

CHAPTER 10: REGOL COROS ACADEMY

Rordan sat at the bow of the boat and watched the water surface split aside at the boat's keel. He glanced towards Borus, who slept beside him. The youngster lay with one arm under her head while the other dangled over the edge.

Fikna helped the butty with the sail. Rordan guessed his bro's sudden interest helped drown out the earlier embarrassment on the island.

The witches played a game of hearts for petty stakes in front of the cabin, despite the breeze. Eogan slept in the hold. Noss and Codal sat on the walkway and sunned themselves.

Rordan thought about Fais' request to repair his damaged shoe. She had taken both shoes and retreated to the cabin. He flexed his toes and hoped she would return with them soon.

The boat kept close to the southern shore as it sailed through the greater part of Sebry Bay. The amount of water traffic increased. Ciriceval's farmworks came into view as they rounded a bend in the hills. Near the shore, a team of six freebers worked on a drainage channel to the waterside.

The tiered pastures up in the hills looked well organized to Rordan. He realized the cooperatives of Ciriceval were larger than that of Nerham.

His gaze moved outwards from the limits of the neighborhood. The mountain range stood out clear and

detailed against the sunny sky. He found the view pleasant and smiled to himself.

Kea stood up from a reshuffling in the game and approached him.

“You aren’t still mad are you? Dalla’s sorry.”

Rordan hesitated. He struggled to understand what she meant. “You stomped on my bro’. Then you made fun of me for saying something about it. That’s not nice.”

She scoffed at him. “I’m sorry you’re upset. You need to get over it pup.”

Borus awoke with a start and glared at Kea. She tensed like a spring and raised her wide palm as if to strike the young woman. A series of unfriendly, guttural utterances came from the back of her throat.

Kea stepped back. “I’m out of here. You can go be moody by yourself pup.” She rejoined the game. Ivixa eyed Kea while Dalla chuckled at her.

The youngster lowered her hand. She stared at Rordan with a look of disappointment.

“That was awesome. Way to get rid of her.” He smiled and playfully pushed his fist against Borus’ shoulder. “Good job.”

Borus looked around. She stared at Rordan again and smiled.

Noss got to his feet and came over.

Rordan felt an imminent menace.

The teenager rested a foot on the travel chest and supported both arms on his knee. He adjusted his rider hat and said, "If your boy lays a hand on Kea, I'm going to have to settle his account."

Rordan sat upright and considered the threat Noss put forward. He knew he couldn't stand up for himself in a gnarring standoff, so his only option was to back off. "Then you tell Kea to stay away from me and my friend. And to stay away from my bro' too."

Noss jeered at him. "Kea is one of them free spirited girls. You're going to have to give her some room to flutter around."

Borus peered uncertainly at Noss.

"You keep him on a tight leash and I won't have to hurt him. Or you."

Noss made his threat sound polite, thought Rordan. The guy had a size advantage. No doubt existed in his mind who had the greater strength. He wanted to wring the jerk's neck, but he could do nothing but chicken out again.

Fikna abandoned his post and approached. He meandered around the hold and joined Rordan and Borus. Noss stood up and the two of them faced each other.

"You know how to handle your blade, shooter?" Fikna's hand rested on Trad's knife and his stance suggested carefree readiness.

Rordan knew his bro' hoped Noss would step on up, and the guy had to be calculating the odds. He grew tense, waited to see if the gnarring between the two would become a struggle.

The passengers all sat or stood upright and watched.

Rordan couldn't see how the Skipper reacted. He saw the booty gesture at her.

Noss said, "Only making sure your brother's buddy doesn't stoop to hitting the fairer side." His body turned slightly away from Fikna.

The young gallant's voice carried a cold dismissal. "Thank you for your concern. You may move along now."

The teenager looked sideways at Rordan and Borus a little too long. With Fikna's eyes on him the whole time, he walked around the other side of the hold and moved aft.

Rordan worried the gnarring had been delayed, not settled.

A look of disgust crossed Fikna's face. "Is it impossible to expect you to stay out of trouble? A single day off from your antics would be welcome."

Rordan said, "Thanks for coming to my side."

His bro' sat down on the chest and faced him. He used a snooty tone of voice. "You're my family. If anyone's going to beat you senseless it's me, not some churlish dirt digger from up north."

A snicker escaped Dalla.

Fikna gaped once at what he had said. Silence hung between them. Rordan looked away and caught a glance of Ciriceval. He rubbed at his shoulder as a memory threatened to surface.

A plume of black smoke in the neighborhood caught his attention. Dread came over him; he hoped the fire wasn't another chapel. The passengers saw the smoke now too. They pointed at the black clouds rising upwards and talked about it. Rordan ignored them as his fears grew to include the chance of a burned academy and a wasted voyage.

Fikna looked at the column of smoke and frowned. He leaned forward and spoke softly. "For Welkin's sake, Rord. We haven't even landed at our destination and matters are already looking out of the ordinary.

"Perhaps you should focus on your studies and not involve yourself with nonsense about visions and witches. This adventure has been most unsatisfactory. I thought we would be fighting evil-doers and saving cursed souls." He looked at Borus, who relaxed and gazed out at the water. "Not this sordid drama of playing fairer side intrigues."

Rordan noticed Fikna's insect bites had almost healed.

"Are you paying attention Rord? Cease daydreaming and begin working. This is your duty. You must renounce living in fantasies and start meeting our responsibilities. We are going to be ordinary, doing regular and normal things. I'm growing tired of

apologizing for your behavior with these people. Those girls think we're a laughingstock."

Anger simmered in Rordan. He held his voice low and even. "They make fun of us behind our backs as well as to our faces. And Kea lay down with that jerk Noss last night. That's why he was over here doing her dirty work."

The revelation silenced Fikna. His face showed disappointment.

Rordan said, "What? You weren't still thinking you had a chance with her? Wake up and smell the dump, bro'. Those girls are dog-droppers. Forget about them. You want an ordinary life, go ahead. But you aren't ordinary to me. You're my bro' and that's what matters.

"You're smart when you stop and think. There's that gift you have with people that I don't have. You walk into crowds and get people to listen to you. Unlike me, you can defend yourself. There's your faith. You've got all those things and you really care about them. Stop stooping down to blend in.

"Plus your family comes from Orirot blood. You're not in the club now, but you're still important inside. Honor, money—that's all noise. Just because the rest of your family thinks it's all that matters doesn't mean that it does. Your family was tough and lucky before they came here."

His passion came out of him before he could think about it. Rordan froze his thoughts in fear and regretted speaking out.

Fikna looked down at the deck. “Your manner of speaking astounds me Rord. Is it possible for you to explain why Deiwos punishes me? For what reason does he torment me with demands?”

“I never wanted to be anyone special at all. I notice everyone walking around and living life. Meanwhile, I am trapped pondering upon the ingredients I’m missing. How do I formulate an explanation as to why my life refuses to begin? What crucial error do I commit?”

Rordan took a tight breath. “How do you know you’re doing anything wrong?”

Fikna rubbed his face with his hands. “Bad fortune falls upon those who deserve it. Deiwos doesn’t punish innocent people. I recite my prayers. I attend chapel. I study the Tablets. And I practice courtesy. Nevertheless, in some way I fail to comprehend a fundamental truth.

“I understand we are imperfect and that temptation is our lot, yet my mind refuses to rest. The headmaster keeps his pupil after school and scolds him for not understanding a verbal declension. This conundrum torments me.”

His bro’s words took Rordan by surprise. He hadn’t realized Fikna suffered so deeply. The voyage must have revealed shortcomings in his care. Rordan felt a vulnerable spot in his heart had been uncovered.

“Bro’, maybe Deiwos isn’t punishing you. Maybe it’s the Deuce. Maybe you really are a good person and he’s the one holding you back.”

Fikna shook his head and stared at Rordan with confusion. “If that is so, why does Deiwos not protect me? Does he allow his faithful to suffer at the hands of wickedness if they are innocent?”

Rordan said, “Then maybe he’s got some plan for you and this is part of that plan.”

A puff of air escaped Fikna’s lips. “You repeat the words of Elder Ofen. After the last services, I visited him with a number of these questions. He answered much the same as you. Deiwos has a plan for us all and that my suffering was part of that plan. I needed to have faith and manage. I would get by if only I continued to hold on.” Fikna massaged his wrist and winced.

“However, doubts remain and my faith turns to weakness. I am crumbling inside, Rord. I prefer to avoid disrepute and the invoking of evil upon others. I only ask for the strength to make my life in this world.”

He saw no sign of the bite wound on Fikna’s neck, but Rordan noticed a scratch on Fikna’s wrist. He thought it ought to be extremely painful for his bro’, yet Fikna didn’t seem to notice it. The symbolism of the scratch pained him.

The voice inside of him said, “He never had any faith. This is what he is starting to understand.”

Dread at the voice’s words moved through him. “Fikna, what if Deiwos was punishing you for trying to be ordinary? What if he’d chosen you for some special purpose and you were denying that by trying to be a regular guy?”

Fikna's face recoiled. "You mean, become a minister? I possess no gift for the robes. No calling resounds within me."

Rordan shifted his cramped legs and scowled. "Look, you're good with people. You have a strong sense of right and wrong. Your manners are great. Doesn't it make sense to you that your calling might be right in front of you?"

"Give up women and live in chastity? That prospect does not interest me."

"Only if you keep your oath of Sacred Homage."

"Leave the tradition and declare myself nonconformist? My family would be outraged."

Rordan said, "Okay, you only have one choice then. Is that so bad? Look, are you getting any favor from the girls? The last time you had a sweetheart was years ago and look how that turned out. You let it slide."

Fikna stared at him as thoughts raced through his mind. "I lack the desire to be a minister, of either sort."

With a sigh, Rordan threw up his hands. "It's an honorable thing to do. Your family is really religious at heart, so they'd accept this as a good move. Plenty of upper-crusters prepare their children for the chapel when they can't make it for themselves. Or won't inherit anything. You don't want to go through the service, so maybe you'd have more luck as a commissary with the dryads."

Fikna gave his foster-brother a troubled look. “Such a destiny is not my preference. I have no other way of making myself clear. What you mention strikes home with some accuracy. I recognize that it’s a match by every reasonable measure of the requirements. Perhaps such outlooks explain why my family is so distant, in that they see the obvious while I remain oblivious.”

He spoke his thoughts openly to Rordan and Borus. “What am I supposed to do, Great Liege? What is my purpose? Give me a sign that I can understand and use to guide my path. My soul is in your hands.”

His head bowed and he clasped his hands. Other than the dance of water against the boat and the talk aft, no sound could be heard.

Rordan grew uncomfortable in the presence of his bro’s act of submission. He intuited a conflict of great importance resided within Fikna. His thoughts stirred with sadness for a moment, followed by an intense, sharp fear. The guardianship of his bro’ slipped from his grasp.

Borus’ eyes drooped shut and she snored.

Fikna stood up and said, “It appears we are almost to the haven. I had best resume assistance with the sail.”

“Maybe the Skipper will let you steer again,” said Rordan. “You should ask her to let you bring us in.”

His bro’ attempted a smile and headed aft.

“Libras,” said Rordan with affection.

He turned his attention to the boat’s progress. The neighborhood had come into full view and the haven was

now visible. Just beyond it, the long span of Saint Domhar's Crossing joined the south shore with the north. The dark grey stone of the old bridge impressed him with its enormity. It saddened him that such marvels couldn't be duplicated anymore. The open sea was not visible from here. The bay must continue on a little ways further.

An abundance of towering, profuse trees surrounded the walled neighborhood of Ciriceval. Groves of smaller trees grew throughout the interior and in some places filled several blocks. He could make out another wall beyond a thick expanse of one such long grove. The stone of both walls had been painted white with navy-blue and gray trim.

Another multitude of trees obscured the source of the smoke. He heard a chapel bell and the sharp whistles of the barrel brigade. Rordan hoped they had the flame under control, or else the entire neighborhood might burn down.

A building he took to be the local shrine stood atop an enormous hillside. The design of the architecture eluded his attempt to identify it. The wide, snow-capped peak stood out in the distance as a backdrop for the shrine. He found it a magnificent choice of location.

The mountain seized a hold of his attention. He heard the voice inside him say, "You have returned." A thrill of anxiety churned in his stomach and the deck beneath him trembled.

Borus sat up suddenly and stared at him.

He stared past the youngster and repeated to himself what the voice had said. The reality of a voice inside of him finally sank in and he worried. It sounded to him like it was living inside his body. He considered what the voices crazy people heard might sound like. Rordan looked at the mountain and felt a powerful attraction to it. The attraction made him shiver.

His gaze turned back towards the bridge. Pennants flew in the breeze all along the span, and in the middle a pair of wooden drawbridges allowed larger ships to anchor near the neighborhood. He saw a dozen caravels and two service galleys, along with a dromond flying Farian streamers.

A stone tower at the other end of the bridge was also painted white with navy-blue and gray trim. The neighborhood banner flew beneath the Heartland banner. Rordan made out a densely packed camp around the outside of the tower.

The Skipper steered the boat into a docking approach. Fikna and the butty secured the sail while Noss and Mungo stood ready with poles. The stern fenders of bleached rope were down.

With luggage in one hand and Rordan's shoes in the other, Fais emerged from the cabin. She made her way through the flurry of activity and then dropped the shoes by his feet.

Rordan pulled out of his trance. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He examined the repaired shoe. The cut had been sewn shut with crude, but effective skill. “How did you do it? I didn’t know you were a cobbler.”

Fais looked at the approaching pier with relief. “I was a summer attendant for one and picked up basics by watching. The stitch I used took me a few times to learn—” She stopped herself. “That’s how.”

Rordan put on his shoes and tested the fit. He thought she’d done a good job. “Good work, thanks. This means a lot to me.” He marveled at the nostalgia he already felt for the voyage.

“Oh hush already, you dingaling. I didn’t do this for you, I did it for me.” She made a mild laugh and shook her head.

The Skipper said, “Ballast rats, this is where we part ways. Maybe I’ll see some of you again. But if not, may brightness and blessings move before you.”

The boat came to a rest beside the pier. Fikna and the butty secured the boat to the mooring ballards. The Skipper disembarked, walked down the pier and out of sight. The passengers unloaded their luggage onto the pier.

The prospect of carrying a chest, a backpack, and a daypack drew a sigh from Rordan. He realized they had reached Ciriceval just in time. The voyage had cut it close with the schedule of his classes, but they had made it. He smiled a little.

Codal put on his backpack. “Brothers and sisters, it was a good trip. But I’ve got to head out.” He gave Fais a bear hug.

She accepted the indignity. “Take care, cloud-buster.”

Rordan said, “Be cool, hard-core. Remember to get the jump on the backmonkeys and drudgets.”

Codal made the sign of peace at Rordan and said, “See ya late-ah bru-tha!” He walked away and disappeared into the crowd of people on the pier.

Mungo said his farewells and followed.

Thoughts held Fais still. She regarded Rordan and Fikna. “Thank you for your company, and your kindness. I suppose it’s my turn to say goodbye. Goodbye then.” She grabbed her luggage and departed.

Fikna said, “My word, that was indisputably abrupt.”

“Yep,” said Rordan. “I hope she’ll be okay.”

Ivixa exchanged hugs with Kea and Dalla. “I’ll see you two again real soon. You know where to find me.”

She opened her arms towards Rordan and Fikna.

Fikna accepted the hug. “May good fortune accompany you, warm-hearted Ivixa.”

Rordan dodged behind Fikna. He couldn’t help but think it nuts to hug a witch who had drained his bro’s blood.

Ivixa pouted at him. “I might see both of you again. Kea and Dalla will be staying at the academy for a while. And I’ll want to visit them. Until then, farewell.”

Fikna bowed. “I would consider it an honor to meet you again. It has been a privilege to make your acquaintance.”

She curtsied for him. Ivixa departed, her son’s hand in hers.

The Skipper returned with the haven master, a well-groomed man of middle age in a gray uniform. Instead of the usual boots he wore sandals. While the man made an inspection of the boat, she approached the two brothers.

Rordan took the tin cup he had borrowed from his daypack and returned it to her.

She accepted the cup and faced him squarely. “I like you. I hope you’ve come away from this knowing a thing or two. I only have two requests. That you remember to protect the spark of your own true nature, always and ever. And that you refuse to bow down to the trials of your life. If you do this, I assure you that you will outlive your enemies.”

Her words pleased him. “I’ll remember.”

She gave him a strong and vigorous handshake, which he accepted and returned.

The Skipper shook Fikna’s hand. “You took to this pretty quick today. If you ever need a job, we make this run regularly. We’re always in need of someone to help us make expeditions.”

Fikna bowed. “I shall give your offer much consideration, Skipper. And now I must bid you fond

farewell. I shall recall your hospitality whenever I am in need.”

Kea shook her head at him. She hoisted her luggage and said, “Come on, you champions.”

Rordan looked at Kea and Dalla with skepticism.

The two young women shared a look of mischief with each other.

Kea said, “We’re staying with some friends at the academy. It’s that thing called sponging. When you’re a freeloader you live off your friends. I have a lot of them there whom I haven’t seen for a while.”

Noss adjusted his rider hat and smirked at Rordan.

“A suitable arrangement,” said Fikna. “Your company and any guidance you provide shall be much appreciated.”

The thought of the witches in the academy irritated Rordan. Noss and Bov being there didn’t bother him. He could ignore them. But the witches had given him a real kick in the trousers by coming along. He’d hoped to ditch them at the haven, despite what he’d heard about Kea’s connection to Regol Coros.

Fikna looked around for a moment. “Unbelievable, I forgot. Skipper where are the patrollers? Shouldn’t we be inspected?”

The Skipper said, “Different neighborhood, different rules. My manifest covers you.”

Fikna showed his exasperation to Rordan. “I declare. This is an unusual development. We’re near the borders, think of the safety issues involved.”

Rordan shrugged. “Maybe it’s safer than we thought.”

Bov said, “You need help with that chest? Fikna isn’t going to make you carry it by yourself, is he?”

“Yep, unless we catch a wagon. It’s okay, I’m used to it. But if you’d help me carry it some of the way that’d be a big help.”

A cheery smile appeared on Bov’s face. “Sure. Hey maybe we’ll be in the same hall, or even bunkmates. That’d be great.”

Rordan found Bov’s sudden enthusiasm off-putting. He donned the backpack, then hefted up the daypack in one hand. Bov helped him heave the chest upright and they carried it together.

The group walked down the pier to the edge of the haven, where the mart began. Borus kept close to Rordan and gawked at everything that came into view.

Rordan found the character of the people on the streets different from his old neighborhood. He took note of how the locals wore a lot more color and accessory. They carried themselves with more ease. His guess was it must be a result of the dryad influence and the fact that this neighborhood had been settled only near the end of the troglodyte wars.

The group stopped at a street corner. Fikna signaled a wagon over and negotiated with the smelly, muddied

carter for a ride to the academy. He paid the old man three pawns and motioned for the group to join him.

Noss opened his wallet. He stared inside the empty bill flap and frowned. His gaze searched the crowd for a few seconds, followed by a silent profanity.

Fikna accepted the words of thanks for his generosity with a reserved smile and a nod. The group loaded their luggage into the wagon and climbed aboard. Rordan found himself jammed next to Kea, with Dalla and Noss across from her.

The old man got the horse going. He directed the wagon onto a street that went up a steady slope and into the neighborhood hills. Borus withdrew into herself and stared downwards.

As the wagon passed through the mart, Rordan caught a number of delicious smells. Everywhere he looked he saw brightly painted stone buildings, each different from one another. Often they were separated by wild-looking gardens. He spotted an amphitheater up the hillside and down a different street. His own neighborhood had nothing like this.

They stopped to let crossing traffic move past. Kea's stale tobacco breath wafted past Rordan and he pretended not to notice.

Fikna said, "Driver, could you enlighten us as to the fire?"

The old man answered in an easy-going voice. "That's the trash mart. Some firebugs probably set it. Been

going for an hour. Barrel brigade's on it. When they catch the rascals, bottoms will ring. Mark my words."

The carter's words didn't reassure Rordan. By the look Fikna gave him, he could tell the feeling was mutual.

He decided to make conversation. "Kea? Since you know so much about the academy, how about telling us some pointers?"

She looked up from her thoughts and glanced at him sideways. "What do you want to know?"

Rordan assembled his questions. "I've got to go to the steward-hall and do a reference exam. What can you tell me about that?"

Kea laughed to herself. "Oh that's nothing. They have you fill out the paperwork and see what test you'll need."

"Is the study-up for tests hard?"

She eyed him. "Not usually. But no one's going to make you do your lessons. If you get too much into the Depressing Club, your lessons will slip up. The tutors will cut you no breaks."

Her look gave Rordan the impression she didn't think he was ready for the academy. He considered her words. "What's the Depressing Club?"

His bro' listened.

Dalla interrupted Kea. "Pupils have the most unusual life. You're free from your head-of-household junk, but you aren't working either. You're in between, and you're free to do anything. Some people can't handle it and

drop out. But the whole thing creates this atmosphere where everybody's doing something sideways.”

Rordan heard her trying to connect with him through her words. He didn't want to forgive Dalla. The scene with the blood drinking gave him the creepies.

“You'll see what she means,” said Kea. “That's why I have so many friends here. We all did a lot of Depressing Club together while I was studying. But everyone can get on your nerves. So after I got my secondary papers I took some time off. Now I want to bring Dalla into it since she's heard all my stories.”

Noss said, “Should be interesting.”

The guy's statement indicated to Rordan the end of the conversation. He turned his attention back to the neighborhood sights. They had left the mart behind and entered a townfolk street, with trades advertised by pageant boards.

He saw a dozen paupers walking the streets, from teens to older adults. Some begged for money outright, others employed a scam. He saw an old man in dingy clothes play a cheap recorder loud and out of tune. It struck him as comical and tragic at the same time, which he believed might have been the point.

Statement-hangings littered the walls and corners. Rordan saw artwork of a kind only seen in the shady street of his own neighborhood. He didn't see anything smutty, only a style associated with lowlife vulgarity. The open practice seemed to lend vitality to the

neighborhood. Rordan liked the character that Ciriceval revealed to him.

The wagon's route transported them out of the center of the neighborhood and into the outer streets. They climbed a steady hill rise. As the group rode above the neighborhood center, Rordan thought the effect on their view pleasant. He wouldn't describe Nerham as flat, yet his home lacked any kind of real elevation.

From here he saw the fire a little better. Smoke covered a street section and he caught a glimpse of a wisp of flame. The flames didn't spread, which made him grateful.

Rordan took in the weather. The sun shone on a clear blue sky, so no rain for the brigade today. Ciriceval's climate felt dry to him. He took the air to be the influence of the nearby sea. In Nerham, one could really swelter during the summer. He found he preferred the dry heat to the damp one.

Kea pointed out a warehouse-like structure down the street. "That's Distaves, the local mart post. You can get a counting-house account there and buy food and goods. It's the closest thing to the academy. It'll save you the trouble of having to go into the mart itself every time you want something.

"And over there next to it is Astragal's, a tavern that serves good Farian food. Your only other option close by is to hit the Hideaway Grill. That's the local academy tavern, but their choices are pretty limited."

The wagon continued to climb, then passed through the inner wall and crossed a bridge over a wide gully. Cottages lined the cobblestone street on the other side. Rordan spotted the occasional townsfolk outside doing chores. One churned butter on the porch while another fed a chubby pig in a wooden pen. He thought everyone looked a lot more neighborly and open than the people on his own street.

They rode past a cemetery and rounded a bend. An enormous wild forest dominated the view to their left. A row of cottages on the right appeared more in line with what Rordan expected.

Everyone remained indoors. The cottages had been secured against prowlers and beasts. He saw stained glass pastoral hangings on the windows. Wreaths of twisted sticks and flowers were tied onto the gateposts. The canopy of the forest extended over the street and dampened the sun. The place painted an eerie picture for him and he shivered.

The forest gave way to a large estate of tended gardens and cultivated trees. The shrine Rordan had spotted earlier rested at the top of the grounds while nearby an intricate manor house lay at a confluence of stone buildings.

Kea said, “That’s the original colonist manor of the Director of Ciriceval, Greatheart Dugald Pugfrons. He donated it to the academy foundation back when the place started. The steward-hall is behind it. That pillared building next to the manor is the archive, and past that

are the classrooms, apothecary, and academy amphitheater.

“Over there’s the sanctum, a nonconformist style built with Dimmurian counsel. That blocky building is the community hall and the center of pupil life. Past that, where you see those long buildings? That’s the dormitory hall complex. The rest are all small functions cottages. You’ll get to know them soon enough.”

The wagon drew up to the community hall and stopped. Everyone disembarked and unloaded their luggage. Fikna thanked the driver and gave him a pawn. The carter tipped his hat to the young gallant and directed his wagon back the way he had come.

Rordan took in the grounds. He saw mostly teens his age walking back and forth along a central cobblestone path. Most of them carried daypacks. The scene reminded him of being back at school without the uniforms.

The dress seemed proper at first glance, but then Rordan spotted pieces here and there of unusual hairstyles or accessories.

Fikna gave his best smile. “What excitement. Here at last, after all the bothersome rot of travel. Where do you need to arrive Rord? We shall walk there together.”

Rordan unlocked the chest and searched through his papers in the waterproof case, careful not to let anyone see the map. He came up with the admissions document that authorized him to travel and attend the academy, and

his instruction letter. He locked the chest, then looked through them.

“It says here that there will be a pupil leader. Waiting for me at Boant Oak Hall. Kea, you know where that is?”

She nodded. “That’s where my friend Manissa is bunked. Maybe we’ll even be staying on the same floor.” She pointed to the closest dormitory building.

Noss dug into his pack and Bov did the same. They were housed in a Dorus Elm and an Ardan Pines. They each received rough directions from Kea.

“I’ll ask for help if I get lost,” said Bov. “See you all on the grounds. Bye Rordan.” He picked up his backpack and headed off in the direction Kea had pointed him toward. His path took him through some trees, toward a structure Rordan could barely make out.

“Later people,” said Noss. “Kea, I’ll drop by once I’ve settled in.”

She laughed a little. “I’ll let my bunkie know where to direct you. I have no clue where I’ll be tonight, so ask for Manissa’s room. It’s probably still on the second floor.”

With a nod, the rugged teenager grabbed his luggage. “See you later.”

As Noss walked away, Rordan felt instantly relieved. He had a suspicion at the back of his mind that the jerk would show up again. For now, he intended to forget about the guy. Rordan put on the backpack.

Fikna said, “Guide us Kea, if you please. We shall follow.”

She gave the gallant an amused glance. With Dalla beside her, Kea walked toward Boant Oak. Fikna slung the daypack as if he were a pupil and followed after her.

It occurred to Rordan he would still have to carry the chest some distance. He lifted it and took a moment to steady his grip, then walked after his bro’.

Borus kept up beside him. The girl gaped about and received an occasional stare from passers-by, who all saw only a teenage boy.

Rordan trailed behind Fikna for a minute. He let the chest down and caught his breath. His bro’ and the two young women increased their lead on him.

He hoisted the chest again and crossed a street. After half a minute up a slightly sloped path, he let the chest down and looked up. He had lost sight of them.

Borus looked at him funny.

Rordan said, “If only you could give me a hand with this. But it’s looking like this is all me.”

A monstrous pink humanoid charged out of the nearby bushes. The creature pounced on Borus in a blur and knocked her to the ground.

Paralysis seized Rordan. He watched as the hideous thing moved to bite Borus on the throat with triangular, serrated teeth.

The girl bounced out of the creature’s grasp, snapped upright, and used her huge hand to smack the creature on the side of its head.

The creature shrieked under the terrific blow. It attempted to swipe at Borus with the sharp, tapered fingernails of its right hand.

Borus moved faster. She smacked the creature hard on the head with each hand in rapid succession. The creature crumpled onto its back and appeared to have been killed.

Rordan refused to believe his eyes. He hadn't guessed the boy possessed such vigor. Borus' feat reminded him of Fikna's understated strength.

He studied the creature in detail. It had bubbly, pockmarked pink skin the texture of melted wax. The creature's face was frozen in a wide-eyed grimace, which struck him as odd.

The body dissolved into a puddle of pink grease before his eyes. Borus jumped backwards. She glanced at him, then stared at the puddle.

Rordan looked around. While their own behavior attracted a few glances, no one seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. He looked back and the grease had vanished. A patch of wilted brown grass and a wisp of fading pink smoke remained.

He looked up at the building. At a second-floor window he saw Kea with her monster mask on. The witch backed away out of sight and Rordan realized the creature had been her doing.

To his relief, Borus had proved stronger than Kea had guessed. One could easily underestimate him based on how wretched the boy looked. He remembered the

youngster's strong grip during his vision on the island. The pauper possessed an animal-like fierceness he hadn't suspected.

"Come on Borus. Time to get busy." Rordan let the encounter slide for now. Nothing more could be done. No one would believe his word on what had happened and Borus couldn't tell anyone.

He reached a side entrance in the building, surrounded by tall bushes. Rordan took another rest and massaged his hands. If Fikna had kept going straight ahead, he would have come through here.

"There you are."

Rordan looked up. His bro' leaned out an open window. The same window he had seen Kea behind a moment before.

"Hurry along Rord. Your bunkroom is located here. There's a pupil leader named Stroma waiting to make your acquaintance. And Kea will be staying adjacent to us. Wait until you behold your exciting accommodations."

Fikna's news dampened his spirits. Rordan muttered to himself. "Great, right next door. How does that not surprise me?"

He opened the door and lifted the chest for what he hoped would be the last time. Rordan climbed a set of stairs back and forth through a square, columned stairwell that linked the different floors.

The building was made of solid brick with plaster covering the walls on the inside. A stained, well-worn red carpet covered the floor. Statement-hangings he didn't recognize decorated the walls. Rordan noted the presence of a third floor, probably an attic converted for use.

A side passage led in the direction of the window Fikna had hailed him from. Rordan turned a corner and faced a hallway of doors. In the middle of the hallway Fikna spoke with a young woman wearing a pupil leader's jacket.

She wore eyeglasses and around her neck hung a traditional Empyrean rood of wood. Her smile gave him a comfortable feeling inside. At once, he felt safe with her.

Rordan put down the chest. He waved and said, "Hi, I'm Rordan. And this is Borus, my friend. Uh, are you the P.L.?"

"Yes, that's me. I'm Stroma; go ahead and call me by my name. Your brother here has been telling me about you. Your room is ahead on your right. Number eight."

Her voice soothed his nerves. For a moment, he relaxed and spaced out.

Fikna said, "Not much farther, Rord. Quicken your pace."

Rordan jerked back to attention, then dragged the chest behind him and toward the door indicated by Stroma. Along the way, he passed a room with an open door and saw Kea inside. She dug through her side-bag

while talking to an unseen occupant. He heard Dalla laugh.

At the door to his room, he saw a square living space with two walk-in closets attached. There was a pair of beds and desks with a chair, split between opposite walls.

Borus entered the room and went up to the window across from the door. She stared through the glass and her face tightened.

Stroma said, “Take whichever side you want. Your bunkmate isn’t here yet. A guy named Stig. About everyone else is here though. We’re going to have a meeting in the snug later tonight. You’re all welcome to come.”

Rordan heaved the backpack off of his shoulders and onto the bed at his right. His shoulders tingled with numbness. He dragged the chest over to the desk by the bed he had chosen. His arms tingled; he moved them around, looking forward to a return of some feeling.

Fikna watched his efforts and trembled with excitement.

Rordan pointed at Borus. “Don’t mind him, he doesn’t talk. He’s a pauper I picked up. Uh, I hope that isn’t a problem.”

Stroma said, “I’ll admit it’s pretty unusual. But as long as he doesn’t misbehave, it’s fine. You’d be surprised what we tolerate around here.”

He nodded. “What else do I need to know?”

She reached into the pile of folded papers she carried and gave him a brass key. “This is your room key. You get settled. I’m down a door from you on the other side. When you’re ready, come by and ask me any questions you like.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. And also, welcome to R.C.” She took her leave.

“A nice gal,” said Rordan. “What a stroke of luck.”

Fikna took a seat at Rordan’s desk. “I completely agree. She’s a splendid lady of obvious, outstanding character. Certainly make our stay here a good deal more pleasant.”

Rordan closed the door. He spoke in a low voice. “Bro’, I find it really weird that Kea is staying in a room next to mine. Just tell me you’ll be careful.”

His bro’ pursed his lips at him with tight-eyed regard. “You may rely on me to be cautious and discrete. Now, let us be certain to locate a shower station and clothing for Borus. Surely he can wear something of yours until we acquire an outfit suited to his measure.”

“I’m guessing we hit that mart-post and shop for him,” said Rordan. “I’ll have to see about a credit account at some point. What are you going to do?”

Fikna assumed a relaxed poise in the chair and bit his lip. “I suppose I ought to introduce myself to everyone. I’ll be staying here until I can manage quarters of my own.

And I shall have to locate a manner of employment to support my activities. My allotment is limited, after all.”

Borus entered the closet diagonally opposite from the bed and looked displeased. She seated herself and looked for a place to rest her head.

Rordan gathered up his bedding and laid them on the floor of the closet.

The girl smiled and wrapped herself in the weave. She curled up and laid her head down on a bundled warmer.

“Well, at least he’s happy.” Rordan chuckled to himself.

Fikna puffed. “I’m astounded you picked him up. I’m surprised they are allowing him to reside here. And I’m also surprised to find boys and girls bunk on shared floors.

“Not that I’m complaining. However, it’s highly irregular. I had assumed a segregation of some kind. I even saw a troglodyte in the hallway. Higher education for troglodytes? I had no idea the Director of Ciriceval was taking such liberties.”

Rordan wrestled with the thought of it. “I hadn’t thought about it. They do have the rights now, so I guess if they have the money it’s possible.”

Fikna nodded. “I assumed it was going to be all Seltans and a few upper-cruiser Kgosians. However, it appears there are still traces of Dimmurian influence on the Heartland.”

A pale-skinned, skinny teenager with silvery-blond hair walked in through the door. His ears and tongue were pierced with studs. He carried a pack and two line bags.

Rordan waved to cover his shock at the piercings. “Hey there. You my bunkmate?”

“You sure you got the right room?”

The question irritated Rordan. “Yes, the P.L. herself put me here.”

A look of annoyance flashed on the teen’s face. He dropped his luggage on the other bed.

“I’m Rordan and this is Fikna, my foster-brother. In the closet is Borus, my friend. I’m afraid it’s going to be a little crowded for a while.”

The teenager ignored Rordan’s outstretched hand. “I don’t shake. Name’s Stig. Only just got in. Travel is impossible. That fire has you brownies squirting into your pots.”

The put-down made Rordan nervous and he laughed. “Sorry. It’s kind of a downer for us. The chapel burned down in our neighborhood right before we left.”

Stig said, “No crap?”

Fikna started at the profanity.

Rordan had forgotten how much Dimmurians could swear. Codal had been so different. “Yep, no jest. So what neighborhood you from?”

Stig unpacked at a rapid rate. “I hate that word. It’s so weak and avoids the truth. I hail from the last stronghold, out east. You call it Wulvil. I don’t know exactly what I’m doing here. I’m supposed to study history. But I don’t know if that’s what I want to be doing now. This place is such a big let-down.”

Fikna peered at him sideways. “Your impression confuses me. I find the grounds of this establishment quite pleasant and the people all full of fascinating possibility.”

Stig looked at Fikna, shook his head. He unpacked a dozen rolled shirts. “Wulvil is the greatest place in the entire Dominion to live. I can’t get over how bitched my people are up here. All this stupid joint effort crap. From your reactions, I’m guessing wherever you’re from it’s worse. Am I right?”

“We’re from Nerham,” said Rordan, “near the capital.”

Stig puffed. “Yeah, it figures you’d be near the Chief. Everyone is reduced to the level of a freeloader over there. Pretty sad. Spunk that.”

Rordan sat on the bed and tried to figure Stig out. “I’m guessing this is going to be a living setup where you give us crap for being brown.”

Stig glanced at him while he unpacked a case of papers. “I don’t care if you’re brown. I don’t know how far I’m going to get here. There are going to be so many brownies and peacocks breathing down my neck.”

The Dimmurian expression for Kgosians reminded Rordan of the old wars between the two. He felt embarrassed.

Fikna said, “Then explain your reasons for traveling here. If your home is incredible, what would you leave it for?”

“I thought this place would be fun. I didn’t realize how mixed up it is here.” Stig pulled out some rolled statement-hangings and a writing kit. “I’m waiting to hear the word troggie to see what I do. Down home, you brownies wouldn’t dare use that word. But I’m betting up here it’s common. Am I right?”

Rordan swallowed. “It’s true. Some of our friends use that word.” His bro’ glared at him.

“See, that’s what I mean. That crap shrine with local carvings is still a stupid kneeler place of worship. It’s for people who are playing ball with you. I wonder if I can even go to a greftrun here without papers. Down in Wulvil, I can go anywhere and it’s my people’s land, even though we have a shrieve from your court. It’s occupied, but not taken. You’re the minority and I never have to apologize for anything.”

Rordan wrestled with his bunkmate’s point of view.

Stig said, “Anyway, I don’t mean to stir you up. I only want you to know I’m not going to listen to any troggie jests or put up with any ‘pull the wool over the troggie’ crap.”

Fikna said, “Well spoken, Stig. We will extend you every courtesy it is in our power to produce. It is my fond hope you will welcome us during our stay together.”

The sincerity in Fikna’s voice made Stig chuckle. “You are too much. Okay, I’ve got to run. Got to go take care of some paperwork before business hours wrap up. You brownies have messed-up notions of time. See you around.”

He got up and left. Strewn about were piles of clothes and accessories half-unpacked.

Fikna looked at Rordan and laughed. “Good Welkin, I suppose you had better catch up on unpacking. I confess I haven’t ever seen one of the silver-haired ones before. Tora’s white hair is no longer a novelty I’m afraid. Still, I hardly know what to think. Sleeping in the same room with someone who openly worships in a skeleton mound?”

The concept struck Rordan as eerie. He watched his bro’ take off the loyalty hat and play with his hair.

“Now would be a good moment to avail myself of a tour. This building must possess a shower station somewhere. I would enjoy a lengthy dousing. May I borrow your key?”

Rordan shook his head. “Nope. I’m the pupil here. You’re the one who’s the guest. We’ll see if we can’t get a locksmith to copy it later. But until then, I keep the key. It’s bad enough you’re going to make me sleep on the floor.”

Fikna waved his hand and got up. “Never mind then. I’ll return shortly. Afterwards, we would do ourselves a service by locating the meal hall. I’m pining for sustenance.”

“Same here. But I need to get my papers out and put some stuff away. I can’t believe I’m here after all that poling.”

Fikna stood in the doorway and made a gesture of disgust. “Enough. Let us never mention poling again.”

Rordan said, “I don’t know. You looked like you were an eager learner there at the end. The Skipper was ready to offer you a job.” He smirked.

His bro’ left and closed the door behind him. Rordan took the opportunity to open the chest and take out his writing kit, doodler kit, illustration pile and lesson collection, his ranc cards, statement-hangings, small knick-knacks, and pamphlets.

He took over the desk and organized all his favorite things. They were put in order so the framed illustrations of his friends and his knick-knacks could be seen in plain view.

Dominating the collage was a sketch of his offbeat friend Brica. She’d allowed him to capture her profile when she had been in a good mood that day. Her smile warmed his heart.

Rordan studied the sketch he’d made of Abrafo reading a demerit slip. His friend’s nonchalant expression made him smile. He had tried to get Abeni to pose with Abrafo on that day, but she had dodged his request.

Rordan shrugged. His friend always seemed to have a sweetheart of some kind or another. Abeni was just another passing fancy to Abrafo.

He looked at his sketch of Tora and wondered if she were safe. Rordan wished he had gotten more news on the investigation of the chapel fire. A nagging feeling tugged at him that the fire here was related.

His attention switched to her gift. He held it up and strained to see through the thick, parchment-like paper of the envelope. Rordan tore open the top with the thin handle of one of his ink pens.

Inside was a foot long, rolled strip of creamy white vellum pressed flat by his travels. Judging by the neatness of the type, he believed the strip came from a press, probably an unlicensed one. The strip had been stamped with violent scenes in pink ink. A series of dark, rust colored stains had been spattered across the strip.

Rordan trembled with discomfort. Tora had done some cutting for him. The thought of her drawing blood on his behalf made him nervous. He knew troglodytes were skilled at hiding their cuts and the tools they used. The officers hadn't found anything in the obvious places. They hadn't searched her clothes, probably to avoid offense to his pride because she had claimed to be his sweetheart. Abrafo always said they were still savage.

His attention returned to Abrafo's sketch. Rordan thought about the monster mask he'd seen on his friend. It hadn't looked like a witch, more like an animal with bared teeth. He didn't believe his friend was a witch.

Such a thing made no sense, no matter how he approached it in his thoughts. After Fikna and his folks, Abrafo was his closest friend.

He put the strip back into the envelope and the envelope in his daypack. If Fikna saw the strip, his bro' would not approve. Rordan wondered if he'd ever known who Tora was and what she was about. It dawned on him he hadn't understood she wanted him. He had ignored her. Now he wished he'd asked Ivixa about her experiences.

“Great. More bungling.”

Rordan took out his official papers and studied the course listings. He examined the academy guide-map and located the office of the tutor who would guide his academic plans. After a few brief glances, he noted the requirement to finalize his registration at the counting house in town. Registration with the patrollers could be worked into the trip. He liked the idea of knocking out two chores in one day.

His impression of Stig had been a poor one. He decided he didn't like his bunkmate very much. Rordan bet his bro' would be friends with him in short order. Fikna had a talent for winning people over with his charm.

He looked at the window and decided to make sense out of the attack on Borus. Rordan opened up his doodler kit and made a series of rough sketches of the creature, its face, and skin.

The doodles he made didn't ring any bells. He wished his whole lesson collection were here. Only the essentials had fit. He made a few more sketches and tried to remember every detail.

In a flash of remembrance an image came back to him. He recognized the creature's resemblance to an illustration in a collection his parents owned. The collection called the thing a bugbear, an evil spirit that caused trouble. Its bite was supposed to turn people into bodysnatchers, but his memories failed him on that part.

He had never believed any of the stuff he had read in that collection. Rordan had just assumed it a bunch of fantastical topics mixed with a little common sense to sound useful.

The bugbear had been real. And Kea had been watching, so she knew. The witch must have summoned it to try and get the jump on Borus. He'd noticed Borus watching over him. Ever since the island vision after he passed light along to the boy. And Kea had retreated from the boy each time she'd come along to work her mischief.

Rordan thought about what had happened to Fikna with Ivixa's monster mask. The witches must be bloodsuckers who used making fun of people to get their fangs into people. If Borus kept him safe from that by scaring them off, then that made Borus a threat.

How Noss fit into the picture, Rordan couldn't guess. He had threatened Borus twice and each time gotten more serious. Were the witches using the guy to drive

Borus away? Rordan couldn't figure it out. Wouldn't it be better to just go after easier prey? He didn't look forward to meeting these bloodsucker witches again. With Kea staying next door, Rordan saw no way of avoiding them. It wouldn't help that Fikna still hadn't clued in enough.

He shook his head and placed his hands on his face. "For Welkin's sake." An exasperated chuckle consumed him for a moment.

Rordan made another attempt to put the pieces together. Borus had seen the bugbear, so at least the two of them could watch out for each other. The witch also must have brought the nix and the creature Fikna had seen in his dream. If Kea could summon monsters, they could get jumped at any time. Hopefully, it was a power she couldn't do at will. He'd just have to hope he was awake when things happened. There wasn't much else he could do.

Rordan put away the bugbear doodles. He pulled out the map and stared at the beautiful renderings. The script looked old. Probably only a sage would be able to make sense of it. The trouble was, he'd have to explain why it was in his possession; he lacked the authority to possess a work of art like this.

Then again, it might just look like a blank sheet of paper to anyone he took it to. For better or worse, he was the person who would have to translate it.

He noted the boat resembled the kind of caravel the early pioneers had come across the ocean in. Rordan

corrected himself and mentally replaced pioneer with colonist. In the water underneath the caravel swam a fish with metal skin and gemstones for eyes. He looked closely at the caravel. Rordan thought the masthead looked like a mermaid.

The boat the Skipper had piloted went by the name of the Mirthy Mermaid. It couldn't be a coincidence. The boat had belonged to peryahs. Maybe the boat had been named after this vessel as a kind of tradition. He hadn't searched the boat with any effort. If Fikna got a job on board, he could come along and give it a closer look. His new magical sight might spot something others couldn't see.

He put the map away with a smile. Rordan opened his door and peeked down the hallway. Kea's host had closed the door. He guessed the witch had left with her friends, off on whatever they were going to do for the Depressing Club. Now would be a good time to speak with Stroma about his duties.

Rordan grabbed his pupil papers. He checked to make sure Borus looked comfortable, then closed the door on his way to Stroma.