

CHAPTER 19: THE POISONED KISS

Rordan pressed on. He needed to find a safe way out of the forest. The question of how Master Beag had found him crossed his mind. He pulled his papers out of the daypack. Master Beag's signature glowed like a hot coal and writhed as if it were alive.

“Great.”

He jammed the papers back into his pack and frowned. In order to dodge the vampire, he'd have to lose the papers. Rordan weighed the inconvenience of having his attendance delayed against being tracked. He decided not to toss the papers for now.

The thought that he'd almost been stuck like a wild pig bothered him. Those were the sorts of things that happened to people alone in the woods at sunset. He'd never thought it might happen to him.

Rordan continued down the path with occasional glances behind him. He noticed a change in the character of the forest. The trees appeared older and taller; moss and vines looked thicker and longer. Countless mushrooms, some as large as melons, grew in combinations of brilliant and plain colors. The sound of small animals rustled through the undergrowth.

He spotted short people with lemon-yellow skin going about errands. They were dressed in a variety of green and gray pants and boots. Each of them wore an overtunic, mantle, and conical hat—all of brown felt. He'd only seen such fashions in observatory displays.

A young man carried a net of white, jagged mushrooms on his back. The roots of the mushrooms glowed with a glossy purple light. An old woman led a dozen tawny rabbits by means of a twig with a small radish on the end. The radish also glowed with a glossy purple light. Another young man gathered seedpods from a prodigious growth on the bark of a tree and placed them in an enormous, hollowed out turnip roped to his back. The inside of the turnip radiated the same glossy purple light.

Rordan found the sight mesmerizing. He took a slow breath and the smell of the air intoxicated him with its freshness. The sensation resembled the crisp snap of biting into a fresh vegetable or the sharp thrill of kissing a crush for the first time.

The fantom girl poked her head up from behind a tangle of ferns on his left and peered at him.

He found her lovely to behold in the darkening light. Her vitality had a visibly hypnotic quality to him. The appeal of the fantom girl on guys in stories made sense to him now.

“I didn’t know you were the vampire’s next victim,” she said.

“Yep. I stood up to him and now I have to pay. I need to leave this forest. I don’t suppose you could show me another way out?”

The fantom girl returned a coy smile at him. A ray of sunlight pierced the eaves of the wood and shone on her face for a brief moment.

“There is no going back, you have left childhood forever.”

A sense of disorientation overcame him. “You mean, by coming to fantom land here, I’m an adult now?”

The fantom girl approached him and took his hand. Her firm touch felt like a hundred fireflies landing on his skin. Rordan took her hand in turn.

“You are still a child. It is the safety of childhood you have abandoned. The choice to grow up is upon you. Many people decide never to do so and stay here for the rest of their lives, even when they return to the human world.”

Rordan said, “Will you help me?”

She wriggled her nose at him.

He admired the way the borders of her eyes were adorned with a golden dust and a liner of black powder. The flower in her hair had become part of a hairpiece encrusted with minerals. He heard the sound of a cracked branch nearby.

“Come this way.”

Rordan looked behind him. He nodded. “I’ll go with you. Lead the way.”

The fantom girl led him off the path and deeper into the forest. He remembered the chastisement he’d received from the woman behind the curtain and treaded with care. The last thing he wanted would be to step on any animals or tear through their homes without thought.

He didn't feel good about leaving the path behind. His hope rested on the evasion of the vampire by means of a secret path known only to his fantom guide.

For several timeless minutes they stepped through the undergrowth. The activity of the short yellow people faded behind him. Ferns and drapes of moss caressed him as he walked past. He moved over a fallen tree and through a field covered by twisted vines. A loud noise followed his every step, despite his care. The fantom girl stepped with such agility she hardly made a sound.

The shadows grew darker and he lost the ability to see details. He realized he might not find his way back to the path.

They came to a field of tall, thick reeds. The reeds grew in bunches and sprouted forth leafy branches. She led him through the field to a small clearing covered in thick moss. A dozen flat, rough stones two feet tall were arranged in a triangle around a smaller, irregular rock. A calm, cool air hung inside the clearing.

“Where are we?”

The fantom girl said, “This is where I make my burrow. The ones you call Dimmurians used to come here to commune with Sonia and think disciplined thoughts.”

Rordan said, “Who's Sonia?”

“A goddess of masks and the stage. They abandoned her for unhealthy idols and she has been all but completely forgotten.”

He examined the central rock and found it composed of numerous, extruded quartz crystals. They felt rough and cool to his touch. A small puddle of water had collected in one crevice of the rock, from which sprouted a tiny plant of light colors.

“This is a neat place. Thanks for bringing me here to see this. Where do we go from here?”

The fantom girl said, “Nowhere. When the sun sets, I turn into a giant spider and I eat your insides for my meal.”

A tremor of fear ran through Rordan and he stared at her. She gazed back at him with wild eyes and a parted mouth suggestive of extreme hunger.

“What? I asked you to help me. Now you’re going to eat me? How does that work out?”

The fantom girl said, “Humans are not allowed to step into our lands. I gave you a chance to turn back. Now you must forfeit your life.”

Rordan said, “I couldn’t leave. The vampire was waiting for me. Just show me the way out and I won’t come back.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“Well I’m not waiting around. I’ll find my own way out.” Rordan walked toward the edge of the field. He ran into an invisible thread and fell backwards onto the moss.

The fantom girl moved slowly around the triangle of stones toward him. “You won’t leave. My web has closed around you.”

Panic crept into him. He fought it back and opened his daypack. His hand closed around Kea’s dagger and drew it free. Rordan kept the blade pointed at the fantom girl to his left and got back on his feet.

She laughed. The pleasant sound of it soured his stomach.

“Really now. I’m much stronger and faster than you. Even if you knew how to handle yourself, you’d still end up the same. I’ve eaten better fighters than you many times over.”

Rordan swung the dagger vertically in front of him, where he had met the invisible thread. The blade severed the thread in two and the ends became visible in a halo of soft, white light. They drifted about in the air before fading from sight.

The fantom girl closed the distance between them with inhuman speed and seized Rordan’s arms.

He struggled against her for an instant, then used her unbreakable grip to hold himself up for a kick at her face.

She let go of his left arm and twisted his body in her grasp.

Rordan felt his shoulder give way to a dull pain and his hand released the dagger. He dropped to the mossy ground face down and felt her take firm hold of him again.

The fantom girl lifted him upright as if he were a doll. She pushed him in the direction of the stones.

Rordan flailed with his arms and hit the mossy ground on the left side of his back. He tensed and his sight vanished under a haze of sudden injury.

As the pain lessened enough for his sight to return, the fantom girl knelt beside him. His right arm and shirt were forced away. She sank her teeth into the flesh of his side, below the ribs.

His mind blanked out again and he struggled wildly against her strength. She pushed away and let him flail free of her.

Her voice rang distant in his ears. “I’ve poisoned you. In a matter of minutes you’ll be unable to move. There’s nothing you can do.”

Numbness spread from her bite. He crawled over to one of the flat outer stones and used it to prop himself upright. The dark stone held many dull-white formations within. Rordan realized they were the petrified bones of tiny sea creatures.

Their presence comforted him and he turned to face the fantom girl with his backside on the stone. “My name is Rordan Mannlic. Your name, please.”

The fantom girl said, “Pasiphaea, daughter of Arakhne.” She moved toward him with slow ease.

Rordan said, “You invited me to your burrow and I claim the rights of hospitality due a guest.”

Pasiphaea paused. “In a moment I won’t be bound by that law.”

Rordan said, “You attacked me as a person when I tried to leave. You were required to let me leave and then chase me, or ensure my safety while here. You’ve failed.”

Her face twisted in a scowl. “Regrettable, but unavoidable. You crossed over; you’re mine.”

His eyes bored into her with their gaze. “A local custom. Hospitality is the supreme law of the land. Even fantoms must respect it.”

She approached to within an arm’s length of him. “It’s too late for any of that.”

The numbness had spread all over his side. His sweat felt cold and he shivered once.

Rordan said, “That’s right. Because now that you’ve broken your guest’s trust, the destroyer bee is going to punish you.”

Pasiphaea said, “Destroyer bee? There’s no such thing.”

“That’s what you think! A few days ago, I was stung by a destroyer bee. The bee must have known you were going to do this. And you sank your fangs into it. Looks like you don’t have long to live.”

Her composure grew uncertain. “Your blood does taste bitter.”

“There’s only one antidote to the destroyer bee.”

Pasiphaea said, “Letting you go, I suppose?”

Rordan pretended annoyance. “No, you’ve got it all wrong. I’m not even sure if it’ll work. I’ll trade with you if you give me something in return.”

He felt her hard look. She licked her lips and made a grimace. “I can’t let you go.”

“Of course not. What I want is a kiss from you. If I’m going to die, I want to get that fantastic fantom girl kiss everyone’s always talking about. You do that and I’ll tell you how to avoid the destroyer bee’s poison.”

Rordan shuddered. His chest felt cold.

Her eyes regarded him with irritation. “Very well, but you must tell me first.”

Rordan said, “That hardly seems fair since I’m the one who’s been wronged. But okay. Since I’m such a nice guy, I’ll go first. When the vampire attacked me, I dropped a bag I was looking at. Inside is a charm against bee stings given to me by one of my new friends here. If you carry it, it’ll alleviate the poison.”

She regarded him carefully and smacked her lips. “Oh, all right.”

“Hurry up. I’m already going numb and I want the full effect. A real kiss too, not some measly peck. It’s the least you could do.”

Pasiphaea took his head in her hands and brought his face close to hers. She held a look of slight disgust, then kissed him on the lips.

Her touch tingled like a thousand tiny nettles and she smelled of breeze-blown wildflowers. He wrapped his

arms around her smooth shoulders and felt the phantom cloth slide under his touch with a slight crackle of heat. A sensation of arousal flooded through his body and he drifted in bliss.

She pulled away from him with a firm and determined movement. Her eyes burned with angry thoughts. Pasiphaea turned on her heel and rushed off with inhuman speed.

Rordan fought against the numbness in his chest and stumbled toward the dagger. He reached it and lay on his back. His breathing came in tight gasps.

“I’m going to live. I’m getting out of this.”

He opened his body up to the song of nature and strained to keep his eyes open. His elbow pressed against the bite and he endured a fit of trembling. Rordan’s thoughts drifted to the pleasures of Pasiphaea’s kiss and naughty impulses swelled through his mind.

The song of nature responded to his impulses and filled his senses with an explosion of feeling. Rordan floated on the sensations the song stirred inside of him. He heard his own chord in the song, which resonated in his spirit with a powerful love of all beings.

The river of fire inside his body rose up and caught hold of him with a blaze of passion. The passion set fire to the poison in his blood, searing his senses with a sensation of molten heat and blinding light. His body shook with the force of unleashed personal depths. He sat upright and took rapid breaths.

A wave of nausea struck him and he held back an urge to vomit. Rordan turned sideways onto his hands and knees; he waited.

The discomfort passed. Rordan spotted his daypack where it had fallen during the struggle. He looked up at the forest canopy and estimated he had minutes before he would be unable to see where he went. His hand grasped the dagger and he stood up.

He scooped up his daypack and sat down on one of the outer stones.

Rordan said, “Which way do I go mascot? I don’t have much time before she comes back really mad.”

His mascot came out of him and said, “Before you go, take the plant with you. It wants to come with us.”

The words sank into Rordan’s mind. He stood up and moved toward the rock. The now luminescent plant stood out in bright relief from the growing shadows. Rordan picked it up and said, “I hope you don’t mind hanging out with a bungler.”

A dense sound and thick fragrance overwhelmed his awareness. He fought off a dizzy spell. Rordan placed the wet plant into a pouch on the side of his daypack, then steadied himself.

“Okay, where to?”

The mascot said, “You know who you are and where you are, even if you choose to forget. You will never be lost if you decide to know where you are. Such things are in your blood.”

Rordan knew his mascot spoke the truth. A memory of a time where he had found his way home came back to him. After separation from his parents for a long while, he had found them again. He decided on a direction and walked away from the stones.

He chopped ahead of him with the dagger and the threads of Pasiphaea's trap severed before him. The undergrowth of the forest became more difficult to traverse. The roots of the trees tripped him up.

The light had grown so dim he could hardly see where he walked. Rordan wished he could walk the dark depths of the forest like he could walk his own home at night. He forced himself to pick up the pace and stopped his use of the dagger before him. The whisper of leaves being pressed upon made him turn to his side. He saw nothing.

A familiar voice spoke to him in his mind from afar as though projected through a tunnel. "Over here Rordan."

He looked about and spotted a glowing red and white light in the distance through the trees. It waved back and forth. His mind heard the voice say, "If you reach me first, I'll see to it you escape alive."

Rordan stepped with care through the dense underbrush and made his way toward the red light. He pushed aside the fronds of a massive fern from his face. The outline of a figure holding a torch beckoned to him.

The figure said, "Quicken your pace. She is almost upon you."

Rordan recognized Varan's voice. He stepped through and out of the woods, onto a road with cottages on the other side. Smoke trailed from their chimneys and light shone from between the cracks of shuttered windows. A lighted streetlamp was at an intersection a hundred feet to his left and two hundred feet to his right. He recognized he had passed through here in the wagon yesterday.

Varan gazed at him from behind the hooded cloak. He sucked on his pipe and blew clouds of smoke about him. In one clawed hand he held a thin, irregular black torch. The torch flared with a bright, reddish-white flame.

Rordan said, "Thank you. I didn't look forward to finding my way out of there."

Varan took the pipe in his free hand. "There is no need to thank me. I would be a poor lodestar if I abandoned you too soon. That part of the forest is dangerous for humans at night. Hostile, unhuman beings walk there. Look behind you."

Panic seized Rordan and he turned around. A hunting spider as large as himself stared back at him from the forest underbrush. Its fur bristled like spines and its multiple eyes gleamed in the light of Varan's torch. Enormous, wet fangs jutted from the spider's mouth area.

"Good evening, Pasiphaea. It appears this human has outwitted you this night. I shall be taking charge of him from here. Give my regard to your sisters, will you? Until we meet again." Varan made a slight bow.

Rordan swallowed.

Varan said, “You are safe for now. She is not allowed to leave the forest during the night. Come with me and we will talk a while.” The reptile man walked down the road toward the streetlamp at the intersection.

Rordan followed him. His feet felt unsteady, but Varan’s presence made a difference to him. The creature gave him a goal to focus his remaining strength upon. Fighting the poison felt like it had taken all he had.

“How did you know where to find me? And what’s a lodestar?”

Varan said, “Far-seeing is my specialty. I know a good deal of what goes on around here. A lodestar is a fantom who volunteers to be a human’s guide for the fantom world.”

Rordan repeated most of Varan’s words to himself. “Is Pasiphaea really a daughter of Arakhne, the girl turned into a spider by a witch?”

Varan said, “A statement of lineage. All of Arakhne’s descendents must dwell in the darkness at the edges of humanity, unable to form relationships and have an authentic life.”

He felt his heart sink. “Is she really a spider?”

Varan took a puff of his pipe and filled the air ahead of him with aromatic smoke. Rordan caught a whiff of it and coughed.

“Partially. She is one of many people trapped in the phantom realm, without a shape of their own. Cursed to live a life that does not suit them.”

Rordan said, “That’s terrible. Can’t anything be done to help her?”

They reached the streetlamp and turned to the left. The lights of the academy and the silhouette of the sanctum came into view.

Varan said, “Does she deserve help? You are not the first person she’s dragged into her burrow. Pasiphaea would have devoured you without remorse. Her existence might be a well-deserved nightmare. See what happens when you don’t look at yourself?”

A sense of diminishment enveloped Rordan. His feelings drifted into pity.

The reptile-man stopped to turn and face him. “She harrowed you to the brink of death. Poisoned you with venom that you can never be rid of. Touched you with a kiss that will torment you forever. Is that the kind of behavior that merits help?”

Rordan looked up at Varan and said, “She’s messed up and I care about that.”

Varan took a long puff of his pipe. “If you understood the strength and wisdom inside your soul, you might be able to redeem her from her fate. One of her sisters would take over for her.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “I heard you mention her sisters.”

Varan chuckled. “The Tangleprickers. They’ll want a word with you over what happened. There’s a mother too, named Thistlemouth. She walks the academy grounds at night.”

Rordan boggled. “That’s horrible! They eat people.”

Varan said, “Only when they are hungry. The Tangleprickers are usually content to scare humans away from the forest. There is more to them than your sinister image of the spider. Most humans are sleepwalkers and easily turned aside. But the living dead like Master Beag can do harm. They must be driven off if they cannot be righteously defeated.”

“You know about Master Beag?”

Varan said, “He’s one of the local vampires.”

A squeak escaped Rordan’s throat. “There are more of them?”

A puff of smoke curled from Varan’s jaws. “The riddle of evil extends beyond your small torch of vision. There are many ways of not looking at yourself.”

Rordan said, “What’s the deal with humans and the forest? Why don’t the Tangleprickers want them there at night?”

Varan said, “They call the forest Unruly Wend. It is one of a shrinking number of fantom wilds not ruined by your people. The fantoms who dwell within intend to preserve their borders from the harmful influence of humans. Even if it means extreme measures.”

An image of the secret crater came to Rordan's thoughts. "I understand that stupidity causes harm, I just don't see how exactly. Fantoms have special powers. I don't see what humans can do against that."

Varan said, "Human beings and fantoms have been at war with one another for a long time. Your people ignore or pretend us away to nothingness. My people curse yours with madness and misfortune."

"We're at war with each other? That's horrible too. What's the war about?"

Varan said, "A long history of undeserved pride."

Rordan said, "Where do you stand on this?"

"I am against war. There can be no victory, only misery. My people have grown stale and angry while yours have lost the dearest part of themselves."

"What about humans who look at themselves. Could they go into Unruly Wend?"

Varan said, "If they were so inclined. They would likely find only hostility. Pasiphaea is a sentinel, one of many protecting the last fantom wilds from human sleepwalking.

"Ages ago, the sentinels played an important part in the exchange between humans and fantoms. Now there is no relationship. The old friendship has turned sour. She and the Tangleprickers capture and eat those who enter, awake or not."

Rordan said, "Where were her sisters?"

Varan said, “They were present as observers. Pasiphaea is the eldest. The honor to hunt intruders falls to her first.”

Rordan said, “You said I can never be rid of the poison. I know fantom kisses are supposed to mark you in some way. What else do I need to know?”

Varan said, “Your encounter with the fantom world has traumatized you. You could die this very night or you might come away with fantastic abilities. The spirit of life has entered you and even I cannot predict what will come of it. Large parts of you are beyond my knowledge.”

“How did this happen? The seeing things, I mean.”

Varan said, “That is a puzzle I would enjoy learning the answer to. You do not willingly close your eyes. It was inevitable that nature would send you to a fantom wild. You have passed the sentinel’s crossing and left the helpless safety of youth behind. Should you survive this night, the dangerous and delightful fantom world is open to you now. It’s up to you—and ourselves—what to make of it.”

Rordan wanted to ask about Kea. He felt his nausea return and dropped his next question.

Varan said, “Enough knowledge. You are an eager pupil, but a good lodestar does not burn his charge. He cooks him slowly to completeness.”

Rordan felt Varan’s statement implied more danger to come. He refused to dismiss the feeling. “Are you going to try to eat me too?”

The reptile-man smiled a wicked grin and showed his teeth. “Yes, but not today. You have to pay to learn how to think.”

Rordan smiled thinly. “I see you’ve read Doctor Skulky too. Tell me, is he really dead?”

“He was never alive. His creator has turned to stone as Master Beag has. Vampires are petrified humans controlled by the machine men.”

A silence came over Rordan. He recalled his precious time alone with Tora. “Is there any way you could see how my friends in Nerham are doing? I’m afraid of what might be happening, but I still need to know.”

Varan said, “I am unfamiliar with your friends. If you require answers, it is better that I show you how to get them yourself. Let me invite you to my lair. I promise to be more hospitable than Pasiphaea.”

“Okay, sure.”

The two of them continued on. They headed up a hill and past a closed office with a patroller checkpoint symbol outside the door. Boant Oak came into view.

Rordan said, “Thanks for all the stuff you told me. And thanks for saving my life too.”

Varan smiled. “My pleasure.” He took a puff of his pipe. The torch shone brightly without having consumed any part of itself.

Rordan said, “I’ve looked at the wheel page. Really weird stuff. I don’t suppose you could tell me what I’m supposed to do with it?”

Varan said, “It is a training compass for your heart’s desire. Keep up the good work. It’s refreshing to see a human around here asking questions. I’ll see you again Rordan.”

The creature tossed the torch aside and it bounced over the surface of the road. The torch flared once, then became a pile of cinders.

Rordan felt a piece of him had been used up for all time. He watched the creature’s cloak disappear into the darkness of an unlighted side street. The orange glow of Varan’s pipe flashed once. The smell of tobacco vanished.

He continued up the slight hill toward Boant Oak on his own. His body’s aches and pains came back to his attention. Rordan felt his blood buzz with the after-effects of Pasiphaea’s poison. He imagined his experiences had finally caught up to him. The need to find a safe place to crash focused his steps.

Rordan reached the field where he and his friends had fought the Stinge. Halfway across, a wave of poison forced him to his hands and knees. He sat down on the grass and noticed he still held Kea’s dagger. The weapon was returned to its sheath with difficulty. He cupped the small plant into his hand from the pouch. The sprouting leaves and tiny roots looked fine to him.

His eyes stared at the ground. Grief consumed him and he cried without sound for a minute.

By small degrees, he came to realize he had experienced this pain before. When he had been little.

Rordan felt the raw wound of two separate incidents in time, now linked by a common feeling of shock. He had come back from the woods with no answer in both instances and the sting of failure squeezed a gasp from his chest.

His quiet sobs passed. Memories of shame and repentance gave way to a forgotten feeling of resentment. Rordan trembled at the repressed emotion he hadn't felt a right to. It burned its way into his memory again like fire and he realized a part of him had become mean that day. Tonight's bungle had brought it back from the depths of his childhood secrets.

As the remains of the poison traveled inside of him, he imagined his mean streak made him sour and grumpy, or bitter and cruel. The quality felt like it existed as both part of him and not of him. He supposed it must be a semi-separate entity from him and he pictured a wasp buzz around his mind. At times the wasp gained his attention and other times it didn't.

Rordan knew he couldn't ignore this part of him anymore. Darkness lived inside of him. For a second, he believed a person stood nearby, looking down on him with contempt.

The song of nature came to his attention and resonated through him with violence. His mind reeled from the impact and he tumbled about in his head. The dizziness tossed him around dark colors and uncontrolled currents of mindless sight.

He found himself accepting the poison into himself, even as he fought against it. The poison changed him and became part of his being. The nerves of his body trembled with the pain of the struggle.

His lips burned. Regret entered into his thoughts while a gentle bright light doused all his other sensations. A vision emerged from the song of nature and seized his attention.

A long stretch of rocky, forested beach filled his view. The smell of salt and sensation of wet sand beneath him nearly overwhelmed his sanity. He saw Pasiphaea, both woman and spider impossibly as one, grotesque and consuming as well as lovely and strong. Her venom had moved inside of him and his bitter human blood had moved through her. He intuited they had changed each other because of the bee sting.

In pain, Rordan reached out to touch her. His hand strained palm upwards to express a meaningful connection. He touched her on the heart and she closed her eyes while her many limbs buffeted his head. The vision became a reflection upon a surface of water; his hand disturbed the image as ripples moved outward from his touch. He watched her crumble into tiny pieces of moss-eaten stone and the vision went dark.

His face grew flush with sweat. He touched drool on his lips and laughed with a whinny. Rordan knew he couldn't wash the kiss of death out with mere spit. He moved onto his elbows and knees, struggling to keep the

plant in his left hand. Rordan took shallow breaths and convulsed like an animal absorbed by sickness.

A comforting soft note rose up in the song of nature. Strength flowed up from within him like a tide. A wave of water flowed against him, splashing across his arms, legs and face. A sensation of renewal passed through his body and he beheld a shining onion surrounded by flecks of radiant gold. The onion peeled open before his irrational sight.

Rordan stared in awe. Numbness gave way to knowledge and he intuited he beheld a fundamental part of himself.

His mascot said, “Your recognition of your darkness has released your own life. It shines forth for you to behold. This is your quest, your salvation, and secret wish standing before you. It glows in your darkness and you do not understand.”

The song of nature resonated within him once more, then vanished. His own chord sounded, distant and deep in a repressed wilderness of personal desolation, before slipping from his grasp.

Drool dripped from the edges of his mouth as he took a slow breath. Base emotions shook him with their wildness and he cast aside all shame through a rough series of grunts and coughs.

A limitless view of life passed before his eyes and took his breath away. He could destroy and create anything and everything. The insight faded and he found himself gasping for breath on the grassy field.

He blinked as clarity washed through his mind. The impressions of what he had experienced remained. Drool covered his chin and grass stuck to his sweaty clothes.

“I’m a mess.” His voice was a craggy whisper.

The small plant remained in his palm. He rose to his feet and grabbed the daypack with his free hand. Rordan stumbled toward Boant Oak. A dull willpower guided him through the front door. He walked past the eyes of curious and concerned pupils in the hall, then up the central stairwell. His eyes fixed on the door to the Upper Trow snug as he stepped down the hall.

The snug was empty and unlit. He closed the door behind him and sat on one of the plush chairs. His daypack slumped to the carpeted floor. The plant ended up on the table in front of him.

A weak feeling of poison struck him hard. He had no madness or fear to take him through the nausea. Rordan sat with his head bowed down and suffered through a need to mew.

The nausea passed. He sat back and his thoughts wandered. The poison had burned a hole in his stomach. Rordan dug into his daypack and found the last piece of beef jerky. He chomped it down and the snack dulled the edge of his hunger.

The plant spoke to him in a good-natured voice. “Thank you for taking me with you. I was happy when you dropped by. You look like a fun wayfarer to travel with.”

Rordan said, "You're welcome. I'll get you into a pot as soon as I can manage."

The plant said, "That's mighty kind of you. You'll find me a hardy traveler."

Rordan said, "That makes one of us anyway."

The plant said, "Maybe I can help you out and return the favor. That was a pretty sneaky trick you played on Pasiphaea. I'll bet you didn't know how clever you could be."

"Yeah?" Rordan stared at the plant and tried to make sense of the conversation.

"For an instant, everything you said was true. Who is to say there wasn't a destroyer bee or you hadn't dropped an amulet against poison? Your imagination is a strong power. All you need is a token to train it."

Rordan said, "A token?"

The plant said, "Your lucky stone could be that token. It sure would be honored if you chose it for that job. All you have to do now is ask the diamond child growing inside of you for permission, and you could have some power."

A thrill shot through Rordan and he sat upright in a daze. His hand fumbled into his pocket for the lucky stone.

"Thanks plant. I need the help."

"You're welcome."

The crystal was in Rordan's hand. "Hey, I don't know your name. But you've been with me a long time. If you want to do this, well...yes. I couldn't choose a nicer crystal to go on this adventure with."

The crystal shone with a green flare Rordan recognized. The memory of the flare in his father's lantern came back to him and he bristled with goose bumps.

A trance came over him. He perceived an invisible shine move inside and around him. Out of the shine came a secret. Rordan understood he had been granted permission to know how to use his token, or anything he took a mind to honor as a token.

He reckoned on what he had learned from the invisible shine. An insight struck him.

"Am I becoming a magician? Have I always been waiting to become one? Is this journey the way my powers will be revealed to me?"

The invisible shine vanished from his awareness and Rordan faded from the trance. The plant, the crystal, and his own body seemed ordinary to him now. He believed part of his purpose had at last been made clear and he smiled to himself.