

## CHAPTER 9: BAD FEELINGS

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Rordan stood before a maze made of waist-high green grasses and weeds in flower. Iron gates blocked off some of the passages and a field lay in the center of the maze. In the middle of the field stood a famous songster called Angelic Rascua. The man waved at Rordan and sang to him, “I hope there’s hope for you.”

The dream passed from view and Rordan drifted awake. He opened his eyes and remembered sleep had happened the moment he pulled the warmers over. Cold night air had forced him to wear his jacket and waterproof coat. They clung to him with oily tightness. The bedroll and moss had proved a good combination. Though stiff, his back otherwise felt fine.

Against his right side lay Borus, curled within the dryad-weave for maximum warmth. Fikna faced away from them on Rordan’s left. He envied his bro’s two kinds of covers. The need to help Borus had drawbacks.

Rordan sighed. He elbowed himself upright and took in the surroundings. A mist hovered in curtains over the surface of the water and a haze obscured the sky.

He remembered last night’s argument and the way it had separated everyone over safety. The people in the campsite at the edge of the forest still slept. Smoke rose from the remnants of the fire on the beach. The butty sat on a log segment beside the fire and stood guard. From the angle of his head he appeared to have dozed off. No sounds emerged from the boat.

Rordan stood up and contemplated how he felt. His cut toe and stung foot throbbed with soreness. A number of inflamed mosquito bites itched and his muscles were stiff. However, his mind felt refreshed.

He put on his shoes and walked to the edge of the promontory. The water level surprised him; the river had sunk several feet and exposed sections of the island to view. Purple starfish, bundles of olive green kelp, and packets of mussels were exposed to the air. They had moored closer to Sebry Bay than he thought.

His fantastical awareness had vanished. All the details of last night stood out in his mind when he recalled them. He supposed his special sight only lay dormant and might reappear at any time.

Rordan sat down on his bedroll and took the map out of his daypack. The reality of yesterday's crater adventure encouraged him. He took a moment to study the map in the morning light.

Some of the boxes in the maze were blank. Others only had the arcane text in them. The central part of the map, where the maze seemed to go, had a locked double door of paper framed in gold ink and small gemstones. Past the double door was the center of the maze, which was blank.

The depicted symbols, people, and scenes made no sense to him. They had been rendered in miniature, with a fine calligraphic script. His fingers stopped presently over a box illustration of a figure in a forest, crouched with its hands on its head in distress. The details amazed

him. If only he had a magnifying lens. He hoped the map had magic powers. What happened to him yesterday had seemed magical.

He turned the map over. A paragraph of large arcane text had been scribed in one corner. The text had been penned in vibrant black and outlined in ink mixed with gold.

His bro' stirred. Rordan put the map back in the daypack.

Fikna turned onto his back and looked at his foster-brother with a dazed expression. "Rord, you awake?"

"Yep. How you feeling?"

Fikna closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "I think I'm much improved, thank you. My bites have passed into the less immediate stage of, 'itch me every minute'. And it would appear the rest of me is mending to match this challenge."

Rordan said, "A lot of weird stuff happened to me last night."

A frown appeared on Fikna's face. He knuckled eye boogers from the edges of his eyes and said, "How remarkable. Meanwhile, I'm resigned to the short end of the draw. The prospect I was set upon has chosen a lesser man. I'm of no mind to make sense of your inscrutable escapades, Rord."

"What do you mean?" A sense of alarm seized Rordan and pushed aside the last of his drowsiness.

Fikna sighed. “While locating a suitable place to attend to my business, I spotted that disagreeable yokel Noss with Kea. They were kissing out. Of all the most wretched indignities I’ve had to suffer, observing that was surely a low point.”

Rordan picked at his own eyes for a moment. “At least you won’t have to chase her anymore. Good riddance. Maybe she’ll leave us alone.”

The sound of a bump came from inside the boat cabin. Rordan guessed their voices had stirred someone from sleep.

Fikna put his hands behind his head and lay back. “I suppose such an outcome is for the best. A witch is not the healthiest of romantic pursuits.”

“That’s sour grapes if I ever heard it.” Good humor replaced Rordan’s worry and he chuckled.

A smile returned to Fikna’s face. “So what were these unusual happenings you experienced?”

Rordan kept his voice low. “After you left to go back to camp, I went into the woods and found a hidden crater. With a deep pool of cold water and a cave inside. The place was managed like a countryman was living there.”

“Are you certain? This is hardly the location for such a skilled and established farmhand,” said Fikna.

“I’m sure. It was that amazing. I talked to the person living there, some scary woman. She told me to get lost. But she let me take a piece of decorated paper from her

desk and I had a swim in the pool. When I came up for air, all that stuff disappeared. I was in a regular crater.”

He gave his bro’ a chance to say something. Fikna nodded for him to continue. “Just then, Ivixa, Kea and Dalla walk in like they know the place. They all act weird, start taking off their clothes, and make fun of me. I saw Deuce-marks on the bodies of Kea and Ivixa. Then they start putting on these heathen clothes.”

Rordan checked the cliffside camp for activity.

“I left the place and came back here. I found you asleep and Borus sitting around. Then I had this crazy vision and all sorts of stuff went through my head. I really bonded with Borus. I believe he gets that I’m his friend. Anyway, things calmed down after that. I hung out waiting for supper, which was where you came in. Weird, huh?”

Contemplation played over Fikna’s face. “What did the scary woman look like?”

“I never saw her. She hid behind a curtain and gave me lectures with a scary voice.” Rordan decided to keep the detail about the gold and gems to himself.

Fikna said, “She might have been a fantom.”

Rordan nodded. “That’s what I thought too. Except there was nothing there you’d expect. It was really heathen, not homely and proper at all. More like an overgrown clutter.”

“You mentioned the girls behaved strangely. Aside from the undressing part, what exactly were they doing?”

Rordan said, “I don’t know, it was like they hadn’t expected me to be there. At first, Kea and Ivixa acted kind of blank. They walked around the pool toward me from both ends. Dalla just stared at me. Then, I don’t know, they started talking like I was one of them or something.”

Fikna sat up and wrapped his covers around his lap. “I think you’re fortunate to be alive, Rord. They intended to assault you, but something changed their minds.”

“What?”

A subdued smile appeared on Fikna’s face. “All three of them walk like handlers. I’ve noticed the way they carry themselves. They’ve got the attitude. I’ve trained with razorgirls like Tora or the occasional daddy’s fighter like Lewinna. However, I don’t ever recall coming across three Seltish girls who carried arms and were friends.”

Bafflement showed on Rordan’s face.

Fikna said, “That was careless of me to abandon you like that. I always forget you haven’t any training. Your description of their activities sounded like a pincer attack with a backup guard. How did you react?”

Rordan said, “I don’t know. I told a few crude lines. They came over and started taking their clothes off after that.”

“Most peculiar. They must have remembered your lack of service when you didn’t notice their intent. There is a difference in the way we treat unfighters, after all.”

The term struck a chord of gall with Rordan. It annoyed him to realize it had been his weakness, not his humor, which saved him.

“Bro’, why do you think they were there?”

Fikna shrugged. “If they are indeed witches, perhaps they intended to meet for a coven gathering. The woman you saw may have been the coven master. She merely spelled you into forgetting the furnishings.”

Rordan shook his head. “I have the piece of paper, remember? She was just hiding from them. The witches probably use the place to meet, but have nothing to do with her.”

Fikna said, “Do you still possess this piece of paper?”

Rordan went for the daypack and produced the map for his brother, who took it and stared at it in bewilderment.

With a sense of pride in his voice Rordan said, “What do you think, isn’t it beautiful?”

Fikna looked at him, and then at the map again. “What’s beautiful? You presented me with a paper containing a number of bright, marbled patterns. Rather formless ones too, if I might add.”

Rordan looked at the map and he understood. “You can’t see the maze.”

“I see only the patterns on one side. Might this be some manner of wrapping paper?” Fikna turned the map around and over.

Disappointment caused Rordan to sigh. He took the map from Fikna and stared at it. “I don’t understand why you can’t see what I’m looking at. I guess there’s nothing to be done.” The map ended up in his daypack again.

Fikna grew peeved. “This wouldn’t be your idea of a jest, would it? Perhaps you ought to destroy the thing. There might be an enchantment to convince you of its value. A version of fantom gold made manifest in a fake paper.”

Rordan sat with his hands on his knees. “Bro’, I know it seems crazy. But it happened, it was real.”

“Then let us investigate this crater. Perhaps the fantom woman will show herself again.”

Rordan shook his head. “I don’t believe that’s a good idea. She was upset I was even there—threatened to harm me if I came back. She might get real mad if I showed up with you.”

Fikna threw his hands up in the air. “Wonderful. You expect me to believe all this fantasy nonsense of yours, which I can’t see for myself. I thought Borus was going to help me witness this incredible world of yours.”

Rordan looked down at the moss and frowned. “I’m sorry bro’. I really am. Just forget it for now. I’ll figure this out.”

He received an angry look from Fikna.

“Put away my things, Rord. I’m going to investigate whether some tea might exist in my immediate future. I was hoping for a magnificent adventure. However, it



appears I'm going to watch so-called witches snuggling up to mindless yokels. Meanwhile, I am situated with pondering if I'm allowed to make progress."

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth.

Fikna put on his shoes, vest and hat. He pulled Rordan's mug from the backpack, then walked over and down to the pier.

Both sets of bedding took time for Rordan to fold and load. He decided to get the weave when Borus woke up and packed the weatherproof clothing next. Rordan drank a cool splash of flat beer from the beerskin and noticed the beer was almost all gone. He slicked back his greasy hair with his fingers, then left the beerskin and daypack beside Borus.

With the backpack slung over his shoulder, Rordan returned to the boat. He passed the forest campsite and didn't see Noss or Kea. Dalla sat upright and awake on her bedroll, with a warmer wrapped around her. Fais and Ivixa were already dressed and packing their things. Eogan slowly pulled on his shoes, a dazed stare on his face.

Ivixa wore a monster mask. The visage displayed an orange, waxen ghoul. The mask otherwise shared the same characteristics as Kea's.

The revelation irked him. To see this kind of thing all the time, or even some of the time, would get old fast. He imagined himself in a neighborhood mart with dozens of people wearing monster masks. The thought of large numbers of witches everywhere increased his displeasure.

He waved at the camp members with forced cheer. “Good morning, everyone.”

Eogan gawked up at him.

Dalla moaned. “What’s good about it? I hate waking up. Let me sleep some more.” She lay back and pulled the warmer over her head.

Fais grumbled. “I look for a place to sleep in comfort and all I get is a rock in my back.”

Rordan chuckled. “That bad? But it beats being inside with a tooting bunch of guys.”

Fais grimaced and wrinkled her nose. “That was so gross. Taking turns teasing me. Yes, a rock in my back was better than all that gas in the cabin.”

He admired her matter-of-fact way of speaking as she explained herself. Her reasons for traveling alone and putting up with so much hassle intrigued him. “Yep, I couldn’t take that.”

At Ivixa’s smile, Rordan’s skin crawled. He intuited the witches had given Fais their own version of teasing.

Dalla peeked from under her warmer. “How was Camp-Borus?”

Rordan chuckled once. He let the backpack down and massaged his shoulder. “Not bad. After everything that happened yesterday, I went right to sleep.”

She stared at him. A little too personally, he thought.

A haggard Kea showed up. She dragged the ends of her bedroll and a warmer on the ground.

Dalla reached into the side-bag next to her. “You left this lying around last night.” She tossed a plum colored undershirt at Kea.

He caught a glimpse of a nasty bruise on Dalla’s shoulder. Fikna sometimes had similar injuries after levy practice. His bro’s words crystallized in his mind. These women were fighters.

Kea caught the shirt and tucked it under her warmer. She made a laugh at Rordan. “You didn’t see that.”

A mischievous urge seized him. “Where’s the lucky dog? Did he bark for you last night?”

Kea said, “Hush, Ror!”

Fais stood up and grabbed her luggage. “Glad somebody had fun.” She took off in a huff.

Dalla made faces at Fais behind her back.

Ivixa said, “Some people have a hard time accepting others.” She played with the ties on her pack.

Eogan got up and followed after Fais.

Dalla puffed. “She’s traditional. We’re freeloaders. There’s no winning with her.”

“Fikna’s the same. Rordan, your brother afraid of real women too?” Kea’s voice carried an invasive tone.

Rordan shrugged. “He’s a gallant. Weird stuff interests him. And Fais has her own way of doing things. I wouldn’t discount them just because they don’t like how you attend services.”

She stripped off her garments and pulled on a new set of clothes from her pack.

He remembered these witches had no modesty. Rordan caught a closer glimpse of her Deuce-mark and saw it was a stylized badger.

“Who do you recognize, Ror?” She packed her bedding.

Kea’s glance gave him the willies. He studied her and tried to figure out what he should say next. She didn’t have a monster mask on, but her movements reminded him of the way his cousin sleepwalked.

“I don’t recognize anyone,” said Rordan.

Dalla said, “Innocent as a pearl.”

“So you say.” A chuckle escaped from Ivixa. She hoisted her luggage over a shoulder and winked at Rordan. “Don’t pay them any mind. They’re reckless and haven’t any patience.”

A witty retort flashed in Rordan’s mind, but he held it back. “I guess.”

Ivixa looked at Dalla and said, “Hurry up, sprout. You’re going to miss the sour tea and stale biscuits of our host.”

Kea picked up her luggage and joined Ivixa. The two young women descended the cliffside and walked toward the boat.

Rordan said, “Sprout? Is that your nickname?”

Dalla rubbed her eyes and nodded. She gave her side-bag a disagreeable look and sighed.

Curiosity bugged Rordan. “Did Kea lie down with Noss?”

She gave him a curious look. “Does that bother you?”

He considered his answer. “It bothers my bro’. He likes her.”

“She doesn’t want him and he wouldn’t want her either.”

Rordan blinked. “That’s a weird thing to say.”

Her stare burrowed into him. In a hushed voice Dalla said, “I know a girl and she’s sick. She doesn’t care about whom she spreads her sickness to. Be careful, Rordan.”

The concern she showed him melted his sudden fear. “I like you Dalla. Thanks for telling me.” He took up the backpack and turned to go.

Dalla said, “What you said about Kea being a Scorpio. Some of that is true. Watch your step with her.”

Rordan looked at her over his shoulder, but she ignored him. Dalla pulled the side-bag over to her and went through it.

He had dozens of questions about witches, but didn’t want to put her on the spot. She’d been kind to him. “You be careful too, Dalla. Don’t hurt yourself.”

He stepped sideways down the steep path of the cliff. As Rordan walked across the beach and onto the pier, he caught a closer glimpse of the low water level. Russet-

brown urchins clustered in crevices with the kelp and starfish. The sight of it brought a smile to his face. He couldn't wait to ditch these witches and get away from trouble.

On the far end of the pier, Fikna hung out with the male passengers, minus Noss. His bro' had obtained some hot tea and appeared pleased with himself.

The Skipper and the butty passed by him on their way to the beach.

Rordan said, "Good morning Skipper."

She smiled at him. "Get it while it's hot."

Bov and Mungo made way for him as he boarded the boat. The chore of securing the backpack occupied his attention. Satisfied with the results, Rordan headed aft.

Eogan sat on the side of the boat with his hand in the water. Rordan's mouth gaped as he struggled to act before the nix grabbed the child.

The boy removed his hand from the water and stared at him. "You're not tame."

"What does that mean?" Rordan found himself unsettled by the boy.

Eogan said, "She's hunting you."

"Who?"

The boy broke eye contact. "Never mind."

Rordan turned away and entered the cabin. The warmth of the stove enveloped him. A billycan hung from a polished brass hook. No breakfast appeared in

progress. Fais had stashed her backpack in the far corner and sat on the nearby bench. She had a stunned look to her.

Her voice sounded resigned. “There’s tea in the billycan. The hardtack is over on the shelf.”

Rordan said, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. The Skipper told me to take a break. Everyone gets to fend for themselves today.”

Last night’s strained conversation about chores came back to him. The butty must have made a full report to the Skipper. “Maybe I can make the breakfast. You can tell me what to do.”

Fais said, “No, Rordan. I need this.”

Her firm reply erased his sudden eagerness and he stood still.

“Okay.” Rordan lightly clenched his teeth and his thoughts wandered.

He realized he was tired of not having a mug. His roaming eyes spotted a tin cup hung from a hook, under one of the shelves. He took it and poured the cup two-thirds full. Rordan spotted the hardtack and decided he wasn’t in the mood. He left Fais alone in the cabin.

The thought of no warm breakfast dampened his mood. Mungo had been right. They’d all taken her cooking for granted. This was daily travel, not a luxury outing. As he walked back to the promontory, Rordan realized he didn’t want to depend on scullions anymore.

If Fais felt burdened by her training, how many others felt the same?

Borus still slept. Rordan stood at the edge of the promontory and watched the sun come up over the bay. He sniffed the tea and thought about what Dalla had said.

As far as he could tell, the witch had meant “sick” as in mental illness. It might have been a double play on words, meaning both spiritual and bodily sickness. He doubted he could do anything for Kea. She must be empty inside. The sooner he and Fikna got away from her the better.

She had focused her attentions on Noss, but he believed she meant to get her claws into all of them. Noss was just the first victim. The guy struck him as not too bright and an easy target.

He watched Dalla board the boat with her luggage. She had turned out to be a witch too. Rordan didn’t understand her reasons for confiding in him. Maybe she could still be saved.

Borus stirred and Rordan smiled at the youngster. “Wake up, sleepy head. We’re leaving soon. Then it’ll be Ciriceval time. Hope you’re ready to hang out with me.”

The girl turned over and resumed her slumber.

Rordan uttered a light snort. He sipped his hot tea with relish. The dull spice pricked at his tongue and the warmth reminded him of home. Rordan sat down and looked at the creatures revealed by the withdrawn tide.



An otter caught his attention. The animal floated on its back and used a small stone to smash open an urchin. The playfulness of its antics delighted him. He closed his eyes and listened for the song of nature.

The song revealed itself to his efforts, but he could barely hear it. The sound lulled at him like the faint roar of the ocean in a tunnel. He opened his eyes and watched the otter with reverence.

The animal tapped the urchin open with its stone, then pulled off pieces of the weakened shell with a crunch of its jaws. It munched on the morsels of flesh inside and Rordan chuckled.

Suddenly, he realized the urchin's life had ended before his eyes. Its fate moved him to silence. The display took on a tragic element to him and the playfulness of the otter's antics now disturbed his peace of mind.

“Is that the flaw in the song of nature?” he said aloud. “Creatures eat one another?” Rordan thought of the beef jerky in his daypack. Now he understood Borus had snacked on the meat of a killed animal.

What the scary woman had said about eating him came back to his thoughts. “Humans get eaten too.” Rordan bowed his head and grew sad. He realized humans and animals gathered at the same table and ate each other.

He sipped his tea, then held the beverage in his mouth. Rordan recognized the herbs the water took its flavor from had once been alive. The water contained

germs that had died in the heat of boiling. The taste of the tea turned to stone in his mouth.

Rordan swallowed with a grimace. “The song of nature is cruel.”

All the times he and Fikna had been mean to small animals and bugs came back to him. A sense of shame at the memories burned in his thoughts.

A scene appeared in his mind of young Fikna. His bro’ tried to cut the claws off a large praying mantis and plucked the helpless insect in two. Rordan watched it happen and cried out in disappointment with the other boys at Fikna’s mistake.

The voice inside him said, “He ripped his own guts out on that day and you cheered.”

The memory vanished and a new one took its place. Young Rordan came across a sickly mouse in the yard and he crushed it under his feet.

The voice said, “The bones you heard crunching were your own.”

Rordan recognized how profound the woman’s words had been. He stood guilty of stupidity. In gross ignorance he had blundered into her home like a mindless picaroon, no better than an outsider.

He poured his tea onto the rocks and said, “How sad. Life is horrible and I’m horrible.”

Borus made a hum. She sat upright and stared at him expectantly.

“Good morning, Borus. Welcome to horrible.”

The girl stood up and stretched. She rubbed at her greasy, tussled long hair with her left hand. Borus picked up the beerskin and drained its contents, then uttered a small burp.

Rordan felt an urgent need to leave the island and start his studies. “Come on Borus. Let’s get out of here. Before any more horrible things happen.” He grabbed his things and carried them back to the boat. Borus shambled after him, peering about and blinking.

He moved past the chatting passengers on the pier and over to the fore of the boat. Borus sat on the deck and watched him. Rordan set down his burdens. He took a key from his vest pocket and unlocked the chest.

With his body in the way of everyone but Borus’ view, he put the map and Tora’s envelope in the waterproof case. Rordan closed and locked the chest. He nodded inwardly to himself. The map ought to survive whatever trouble remained. At this point in the trip, he didn’t anticipate any hazards. He hoped the patrollers wouldn’t open the envelope during a search.

Rordan spotted the Skipper and the butty. By the way they gestured to the boat and the river, he intuited they discussed moving on. He realized he had better relieve himself before they got going. Borus had gone in the bushes during the night, so the boy should still be okay.

He gestured with an upraised hand at Borus. “I’ll be back buddy.”

Codal saw him make for the shore and said, “You going to dangle, brother?”

Rordan nodded. “Last chance to go before we get going.”

The teenager took a drag of his smoke and came with him. “When a brother’s got to go, a brother’s got to go.”

They went up the cliffside and into the forest. Out of sight from the others, they each chose a tree trunk and took care of their business.

Codal’s lips held his smoke tight while his hands were otherwise occupied. He muttered between puffs. “I sure hope brother Noss wakes up before we leave his sorry behind.”

Rordan said, “Yep. Kea probably ran him out of fuel.”

Codal finished up and took his smoke in one hand. “Is that so? Well those two can smell my rump dump.” He did his squat routine for what Rordan guessed was the millionth time.

He groaned to himself, the guy needed new material. Rordan chuckled as he realized the same could be said for his own acts.

A tired Noss walked into view. He came down the path with his side bag packed and slung across his shoulder. Noss wore his rider hat and workshirt.

Codal said, “Glad to see you didn’t fall down too big of a hole, brother.” He took a drag, then offered his smoke to Noss.

The rugged teenager walked up and accepted it without a pause. He took several heavy puffs of the smoke, then passed it back to Codal, who finished it off.

Rordan held back a laugh, finished up.

In a tired voice Noss said, “I don’t know where the time went. Nobody woke me up or made much noise. I wasn’t far from here.”

Codal looked droll. He flicked the smoke-stub over the cliffside and onto the shore, then sprang down the path like a madman. “Big women! Big women!”

Noss shook his head and gave the bag a shift to his other shoulder. “Guy is as crazy as you man.” He took a slow pace back to the boat.

Rordan pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth. He disliked knowing this jerk had gotten somewhere with a girl, even if it was one he didn’t like.

On the beach, Fikna chatted with Kea and her two witch friends. Rordan joined his bro’ to see what they talked about.

Kea said, “The thing is, there aren’t any good men out there.”

Laughter spattered from Dalla as a sticky pink aura oozed out of her.

Rordan cringed inside.

Dalla said, “I know. You can’t find any guys out there who know how to be nice. All that romance and chivalry stuff is junk.”

The sourness in her voice confused Rordan. He hoped she hadn't entered a Capricorn ruthless streak.

Fikna pouted. "That is decidedly untrue, good Dalla. There still remain gentlemen of honor and integrity out there. Champions exist in the world who uphold the highest standards of behavior and conduct. Courtesy is not dead. Nay, say rather it lives even as I live."

Kea laughed. "What? Are you saying you're a champion? You, of all people, are saying you belong in the Chief's court?"

Fikna hesitated.

Dalla said, "There are no real champions. Only a bunch of military boys repressing people for the sovereigns. What are you doing about that, Fikna? Where are you when women are being treated poorly?"

Rordan tensed.

Ivixa smiled through her ghoulish mask and waited.

Fikna said, "Where are women being treated poorly? Show me a specific example and I shall remedy the situation immediately."

Kea smirked. "He thinks he's a champion."

Dalla giggled. "Yeah, a gentleman who can't get the nerve up to pursue anyone."

Rordan's heart stung. He knew his bro' had been hurt.

To his surprise, Fikna said, “Please excuse me for a moment.” His bro’ left the conversation and ambled towards the boat. Kea and Dalla continued to giggle.

Kea said, “There goes that champion.”

Dalla said, “You mean chumpion. Buh-bye.”

In horror, Rordan watched a wound appear on the back of Fikna’s neck. The small, jagged bite mark did not bleed. A stain of blood appeared on the mouth of Ivixa’s mask, then spread across in the shape of Fikna’s wound.

Rordan felt a sharp chill in the air. He guessed she used magic to drink Fikna’s blood. When he considered their talk with his bro’, he saw a thirst for blood behind the words. His special sight had allowed him to see how the witches performed their mischief.

The bleeding onto Ivixa’s ghoulish mask stopped. Her mask absorbed the blood and the stain shrank from view. As the last of the blood disappeared, the mask grew indistinct and faded away. Her pupils grew larger and she broke out in a cold sweat.

The three women looked paler than Rordan remembered. Their lively activity repulsed him.

He choked out his words. “Why did you say that to him? Didn’t you find that mean?”

Kea settled down while Dalla giggled on.

“Oh please,” said Kea. “He was trying to tell us he was some kind of gentleman or something. All that fake upper-crust talk, it’s too much.”

Rordan said, “That’s part of who he is. Is that what you’re about? Hurting people’s feelings?”

Dalla said, “Are you a chumpion now?”

He didn’t know how to make contact with them. Fear constricted his mind and the cold sank into him. Rordan intuited that by not standing up to the witches, his bro’ had given ground on something important. He walked past them, cold seeping into his body.

Kea said, “These chumpions sure come and go.”

Dalla giggled. “I know what you mean. No staying power, always withering away when the pressure’s on.”

Rordan boarded the boat and sat beside Borus. He felt an intense desire to be unsociable and retreated into himself.