone was taking it so seriously and I just didn’t. I was doing it for fun. The only reason I signed up was because this girl Fikna liked was angry at me for not joining.”

Codal chuckled. “Your brother got you hooked into one of his schemes to scope out a sister, eh brother?”

Rordan nodded.

Fikna said, “Dianan was an interesting girl. With you working the play I could pass backstage and have a reason to mingle. It worked well.”

“Except you never courted her,” said Rordan.

Fikna was taken aback. “I was unable to consider it. How does one approach a worldly girl when one is so reserved as I?” He sighed with a flourish of expression.

Kea arched an eyebrow at him. “Fikna, I get the feeling you haven’t any clue about women.”

Dalla said, “Well, he better find someone to teach him fast. I nominate you, honey.”

She shook her head. “Dalla, you and I are too far past breaking in the young bucks. They’d better learn to catch up.”

The two young women guffawed.

Rordan chuckled. They spoke the truth about Fikna. But he knew he sat in a similar, if not the same boat as, his bro’.