

The Crew Rustler

BETH BEST

Cosmer

Being late in Vikemy doesn't normally get you executed. If it did, Cosmer would've been dead a thousand times by now. A *million* times. He's very aware he's usually late to go shine shoes or deliver laundry or pick things up to fix or clean.

But it's not shoes he's shining today. It's a sky ship.

A crew rustler arrived in Vikemy two days ago, and early this morning a watcher came by Cosmer's house to ask him to go wash and and wax the ship at noon. Which would have been fine.

Except Cosmer got side-tracked. It took too long drawing up water for his mother because the visit from the watcher meant he was late leaving the house, and there was a queue at the village well. Then Protcher caught him and asked him to bring up some sacks of flour from his stores — and Cosmer never turns down helping Protcher because he always gives him a fresh loaf of bread or even offcuts of cake in exchange for his help, all things Cosmer can share with Ara and her brother — and then it was noon, and he only realised when the Temple bells were ringing out for it.

It's not like he *wants* to be late. It's his brain. It thinks up so many thoughts — multiple at the same time, sometimes — but never seems to finish any of them. He imagines them like wires, all bending and crossed and coiled with nowhere to go. They get even worse when he's around Ara. Like he can barely see straight.

Running isn't easy, with the ground this cracked and rocky, and with the heavy buckets of soapy water he's carrying weighing him down. Every step he takes churns up thick chalky dust, and one of the faded leather straps on his sandals keeps coming off, and he needs to keep adjusting it.

A pocket watch.

That would help him not be late, and stop him getting into situations like this. Most people have one these days.

Won't happen, though. No one's going to trade a shoe-shine for something like that. They barely trade bread for it.

Cosmer sprints through the stone archway that marks the end (or beginning) of his village, and then he's here. Two watchers are standing pin-straight in pristine beige uniforms Cosmer probably helped launder and starch. They're on either side of Temple's hefty arched wooden doors, silver masks catching the sun and rifles up by their shoulders like trophies. They nod at him to let him pass by, and Cosmer exhales in relief. Today won't be the day he dies.

The sky ship's just opposite Temple, out of place on this patch of earth just outside his village they call the desert, because while Vikemy does have some vegetation, it's flat, dead soil out here for miles.

The ship doesn't *look* like advanced tech. Looks more like something someone with hands too big for his body made. A large, round-nosed machine of dull brown metal squatting on the earth with wide, flat wings and a clunky-looking tail. Cosmer can see the bolts in it. He wonders if it would fall apart if it flew too high.

It looked more impressive when it first arrived. Dark against the bright sky, growing in size as it drew in like a mechanical vulture. It was whirring, and all lit up. A crowd gathered to watch it descend like it was a special occasion, or Provision Day, and there was excitement in the air, because it was well known crew rustlers brought news from the war or letters from soldiers sometimes, and even extra provisions.

It was also well known that if you went into the sky with a crew rustler, you probably weren't coming back.

Because that's their real purpose in visiting Hevalla villages. Recruiting soldiers. Cosmer is very aware even him washing this ship might be a recruitment tactic. He's the right age, being sixteen. Boys as young as fourteen enlist.

He throws the buckets down, picks up a cloth and gets to work. Maybe he'll be done by the time the crew rustler comes back from whichever street corner he's shouting from right now about how great life in the sky is, and how you get three meals a day, and how your household on the ground gets better Provision, too. Funny how the speeches never seem to mention the fact you're also going to be *killing Rhavnan people*. All because they have magic, and Hevalla doesn't like it.

If he's honest, Cosmer was all for the war against Rhavna. It seemed a lavish, backwards country, undeserving of its wealth. Wealth that could be used to boost Hevalla, which was far more deserving, being a country that valued hard work.

But then Cosmer met Ara. It made it... difficult, to carry on hating Rhavna, when it had helped make something so perfect.

He's still working thirty minutes later. The grime on the machine doesn't come away easily, and his bucket of water, and his hands, are completely black now. He keeps catching sight of himself in the long window of real glass at the front of the machine, and it stresses him out every time, because he

looks like shit. The bags under his eyes are like holes. His red hair is all over the place-

Shit. He's no longer alone.

He spins around, and comes face-to-face with the crew rustler.

The man is in his full soldier's uniform. A leather jacket with a turned-up collar, red shirt, breeches, and thick boots on his feet, despite the heat. The man himself is short and portly and red in the face, like maybe he drinks a lot. There are a lot of drunks in Vikemy, often seen strewn about in the street like their discarded bottles. They don't bother earning Provision anymore. They rely solely on stealing or begging.

Sometimes Cosmer envies them.

"Cosmer?" the crew rustler asks, breaking the silence.

Cosmer stiffens. He doesn't like the crew rustler knowing his name. He owns very little other than his name.

The man chortles. "You *are* Cosmer. It's good to meet you."

Cosmer tries something like a nod, then turns his back on the man. Since he'd just dried the ship, he starts on smoothing the wax over it.

He'd been planning to ignore the man. But after a minute or two, he finds himself asking, "Why did the watchers give you my name?"

"They didn't," is the man's instant answer. "I already knew it. I was asked to find you on my visit and give you something."

If the man didn't have Cosmer's attention, he does now. He spins to face him again, and sees the man approaching him, holding out an item. It's silver. *Really* silver. Like it actually *is* silver, not tin.

A small hip flask, Cosmer realises. It's glinting in the beating sunlight.



"Take it," the man encourages, nodding heartily. "It's for you."

Cosmer gapes at the item for a moment.

Then his mouth breaks into a grin, because his tangled brain is finally making this make sense.

"Used to be chocolate, didn't it?" he chides. "You must really need soldiers if you're now bribing them with *silver*."

The man shrugs a couple of times. "Take the flask, or don't. I'll happily keep hold of it if you don't want it."

Cosmer hesitates.

But slowly, he reaches for it.

The flask is cool and smooth and immaculate in his grimy fingers, which themselves are rough and cracked from his work.

Something like this doesn't belong in his hands.

But... he could definitely trade a pocket watch for it.

Hell, he could trade it for *ten* pocket watches.

Or he could give it to Ara. That would be worth a hundred pocket watches, being able to give her something like this. She's probably seen silver like this before, back in Rhavna. Probably drank from it, ate with it. It would be like presenting her with a piece of her home-

Shit. What's he thinking? He can't take this.

Snapping out of it, he says, firmly, "I'm not going to enlist. So, you're wasting your time. If that's what this is all about."

The man says, matter-of-fact, "You do not need to enlist. But you might want to, after we've spoken."

Heat floods Cosmer's veins. "Listen," he says, carefully. "I'm busy. I'm working. My mother has a laundry. We can't all just get up and leave everything to go blow up some Rhavnan ships."

But the man's talking over him. "She's a pretty girl," he

states, his beady grey eyes glinting a little like the flask in Cosmer's hand.

The irritation buzzing through Cosmer's body is replaced with... well, bafflement. "My mother?"

"No," the man says, calmly. "The girl you were with at the beach yesterday. Your friend."

Cosmer freezes up. His mouth parts, but nothing comes out of it.

The man continues in a slow, sly way. "Is she Rhavnan? Dark hair like that."

"She's Hevallan," Cosmer says, quickly. Which isn't a lie. Ara is half-Hevallan, and she lives here. That would make her Hevallan. And this stranger — this *Hevallan soldier* — doesn't need to know any more than that. "And," Cosmer says, fighting to get some control in this conversation, "You know that's kind of creepy, and frowned upon? Watching kids—"

"A shame," the man says, in a thoughtful way. "A pretty girl like that, being so thin."

"She's fine," Cosmer insists, but the words come out quiet, echoey, like he's said them in his head. Any hint of a smile has burned off his face.

The truth is, he knows Ara's thin. Thin as him, these days. He's seen it, how she came to his country two years ago, clearly from a privileged background. The neatness of her. The way she held herself. Her blue eyes, which had life in them like skies do.

He's watched as her arms and legs have become sticks and her cheeks have drawn in, not helped by the manual labour she does every day, fishing to earn her own Provision for her brother and grandmother.

The man says nothing else, so Cosmer puts the flask on the ground and goes back to waxing the ship. He can feel the man's eyes still on him.

After he's done, he chucks out the dirty water onto the ground and loops the buckets around his arms. Picks up the flask, too.

"Your ship's done," he spits at the man, barely glancing at him. And then, because he might as well ask, he adds, "Do I get anything for the work, or just the pleasure that was your company?"

The man smirks. He seems to do that a lot.

He steps over and drops a folded piece of paper into one of the buckets.

"In case you didn't know," Cosmer says. "Paper isn't edible." It isn't even useful. Who's Cosmer going to write to?

"It's a letter," the man says. "Read it."

Cosmer scoffs. "And what? I'll want to join the army?"

The man turns his head. "You might."

Ridiculous. This whole thing was ridiculous. And Cosmer didn't even get anything useful out of it. Anything that could help his mother, and Ara.

He'll go straight to her. She'll be bringing in her boat right about now after her morning fishing. He can picture the silhouette of her against the sea. The way she'll wave when she sees him. She'll calm him down. And he'll give her the flask-

"Don't give it away," the man calls out. There's already some distance between them.

Cosmer can't help it. He turns around. "What?"

"The flask," the man confirms, nodding. "And *read the letter.*"

Cosmer storms on, back into the busy thrum of the village, rickety wooden buildings of different sizes and shapes all around him. He can smell the sea, here. He'll be with Ara in minutes.

And then, as if just to spite the man, or himself, he scoops out the letter and opens it.

The paper is creased and a little damp and ink-smudged,

but still readable. It's official army correspondence, stamped with the crest of Hevalla. And it's boring as shit. Just a list of benefits you get if you join the army. Cosmer knew most of them anyway. Although there seem to be some new ones.

His broken sandal comes off his foot completely, and this time, he doesn't register it. It gets left behind, in the dirt.

