

CHAPTER 16: A BROTHER'S ORDEAL

Rordan heard the door open. He turned around and saw Fikna walk into the room. His bro's face was newly shaven and he was dressed in fresh clothes. The young gallant smelled faintly of cedar oil. "You look great. Am I glad to see you."

Fikna closed the door behind him and said, "Thank you. How are you managing Rord? Are you unharmed?"

Delight surged through Rordan. He took his bro' by the shoulders. "I'm fine. You wouldn't believe what's been going on. Are you okay?"

A wide smile appeared on Fikna's face. "Today has been eventful. I dare say I endured. Nonetheless, tell me you are well."

Rordan said, "I'm fine. Is Borus okay?"

"Oh, I think he's around somewhere." Fikna looked over his shoulder and gestured back with his hand. "He refused to stay here and wandered off on his own."

"We'll have to find him then. Bro', the craziest stuff has been going on. Dalla came on to me, I met the bad guy behind all of this, and Kea and I argued. Plus, I found some clues."

Fikna sat down on Rordan's chair and assumed a comfortable position of elegant repose. "One story at a time Rord. Tell me your adventures in brief. Afterwards, I shall relate to you my own encounters."

Rordan cast a suspicious glance at the door. He sat on his bed and spoke in a low voice strained with

enthusiasm. “I went and did my chores to begin my studies. All that went well. I visited my mentor—Master Beag. He signed my papers and gave me advice. We disagreed over one of my class choices. He then turned into a weird guy wearing a vampire mask and said some super scary stuff.”

Fikna said, “Such as?”

The memory of the vampire’s words caused Rordan to press his tongue to the roof of his mouth. “He said we were here for only one reason and that was to give him blood. We didn’t matter and we were to do what he told us or he’d get rough.”

“Good Welkin, what a madman.”

Rordan said, “Yep, that’s what I thought too. It got cold in the office. All his stuff turned into spooky dead animals in jars, and looked old and covered in dust.”

He took a long breath. “My mentor said that the next time the monsters came to hurt us, we were to let them. He said that all our joy and fun were only for him and we didn’t deserve any of it.”

Fikna put his left hand to his chin and furrowed his right brow. “How very unusual. Is he draining us of life then? To what purpose?”

An image appeared in Rordan’s head of Ivixa’s mask, stained with blood. “Yep, that’s something I need to talk to you about too. I believe he sucks the blood out of people using witches as a go-between. Back on the island, I watched Ivixa suck your blood from a distance. After Kea and Dalla made fun of you.”

Horror showed on Fikna's face and he clasped a hand to his rood. "Deiwos protect us! You witnessed this?"

"Yep. I couldn't tell you because I was afraid you wouldn't believe me. We'd already fought over the piece of paper."

Fikna said, "I possess every reason to believe you now Rord. Is my neck besmirched with bite marks?"

"No. The bloodsucking must be what my mentor said—fun, happiness, stuff that has to do with your soul. The other two witches weakened you by putting you down and then she drained the life from you. It was like Ivixa was sucking your blood, even though it was your soul. So that's how it looked."

"Did the blood leap into her mouth from afar?"

"No," said Rordan, "a wound appeared on your neck. The blood didn't drip—it showed up magically on Ivixa's mask as it flowed. Then it was absorbed so there was no sign of it. I'm guessing the witches must have done this more than once. That was just the one time I got to see it."

Memories danced around in Fikna's head. "That day stands supreme as the most humiliating moment of the voyage for me. As I recall, my thoughts were frozen with anger. I couldn't think straight and an overwhelming cold seeped into my body. That was when the Skipper approached and offered me a chance to assist with the boat."

"There's more to her than meets the eye bro'. You should take that job offer. She's a nice person."

“I quite agree on that score. However, getting back to the matter at hand. Assume for the sake of argument these witches transport the blood of souls to your mentor. We return to my previous question—for what purpose?”

Rordan sighed. “I don’t know. If he’s a vampire, then that’s just what he does to go on. I have to say it’s weird that he would need to use servants when he could drink the blood himself.”

“That is precisely what I mean Rord. Perhaps he consumes real blood for his own sustenance. And in addition, he collects the blood of souls. With numerous young pupils and a position of authority, he is assured of a vast supply of genuine blood.”

“Wait,” said Rordan. “He said something about coming to collect cruor. That must be what he calls the blood of souls. The life of people must be cruor. He didn’t say anything about blood. That must be a given for him. What he needs is cruor, so why?”

“Congratulations Rord. You catch up to my manner of thinking.” Fikna smirked.

Rordan made a slight scowl at his bro’. “Glad I could get on your level.” He put a knuckle to his lips. “Think, think. I didn’t see any jars of cruor in his office. Just a bunch of yellowish goo. He must keep it in his secret vampire lair.”

Fikna said, “If we consider the popular plots of your many pamphlets, we may formulate a guess. The obvious answer is he means to employ the cruor in one of two

methods. Either he is saving up for a powerful spell, or he is feeding it to an evil force in order to acquire its services.

“Perhaps that is how he sends demons against us. Kea provides him the necessary ingredients and he uses the cruor to command the demons.”

Rordan said, “If he’s saving up for a spell, then we have to stop him before it’s too late. But I have no ideas on that score. Anyway, he’s the bad guy. No doubt about it. He said I had to obey or die.”

“So you disobeyed,” said Fikna.

Rordan nodded.

Fikna smiled. “I’m hardly surprised. He is ignorant of your shortcomings, unlike myself. You’re truculent, intractable, and unmanageable. The last action he should have undertaken to assure your obedience is to order you around.”

A brief chuckle escaped Rordan.

Fikna said, “Now what happened after your encounter with Master Beag?”

“I left in a state of shock,” said Rordan. “I wanted to take a performance class. But he said I had to take formulas unless I passed the placement exam. I believe he wanted me to fail so I would do what he wanted.”

“Did you manage to succeed with the examination?”

Rordan said, “I don’t know. It was really hard. But I gave it my best shot. I didn’t let him get the better of me. I’ll have to see when the results are posted tomorrow.”

Fikna nodded. “You mentioned an encounter with Dalla?”

“Yep. I was waiting to sign up for the exam when she walked by. She said she wasn’t involved with what Kea was doing. I believe her. Then she started coming on to me. Said if I became her pet she would protect me. I chickened out, which she didn’t like. But I believe she’s going to stay out of this. And Kea doesn’t like her now.”

Fikna said, “What was Dalla doing there?”

“She was with a friend who was signing up.”

A puzzled look came over Fikna. “One wonders what she could possibly mean by her pet. A familiar?”

Rordan shrugged. “The way she said it, she must have meant some kind of lecher. It was like she was talking about things with a totally different view. That’s the other thing. I got the feeling that there’s this whole complicated world with witches. Oh yeah, she said not to call them that.”

Fikna laughed a little. “What should we label them, then? The Deuce’s helpers?”

They chuckled.

“No, dummy. They must have some name for themselves. It’s like they are a huge private society of people, like the pastorals or the mystagogues. She said it was bad to talk about stuff. So I guess there was lots she wanted to talk about, but couldn’t.”

Fikna said, “Unless you agreed to become her lecher.”

“Yep.”

Fikna stared off into space for a moment. “I’m pleased you managed the wits to refuse. Those witches are trouble incarnate. I myself am relieved to have dodged an encounter with Kea. Our enemy Noss likely deserves some sympathy.

“However, it does paint an interesting picture. I think the Deuce’s followers are not as united as the ministers would have us believe. The whole affair makes a certain amount of sense to my suspicions. Being all ruthless fiends, it requires the immediate fear of the Deuce to convince them to act together.”

Rordan said, “If that’s true, I believe Kea is losing good will. When I ran into her next door, she was getting bandaged by her host Manissa. Glenys scratched her up, or so she said.”

Fikna turned incredulous. “Truly? She confronted our sweet darling Glenys and received the cat’s claw? Marvelous. Our Glenys has some uncommon bravery in her. I wonder about her extensive knowledge. She knows more than is perhaps safe for her position in life.”

Rordan chuckled a little. “I don’t know. I have to hear it from Glenys to believe it. We’ll ask her later. But Manissa left when Kea and I started arguing. So I believe she’s starting to run out of friends.”

Fikna said, “What was your argument about?”

“I tried to talk to her and get a reason why she’s doing what she’s doing. I did learn something. The big bad guy is controlling Kea and she doesn’t know it. She’s under his power somehow. So whatever the witches are really

doing, her attacks on us are not part of that. Some of them are starting to think twice.”

Fikna smiled. “Splendid. We might triumph after all. The righteous have each other, while the wicked possess no such shield. Although, now that you have unmasked a tutor as our foe, I daresay things appear more complicated. You mentioned some clues?”

Rordan opened his daypack and pulled out his shirt. “See this? She stole my Deep Uirolec shirt and dirtied it with who knows what. That’s how she’s been finding us.”

Revulsion wrinkled Fikna’s face. “I see the part about needing a personal object is true.”

“I’ll bet it was a big help to her. And I took this.” Rordan showed Fikna the dagger.

His bro’ took the weapon. The young gallant drew the blade with a careful motion and gave it a swordsman’s eye. “Where did you find these things?”

Rordan scratched his head. “In her room, or the room of her host I mean. They left it wide open and I rummaged through Kea’s bag.”

Fikna gave his brother a severe scowl. “You should not have breached hospitality like that.”

“I didn’t accept. I walked through an open door after they were both gone.”

Fikna said, “Don’t shuffle words. Even if she violated your baggage, it’s no reason to reciprocate at her level.”

Rordan tensed his face. “She’s an enemy. Her host didn’t invite me and I refused Kea’s invitation. Look at my shirt. She was using my stuff to hurt us. And look at that dagger. Who was going to get that when they were sleeping?”

Fikna sheathed the dagger and handed it back to him. “A man’s room, cottage or patch of grass is his castle. To break through trust and steal is to violate Deiwos’ law. You will suffer for that breach Rord, mark my words. I agree she should not be possessed of such objects. However, the ends never justify the means.”

At his bro’s words, Rordan slumped. He put the items back in the daypack. “I don’t feel good about it. Maybe I will pay for it. But she got me mad. She wouldn’t listen to me. Kept going on about munching dongos and repeating everything I said. Like being in a house of mirrors.”

His bro’ sighed and shook his head. “Rord, you cannot expect to render her assistance. She’s a false heart whose misdeeds will rebound upon her. I’m the gallant here, not you. Release your concerns and let us instead think about survival.”

Rordan felt defeated. “So what did you do all day?”

A smile reappeared on Fikna’s face. “After you departed this morning, I utilized one of the baths and washed up. Apparently there’s mixed access, as in classicist times.”

“What? No way!”

Fikna nodded. “It would display poor manners to notice. The ladies are all dressed in robes anyway. However, each station or private bath is adjacent to someone else’s. I dare say I received a temptation knowing only a stone wall separated me from views of carnal paradise.”

Rordan expressed bewilderment. “Stroma didn’t mention that on the tour. There was nobody around yesterday when I used the station. I guess I’ll have to wash up during peak use and see for myself.”

Fikna said, “The situation is rather permissive. One has to wonder what kind of academy you’ve found yourself attending.”

Rordan said, “Stroma told me it’s for catering to a handful of rich pupils.”

Surprise showed on Fikna’s face. “Are you certain?”
“Yep.”

Fikna said, “I’m beginning to wonder if money truly isn’t the root of all wickedness. In any case, I ended up refreshed and in a clean set of clothes. As a result, my mood improved dramatically. After my brief shave, I thought of myself as properly civilized once more.

“Oh, I recognize how I am getting ahead of myself. I met the most delightful girl there. Name of Blai. Quite a wonderful sort.”

Rordan sneered. “Oh I see. You met a wonderful sort in a robe and now you feel like a million peers.”

“Correct. She’s a sportsman, a sprinter as a matter of fact. Excellent legs I would gather. She appears quite well educated.”

Rordan said, “How about that? Good work, bro’.”

Fikna preened. “Why thank you. Now, after my refreshing encounter I returned to find Borus prepared to depart. And that unsavory Stig fellow had vanished again. As I stated, Borus would have nothing of sticking around and went off. I spent considerable effort arranging my things in the better parts of the closet, which you thoughtfully left for my use.”

Rordan said, “Of course.”

Fikna rubbed his left wrist a little. Rordan saw the scratch had resumed oozing. His bro’ rubbed the right wrist, though Rordan didn’t see anything there.

“I completed my arranging and began to consider my next adventure. Without warning, the door slammed open and in came a leathery, rust-colored monstrosity of a man. With a cry resembling a sick child, he shrieked from a shrunken mouth. Before I could speak two words or draw Trad’s knife, the blasted creature reached me. The demon grasped my shirt with withered hands, its empty eye sockets spewing forth a rotten-smelling mist.”

Rordan gulped. “Yikes. The things can come busting in at any moment, from anywhere.”

Fikna said, “Quite so, Rord. The demon pressed me hard against the wall of the closet and tried to bring its revolting face close to my own. I became rather cross and struggled against it with all my might.

“Then I remembered what Glenys told us earlier. I shouted out with all the conviction and breath I could muster, ‘In the name of Empyreon the Great of Greats I command you to go!’ To my surprise, the demon made an ear-splitting cry and collapsed backwards.

“I pulled my rood from under my shirt. Displaying it with the power of my faith, I yelled ‘Begone, unworthy soul, it is Deiwos who commands you!’ The creature crumbled into a pile of rusty smoke. As I watched, the smoke promptly exited down the hall and out of sight. There. What do you think?”

Bafflement clouded Rordan’s thoughts. “I don’t know. I wonder what kind of demon that was. Are you sure it was rust-colored?”

His bro’ nodded.

“Weird. Well I’m just glad the thing didn’t get the better of you.”

Fikna said, “He intruded without welcome. However, one such as he had long ago rejected salvation. His breach of hospitality was therefore immediately punished. A lesson you would do well to remember.”

Rordan frowned at the lecture. “I’ll do my best. So what did you do next? Was Kea around?”

Fikna said, “No, I checked. Her host’s door was closed and my knocking produced no answer. I listened and was rewarded with silence. Nobody appeared either, despite my calling. Everyone in the hall must have been occupied I suppose. I returned to our room and knelt in a prayer of submission for my deliverance.”

Understanding cleared Rordan's thoughts. "The cool thing is you saw your attacker. That means my third eye must finally be spreading."

Surprise overtook Fikna. "Yes. Yes! That reminds me of what I intended to mention next. Rord, we've been through a great amount of troubles lately. However, to actually witness this creature first hand, by myself. I apologize for doubting you. The fact that such horrid things walk the Heartland freely among us explains a great deal."

Rordan smiled. "This is a good sign. I'm not excited about our enemies attacking us in our own room. But if you can see what's happening now, even a little—it's a help."

Fikna stood up. "Yes, I dare say it's a major improvement. I understand now what you mean about these encounters being a drain. After my victory over the demon I became dull-headed. I shambled into the snug upstairs and watched the clouds about the mountain."

"Did you get any weird feelings? See anything?"

Fikna rubbed his temple. "I scarce have words to describe the fever of reflection I encountered. The most unusual thoughts entered my thinking and for a while I suffered a great pain throughout my entire body."

Rordan looked his bro' in the eye. "What kind of thoughts?"

Fikna rubbed his right wrist and looked down at the ground. "The thought entered my mind that I would never have a normal life. All my hopes otherwise were

folly. My existence was not my own and my fate resided with Empyreon.”

Rordan stared. “That kind of sums up your life. So why does that bother you?”

Fikna said, “Because that’s what I’ve always wanted. A normal life! However, the thoughts inside my head were definitive. They mentioned other things as well. Deiwos was neither merciful nor kind and would tear me to pieces like an insect.”

Embers of rage seethed in Rordan and he turned introspective against them. “That does sound pretty bad.” His memory returned to the island and what the mascot had said.

“The thoughts became a fully realized image in my head. I walked alone in a desert, wearing rags worse than those of Borus’ garments. No fortune lay in my future—no society, no wife, no offspring, and no associates. Even you had vanished from the picture.”

Rordan shook his head. “That will never happen.”

Fikna sighed. “The thoughts told me I beheld what I deserved. I was a lowly worm fit only to grovel in the dust.”

The urge to openly question the source of his bro’s thoughts raced through Rordan’s heart. He wouldn’t put anything past their enemies. His gaze settled on his bro’s face and he saw Fikna described a real experience.

Rordan intuited his bro’ had looked at himself, perhaps for the first time ever. With plans as grand as

Fikna's, anyone would be shocked to see they were really a lonely and pathetic nobody.

He decided Fikna's vision revealed the truth and his anger became harder to hold back. Rordan spoke with difficulty. "I believe you had a real vision bro'. But that's not all of it. You see yourself for the first time. That you aren't what you thought you were. But you'll see more as time goes on. If you keep looking at yourself..." He struggled with the last words, which repulsed him, and said, "...with faith."

Fikna said, "Rord, what I experienced reduced my faith to naught. I beheld a profoundly morose revelation and became weak beyond explanation. These thoughts fly in the face of all I believe. They continued relentlessly, chipping away at my sanity.

"I thought perhaps I might be turning mad. Or that the sickness you spotted last night had gained the upper hand. However, the thoughts kept telling me 'no'. They said, 'You are not going mad, you are seeing the truth.' Such thoughts devastate my composure."

His bro's words shocked him. Rordan looked down and shifted his feet. He gazed at Fikna's shoulder and saw no sign of the sickness from last night. He opened himself up to the song of nature and strained with the weakness in his body.

Fikna said, "What do you perceive Rord? Have I become worse?"

Rordan said, "No, I don't see anything. You must have beaten whatever it was. The thoughts must be

telling the truth. We had a talk about this before, remember?”

Fikna rubbed at his shoulder. “I was rather hoping I might place blame on the influence of last night’s demonic touch. Yes, I remember we had a similar conversation on the boat.”

Rordan nodded. “What I was saying was, maybe your dreams are unrealistic. Maybe you’re meant for something else. All the vision shows you is that you are something that to you seems worthless.”

Fikna said, “What of Deiwos’ cruelty? What of his desire to rend me to bits and consign me to nothingness?”

Rordan put up his hands. “All I’m saying is, maybe he seems that way to you because you aren’t getting what you want. You can be really selfish and bossy. It’s always got to be your way and you get it because you’re a charmer. But you can’t smooth talk your way out of Deiwos’ plan.” He grimaced when he said the last two words.

Fikna chuckled. “To hear you handle my faith seriously is comforting. I must admit, seeing you squirm as you try to reassure me is amusing.”

Rordan said, “I can’t stand religious stuff. But that doesn’t mean I believe it’s false. I don’t know, maybe Deiwos really is going to put you to the test for laughs. If that’s true, don’t you think it’d be better to know that for sure than live a lie?”

Fikna's smile turned serious. "Without my dreams, I may as well be a starving hermit in some desert. Lost and alone."

Rordan said, "Maybe you need new dreams."

Fikna blinked. "Oh, that reminds me. I experienced a dream last night."

Rordan jerked his head forward at Fikna. "What was it?"

The young gallant crossed his arms. "How did it unfold again? Oh, that's right. I found myself in this extremely ancient house made of stone. I remember an enormous granite stairway and a gargantuan hearth. The air smelled fresh and clean. The ceiling had been built low and the space was limited and personal. I was seated at the head of a large, circular table with a group of people.

"Glenys was present; she wore countless precious adornments. I spotted a girl who reminded me of Fais. You sat among us, wearing outsider clothes of a midnight blue. Even Kea had a place at our table, yet she was so changed I almost failed to recognize her. I recall Borus sat with us, except he was a girl for some reason. There were others but I fail now to recollect them.

"We all wanted to eat some delicious food and were waiting for strange attendants to serve us. On the table was an assortment of rotten food and some of the guests were eating it. You warned me to wait. However, I continued regarding the rotten food, thinking a miniscule amount would tide me over until the fresh food arrived.

“Then I found myself restricted to a large, unusual bed. I had caught a burning fever and was starving because the fresh food still hadn’t arrived. I think I had eaten a portion of the rotten food. Girl Borus looked at you and touched your heart with her hand. The two of you discussed a scary adventure you had shared.

“You looked at Glenys and then at myself. I could plainly see you were about to make a decision. I tried to influence you to choose Glenys, because I wanted you to be happy. Yet you pointed at me. Borus walked over and she breathed on my face. The touch of her breath revitalized me and I recovered quickly from my fever. I awoke right as I sat upright in the dream.”

Rordan grabbed his daypack and stood up. He leaned against the windowsill with one hand. “That’s so crazy. I don’t believe it was an ordinary dream. If there is such a thing. Borus must have really helped you. I can’t figure him out, even though I feel a connection with him.”

Fikna placed both hands to his chin and scrunched his eyebrows. “I think the moment has arrived to search for our mutual companion. Too much time has elapsed to allow him further wanderings unsupervised. The danger we face threatens him as well. Besides, he is overdue for a dousing.”

Rordan grabbed the lamp on his desk. He went to the door and opened it. “After you.”

The two of them started their search in Upper Trow and worked their way down. The level of activity in the halls increased as pupils returned for the day and formed

groups to socialize. Fikna smiled and waved with friendly encouragement at the pupils they met.

Rordan watched his bro' at work. He thought of himself as a beginner with people compared to Fikna.

They found Borus laying on one of the carpeted tiers in Radix Trow. She looked up when they entered and sat upright. Her eyes were droopy and her movements slow.

Rordan set the lamp down and sat beside the youngster. He dug out two pieces of beef jerky. The girl immediately reached for them. She held the strips in her large hands and chomped the snacks down.

“Rord, you are kind. How do you manage it?”

Fikna's clear voice opened a vista of limitless space beyond their vision. They had the sensation of a huge force descending upon them, followed by a deafening silence that quickly settled into their hearts.

Rordan glanced over at his bro'. Fikna had a look of struggle on his face. “I don't know. I just am, I suppose. But maybe I'm not kind at all. Maybe I just can't stand to see people suffer.”

Fikna said, “You experience a sense of right and wrong.”

Borus accepted another piece of jerky from Rordan and wolfed it down.

“I believe so. But so do you. At least, I hope you do.”

Fikna held his hands out and looked at them. “I am concerned with such things. Yet that is based on the

Tablets. If not for that upbringing, then where would I get the impetus to do good?”

Rordan pulled out the beerskin from his daypack and let Borus have a drink. Warm beer dripped from the girl’s chin and onto the carpet. “You’re getting into doubt-your-faith territory here bro’. If you don’t have faith in the Tablets, you’re kind of humped.”

The young gallant put his hands in his pockets and paced in a small circle. “Rord, unlike your folks you’re an unbeliever. How do you manage it? How does anyone accomplish right and wrong without belief in something?”

Rordan watched Borus take another drink of warm beer and pondered his bro’s question. “I do have belief bro’. Just a different kind from yours. I believe in the basic goodness of all things. My ‘Pisces nonsense’, remember?”

Fikna said, “Where does inherent goodness come from? How can we need the Tablets if such morals are natural?”

The turn of conversation took Rordan by surprise. He could hardly believe what they discussed. His own words made him feel exposed. “Maybe you don’t need belief or faith at all. Or maybe you’ve got it backwards. People want to do the right thing because they’re people. They come up with some tablets to remind themselves of that.”

His bro’ stopped pacing and faced him with a strained look. “If people are good naturally, then why do they do wrong?”

“I said people want to do the right thing. That doesn’t mean they do. Sometimes doing the right thing means doing something uncomfortable. People are also weak, or lazy, or confused. And not all choices are clear, or even choices at all. It’s never easy, Fikna.”

“You are correct. Making decisions is difficult for me.”

Rordan resisted the urge to tell a Libra line about indecision. “What are you deciding now? Whether or not your faith is a waste?”

Fikna puffed. “Possibly. For the moment, I feel most confused.”

Borus looked sideways at Rordan. She stared at Fikna. Her eyes were tinged with anxiety.

Rordan took the beerskin back from her. “It’s okay Borus. My bro’s just trying to get his act together.”

He watched Fikna shrink in stature and assume a haggard expression. Rordan sensed a change in his bro’ and intuited the experience as deeply personal.

Borus watched Fikna cautiously. She waited.

Rordan looked into the youngster’s enormous, dark eyes and trembled at the potency he saw in their depths. He looked away and felt Borus’ anxiety now, which gave him the shakes. His mind struggled for a second, and then he realized the boy wasn’t nervous, but excited. Borus must understand what Fikna went through and could hardly wait to see what happened.

The girl grinned with a wide mouth of large teeth.

A charge shot down Rordan's spine and he saw in Borus the same capacity for vision as his own. He ached to know what the boy might know or see. Borus' joy for life made a mark on him and he had the sensation of cracks widening throughout his body.

At the edge of his senses Rordan detected an invisible force in the room. Heaviness descended on Fikna's shoulders. The dim haze of light became stronger and bathed them in a harsh glare that baked the air like an oven. Rordan squinted his eyes against the light.

Beside Fikna stood a glowing brown humanoid being with wings like an eagle. The being wore a loose, one-piece gown made of platinum. A silver scarf woven with brilliant, cornflower blue sapphires hung around the being's neck and blinding sparks of white flame danced behind its head. Despite its hands on Fikna's shoulders in a comforting gesture, a frightful aspect surrounded the being.

Rordan guessed the being was a messenger of Deiwos and grimaced. His bro' could only be the recipient of a big message or scary vision from the Tablets. He didn't want to offend the messenger with his mistrust and dislike. Fighting back his protective feelings for Fikna, Rordan waited.

The messenger floated off the ground, then both the glaring light and messenger slowly vanished. Rordan still sensed a presence in the room.

His bro' appeared shaken. Fikna turned toward him with his eyes leaking tears. "How long have you had

knowledge of this?” He held up his wrists toward Rordan. Both had oozing scratches.

“Since the boat. That’s when there was no doubt.”

Fikna stumbled backwards. “What manner of response can I make to this? What am I supposed to do?” He faced his wrists toward his chest and closed his eyes tight.

A sense of helplessness rattled Rordan. He had no answer for his bro’.

“If this overwhelming madness is the world of your visions Rord, I would prefer to stay asleep. This doubt inside me has broken free and polluted my entire being with its corruption.”

Rordan said, “You were always like that bro’, deep inside. You were never a fanatic. You only wanted to believe. Or at least I imagine you still do.”

Fikna opened his eyes. “I possess no faith and I recognize this damning truth. I cannot return to pretending, can I?”

The sight of his bro’ in pain sent shivers through his body. Rordan shook his head against a growing fear of failure. “Would you want to? I’ll never be the same after what I’ve seen. Who knows where it’s going to lead us. You wanted fun. Here it is. Welcome to crazy land.”

He tittered and an edge of hysteria heated the back of his mind. The messenger frightened him over his bro’s safety more than he wanted to admit.

A dozen people sat with them now. Borus grunted and scrambled to the other side of Rordan. The people all watched Fikna with an air of expectation.

The young gallant studied them. “Where did you appear from? Identify yourselves. What is your intention?” He waited for an answer. “Rord, do you witness them?”

The people had a sleepy quality to them Rordan couldn’t figure out. He felt comfortable with their presence and nodded. “Yep. I do, and so does Borus. They seem okay to me. Every time I see something, I come across some magical being and we have a talk. Maybe it’s the same for you and Borus, or maybe not. I don’t know, but it’s personal to you.”

Fikna stared without focus. “It’s hardly fair, this development. I find myself at a loss. How can one be expected to deal with such a fate?”

Rordan said, “You can do it, bro’. I’m here. Borus is here. You’re not alone and you’ll make it through this.”

“What does it matter?” Fikna faced Rordan and made wild gestures with his hands. “None of my plans matter. We’re all insignificant motes of dust. Pushed and pulled at the whim of Deiwos. There’s no protection from him—no justice you can appeal to. He has made an example of me. Dashed my hopes to a thousand ruins and shown me a miserable expanse of lowly suffering to dwell in.

“Inside, the twin poles of doubt and need tear at my conscience like raging beasts. Shall I see the unseen now

at every turn? Will my suffering manifest itself now as bolts of divine lightning? To strike me down, whereas before I would be ignorant of the fantastic and miraculous sights bearing down upon me? From what unnamable source springs my doubt? Where did this sickness first manifest itself? I am nothing of account.” His body slackened and he stared at the floor in a mania.

An impulse seized a hold of Rordan. He moved to his bro’s side and grasped him by the upper arms. “Stop it! If you’re so filled with doubt, then doubt the horrible thing you’ve just seen. The vision you’ve had might not be what you think.”

The two of them exchanged sorrowful glances. Feelings passed between them and tore at Rordan’s heart.

Fikna said, “How can anyone doubt what they’ve witnessed with their own sight?”

“Easy. You do it. Don’t take everything you see at face value. Don’t discount it, but neither should you obey it without question. If Deiwos just delivered the message, ask him to explain it.”

Fikna thrust his wrists at Rordan. “Explain this! I’m not anybody. I understand not the first thing about sacred matters. Except it means my life’s ambitions are in the chamber pot and I’m expected to live as some kind of hermit or worse.”

Rordan held his bro’s arms and glared at the scratches. He spoke with a husky growl. “You don’t know what it means. It could mean anything. Or even if it means you’ll be going around as some goody-goody, maybe it’s

what you make of it. Look at it without judgment. Maybe bearing Empyreon's mark of disgrace is exciting and fun."

Fikna laughed once.

Rordan chuckled as he segued into an improvised comedy routine. "All right. Check this out people, time for high adventure in the Empyreon shop of horse-hair rags and wild honey." He accompanied his routine with a mimicry of Fikna's voice. "I say, I've hit the jackpot now. The eligible maidens shall flock to my side in droves."

They snickered and stumbled about. Borus watched them with a pleased look on her face.

Fikna said, "Rord, you are a welcome jester. Very well, I shall endeavor to understand my plight with more consideration." He studied the people. "They present a puzzle, would you agree? Old and young. Men and women, even outsiders. I wonder as to their appearance. Have they followed me during the entirety of my life?"

Rordan shrugged. "Maybe. Hard to say. They must want something; probably from you. But I have no idea what that is. I'm guessing you'll figure it out if you're meant to."

"That's not terribly helpful Rord. If they manage no dialogue, and you witness nothing special, how do we progress?"

Rordan said, "Hey, you're part of the third eye club now. I'm out of ideas. If I see something I'll let you know. But keep in mind I haven't been doing this long

enough to give good advice yet. Look how long I've been waiting to figure out Borus."

Fikna looked at the closest person, a pale skinned girl around eleven years of age. She had long, blonde hair and her garment consisted of a one-piece nightgown of plain blue cotton. She wore thick black boots too big for her.

The girl looked anguished to Rordan. He thought her skin seemed paler than normal, almost corpse-like. A thought struck him. Before he could articulate it, Fikna came to the conclusion first and spoke out.

"They're people who have passed away," said Fikna. "They're ghosts." His hands came close to his chest, thoughts passing through him faster than his face could articulate.

Rordan let his bro' come to the conclusion on his own from there.

Fikna said, "Maybe they require laying to rest. How might this be accomplished? I'm no minister. I possess no authority for official blessings even if I had the learning. What right do I hold to officiate for those outside my faith? They deserve better than my incomplete knowledge." A moment of anguish crossed Fikna's face. He wrangled his hands together and trembled.

Rordan watched his bro' decide, then approach the girl. She took in a breath and reached out. Fikna took her in his arms and exchanged a hug. For a ghost she looked solid to his eyes. The two separated and regarded

each other. Fikna made the sign of the rood and said what sounded like a personal prayer to Rordan.

The girl transformed before his eyes. She wore a bright, sunset red dress and a necklace of tied daisies. She smiled, then disappeared with a blink into what he could barely conceive of as an infinite inner space. Rordan couldn't tell if she had flown to Welkin or evaporated like a puddle of water into oblivion.

Fikna looked back at him. "This matter overwhelms me. She was dead, yet I touched her. She is beyond peace and suffering. This surpasses my way of thinking."

The iron door to the furnace became outlined in a crackle of yellow-orange light. The door unlocked with a loud snap and slid open. A wave of savage heat flooded the room. The doorway revealed a large room beyond, filled with violent flames and a roaring conflagration.

Some of the ghosts cringed with looks of fear while others bowed their heads in sadness or looked on in shock. Rordan stiffened. His face turned severe and he remembered what he was capable of for those he loved.

One of the ghosts got up and shambled toward the door with a face full of dread. He was a man of about fifty, with a deeply lined face and a pallid quality to his brown skin.

Rordan said, "Do something bro'!"

Fikna looked at him, then rushed over and seized the man. He pulled the ghost around to face him. "How is it this door to the gate of damnation opens? Answer me! What crimes are you guilty of?"

The old man gaped and stared. His eyes and mouth were dry.

A voice issued forth from the furnace and filled the minds of the living. “Deiwos demands a sacrifice. Who are you to question his will?”

Borus recoiled from the voice as if dealt a blow. She looked away and her breathing came in shallow gasps.

A spasm ran through Rordan’s body and he staggered back onto a carpeted tier. He trembled with shock and had trouble seeing through the haze before his eyes.

Drool beaded at one edge of Fikna’s mouth and his face grew flush. He strengthened his grasp on the old man. “I question! What wrong has this man committed for his soul to be consigned to everlasting torment?”

The voice answered with an irritated tone. “Can you set yourself against the might of the All-mighty Power? Do you see into the heart of the deepest ocean and behold the farthest shores of space and time?”

Rordan felt his bro’ weaken. He slid to the floor and crawled toward Fikna. His heart beat fast while tears ran down his numb cheeks. The heat grew uncomfortable. He looked up at his bro’ and blinked several times. The strong arms of Borus seized him by the waist and he fell to his side.

The girl held Rordan tight and pulled him toward the exit. Her overwhelming strength cowed his struggles and he fought against blacking out.

Fikna looked away and squeezed the old man to his chest. He shouted over the din. “Is this justice then? Is this goodness? How is it you do not answer? Perhaps you are some darker force masquerading as the Great of Greats!”

The voice said, “Who is Deiwos answerable to? Are you wise enough to see every corner of the world and judge right from wrong? There is no other but the Almighty Power, who renders the day and the night, tending the eternal and the perishable without equal.”

Fikna continued to shout. “Then take this man from me! If you are Deiwos, then I cannot stand against you! And if you are something besides, then Deiwos shall save us from you if it pleases him!”

The voice hesitated. “Deiwos has received his sacrifice.” The door slid closed with a resounding grind, followed by a clack. The heat of the flames became stuffy warmth.

Borus stopped, but held a firm hand on Rordan’s chest.

He rubbed his eyes clear of tears and tried to focus on his bro’.

Fikna released the man and looked him in the eyes. Through strained gasps for air he said, “Rest in peace, old man. The Deuce has been driven away. If Deiwos does not object then I bless you. In the name of the Great of Greats, Emyrean the Heir, and the Spirit of Welkin. Your wrongs are removed if it is the will of Deiwos.”

A mild odor of sweet incense filled the room. The smell of it comforted Rordan and he found the trauma of the voice lessened. He thought of the censers in the chapel back home and how they smelled when not in use.

His eyesight cleared and he noticed the room had acquired a soft, indistinct light. The stone of the walls had a smooth, appealing look to them and the tiles of the floor absorbed the noise of his crawling about. The flames of the lamp they had brought burned without a flicker. The sunlight that came in through the window slits on the far wall had a brighter character.

Rordan felt holiness enclose him. He raised his arms up and out, enjoying the peace that filled the room.

Borus sat back on her hands and looked satisfied. She chirped once to herself

Fikna said, “This display speaks volumes to me. I think you are indeed removed of wrongs old man. Forget the life of wickedness that may have plagued you and put on the robes of the Welkin host.”

The man stared at Fikna in confusion. He searched his pockets for a moment. A thought played across his face and he sighed. The man nodded at Fikna and at Rordan. The sun emerged from behind the clouds and shone on his face through the window.

Rordan thought he looked a little less burdened.

The old man’s clothes changed colors to earthy red and brown tones, and reverted in fashion fifteen years. Then he vanished out of existence in the blink of an eye.

Fikna knelt on the floor and prayed in the sunlight.

The rays of the sun changed from direct to indirect. Rordan knew the fantastical scene had changed back to normal. The ghosts were no longer visible, but he still felt their presence. With difficulty, he crawled over to Fikna and knelt beside him. “You okay?”

Fikna bowed his head. “Rord, I understand the reasons for your behavior. Stick together?”

Rordan smiled. “Always.” He slapped his bro’s hand. They stood up as one.

Fikna looked around. “Are they still here?”

“I believe so,” said Rordan. “The vision comes and goes. I really hope we aren’t going to have to help every one of them. This is hard work.”

“I concur. I am motivated towards nothing more than the rendering of assistance to them all. However, as I mentioned I’m not anyone special. I think this flock of ghosts is safe for the moment.”

Rordan watched Borus shuffle over to them. “Yep, there’s a fated aspect to this. You show up for the important parts like it’s a pamphlet-slam. But it’s tiring.”

Fikna said, “The moment has arrived for us to seek out Glenys. Therefore, I shall speak a prayer on behalf of the ghosts’ safety. And I shall place my trust in the refuge they find with us.”

Rordan nodded. “Borus, I guess we’ll have to get you in that shower station next time.”

The girl looked up at Rordan and peered at him with curiosity.

Fikna clasped his hands and said a silent prayer. Then the three of them left the room together.