

## CHAPTER 6: AN ODD COMPANION

---

Rordan took a drink from his beerskin and cleared his throat. He studied Sangham's haven. On the pier where the Mirthy Mermaid was docked, a seated fisher wearing thick trouser-boots untangled her line. Aboard a boat beside the Mirthy Mermaid, a steersman smoked a weathered brown pipe and cleaned his waterproof bags with a rough cloth.

Next to the steersman, a carter lifted a large wooden bucket by the handles onto a wheelbarrow. Brown eels swam in the murky water of the bucket.

Up the hill, beside the haven master's office, the Skipper and the butty still waited in line to declare their manifest. Kea and Dalla stood nearby and bought from a street peddler.

The sun lowered behind the tree line. The last of the clouds gave way to a clear and cool night. The Mirthy Mermaid creaked against the pier to the ceaseless current.

He glanced about the boat. Codal and Noss sat on the deck in stunned exhaustion. Fais leaned against the cabin with her sleeves rolled up. Patches of sweat stained her off-white and soft gray clothes dark. A teenager with the dyed amber hair of an errand runner turned away from Fikna and sprang onto the pier.

Rordan handed his bro' the beerskin.

With slow effort, Fikna squeezed a squirt of warm beer into his open mouth and swallowed. He took a breath. "I had no idea the sun would burn so brightly late

in the afternoon. It's official, Rord. I am unhappy with this traveling experience. Find a songster and have him sing away my suffering. I am finished."

A tremor of warmth passed through Rordan. "I'm done too bro'. All this poling has made me sore all over. I'm going to nap like there's no tomorrow. And so will you."

Fikna nodded. He sniffed in the direction of the cabin's stovepipe. "Quite correct, Rord. I envision a hot meal for our pleasure, which shall speed our descent into slumber."

"Just relax, bro'. This is the hard part. And if I get my wind back, I'll do some bits for people."

The young gallant made the effort to smile. "I look forward to your talents. Do you envision my side of the family making an appearance?"

Rordan pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth. "I don't know. The errand-runner might take a while. You stick it out here. I'll see if I can't find a peddler selling some nectar. Maybe some snacky cakes too."

Fikna's spirits lifted a little. "That would be a refreshment worth idling for."

Rordan put away the beerskin. He grabbed his coat and pulled it down around him. "I'm going to go grab a nectar for my bro'. Anybody want something?"

Codal stood up and said, "I'll go with you, brother."

“Come on, then. Let’s grab something other than hard biscuits and dried fish.” He smiled and waved the teenager over.

They disembarked and walked the maze of piers. The two of them climbed the wharf stairs and found themselves surrounded by dirty warehouses and run down riverside establishments.

They passed the Skipper’s group. The peddler that Kea and Dalla had dealt with was already gone.

“We’re grabbing some snacks. We won’t be far off.”

The Skipper said, “Be careful. It’s getting late.”

Rordan waved and the two of them pressed on. Codal located a peddler down the street and flagged him down. The middle-aged, pale-skinned man had crooked teeth and wore drab, red and brown clothes.

The peddler refused to go lower than seven pawns for two bottles of coal-nectar. Rordan thought the price a little steep for such a disposable luxury. Libras needed regular comforts and his bro’ followed the norm. He decided to accept and forgot about the snacky cakes. A bottle ended up in each of his deep coat pockets.

Codal bargained with the peddler for three packs of smokes and failed to get the man lower than eight.

While the guy paid for his smokes, Rordan looked to his side. He noticed a teenage pauper in an alley beside an eatery.

The girl crouched on huge feet beside a pair of refuse crates. Her large, wide hands clutched at her chest. From

the cracked lips of her unattractive face came a regular, low whistle.

Rordan saw only a teenage boy. He swallowed hard and a rage seethed inside of him. Tears welled up in his eyes and poured down his face. All fear in him vanished before a sudden need to destroy the cause of the boy's misery, even if it meant death.

The girl felt Rordan's gaze and crawled toward him. She made low whines and short whistling noises as she moved.

Codal spotted the pauper and saw only a teenage boy. He bobbed his head with a jerk. "Whoa brother. Time to split." He moved away with his gaze on Rordan, then fled back toward the haven offices.

The peddler saw a dangerous-looking teenage boy. He gaped at the pauper and stood paralyzed.

Rordan acted without thought. "The jar of sardines. How much?" His voice had a lethal edge.

The peddler stared at him. Hysteria crept into his voice as he said, "Take it. You can take it."

"How much?" Rordan drew out his money pouch and kept his livid eyes on the man's throat.

The peddler trembled. "Two...two. Take it."

He placed the bills in the peddler's neck tray. Rordan took one of the two small jars next to the wrapped snacky cakes. "Thanks."

The peddler backed away. He disappeared around the corner of a closed eatery.

The pauper clutched at Rordan's leg. She made a deep whine from the back of her throat.

Rordan flung his money pouch to the ground and kneeled. He grasped the jar ring and his face twisted in a silent, clenched snarl. A savage burst of strength seized him and he twisted the ring free. Rordan used the edge of the ring to pry the sealed metal lid off with a pop. Greasy yellow oil spilled over his hands. His vision blurred as he offered the jar to the pauper.

She scooped a bunch of the oily fish from the jar and consumed them.

A surge of heat rushed through Rordan's chest and he knew the boy would survive. A fresh round of tears dripped from his eyes.

A series of low hums emerged from her throat. She grasped the jar with both hands and Rordan released it. The teenager lay on her back and dripped the remaining contents into her wide mouth. She rolled back and forth sideways, then rested still. The pauper held the jar to her chest and stared at the sky.

Rordan wiped his hands on the backside of his trousers and retrieved the money pouch. He considered leaving the boy behind. If he gave some money or more food, his conscience might be clear. His mind resisted making a decision.

He returned to his senses and looked around. The shadows lengthened. People must have stared at him during his fit of madness. Now they paid a kneeling teenager and deformed pauper no mind.

His decision refused to be put off. He agonized over it for a minute. Nothing could be more obvious, yet the burden made him hesitate. He would have to defend his decision forever. No matter what he chose. His knees ached.

The pauper sat upright and left the jar on the ground. She crawled over to Rordan and pawed at his coat, leaving greasy smears on the oiled canvas of his coat. Her clothes smelled like a moldy blanket.

Tears streamed from Rordan's eyes again. The boy's actions seemed to him a form of gratitude. "Okay. You're coming with me. To Ciriceval. On the boat. I don't care what happens. Come with me. Will you come with me?"

The girl clasped Rordan in her arms and uttered a series of long, deep whistles.

He accepted the gesture in a daze. Rordan put his arms on the pauper's shoulders and felt transfixed by his decision.

"Okay buddy. You can be my other foster-brother."

His body twitched and the pauper startled. Rordan found his arm grasped at and a head rubbed against his shoulder. He got to his feet in a crouch and stood upright. His head and knees pulsed with agony.

Rordan took his new charge by the hand and said, "Come on. I have to get Fikna his nectar. Come on." He limped his way back to the haven-pier and the pauper accompanied him.

She stumbled at first. Once they reached the stairway down to the pier, she shuffled on her own. A thin smile appeared on her cracked lips.

Back at the boat, the Skipper negotiated with a young woman. With her was a three-year-old child. Two new guys, a teenager and a young man, waited behind the mother and child. The brazier was filled with ignited coals and nearby stood Fikna, Codal, and Noss.

Codal enjoyed one of his new smokes. He spotted the pauper and exhaled a puff of smoke. “Dang, brother. You brought that tramp here?”

Attention focused on Rordan and his new companion. Everyone saw a teenage boy. Noss sneered and made a soft chuckle. Fikna put his hands on his hips and frowned. The Skipper rested her arm on the roof of the cabin and peered at Rordan’s face.

His bro’ stepped onto the pier and faced him. “What in Welkin’s name happened to you Rord? Codal said you were accosted by a destitute. Is this disagreeable fellow the culprit?”

For a moment, Rordan didn’t recognize his bro’. He addressed the Skipper. “I’m taking this person with me to my destination. If anyone has a problem with this, let’s hear it.”

Fikna gawked. A stunned silence took hold of Rordan’s audience. The pauper cowered behind him. Kea and Dalla emerged from the cabin and joined the other staring passengers. They too, saw only a teenage boy.

The Skipper said, “He’ll sleep topside and away from everyone else. You’ll have to pay the fare.”

Rordan said, “I’ll pay. And I’ll stay with him on deck.”

The Skipper approached him and said, “That’s going to be sixteen pawns.”

Rordan nodded and opened his money pouch.

Fikna trembled. “That’s your academy money. Are you going to waste it feeding and clothing this excrement?”

“Shut. Your mouth.” Rordan squeezed a bunch of bills in his hand. “He’s my problem.”

“How can you take responsibility at a time like this? You’re supposed to be studying. He appears retarded—probably carries disease. Allow him to wander away on his own.”

Rordan shook his head. “He’s coming. Skipper, here’s your money.” He counted out sixteen in three bills.

The Skipper said, “Are you sure of this Rordan? If he becomes a problem or gets in trouble we might not be able to help you.”

Fikna said, “Give him a donation Rord. Release him from your concerns. You can’t assume responsibility for a destitute.”

Kea joined the attempt to dissuade him. “Why do you feel the need to help this boy?”



Rordan felt buffeted by the spoken and the unspoken. Her stare and stale tobacco breath irritated him. He stared back at her. “I had a vision, and the vision said I should take care of him.”

She laughed with a guarded look. “Are you sure you aren’t going crazy?”

Rordan recognized the same questioning Kea had used on Fikna earlier. In the fading daylight, her face looked rotten. Kea’s eyes burned into his commitment like tiny pools of black acid. His thoughts raced. He believed he glimpsed the real Kea, a drifter who meandered through life at the expense of other people.

“I’m taking care of him and he’s coming with me. I believe it’s important.”

Kea adopted a nicer tone. “Okay, your friend can come with us. But we both know that’s going to be tough on you and on us. Don’t you think we should have a say in this?”

Noss stood beside Kea. Rordan understood this act to mean the guy meant to join her side. He believed his next words would prove important.

“I won’t force you to take me along,” said Rordan. “But if I have to walk to Ciriceval on my own, I will. You have more than enough people. You don’t need me.”

Kea laughed once and crossed her arms. “You’re a strange one, Ror.”

Her dropping of the matter relaxed him a little. He held out his hand and passed the bills to the Skipper. “I’ll

stay topside with him.” As soon as he said those words, Rordan felt a sensation of relief move throughout his body.

The Skipper said, “Welcome aboard, Rordan’s new friend.”

He boarded the boat by the hold. With a slouched posture, the pauper skulked close behind him.

Codal walked up to Rordan. He turned around, bent over, and discharged a sharp toot from his rear end. “That’s what I think of that, brother.”

The guy stomped aft and entered the cabin. Kea, Dalla and Noss followed him inside. The sounds of nervous laughter emanated from within.

The Skipper motioned her hand at the new passengers. “Okay ballast rats, enough with the free show already. Let’s finish getting your fare settled and luggage stowed. Looks like there’ll be room for two of you in the hold now. Or are you still going to stay below, your lordship?”

Fikna shook his head. “I’ll be staying with Rord. Topside.” He boarded the boat and stood beside his foster-brother. His face showed blank surprise.

While his bro’ watched, Rordan moved their luggage onto the area of the bow. He secured the travel chest to a mooring pin with a spare strap from his backpack, then took out the beerskin and his dryad-weave.

Rordan offered her the beerskin. She looked at it, then at him. With a sigh, he demonstrated how to drink from it.

She took it from him and mimicked his movements. The beer made her pucker at first, then she drained half the skin. The youngster turned drowsy and yawned without a sound.

The pauper let Rordan wrap her up in the folds of his dryad-weave. She lay down and rested her head on the backpack. A nasal hum emanated from her throat.

Rordan stood up and gazed at his companion's face. Only large-pupiled, black eyes were visible past the edge of the weave and through her long, unkempt hair.

She closed her eyes and emitted tiny, regular snores.

The Skipper finished her bargaining with the new passengers. She came to stand beside the hold with her arms crossed.

The young woman and her boy loaded their luggage into the hold and took over the empty spots. Rordan liked her lush mane of hair and soft eyes. She had a lazy stride and wore an abundance of Dimmurian bracelets, necklaces and rings.

The young woman noticed his stare and beamed a friendly smile at him.

The child had brown hair and brown skin. His body was strong and his hazel eyes gave Rordan a magnetic stare without flinching.

The butty helped the two new guys stash their luggage aft. The teenager was lanky and wore a knee-length white outer robe, with shirt, hose, and shoes of dark colors. He gave Rordan a curious glance.

The young man caught and held Rordan's attention. He had haunting gray eyes and several days' growth of beard. His brown hair was stuffed under a rider hat with the rims pinned up on the sides. A tattoo of a fantastical horse could be seen beginning on the back of his neck. He wore a black, long-sleeved crop-top and denim trousers that ended above the knee. His rider boots were dark brown.

Rordan realized the child and the young man were mengans. Conversations from school came back to him about the ones called berserkers who loved to get drunk and start fights. His thoughts froze up and he felt awkward.

Fikna pretended not to notice them. He whispered close to Rordan's ear and said, "A poor choice of behavior earlier on that troglodyte's part. Most sordid and uncalled for, if I do mention it myself. I'm with you, Rord. Did you obtain the nectar?"

Rordan pulled a bottle from his coat pocket and twisted the cork free. "Here you go."

Fikna waited until Rordan had opened his own bottle. He toasted him. "To your good health."

They took long gulps.

The sweet, pungent beverage burned down Rordan's throat and washed away some of his fatigue.

His bro' said, "I apologize for my earlier behavior Rord. Besides, I ought to have known better than to attempt to convince you in that manner. Your actions are worthy of any gallant."

Rordan said, "It's okay. I'm not sure I'd have acted better if it had been you in my place."

The Skipper eavesdropped on the two of them.

Fikna frowned at her presence. "Have you a name for our new friend?"

"I hadn't gotten that far. He seemed pretty far out of it to be telling me his name."

The young gallant stood in thought. He took a long slug of nectar. "I comprehend. How about Borus?"

Rordan licked his teeth and sucked at the tangy aftertaste on his tongue. "Yep, that sounds right."

Fikna said, "You want to inform me of the details concerning your first meeting with Borus?"

Rordan stared at the soundly sleeping youngster. "I don't know. I felt this burning pity for him. I couldn't walk away without walking away from myself. I can't describe how angry I felt."

Fikna said, "Were the fantoms responsible? Did they persuade you to adopt him?"

"Whatever I went through was mine alone. They were miles away, I believe."

Fikna said, "It unnerves me to consider that there are still paupers roaming the streets in this day and age. How

could this fellow have avoided notice by a commissary trainee?”

“I don’t know. I wonder about my sudden attack of good will. I’m just not cut out for it.”

The Skipper said, “Rordan, if charity struck you tonight that isn’t a bad thing. I’ll take your friend to Ciriceval. But try to keep him from getting in the way. Fair enough?”

Rordan nodded at her. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

The new passengers approached the two brothers and exchanged introductions with them. The young man presented himself as Mungo. The young mother called herself Ivixa. She traveled alone with her child, who was named Eogan. The teenager went by the name of Bov.

Rordan found it hard to believe the coincidence of two women traveling alone. He couldn’t help but think about whether the mengans were safe to travel with. If the boy had a tantrum he might stab or bite them.

Mungo said, “That was some scene back there. But I respect your choice to bring the tramp along. The Skipper told me you’re a rustic.”

Rordan nodded. “Yep.”

Eogan stared at him with curiosity.

Mungo said, “That’s great. I’m an amateur songster. I can sing a few tunes, maybe even give you some background music.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “Sure, that’d be cool.”

Bov said, “Hey, what was all that about, anyway? What’s the big deal?” He fidgeted with his hands and pulled a piece of dead skin off his left palm.

Fikna said, “Good fellow, the explanation is lengthy. However, suffice it to say the last two days have been overlong. In these cramped quarters we will only continue to get on each other’s nerves.”

“It gets that way sometimes,” said Ivixa.

Bov pursed his lip. “Where are you guys from?”

Fikna finished off his coal-nectar and handed the empty bottle to Rordan. “We hail from the neighborhood of Nerham. I’m traveling to Ciriceval to make my fortune, and Rord here is planning to study at the academy.”

Mungo grinned. “Sounds fun. I’m working my way around the marts. Finally saved up enough for a ride to the next neighborhood. Heard the scene up in Ciriceval is pretty good.”

Rordan swallowed the last of his own coal-nectar. He grimaced as the bitterness burned his throat.

Ivixa smiled at his reaction. “You should stick to tea. That nectar will rot your teeth and stomach.”

Fikna said, “Perhaps. However, in the meantime we depend on the beverage to keep us refreshed.”

She smiled warmly at Fikna and shook her head. Eogan clasped at her leg and looked away from Rordan.

Bov looked up from his hands. “Wait a minute. The academy? You mean Regol Coros? Hey, I’m going there

to be a scribe. What are you going to study...Rordan is it?"

"Alchemy." Even as he said it, Rordan realized he had lost all interest in the subject as a study. He no longer wanted to be a sage. Rordan jammed the two empty bottles into his backpack.

Bov said, "Hey, that's different. I'm only planning on learning enough to get my secondary papers. Get an archive job or a steward-hall desk."

Fikna said, "A splendid idea. My foster-mother has managed a decent living for herself at the central steward-hall in Nerham."

"I'll be back," said Rordan. He walked onto the pier and away from the boat. His gaze rested on a wooden corner post in the shadows twenty feet away. He sat against it with his back to the group. The responsibility for Borus, combined with talk about his life plans, was too much. He looked out at the haven-pier and wished he wasn't so overwhelmed.

The sounds of the river came to his attention. He heard boats strain against their moorings and the faint sounds of conversation behind closed doors. On one pier, he spotted four fishers head toward a waterfront barrelhouse. They passed a patroller trustee lighting a streetlamp near the riverbank.

His attention turned to the evening sky. The stars came out strong and bright through the scant wisps of cloud. His entire body responded to the sight with an



unexpected sensation of euphoria. Strong feelings flooded into him and submerged his reason.

Rordan whispered to himself. “Maybe Kea’s right. Maybe I really am going crazy.” Sadness burned inside of him. “What’s happening to me, and what does all this mean? I feel empty inside, it’s all so weird.”

His body absorbed the evening cold and his limbs curled inwards against the onslaught. Rordan’s toe and sore muscles throbbed with pain at the position he assumed. He wanted to cry out, but only a damp choke emerged from his throat.

Rordan determined the feelings came from within him, not without. An image of a crack appeared in his mind, out of which flowed the feelings. A change in him had grown and broken open his life. He didn’t know whether to shriek or dash his head against the post. The temptation to lose his mind and stay in a state of timeless sensation pulled at his heartstrings. He could exist here forever and vanish from the world.

He pulled himself away from this mental state by degrees. “No, I’m not going to drop into nut-land. I’m going to walk away from this passion for now. I’m going to interact with people again. I don’t know how to talk to them, but I’ll try.” The feelings subsided and he returned to his senses.

Rordan believed the reprieve temporary. A premonition of no going back passed through his thoughts. He would have to face the madness again. His

cold body moved out of its stiff posture and he stood upright.

The butty lit a pair of lanterns. He hung them from hooks at the end of removable poles, on either end of the boat.

The light reassured Rordan. He heard the Skipper's voice from inside the cabin. The smell of broth reached his nostrils and he noticed his hunger. His mind acknowledged its own mental exhaustion. He imagined his weariness as the result of a battle he had fought, in which he had only now noticed his wounds.

The butty opened the coal bin in the floor and placed some fresh charcoal from it into the brazier. Fikna and the new passengers noticed his efforts and headed aft.

Rordan boarded the boat and stood next to his bro'.

Fikna said, "I dare say Ivixa, your story about the Dimmurian husking sounds most intriguing. You suppose there might be any in Ciriceval?"

Ivixa smiled. "I don't see why not."

He clenched a fist before his chest and pursed his lips in a lopsided smirk. "I can imagine it now, the brutal rhythms and strange delight of unleashing my burdens to the music."

The butty held back a laugh. He mouthed a long "No" to himself.

Ivixa shook her finger at Fikna. "They aren't brutes, nor are they strange. Their huskings are how they socialize. They can be themselves without us telling them

what to do all the time. If you receive an invitation, do it to open your eyes.”

Fikna nodded. “Of course. The experience of seeing for myself would be exhilarating.

“Say Mungo, you wouldn’t happen to play any husking loyalties by chance?”

The young man shook his head, “I’m all about mellower and less rolling tunes.”

The butty said, “Any song would be welcome. Once we have our meal for the night, how about sharing your gift?”

Mungo put his hands in his trouser pockets. “Sure. I’ll do that.”

The Skipper exited the cabin. She carried a small ceramic jar half-filled with water and an iron tong.

From the serious faces of the people inside, Rordan understood she’d given them a lecture.

“Food’s almost ready,” she said. “Chicken noodle soup and some more hardtack. With a surprise treat at the end if you all play nice.” The Skipper put the vase down by the brazier and used the tong to move the coals around.

She reached into the jar and withdrew a handful of wet plant clippings. The Skipper tossed the clippings onto the hot coals. As they slowly heated and burned, the plants gave off an acrid, sweet smoke.

Rordan watched in awe. “What’s that?”

She shook her hand of water. “Rosemary. If you use a grill, the smoke flavors whatever you cook on it. But this is only to clear the air and scare off nixes.”

Fikna gave Rordan a look of expectation.

He nodded and made his way to the backpack. Rordan grabbed his mug and dug out a spoon. His gaze rested on the sleeping pauper.

He studied Borus’ face and shivered at the boy’s appearance. His new companion seemed both untamed and familiar to him. “Sleep, little one. Sleep.”

His bro’ came over. Rordan passed him the mug and spoon.

Fikna said, “We shall brave the deck together Rord. Though the cold chill my bones and the insects devour my life’s blood, I shall persevere with you.”

Rordan accepted his bro’s devotion in his heart and bowed his head. “Stick together.”

They slapped each other’s right hands.

“Always,” said Fikna.

Rordan moved his bro’s bedding out of the hold.

Fikna’s expression slumped. He lowered his voice and said, “Rord, no one paid their respects.”

“You can never tell with your side of the family. I guess they’ll visit tomorrow, if at all. Hopefully, we’ll be here.”

“They could easily claim responsibility to an earlier appointment,” said Fikna. “Most distressing, for I’d

hoped to experience the delight of beholding Alston and Cottia again.”

Rordan stretched his arms out and yawned. “They’re still too young to go off by themselves. Just wait it through. They have to send some word; they’re family.”

Fais opened the cabin door. “Supper is ready.”

While his bro’ joined the cluster around the stove, Rordan waited outside.

The passengers crowded onto the aft deck of the boat and shared their meal together. The Skipper and butty disappeared into the cabin, closing the door behind them.

Fikna returned and handed Rordan a piece of hardtack. “You appeared to be starving. Therefore, I brought you an appetizer.”

“Thanks bro’. You’re right.” Rordan savored the hardtack as he munched on it. He watched Fikna stir and blow on a serving of hot soup. The smell made his stomach tingle with awareness.

Kea stood close to him and ate with disinterest. Noss hovered next to her and asked about her family. She evaded his questions and got him talking about himself.

Rordan tuned out the conversation. He hoped it wouldn’t take long for his bro’ to get a clue. Romantic rivals always got the better of Fikna. He only wanted his bro’ to avoid getting hurt.

His gaze took in everyone’s activity. Dalla stood aloof against the railing and stared at Borus. He wished he

could read her mind. Ivixa handed her soup to Eogan and the boy took it with a practiced motion.

She started a chat with Fais. Rordan heard her mention a cave exploration and Dimmurian pre-colonist worship practices. Fais reacted with blank-faced strain.

He guessed she listened to Ivixa out of politeness. The child ate behind his mother's back and studied everyone in glances. Rordan didn't know what to make of the kid. He was too intense for his age.

Fikna finished his meal and passed the spoon and empty mug to him. "All yours, Rord."

Rordan maneuvered past Fais and entered the cabin. He took in the rich interior furnishings and tried again to make sense of them. His sight feasted on rag rugs tied to the floor, gleaming metal knobs and handles, and tin utensils resting above the portholes on tiny recessed shelves of stained dark wood. He saw paintings of roses and romantic landscapes, with the occasional stargazer symbol for the moon, stars and sun.

The butty tidied up the area around the black lead stove. He unlocked a cabinet and pulled out two tins. One had bright red and green labeling, and the other had a yellow and orange background on which black cats frolicked. The Skipper tossed some rosemary clippings into the stove and moved to the other side of the cabin.

At the far end, a pair of nets hung from polished brass hooks in the ceiling. The nets had been fashioned from bone white rope and tied with small, bright red rope tassels. They held changes of clothing, towels, and

washcloths. A folded hammock hung from a hook in the corner.

The Skipper unlocked a drawer under the far bench and secured the jar. Inside the drawer sat two wax-sealed green-gray jars and one open, reddish-white jar. Next to these ceramic containers was a small, reinforced coffer with gray-brown iron bands and rounded bolts.

Beside the coffer, Rordan spotted an oval picture in a dull glass and polished silver frame. The picture showed a family of pastorals in their black and gold colors. A father, mother, and two girls who wore white accents were depicted. His curiosity ached to know what secrets might be concealed throughout the cabin.

The odor of rosemary pleased him as it filled the cabin. He approached the soup pot and grasped the hot ladle by the kerchief-wrapped handle. As Rordan filled his mug, he glanced at the Skipper. “Is all this nice decoration your touch?”

She closed the drawer and it locked with a click. The Skipper regarded him and stood up. “No. The peryah who ran this boat was probably an actual steersman. I liked the style and maintained it.”

Puzzlement played across his face. “I thought peryahs were crazy people. It’s hard to imagine a member of nut-town keeping such a nice setup.”

The butty pulled out a folding table from the wall around the mast. He placed the tins on the table, then worked at pulling them open with his fingers. The Skipper sat down on the other side and took a small metal

flask from her inside vest pocket. She opened it and took a swig of what smelled like sweet-rum.

The Skipper licked her lips and rubbed her eyes. “Steersmen are a proud folk. The peryah may have been crazy but unable to let go of old habits.”

Rordan nodded and let the matter drop. He exited the cabin and resumed a place beside Fikna. His appetite took over and he had a spoonful of hot soup. The consistency resembled sludge and burned as he slurped it down, but the soup hit his stomach the right way.

He noticed Kea wore a monster mask. At first, he thought the mask a brief trick of the light. Rordan glanced around at the group. Nobody appeared to notice her unusual appearance.

His eyes caught another glimpse. A metallic strap held the mask to her face. The front portrayed a pallid yellow hag. The mask had an otherworldly, reflective light to it that made him uncomfortable. He couldn't tell what it was made of.

He lost his appetite, but the urge to eat remained. Rordan nibbled at his biscuit and it lacked taste. The comfort of food had vanished. He decided to stay calm and see what happened next.

Kea turned to face him. Her voice sounded lifeless to him. “You all right, Ror? You aren't spazzing out again are you?”

The sight of her eyes and lips moving from behind the mask disturbed him. He made a tiny shake of his head.



Noss said, “You don’t look so good, man.”

Rordan said, “I’m tired. It’s been a long day.”

She scoffed at him. “I hope you aren’t upset about what happened. We’re not used to your strange way of doing things.”

Noss said, “That’s for sure. Your brother, I can follow. But you, man. You don’t get out much, do you?”

Rordan considered what was behind the guy’s actual intent. “No, not much. What was that you were going to Ciriceval for again? A trade?”

Noss shifted his feet and switched his mug from one hand to the other. “I’m learning business. How to be a shopkeeper.”

Rordan aimed his words at what he guessed was Noss’ vulnerable spot. “So you’re going to the academy to learn how to be a practical?”

Noss shrank back a little and his voice lost confidence. “At first, yeah. But later on I’ll organize my father’s whole business.”

Rordan crinkled his face in thought. He let the expression sink in for a few seconds. “How does a handyman own a shop?”

Noss said, “My father will be the foreman and I’ll be the practical. We’ll hire...Dimmuriens to do the work.”

A nasty retort almost passed Rordan’s lips. He held the words back and nodded as if he were considering Noss’ answer. Rordan intuited his words had been Kea’s.

She must have been influencing him to make fun of Noss.

He stuffed the last of the hardtack into his mouth and looked around. Nobody had noticed her mask. Rordan thought he might be the victim of a prank, except Fikna didn't participate in group jests. His bro' left pranks to Abrafo.

Rordan remembered he'd seen Abrafo in a monster mask. His friend had scared him and for a moment, he'd thought he saw a mask on Abrafo's face. He hoped the two incidents weren't related.

Kea said, "Don't look so excited, Ror. You said you were studying alchemy. Have you always been good with formulas?"

He avoided eye contact with her. "Not really, I was just good in a few of my classes. And that was because I took the basic course. My tutors were disappointed that I decided to do that, but I didn't want to sweat anymore. I did very poor in my advanced arithmetic class. I fell behind and I vowed never to do lessons late into the night just to scrape by with a pass."

Rordan huffed. "I didn't study for the final exam and I failed it. I was so happy to be rid of that junk."

Noss fretted with his shirt collar.

Kea said, "Why didn't you study?"

Her questions distressed Him. Rordan didn't want to answer a young woman with a monster mask on. Her attention compelled him to speak.

“It was a waste. No matter how much I worked out the equations my numbers never worked. The tutor just let me fall by the wayside after a while. I was staying up late every night. I got to hating it and I felt betrayed. I took it only because my stupid tutor said I was so good I should challenge myself. I went from an easy study to a hard one and it stunk.

“So when Elder Coinim—my alchemy tutor—asked if I wanted to take the advanced course, I said no. He was disappointed in me and tried to get me to change my mind, but I didn’t budge. It was an easy class and I was around people sweating the mixtures. But I was happier.”

Noss parted his lips. He shook his head.

Kea said, “You don’t have to sweat in the academy if you don’t want to. But no tutor will try and convince you of anything. They won’t care.”

Rordan considered her statement. “That’s fine with me.”

Kea said, “Then why are you studying alchemy?”

“I don’t know. I had to have an interest and I was good at it.”

She smirked at him. “You were good at the basic class. This is going to be academy level study. Don’t do it if you can’t handle it.”

Rordan ignored his lack of appetite and finished the soup.

The Skipper came out of the cabin and motioned for everyone's attention. The butty stood behind her with the pair of opened tins in his hands.

She said, "Okay, ballast rats. Now that you've all had something to eat, here's what's for dessert—crackypuffs."

All the passengers cheered.

The Skipper withdrew a small rectangular tin and a handful of hardened wooden skewers from her vest. She pulled off the lid. Inside were squares of chopped chocolate, which she passed out to everyone along with a skewer. The butty gave everyone a pair of crackers and a puff from his tins.

Rordan joined in the line to get his allotment of treats. His turn came and he roasted his puff over the brazier. He put the burnt, sugary confection between two crackers, on top of the chocolate. With the enthusiasm of a starved bear, he wolfed it down in defiance of his fear of Kea.

He watched the young woman take her turn. Curiosity nagged him as to how she would eat with the mask on. She would have to force her treat through the mouth slit to eat.

A chill ran down his spine as she ate the crackypuff without incident. The act of eating happened as if he were in a dream. She just did it and no real world rules appeared to be violated, except they must have been.

Rordan feared he might be going mad. Or someone had slipped him a dispensary. He searched the pier with

his gaze. The place looked colder than it felt and radiated a mild fear he hadn't picked up on before.

His gaze turned toward the boat. The light shined brighter on his side, even though the lanterns were the same type. He looked out at the river. At the edge of the light's radius, a pair of large and glassy eyes stared back at him from the water. The creature sank its head beneath the surface and disappeared. Rordan decided to rinse his mug in the morning.

He sucked on the remains of the chocolate stuck to his teeth. His thoughts went back to the earlier mishap on deck. He'd felt a monster had tried to get on the boat. Now he knew for sure.

Ideas formed in his head and he peered over at Borus. The pauper must be magical and thus allowed him to see hidden things. He found it hard to believe, but Kea must really be a witch. Rordan strained to recall what he had read on them.

He remembered the nicer a witch appeared on the outside, the worse she would appear on the inside. Using changes to their appearance, a witch could work evil without anyone finding out.

His new sight revealed the truth in the form of a mask. Kea looked pretty on the outside, but she used her witchcraft to spread bad feelings between people. Unfortunately, a griller wouldn't view his seeing as evidence. Chances were, Kea's fast talk would get him roasted instead.

The conversation around him took on a weary undertone. Rordan nodded to himself. He imagined everyone's tired muscles and their stomachs filled with good food worked against wakefulness. His guess was the passengers would go to sleep soon. Probably after Mungo sang for them.

Rordan left the group and walked to the fore of the boat. He put away his mug and Fikna's spoon, and unwrapped his dentifrice.

While he scrubbed his teeth, he considered the sleeping arrangements. His bro' would probably insist on sleeping away from Borus. He decided to sleep in the middle and hoped he could help his friends if they were attacked.

A sense of guilt came over him. Rordan reminded his conscience of the monster in the river and of the witch on the boat where he hoped to sleep. A voice inside him mentioned his propensity to sleep through anything. Between the demands of his tired body and the self-preservation of not closing the eyes when threatened, he grew sleepy.