

CHAPTER 7: TWO BREAKFASTS

Rordan opened his eyes to the morning light. His coat had slid partway off his face and Trad's unsheathed knife now rested under his right arm. His legs were still arched over the travel chest. He heard a person move about inside the cabin, followed by the sound of pots on the stove. Nobody stirred in the hold. Judging by the conversations last night, space had been tight.

His limbs resisted attempts to move. Between the mosquitoes and the hard deck underneath, Rordan felt beat. He managed to pull the coat off the rest of the way and looked about.

On his left sat Borus. The ragged boy slouched on the weave and stared at him. He found the youngster's ugly face uncomfortable to look at.

Rordan turned away, remembered the dream he'd had last night. Borus had stared at him intently while he slept. The full moon had silhouetted Borus' head while bathing the ground in hazy, enchanting moonbeams. He'd felt the boy waited for something from him, but he couldn't know what that was because he had to stay asleep. Rordan didn't remember what happened after that. He recalled only feelings of surprise and later, fear.

To his right slept Fikna. His bro' had jostled him several times during the night. Mosquitoes seldom bothered Fikna. Yet the way he had thrashed about, Rordan believed his bro' must have been dartered dry.

The young gallant slumbered with hair flattened about in greasy mattes. Rordan smirked. His bro's handsome looks had dropped a notch in quality.

He took a sniff of his own armpits and realized he stank. His clothes were officially used now. They had a familiar mangy quality of having absorbed his sweat for several days. Rordan looked at the backpack and contemplated changing clothes today. At the least, the ruined hose should be changed.

His gaze rested on the town. He weighed the hassle of locating a shower station against how much it would cost and whether he had the time.

The cabin door opened and the Skipper appeared. She rested an arm against the cabin and smiled at him. "Good morning, Rordan. Ready to rise and shine? We've got another exciting day of poling for you and your brother."

A fake grin appeared on his lips. "Will we reach Ciriceval today?"

She shook her head. "Not until tomorrow. I have to buy a few more supplies before we head out. Then we head downriver until we reach the edge of Sebry Bay. At which point, I'll have us dock at an island I know. It has a good place to camp."

Rordan acknowledged her plan with a nod and struggled to his feet. Borus looked at him from her seated position for a few seconds, then staggered upright.

Borus' outfit caught his eye. The boy's clothes were faded and tattered from long use, but still identifiable as a

tracker's outfit. An insignia patch appeared to have been pulled off the front of the tunic, damaging the fabric. The leg ends of Borus' knitted stockings had unraveled. He wore a weathered leather strip around his neck, tied on with a tight knot.

He whispered to Borus. "Are you from the maidenland? Is that why you can't speak? You lost your mind out there?"

The pauper stared at him without comprehension.

Rordan remembered he could see hidden things and looked around. He saw nothing he thought unusual.

Borus whistled at him.

"Great, you really can't talk." Rordan hesitated. "I don't know your name. That's Fikna, my foster-brother over there. We're going to call you Borus. Is that cool?"

Borus gave him a blank stare. She took a soft breath and smiled.

A grumble passed Rordan's lips. He pulled on his coat and put away his bedding. The knife ended up sheathed and in his coat pocket. A memory of receiving the blade from Trad, his folks' best friend, came back to him. "Where's Trad when you need him?" He sighed and stepped onto the pier. Borus followed him with an excited step.

Rordan wandered the pier and searched for a peddler. He saw one and waved for the wizened man's attention.

The peddler wore a fisher's cap and sported a red and brown Sangham pattern sweater against the brisk

morning air. He had a packed line bag at his side and a sturdy tray of goods hung from his neck.

Rordan said, “Can I have a dried fish packet? And do you have any bread?”

The peddler reached into his line bag and produced a large roll. He chose a wrapped package of dried fish from his tray and said, “That’ll be three pawns.”

Money changed hands, and Rordan received the roll and package. He unwrapped the paper and handed the fish over to Borus. The girl knelt on the pier and wolfed her meal down. Rordan jammed the paper into his coat pocket and broke the roll into halves.

Borus finished her fish and received a half. She chomped at the bread until only crusts remained on the pier. A grin appeared on her face and she uttered two soft whistles.

“That’ll be for the birds, I suppose.” He broke his half in two and took a bite. The bread smelled fresh and tasted of sesame seed.

The peddler meandered all the way down one line of the pier and returned to start another. Rordan chewed his lip. He’d forgotten to get something for Fikna. His attention shifted in the direction of the boat and he saw the young gallant walking toward them.

Rordan said, “Good morning, bro’.” He extended the remaining quarter piece of roll to Fikna.

His bro' accepted the offering and made a slight bow. "Yes, thank you. I see you've attended to your friend's needs as well."

Borus batted at the crusts with her hands. She looked around the pier, then stared at Rordan and cocked her head. The girl stood up.

Fikna said, "He does present an unwholesome odor. However, no worse than any animal. Still, we ought to ensure he manages some manner of shower. Indeed, I myself could use some assistance on that matter." He adjusted his Deep Uirolec loyalty hat and examined the wrinkles of travel in his clothes.

A mosquito bite on Rordan's knuckle acted up and he scratched it. "Yep. Bro', how about we walk around the pier for a bit. Let the others take care of any chores the Skipper puts on them. I have some things I need to tell you."

"A peddler resides over there by the stairs," said Fikna. "Let us acquire a measure of coal-nectar for ourselves. Then we may discuss matters while we partake. What say you?" He produced the two empty bottles from his coat pockets.

Rordan nodded. "Way to think ahead." He looked at Borus and said, "How about it Borus? Want to come with us for a little bit?"

She uttered a hum and looked around in confusion.

Rordan put a hand on the pauper's shoulder. "Let's go."

The three of them walked down the maze of piers, toward the stairs at the base of the haven. Fikna waved the wizened peddler down and negotiated for two bottles of coal-nectar. He ended up trading the two empty bottles and five pawns for them.

The foster-brothers sat down together on a rotten wooden beam by the steps. Borus stood in front of them while they uncorked the bottles.

Rordan said, “Bro’, what I’m going to say will sound really weird. But I believe in what I’m saying. While I’m still not exactly sure what’s happening, we should be careful.”

Borus sat down on the wooden boardwalk and stared into the distant trees on the other side of the river. She listened hard for a minute.

Fikna took a sip of his coal-nectar and grimaced.

Rordan said, “Ever since we went on this trip, I’ve been getting funny feelings. Last night, I started to see things that were really weird. I saw Kea and she was a scary witch. She means everyone on the boat harm.”

Fikna took a drink from his bottle and waited.

Rordan stared at him.

“I will grant you, some peculiar things have occurred recently. However, Kea a witch? Where’s her familiar? Her interest in magic appears non-existent. She scoffs at your stargazing, your speech about visions, and the like.”

“Do you scoff at them?”

Fikna sighed. “There are moments you make me extremely uncomfortable Rord. You have an over-active imagination and daydream more than is healthy. Such quirks normally make you an outstanding rustic.

“However, you haven’t presented any of your routines on this voyage. I’m terribly surprised at you. Are you certain you aren’t letting your imagination wander further than is healthy? Perhaps you could perform tonight? Such a gesture would mend feelings after last night’s embarrassing scene.”

Rordan said, “How do you feel about Kea?”

Fikna smiled. “She’s pretty, her bosom is ample, and she matches my height. I can imagine what getting my hands on her might be like. In short, I’m drawn to her.” He took a sip of his nectar.

Borus turned to look at Fikna. She hummed at him.

“Bro’ if she’s a witch then she’s just charming you. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was charming every guy on the boat.”

Fikna gave him a peevish look. “What causes you to mention such a thing? Have you witnessed other suitors showing an interest in her?”

Rordan nursed a sip from his bottle. He frowned at the taste and said, “Yep. That Noss guy. It’s obvious that he has the hots for her.”

Fikna sniffed. “That detestable yokel? He possesses a brain scarcely above that of a...” He noticed Borus’ stare. “Ahem. I mean he appears not too bright. I’m

unconcerned with regards to his interest. The Skipper and her butty appear to be involved. Codal is too unbalanced to have any interest in the fairer side. Mungo and that Bov fellow remain to be seen in action. I fail to discern a great deal of competition here, Rord.”

Rordan took a long drink from his bottle and swallowed with a gasp. The acrid liquid burned his throat and hit every nerve going down. “Look, she’s bad news. I don’t know why you’re interested in her. You’re not looking to get married yet, are you?”

“Hardly. However, the time has arrived to gain worldly experience. As I seek my fortune, I am obligated to pursue romantic adventures.”

Disbelief played across Rordan’s face.

Fikna said, “How is it you regard me with such an expression? I am expected to become a man one day. The matter is best resolved sooner rather than later. Kea appears to be the sort of girl who might educate me.”

Rordan rolled his eyes around. “Are you goating me? You’re traditional. Are you just tossing that out the window now? When did this change?”

Fikna smirked. “See here Rord. It’s not as if I’m taking advantage of a virtuous maiden. A girl like Kea is already experienced. She’s nonconformist. I’d prefer to understand a thing or two to teach my wife when I do get married. It’s my responsibility as a man to take care of this aspect of my upbringing.”

“Now who’s daydreaming?” Rordan shook his head. “You and I both know you won’t get anywhere with her.”

You're afraid of girls, period. How long has your group of admirers at the chapel been waiting for you to court them? You put it off with this pretense of friendship. Is that your idea of becoming a man? It's fantasy."

Borus studied the young gallant's reaction.

Fikna narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. "You are skilled at driving the verbal dart home. I desire some form of romance during my search for fortune, is that too much of a request?"

Rordan softened. "I'm sorry. I know you just want to have a sweetheart. Me too. I don't know why we're such a bunch of losers. You bring 'em for miles but can never take advantage of that. I always run away. Maybe we're cursed."

The sun broke the horizon of trees and Fikna squinted. He finished his coal-nectar and handed the empty bottle to Rordan. Fikna rubbed his wrist with his thumb.

"What you mention is accurate, Rord. I often contemplate that turn of phrase. Cursed. I desire a normal life where I may earn a decent living, raise a family well, and earn enough honor to be proud of. I'm frightened, Rord. What if I become a failure? My thoughts are brought down by the weight of my family. My responsibilities seem insurmountable. I flounder over what I think is expected of me. The competition between myself and my cousins is wearing my nerves thin."

An ember of rage at his bro's burdens flared inside Rordan.

Fikna said, “Last night, I experienced an unwholesome slumber. I dreamt I was unjustly imprisoned in a mountain castle. A frigid wind blustered through my open window and I was without sustenance. My predicament was known to none. I sank into dejection and remorse, and felt a hundred imps torment me with sustained aches.

“I awoke, or at least I believed I did. I found myself casting glances about the boat in the middle of the night. Everyone remained asleep and the lanterns had gone out.

“Despite the darkness I knew there was an unholy creature lurking on the pier. This cruel demonic horror had been the source of my torment.”

A shudder passed down Rordan’s back.

Fikna said, “I managed the sign of the rood and the creature snarled, or perhaps I perceived it as such. The creature flew away in a harsh gusting of wind. I had the thought that the unwholesome thing had attempted to board the boat and I had prevented this. The only matter I could contemplate was the People’s Prayer, which I repeated until I returned to sleep.

“An unseen hand placed my covers over me again. The touch was familiar. However, I failed to place to whom it belonged. I heard a voice say, ‘Accept.’ I tried to open my eyes to find out who spoke. I awoke for certain this time, only to find you and Borus had departed.”

Rordan said, “Sorry about that. It sounds like you know some of what I’m talking about. What happened

with me the first day when I fell down. I felt something trying to board the boat too. But I stopped it and the thing went away.

“Bro’, something is messing with us. It’s real. We have to keep our eyes open and not let it get us, or get on the boat, or whatever it is that it wants. We have to stop it.

“I believe Borus here allowed me to see things last night. He must be blessed because he’s an innocent. Maybe he’ll help you see it too and we can fight it. And I’ll bet Kea is involved. We have to watch out for her.”

Fikna slumped his shoulders and looked down. “I ache in all possible ways, Rord. A melancholy confusion has put me out of sorts. I fear our only recourse is to pray to be left in peace.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “I’m not going to sit and let this thing take bites out of us bro’. Maybe all we can do is resist it. Let’s not give it an easy ride.”

He looked at the pauper. “Right, Borus?”

The girl turned to look at him. She looked down at her tattered clothes and fiddled with them.

Rordan put his bottle down and took out Trad’s knife. He approached the pauper, who cringed. “It’s okay Borus. I’m going to cut you free of that strip. Here.”

He unsheathed the blade and tugged at the strip around Borus’ neck. The youngster squirmed and made it difficult to maintain a good grip. Rordan cut at the leather, but the material turned aside his blade.

“Hey, what is this? It’s not leather, it’s slippery like grease.”

Fikna grew confused. “What are you trying to accomplish?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m trying to cut off the strip around his neck.”

Fikna said, “Have you lost your mind? You’re poking his tattered clothes.”

Rordan dropped his arms to his sides. “Great, so this is magical too?”

He closed his eyes and with a sweep of recollection came to the place in his mind where he kept scraps from his studies. He needed to remember. A phrase he had once read came forward: “If you are meant to break the spell, then the way will reveal itself to you.”

Rordan opened his eyes and gave Borus a sad smile. “Okay, I guess this is something I’m just going to have to wait out. Don’t worry. If I’m meant to help, I will.” While his bro’ stared, he sheathed the knife.

Fikna grew excited. “You mean to say he’s under the influence of a malicious enchantment? His appearance presents a pauper.”

Rordan grabbed his bottle and stood up.

Borus stood with him and expectation brightened her face.

“Maybe he isn’t a pauper. Maybe he’s really a sovereign or champion. Though I don’t know, he may just be some poor soul. That’s why Kea was trying to talk

me out of taking him with us. He must have been cursed by another witch and she was just protecting that coven's work."

Fikna rose to his feet and struggled with his thoughts. "You mentioned his assistance in helping me glimpse the unknown. For the moment, I'm blind to anything extraordinary."

Rordan said, "Maybe it takes time. Or maybe you just have to believe, I don't know. It could be it's only me Borus helps, because I'm the one who agreed to help him. But we have to watch out. Kea is a witch and that means there might be more witches."

"Are you referring to Dalla? The two of them are companions."

Rordan shook his head. "No, I don't get any bad feelings from Dalla. And I haven't seen anything to make me doubt her. She might just be someone to travel with, to keep people from getting smart. Though I don't see how anyone would unless they could see that darn mask."

Fikna said, "What mask do you refer to?"

Rordan squirmed. He took a swig of coal-nectar to focus his nerves and decided not to mention Abrafo. "When I saw Kea last night, she was wearing a witch mask. Yellow and scary. It was magical. Like when she ate, the mask let her do it without having to take it off."

Fikna said, "Are you serious?" His eyes grew wide with bafflement.

“Yep, I’m totally serious, bro’. You and I are on a real adventure now. Invisible monsters, witches disguised by magic spells, and a cursed guy. Still think Elder Ofen’s death was an accident?”

Fikna blushed. He took two deep breaths.

“Of course, I assumed criminal intent in the matter. Yet how might the situation we find ourselves in be related?”

He turned solemn. “Rordan, lend me Trad’s knife. If there is any possibility of a struggle, I’m the one trained to handle arms. Remember?”

“I know,” said Rordan. “Though honestly, I believe prayers might be better. You have your rood, right?”

Fikna pulled aside his shirt collar and exposed a leather cord hanging around his neck. “I never thought I’d hear you express such a sentiment.”

Rordan grinned. He slapped hands with his brother. “Stick together.”

Fikna smiled. “Always.”

Borus uttered a low whistle and extended her hands toward them.

Rordan lightly slapped the pauper’s hands. “Yes! Borus, you’re in this too. We’re together.”

She looked back and forth at them, then made a slight hum.

Fikna laughed. “Splendid, what a magnificent bunch of fellows we shall be, on an adventure at long last.”

The two foster-brothers chuckled while Borus stood and looked up the stairs.

A deep voice called out to them from the stairs above. “Fikna? Could that possibly be you?”

Fikna and Rordan looked to the right and upwards.

A middle-aged, big-bellied man descended the steps. The man wore two gowns over his clothes, the inner lined with fur and the outer patterned with silk. He glanced at Borus and saw only a boy pauper.

Delight shone on Fikna’s face. “Uncle Osgar! I can scarcely believe my eyes. Are the others arriving as well?”

A warm thrill unfolded inside Rordan.

Osgar said, “I’m afraid I alone am your official delegation. The rest of the family sends their regards. Catigern and Sulicena in particular extend their best sentiments for your success.

“Such an exciting time for you, making your way to the unsettled neighborhoods of the Heartland. It seems proper Rordan should pursue a knowledgeable trade while keeping an eye on your activities.”

He pretended to examine the pier for a moment. “I gather you’ll be heading off in good order. A pity there is not a more agreeable location nearby. Let me offer to buy you a meal. An eatery stand at the top of the steps is selling fish and chips.”

Fikna bowed. “Your kindness is admirable, uncle. We would be delighted to have a moment of your time. I

haven't visited since I was young. It brightens my day beyond words to finally see you again."

Rordan noticed Osgar almost crack a smile. The man maintained his emotional distance and turned to re-climb the stairs. The two brothers followed him, with Borus falling in behind Rordan.

Osgar said, "Your father wrote to us, saying you would travel this way soon. It was most kind of you to send an errand-runner to fetch us. We might have missed you entirely. How are you managing the voyage?"

Fikna said, "As you can see, with the decline in one's personal appearance attendant to such endeavors."

Osgar said, "Indeed, it is a pity you lack time. We would offer you some hospitality. Patience—you haven't far to go now. The voyage shall become easier."

At the top, the man took a moment to catch his breath. "Whoa. That's quite an ascent. Follow me." He led them down the street and over to a booth with a wide counter. At the top front of the booth was nailed a wide, wooden painting of a hungry man with a serious face. The man ate fried fish patties and sliced, fried potato strips.

Rordan recognized the place. He had passed the eatery stand yesterday, but it had been closed. Now a young woman attended behind the counter. The attendant had a blemish on her upper lip and reeked of sour sweat. An older, muscled woman with her hair tied in a bun tended the kitchen in the back of the booth.

The aroma from the kitchen smelled good and stimulated his hunger.

Osgar ordered two sets and paid out four bills from his pocket. He stood off to the side and waited.

The attendant made rude gestures at Borus. “Get lost boy. Go on!”

Borus flinched and hid behind Rordan.

Fikna moved up to the attendant and faced her. “The pauper attends us on our charity, young lady.”

She glared at Fikna. “Keep him out of sight then. He’ll scare the customers off.”

With a wave of dismissal, Fikna joined Osgar.

Rordan put a hand on Borus’ shoulder. “It’s okay, just stay here. I’ll pass you some food from my share.”

Fikna said, “Where is Kent? Does your footman enjoy the good fortune of a respite today?”

“Faithful Kent is no longer employed in our service.” At Fikna’s look of surprise, Osgar said, “His departure brought us great sadness. We are compensated only by the thought of his transferal to a new opportunity.”

“I add my sadness to yours, dear uncle. For Kent to leave you after so long a service seems almost a slight. He shall be missed.” Fikna sighed. “How goes the business?”

Osgar cleared his throat. “All goes well. Sulicena and I continue much as we have in the past. My eldest daughters are attending socials in search of prospects. My

youngest is pursuing private studies. Sulicena's children are still in school. Your father and mother are fine, I trust?"

Fikna smiled. "Crovan is well, and Esa also. Crovan pursues his usual reading, antique hunting, and wine tasting. Esa attends performances when she isn't organizing the household."

Osgar nodded, "That is excellent news. Certainly more promising activities."

Fikna's response was interrupted by the attendant, who served up a pair of fish and chips in stiff paper trays. While Fikna decided on the splash of vinegar, Rordan chose the sticky glob of tartar sauce as a condiment.

The young gallant assumed a pose of disinterest and held off on eating his portion. "You mentioned your youngest daughter pursuing a private study. What subject is she being tutored in?"

Osgar said, "I intended her to study conversational topics. Unfortunately, she insists on being a sportsman. Has it in her head to become a tutor herself. I have yet to figure out how to get her to behave. No doubt, this attitude is due in part to Rordan's mischievous influence the last time you were present as guests."

The comment chafed. Rordan pretended not to have heard. He took the two pieces of cooked fish and broke them lengthwise in two.

Fikna ate in measured amounts.

Despite a desire to chow his food, Rordan followed Fikna's example. The tartar melted in his mouth and the fish tasted fresh. The food burned his tongue and the roof of his mouth, but he didn't care. He tried a chip and found it crisp and tender in all the right places.

He handed Borus half of his fish. The youngster gobbled it down. Rordan smiled. If Borus were returned to his former self and turned out to be a sovereign, he might reward them. Fikna's relatives would have to change their attitude.

He shook his head of daydreams and jammed a chip into his mouth. Rordan ached for his bro's family, yet all he had to offer existed in his imagination. Reality kept turning up a big zero. Borus had to be just some unlucky kid, probably a run-off who had fled a sick home.

Fikna said, "Once your daughters are all married, what are your plans?"

Osgar considered an answer. "A celebration would be in order, I suppose. Your aunt-in-law desires to travel by ship on a luxury adventure. Perhaps we shall choose The Orirot. The birthplace of our people is a worthy endeavor. Buziba Sound is also a possibility."

Fikna said, "I envy you, then. The Orirot possesses many significant experiences and the coast of Kgotla is known for lush resorts."

Osgar said, "I daresay, the moment is still many years off. By then, who can say what shall have become of you? After that, your younger cousins will have their

chance to enter the world. Although, marrying Cottia will prove no small feat. She is as lively as my youngest.”

Fikna said, “I have every confidence she will find a gentleman worthy of her. She cultivates many fine qualities.” He took a bite out of a chip.

Osgar said, “I declare; we agree on that point.” He waited while his guests ate their meals.

Rordan watched the passers-by in the street go about their business. The trickle of pedestrians had grown into a regular stream and the noise level had risen. He offered Borus a chip and the pauper pushed it away without a glance.

The increasing mass of people rattled Osgar. He glanced at the sky and wiped his face of sweat with a silk handkerchief. “I imagine by now your skipper is concerned for your whereabouts. I shall refrain from detaining you any longer.”

Fikna handed his portion to Rordan. He wiped his hands with his own silk handkerchief and said, “Of course. I am saddened to be parted from you so soon. Thank you for the pleasure of your company and the hospitality of a meal. Your gesture has lifted our spirits considerably.”

Osgar shook hands with Fikna. “Think nothing of it. The least I could do for family since you were passing through. Nice to see you again Rordan, you rascal. Goodbye.”

Rordan frowned and stopped trying to free up a hand to offer. He watched Osgar maneuver through the crowd

and out of sight. His foster-uncle's sudden departure made him uneasy.

Borus stared in the same direction the two brothers did.

The young gallant took his portion from Rordan and gobbled down the remaining chips. Rordan joined him and finished off his own chips with a voracious will.

A difficult, last swallow forced Fikna to grimace. He rubbed his stomach and took a breath. "You witness that? They acknowledged me. What a stroke of good fortune. I haven't seen him in a terribly long time. I was worried we might miss them entirely."

Rordan ate the last chip from his helping. "Mm. Yep. It's good to see family. We've missed a whole branch living in different neighborhoods."

"I quite agree, a definite loss. If not for the meetings at the family estate in Suthlinc, we might not have even seen the younger cousins."

Together, they tossed their empty paper trays in the nearby waste heap. Borus' eyes darted back and forth excitedly at the brothers.

Fikna said, "When I make something of myself, they shall realize how mistaken they were to snub my father."

Rordan hoped his bro' was right. "Come on, let's go. The others are probably getting ready to ditch us."

Fikna said, "Yes, I expect we must. I had hoped we might locate a shower station and recover a little of our appearance. However, it appears Divine Regard has

intervened. Before we return to our wretched transport, lend me Trad's knife."

Rordan handed over the knife and sheath. Fikna inspected both and attached them to his belt. He tested the arrangement and made an adjustment to the sheath. "There, that ought to function properly."

The three of them set off for the boat. As they descended the stairs, Noss approached them from the pier.

"There you are. You're holding us up."

Fikna said, "Our apologies. We encountered some family and had to pay our respects."

Noss took a moment to stare at Fikna's knife. He frowned at Borus. "The Skipper's ready to go. Hurry up."

They followed Noss back to the boat.

The hold had been tied down and the lanterns put away. Rordan noticed their bedrolls were packed and their luggage secured. He guessed the butty was responsible. The passengers sat or leaned in wait.

The Skipper stood up and rested an arm upon the tiller. "There you are. We were about to dump your gear and continue. Let's head out."

Codal leaned with his rear end against the railing of the cabin walkway. "Welcome back, brothers." He blew a pair of smoke rings and smiled.

Rordan resisted an urge to punch Codal in the face. He reminded himself the guy was bigger than him and

might be able to broil like Abrafo. A busted nose or limb wouldn't help his achy toe.

They boarded the boat. Noss cast off and leapt on board while Bov and Mungo polled the boat away from the pier. The Skipper steered the boat clear of traffic and on its way downriver.

Rordan sat down on his travel chest and Borus sat next to him. Fikna went over to the Skipper and started up a conversation, but Rordan couldn't hear what they said to each other. He studied Kea and Dalla. They stood and leaned against the front of the cabin facing forward. Kea didn't have the monster mask on. He imagined she must rest between fits of mischief.

Codal said, "Where'd you all go, brother?"

"Relative. Fikna has family here. One of them came to see him."

Kea said, "Is your brother okay? He looks tired." Her concern drew an intense look from Noss.

"Mosquitoes. We got eaten alive last night. Plus the hard boards of this boat. He's not used to it."

Codal said, "What did your brother's relatives say about your new friend?" He took a long drag of his smoke and made a clownish face.

Rordan crossed his arms and said, "Nothing. Poor people don't exist to them."

Laughter and smoke burst out of Codal. "Dang, brother. I guess you didn't have to explain anything to them then. All aboard the charity war! I've got a fist in

my pocket—for a popper in the socket—of a draggin’ shab who betta hop it—outta sight before I stomp it!”

Noss chuckled. “Good rhyme. Who’s that?”

“I don’t know, brother. Some un-Deep killjoys I heard in the pit.” Codal took a drag and feigned illness. Smoke leaked out of his mouth and nose.

Rordan organized his thoughts. “Codal, what’s your goal in Ciriceval? I don’t recall you saying anything about what you’re doing or where you’re going.”

The teenager pursed his lower lip over his upper one. “I don’t have any destination brother. And I don’t have any goal. I’m floating through life with no intents or purposes.” He grinned and took a long drag off his smoke.

“You’re a freeloader too.”

Codal blew smoke out his nostrils. “You got me there brother. Wandering the paths of this desert in search of beer and smokes.”

Rordan peered at Kea. “Is that what you’re in search of, beer and smokes?”

She rolled her eyes and looked at Dalla, who chuckled at her. Kea glanced coyly at Rordan and said, “That’s me, a beer and smokes kind of woman.”

Dalla shook her head and pushed Kea. “Liar. You’re a wine and tokes kind of woman.”

Codal’s eyes expanded and he grinned. “I hear that sister. Taking a toke from the smoke. Hard-core

breaking it to you on the spark!” He did a series of random dance moves in a burst of expression.

Dalla reached behind her and pulled a rider hat into view. She settled it on her head and smiled at Rordan. “And I’m a shots and tokes kind of gal. Heeyah!”

Both women laughed and Rordan chuckled with them despite himself.

The sound of a few notes off a guitar came from the aft side of the boat. Mungo rose his head above the cabin and said, “Who’s up for some music? I’ve got old party Griever Rogelio. How about it?”

There were murmurs of agreement from those on deck. The young man moved to the front part of the boat. He took a seat at the bow near Rordan and faced everyone. Mungo tuned the guitar to his satisfaction, then did a series of vocalizations to himself. With a focused will, Mungo went straight into a song. The wide-open space absorbed his music.

Rordan recognized the popular song about a violent encounter with a griller. He’d heard it many times over. His folks had been big fans of the Griever before he became famous with the mellow loyalty crowd. At last, he could stop talking to people and keep to himself.

The terrain around the river changed from forest and hills to scrub and rocky terrain. Ahead, the course of the river flowed through a tall ravine. Rordan knew the music would resonate better when they reached the sheer stone cliffs.

Noss took a break from poling with the butty. He stood next to Kea and took in the view. She checked him out with a glance and looked smug.

Rordan considered how many more points Fikna had fallen behind in the courtship race.

Mungo paused between songs to take in the sights. He bowed his head at the applause he received.

Off the port side and up ahead was a patroller boat. From along a riverside towpath, a team of four horses and two drivers towed the boat slowly forward against the current.

The Skipper and the butty pretended to ignore the boat.

The Mirthy Mermaid was not stopped for inspection and passed the patroller boat by. The wall of the ravine rose up over them on the starboard side.

Rordan found the view invigorating. He made out boats anchored in eddies and near small islets, from small one-man canoes to boats as large as the Mirthy Mermaid.

The Skipper pointed Fikna at a small shore on the side of the river to their left. “Look, there’s an eagle.”

Rordan spotted the bird. The creature perched on a gnarled tree and surveyed the area. As he gazed upon the eagle, the sound of the water and the fresh savor of the air moved him. He’d never seen a wild creature before in such a vast expanse of outdoors.

The eagle’s gaze turned towards him and he shivered a little. The wild bird stared at him with what he imagined

was resentment. He hoped the bird wouldn't decide to attack. The talons looked strong and dangerous to him all of a sudden.

A voice inside him said, "The conceit of people grows anger in beasts."

Borus took an interest in the bird. She crawled to the port side of the boat and stared at the avian creature with longing. The perched eagle passed out of sight upriver and Borus relaxed.

Mungo played a new Griever tune, this time about questions of love and the capacity to return it.

Rordan struggled with a mixed feeling of attraction for and fear of the eagle. He had heard the voice before. His mind lost focus under the struggle and he stared into the wilderness.

A river convoy passed them by, made up of three long barges loaded with cargo. Teams of polers pushed the barges slowly up the river to a rendezvous with drivers on the riverbank. The towpath veered inland as the ravine rose in the direction of downriver.

Rordan imagined the sorts of luxuries the triple convoy might carry. The Chief's palace probably needed them to stay in operation.

The sun burned away the last of the morning haze. Rordan remembered Fikna's bites and dug around in the backpack. He pulled out the mercy kit and took out a container of aloetic.

Rordan held the container and stared. He came to the conclusion that something of importance would happen soon. This part of the voyage had just been the long haul before the moment of action.

He rolled around in his thoughts how he could possibly know this. The premonition came to him as if it were recognition of a path coming into view. Rordan needed to get his thoughts down on paper. His dauber materials were locked away in the chest. He would only draw attention to himself if he wrote now.

The Skipper had mentioned an island for tonight's camp. She could still be a peryah or in league with peryahs. She'd talked about boat-ruffs, which may have been a slip of the tongue or a diversion to allay suspicion. He wondered about her.

And then there was Kea, the monster-masked witch. Rordan thought she represented the greatest danger and would make her move on the island.

He exposed his foot and removed the bandages. The cut had turned red and sore. Rordan wrapped his toe in a fresh set from the mercy kit, then took the time to cover his foot again.

Impatience and dread tugged at him. He could do nothing until someone made a move and by then it might be too late. Life had a way of dropping a struggle on you from nowhere. Perhaps his magic sight would give him a warning. Or it might give him all the more time to see and fear the inevitable.

The sense of helplessness grew overwhelming. Borus touched him on the arm. Rordan withdrew from his introspection and smiled at the youngster. He made a silent prayer, modified from one he'd learned in school. It never hurt to have all your bases covered.