

## CHAPTER 15: LAST WARNING

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Rordan shambled through a decrepit hall and looked for the office of his mentor. His bed hair had been combed back and he wore a fresh set of clothes. He carried his daypack on the left shoulder and his papers in the right hand. The growth of several days' worth of beard gave his young face a slight fuzz.

He bemoaned his lack of sleep and leaned against a wall. His thoughts recalled Stig's return. The guy had taken over conversation in the room for hours with tales of his family's strength.

Fikna had probably found the boasts of interest. Rordan hadn't cared for it. He kept coming back to Stig's mother with the broken arm in a snowstorm or the father fighting off wolves with a walking stick. At least Glenys had been there, sitting close beside him.

Rordan tamped his hair with a finger. The thin strands tangled into small crimps and spurs. He fumed over his lack of sleep and wished people would just leave him alone sometimes. His sense of self found no relief.

The hall smelled dry and dusty. A lamp provided some light. He noticed countless dings, scratches, and cracks in the paint and plaster of the walls, none of which looked new. Framed awards printed on cloth hung on the walls. The wooden frames were stained dark brown and appeared well maintained. Rordan admired the faded gold and sepia inks of the lettering and pageantry, in particular a stylized figure in thin black ink on one award.

A sense of anxiety came over him and he stood upright again. He didn't like the hall or the awards. They reminded him of trail markers on the border of a dangerous place.

He looked at the stamped tuition receipt on his papers and pressed on. A trio of doors appeared out of the shadows at the end of the hall. Scraps of paper and announcement hangings adorned the doorframes. Embossed nameplates were affixed to the wall on the right of each door.

Rordan knocked on the door with the nameplate of Master Dunlin Beag next to it. An imperious man answered. He wore an oversize gown that drooped on the ground and reading eyeglasses hung low on the bridge of his nose.

With a slight bow Rordan said, "Hello. I'm Rordan Mannlic, a new pupil. My papers say you're my mentor."

Master Beag shook Rordan's hand. The man's grip was cold and strong. "Yes, I've been expecting you. Please come in and have a seat."

Rordan entered and shut the door behind him. He sat down on a chair across from the man's desk. Light entered the small office from a quartered window to the right of his mentor. The panes were made of thick, old glass. Shelves crammed with lessons took up most of the wall space around them. Rordan didn't see much in the way of personal touches, so he guessed his mentor did little else but read.

Master Beag said, "Please show me your papers."

He handed them over and let the daypack slide to the floor.

The man examined them closely. “Yes, I see. All verified. Okay, I’ll recommend you for a basic alchemy class. It’s packed, but I’ll make sure you get in. We have a requirement that all first year pupils take a research class as part of their core requirements. No problems there. I see here you crossed out your choice of a formulas class and replaced it with a performance class. Would you explain that?”

Rordan nodded. “I changed my mind. I want to do something that’ll keep my rustic skills in practice.”

Master Beag stared at him. “That’ll depend on the examination. It’s a test of arithmetic. If you don’t do well, you’ll have to take formulas to satisfy a core requirement.”

A frown creased Rordan’s face. “I didn’t know that. I guess we’ll have to see how I do before that gets decided for sure, right?”

Master Beag looked the papers over a second time. He signed a few parts with a pen from his writing kit. Rordan noticed the kit had a Farian inlay. Master Beag let the ink dry, then handed the papers back to Rordan.

A silence hung between them. Rordan expected his mentor to say something.

The room grew frigid and a stale smell filled the air. Most of the lessons disappeared from view and were replaced by jars filled with dead animals or golden ooze. The remaining lessons now appeared dusty and silverfish-

eaten. Tiny impurities multiplied in the glass of the window and plunged the office into dull shadow.

Rordan had the sensation of being lowered deep into the ground. Stillness came in at him from all sides and paralyzed his ability to move. Claustrophobia gnawed at the back of his chest and he struggled to remain calm.

Master Beag pulled a rusty iron mask onto his face by means of a rapid and automatic sleight of hand. The pitted and jagged visage displayed a vampire's face. His limbs and features shrank until he looked starved and bony. The man's movements and speech acquired a vigorous strength.

The cold bit into Rordan and nausea churned inside his stomach. He waited for horrible things to happen to him.

Master Beag said, "Since you insist on acting like a mindless savage, I will explain the facts of life to you. You are here for only one reason: to eagerly and without question allow me to squeeze the life out of you. You begin by obeying the course laid out for you by your betters."

The man's wide-eyed stare burrowed into Rordan's personal space.

"Your enthusiasm, your joy, and your freedom flow into me. Every time you fail to obey you are stealing. Every time you refuse one of my collections, you are wasting my valuable time. Your brief career as an ungrateful, crapless traitor is over. The next time I crush

your throat for some cruor you will cough it up. Or there will be an accident.”

Rordan hurt all over, his body trembling against the tight paralysis that held him.

Master Beag said, “I have nothing further to say to you.”

The man’s dismissal stung Rordan like a slap in the face, dispelling his paralysis. He grabbed his daypack and left the office with a heavy fear in his heart.

Rordan exited the steward-hall and returned to the warm daylight. The numbness of the cold office refused to let go of him. He walked over to a nearby oak tree and sat down on the grass with his side against the ridged bark. His feelings raced around inside of him as he took pained, shallow breaths.

He hadn’t seen any wisps of breath in the cold. Rordan decided the office must be under an evil enchantment.

The things he had just seen and heard convinced him he’d been doused in evil. Everything his mentor had said reeked of wrong.

The stargazing of last night came back to him. He had learned the identity of the person behind Kea.

The man had worn a vampire mask. Rordan understood now where Fikna’s blood had gone. The witches sent the vampire blood from their victims. That must have been what the horrible man had meant by cruor.

The numbness faded and Rordan grew angry at having been talked down to. The man's threats made no sense to him. He didn't understand how Master Beag could expect anyone to sit back and let themselves be hurt.

Rage smoldered inside his chest and he imagined a kick to Master Beag's face. His hands trembled and he took more shallow breaths. A tear fell from each of eyes. He fought back memories that cried out for him to remember them.

A ghastly voice hissed at him. "Oh, look. The bungler is crying like a sissy."

Rordan snapped his head up and stared in shock. Two bugbears stood on the lawn in front of him. Their large eyes froze him in fear. They went unnoticed by the pupils walking nearby.

The bugbear on the left hissed. "Did you wet yourself little boo-hoo bungler?"

The other bugbear said, "I have an idea for a pamphlet slam you could do. It's called *Bungler On The Grounds*. What do you think?"

They laughed at him.

Their laughter sounded overwrought to Rordan, but he still trembled.

The bugbear on the left turned fierce. "Stop your crying! After we finish this run we'll come for you and your phony brother. Then we'll make you really cry!"

With nervous laughter, the two creatures bounded down the field away from him. They disappeared behind the steward-hall.

Rordan took a breath and stared at the grass for several minutes. His body shivered in the warm sun as he struggled to regain his thoughts.

He still clutched his papers in one hand. Rordan smoothed them out and examined them. His mentor's signature consisted of a stylized letter B. He resisted an urge to tear it in two. The papers ended up stuffed back into his daypack and he dug out his academy guide-map.

The printed leaflet showed a black and white illustration of the academy grounds. He searched the small lettered locations and matched them with the text of the side index. The guide-map indicated a slight hill near Ardan Pines as the location for the exam registration.

Rordan considered what he might report about his tutor to Vacia. He intuited Master Beag as one of the officials behind efforts to minimize the Council. A yawn came over him; he realized his body wanted to sleep in response to his recent brushes with evil. He grabbed his daypack and headed in the direction of the community hall.

“Stupid chores.”

He entered the large building. A regular flow of pupils passed him by as his course took him through the community hall. He walked by a post facility, then left out the other side of the building. Rordan stopped to

examine the guide-map. He walked uphill and turned left toward a downhill path surrounded by dense forest.

A row of small cottages came up on his right. Wooden office signs were posted outside their doors. The undergrowth tended to conceal the signs and made them difficult to read. Small groups of pupils chatted on the path.

Through a gap in the trees, Rordan spotted the path where last night's bugbear attack had taken place. He watched pupils walk along the path and wanted them to know how close they were to danger. Invisible monsters could attack them at any time without warning. He realized how impossible his wish was. Only a handful of people saw what nobody wanted to see.

A whiff of cold air moved past him and he shivered. The sound of crackling ice reached his ears. In the trees near the path, a miasma of pink cold rose out of the ground. The formless cloud was larger than he remembered it being. It drifted away in small spurts of movement past several pupils and down the path, where it disappeared from his sight.

His mouth peeled open as his jaw dropped. He whispered to himself. "What is going on?" A sense of foreboding crept into him and he stood still for a minute, afraid of the cloud and unsure of what he should do.

Rordan stepped slowly around and searched for the exam office. He approached a sign, then pushed aside the fronds of a large fern from the inlaid letters. The sign



confirmed the cottage in front of him as his destination and he went inside.

A dozen pupils waited in line before a pair of large desks staffed by adult, uniformed practicals. Rordan resigned himself to wait and sat at a long bench beside the line.

He placed the guide-map back into his daypack. Rordan cast a wistful look at his new journal. He glanced about. No one took notice of him. He withdrew the illuminated paper Varan had given him from between the pages of the journal.

Rordan stared at the cover page and admired the fine stain of the ink on the paper. The text was done in an antiquated style. The reflective borders and accents along the edges had a dull luster. He examined the colors used in the illustration of the circus. The ink contained both texture and depth.

He glanced at the line of pupils, then at the door. His hand shook as he let the cover page drift up and back. The painting of Glenys, the scenes of torture, and the text were still present. The surfaces of tiny polished gemstones absorbed the daylight. Rordan ran his finger over them and across the inked scenes. He felt the smooth surface of the paper race by and slow only when his finger crossed the grooves of the ink.

His attention drifted toward the illustrations of torture. He believed the text gave explanations of the scenes and might be a morality lesson. The male attendant rode a spiked wheel impaled on his back while

in chains. A monster turned the wheel with one appendage and maintained a fire underneath the wheel with another. The attendant's face headed right for the flames.

Meanwhile, the female attendant stood in a glass iron maiden impaled by the short spikes inside. A different monster maintained a fire underneath the iron maiden with one appendage and held a key in the other.

A paper wheel had been set into the back of the page and attached by the silver stud behind it. The wheel could be rotated by means of a flat silver arrow attached to the top of the stud. To view the impossibly thin wheel mechanism, Rordan would have to ruin the paper. Part of him had no qualms about doing such a thing, but he remembered you didn't always learn something.

He stared at the painting of Glenys. She had longer hair dyed a shade of wine red. Her playful expression made him smile. The room in which she reclined had been painted in colors suggestive of moonlight. He didn't recognize the room, but the slight feminine touches convinced him she lived there.

Curiosity got the better of him and he turned the wheel counter-clockwise. The painting of Glenys moved to the left and out of sight as another painting came into view. Rordan hesitated, then tried to move the wheel clockwise. The wheel met with solid resistance. He resumed his turn of the wheel in the proper direction and the next painting depicted Dalla.

She sat naked on the ground of a dark forest with a wide-bladed dagger in her left hand and a fighting axe in her right. Her entire body had been dyed midnight blue and decorated with intricate brown designs. Rordan couldn't tell if the designs were body paint or tattoos. She had blood red hair.

The colors glowed at him. He looked up close at the painting and realized the use of vibrant pigments created the illusion of luminescence. The mastery of color distracted him from her suggestive form for a minute.

Dalla's eyes were at ease and she smiled. Her naughty details were covered by the pose of her limbs. His heart raced.

He replaced the cover sheet and put the wheel page back into his journal. Rordan placed the journal over his lap and thought about what he'd seen.

The line moved forward. Rordan slid over on the long bench while Dalla walked into view from the front of the line. A young woman he didn't know accompanied her. Dalla spotted him and they stared at each other.

“How're you doing?” said Dalla.

Rordan said, “I've been better.”

She smiled a little. “Rordan, this is Saba. She's getting the last requirements for her primary papers done.”

“How do you do?”

Saba smiled and waved at him.

Dalla's face grew serious. “Saba, I need to talk to Rordan for a moment. Will you wait outside a few?”

Saba said, “Sure. Nice to meet you Rordan. Good luck on the exam.”

Rordan smiled. “Thanks.” He waited until Saba exited, then faced Dalla. “What do you want?”

She sat beside him on the bench. Her rider hat was in her hands. Dalla faced him with a personal, focused stare. “You see them, don’t you? The specters?”

He strained with thought. “I see what you and Kea are sending my way.”

Dalla said, “I was okay with it at first. Not anymore. Not after last night.” She moved close to his face and spoke in a quiet voice. “What has Kea got against you? What did you do to her?”

Rordan’s throat tightened and he straightened his shoulders. “I never met her before the voyage. She’s been hurting me and my bro’. And anyone nearby just because she can. Actually, I learned she’s doing it for some crazy guy. Part of some stupid plan to crush people and make them miserable.”

Dalla briefly narrowed her eyes at him. “What guy? Noss? He’s only her chump.”

Rordan shook his head. “Forget him. I meant my mentor, Master Beag—he just laid down the law. Next time Kea sends her bugbears, I’m to bend over and take it up the tooter. Know anything about that?”

She crinkled her face. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“What, you witches don’t work for guys or something?”

Her face grew hard. “Don’t use that word. It’s offensive. We’re people, not scarecrows.”

“What do I call you then?”

She leaned close enough for Rordan to smell her sweat and his blood sped up again. “You could be my pet. I’d protect you. Run with me.”

He gazed into her eyes and perceived open want mixed with anxiety. An ache pulsed in his chest. He looked away and lowered his head. “I can’t. I’m sorry. You’re so wanton. I’m not up to it. To you.”

She fumed. “You dumb pup.”

Rordan said, “What? You don’t get it. How can I trust you? You scare me.”

Dalla said, “How did you find the grove on the island?” Her voice held a hint of frustration.

He watched her eyes search him for an answer. “I followed my visions. You wouldn’t believe what I saw there.”

Her eyes widened and she seized his hand. “Don’t speak of it, no matter what. You have enough problems.”

“Too late. But nobody believes me anyway so what does it matter?”

Dalla said, “Rordan you dumb pup, I’m serious. It’s a holy place and speaking about it is a grave offense.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll keep quiet about it.” The line moved forward and Rordan slid over. She slid with him and held onto his hand. Her grip warmed his skin.

Dalla said, “What do the specters look like? The ones Kea sent after you?”

He frowned. “Scary. They look like monsters out of a nightmare. And when they get their claws on you it hurts. Is that what you and your friends are about? Hurting people?”

She glanced around. “It’s complicated. Talking about it might not be safe for you. You already see more than I judge you should. You’re scared of me?” Dalla made a soft laugh. “I don’t see why. I’m not a puncher like Kea.” She smiled at him.

Her hold made him feel faint. He spoke in a growl. “I want to fall under your spell. But I’m deep inside a calm pool of water right now.”

Dalla let him go. Her face took on a mixture of confusion and impatience. “Oh, shut up you crazy pup. Jolly wing!”

Rordan watched her get up and leave. He clenched the straps of his daypack tight and frowned, ignoring the stares of those close by. “Darn it, why do I always have to be such a total loser? What’s wrong with me?”

A grumpy mood came over him. He stared at the wall and waited for his turn to come up. More pupils arrived and got in line behind him.

He looked into himself and imagined the deep pool of water he had blown Dalla off with. In his mind, he asked why the blazes he had turned down a carnal encounter with a hot young witch. Or whatever it was they called themselves. He concentrated on the dark and cold depths of the pool.

The voice inside him said, “What’s wrong is you are afraid of abandoning your bro’. You fear the river inside yourself will take you away from him. Rest easy. Sometimes the choice is not yours to make.”

For a long while, Rordan sat on the bench in depressed silence and strived to understand the voice’s words.

A person peered through the window on the opposite wall. Rordan looked up and stared. Outside stood a teenager. Her black hair had been dyed with two long streaks of light gray and her dark brown skin had been painted with fuzzy splotches of the same color. She wore a short black tunic with bell-shaped sleeves over long, dark-grey tights. Her tunic sparkled like a multitude of tiny crystals.

He waved at the girl. She moved out of view with blinding speed. Rordan stared at the window. He imagined she must have been a magical creature who had flown in on a breeze and drifted from view.

At the front of the line, he noticed the scarf one of the practicals wore had changed color. The scarf had gone from a brown-based pattern to a green one. Rordan

chalked it up to another inexplicable event in the hidden world. He put his journal back in the daypack.

When his turn came, he stood up and had his papers looked over. He decided to take the next available slot, a little over a mark from now in the archive classroom.

Rordan left the office. He glanced about for a sign of the weird, quick-moving girl. A heavy, sweet perfume hung in the air. He put his papers into the daypack and wandered downhill to the main hall. His choice of direction turned him toward the Hideaway Grill, down the same path where he had been attacked last night.

At the location of the ambush, the tread of numerous pupils had removed signs of the bugbears' demise. Only a spot of withered brown vegetation marked the location where Borus' foe had fallen. He saw no sign of the cloud of cold.

Rordan headed further down the path. He passed the Grill and made his way toward a bridge over a small ravine. A few pupils used the bridge to and fro, going about their business.

The surrounding tree trunks were several stories tall and spread their canopy over a wide area. Thick undergrowth filled in the ravine. He heard the steady gurgle of a stream beneath the undergrowth. On either edge of the ravine was a path. Both headed from his level to deeper in the woods.

The bridge had been constructed from thick iron supports and gray-brown beams of wood. A wooden railing reinforced by iron bars was on either side.



The amount of iron in the bridge impressed him. Remembering Stroma's mention of the wealth behind the academy, he crossed the bridge. When Rordan reached the other side, a shiver of fear went down his spine.

He stood in a large, circular courtyard paved with cobblestones and surrounded by trees. Two cobblestone streets and a dirt path led away from the courtyard. The street straight ahead of Rordan led into a tended garden of stone alcoves, walls and fountains. The traffic of pupils walked back and forth along this street.

The voice inside of him said, "You are in danger here."

Rordan said, "What do you mean? Who are you?"

The voice said, "This place is beyond you. Get out of here."

He chose the street on his right and walked down its length, further into the forest. The artificial twilight of the trees generated an eerie quiet. A small dirt path that led off the street and into the forest became visible and Rordan took it.

The path descended past enormous ferns and nests of brambles twisting into one another. The sound of the creek grew louder.

Rordan said, "Who are you? You keep talking to me for some reason."

The voice said, "I'm your mascot. I'm supposed to talk to you."

"What's your name, then?"

The mascot said, “You’re still too ignorant. If I told you now, you wouldn’t listen.”

Rordan felt embarrassment. “How do I stop being ignorant? I don’t want to be a bungler.”

The mascot said, “You’ll always be a bungler. Until you learn your lessons, that’s all you’ll ever be. You can be more. Try harder and see what happens.”

Bafflement stopped Rordan in his tracks. He felt his mascot retreat within him and its words replayed in his head. Eyes watering, his breathing came in fearful gasps. Rordan clenched his fist and walked on.

He came to a fork in the path. To his right, one path crossed the stream at the bottom of the ravine. To his left, the other hugged the steep hillside and turned sharply away from the creek.

His intuition moved him to take the path away from the creek. He tromped along the small and irregular trail with difficulty. The fronds of ferns brushed against his arms.

Rordan stopped and took in his surroundings. The earthy air smelled rare and fresh. Neither animal nor bird made a sound. The purity of the forest comforted him. He closed his eyes and opened himself to the song of nature.

The song echoed throughout the forest and flowed through his body as if it were a strong breeze. He heard his own chord in the song. A sensation of calm deafened his senses and submerged his mind into deep nothingness.

Vibrant colors danced before his eyes and an image of a black marble door appeared before him. The door was set with gemstones in a circle around the image of a willow tree. At the top of the circle, above the tree, was a black diamond. He saw the inscribed outline of a snake eating its own tail and a solitaire ring, both merged with the circle of gems. The diamond served as the gem set in the ring and a crown above the snake's head.

The well cut, black diamond glinted with fire from a light source behind him. The colors dazzled his eyes and he became aware of a buried longing within him. The longing matched how his chord in the song of nature made him feel. His head ached with strain and he lost the vision in a haze of bright colors.

He opened his eyes and saw a dirty boulder beside the path. Rordan sat down on it and put the daypack by his feet. His thoughts and gaze wandered free. He imagined the presence of friendly fantoms surrounding him, with hostile ones lying in wait nearby.

Rordan said, "I guess you're real. I'm starting to see you now. I had started to not believe. Even though now I see how certain things were signs you were there."

He sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I have to make a choice. Looks like I've been making them since I started this adventure. But this one seems important. Am I going to do what I'm told by the vampire? Or am I going to do my own thing and hope I make it out alive?"

Rordan studied the forest and lost track of time. He found pleasure in the many shapes and sizes of branches, the brilliant green of the moss on the trunks, and the vibrant green of the enormous ferns.

“In this quiet place of safety and power, I believe I’m going to give it my best shot. See if I can’t outsmart that vampire somehow. And if I bungle and I’m a loser, then that’s how it goes. But I’m not giving up.”

Rordan felt a puff of wind on his face. He took a deep breath and enjoyed the sensation of light-headedness it gave him.

“Maybe that’s what this is all about. Making it through and surviving what comes after. I really do want to see myself and be more than a bungle. But I’m scared of what I’ll find out. I just hope I can handle it.”

The flaw in the song of nature came to his attention and he became sad.

Rordan said, “Okay. Whatever. But I’m doing this thing wherever it’s leading me. I don’t get what’s going on, but maybe I will if I don’t wipe out.”

A faint tink of metal on stone caught Rordan’s attention. He strained to hear more, but only the silence of the forest reached his ears.

He grabbed his daypack and stood up. “See you next time I guess.” Rordan continued on his way.

The path left the ravine behind and curved around the slope of a steep hillside. The song of nature grew distant. He came across a fork where another path continued

straight down the hillside. Rordan passed it by and continued on ahead. His efforts took him around the hill. The ground leveled out and he found himself on one side of a smaller ravine.

A makeshift bridge of scrap lumber crossed the ravine. The path forked away from the bridge and up the hill. At the top of the hill the trees gave way to the steward-hall. Rordan repressed a shudder at the thought that one of the windows might belong to his foe and pressed onwards across the bridge.

On the other side, the dirt of the path mixed with gravel. Another path forked upwards from the one he followed. Rordan avoided the upward path and wound his way out of the ravine. He reached a sloped hillside and had to slant himself against a tumble into brambles below him.

He stopped and looked through the intertwined limbs of the thorny growth. His gaze spotted a small dwelling in a tree. The brush and canvas-covered dwelling appeared large enough for one person, or two cramped together. There wasn't enough of a view to see how one approached the dwelling. Rordan took note of the location and continued on.

The path wound upwards and Rordan emerged on the far side of the academy. He stood in a small field near the observatory and amphitheater. To his left, the paths and streets of the academy grounds began. On his right, a small path led into a larger and wilder forest than the one he had exited.

Rordan told himself he would investigate the larger forest later. He turned back to the academy grounds and walked toward a sundial in front of the amphitheater.

According to the sundial, he still had a mark to go before his exam. Rordan meandered up the path beside the observatory, then over toward the archive.

The classroom adjoined the massive stone structure of the archive. Inside, the layout had been constructed along a slight incline encircling a flat circular space. Dozens of wooden chair-desks were arranged in a half dozen rows of semicircles. The rows were oriented toward a tutor's wooden desk and chair. In the floor by the desk was a large metal grate.

Rordan walked into the empty classroom and took a seat in the back. He tried to remember his arithmetic formulas and equations, but only the day of his final exam came back to him. His thoughts throbbed hot in his head.

“Great. Do it again and this time the results count.” Rordan glared off into space and waited. He had the sensation of being watched by a familiar, but freaky set of eyes.

A plump, bearded tutor arrived. The man unloaded a pile of papers from his line bag and set them on the desk in front of him. He took out a folded sheet of paper, a writing kit and a square sandglass. The sandglass had an orange sun stained into the glass on the side.

The man noticed him and waved. Rordan waved back.

The first pupils arrived and took seats. Rordan dug his writing kit out of his daypack. He set up his ink and pen, then resumed his wait.

Stig showed up. Rordan gave him a wave. His bunkmate took the seat adjacent to him. The teenager slumped back in the seat and stared.

“Spunk this,” said Stig. “Oh hey. Did you know your brother was looking for you Rordo?”

Rordan shook his head.

Stig said, “Yeah. He was hoping you were all right and staying out of trouble. I don’t know why. You look like the least likely guy to get into anything.”

“Yep, that’s the way he is,” said Rordan. “Always worrying about me.”

Bov arrived. He took the seat in front of Rordan. “Hey. Fancy meeting you here. How’s the rustic business?”

Rordan gave him a rueful smile and said, “Horrible. It’s looking like I’m out of action on that front for now.”

Bov nodded. His face showed disappointment and confusion. “There’s a rustic on my floor. He’s fantastic and he’s also super smart.”

“I guess I’ll have to go check him out then,” said Rordan. He pushed aside competitive thoughts and used his anger to focus on the exam.

A wave of pupils filled all but two of the remaining desks in the classroom. The tutor went up to a pupil and examined her papers. He marked his records and gave

her an answer booklet. The tutor continued this process with every seated pupil. He returned to the desk and rapped on the surface with his kit.

“Attention. Attention, please. If you are not here for the noon qualification placement exam, please leave now. I’m sure your friends will be fine. They can do without the distraction afforded by someone not worried about their grade.”

Several pupils chuckled and the man smiled.

“You have a mark to complete the test. Answer as many questions as you can. Incomplete or unanswered questions will count against you. It is in your interest to at least make an attempt on every question. I will now distribute copies of the test. Do not open the test booklet until I say.”

The tutor pulled at the front of his collar and rubbed his fingers. He distributed a copy of the test to each pupil, then returned to the desk.

“The test begins...now.” The tutor turned over the sandglass. The tiny beads of sand fell through the narrow opening in the middle to accumulate at the bottom.

Stig said, “Good luck Rordo.” His voice held an air of indifference.

Rordan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his eyes again and stared at the test booklet. The panic at the back of his thoughts paralyzed him. Tears welled up in his eyes and he bit his teeth down on his lower lip. Rordan opened the booklet and wrote his name and number in.



The first set of algebra questions proved easy, and Rordan answered them without losing much time. The next set gave him a little trouble. He noticed a steady creep of harder theorems and formulas into each successive problem. Rordan slowed down and grew more worried with each new question.

He glanced over at Stig. His bunkmate was deep in concentration.

Rordan pushed himself to return to the test. He came across a problem he had no idea how to solve. Thoughts danced in his head. He recognized that he had hit upon the first in a vein of advanced questions. Rordan worked out an answer by guesswork. His stomach tensed as he moved on to the next question.

A string of easier geometry problems came up next. Rordan took his time to double-check them. He hoped he hadn't been taken in by trick questions. The back of his mind noted his underarms and unmentionables had built up a layer of sweat.

Rordan gritted his teeth. The pit of his stomach felt a raw tang of agony. He had traveled back in time to the advanced arithmetic final in school, only this time he cared about the result. The free-floating sensation of helplessness and panic he had thought over with had come back to him in a flash.

He stopped and stared at the current question. Rordan took a series of slow breaths and psyched himself up for a renewed effort.

The exam leader turned over the sandglass. “Half a mark to go.”

Rordan focused on the question he had blanked out on. His mind grasped at a solution and imagined a useful equation he could apply. He worked out the process on his lesson booklet and settled on an answer.

The next question matched the previous one in difficulty and Rordan felt his time eaten away as he struggled for an answer. The agony in his stomach gave way to a dry mouth and dull nausea. He managed to work out an answer he believed correct and moved on.

Rordan found himself faced with another, similar question and he lightly clenched his teeth. His intuition told him he had almost run out of time. He ignored his panic and concentrated on the steps. Rordan scribbled in an answer and prepared himself for a brick wall.

The next set of questions involved triangles and ratios. Rordan frowned as he remembered the many hours spent struggling at home for solutions to similar questions, only to get burned later in class. He hated these kinds of problems.

Rordan forced himself through each question with a grimace on his face. He stared at the lesson booklet and realized he’d finished with the test.

His gaze moved over to the sandglass. He still had a little time left. Rordan got up out of his chair and gathered up his exam materials. He walked on unsteady knees to the tutor’s desk and handed in the materials.

His voice choked with disbelief. “Is that all?”

The older man smiled through his dark beard and adjusted his large eyeglasses. “That’s all there is.”

Relief flooded into Rordan and he nodded. He walked back toward his seat and noticed Bov give him a sad smile. Rordan waved his hand briefly at the teenager. Bov returned to his test with a frown.

Stig reviewed his answers page by page. Rordan wished he had been as methodical as his bunkmate appeared to be. He stashed the writing kit in his daypack and walked out of the classroom.

The last of his discomfort subsided and left him numb. Rordan realized the violence would arrive no matter what class he ended up in. He had refused to submit to the vampire.

Rordan walked up the hillside toward Boant Oak. He imagined a struggle with Master Beag or Kea. His mentor had the advantage of size. And if his bro’ were right, Kea would make steak cutlets out of him. He didn’t think he had the guts to kill either of them anyway, even in self-defense. His only option would be running. Rordan wished he had kept up with his sportsman days.

Dalla’s talk about specters didn’t make sense to him. Whatever the things were, he was pretty sure they weren’t alive. Rordan suspected he had been lucky and sighed. He didn’t know enough about them to be afraid and he had committed himself against their master.

“Hey mascot, how about some help here. What do I do?”

Rordan sensed a block in his thoughts and received no answer.

“Great, that’s helpful. A mascot that’s never around when I need it.”

The mascot said, “I’ll be the judge of when I’m needed.”

Excitement pulsed through Rordan’s body. “You came after all.”

“Of course I came,” said the mascot. “A point needed to be made. Don’t take me for granted. That state of mind weakens me and might make me leave you.”

The insecurity of being a bungler seized Rordan. His spirit sank.

“No need to sulk. Our friendship moves both ways.”

Rordan said, “I’m sorry. But I’m scared.”

The mascot said, “I’m scared too. That vampire means business. Welcome to the world.”

“How do I fight him and his witch?” Rordan spoke aloud, but the pupils who walked past him heard nothing.

“Do you want to fight them?”

Rordan said, “No, but they’re coming to get me.”

The mascot said, “Then don’t let them get you.”

“How? Run away?”

“What’s wrong with running away?” said the Mascot. “Works for a great many creatures in this world. Your enemies expect you to struggle because that’s what most people do in this world.”

Rordan said, “I can’t run away forever. I’m a bungler, I’ll make a mistake.”

The mascot said, “Or they will. Chasing after victims is dangerous too. The vampire had better hope you’re still just a bungler when his number gets drawn.”

Rordan considered his mascot’s words. “I can’t fight. So running away is my only option. I guess I thought I could think of a plan or something. But I’m just too dumb for that.”

The mascot said, “There’s no magic recipe for every life experience. Running away is sometimes the wrong thing to do too. The only thing that works is what worked at that moment. Fikna could tell you a thing or two about that. You are in big danger. There’s no study-up for this. Our instincts will prove true or they won’t.”

“I don’t know if I can live up to that,” said Rordan. “I’ll take your advice and try. What you’re saying is so hard to understand, though.”

He felt his mascot withdraw back inside of himself. Rordan passed by the place where he and Borus had first been attacked. The grass the creature had fallen upon remained withered and brown.

Thoughts buzzed inside his head. Rordan felt his mascot’s departure held significance. He decided the proximity of the withered grass had been used to make a point.

“I get it. The moment you sense trouble coming, stay away.”

Rordan thought about how Borus had been able to fight off the bugbear. He couldn't hope to match the youngster's strength and speed.

His thoughts turned toward the Mountebank card Glenys had drawn. If Borus could surprise Kea, then he could too. The figure in the card had been accompanied by a mongrel. He recognized his resemblance to the figure in the card and how his mascot resembled the role of the mongrel.

His mascot's name and identity intrigued him. He imagined the mascot must be an animal that ran away or hid from danger, such as a deer or a bird. Fikna's possible reaction worried him. The mascot would have to be his secret for now.

At the side door to Boant Oak, he paused. Rordan realized all the sweating he'd done had begun to stink. "Yuck. Time for another shower," he said.

Rordan entered through the side door and climbed the stairs to his hall. He passed by Manissa's open door and caught a glance of Kea inside. His hand fumbled in his pocket for the key to his room.

Kea said, "Hey Ror. Come look what your friend did to me."

Rordan uttered a profanity under his breath.

He approached to the edge of the open doorway and looked inside. The mattresses in the center of the floor were at right angles to each other. The desks were bunched together against one wall. Loose clothes, papers and bags of clothing covered the floor. Kea sat on a

mattress while Manissa sat across from her in a chair and applied a small bandage to her right hand. He recognized the treatment as part of recovering from an injury suffered during armed struggle.

Kea looked over in his direction and said, “I won’t bite. I only want you to see what kind of brat you’re hanging out with.”

Manissa said, “Hold still.”

Rordan decided not to argue. “What did my friend do?”

A look of self-satisfaction came over Kea. “She scratched me. I was talking to her about you and she went berserker on me.”

He stared at her. “I doubt it. You must have done something.”

Kea said, “Yeah, that’s me. Always looking for trouble.” She made a light laugh.

Manissa finished her adjustment of the bandage.

Rordan said, “You’ve been sending nothing but specters my way since I met you. Who knows what you said or did to get her to claw your arm?”

She glowered at him and he felt a stab of fear. Her face returned to a softer visage. “What can I say? I’m a mean girl.”

He nodded. “You are. What turned you into a monster?”

Kea flexed her bandaged arm and nodded at Manissa. “Maybe I have a mean streak. As I said, I’m a mean girl.” She pulled on a light vest.

His teeth clenched and he squeezed the strap of his daypack. “I don’t believe that’s it at all. You’re just sour because of how your life turned out.”

Her gaze moved around the room and settled on the line bag in front of her. She pulled it toward her and fiddled with the straps on the bag.

Manissa stared at her.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sour all right. Maybe I had strict parents who scolded me all the time.”

Rordan said, “If that’s true, it’s ugly of you to make it a throw-away line.”

Kea dropped her line bag and stood up. She stomped around the room and searched through the piles on the floor. “What do you want from me, some admission of guilt? So you can turn me into the bad woman messing your life up?”

He flinched backward. “I want you to stop hurting other people because you didn’t get what you wanted out of life.”

She stooped and moved aside a bag of clothes. “Wait until you’re a little older Rordan. You won’t be saying that so easily.”

“What? You want to make excuses? You want to make people eat it because you can’t find out what you’ve lost?”



Kea said, “I don’t have to listen to this.” She dug into another pile of clothes and searched through them.

Rordan said, “When have you ever listened? Or do you do whatever Master Beag the vampire man tells you what to do?”

A tremor ran through her body. She looked at Manissa, then at Rordan. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play me for stupid. I saw him today. He’s the guy pulling your strings. How the blazes you came to work for him I can only guess.”

Kea barked out a laugh. “What are you talking about? You think I’m munching some guy’s dong and it was so amazing that I’m acting under his control or something? Good one Rordan.”

Rordan’s eye sockets tingled. “Then you don’t know at all. You’re just his doll and you have no clue what your life is about.”

She laughed. “Let me guess, now you’re going to save me with your chumpy ways from the evil tutor with the big dong. You need to rescue me, is that it?”

His heart stung. He did want to save her. “Just stop cursing us. You can stop and walk away. Tell him no.”

Kea became hysterical. “Yes, that’s it. I’ll look that dong in the eye and say no way. All because I want to be saved by the chumpion.” She scoffed at him.

Manissa threw her roll of bandages against the wall. She grabbed her own line bag and left the room with a sullen expression.

Rordan let her pass. “Dalla said you were sick and now I see what she meant. You’ve caved in like a house of cards.”

Kea shoved aside a pile of papers with her foot. She laughed. “Your pup dong must have been severe for her to say that about me.”

Rordan said, “Will you stop talking like that? You’re a wipe out, Kea. You’re going over the edge, wake up. Before it’s too late. I’m not your enemy, that guy is.”

She uncovered a pouch tied shut with drawstrings and seized it. Kea grabbed her line bag and brushed past Rordan.

“You should let Dalla run you down. She’ll do anything for pup dong.”

Her stale tobacco breath struck him hard and he held his breath for three seconds. Rordan watched her walk down the hall and out of sight. He stared at the door she had left open. He walked inside with a slight effort, determined to find something of use against her. His breathing grew tight and his shoulders tensed.

The room looked like a mess to him. Neither woman showed interest in cleanliness. His memories went back to the boat and he guessed Kea had lied about being a cleaner. Rordan kicked aside a pile of unkempt blankets and stepped over piles of clothing and lesson papers. The place smelled only a little better than he did.

He searched for Kea’s luggage and found her heavy side-bag under a blanket. Rordan opened it and rummaged through the contents. His grin turned into a

snarl. He recognized he had crossed the line into thievery and memories of a previous larceny as a little boy returned to him. Rordan pushed the thoughts away and let his instincts take over.

Inside he found folded travel clothes, a laundry sack with the voyage's clothes still inside, and a number of outsider accessories he consciously ignored. His hands pulled free a large wooden tube wrapped in canvas. The tube rattled when he shook it. Rordan guessed the tube contained a writing kit and maybe some papers.

Rordan came across a large dagger in a sheath. He pulled it free of the bag and examined it. Tough leather wrapped the handle and the pommel had a stylized animal design he didn't recognize.

The reality of axes and an outsider dagger sunk in. His mind tried to work out how she might have smuggled arms past the patrollers when she got stamped clear. She must have just taken her chances. He guessed it was another sign she was close to the edge.

Glancing at the open door, he dug some more in the bag. Rordan found his missing Deep Uirolec loyalty shirt and stared at it. The white shirt smelled and looked dirty. His mind struggled to accept the implications.

The dagger and his shirt went into the daypack. He rearranged the contents of Kea's side-bag so it looked like it hadn't been searched to him. Rordan covered the side-bag with the blanket again and grabbed his daypack. He left Manissa's room and entered his own.

Stig and Fikna were not in. He looked inside his closet. The blankets lay in a heap on the floor. Worry over Borus' whereabouts nagged at him. He'd have to go find the boy. Rordan closed the door to his room and sat at his desk.

He pulled out the shirt. The smell reminded him of mold and incense. There were dark brown stains on the chest area. Rordan considered the shirt ruined and felt mixed about having it back. He wanted to lock up all his things. As he had just demonstrated himself, no safety from thieves existed in the communal quarters of an academy.

Rordan put the shirt back in his daypack and examined the dagger. He pulled at the handle and the wide blade drew free of the sheath. The dagger resembled the one he'd seen Dalla hold in the wheel painting. The blade's leaf-like shape reminded him of doodles he'd seen of ancient heathen weapons. The metal smelled seasoned and the leather of the handle had a strong odor of polish. The edge didn't look sharp, yet Fikna had once told him a blade didn't need sharpness to cut a person open. The dagger made an impression on him as a personal, vicious piece of arms.

The clues he had discovered stirred his thoughts and he considered the situation. Kea had stolen from him, probably to harm him more easily. He wanted to feel angry. Instead he felt guilty. His own actions had been wrong.

Rordan smiled and made a soft laugh. Here he was, a thief angry someone else had done to him what he had done to others. The shirt's theft didn't justify going into Kea's things. They were both guilty. At least now he knew she was capable of it. He'd let Fikna and Stig know what they needed to be wary. Glenys too.

He sheathed the dagger and returned it to the daypack. His thoughts turned inwards. Kea had already threatened his life several times over. Rordan believed she intended to use the dagger on him—probably Fikna and Glenys as well. Without his shirt and the dagger, she might lose the edge. Those were all reasons to keep it out of her hands.

The consequences of doing so entered into his thoughts. If she suspected him, she might get real crazy and send her friends to rough him up. He considered throwing it in the river or down the ravine of the forest. Confusion clouded his decision and he resolved to hold onto it for now.

Rordan walked over to the window. He looked out at the pupils outside, going about their daily business. Fikna's longing to be normal made sense to him now. His own life would be a lot easier without visions and bugbears.

Sadness came over him. Rordan realized he'd failed to run away from trouble and had gotten himself deeper into it. His mascot probably wasn't pleased with him.

He replayed the conversation with Kea in his thoughts and tried to make sense of it. Rordan felt grateful for Manissa's actions. Her departure indicated Kea had lost

some ground and made him feel better about failing to talk.

Her absolute craziness had come as a surprise to him. He believed her reaction to his mention of Master Beag had been genuine. Rordan wished he'd used his third eye to look for signs of outside influence. He hadn't expected the vampire to control Kea without her knowledge.

Disappointment increased his doubts and he shook his head. If she wasn't in control of her actions, he couldn't hate her. He needed to blame Master Beag, but his intuition wouldn't let him. His only clear thoughts were Kea's dangerous behavior and the need to outwit her.