

## CHAPTER 18: INTO THE WOODS

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Rordan lowered himself into the hot water of the bath. His skin bristled at the sting of the immersion while his muscles tensed. He sank up to his neck in the water and the extreme heat worked its way all over his body. The steamy air stank of rotten eggs.

The bath had been built out of a smooth, grainy silver stone. He believed the stone was thick granite. The bath was four feet deep and wide in the pale, blue-gray tiled floor. It was walled in stone from the floor to the ceiling, creating a private niche.

A small wooden changing room adjoined the niche of the bath, with a worn latch-bolt on the door. His discarded clothing, a towel, and a folded pile of fresh clothes lay on a wooden bench in the changing room. He had placed his soap jar on the edge of the bath. Next to the jar was a wooden bucket.

He couldn't believe he had put this off for so long. The hot water brightened his spirits and reminded him of his playful, carefree years as a child. A week of grime melted off of him and his skin felt increasingly refreshed. Rordan stared off into space and let his worries lessen in a world of steam and wetness.

His thoughts came forward in a free association of contemplation. The blasting of the bugbear had weakened him. He recognized a pattern in his encounters with demons. They drained his energy and made it harder to act. Rordan decided there must be limits to how much a person could deal with demons and expect

to resist them. His inevitable struggle with Master Beag and Kea were more than he could handle.

He no longer considered Kea evil. She had lost control of herself and couldn't be reached. Rordan pondered if Master Beag were also evil. His mentor's threat had been evil and the things Master Beag and Kea had done were wrong. Rordan felt he must be missing a greater picture.

In his mind, Master Beag and Kea were crazy. He doubted if they were capable of truly evil intentions. Rordan acknowledged his stealing had been on purpose. According to his own people, theft was evil. He didn't know how to place his actions in relation to what he faced. His feelings matched the conflicted jumble of the first journal entry he'd made.

The noise of pupils in the hall stirred him from his inner reverie. The thought of new people to meet pleased him. He knew he had to be patient, but he still wanted to be part of the community of Boant Oak. When the noise of meet and greet died down, he resumed his private thoughts.

Rordan considered Dalla's offer and realized he had yet to churn himself for some time. He had been so overwhelmed by the voyage, his new school, and the forces of the hidden world that the need had slipped past him.

His mind let go of the thought and he washed his hair with the soap. He rinsed with the wooden bucket and reveled in the feeling of being clean.

The hot water turned his relaxation into weakness as sweat leaked out of him. Rordan faded into a deep meditation and imagined a solution to his dilemma. His intuition told him he couldn't plan the unexpected.

The heat became too much to bear and he stood up out of the water in a daze. Rordan leaned against a wall and recovered his thoughts. Steam rose from his body and the wetness of the bath mingled with sweat from his skin. He lifted the wooden plug and watched the water drain away.

His feelings turned toward Fikna's speech at the last revel of the Hearth Bunch. He tried to recall what his bro' had actually said. The theme of Fikna's speech had sounded like a plea for forgiveness. Rordan grew angry and confused. His bro' had no reason to apologize for anything.

He remembered how Fikna had not visited the school that day. The wind that had changed his bro's mind must have been otherworldly. Libra was an air sign, so the wind must have been a personal warning. It might have been that messenger, which he wouldn't have been able to see at the time.

The thought of the messenger helping his bro', but no one else, disturbed him. Couldn't another messenger have warned Elder Ofen? Varan's words about seeing what one wanted to see came back to him.

A faint ache moved through his body. He had a sensation of being the one who ought to have apologized.

His mind muddled about through a fog of unknowns and half-formed questions.

His mascot said, "It's okay. You were afraid."

"What was I afraid of?"

"Of failure."

Rordan hesitated. "What did I do wrong?"

"You pushed your work onto your foster-brother. He wasn't strong enough."

An ache ran down Rordan's back. "Is the fire my fault?"

"You are guilty and you are innocent."

"Why am I both?"

"We'll have to take this up later," said the mascot.

Rordan felt his mascot grow quiet. He made his way to the wooden bench and sat down. On the wooden wall opposite him were carved character designs of a Dimmurian nature. Tiny colonies of green algae grew in the weathered nooks and crannies.

He felt comforted by the presence of this small revelation. The muffled sounds of pupils lent a sanctified quality to the atmosphere. Around him, the antiquity of the ruins rose to life.

His attention focused on graffiti carved into the wood by a modern outlook. The vandal had scraped into the wood with a pointed instrument, 'I hate you wall. This wall munches!' Rordan stared. The absurdity of the words moved him.

Rordan towed himself from wet to damp, then examined his cut toe. The wound had healed over and no longer looked swollen. His bee sting had shrunk to a tiny red dot and itched.

He looked at his repaired shoe and felt grateful to Fais for her efforts. He hoped she was okay. His intuition told him he would see her again. An image of a huge sun made of stone and an arch of thick quartz blocks flashed through his thoughts.

His mascot said, “You’ll probably need her help to realize your destiny.”

Rordan said, “What’s my destiny?”

“There’s no way I can tell you that while you are alive. If you look into the future you are choosing a point of view. All I can do is help you in the short term.”

“You just told me about Fais,” said Rordan. “That means you know things I don’t. How much do you know?”

His mascot said, “I see what you see but do not notice. My job is to assist you in your journey by pointing out the details. You had a hunch Fais meant something to you, but only now did you think about her. Now you notice the connection the two of you shared. The image in your mind comes from a far away time in response to your need. I guessed you were struggling to hold onto the connection and I lent you a word of encouragement.”

Rordan said, “What does it mean? Will I see Fais again?”

His mascot said, “You’ve seen the stone sun before in one of your lessons. I don’t know what connection it has with you or Fais. You want to see her again and her secret friend thought it would probably happen. The forces of linked destiny have a powerful attraction.”

Rordan felt a sudden thrill. “Wait a minute, her secret friend? Does she have a mascot too?”

“Everyone has a helper sent from nowhere to help them in this life. The details are as varied and as similar as people are.”

“What else did her secret friend say?”

His mascot said, “This is a good time to bring something else up. You have a strong talent for seeing more than most people. The secrets they hide from others or themselves come to you naturally. A lot of these secrets are none of your business and can hurt if brought out at the wrong time. Be careful and take responsibility for what you see.

“Her secret friend said what you already guessed, but didn’t recognize. You noticed you made a strong impression on her and she fixed your shoe because she wanted to help. From that you harbored a secret thought that she might help you in the future—that this small exchange is the seed of greater things. But there’s no telling if that seed will grow or not.”

Rordan said, “Wow. Okay that makes sense then. Thanks. Hey, does Glenys or Borus or my bro’ have helpers?”

“Yes. Helpers have to agree to be seen. Or you have to find their hiding place, which is usually impolite.”

A moment of fear clutched at Rordan.

His mascot said, “Yes, even Master Beag and Kea have helpers. Everyone is called and everyone is accepted if they listen. The disease of their souls has sickened the well their helpers drink from.”

Rordan said, “Do I have a well?”

“You have a pond. Yes, I drink from it. Our friendship is a mutual exchange.”

Another question came forward. Rordan held it back. “Maybe you’re right, I should be careful. I’ll let them tell me if they find out. Secrets are holy things.”

His mascot said, “Good, you’re listening. See you next time.” Rordan felt his mascot disappear into what he guessed was its hiding place.

He pulled on the fresh set of clothes. His body moved slow. The sound of two young women outside distracted him. They talked about a musical loyalty he didn’t share. Rordan had the feeling there were many personal tidepools throughout Boant Oak. He imagined he would come to know some of them in time and many more he would not.

Rordan left the bath niche behind and entered the hall. A middle-aged attendant woman with pale skin and gray hair walked past him. She carried a mop and a bucket. Her face looked weary and distant to him. He felt a sense of discomfort and looked past her.

He returned to his room. His bath things had just been put away when he heard a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

Fikna came inside and closed the door behind him. He carried his own daypack with him. His throat bore a pair of darkening bruises. “At last I locate you Rord. From your appearance I gather you enjoyed the bathing facilities. Magnificent, are they not?”

Rordan gave his bro’ a weak smile. “I feel like a wet noodle. How was your walk?” He used the towel to dry his hair a little more.

Fikna sat down on Rordan’s chair. He took a deep breath. “I am at a loss to describe my adventure. I visited the sanctum. Partly to familiarize myself with the layout and partly to pray for guidance. The sacred architecture is a splendid affair. The mixture of styles does a shrine great justice. We have nothing like it in Nerham.”

Rordan straightened out his hanging towel. “What did you see bro’?”

Fikna looked at his wrists. The scratches had scabbed over. He grabbed his knees and stared ahead in confusion. “I met a most unusual girl from Kgotla. She wore a nonconformist minister’s robe, only the robe resembled a free-flowing dress. Her features were uncommonly beautiful, breathtakingly so. She appeared around my age. Yet, I reeled in awe of her as though she were timelessly ancient.



“While she stood there, a subtle and ethereal music played on the pipe organ. However, I could discern no players. There blew a fresh draft as if the doors were open. Yet they were obviously closed. The breath of wind was rich to my senses. Much like full blossoming, late summer flowers.” His eyes closed and he took another deep breath. He smiled and opened his eyes again.

Rordan ran a hand through his damp hair and sat down on his bed. “Did she say anything?”

Fikna said, “She did. The girl approached and greeted me by name, even though we hadn’t been introduced. I asked her to excuse me, for I was praying for guidance. A long conversation between us followed. Her voice sounded pleasant and her speech well mannered to my ears. However, I have a difficult time remembering everything we discussed.”

Rordan peered at his bro’. “Try. Hold onto it and remember. It’ll come back to you.”

Fikna said, “You speak truly. When I concentrate, I recall fragments of the whole. She mentioned I didn’t need guidance. I needed to guide others to find my way. She pointed out my marks and said they were my signposts. I should trust in my own doubts to lead others to the correct location.”

“Did she give you anything? Tell you to do something?”

Fikna said, “Yes. That was an odd occurrence. She mentioned it was my birthday, which I assured her was

incorrect. However, she insisted. Said today I had been born for the second time and it was a call for celebration.” He shook his head.

“And she gave you a present?”

“No,” said Fikna. “I asked her what I should do. She said that perhaps the question isn’t what I should do but what I might do. The girl directed me downstairs, to a meeting room.

“Down in that room waited an enormous lion in a cage, larger even than the stuffed lion in the Parcwood observatory. In front of the cage, within reach of the lion’s paws, was a stacked pile of presents. The sheer variation of different types of artistry in those presents was breath-takingly beautiful.

“The lion spoke to me then, in a voice like the rumbling of an earthquake. He said it was seldom those he marked ever returned to him. I asked when he had marked me and for what reason. The lion said this action had been performed a long time ago, so that he might return to me what was entrusted to him. In a holy daze I reached forward and took a present.”

Rordan shivered.

Fikna said, “I returned to the girl upstairs. She told me I was valorous to ask and so this time I was given. I would recover what was lost and bring the harmony back.”

“So where’s the present?”

Fikna pulled a wrapped package out of his daypack. The paper was dyed marbled colors of bright red and yellow. Tough twine tied the package together. “Whatever the contents, there is ample weight to this unusual gift.”

Rordan said, “Open it.” Excitement and curiosity played across his face.

Using Trad’s knife, Fikna cut the twine. He tore the paper free and placed it in a pile on the bed. In his hands he held a wooden box. The wood had a dark, flat gray color. There were many cracks in the surface and small pieces had fallen off all along the edges. The box gave off a sharp, cedar-like fragrance. Fikna slid the top of the box off, revealing an object wrapped in a frayed and dirty white cloth.

Rordan’s heart beat with excitement. His eyes strained impatiently at every move Fikna made to unveil the prize within.

The young gallant moved aside the cloth and held up a candle. The candle was ten inches high and four inches wide. It had been formed from a slightly translucent, faded red wax. The room filled with a powerful smell of resin. He held the candle in both hands and examined it. The wick had been burned before.

In a hushed whisper Fikna said, “Rord, is this real?”

Rordan said, “It is. A holy relic. A very special candle.”

Fikna said, “I quite agree. This matter surpasses me. Perhaps the might of Deiwos himself is in this candle.”

“Or the mystery.”

Fikna looked up at Rordan with a stunned expression. His eyes stared vacantly. He put the candle back and returned the closed box to his daypack, along with the wrappings. “Rord, you once tried to show me a paper. Might I peruse it again?”

Rordan produced the map for Fikna. His heart beat fast with acute anticipation as to what Fikna might see.

His bro’ examined the illuminated map. “Good Welkin. This paper is wonderful, unbelievably so. Do you comprehend the meaning of the illustrations?”

Rordan shrugged. “Not really, but it seems to be an indicator of what I’ve been going through. I can’t read the script.”

Fikna caressed the texture of the upraised portions. He drew in a breath and exhaled in awe. “Amazing. Has it occurred to you Rord that we have received gifts of incalculable value? To what end?”

Rordan looked away. “I’m aware of the value. The end must be important, whatever it is. It’s really cool to have a special treasure that no one else can see. But I admit; it’s nice to have someone to share the secret with.”

Fikna said, “Allow me to apologize again for doubting you earlier. Behold the fabulous detail. The miniature pen strokes. It’s masterful. I wonder what the map reveals? Could there be a forgotten neighborhood at the end of it?”

Rordan said, "I don't know. The map changes over time. I wouldn't be surprised if your candle does too."

Fikna's eyes widened. "What you suggest is nothing short of fantastic. How might such things occur?"

Rordan's neck tingled at the base. "I don't know. Magic seems too cheap a word. But until I saw your candle, I wouldn't have thought any of it Divine Regard either. There are pictures on the map now that weren't there before. Maybe things will appear on the candle too after a while."

Fikna said, "Now that's a prospect I dare say is most astounding. Astounding!"

"That lion. Despite its captivity, I am somewhat puzzled and disturbed by its presence in the shrine. I think there is a mystery there which requires discovery."

He studied the map. "You will relate to me what you discover won't you? It may transpire that we shall both benefit."

"You know I will," said Rordan. "Though right now all it is are a bunch of weird pictures."

Fikna strained at the map. "This man in the forest appears to be screaming in torment or fright. If this is an event on either of our courses, I hesitate to look forward to it. And this island with the six-headed monster reminds me of that blasted island we spent the night on. You didn't meet any six headed monsters did you?"

Rordan smiled. "No, but the pictures may be symbolic. I haven't unlocked the secret yet."

“And look at this boxed illustration of a gigantic spider-woman. Frights, what a monster. Not the sort of creature I’d like to come across.”

The violet and blue shades of the middle-aged woman’s dress impressed Rordan. The spindly legs and mandibles in shadow did not.

Fikna shook his head and returned the map to Rordan. “I am unable to make any further sense of it. It is an unparalleled work of art. A shame you didn’t go into a hermitage. Your daubing skills might have reached such a level of perfection.”

Rordan put the map away. “I don’t know why I stopped daubing so much. I just lost the spark of it one day.” He paused. Explaining his theory would only upset his bro’. “I can still illustrate, but not like that. I’m not even sure anyone alive today could accomplish that level of artistry. For all we know, some fantom did the work.”

Fikna said, “As it would appear. Such miracles make for quite an adventure.”

Rordan said, “Yep. But what else happened at the sanctum? That wasn’t the whole story, was it?”

Fikna started with a bob of his head. “Oh, good Welkin no! I had quite forgotten again. The revelation had slipped my mind and yet enough remains for retrieval. She was indescribably lovely Rord. Her beauty was such that I feared I might swoon with rapture.”

Rordan kept silent and rolled his eyes internally.

“After my encounter with the caged lion, I finally asked if she would introduce herself. She seated herself beside me and said her name was Helod. She mentioned meeting me when I was an adorable little boy. One of her fondest expectations had been to see what kind of young man I might become.”

Rordan said, “Wow, so she knew who you were. That’s more than I got from my fantom friend.”

Fikna said, “I inquired as to whether she was my guardian messenger. She laughed like the ringing of tiny bells. Such delicate laughter!” He sighed.

“Helod said there were many kinds of messengers and that she was a guardian of messengers. Apparently, even the messengers of Deiwos need a hand occasionally.

“Because I was a special case, the messengers near me needed extra assistance. She took my wrists in her hands and said I would test the messengers severely. I needed to bear my burdens bravely, for Deiwos had great need of me.”

Rordan said, “For what?”

Fikna smiled. “I had become so awestruck I forgot to ask. The last thing we conversed upon was you. That I should always trust your purity.”

Rordan frowned. “You know I’m with you bro’. Always. But what did she mean by purity?”

Fikna said, “Enough tales for the moment, Rord. Let us check in on Borus and Glenys. We shall have the

opportunity to relate our experiences while having dinner with them. My appetite has come forward.”

Rordan nodded and got to his feet. He stretched long and wide. “Yawn. That bath really got me all relaxed. Yep, let’s go see them and get some food. I’m hungry even for slop. We can talk about the rest of this later.”

The two of them made their way out the door. Rordan locked it, then fell in behind his bro’. He gave the door to Manissa’s room a glance and suffered a brief apprehension about Kea’s whereabouts.

The door to Glenys’ room remained open and two lamps generated light. Sinna rested on her bed with a scraggly teenage boy sitting beside her. Glenys sat on the side of her own bed and appeared in better spirits.

Her hand and elbows were bandaged, and she had changed into trousers. Borus lay sideways with her head on Glenys’ leg. The girl had a lazy expression. Glenys stroked Borus’ hair.

Fikna smiled and stretched out his hand in a flourish. “I notice you are much improved, dear Glenys. It strikes me as a blessing to find you so well.”

Glenys said, “A little better. Though now I’m starved.”

Rordan held back a smile. “An appetite is a good sign, or so I’m told.”

“By whom, I wonder.” She rolled her eyes at him.

Sinna and her friend looked confused.



Glenys said, “Fikna, this is my bunkmate Sinna and her friend Coll.”

Fikna addressed them. “I apologize for intruding. We are your bunkmate’s good friends and as such mean her no harm. We intend only to escort Glenys to the meal hall. Pay us no heed and continue about your business if it pleases you.”

Rordan believed the scraggly boy with dyed, light brown hair looked like a negligent. It occurred to him Sinna probably shared the pastime and they would appreciate some time alone to enjoy their preferred activity. “We’ve got things to talk about bro’. Glenys would probably want to be there. Sorry, but we may be a while.”

Sinna brightened up and said, “That’s okay. We weren’t planning to be around. But thanks.”

Glenys looked at Fikna’s bruises. “Did you drop by the physic?”

Fikna looked at her and said, “I thought the wisest course of action would be to see how things progress. I feel much improved.”

“Am I going to have to make a request?”

“Your concern is the only request needed, my devoted Glenys. Are you ready to partake of tonight’s sustenance?”

She patted Borus on the shoulder and the girl sat up. “Of course. Lets go get something to eat.”

Rordan slouched and drooped his eyelids. “Yep, slop is the way to go.”

The four of them departed together. They made their way down the stairwell, then out the side entrance. While Fikna led Borus to the side door to the meal hall, Rordan and Glenys headed to the food line with their papers out.

Rordan grabbed an empty table and guarded it. He watched Glenys let Fikna and Borus inside, as well as two other guests who went off to meet friends at another table.

She accompanied him to the food line. He grabbed an extra helping of meat in cheese sauce with an additional piece of bread and utensils.

“We can get our two spongers more on the second go-around,” said Glenys. She took a mug of warm beer and an extra piece of cake.

“Yep. This should take the edge off their hunger.” He followed her back to the table. Fikna accepted the mug and cake from Glenys with a bow. Rordan passed the extra utensils and helping of meat to his bro’. The extra bread went to Borus.

They fed themselves without conversation. Fikna ate with small, dignified bites and kept his napkin spread out over his lap. Glenys chowed her food with gusto. Borus munched on her bread and spread crust crumbs on the table.

Rordan watched Borus eat. He felt proud of the boy and smiled. His hunger overcame him and he took a bite out of the sliced meat. To his surprise, it had a tasty

flavor. He imagined the meat had come from an animal whose death had not disturbed the fantoms.

Borus eyed Rordan's helping.

"Would you like some?" He offered a piece at the end of his fork.

The girl snatched the piece from the fork and wolfed it down. When Rordan offered her more, she gulped the pieces down without chewing.

Glenys finished her meal and looked at Fikna. "How did your walk go?"

Rordan noticed his bro's awkward twitch. "He had another vision. It was pretty cool."

"I'm falling behind here," said Glenys.

Rordan said, "You'll have one. I feel it. I don't know why, but the four of us are special for some reason. We're meant to be together." He finished off the pulpy innards of a shrunken potato.

Borus gobbled down the last piece of meat on Rordan's plate.

Glenys shut her eyes as if a decision had passed through her. She opened them. "I hope so. I don't want to miss any of the fun. I'm not complaining. These past two days have been jolly."

Fikna said, "You need not worry, devoted Glenys. Your place is beside us. I think when you join the third eye bunch, all four of us shall become a revel of epic proportions." He winked at her and ate his last forkful of meat.

Glenys said, “We’re already a revel of epic proportions. After I get in on this magical adventure I’ll bump us up to legendary.”

Fikna swallowed his food and smiled at her. “Well said. Although I must warn you, there is an uncomfortable element to these experiences.” He stuck a fork into the moist cake before him and took a bite.

Rordan started on his cake as well. “He’s right. Be ready for a shock. Accept what happens, but don’t let it rule you. Stay true to who you are and don’t flinch if what you see is weird.”

“You make it sound like a chore,” said Glenys. “I’ll have to see for myself what’s got you two so down. Until then, I feel like I’m missing out on the excitement.”

Borus looked at their empty plates and licked her lips.

Rordan got up. “How about some more Borus?”

The girl smiled at him and looked expectant.

His hand went up and he closed his eyes for a brief moment. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

He walked up to the start of the food line and got behind a pair of pupils. His turn came up and he got another plate of meat and cheese sauce.

A voice behind him said, “You’re the guy who’s been bugging Kea.”

Rordan turned around. The large menga from the Grill last night stood behind him in line. “You here to scare me too?”

“Whoa, hold on there. My name’s Flann. You’re Rordan, right?”

“Yes, I’m Rordan. What do you want?” He noted Flann’s size and strong build. The man could easily beat him up.

Flann said, “I wanted to meet you, that’s all. See what kind of clumser was getting Kea all excited. And after having met you, I don’t get at all why she’s so off on you.”

Rordan clenched his teeth lightly. “She’s off on me because she’s not facing the facts. And I’m not a clumser, I’m a pup. Goodbye.” He walked back to his table and tried to keep from losing his temper.

Fikna said, “What did that scoundrel say to you?”

“He wanted to meet the guy who was messing with Kea. That’s about it.” Rordan put down his tray. Borus eyed the slices of meat with interest.

An angry frown creased Fikna’s face. He got up out of his chair.

Glenys said, “Don’t.”

Fikna moved to intercept Flann. The young man was on his way to a table of pupils Rordan didn’t recognize.

He got up and followed behind his bro’.

The pupils at the table watched Fikna.

In his clearest voice Fikna said, “I advise you to cease speaking to my brother Rordan, or my friend Glenys, again.”

Flann looked at the gallant with a calm expression. “No need to get upset. I was trying to be friendly.”

Fikna’s eyes clouded with irritation. “Far from it. You are scaring people I care about. If I hear additional stories about you I’ll settle your score. Is that understood?”

The pupils at the table tensed. Rordan could feel the approach of a struggle. He didn’t see how drawing Trad’s knife in here would end in their favor.

Flann shrugged. “Okay. If you want me to stay away I will. Don’t get so excited; it was nothing.” He walked around Fikna and sat down at the table.

Rordan didn’t feel so good. Flann had chickened out, but not in a way that suggested things were over. Added to Noss’ own gnarring, this looked worse than ever.

Fikna walked away. Rordan came in behind his bro’ and back to their seats. Glenys gave Fikna a hard look.

Borus scooped the last of the second helping into her mouth. She chomped and chewed with her mouth open, then gulped it all down. Her chin and lips were smeared with cheese sauce. She looked up at Rordan with a wide-eyed expression of phony guilt.

Fikna and Glenys stared at her. Rordan held back a chuckle and offered her a napkin.

The girl’s stomach made mild sounds of digestion. She looked at the napkin, then at Rordan.

He wiped at her face and she squirmed. Her hands pushed his away.

Fikna recovered from his shock. “I dare say. Borus still has numerous habits to unlearn.”

Glenys said, “Never mind Borus. Was that little show of gallantry worth the risk?”

Fikna said, “I’ve lost patience with these ruffians hassling us at every turn. I’d have shown that gaif a thing or two about Seltish manners. But you can’t act against a coward who slithers aside. Glenys? Rord? If he so much as passes near you the wrong way, you inform me.”

She put her hand on Fikna’s forearm. “No. If he bothers us again we’ll go to the patrollers. I’m not going to play with him.”

Fikna said, “In any event, facing off the insufferable irritant gave me no small amount of satisfaction.”

Glenys said, “Fikna, I mean it. Don’t get yourself hurt. That man’s not worth your trouble.”

Fikna said, “Fear not, Glenys. I’d have made certain the wretched mengan paid for his allotment of fun at our expense.”

Rordan had his doubts.

“I’m not questioning your abilities,” said Glenys. “You almost started a struggle there. Remember what Nyah said. Don’t let these people draw you into a scene. You’re only making things worse. I insist you behave like a gentleman and not act unless they force our hand.”

Her tone of voice struck Fikna still. “Of course. I apologize. I understand I may have erred and am at your service.”

Glenys said, “Your apology is accepted on the condition that you remember yourself. Rordan needs you to be strong and polite for his sake. And my own peace of mind. Are we cool?”

Fikna bowed his head. “We are agreed.”

Glenys said, “Good. Let’s move on. Rordan, what did you do while I patched myself up? I was worried about you.”

Rordan said, “I discovered the baths in Radix Trow. It was mind-blowing.”

She smiled. “I know. It’s a luxury. I like your grubby side, but you look so much happier when you’re clean.”

He chuckled. “Thanks.”

They heard the long, distant cry of a wild beast. Rordan recognized it as belonging to the giant lizard Borus and he had seen.

The youngster’s expression changed to excitement. She stood up and trotted away without them, making a sound like laughter and grunting.

Rordan stared as Borus walked out the door to the meal hall and disappeared from view.

Fikna said, “What transpired? Where is our friend headed off to?”

Rordan played with his fork. Despite his intuition telling him Borus needed to be alone, he felt left behind by the boy. “He’s hearing a call meant only for him. We have to let him go. It might be a phantom she met.”



Glenys said, “Will she, I mean will he be okay?”

Rordan said, “I don’t know. He can’t speak. I can only guess what Borus sees. If he’s having a vision, then this one is his to go through. I only know that I’m with him no matter what happens.”

Fikna steepled his fingers together and sat in thought.

Glenys said, “And if you saw who I truly was? Would you be with me no matter what?”

Rordan looked her in the eyes as if challenged. The raw beauty in her gaze pierced his heart with feelings he couldn’t explain. He looked at his plate and said, “I had a vision that night we were in the Grill. The vision showed me that I had a limitless depth of love for people. That vision scared me, because I never knew what I was capable of until then.

“Now I know there’s a part of me that wouldn’t hesitate to love someone and would bear any burden to experience that love. I looked at you and I saw I would love you forever no matter what.”

He experienced both relief and vulnerability.

Glenys said, “I also love you, Rordan. I love you as a wild berry patch that grows on the side of a volcano’s ashen slope. You shake my life to the core and awaken in me nourishing passions. A firestorm has been stirred up because of you.”

A thunderclap resounded outside. Glenys laughed to herself. “Okay, whatever. I can do this.” She smiled,

touching her medallion with the tips of the fingers of both her hands.

Rordan felt a hot breeze across his face, even though they were indoors. He sat in stunned quiet while Fikna stared at the crumbs of his devoured cake with regret.

The lamps of the meal hall faded to an indistinct light and the conversations of those around them drew further away. A vision they could all perceive pushed through to their attention.

They sat on carved balls of cracked stone at an enormous rectangular stone table, in a field of tall and red-brown grass. Thunderheads darkened the horizon and the breeze blew dust and pollen through parched air. A pair of men twenty feet tall, dressed in elephant skins, stood nearby. They had yellow-brown skin, long dark hair, and flat stocky features. Their expectant gaze was fixed on Glenys.

Her eyes grew glassy and wide. “Rordan, I’m not what I thought I was. I don’t know what I am anymore. But I swear to you, by all I hold close to my heart I won’t let anyone hurt you. Or anyone you care about, no matter what. I would face any spirit or person, no matter the cost. I’ll find a way to keep us safe from harm.”

A powerful sensation of envelopment by a circle of barbs in a hot windstorm passed through Rordan. Her eyes soothed him with their fierce devotion and he welcomed the shockwave she sent through him. Glenys’ potent, lovely feelings buffeted his heart like an avalanche of burning splinters.

She let down her defenses without fear or doubt and allowed them to see what they could. The room transformed into an other world of heat, wind, and flashes of lightning. Fikna turned away from her and bowed his face into his hands.

Rordan felt an instant of worry over his bro's reaction. His sight drowned in Glenys' revelation. A glimpse of a dangerous girl, wise beyond her years and possessed of marked knowledge passed before him. He had an impression of worldly experience, a tremendous sorrow, and a rebellious streak that tormented her. The scope of her strength overwhelmed him.

His sight moved past her outer shell of being and he experienced her innermost soul. He stood on the side of a mountain near the peak and before a small lake of turquoise blue water. A strong wind blew past him and the low sun illuminated a nearby snowcapped mountain range in pink and orange colors.

Glenys sat with eyes closed on a broken piece of boulder beside the lake with her back to him. She wore only a long white and sea blue scarf around her waist, and a gray-white feather in her hair. Her scarf and hair blew in the wind while the sun shone golden orange on her skin.

He noticed scars on her shoulders, arms and thighs. Her body revealed to him the long-term discipline of a sportsman. He realized she had at least the same level of swordsman skill as his bro'.

“I dreaded your coming,” said Glenys. Her potent voice carried through the wind without trouble. “Now I know I can’t hide here anymore.”

Rordan ached to speak to her. His mascot held him still by the shoulder and he endured the temptation.

She stood up and faced the wind with her eyes closed. Her hands held her hair from whipping around her face. “I can’t tell if I’m too late or if I have another chance.”

A voice inside Glenys said, “Open your eyes woman, you aren’t alone.”

She opened her eyes and Rordan followed her gaze to a huge crevice, out of which padded a large and dapple-gray wolf. The wolf studied her with intense interest. Rordan perceived intelligence in the wolf’s eyes and he shivered.

The wolf trotted up to her. Rordan watched them interact together in an arcane, heathen process he could barely grasp. Glenys spoke in a softened voice with a language he didn’t recognize. The wolf sniffed at her and made gruff noises. They strained and struggled against one another in a dance he believed was a test. The wolf’s antics were not tame and he feared for her despite the vigor in her limbs.

Glenys and the wolf reached an understanding and they became friendly toward one another. She hugged the wolf and the beast wagged its tail. A sudden gust of wind blew through and seized the feather from her hair. Glenys watched the feather tumble through the air over the edge of the mountain and out of sight.

The face she made pierced Rordan with sadness.

She looked in the direction of the mountain peak for a moment and clutched at her chest. A look of determination appeared on her face. Glenys retrieved a small line-bag from behind the boulder where she had been sitting. She pulled on a pair of shoes from her line-bag. An outsider's melodic, atonal song sprang from her lips and she marched up the slope toward the peak. The wolf accompanied her.

Rordan intuited the remaining part of her journey would be difficult. He realized how serious and in doubt the outcomes of a vision could be. The extent of his responsibility for the change in his friends had eluded him until now. Rordan felt his conscience bother him.

His sight blurred into a golden light and he slipped into a trance. Rordan lost consciousness for a few seconds, then regained his sight. His legs pressed against the ball of stone he sat upon and he rested his curled hands upon the table before him. Pressure throbbed in his head, sinuses pounding. A wave of fear passed through his stomach as he sank into himself.

Fikna said, "What a transformation of the world the meeting of ourselves must be. I cannot help thinking you will experience exaltation and misery. As for myself, I see little save humiliation."

Rordan looked up at his bro' and recoiled with a silent gasp. Fikna sat downtrodden, without clothes. His skin hung in flaps against a starved body and thin cracks lined

his face. Blank eyes stared from Fikna's skull. He looked like a fresh corpse.

Glenys said, "Fikna, do you want to be a victim?"

Indecision crinkled Fikna's face. "I don't know what I want. What can I want?"

Rage flared into Rordan. He felt a strong urge to attack his bro's problems. The need to destroy caused him to shake and blush. Tears streamed down his face onto the table.

A smile of unrestrained affection shone on Glenys' face. "You're so wild, dearest Rordan. Don't be afraid, I'll watch after your proud brother."

Fikna gaped at Glenys as if he'd been struck. He choked on his words. "Explain yourself."

Her arms curled toward her chest and she shifted sideways to face him. "You want people to look up to you. You want them to like you. Your greatest fear is a lack of respect."

Fikna sat forward and sprawled his arms upon the table. "I'm so disappointed. I don't want to apologize for my life anymore."

Glenys said, "You're being difficult. Don't you know how much it hurts Rordan to see you suffer?"

Anger and sadness overwhelmed Rordan; he lost consciousness. The song of nature carried him along a wave of heartbroken music and he retreated into dark tunnels of half-dream and anxiety.

He opened his eyes to find himself standing in an underground aqueduct with water up to his ankles. A shadowed diamond down the passage bathed him in warm, ultramarine light. Stillness calmed Rordan's fearful turmoil.

A scaly creature the size of a huge dog stared up at him. Its circular shaped eyes glowed with the same light as the diamond. The creature had a long, solid tail and small, clawed arms with sharp fins behind them. It had a large snout and in its mouth were many rows of dark white teeth.

His mascot came out of him and said, "You have never been here before. You see in the dark but you do not understand. The egg cracks and spills its contents upon you. You have been fertilized."

A sensation of filth came over Rordan and he looked at his hands. They were dirty; his arms too. The cool water on his feet relaxed him and he had an urge to lie in the water and rest.

Rordan said, "You're right, I don't get it. What's that diamond over there and what's this monster?"

The mascot said, "The diamond child is a being inside you. The creature is a hungry snapper you must make friends with."

Rordan tensed and considered the snapper. The creature bolted forward and sped off into the darkness of the passage behind him.

He leaned against the wall of the aqueduct. “Mascot, you said something about an egg. What do you mean I’ve been fertilized?”

The mascot said, “The egg is a treasure you found when you were young. The power inside the egg has changed you and now you are growing.”

Rordan said, “I don’t know if I can handle this.”

The mascot said, “I don’t know either.”

Moisture clung to Rordan’s skin and mixed with the dirt to form a thin layer of damp slime. The sensation of impurity bothered him. He walked toward the diamond and the water splashed around his ankles. His mascot padded on four legs behind him.

He picked up the diamond and held it before him in a trance. The song of nature came back to him and thrilled his heart. His own chord in the song came forth and Rordan entered another vision.

The flaw in the song of nature showed itself to him as a crack in the world, out of which poured forth fire and smoke. A deafening clamor echoed from the crack and the earth shook as the crack split in two directions at once.

The vision loomed in size before Rordan and a sense of futility overcame him. He returned to his body sitting at the meal table with his friends. The sound of pupils going about their business came back to his ears. Glenys held Fikna’s hand and sat at ease with herself. Fikna’s eyes were tired and bleary. His shoulders slouched forward.



Fikna said, "I didn't know I was so empty. So needy, so worthless." He bowed his head and exhaled a long breath.

The sight turned Rordan's feelings to ashes. He stood up and said, "I'm going for a walk. Suddenly I don't feel so good."

Glenys' eyes pierced him with heartfelt warning. She stood up and said, "We're coming with you. It isn't safe for you to walk around like this."

"No. I'm going off by myself. I'll be okay." Rordan hardly recognized his own voice.

She considered him with narrow eyes. "You're out of your mind right now. This isn't the best time to go off on your own."

Rordan said, "I mean it. I'll be fine."

She regarded him. "Be careful, dear. You aren't alone."

He left the hall and made his way downhill, along the paths to the amphitheater and beyond.

A stony sharpness punctuated his emptied feelings. Rordan knew he would be cross with anyone who spoke to him. He also knew no such encounter would happen.

His steps returned him to the field he had reached from the forest earlier today. A pair of teenagers threw a disc back and forth to each other and paid him no heed. The sun's progress touched the tree line. He imagined time still remained for an exploration of the woods.

Rordan believed he should be more tired than he was. With a backward glance, he took the trail into the woods.

Gravel and wood chips overlaid the path. The tree trunks were covered in soft chartreuse mosses and deep emerald vines. He walked into a quiet arboreal tunnel interrupted by thick roots and uneven patches of ground. The trees swallowed up the outside world behind him.

His thoughts unwound and he considered what had happened in the meal hall. He believed Glenys had opened her third eye and somehow been able to share her vision with them. The events in the field and on the mountain came back to him and he replayed them in his head. She stood above them all, he believed.

Rordan sighed. He considered her reaction to his confession a statement of deep tenderness, without overt romance. Glenys had welcomed him into a secret side of her in a way he didn't understand. Her lush inner imagery and complex nature fascinated him. He had to know more.

His encounter with the diamond made no sense to him. The image of a crack in the earth disturbed his feelings. Glenys must have seen him in the aqueduct as he had watched her on the mountainside. He felt vulnerable and hoped she wouldn't hurt him.

Fikna had turned away from Glenys' overture. Rordan guessed he must have remained at the stone table with the two giants. His intuition told him everyone's view had grown beyond easy explanation.

The conversation between Glenys and his bro' struck a chord with him. Fikna had been revealed to be a victim and Rordan flashed back to the horror he had confided to Glenys.

The experience had destroyed his bro'. For a long time Fikna had been fearful of the outside world and of people, especially the ones he knew. Rordan remembered how he had to bring meals for his bro' and clean up after him.

He came to a split in the path. "Damn it. These choices! There's only one way, damn it. Make things better!" His voice sounded harsh to him.

Rordan chose to walk to the left and continued on. He stopped and a savage sound of rage mixed with anguish came out of him.

The memory of his own reaction to the attack came back to him. He had withdrawn into himself and taken to dangerous treks in the woods around his neighborhood. There had been crying. Also conversations with Deiwos that had gone unanswered.

He leaned against a tree trunk and fought against a resurgence of hot rage. His bro' had been a victim again and no matter what Glenys said, he blamed himself. Fikna's starved appearance and sad reaction suggested great damage had been done to his bro's self-protection.

"Stop torturing him Deiwos! Let him go!"

His intuition told him not everyone should look at who they were. He had believed everyone should have the experience and now uncertainty clouded his mind.

Self-imposed blindness might be a good reaction in some cases.

Remorse poured into his heart. He wished he hadn't been so excited about the prospect of visions for everyone. The correct decision always eluded him.

His mascot said, "The choice is not always yours to make."

Rordan said, "You mentioned that before. This stuff that's happening to me and now to other people. Why should it happen without any chance to fight or refuse that change?"

"Answering why questions is not my job."

"Okay," said Rordan, "let me say that again." He calmed himself a little. "How does this thing work? There doesn't seem to be a way to say no."

His mascot said, "Sometimes you have no choice and sometimes you do. You gave Fikna and Glenys choices and they decided to take a look. Varan was serious when he said this is difficult. You don't know what you'll see when you look into the center."

Rordan said, "I never wanted Fikna to suffer this again. I wanted Deiwos to take my life so that my bro' would be okay."

The mascot said, "I know. I was there when you offered."

Surprise shocked Rordan upright. "How long have you been with me?"

“I’ve always been with you. I told you, everyone gets a helper.”

Rordan said, “I thought I was alone in the woods.”

“Sometimes you were. The fantoms couldn’t stand your grief and I needed a break too now and then.”

Rordan said, “I can’t protect Fikna! I love Glenys, but neither can she. And I can’t help him anymore than I already am. I want him to be okay and fun again...like he was.”

His mascot said, “In your growing light, Fikna has a chance to choose to be an orphan.”

Rordan swallowed. Tears streamed down his cheeks and he struggled over his next words. “What does that mean?”

“Orphans are exploited and victimized because they have no hearth to guide them. They are lost souls. Fikna can choose to accept what he is and transcend it. You can’t carry him anymore. He has to learn to walk on his own and take the risk of being hurt again.”

“I have to go into the woods,” said Rordan.

“I know.” His mascot retreated back inside its hiding place and disappeared.

Rordan continued on his way. Overgrowth narrowed the path. The gravel and woodchips gave way to a dirt trail. The air grew heavy with the smell of damp earth.

He stopped to take in the ambiance and believed the light enough for more exploring. The girl he had seen

through the window of the office returned to his thoughts.

The very same girl stood up out of the foliage and smiled at him.

He uttered a noise of surprise. Rordan could only see her from the shoulders up. Her strong fragrance and the sparkle of her tunic dazzled him.

She said, "I've been hunting for sunshine crystals to wear. They're difficult to find this close to sunset, but are more fair for having survived the day." Her words were alluring to his ears.

The girl took a small bead of moisture stuck to her fingertip and placed it upon the shoulder of her outfit. The bead shone with a starlight blue as it touched the fabric. Then it transformed into a precious stone and added to the gleam of her garment.

Rordan shook his head. He held back a sudden urge to cry out at her supernatural loveliness. "You're a phantom girl, aren't you?"

She wriggled her nose and closed her eyes. A breeze moved through the woods and blew her hair about. She reveled in the sensation, turning her head to and fro.

The breeze faded and she said, "You are unwise to travel these woods so close to sunset. Fearsome creatures and dangerous spirits come out to haunt these trails at night. I like you and don't want to see you harmed. Go back the way you came. Return when you have the day to watch over you."

Disappointment showed on Rordan's face. "Okay. Since you put it that way, I'll leave. Maybe I'll see you again?"

The girl drew up a tiny, blue-violet blossom and inhaled the fragrance. The air filled with the scent of fresh flowers. She placed the blossom in her hair, then smiled at him. In a flash of incredible speed she disappeared.

Rordan chuckled. "She sure comes and goes, doesn't she?" He sighed, then walked back toward the entrance to the forest.

Past the fork in the path, his body froze in fear. Master Beag approached him from up ahead. His mentor walked the same way the neighborhood bullies did right before they attacked.

The bony, shriveled man wore his vampire mask. In his right hand he held a pigsticker of dark brown wood with a grey luster. The end of the shaft terminated in a blade of rusty black iron.

Rordan vanished from his fear and plunged into a roaring din. He grabbed a handful of earth and flung it at the man's face. Dirt and pebbles smacked against Master Beag's mask and the man turned sideways with a jerk. Rordan bolted back to the fork. He took the left turn again and felt the pigsticker land in the ground inches from his right foot.

He hurried down the path, mindful of the obstacles. His thoughts raced in a blur, remembered a passage about

vampires and crossroads. Rordan stopped to check behind him and didn't see or hear the vampire.

His mind struggled to recall what he had read. He remembered vampires were confused by choices in a road and had to return the next day in order to go on. Rordan didn't know if the path qualified or if Master Beag counted as a vampire. He decided to keep running.

The path gave way to the dirt trail once more. He grew tired and paused to catch his breath. Rordan wished he hadn't given up the swimming and ball games of his youth. His sportsman interests would have come in handy now. He chalked it up to another missed calling in life and walked on.

Rordan examined the light and realized the forest would grow dark soon. The trees transformed the last of the day into a subterranean twilight of shadows. The phantom girl's words came back to him and he worried.