

CHAPTER 12: A WINNING HAND

Rordan followed Glenys back to her room. Inside, a teenage girl with a cheerful expression lay sideways on the opposite bed. She read a lesson by lamplight.

Glenys waved at her and said, “Hi Sinna. This is Rordan. I’m spending the night with him and his brother. Second floor, room eight. I’ll be back in the morning.”

Sinna waved back and smiled. She studied Rordan’s face. “Okay. Have fun.”

Glenys pulled a travel bag out from underneath her bed and opened a side pouch. She drew out a wrapped item Rordan took to be her fortune cards. Then she grabbed her line bag, followed by a pillow, a blanket and a small stuff-friend bear.

His interest in the bear caught her attention. “His name’s Nuzzler.”

Rordan said, “Cute. I have a bear too. His name’s Tedder.”

Glenys shot him a wry look. “Original.”

They returned to his room and rejoined Fikna. Borus remained asleep.

Fikna adjusted a lighted lamp on Rordan’s desk. “There we are. Rord, we promised to escort those girls to the Grill tonight. You might say we are caught in a bind.”

Rordan sighed. “Dang it. We’re going to have to flake on them or something.”

Fikna huffed. “Unfortunately, that would be exceptionally rude.”

Glenys watched the two of them fret. “You can keep your thing with them. I can still do the cards. The Grill has a side room we can use.”

Fikna motioned toward Borus. “What about our sleeping friend? We can’t abandon the poor fellow here, all alone.”

Glenys laughed softly and shook her head. “Obviously then, you’ll have to wake your friend up.”

Rordan nodded. “I’ll do it.” He approached Borus and nudged her. “Borus, wake up. We need you to come with us. Wake up.”

The girl stirred and opened her eyes. She peered with a sleepy daze at the three people who looked in on her. Borus studied Rordan for a moment, then got up. She stretched and yawned in one elongated motion.

The four of them spread out into the room. Glenys dumped her things on Rordan’s bed and sat down next to them. Borus took a seat beside her. Fikna assumed a dignified pose upon the desk chair.

Rordan remained on his feet and crossed his arms. “Okay. Glenys you said something about using the cards to see what’s going on. What would we be doing, exactly?”

She unwrapped the item she had brought with her and revealed it as a pile of fortune cards. She shuffled them with ease. “Guidance. We might find out why Kea is out

to get us, or how to solve this problem without getting hurt.”

Rordan looked at the cards with interest.

“Those don’t match the appearance of the cards we play ranc with,” said Fikna. “They appear reclassicist in their design. Where did you obtain them, if I might ask?”

She cut the cards and shuffled them again. “There’s a bookman at the mart who sells them. He gets all kinds from all over the Heartland.”

Fikna said, “And you think they might be employed to tell our future? I find this usage an uncomfortable prospect, not far removed from the witchcraft of our opponent.”

She stared ahead for a moment. “I don’t know. I always find that it helps me unwind. If you don’t believe in the cards, think of it as an exercise. It clears the head and lets us think of things we might not otherwise. The best thing you can do before a struggle is relax.”

Fikna said, “I agree, that’s sound advice.”

Borus moved her gaze from person to person.

“Okay, why not?” said Rordan. “But first bro’, we need to tell Glenys our dealings with Kea so she is up to date.”

Fikna said, “Yes, such an exchange would be in order at this point. I shall speak first.”

The young gallant provided Glenys with a general account of how he and Rordan had met Kea, their interactions with her, and what they had seen her do.

Rordan felt his bro' meandered a little.

Glenys arched an eyebrow at Fikna and chuckled to herself. "I'm sorry things didn't work out with her like you'd hoped. She sounds like a bad person. It's doubtful you could have had a long-term relationship with her. That guy Noss doesn't sound so nice either."

She listened to Rordan give his side of the tale. He kept the bloodsucking incident and the detail about the wealth in the grotto to himself.

Fikna said, "You certain you didn't embellish that a little?"

Rordan pursed his lips and stared at him.

Glenys handled the deck of cards in her hand absently. "If I hadn't seen the Stinge with my own eyes, I'd swear you were putting me on."

Rordan said, "Do you want to see the map?"

She shook her head and her hair bounced lightly across her shoulders. "I probably wouldn't see anything either. That woman meant it only for you. So pay attention to whatever you see there. Whoa, this definitely shoots down my plans to be an ordinary pupil."

Glenys stared into his eyes.

Her scrutiny seemed curious and playful to him.

The moment vanished as Fikna blurted out his thoughts. "What I fail to perceive are the reasons for Kea's behavior. It eludes me how we could inspire such effort as she has expended."

With a jerk, Rordan shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Maybe she doesn’t need a reason.”

Fikna said, “I find that absurd. Why would anyone want to cause a magnitude of trouble for no reason other than pure malice?”

“Because she can,” said Glenys. “Kea began her activities on you from the start. She sounds like she has a special dislike for Rordan, maybe because she sees how different he is. It only makes her angrier with each failed attempt to harm him. What confuses me is why she didn’t finish you off when she had the chance.”

Fikna stared at the floor and shifted uncomfortably in the chair.

She gazed out the window, then stared ahead in thought. “Hurling curses is a dangerous thing to do. I’ve read it’s hard to stop once you start; you always end up paying a steep price. It might be something she’s lost control of. Maybe she isn’t acting out of malice at all.”

Fikna looked up at her. “You mentioned earlier our opponent was bad.”

She frowned at him. “I said she sounded bad. But even so, bad is good tormented by its fate. Unless you’ve been in a dark place yourself, don’t judge those who are lost.”

Fikna clenched his fists. “We decide our actions. If this girl commits wickedness, she is guilty.”

Glenys glared at him. She used a firm voice. “I can’t help it. I don’t mean anyone harm, not even enemies. If

I can't stand in their place and say 'I deserve this', I have no right passing sentence.

"You should remember that she's a human being and might be hurting inside. If she's in pain, then she's lashing out as a means of coping."

Rordan said, "I agree. We shouldn't be so quick to judge. We should be fair in our decisions bro'."

Fikna sat back and gaped. "I prefer to avoid unjust positions. Yet, how can we remain inactive? If not us, then another innocent will be harmed. And while we stand here debating we become responsible for idleness."

Rordan smirked and opened his hands in a gesture of revelation toward Glenys. "That, dear bro' of mine, is why she's here with the cards. So we can brainstorm and get some ideas."

She smiled, waving the cards in her right hand at Fikna for emphasis.

The young gallant burst into laughter. "You two ought to form a stage act."

The three of them laughed together, with Borus appearing baffled.

The door unlocked and Stig walked in. He looked impatient. Behind him came two unfamiliar teenage guys. They stood and waited while Stig searched his backpack.

Rordan overcame his surprise and introduced himself to the newcomers. The beanpole with darting eyes gave his name as Dag and the hefty, reserved guy with the eyeglasses went by the name of Mosi. They

acknowledged Fikna and Glenys when Rordan introduced them.

Stig pulled out a truncheon, a narrow dagger with a thin blade, a black handkerchief, and a small wallet of deep red leather tied shut. He slid the dagger into his boot and the wallet in his back pocket. “And I’m his bunkmate by the way. Name’s Stig. Hey Glenys. Sorry, can’t stay. Going out.”

Rordan said, “Where to?”

Stig smiled and gave a careless shrug of his shoulders. “How the damn crap should I know?”

The three guys hurried out of the room and Stig slammed the door behind them. Glenys arched her eyebrows at Rordan.

Fikna went over to the truncheon. He examined the weapon and tested its balance. “A crowner? So he’s a handler then. Bit of a broiler also, by the look of his bearing. He’s studying history? Rather unlikely, I say.”

Rordan puffed. The guys had left before he could introduce Borus. “His friends sure didn’t have much to say. What a bunch of brutes. I don’t like it.”

Fikna said, “The gryphon had a service stripe on his jacket. I would wager the tall troglodyte carries some manner of concealed arms.” He sat down again.

Rordan stared at the weapon. His bunkmate’s visit had set him on edge. “Stig said his father was a trawler. Probably a roughneck yokel.”

Glenys shivered. “He has disturbed energy. Brr. Be careful with him.”

The conversation stopped. Borus snapped to attention and looked at his friends’ faces one by one.

Glenys took in a deep breath and exhaled. “Those three are up to something serious. Whatever it is, it’s left a bad wake in this room.”

Fikna slumped and looked at the floor. “I agree with your assessment Glenys. I’m not myself, all of a sudden.”

She looked up at Rordan. “What does your third eye see?”

Rordan stared back at her. “I forgot all about it. I feel so weak right now. I don’t even know if I can try to use it.”

His attention shifted suddenly to the daubings of the Hearth Bunch back in Nerham. The faces of his friends were covered in a faint smudge of gray color not related to the water damage. The smudge rendered his depictions of them lifeless and sad.

Glenys followed his stare. Fikna looked up and saw the two of them stare past him. He turned around.

Rordan said, “I see our friends in trouble. That’s what I see. There’s a cloud over them.”

He watched Glenys put her head down and glower to herself, a dormant power building inside of her.

Fikna turned forward and looked at him. “Are you certain of your observation? Abrafo couldn’t possibly

have fallen into trouble, could he? Lewinna? For Welkin's sake, what misfortune might they be enduring?"

A dread took hold of Rordan and he lowered his head. "I don't know exactly. I just have a fear our friends aren't safe."

Glenys spoke in a low voice. "I have a big mouth sometimes. I'm sorry, Rordan. That was thoughtless on my part. If you use your gift, you have to be ready to know what it shows you. I have a father and a brother to worry about. If they're in trouble that makes me furious."

Borus slid closer to Glenys and placed a palm on her arm. She uttered nonsensical chatter at her and made a funny face. Her large, dark eyes shone with excitement.

A wave of warmth passed over Rordan. He watched a vivid pressure and pungent aroma of earthy colors emanate from Borus' mouth as the boy spoke. A formless, heavy cold was driven from the room in a sudden blast.

Rordan realized the cold had gained a foothold in the room on the heels of Stig and his friends. He saw that this cold was immense in size and extended across the Heartland, then he lost hold of the vision and returned to a normal view of the room.

Glenys smiled at her. She put her free hand on the girl's and said, "Oh, Borus. You are so kind to think of me, as confused as you must be. I hope Rordan finds a way to help you."

Borus squeezed Glenys' arm. She bounced her rump on the mattress and chattered. Her friends all laughed.

Rordan found his mood suddenly improved and it looked to him like Fikna had recovered. The gloom that had hung over them a minute ago had disappeared. He felt safe again in the light of the lamp.

“Borus is a guardian and a protector. He drives off the backmonkeys and drudgets—helps us toss the boot.”

Glenys puzzled at him and half chuckled. “That last part made no sense. But you're on the right trail. If there's anything we can do, lets start tonight.” She wrapped up the cards and stashed them in her line bag.

Fikna said, “You may count on my agreement. I suggest we pay a visit to those two young ladies now. Perhaps we may investigate the possibility of an early start.” He stood up and checked Trad's knife.

Rordan waited for everyone to gather outside the door, then he blew the lamp out.

His bro' led them down to the end of the hall to Nyah's open door. The floor snug stood across from her room. She played a card game with Eshe. They both enjoyed smokes.

Fikna said, “Knock, knock. Ladies, may we step inside?”

Nyah said, “Get your cheeks in here.” Her eyes had a manic gleam as she grinned at them.

Rordan followed Fikna inside, with Glenys and Borus close behind.

The furniture had been arranged for several people to sit around a medium-sized, square table in the center of the room. Rordan noticed Nyah's interests in statement-hangings and banners leaned toward the occult. Her interests lent her choices of dark colors with light outlines and melodramatic themes an unfamiliar ambiance.

He recognized the acrid background odor of unlicensed dispensaries and noted a water pipe in the corner of Nyah's desk. Rordan hoped Fikna wouldn't make an issue out of her negligent lifestyle.

Glenys and Borus were introduced. Nyah and Eshe saw only a boy when they looked at the youngster. Rordan sat next to Nyah and Fikna assumed a seat next to Eshe. Glenys sat between the two brothers. Borus stayed on her feet and studied the expressive decoration.

Nyah eyed Rordan with an unhinged leer. "What a nice surprise to see Poop Dunce here. We thought you were going to flake on us and ditch the show."

Rordan smiled at her. "No way. You're pretty neat. What are you playing?"

"It's called Negligent," said Nyah, suddenly low-key. "You try and get as high a hand as possible. Without getting busted by the other players. And right now, Eshe is being a real trull."

Eshe took a long drag off her smoke and exhaled while speaking. "Thank you, sweetie." She gestured toward the cards and said, "It's a game that works better with several people. Two people can only mess with each other. There's no third wheel to bug-hump."

Nyah said, “And you can trade cards, which makes for even more front-stabbing.”

Shock turned into excitement on Fikna’s face. “I never heard of a game whose premise involved the gathering of dispensaries. How irregular.”

Eshe giggled a little. “I have the impression you don’t make much contact with gryphons.”

Fikna waved the suggestion off. “My best friend happens to be a...err...Kgosian. However, we enjoy ranc, not this sort of amusement.”

Nyah took the cards and shuffled them. “Oh I see. You’ll play a game about capturing booty captives. But you’re afraid of a little exposure to suggestions of being a negligent?”

Glenys said, “I’ll play.” She looked at Rordan.

He felt her hopes that he would play too. Rordan zoned out for a moment, then looked at Glenys and did a double take. “Oh right, me too. Why not? When do we go to the Grill?”

Eshe said, “We have a little less than a mark before our friend is supposed to play. Enough for a quick game. Or we can leave our cards here and come back.”

Fikna smirked. “A splendid idea. While I find it disagreeable in subject matter, it has the advantage of being original and interesting.”

Nyah grinned like a lunatic. In a childlike voice she said, “You won’t be sorry you played with us.” She distributed cards to everyone but Borus, who stood

behind Rordan and watched the cards as they moved around.

Eshe started the hand. She summarized the rules to them.

Rordan strained to listen and understand, but no strategy jumped out at him. He resolved to wait.

The cards appeared to have been illustrated by a negligent. He found them bawdy and abstract. The mature themes were strongly suggestive of pursuits associated with that group.

He looked at Fikna. The image concepts appeared to tickle his bro's fancy. Rordan breathed an inner sigh of relief. He could never tell how Fikna might react, even though skirting the edges thrilled his bro'. Their Emyrean friends liked the image of Amazing Fikna. But Rordan guessed they would be shocked if they knew his bro' really took on the thrill sometimes.

He muttered under his breath, "Libras."

Nyah fluttered her eyebrows and smiled at him. "Yes, Rordy?"

"Oh, Libra. My bro's a Libra. I'm into stargazing. It's a hobby. But Glenys is really the expert around here."

Glenys pretended not to have heard.

Nyah said, "Can you guess what I am?"

Rordan shook his head. "No, I don't guess. I just read about it. For talk purposes at revels, you understand."

She made a sigh of disappointment. With a sweet voice, Nyah said, “I’m Cancer the crab.” She stared at Rordan with rude expectation.

Eshe started the game and Fikna watched what she did.

Rordan said, “You’re moody, deeply maternal, and a weird moon girl. You enjoy good humor and have a hard outer shell, with a soft inside.”

Nyah puckered her cheeks inward and looked around comically. She cackled a little. “Awesome.”

“You remind me of this guy on the boat I took up here,” said Rordan. “He was really outgoing too.”

Nyah boggled her eyes. She stared at Eshe, who had finished a hand and was explaining it to Fikna. “Ethie baby, what’s your sign?”

Eshe looked up and said, “Huh? Oh, that jargon. Aquarius.” She doused her smoke and waited for Fikna to make a move with his turn.

Rordan nodded. He mulled over what he could remember. “Analytical. Unconventional. The individualist of the stars, and very smart.”

Eshe said, “That does sound like me. But that could also be lots of people.”

Rordan noted the cool mental answer of an air sign and looked at his hand again. He still didn’t understand what he could do.

Glenys looked over at him. “That’s not bad. You understand the basics of each sun sign. I’ll have to

remember to let you borrow my lessons from the Romance Collection. It has an excellent summary of all the signs, both positive and negative.”

Nyah looked at Glenys with pretend suspicion in her eyes. “What about you, honey?”

She eyed Nyah and answered in a low voice. “Leo.”

“Aw. How cute, a kitty cat.” Nyah shifted around the cards in her hand.

Glenys said, “I like it.”

Nyah smirked at her. She turned to Rordan and used a shrill voice. “It’s your turn!”

Rordan shook with surprise.

Eshe said, “He jumps well. We’ll have fun with this one.”

Nyah raised her eyebrows and nodded. “And what sign are you Rordy honey?”

Rordan caught his breath. “I’m a Pisces. Dreamy, reticent, and imaginative. Oh, and wishy-washy.” He played a card he thought might be good.

Glenys said, “You’re not wishy-washy; you’re sensitive.”

“Mrm-hrm. Well, that only leaves your handsome brother here. And what does Libra do?” Nyah drew a card with a look of amusement.

Fikna shook his head in annoyance. “Oh, come now. Can’t we concentrate on the game and not get drawn into

repeated nonsense about birth signs. Stargazing is all a bunch of superstitious guess work.”

Glenys looked up from her hand. “That’s why the Prince Elder of the Classis knows it.”

“That is decidedly untrue,” said Fikna. “I never heard of such a thing.”

She nodded. “It’s true. All senior elders have to study stargazing as part of their training.”

Fikna said, “That doesn’t mean he practices it. It pays to be a sage in all matters relating to superstitious beliefs, particularly for one as holy as His Sacredness.”

Nyah played a weak card with a sideways glance at Rordan. Eshe followed up with an equally lackluster play.

Glenys looked slyly at Fikna and said, “You can’t study stargazing seriously without practicing it to some degree. The sacred archive contains uncounted volumes on the subject. Hardly the sign of something regarded as superstition. You don’t see those learned men studying Hellirism, do you?”

Fikna noted the cards in play. “Continue to profess what you like; the matter still sounds unlikely to me.” He played his turn out.

Rordan watched Glenys’ reaction. He had read in Modwenna’s Stellar Collection how unstoppable Leos were. They could overcome any obstacle because of their royal power.

Unformed thoughts stirred in his mind. He fashioned a realization out of them and came to a conclusion. In

this room he sat among friends. The comradeship was not unlike back home when his friends in Nerham gathered. Surrounded by good people, he played a game of chance different from the one at home, yet not so different. He and his bro' did what they had always done, but this time they learned and grew.

He became conscious of the end of Glenys' turn. The group's attention focused on him. Rordan drew a card and studied his hand. He observed Glenys out of the corner of his sight. Her eyes showed interest and she inclined her body toward him slightly. His intuition told him she wanted to know more about him.

Rordan cowered internally at the revelation. The reality of their mutual attraction scared him. He felt uncomfortable with the worthiness to like and be liked in return. It stirred depths in him where a part of him he didn't want to wake slumbered. Leos didn't make good matches with Pisces either. Fire and water. She could crush him so easily.

All of a sudden, he knew he would open himself up to her. Depths or not, he would take a chance with his feelings. His head swam with dizziness at the absurdity of it, to throw safety to the wind and allow himself to enjoy her effect on him.

He heard a crackle behind him that sounded like the crunching of bone. He turned around and looked through the window. The formless cold lurked outside. It shimmered with stagnant pink sparkles he imagined were ice crystals in the air.

Borus watched him, her eyes wide.

The cold fled from his gaze and disappeared from sight. He faced the table again, struggled against an uncomfortable intuition forming in his mind.

The voice inside him said, “The chill cannot withstand your commitment.”

His thoughts returned to the game and he played a card. The moment he put the card into play, Rordan had a mental premonition he would win the game. He discarded.

“Hey Glenys, what do you think of that? Pretty good amount of dispensaries for a Pisces, eh?”

She gave him a coy look.

Nyah popped her eyebrows up and down. She cackled to herself and discarded.

As Eshe contemplated her move, Glenys said, “Dispensaries are bad for Pisces. It’s easy for them to get lost in addiction.”

Rordan said, “A little addiction isn’t a bad thing. All in moderation.” He flashed an excited smile at her.

She pretended not to notice. “Depends on the addiction. Fish are vulnerable to temptation.” Glenys shifted in her chair and drew a slight, nervous breath.

Eshe discarded with a groan. “Looks like my hand has gone bad.”

Fikna played a card against Rordan. “Nuts to all that Pisces nonsense. I’m putting the downer on you with Patroller Search.”

His bro’s sudden vehemence surprised him. Rordan heard the crunching sound of the chill return outside. He studied Fikna and noticed a doubt that hid behind a need to matter. The doubt burned inside Fikna like a bright light, yet his bro’ smothered it in a whirlwind of distraction.

Despite the revelation, Rordan let his bro’ struggle. “Looks like I have to get out from under the stick.”

Nyah sneered at him. “That’s right. Eat the stick.”

Rordan looked at Borus. The boy stared back at him and he knew Borus thought about their friendship. For a brief instant, he intuited a growing comprehension between them.

Glenys pulled his attention away from the youngster with a downer card she played against him. “And while you’re getting the stick, here’s some Girl Trouble too.” She giggled at him.

Rordan looked at the lewd picture. It suggested he had become distracted by carnal pursuits and thus unable to enjoy his negligent ones. “Great, I see who the third wheel is.”

Glenys giggled some more.

Nyah said, “You’re getting it both ways Rordan.” Her voice grew forceful. “Now draw a card froggie!”

He jumped in his seat, then hurried to start his hand. Rordan drew a Completely Toasted card, which he played to free his dispensary heap from all downer cards in play.

Eshe grinned. “Looks like he got out from under that bug-hump.”

Nyah nodded. She scowled at Rordan.

Borus looked out the window and took a breath. She whistled a series of notes to herself with longing.

Rordan sat up and joined Borus in looking out the window. A ponderous, grey-black lizard stared back at them from the field. The creature was nine feet tall and stood upright on two legs. Its huge, glowing white pupiless eyes regarded him for a moment, then its gaze returned to Borus.

In the darkness beyond the light of the streetlamps, he spotted the cold moving through the grounds, only wisps of its edges visible.

The lizard opened its enormous jaws and issued a throaty rumble. Borus made a long series of grunts. The lizard turned away and departed into the night, its thick tail moving back and forth in opposite tandem with its steps.

Fikna said, “Rord, stop wasting time and pay attention to the game.”

Rordan sat down, stunned at what he had witnessed.

Borus plopped down on the bed of Nyah’s bunkmate and chattered to herself.

The game continued and Rordan's heap acquired a string of high point cards. Nyah and Eshe came in behind him with a mixture of high and low point cards. Glenys managed a pair of mid-point cards. Fikna discarded three turns in a row. Despite his poor luck, the young gallant studied the gameplay and asked Eshe for an occasional explanation.

Downer cards from Rordan's hand went on Nyah and Eshe's heaps. They had the right cards to remove the downers and continued to gain on him.

Fikna drew a card and Eshe laughed at him. His bro' shrugged and discarded a different card.

Glenys put a high point dispensary in her heap and pushed past Nyah's score.

The Duffer card came into Rordan's hand. He used it to discard Eshe's highest rated dispensary.

She sighed, shaking her head.

The sanctum bell tolled once. Rordan remembered what Eshe had said about his Skidaddle card. He played it and ended the game early. The card depicted a negligent skipping town with his ill-gotten goods, presumably to idle in a stupor out in the countryside until the next game. He drew some sour looks before everyone put down their cards and declared him the winner.

Fikna said, "Most treacherous to end the game in that manner. However, good timing regardless. It's not often you are victorious at cards, Rord. I played poorly in your

place, although I admit I learned a great amount. Next time I shall offer a more worthy opposition.”

Eshe pulled on an improper lace jacket over her dress. The jacket had a number of alternative loyalty patches on the back and sleeves. “He made some good points there. But this is a long-term game. That strategy doesn’t always work.”

A satisfied grin appeared on Nyah’s face. “Maximum cool. Rordan kicked us in the teeth. It’s what we deserve for playing like beetleheads.”

“Speak for yourself, sweetie.”

Nyah stuck her tongue out at Eshe.

She curled her lip at Nyah. “Girl, does your mother know where that tongue’s been?”

Fikna said, “Ladies, ladies. Let us maintain some manner of civility here. Save the effort for our next game, where I trust no holds shall be barred.”

Nyah pretended to be chastised. “Whatever you say, sir.”

“Silly girl,” said Fikna. He shook his head at her and stood up. Everyone followed his example and stretched their legs.

Rordan said, “When’s curfew around here?”

“Ten, but there’s no curfew on Fridays,” said Nyah.

Fikna said, “Truly? A supremely unusual arrangement. How do the patrollers manage such a lawless night?”

Rordan stared blankly. He found the concept both appealing and worrisome.

Nyah said, “The director started the curfew free Fridays a few years ago. I wouldn’t get too excited though, all it means is you can’t be treated for staying out late.”

Eshe said, “Or up. We can talk more about the possibilities later. We should head out.”

As they all exited Nyah’s room and made their way downstairs, Borus fell in beside Rordan. She moved with a bounce in her step and smiled to herself.

Rordan furrowed his brow at the boy. The giant lizard had looked dangerous to him and Borus must have seen the chill. His mind drew a blank at how the youngster could be so happy.

He remembered they were all under threat of attack by magical creatures. The game had been so much fun he’d forgotten about Kea’s efforts.

His thoughts turned to Fikna and Glenys. He wanted to know how they felt about the threat. His bro’ entertained Eshe and Nyah, so he approached Glenys.

“Hey, what’s on your mind? You thinking about Kea at all?”

She shook her head. “I’m fuming over my debate with your brother. I only wish I’d come up with a better defense of stargazing to him. I feel like I should have known that subject better. I’ve read it a dozen times but I

couldn't think of it that time. I wasted so much time trying to remember that I let the conversation slide.”

Rordan watched her self-confidence twist inside her. He intuited she carried a secret fear that she wasn't up to the challenges of her life. The crunching sound in the darkness sounded, making him shiver. He wondered if she weren't giving the chill strength. He felt sympathy for her and decided to take her side against his bro'.

“Well, he's traditional. You aren't going to convince him overnight. Libras like to think things over.”

She smiled at him and touched his shoulder with her hand.

He smiled inwardly and a thrill passed through him. Rordan could hardly believe how many things had gone on today. The soft touch of her hand made everything feel insignificant by comparison.