

## CHAPTER 8: DANGEROUS ISLAND

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Rordan hugged his arms close to his sides and waited. The river stretched wider and the breeze smelled of salt. The ravine gave way to steep, wooded hills on either side of the river. A mountain range dominated by a wide, snow-capped peak loomed in the distance to the southeast.

Islands dotted the river's course and the Skipper steered the boat toward a large one. At her command, the butty and Noss disengaged the sail.

The island had enough size and soil to support a small forest of mostly pine. The tree line's shape suggested an enormous hill in the middle of the island. The ground varied between dense undergrowth and a pine needle covered detritus.

The boat cruised easily into an inlet. There was a pier of huge stone blocks fitted together, surrounded by posts of grey wood pockmarked with tiny holes. Short, thick stone pillars jutted from spaces between the blocks; they were all broken off at the top.

Bov and Fikna used poles to guide the boat against the pier. With line in hand, Noss stepped onto a block and used a broken pillar to secure the boat.

The pier connected to a beach of rough gray gravel and coarse dark sand. The beach extended all the way to a slanted cliffside. A promontory of rock stretched out to the water on the left. Straight ahead, a dirt path sloped up the cliff and into the forest. On the right, the cliff gained height and steepness. The cliffside joined the

water where the beach ended. At the end of the beach was a climbing trail up the steep cliff.

The Skipper said, “Stretch your legs, ballast rats. The butty and I have some chores to finish before it gets dark. Those who want to lend a hand cutting wood and starting a fire, I like you already.”

Noss and Fais volunteered. The other passengers went about their own wishes.

Codal tapped Rordan on the shoulder and said, “Hey brother, lets go explore.”

The teenager’s offer caused Rordan to open his mouth and move his eyes about, struggling with a response.

Fikna said, “An excellent proposition, good fellow. I could use an excursion to refresh myself.”

Borus bounded onto the pier and made for the cliffside. She ascended the sloped path and looked back at the boat. A dull smile emerged on her face.

Noss said, “Looks like he wants to live here.”

Codal disembarked and followed the path Borus had taken.

Fikna said, “Come along, Rordan. I am of the mind all will unfold well.” He followed after the teenager.

Rordan grabbed the mercy kit and stashed it inside his daypack. He slung the daypack over his shoulder and stepped onto the pier. His stomach churned with worry as he kept a wary eye on the forest.

Borus turned to the left and made her way onto the promontory. She crouched forward and strained to hear something.

Codal ascended the sloped path and reached the spot where Borus had stood a moment earlier.

Fikna said, “Our companion certainly perked up once we docked, wouldn’t you say?” He climbed the sloped path.

“Yep.” Rordan climbed up after him and managed to get a pebble in his shoe. He shook his foot until the pebble settled to the side of his foot.

At the top, Rordan saw an old campsite. A space had been claimed from the forest and stamped flat from regular use. A rotten log lay close to a shallow fire pit. Paths diverged from where he stood. To the left, a path skirted the cliffside and passed by the promontory. Ahead, a trail passed through the campsite and directly into the forest. The path to the right hugged the cliffside and then turned sharply into the forest.

He turned around and took in the view. He watched the Skipper make plans with the butty and Noss. She carried a long maple toolbox in one hand and a wood-axe in the other.

Codal indicated the path to the right. “Hey brothers, how about we see where this path leads?”

Rordan said, “Sure, you first.” He waved at the pauper. “Borus! We’re going this way! Come on!”

The girl remained on the promontory and stared at him.

Fikna said, “Let our companion stay behind, Rord. He’ll manage well enough, provided he remains in a single location. Perhaps he prefers to be alone for a while.”

Rordan looked at the youngster and felt a twinge of anxiety. “I guess.”

Codal shouted from down the path. “See you brothers!”

Fikna clasped Rordan on the shoulder. “Linger at camp if such is your preference. However, I require a walk. The confounded knots in my upper back will benefit from a change of pace.” He hiked after the teenager.

A sigh escaped from Rordan and he shrugged. “Okay Borus. Stay there! We’ll be back.” He pursued Fikna up the path of the cliff. The path led along the edge of the island as it entered the forest.

He caught up to Fikna and they hiked after Codal. The terrain turned rocky and slowed their progress. Rordan felt relieved to be free of the close quarters on the boat and all the drama he’d endured. The natural setting renewed his spirits.

The two of them found Codal. He stood near the edge of a sheer drop and looked down at the water three stories below.

Codal said, “Brothers, I’m sure glad to get away from those boat-drones. Let’s search this island and see what’s

here. Maybe we'll run into some peryahs and have a hoot."

Rordan stopped to catch his breath.

Fikna said, "What meaning do you intend? I thought you approved of everyone on the boat except for us."

"Don't mind my rump-noise, brother. Somebody had to wake those drones up. Looks like they didn't get who I was pretending to be. That Kea character is a real cold plate. And that Noss guy can't wait to get into her briefs. I say kick 'em both overboard, brothers."

Fikna put his hands on his hips and shook his head.

Codal eyed Rordan. "This trip has been a freaky one, brother. What you did back there with the tramp was hard-core. You slam, you thrash! Only the strong survive."

Rordan recognized the catch phrase and smiled.

"I don't know brother. If I were you, I'd forget those wiener salad sandwiches and move on. Boring, stupid Griever doo-doo. Just point me in the direction of the beer and toke-sticks. It munches that I didn't bring any. Maybe we'll get lucky and run into a peddler who deals. Then we can hit it hard-core."

Codal set off again. He bounded down the path and pushed aside foliage.

Fikna laughed. "To the chamber pot with this, I'm heading back. I hesitate to follow this unhinged troglodyte through the woods."

Rordan chuckled. “So do I, but I admit I want to explore now. You sure you don’t want to come?”

His bro’ took in the wilderness around them. “Yes, I’m certain. The island is more immense than I thought. Night is falling and we brought no lantern with us.”

Disappointment allowed Rordan only a nod.

Fikna said, “Mind yourself. I’ll maintain an eye on Borus.”

A sense of resignation twisted inside Rordan. “And Kea too.”

His bro’ smirked. “I most certainly shall.” He bowed, then hiked back the way they had come.

Rordan found himself alone in the woods. Memories of other solo walks in the forest came back to him. He stared down at the water and watched it flow past. The current conveyed an impression of deep strength to him and he smiled.

“If only strength was the answer for me.”

He turned and walked the way Codal had taken. Along the path, Rordan came across skids in the dirt and crushed plants. The broken terrain required rapid descents and climbs within a few feet of each other. Rordan believed there might be a cave nearby, most likely closer to the center of the island.

In the distance, Codal spouted off a series of rude exclamations. Rordan paused and listened. From the guy’s progress, Codal had to jump and bound up and down the rocky slopes like a madman.

Rordan noticed a lack of any birds, insects, or movement in the undergrowth. It occurred to him he stood alone in the woods on an isolated island, under threat from a witch and maybe peryahs or boat-ruffs.

He imagined eyes on him. Rordan stared into the woods and up the hillside. If anyone were watching, the profuse undergrowth concealed them well.

His curiosity got the better of him and he walked off the path. Tremors passed through his muscles as he pushed onward. The tremors turned into warmth and spread throughout his body.

Huge, bright green ferns and thick, jumbled brambles covered the hillside. Tall, thick-stemmed plants with soft violet flowers swarmed with honeybees and smaller winged insects. Rordan stopped to watch the tiny creatures hover, glide and cavort about on their business. They moved with unusual quiet.

He stepped through the undergrowth and the pebble in his shoe shifted back under his heel. Rordan stopped. He stood on the other foot and pulled off his left shoe.

A sharp pain shocked his left foot as it set down on the ground. Rordan hissed and raised his foot. He saw a honeybee fly off from the vicinity of where he had stepped. The bottom of his foot felt numb in the middle of the arch.

Rordan said, "Great. Stung by a queen bee, of all things. What luck." He rested his left toes on the ground and wobbled off balance.

The pebble fell from his upside down shoe and he limped over to a tree. Rordan rested against the trunk and felt his foot again. The sting swelled with pain. A frown creased his face as he put his shoe back on.

Rordan exhaled a deep breath and continued deeper into the undergrowth. The brambles scratched at him through his shirtsleeve and forced a dirty word from his mouth. He pulled up the sleeve and looked at his forearm. The tiny thorns had drawn small beads of blood from a series of small ragged scrapes. Rordan rubbed his arm briskly, then pulled his sleeve down and stomped his way around the brambles.

He passed between a jagged rift in the hill and heard wind chimes. Rordan searched for them, but they hung out of sight somewhere inside a thick bramble bush. A stab of uncertainty forced him to pause and consider what he intended. His gaze landed ahead of him and he walked through a tall curtain of ferns.

Before him was a huge crater. Around and above, thick undergrowth and a near-canopy of trees created a sense of privacy. The lessened daylight revealed details to him in soft impressions. A pool of turquoise-blue water rested in the center of the crater. The color drew an extended breath from Rordan. His teeth chattered for a second.

A path wound around the circumference of the pool from the entrance where he stood and over to a cave mouth two stories in height. Near the entrance stood a chopped stone obelisk four feet tall and a smaller,



naturally flat stone. From within the cave came the glow of firelight.

The walls of the cave were covered in vulgar, fantastical paintings. The artwork extended all the way inside as far as he could see. Rordan couldn't make out any individual details from where he stood. By the vivid colors he guessed they were splendid to behold up close. His heart raced and a tingle pulsed down his back.

He paused to examine the crater more closely. The grounds supported a massive garden. Plots rested in raised lumps of soil covered in rotting material and bordered by stacked stone. Colorful wildflowers grew beside crops of tomato, corn and pepper. Herb bushes flourished in clusters surrounded by bright blossoms of orange and yellow. Insects, mostly bees, roamed at will throughout the garden.

Wonder tugged at his heart and he walked down the path. A flood of sensations sped past him as his viewpoint changed. He spotted a cluster of carved wooden beehives. They rested in a rocky niche not visible from the entrance.

A sundial of polished stone came into view, and then two large wooden tubs of rainwater, each with a small fish inside. The decorative artistry of the tub and sundial suggested outsiders had crafted them, though he didn't recognize the style. The symbology of the faces and patterns were unfamiliar.

Closer to the cave and on the left he saw enormous grapevines. The vines grew up and across a canopy of

carved driftwood pieces tied together, beyond which another concealed niche teased a glimpse. The stink of rotting flesh issued from that direction.

Rordan reached the cave and the paintings came under his scrutiny. They struck him as grossly heathen and beyond his wildest imaginings. There were erotic depictions of animals with people. Heroically rendered women with red skin and black hair slew multitudes of ferocious, dark-skinned male fighters in gruesome detail. Human and animal crossbreeds, dressed in pageantry, dispensed arcane symbols to masses of bare-chested women in colorful, dyed sheets. Monsters harassed, captured and tortured grand-seeming officials. At the end, these humiliated heads of state had their guts ripped out and stuffed into fanged female unmentionables.

The overt depictions of carnal and murderous passion caused Rordan's heart to beat like a drum. His face flushed and he felt faint. He put a hand to his temples and struggled to remain conscious.

The human bones came to his attention. They lay in neat stacks on the floor of the cave to the height of his shins. Most of them looked old and brittle, but a small number looked recently acquired. All of them were picked clean of flesh. A path in the middle of the stacks led deeper into the cave at a steady descent to the right. Airy silence radiated from within.

The dauber in him appreciated the immense dedication and amazing skill it took to render the cave

paintings. Rordan knew he had seen a style like this elsewhere, but the memory eluded him.

He took a close look at the obelisk and the flat stone next to it. A dark stain discolored the top of both the obelisk and the flat stone. The sacrificial purpose of the stones became clear to him. He'd stumbled upon a forbidden grove of heathen outsiders.

An urge to run burned in his stomach. He stepped down the path and into the cave.

The depictions grew somber in their use of pigment. Scenes of lethargy and isolation took hold of the women portrayed. He looked on one wall and saw a scene unfold in which a heated dialogue took place between tall, wise-seeming women and a younger woman. She wore a long over-cloak of soft blue and a glowing pendant in the shape of a pearl-gold, six-pointed star. Her hand gestured toward a gargantuan fish in the distance.

The paintings changed into nightmare scenes of brutality. Grim, brown-skinned men on horseback erupted onto the scene. Their stylized weapons toppled monuments and destroyed entire villages, with lines of miserable captives led back to camps. The humiliation the captives endured brought Rordan to hot tears and he looked away.

A different stretch of wall on the other side showed a group of monsters in a village of pioneers. They grabbed the people and devoured them. Behind the scene spread a desolation of stillbirth, dismemberment, and affliction.

Thin, mummified beings with eyes sewn shut presided over this affair from the heavens.

The hopelessness of the work washed over Rordan and his skin beaded with cold sweat. He fought back a sensation of nausea and forced himself to resume his study of the depictions.

On his right he saw a solitary, dirty woman with severe injuries and wearing a velvet, sky blue cape topple a town monument with a shove of her arm. An explosion of violent color followed. A horrific, red and black monster-woman with a bulbous tongue burst from the earth in a shower of lightning, fire, and smoking debris. The thunderstorm that accompanied her destructive path buried the landscape in a luminous flood. The pigments sparkled with flecks of mineral in the light. The paintings grew obscure due to the glare and Rordan stopped to look forward.

The firelight came from a living quarters carved out of the rock. The cave and its pile of bones stopped at a main hall with a smooth floor. Alcoves, windows, and hallways connected to the main hall, separated in some cases by heavy wool curtains. The floor revealed a mosaic of a rose, surrounded by a dozen other kinds of flower he didn't recognize. The faded smoothness of the mosaic testified to the accumulated tread of many steps.

Rordan limped into the hall and gaped.

Dozens of fragrant beeswax candles cast primordial light throughout the hall. Gemstones, many as big as his hand, hung from the ceiling by silk threads. Others were

arranged on shelves or furniture pieces, along with piled gold adornments.

He saw rings, bracelets, buttons, and many things that seemed familiar but of which he could only guess at the use. All the colors of the rainbow in the solid bounty of the hidden earth dazzled him. Tears streamed from his eyes and he uttered a choked cry.

His senses returned to him and he caught his breath. He wiped at the wet trails on his face and sniffled. Drowning in mystery, he studied the gemstone hall again.

The hall ended in a curtain, embroidered with gold thread and set randomly all over with what looked like polished diamonds the size of thick blackberries. Splashes of orange fiber wove through the deep red fabric. The stonework suggested the hall continued past the curtain.

The windows and hallways on either side had been made so one could peer into other rooms from where one stood. He saw a storage room filled with shelf after shelf of thick rolled lessons, a workshop cluttered with primitive but clever and functional tools, and a kitchen with a large pantry of many barrels and casks. Shelves filled with stoneware cups, pitchers and jugs shared the walls with tapestries. It reminded him of his own parents' clutter back home.

He'd been to the observatory in the capital and seen many artifacts in the display cases. This place went beyond any collection the Chief's sages could muster in the name of research.

Rordan walked over to a burnished desk of cherry-colored wood and admired the contents. He saw a pile of illuminated papers, a selection of brilliant watercolors and dense inks, and a range of writing implements. The dauber who possessed such an array of tools might create almost anything. His mind attempted to imagine the possibilities and turned numb at the strain.

Curiosity urged him on and he turned some of the papers over into a new pile. His own skill vanished in comparison. The illustrations of dream images humbled him with their artistry.

It occurred to him he had trespassed into someone's home and broken hospitality. Even if the head of the household were heathen, it was still a grave error. He had broken the rules before. Rordan felt torn between his upbringing and his past.

He heard the faint splash of water beyond the curtain. His upbringing lost the battle and he made his way toward the end of the hall.

“You violate into the jaws of death, fool.” A woman's voice with a heavy, unfamiliar accent came from the other side of the curtain. The voice held a menace that commanded attention.

Rordan backed away a little and swallowed his fear. “I meant no harm. I was curious.” His voice sounded cracked and broken to him.

He heard many beads skitter over each other.

The woman's voice growled with suppressed fury. "Your stupidity causes harm and your search is offensive."

His eyes strained to see indications of movement beyond the curtain. "Who are you?"

"I am the horror of this holy place."

Rordan blinked. "What makes you that?"

A long pause hung in the air. "The mindless sacrilege of people."

He discerned an edge of madness in the tone of her voice, yet he spoke his mind. "I don't believe you're really horror; you're sorrow."

A sound of creaking stone came from behind the curtain. The woman's voice hissed at him. "I will do bad things to you."

Conflicted feelings ran through Rordan's heart and he strained to understand. "Let me sing for you. I know a song by this group called Deep Uirolec, about longing to return home. You might like it."

No answer came forth. Rordan decided to give it a try. He knew the words, but had no songster talent. Maybe the hall would help him sound better.

Rordan raised his arms and stepped backwards. In the middle of the hall, he hummed to warm his voice up. He'd seen songsters do exercises of this kind.

A thought tugged at the back of his mind that his life hung in the balance, but he refused to fear. This task moved him with the strength of a deep compulsion. He

clenched his hands together and relaxed his arms. This particular song required softness.

Embarrassment tugged at his heart. He believed the song said something personal and vulnerable about his secret self.

Rordan put his soul into his version of *This Witness Wanders*. The lyrics told of a vague struggle through a storm to reach a nameless destination full of hope. His awkward, off-key human voice resonated within the hall filled with treasures beyond his imagination, illuminated by the multi-colored light of many candles.

He finished the song and bowed.

The woman spoke in a wearied, venomous voice. “I will turn my heads away from you this once. Out of respect, take with you the paper from the bottom of the pile you admired. Leave this place and never come back. Or I take my time eating you alive.”

Rordan stared at the curtain in awe. “I’ll come back and I’ll find a way to help you.”

The woman said, “If you come here again I will eat you whole. There is no shield against my teeth.”

Rordan said, “What about humility?”

The woman said, “Little fish, humility is running away from this place.”

He accepted the reality of his dismissal. The heavy paper from the bottom of the stack went into his daypack.

Rordan bowed. He departed the hall.



At the mouth of the cave, he stopped and stared at the pool of water. The tranquil waters beckoned to him and he approached.

Despite the rashness of it, he knelt and tested the water with his hand. Rordan considered the extreme cold versus his irrational need to swim in the pool. He stood up and fretted with a hand at his hips.

His daypack came off, followed by his clothes. He looked back to see if the woman could see him. At the cave mouth he couldn't see the hall any more, just the light from the candles.

With the woman's last words on his mind, he stepped onto the pool's edge. Rordan clenched his teeth and plunged feet-first into the water.

He surfaced in a shocked rush of painful cold. Holding back gasps and sputters, Rordan tread water with a furious will. In the fading daylight, he noticed his surroundings had changed. He blinked to be certain his eyes saw properly. The crater no longer appeared as it had.

The flicker of the candles, the magnificent paintings, and all signs of the garden had vanished. No sign remained of the splendor he had witnessed.

Rordan heard the wind chimes and a fright seized him. He imagined a ritual needed to be performed to enter the crater—that the chimes were a way to announce your coming. Like a stupid brute he'd walked right into a sacred hall and blundered in every way possible. He understood now what a dummy he'd been.

Kea, Dalla, and Ivixa passed through the curtain of ferns and entered the crater from the rift. They carried their daypacks with them and spoke amongst themselves in a language he didn't recognize. He heard Ciriceval mentioned.

They spotted him soon after they entered. Kea and Ivixa peered at him with discomfort. They each took a side of the pool and circled it toward his pile of clothes. Dalla looked concerned. She followed after Kea and kept her eye on him.

Their reaction puzzled him. With a splash he waved at them. "Hi, I found a secret hiding place."

Kea laughed in a sardonic manner, "Well done, Rordan. How's the water?"

He shivered despite his vigorous activity. "Cold as a shrew's teat." The vulgarity slid out of him naturally.

"Funny," said Kea.

He flirted. "You want funny, just wait until you meet my jolly little monkey."

She reached his pile of clothes and studied him.

Rordan shot a teasing smile back at her. He found himself acting as if he needed to make her like him.

Kea looked around the crater and sighed. She set down her daypack and removed her clothes.

He averted his eyes.

Ivixa watched Kea for a moment, then did the same. Dalla crossed her arms and smirked at him.

Kea said, “You don’t need to look away. We aren’t offended. Clothing is something the clumsers invented to hide behind.”

She pulled out two brown and black accessories from her daypack, then put them on. One was a tight cotton harness over her chest and the other was a fine wool sash around her waist.

He swam back to the edge and grabbed a hold of the stony edge. With a practiced heave he climbed out and let the water drip off of him. “It’s just unusual to me, that’s all.”

Ivixa smiled at him as she rummaged into her daypack. “Unusual, and yet you were swimming without trunks. Don’t be afraid, we aren’t going to reject you. It’s sweet how wild a pup you are.” She put on a similar set of accessories. The harness and sash were dark brown with light brown highlights.

Kea and Ivixa each took out a pair of forearm bracelets made of red leather and slipped them on. They checked each other’s harnesses, tightening them in some places and loosening them in others. Dalla set her daypack down and undressed. Her accessories had a mottled gray color with some white streaks on the edges.

Rordan felt the entire situation improper and uncomfortable. He reached back and grabbed his shirt. “I didn’t know you were coming. I thought I had this place to myself.” He pulled on his shirt.

Dalla frowned. “Looks like he’s leaving.”

Kea nodded. “Women are too much for pups.” She began a series of stretching exercises.

He pulled on his hose and breeches, barely outracing the effect of their attractiveness on him.

Ivixa helped Dalla adjust her harness. “Don’t tease him. It’s adorable that he’s shy.”

Rordan said, “Where’s your kid?”

She gave him a lewd face. “My son is unattended like any young animal. We don’t need to guard our children against life like the clumsers.”

A recognition shot through Rordan. Her words struck him home and brought back memories of his own wanderings as a child.

He stole a furtive glance at them. All three of them were fit, with small scars on their arms and shoulders. Dalla had only one scar, on her shoulder.

The front of Kea’s right hip and side of Ivixa’s left thigh had small tattoos. He supposed they were the marks witches were said to possess. Their locations made them easy to conceal under clothing. He looked down and knelt to put on his shoes. His toe’s cut had sealed up. The sole of his other foot felt numb.

Kea said, “Don’t be shy, it’s not like we’ll laugh at you if your tube is tiny.” She reached into her daypack and pulled out a pair of objects wrapped in red cotton. Kea unwrapped them, revealing two hand axes—one made entirely of wood buffed smooth and the other a real axe made for fighting.

Dalla laughed. “Yeah, we aren’t going to say ‘Wow, that thing is small. That’s it, I’m outta here.’”

Rordan said, “Sorry. This is all too weird for me. I need a break.” He picked up his daypack and walked toward the rift. The giggles and snorts of the women faded behind him. One of them whistled at him.

He passed through the rift and maneuvered his way back to the path. The humiliation he felt lessened and a dull exhaustion took hold of his body. Rordan leaned against a tree and sighed.

His second wind came forward and he opened his daypack. Rordan spotted the paper he’d taken; a light thrill traveled through him.

Mindful of the water still dripping off his skin, he examined the thick, old paper. It featured an illustration of a maze rendered in the manner of a stylized map. He marveled at the richness of the inks and the shiny decorations that enhanced the look. Numerous thin metal doors and solid objects had been attached to the map.

For a moment, he had thought the experience imaginary. Now he was sure he could see hidden or invisible things. Borus wasn’t here, but the magical sight might have something to do with being the boy’s first friend.

Rordan replayed the encounter with the women in his mind. They had acted immodest, yet he had also stripped down and jumped into the pool as if he were an outsider. He remembered when he had first entered school, how

wild he had been at first. His folks had settled, but their Dunser choices were his true roots. That side of him always came out at the weirdest times.

Now that he thought about it, he had been out of his mind for most of his visit inside the crater. He wouldn't forget the rich details of what he had experienced.

Kea's monster mask hadn't shown itself. Rordan suspected he saw things when they were important. The garden and all its wonders had vanished from sight, so perhaps it hadn't been relevant any more. If Kea were a witch, then it followed Ivixa might also be one. The two of them had Deuce-marks. Dalla hadn't been marked, but he felt suspicious of her now too. She must be an apprentice.

Their arrival at the crater confirmed it as a heathen site for him. He wrestled with whether or not they could see the garden. On the one hand, he imagined they were there to pay their respects to the woman in the cave. On the other hand, they might have only gone to a secret meeting place to talk shop.

Rordan chuckled. He imagined the three of them discussing the best methods for flattening beer or giving someone the trots.

His thoughts turned to home. There were also male witches known as warlocks. The stranger at the scene of the fire could have been one. The thought of a coven in his neighborhood made him nervous. He might even know someone in the coven and would never have suspected it. Hopefully, his friends were still safe.

He studied the map. The path of the maze was marked along the way with small, boxed illustrations and tiny paper doors, such as those from a prize calendar, marked with arcane text. The paper doors moved on miniature hinges of gold, attached to the map by means of an adhesive.

The box nearest the entrance to the maze showed a group of friends around a table. One of the figures had an upside down bowl of fire over its head. He traced his finger past the box to the first door. His finger rested against a paper tab on the side. Rordan pulled at the tab and the door opened. Behind it was an illustration of an island with a six-headed monster standing in the middle. A line of arcane text had been written on the inside of the paper door.

The woman had said something about turning her heads. Rordan found it hard to believe she was a monster. The map and her words must be symbolic.

One of the boxed illustrations in the maze showed a path through the middle of a forest, blocked by an iron gate. He recognized the gate from an outdoor hike with his folks when he had been little. The memory went so far back he could hardly remember it and stirred up longings he couldn't place.

Rordan supposed the woman behind the curtain wanted him to find buried treasure or a lost place. The map required further study before he could make anything of it. He placed it back in his daypack with care.

Later, he'd make the time to examine the map where it would remain dry and undamaged.

His gaze rested on Tora's envelope. He took it out of the daypack and examined it. The contents felt like a folded strip of paper. Rordan guessed she'd practiced Hellirism to make him a good luck charm. His bro' wouldn't approve.

He stood up and peered at the sky. The sun had fallen below the tree line and twilight spread in its wake. Rordan decided not to be caught in a wild forest at night with three witches about. He adjusted his hose, then walked back to camp.

The boat came into view. Smoke rose from the cabin's stovepipe and a campfire burned on the shore. Bov sat on a small empty crate and fed the sizzling flames from a pile of firewood. The Skipper split a small pile of logs into smaller chunks. Noss and Mungo used a saw on a small tree trunk to provide logs for the Skipper. They didn't have much further to go before they were done.

Rordan spotted Eogan below him. The child had climbed up the steeper cliffside trail six feet. His small hands pulled at a rock in the dirt.

He shifted his attention to the promontory. Fikna had moved the backpack over there and slept on his bedroll. Borus sat beside him and stared at the river.

The sight of his sleeping bro' pleased him. He thought Fikna had worked hard today and needed the rest to maintain his Libra balance. With a weary smile,



Rordan moved along the cliffside and down toward the promontory.

Borus turned her head and spotted him. She stood up and trotted across the promontory to meet him.

“Hey there buddy. You miss me?”

The pauper looked at him with expectation. Rordan felt the weight of his responsibility return.

“Goodness. You’re probably hungry. I’ll see what I can turn up for you here.”

He dug into his daypack and pulled out two strips of jerky from a wrapped bundle Len had packed him. Borus chewed the strips whole and let them flap around the edges of her mouth.

Rordan noticed Codal hadn’t returned yet. This surprised him. The crazed freeloader had tromped along the path at a furious pace.

He walked over to Fikna’s makeshift camp with Borus right behind him. In the middle of the promontory was a flat, slightly sunken area, covered with steppable moss. Fikna’s deep slumber proved the area was perfect for a camp. Rordan pulled out his bedroll, warmers, and dryad-weave. He unfolded the weave and offered it to Borus.

She rolled it around herself with a whistling sound. Borus stared at him through the end of the tubular passage she had made for herself.

Rordan said, “You wouldn’t believe what I came across today.”

He sat down on his bedroll and wrapped the warmers around him. Rordan looked up at the sky and took several long breaths of the salty air. The brightest stars had become visible in the sky. They made him think of the curtain inside the hall with all its diamonds. Except the curtain struck him as an inner sky instead of an outside expanse.

“Boy am I tired. Today’s poling and that crater adventure really knocked me out. You sure have it easy Borus.” He yawned, stretched, and lay back.

The girl opened her mouth and no sound came out. Her large, dark eyes regarded Bov, who approached them.

The lanky teenager sat down with them. “You going to sleep already?”

Rordan sat upright and faced him. “I sure feel like it. My bro’s already passed out. And Borus here’s looking ready to throw in the towel.”

Bov pressed a patch of moss with his hand. “It’s pretty nice. No wonder you guys are all the way over here.” He chuckled to himself.

Despite his weariness, Rordan made an effort to chuckle with him. “Borus picked it out. Good instincts, I guess.”

A wide smile appeared on Bov’s face. He looked at Borus in the rolled-up weave and said, “Noss told us all about the argument at the haven yesterday. You got a soft spot for the guy, huh?”

Rordan rubbed his face and itched his forearms. “Let’s just say I heard a voice saying to take care of him and leave it at that.”

Bov sat back and rested on his hands. “Hey man, it’s cool. I’m curious, that’s all.” He looked around. “Where’s Codal? Didn’t you and Fikna go off with him?”

Worry tugged at Rordan’s thoughts. He looked back at the campfire. “Fikna ran out of steam and I got distracted. Codal went on ahead of us and I haven’t seen him since. Wow, I hope he’s all right. Soon it’ll be impossible to see without a light.”

“What got you distracted?”

Rordan said, “I ran into Kea and her friends. They aren’t back either. But you know, I’m betting they all show up when Fais is done with that food.”

“Yeah, she’s making cabbage soup. Doesn’t seem to do much but cook and keep to herself.”

“You noticed that too? She’s getting on my nerves.”

“Eh,” said Bov. “I won’t see her again after this, so I don’t care.”

Rordan mulled over the teenager’s words. “I admit, I hadn’t thought of that. By this time tomorrow, we’ll be in Ciriceval and I’ll be going to the academy.”

Bov cracked a smile. “Noss said you knew stargazing stuff. I’m a Libra. Can you say anything about me?”

A light laugh slipped out of Rordan. “Wow, a lot of you scales on this voyage. Libras have a nice smile. They’re handsome and smart. You’re concerned with

fairness and balance above all. You like music and the arts. And you love debate.”

Bov grinned. “The first and last part sound right. I don’t know about the middle part.”

Borus fell asleep. The girl wheezed a little as she breathed out her nose.

Rordan said, “It fits people a little. There’s more to it than your typical sun sign. You actually have about a dozen signs, all of which make your personality.”

Bov shifted his weight forward and crossed his legs. “Sounds complicated. Noss said you were a rustic, but you hadn’t done anything yet. That so?”

Guilt forced a small nod from Rordan. “I haven’t felt like my usual self for some reason. I’m hoping I can do something for all of you before this trip is up.” He rubbed his face again and felt tiny pieces of dead skin peel under his hands.

Codal tromped out of the forest path opposite the one he had originally taken. He shouted loud enough for everyone to hear. “Fat women—love my gut! I bark loud—like a mutt! Got to have a smoke—a smoke and a smoke-smoke-smokity-smoke!”

Rordan and Bov watched him pass the promontory. The crazed teenager made his way over and down to the fire.

Noss motioned for Mungo to stop with the saw. “About time you got here. I was beginning to think Rordan had done you in.”

Codal pulled out a smoke from his front pocket and sat near the fire. “Not a chance, brother. I was walking around this dumpsite and leaving a keepsake.” He did his squat routine and made the usual foul noise to accompany it.

Bov got to his feet. “Nice talking to you Rordan. See you when it’s time to eat.”

“Sure thing.” Rordan watched the young Libra leave and return to the fire.

A change came over him and his weariness turned into dull mania. He stood up and his warmers fell to the ground. Rordan walked to the edge of the promontory and looked down at the water. The space between the edge and the water’s surface seemed a safe distance to him. He still felt the nix might leap up and try to drag him down.

Rordan held back his fear and looked out over the water. The cool breeze blew soft against his face and no mosquitoes troubled him. In the distance, four scattered lights indicated other moored boats or camps for the night.

His attention moved up toward the darkening sky. The sound of the river against the stone of the promontory, the slight whisper of the wind in his ear, and the feel of the cool air on his skin intoxicated him. Rordan felt doused in the starlight as if it were a mysterious rainfall.

He closed his eyes, and put his hands forward and up toward the sky. Rordan imagined his gesture reached the clouds and reflected back the feelings he went through.

Worries stirred up in the pit of his stomach. Fear warned him the night would push him into the river while his eyes were closed. He trembled with the need to open his eyes and save himself as the fear grew.

A wave of water struck the side of the promontory with a slosh. He felt the impact, even though the rock lay solid all the way down below the bottom of the river. His hands curled close to his chest and he opened his eyes.

He looked up at the stars. They burned brighter and softer upon him than normal. His wide eyes watched the water shimmer with a transcendental light. He felt as if he had strained his eyes open to see the world for the first time.

The fear returned with lightning speed. Rordan expected the water to rise up in a tidal wave and sweep him away. His fear changed into a sensation of heat. The breeze passed over him with a crackling sound. Sweat beaded on his skin and he looked at his hands. A feverish, ultramarine glow came from inside of them. The glow spread up his arms and over the shoulders.

His limbs shivered. A flood of images danced before his eyes and a fervent passion swept through him. Rordan intuited a great power beheld him for the first time.

The glow covered his entire body and he shook once as if a gigantic landmass had jolted within him. A vision

of a crack in the earth passed before his eyes. A blast of heat blazed at the base of his skull.

Rordan fell into a state of quiet calm. His body grew tender and a voice inside him said, "More will arrive." Tears welled up in his eyes as he wobbled on his feet. At the back of his mind and in his bones he sensed a permanent change. He believed a strong, indescribable power had changed him.

His limbs shook as he turned to look at Borus. The weave around the breathing teenager reminded him of a pulsing cocoon. Understanding came to him in a splash of intuition. His companion had needed a refuge and he had provided it. The pauper's conditions had changed and now Borus was changing.

Rordan looked over at the steaming silhouette of his sleeping bro'. In an instant he saw Fikna had also changed. The changes continued even as he observed his bro', then Borus. He looked at his hands and saw a continuous stream of force issue out of his entire body through his hands. The sight of it went beyond his ability to observe without going mad and he looked away.

A pressing ring filled his ears and he clutched at his head. An attack of dizziness threatened to overwhelm him. The sensation of heat returned and he feared he might die.

Worry that he would be noticed acting strange forced him to his knees. He took slow, silent breaths. The feverish glow appeared again and spread from his body to the stone and the moss. Rordan grew aware of the great

power once more. The power couldn't possibly exist, yet his experience of it intruded upon him. He fought against the truth that the power was real.

From nothingness, an invisible shine appeared.

Rordan gazed upon the impossible and accepted the dumbfounding mystery. The shine held the shape of a girl before his mind failed to keep up. He intuited his failure came from a limited comprehension.

The shine shared a secret with him and his world spun around. He stayed upright without knowing how. The secret grew inside his body and he felt a part of him fall away. The exposure of loss gave way to a naked anticipation. He understood that he had received a knowledge meant for him.

Somebody tugged at his sleeve. His normal vision returned and he saw Borus. The pauper clutched at him with wide, misshapen hands. Rordan felt the secret inside of him unfold like a flower and reveal itself. Because of his caring nature, the great power had become part of his body. There existed a sacred trust he would have to live up to. He intuited a need to listen to the voice inside him and help out.

He took hold of Borus by the arms. At once, he heard a strange and continuous sound. The sound turned familiar and Rordan realized he'd heard it all his life. He had only ever half noticed it, or thought the sound belonged to him. His imagination cast it as a song of nature, a music that belonged to beasts. The song had always been present.



Rordan's mind grew weary and the sound turned faint. He intuited a need to stay alert or risk losing the song. His body felt as if parts he hardly ever used were in motion.

Borus pleaded with her eyes and made an excited chattering.

He choked up. Rordan cleared his throat and said, "Borus, do you hear it? Do you hear the song of nature that I'm hearing?"

She made whistling noises at him.

Anxiety sharpened his mind and he opened himself up to the song. His tender body hurt with soft pain as he listened. Rordan heard a slight flaw in the song at times, as if nature herself faltered in some way.

The pauper clutched at his arms and the strength in the youngster's grip gave Rordan a scare. He closed his eyes and imagined the answer came to him. Insight floated at the edge of his grasp and he decided to coax it out with speech.

Rordan found it hard to talk above a strained, hushed whisper. "I must be able to do something. I hear the song of nature now; it's so clear to me. I thought it was my own daydreams, but it's been there and I share in it. Maybe it's because I'm an animal too, one with the right skill. Borus, you must be closer to animals, because you're trapped. You hear it and you know something's wrong."

She whined and bumped her head repeatedly against Rordan's chest.

The struggle to stay sane overcame his focus and the song faded again. “I wish I knew what to do. I’m sorry I’m so dumb. Darn it, what am I supposed to do?”

Rordan repeated the last question to himself while exhaustion crept into the back of his head. The soft pain was overtaking him.

“A glow appeared in me and spread. Maybe that’s what I have to do, glow for people.”

He clasped Borus’ wide, calloused hands and put his head against the youngster’s. His pained body cramped.

Borus grew agitated and a deep groan escaped the back of her throat.

The sound unsettled Rordan and his tears splashed on the moss. He clenched his teeth and turned wildly lucid. The song of nature grew stronger for a brief moment.

“I’m going to do this.” His voice came out hot and choked.

Rordan closed his eyes and drew in a long breath. To open to the song of nature required a vulnerability he hadn’t any practice with. The song grew in strength to his ears and he willed the glow he had seen in himself to Borus. A tremor ran down his spine and back up to his stomach. He experienced a moment of blackout, where a bright flare of white-hot light danced past his mind’s eye.

They looked up at each other. Rordan saw gentleness in his friend’s eyes. Borus relaxed and sat down as if nothing had happened. A lively, whispering chatter emerged from the pauper’s lips.

The soft pain faded. Rordan felt cleansed and a peace spread throughout his tired body. “I hope that did it. I’m so tired. What a weird day.”

The three young women returned from the forest. Their hair was damp and they wore a fresh set of Seltish clothes. Kea lighted their way with a small candle lantern. The people on the beach shouted or waved greetings at them.

Rordan wiped his face with a sleeve. He decided to socialize. With difficulty, he got up and made his way over to the beach. Borus tagged along behind him.

The Skipper finished splitting wood. She carried the wood-axe and box of tools back to the boat, while the butty and Noss arranged her efforts in two organized piles. Mungo now tended the fire.

Noss said, “Hey you three, glad you could join us. I was about to go looking for you.”

Kea blew her lantern out and set it down. “Yeah. With crazy Ror running around without pants and Codal shouting filthy words, we were in a lot of danger.”

Bov glanced at Rordan, then at Kea. “Rordan streaked? I want to hear this one.”

Borus chirred at Kea and the young woman started as if she had been bitten. Rordan found the sound frightening.

Kea said, “Hey! I was only jesting.”

The girl hid behind Rordan, with her eye on Kea as if she expected trouble. Kea stared at the campfire and retreated into herself.

Dalla smirked. “Looks like you have a new protector.”

Rordan said, “That’s right. He’s my new friend. So you’d better be nice to me or you’ll get the creak.”

She chuckled. The young woman’s poise suggested to him she had no fear of Borus.

Noss said, “Well he better not creak at me. You make sure he doesn’t do anything he’ll regret, Rordan.”

An undercurrent of threat in the teenager’s words cowed Rordan. He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets. “So when’s supper? Is Fais still imprisoned in the cabin?”

Ivixa took offense. “She’s not a captive Rordan. She’s doing a nice job of making sure we all get something to eat.”

A flush warmed Rordan’s face. Anger and embarrassment followed the surge of red to his cheeks.

Her statement bemused Mungo. He poked at the fire with a stick and said, “Nobody said she was a captive. But she is doing hard work, and I don’t see anyone else helping her out.”

Ivixa said, “By anyone else, you mean us women.”

Mungo sneered. “No, I mean anyone else. We all had to pole today, but I still found time to give a free performance. And I helped Noss saw the wood. I didn’t

see anyone raise a finger to help Fais with lunch today. Rordan daydreamed, Codal sat on his big behind making smoke, and you regaled us with stories. All about your upper-cruiser vacation with people who actually know something about captivity.”

Ivixa appeared stung.

The butty watched the group with a wary eye.

“Hey man,” said Noss, “what Rordan said was uncool. Ivixa was pointing that out.”

Mungo nodded. “Yeah, it was. But he said it after you busted his chops.” With a toss, the stick went in the fire. “The whole thing started with Kea taking a cheap shot at Rordan. I’m tired of hearing her jab at him.”

Kea came out of her trance. “Would you prefer I took a jab at you?”

“Come on, Rordan running around with dropped trousers?” Mungo scoffed. “It only stirs up bad feeling. Where you coming from with that?”

A puzzled expression appeared on her face. “Don’t you think you’re over-reacting?”

Disdain resonated in Mungo’s voice. “Patronizing as well as devious.”

Codal guffawed. “On that note brother, I’m going to go see what’s taking the old maid so long. I’m ready to eat and she’d better serve my big behind up with some grub. Grubity-grub hard-core!” He tossed his smoke-stub onto the beach and left for the boat.

Dalla said, “That’s our Codal, always a barrel of unfunny jokes.”

Mungo gave a dismissive gesture with his hand. “I’m surrounded by clowns.”

Rordan hid his feelings of discomfort behind a phony smile. The awkwardness of the group called out for a friendly laugh. He thought up an improvised mimicry of Codal’s mannerisms and speech, with emphasis on the word “brother” as a centerpiece. His motivation failed to manifest.

Borus exhaled a chattering breath.