

CHAPTER 14: THE COUNCIL

Rordan came to his senses in the Grill and found himself still seated with his friends during Vacia's performance. The illuminated wheel page remained in his hand, but the cover sheet had fallen back over the picture of the wheel.

Borus peered back at him for a moment, then resumed her rapt interest in Vacia's music.

Rordan gazed in Glenys' direction. She picked up on his stare and turned her head to flash him a smile. He nodded at her, then turned his attention to Kea's entourage. They looked oblivious to what had occurred.

His eyes returned to the illuminated page in his hand. He sighed and put the weird encounter with Varan out of his thoughts.

He remembered going crazy and blacking out. Rordan realized the madness hadn't stopped. A tingle at the base of his spine traveled up his back and into the base of his head like a wave of water. The tingle moved into his face and came down his chest and stomach, where it spread throughout his entire body and submerged him in a new sensation.

Rordan perceived the sensation as a gigantic emptiness around him, which contrasted with the rich ambiance of the people in the Grill under an unspoken purpose. The emptiness stirred him to sadness and elation at the same time.

Suddenly, he felt himself plunge through the emptiness at incredible speed and his body prickled as if he were covered in humming bees.

Raw cold surrounded him and the song of nature came forward. In the emptiness, the song sounded vast and lonely. His awareness sank into the tingle throughout his body.

He imagined his flesh and blood as a vessel filled with a fertile energy that collected from nowhere. An image formed in his mind of a subterranean river of mysterious fire, impossible to contain or control. This river teemed with the seeds and nutrients necessary for life. He visualized himself as a partner with this creative force.

A roaring fear rose up out of him and struck the images from his mind, pushed him back into the cold and emptiness. Rordan neither resisted nor despaired. He embraced the emptiness and delighted in the cold, fear giving way to awe as he watched the source of his fear dance above his outstretched hands in a ball of brilliant flame.

The voice inside him spoke in a resonant din that shook him like a tremor in the earth. “The song of nature calls out to you to destroy the wasteland you behold. A new life is being born.”

Rordan rejected the voice’s revelation. Feelings of inadequacy disturbed him and he shrank from the burden into a mental ball.

Cracks like wounds stung his body. The invisible shine appeared within him and out of this shine came a

calm. The tingle of his body subsided and his fears were lifted. The reason of his mind regained a foothold.

The calm receded and left behind the knowledge of another secret the shine had shared with him. He had only to think of it and he would understand.

The tumult of madness pulled back inside of Rordan and he returned to his senses. In the wake of the madness came sensations of exposure and vulnerability. He heard a chord in the song of nature and recognized it as his own.

The voice within him said, “Your ideas and wishes spring forth from the depths of your blood and bones. You exist to pour your life into the world.”

Rordan knotted inwardly as if he had been dealt a severe blow. He thought, “Impossible. It isn’t true. It’s not the way it is.”

The voice said, “There is more for you to know. But you reach your limits.”

The song of nature grew faint and the voice withdrew back into the depths of his being. Rordan became aware of the fact the performance had ended and people applauded. He clapped along with them while his heart beat a quickened pace.

The crowd dispersed. Vacía mingled with two girls in their late teens that Rordan guessed were friends. She grabbed a smoke from the pocket of her rider jacket pocket and used one of the lanterns to light up. A rapid series of puffs emerged from her mouth. Nyah and Eshe stood up and waved at her.

Fikna said, “Would it be possible for us to be introduced?”

Nyah smiled sideways at Fikna and beckoned him with the crook of her finger. “This way.”

Rordan stood up and stretched. He noticed a loss of strength in his limbs. His guess was surviving the madness had cost him.

Kea and her friends stood up and made ready to leave.

He offered the illuminated wheel paper to Glenys and said, “Hey, can you keep this for me until we get back to my room?”

She took it from him and smiled. “Sure dear.” Glenys regarded it with a look of curiosity, then put it inside her line bag.

Rordan followed Fikna after Nyah and Eshe, with Glenys and Borus right behind him.

He took a long look at Vacia. She had tangled hair colored dull crimson and a malleable face. Her shirt was a black, long-sleeved crop-top. She accentuated her outfit with rings and belts that came across to him as a harsh loyalty to claim.

Vacia waved at Nyah and Eshe. “Hey Brass, hey Orchid.” She offered her hand to Fikna, which he accepted. “I’m Vacia. How’s tricks?”

Fikna bowed. “All is well, thank you for inquiring. I am Fikna and he is my foster-brother Rordan. This is our mutual friend Glenys. Last but not least is Borus, who does not speak but is quite trustworthy.”

The young woman chuckled. She shook Rordan's hand and her familiar, haunting gray eyes peered into him. "Yeah, I saw you in the back. You looked like you were having the mother of all boners."

Rordan waited for the laughter to subside. "I was. But I'll bet you get that from all the guys."

Her eyes went wide open and she grinned. "The ladies too."

Nyah fanned herself with her hand. "Oh Vacia, you make me so hot."

She grinned at Nyah. "Get in line girl. You better take a few classes first while you're waiting."

Nyah used a bitter voice. "Trull."

"Yeah, they all say that. Usually after." Vacia took a drag of her smoke.

Nyah cackled.

Vacia assumed a serious look and said in a low-key voice, "So what's everybody doing tonight?"

Eshe produced a smoke from her linebag and assumed a pose. "Well, we could all come back to Nyah's place and churn ourselves."

The songster guffawed a little. She glanced at Rordan and Fikna. "Break the new blood into the Depressing Club, eh?" Her eyes danced with a mischievous glint. "Can't have Boner and Bounder walking around without training." Vacia appraised Glenys. "You can come too, because you're damn fine looking."

Glenys made a pretty laugh. “Thanks.” She smiled as if she were amused.

Vacia waved at Borus, “Hi Borus. You can come too. Only keep your hands off my girl.”

Fikna laughed as if she ran a comedy routine. Rordan wasn’t sure she jested.

Vacia became serious again. “Never mind. Come if you want. The Depressing Club becomes a full time job if you don’t watch out. It takes a while. But soon you’ll be meeting people and getting to know them. Then you want to hang out all the time. Next thing you know, you’re skipping classes and sleeping all day.”

Eshe said, “And you have fewer bottles of wine than when you started.”

Vacia looked stern and pointed her finger at Eshe.

A pleased expression came over Fikna. “Sounds like a superb idea. The night is young and I would definitely enjoy a further distraction in the Depressing Club. It occurs to me I have yet to become truly depressed.”

Vacia grabbed her guitar and rider hat off the stage. “Cool. I’ll drop by after I make some rounds. Your room Brass?”

Nyah nodded and said, “See you there.”

The songster headed out the stage exit and left a steady trail of exhaled smoke behind her.

Rordan said, “Some woman.”

Nyah purred. “We like her very much.”

Rordan turned toward Fikna and said, “Bro’, can we stop by our room on the way back? I’d like to put a flyer in with my stuff. It’s uh...err...cool.”

Glenys giggled.

Fikna shrugged. “Sounds acceptable to me Rord. Though I daresay we need to start carrying our daypacks regularly. I see many here who have already adopted this custom.”

The six of them went out the front door of the Grill and made their way back to Boant Oak. Intermittent streetlamps lighted the path. The immensity of the trees swallowed up the light not far from the path. Up ahead, half a dozen teenagers headed opposite the way they came.

Borus stopped walking. She made a series of deep-throated grunts.

Rordan took a second look at the six of them. They were clothed in a phony layer of cloth as if they were dolls that moved like people.

“Look out,” said Rordan, “they’re not people. They’re monsters.”

The six teenagers’ faces grimaced and they shrugged off their layer of cloth. The teeth, claws, and huge eyes stood out against the pink of their bodies.

Fear clutched at Rordan’s stressed mind.

Borus dropped into a wide-armed crouch. A low, shuffling growl emerged from the back of her throat.

Nyah and Eshe turned toward Rordan with confused looks.

Glenys said, “Playtime.”

Fikna drew Trad’s knife and readied himself with an indecisive stance. “I can’t take all of them.”

Rordan stared, unable to move or make a plan.

The bugbears closed the distance and charged.

Fikna gambled on a first strike and cut the nearest bugbear with a powerful stroke. The creature squeezed Fikna’s shoulder with a clawed fist and tore a squeal of agony from the young gallant. Fikna made a reflexive thrust as a follow-through and the bugbear released its grip. The creature stumbled backwards off Trad’s knife, then collapsed and fell limp.

Borus moved forward with a rapid stride and shoved a bugbear backwards several feet into the underbrush. The creature howled in pain as it fell to the ground with a skid, throwing up dirt.

Glenys assumed a grim countenance. As a bugbear ran past, she produced a shiv from her line bag and sank it deep into the creature’s side. The creature staggered. It uttered a snarl of rage and gripped her collar with a claw. She uttered a faint grunt of pain through clenched teeth. Her shiv traveled sideways and out of the bugbear’s vitals. The creature let go of her and crumpled to the ground.

The other three bugbears rushed past Nyah and Eshe to surround Rordan.

One of them spoke with a hollow-sounding voice. “We’ve been messing up your friends back home real bad.”

Rordan let the frightful statement slide past him. He remembered what Glenys had said about these things being vulnerable and imagined the vision he’d witnessed in the Grill.

The violent force of destructive creativity inside of him came forward in an instant. The creatures shrank back and withered in the face of a blast of heat and light that moved out of his body. They evaporated into foul-smelling pink smoke without a sound.

For a moment, Rordan stood there stunned. The power coming out of him shrank back inside. He blinked to keep his eyes from losing focus and staggered back and forth.

His vision and balance returned. He noticed the other bugbears had also been defeated.

Fikna pressed his knife hand against his shoulder and stared at Rordan with a strained expression. Glenys knelt and clutched her collarbone. Their clothing looked undamaged and neither of them bled.

Rordan guessed their injuries were spiritual instead of physical.

Borus stood near where her opponent had fallen. The bugbear had disintegrated into a small pile of smelly pink grease. She slumped her shoulders and frowned at the pile, then peered into the dark between the trees.

Rordan watched the youngster with a half grin. The boy was a fierce broiler.

Nyah and Eshe overcame their shock.

Glenys put the shiv back in her line bag. She staggered upright and wiped tears from her cheeks. “Grr. That was fun. Can’t wait to do it again.” She laughed through her pain.

Fikna searched the ground. “They’re gone. No bodies. But I saw them. Got one. He got me. Feels cold.” He rubbed his shoulder and a grimace played across his face.

Nyah sputtered out her words. “Where the butthole did those guys go? Did you scare them off?”

Rordan nodded, trying not to worry about Fikna’s sudden lack of gallant speech. “Yep, I guess so. I’m just glad they didn’t hurt us worse than they did.”

Eshe’s face went blank. “Gotta call the patrollers. Guys like that might hurt someone else.” She took a smoke from her jacket pocket and fumbled with it.

Rordan said, “We should get inside and talk about this over a game.”

Everyone looked at each other, then walked together back to Boant Oak. Collective shock clutched at them as they walked towards Nyah’s room

Nyah drew a stubby candle from her pocket. She lit it off the hall lamp by Stroma’s door, then used it to light two lamps in her room. Borus collapsed on the bed of

Nyah's bunkmate and fell asleep. The rest of them sat in their old seats around the playing table.

Eshe lit her smoke at last and took deep drags with her eyes closed. Nyah dug into the line bag on her bed for one of her own. She lit hers with a practiced motion off the lamp.

Rordan found himself unable to speak. He felt out of ideas and motivation.

Eshe exhaled with a shudder. She shook her head and said, "Okay, somebody explain what happened. To make sure I'm not going crazy. We did all see six people jump us and then vanish without a trace, right?"

Fikna rubbed his left shoulder. He clenched his left hand shut with difficulty. "I will attempt an explanation. Rord and I ran into a witch during our voyage here. The witch's identity is Kea. She is staying in the room adjacent to Rord's and down the hall from you. Kea has been summoning demons to harm us. Presumably in the pursuit of some grudge."

The young gallant noticed the knife in his hand and sheathed it with difficulty.

"However, her motive might be solely for the mere enjoyment of spreading misery. We were already assaulted earlier this evening. Those six creatures were demons disguised as people. Rord is able to perceive them as they truly appear."

Nyah tittered. "Whoa. That is hard-core."

Eshe took a deep drag and forced smoke out the side of her mouth. “You mean demon, as in the damned souls who inhabit blazes?”

Fikna nodded.

Eshe said, “They looked like ordinary people to me. Okay, they all seemed a little eerie on second thought, but I didn’t see any horns or forked tails.”

Fikna sighed. “Eshe, I’ve been in struggles before. My dance partner grasped me with the strength of an animal. Its fingers were like talons. I find not a mark on me, yet my shoulder aches as if I have crookybone. I dealt the fellow two solid strikes, yet there is no blood of any kind.”

Lines of concentration appeared on Eshe’s face. “I hear you. I have a hard time thinking demon when I go over what I saw. Maybe they were jinn and not demons at all.” She shrugged and took another drag. Her fingers trembled.

Nyah looked at Rordan. Her bulged eyes were slick with shock. “Jinn or demons, what’s the difference?”

Eshe said, “The severity of the lesson, remember?”

Rordan shrugged his shoulders and looked down. He had no heart to speak. His mind refused to summon up any of the things he’d read about the spirits of Kgosian myth.

Fikna said, “Rord, I thought I overheard one of them speak to you. What words did it relate?”

He raised his head and gave Fikna a worried look. “They’d all been messing up our friends back home really bad.”

Glenys spoke in a hoarse whisper. “This is crazy.” She plunged back into her inner thoughts and stared at the table.

Fikna rubbed his wrist and looked down at the floor. A pained scowl puckered his face.

Rordan noticed the scratch on Fikna’s wrist oozed globs of fluid. A muddy pink shadow clouded his bro’s injured shoulder. The shadow writhed under his gaze and radiated a numbness which dulled his senses a little.

He turned his attention toward Glenys and saw a similar shadow on her injury. She gave off an acute odor of metallic fear and her body tensed with pain he could literally see. Rordan wanted to express horror at these sights, yet knew he had nothing to give. He cleared his throat of phlegm and swallowed hard, twice.

Nyah said, “Rordy, what did you see when those six people jumped us?” She poked him with her index finger and took a drag of her smoke.

Rordan drifted out of his weariness. “Pink monsters. They had long sharp claws and huge, circle-shaped eyes. A gaping oversize mouth with teeth like a shark. Their bodies look like melted candle wax, with bubbles and cracks and craters everywhere.”

Nyah exhaled smoke and said, “Do they have dongs?”

The group sputtered with groans and low laughter.

Rordan shook with release and smiled. “It’s hard to tell. They’re lumpy all over. I wasn’t looking, to tell the truth. I was scared out of my wits.”

Nyah nodded. She sat back and pouted.

Eshe stared at her.

Nyah said, “What? I want to know if they have equipment. You got a problem with that?”

Eshe giggled once and stamped her smoke out in the ashtray on the table. “No, be my guest. It’s not the first thing I would think of when being attacked by my imagination.”

Nyah shrugged. “Nobody ever asks these questions.” She rolled her eyes sideways and smirked at Rordan.

Eshe took out another smoke and lit it. She had stopped trembling. “You know this Kea?”

Nyah said, “No, not really. I saw her around a lot last year, but she hangs out with a different crowd from us. She’s popular with that group. So she’s got plenty of alibis.”

Eshe sighed. “You guys have any proof of witchery? Any evidence that we could bring to the head of pupil relations?”

Rordan shook his head.

Fikna exhaled in frustration. “We possess nothing to formulate a case upon. Only Rord’s word and the experiences we’ve undergone. I think she’s too clever to allow us a handle on anything concise.”

Eshe chuckled. “Then you realize you’re humped, right? She keeps summoning demons with shrunken dongs and you eventually get taken down.”

Glenys said, “That won’t happen.” Her tone of voice resonated in Rordan’s ears and his guts tightened.

Eshe turned her attention toward Glenys. “You could take matters into your own hands. And you might get the griller to accept self-defense. But you’re talking lock up. You might still squeeze.”

Rordan said, “We don’t even know if Kea is the true menace. She might be working for someone.”

Fikna looked up and said, “What produces that line of thought?”

“At the Grill. When Glenys and I left you guys for a bit, we did a stargazing. One of the things we learned was that somebody else is pulling the strings. Kea is being manipulated by someone else.”

Nyah extinguished her smoke.

Eshe said, “I love that stuff, but again it’s only guesswork. You have nothing but a hunch, based on doubtful practices. Where are you going to end up with that?”

An insight came to Rordan. “She used them. Her friends. She used them to curse us. Glenys, how often can something like that be done?”

She looked at Rordan and shook her head. “I don’t know. As often as they’d let her?”

He nodded. “They got together at the Grill and she was able to talk bad about us. Point us out to them. There were five of them there with her. She must have milked that for extra curse power. Maybe she was in the meal hall too and we didn’t see her. She could have had friends there she hit up for extra curses. That’s why the three of us were attacked then.”

Fikna angled his head at him. “What, are you suggesting she’s been using her connections?” His face lit up. “Of course. She must have exhausted her power tormenting us on the voyage. The sudden increase in attacks is because she’s reunited with old friends. She has been capable of utilizing that resource.”

Eshe narrowed her eyes and nodded. “If what you are saying is true, then you could look at it that way. According to that logic, once she runs out of friends she’ll be out of action.”

Fikna said, “Yes, I concur. Therefore, how long will her supply of friendship last?”

Eshe smiled. “How long can you trash talk someone with your friends before they grow tired of hearing it?” She tapped her smoke on the ashtray.

The line of discussion pushed Rordan along despite his weariness. “We might have some breathing room then. That last attack must have been her big bet. Anything else would have to be smaller or less effective.”

Eshe said, “You hope.”

Rordan felt diminished by her realism. He nodded slowly.

“If there is a possibility we have obtained the advantage, then we should press forward,” said Fikna.

Rordan waved his hands in negation. “Bro’, I’m all out of the show here. I blasted those last three bugbears and it took all I had. This running out of power goes both ways.”

Nyah and Eshe gave Rordan questioning looks.

“Glenys says the demons are called bugbears. Those kinds anyway. Yeah, I blasted them. Don’t ask me how. Or ask me, but I don’t know anything. It’s a long story. I can see them. Now I can blast them. Or at least I was able to that time.”

Glenys peered at Rordan. “You blasted them? I wondered how you managed to take on three attackers. How’d you do that?”

He felt everyone look at him with a variety of expressions. Part of him didn’t want to relate the unexplainable to people over and over.

Rordan took a long breath and sighed. “There was a fire at our chapel right before Fikna and I left home. We took a boat voyage to get here and Kea was one of the passengers. Then we get here and there’s a fire in the junkyard. That’s weird.

“In fact, ever since I left home weird things have been happening. I’m changing somehow. I have visions. Things that aren’t there tell me clues about the world. It’s all confusing and kind of scary. But I feel it’s important that I see this thing through. Glenys calls it a third eye.

“Maybe Kea doesn’t want me to see things. If there’s another world—a secret world that no one can see but me—maybe that’s important. I don’t believe it’s a coincidence that she came with us on the voyage.

“I don’t have any answers. I just try what seems right and so far Kea has failed to kill us. I believe that’s what she’s trying to do. But in a way that nobody will be able to trace back to her. We’ll just look like we had an accident, or got sick with the bumps or something.”

He gestured at Fikna. “You should see what I see bro’. You look infected to my third eye. And Glenys looks the same. But they meant to finish me off. They skipped Nyah and Eshe because they didn’t know anything. But me, three on one? Bro’, isn’t that the death number?”

Fikna nodded. “Unless one is incredibly good or lucky compared to his attackers, three on one odds will finish off anyone. They fight with the strength of animals, which makes them especially dangerous.”

Rordan nodded. “It looked like they got you and Glenys with surprise dying blows.”

Fikna sighed. “The reach is the issue. This knife isn’t enough. I need a longblade or a pigsticker to dispatch them safely.”

A shiver played up Rordan’s spine. “Fat chance of getting those. And that blast took it out of me. I don’t know if I could manage any kind of defense against those things again. I’m not even sure the two of you aren’t at risk now. Those things dealt you nasty hits.

Glenys closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Oh, great. It gets better.”

Fikna rubbed his shoulder. “How would you describe what you witness?”

Rordan squinted his eyes. “I see a kind of cloud over your wounds. It doesn’t look like it’s spreading, but I wouldn’t risk another dose with those things. I believe you’re fighting it.”

Nyah blew out some smoke and uttered a light laugh. “Whoa. This is too much. You are all out of sight. Eshe, I feel we need to seriously let them in. I’m cool with them.”

Eshe nodded and put her smoke out. “I agree, they’re cool.”

Fikna and Rordan gave each other a look of surprise. Glenys arched her eyebrows.

“What are you suggesting by that, exactly?” said Fikna.

Eshe folded her hands together. “It means that Nyah and I are members of the super secret Mesdames Council. We think you’d make good candidates for membership.”

Rordan intuited this would flatter and thrill his bro’.

Fikna leaned forward and said, “Tell me more about yourselves.”

Eshe said, “The Council has been in existence on and off since the academy was founded. Its membership has always been composed of pupils of the academy, mostly women but men have been members in the past. The guide of the council is nearly always a woman though.

“One of our charges is to keep watch for prowlers from the outside and stalkers on the inside. Another charge is to bear witness to what we find out. To make sure the academy officials are aware of any problems. Our last charge is to make demands for action if they do nothing.”

Fikna put his good hand to his mouth in thought for two seconds. “You’re an unofficial settler’s committee. What do the patrollers think of you?”

Eshe said, “We have ties with them and they’re behind us. We have connections with the academy as well, so we’re taken seriously here.”

Fikna chuckled. “You aren’t terribly secret then, are you?”

She shrugged. “We’re a name that’s out there. But most pupils don’t know who the members are or what they do. It’s enough for them to know that they can drop an anonymous note in a box and we’ll look into it.”

Rordan said, “What made you choose us? And what do you expect us to do?”

Eshe said, “Our credibility is always on trial. There are some officials who would like to see us minimized. If there’s a supernatural threat to pupils, it’s going to be hard to convince the staff to take action.

“I see something dangerous going on here. Something new we should take seriously. It looks like you’re already in the middle of this. We want you on our side, keeping us informed in case there’s action we might take.”

Fikna gave his best smile. “Very well. Rordan? Glenys? I am satisfied they represent a worthy cause. Shall we join them?”

Rordan nodded his head. He didn’t know what else to say.

Glenys said, “Of course. I’m in.” She smiled with delight and her eyes shone with pleasure.

Eshe grinned. “I’m glad you could join. You are now junior members. Right now, keep us informed and we’ll help you where we can. After a certain period of time our guide will confer with us. If we all agree, you’ll take the super secret oath and be full members. The only rule is that you never betray our mission. We have a supreme penalty for that.”

“What’s the supreme penalty?” said Rordan

Eshe said, “That would be revealing too much, sweetie. All you need to remember is it’s supreme. I don’t think any of you will betray our mission, so it’s not an issue.”

He looked at Borus. “Sounds good to me. Uh...I guess Borus would join, but he’s sleeping right now.”

Eshe said, “That’s fine. The only requirement is that you not be a danger to the pupils of the academy. I don’t think Borus is one.”

Fikna rubbed his hands together and winced as his shoulder gave out on him. “Oh! Err, ouch. Anyway, superb. This development is fantastic news. And an enormous honor.”

Glenys said, “This is too cool. I feel all special now.”

Rordan melted inside at the delight on her face. It felt good to see her smile again.

The door burst open and in walked Vacia. “Boys and girls—I’m home for the holidays.” Borus stirred awake and looked at her with sleepy annoyance.

Vacia closed the door and grabbed a seat between Rordan and Nyah. “How’s tricks Boner? Hi Bounder. Glenys. I never forget a pretty face. Where are the cards? Don’t tell me you’ve been churning yourselves the whole time?”

Nyah said, “They’re all junior members now.”

Vacia issued a throaty chuckle. “Damn. But I guess we need the extra hands, beginning of the year and all.”

A flash of understanding came to Rordan. “You’re the guide of the Council, aren’t you?”

She pretended to be surprised. Vacia smiled and her eyes narrowed with cunning. “He’s good. Okay, he’s in. Now deal out the cards Brass. I want to catch up to Orchid’s running total and wipe these young bloods off the list.”

Rordan found he liked Vacia. She seemed familiar to him, though he couldn’t quite place where he might have seen her before.

He watched Nyah dig out a writing kit and ledger with a running total of figures on it. While Eshe shuffled and dealt, Nyah filled in name slots for himself, Fikna, and

Glenys. Rordan spotted the names Klara and Tiabhal in addition to those present.

Fikna peered over Nyah's shoulder. "You keep score, then?"

Nyah said, "Yeah. Right now the person with the most negligence is Eshe. Vacia and I are trying to keep up. Everyone else is blown away."

Fikna sat back in his chair and put his good hand to his chin.

Rordan considered whether or not to catch Vacia up on what had happened tonight. He came to the conclusion Nyah and Eshe would let her know when the time came. His strength couldn't take going over it all again.

He played without interest or concentration. On the other hand, his bro' handled the game with a smiling face and an easy banter.

Vacia leaned toward Rordan and said in a low voice, "He's a ladies' man, isn't he?"

Rordan noticed a statement button on the inside of her jacket bore a witty phrase that would be offensive to settlers. He answered back quietly. "Yep. It's just the way he is."

Vacia said, "I'll bet he's only a tease."

He snickered. "Kind of. He never follows through on anything."

She played with her cards for a bit. "Does he prefer men?"

Rordan peered at her eyes and struggled to read her intent. “I don’t believe so. He’s just really insecure.”

Vacia said, “Nice recovery. Do you prefer men?”

“Not that I know of. Do you?”

She smiled and said, “Your turn, Boner.”

Rordan tried to get a grip on what his strategy should be. Vacia’s personal questions disturbed him. He played another low points card. Nyah and Fikna played downer cards on him.

Fikna said, “Oh—ho, Rord. Appears that you have the double downer.”

Nyah and Eshe both chuckled to themselves.

Rordan said, “Glad I could take the heat for all of you. Grumble, grumble.”

Glenys giggled. “Wow, that wasn’t nice at all.” She played a third downer card on his stash, covering his last card. “Sorry dear.”

Vacia added an out-of-turn Embezzlement card to his stash. She broke into a grin.

Eshe whistled. “Absolute zero.”

“Anybody else like to dog-pile on the rabbit?” Rordan discarded.

Eshe chuckled once. “I would. But it looks like you’re out of cards I can put the downer on.”

Rordan understood. Bungled again, just like back home.

On Eshe’s turn, she played a downer card on Vacia.

Vacia said, “Munch it.”

Eshe wriggled back and forth in her chair.

Rordan’s thoughts drifted away from the game. He contemplated the illuminated wheel page. Varan had said it was dangerous. There couldn’t be more than five or six paintings on the wheel. The chances of Glenys posing for one painting in her briefs, let alone several, were awfully slim.

The page must possess some magical quality, then. The possibility of seeing Glenys without her dress presented a strong temptation. The danger might be to obsess over what the wheel revealed.

Varan had also said the page was for looking at yourself and was only as good as one’s understanding. The painting that appeared must be indicative of something inside him. He didn’t know enough about Glenys to understand how she might give him a clue about his own self. He only knew he had strong feelings for her.

The spooky reptile man had said something about looking at yourself and you would see things. There must have been a point at which he started looking.

“Rordan.” Glenys touched his arm.

He realized his turn had come up again. His voice stammered as he said, “Sorry, I was daydreaming.”

Fikna chastised him with a look. “Seize the iron, Rord. Time for the big time. Cease lollygagging about and play your best.”

Vacia said, “And put your mind back in your pants where it belongs.”

Rordan said, “All right, I hear you.” He drew a useless card and discarded. Focus shifted to Vacia and he mentally drifted back to the illuminated page.

He decided Glenys had shown up in the picture because she had made an impression on him. The choice to let his feelings free couldn’t be taken back. Those feelings had told him he loved her and now he knew. He would have to tell her, which would be embarrassing. They had only just met. To make an overture to her now would be sudden and forward.

Fikna played a Big Bonus card, followed by a high points card to his stash, then ended the game with a Skidaddle from his hand on the extra turn.

Nyah totaled the negligence points and recorded them in the register. She looked at Rordan’s stash and chuckled. “Rordy, that’s negative points you have there.”

He puffed. “What a surprise.”

Eshe examined Fikna’s stash. “Not bad.”

Fikna said, “Thank you. I don’t understand the particulars. However, you appeared unable to muster any decent cards there. I’m of the mind poor luck did you in, fair Eshe.”

She shrugged. “Luck’s part of the game. But sometimes it’s in the strategy. Putting the downer on your brother there convinced everyone to do the same. That kept your own stash safe. Good job.”

Rordan grimaced. “Thanks.”

Vacia guffawed a little. “Don’t worry. Now we know who the real player is. He’ll get squashed by us in the next hand.”

“Good. Bro’, I hope you’re ready for the bug-hump.”

Fikna smiled. “Of course. I am enjoying the challenge of taking on such a diverse array of opponents. Don’t maintain such a glum look Rord. I shall display good sport and apply my strategy to every player.”

Nyah gave Fikna a sly leer. “You talk some serious bluster, mister.”

Rordan said, “He’s a master of it.”

Vacia said, “Easy to talk tough after one round. Lets see what kind of package he has for the next go-around. Us girls are just getting warmed up.”

Fikna smirked. “Certainly. I possess the wherewithal to go all night if necessity requires it.”

Glenys scrunched her face at Fikna. “Okay, that was way too much information.”

Fikna bowed his head. “My apologies, sweet Glenys.”

Vacia clapped her hands. “I got it! Finally. Your name is Brambles.”

Glenys said, “Took you long enough.”

“I’ll bet long enough is not a word you use often,” said Vacia.

A rascally smirk appeared on Glenys’ lips. “It’s width I care about.”

Fikna cracked up.

Rordan said, “Oh, for goodness sakes.”

Vacia said, “Easy Brambles. Now you’re making Boner nervous.”

“A woman needs standards. Nyah, where’s that deal?” Glenys eyed Vacia evenly.

Nyah dealt another hand, cackling to herself.

A number of rude routines sprang to Rordan’s mind. The flirtatious tone of the conversation interested him. His body refused to take up the opportunity and he drifted into passive thought. A premonition of exhaustion flashed before his eyes.

He observed the group dump negative cards on each other. Glenys stayed out of it and grew her stash.

Rordan drew a low points card and put it into play. He passed his turn to Vacia with a discard.

Glenys said, “You look tired, dear.”

“I don’t feel tired,” said Rordan. “Instead I feel like a big, empty nothing.”

“You should sleep anyway. It’s been a long day for you.” She reviewed her cards.

Vacia said, “There’s that long word again. Get a room you two.” She removed a downer from her stash and discarded a Skidaddle card.

Rordan opened his mouth to speak and found he had nothing to say.

“Oh look, he’s speechless,” said Nyah. “I’ll bet two pawns he’s a cherry.” She eyed Rordan with contained amusement.

Fikna grew agitated.

Glenys tilted her head at Nyah and chuckled once.

“I’ll bet you a fiver they make a love bed in two weeks.” Vacia grinned.

Fikna said, “For Welkin’s sake, let’s remain civil here.”

Eshe contemplated her next move. “Love bed. Heh, cute.”

Vacia said, “Which one of you two boys is older?”

Fikna said, “I’m older, by five months.”

“Then Fikna, you have to face facts that your younger brother is about to become a man.” Vacia watched Rordan’s facial twitch.

“That’ll be the day.” Fikna huffed.

Eshe finished her turn. “Don’t worry sweetie. Your day of manhood will come. We still love you.”

Fikna drew his card and put another downer on Vacia. “Take that, then. To the dumpheap with your love bed.” He discarded a Booty Bribery card.

Vacia guffawed.

Glenys drew a card. She looked smug as she put down a high score card and ended the game with a Skidaddle.

Nyah said, “You rat.”

Eshe examined Glenys' stash. "That's a pretty good score. Underestimating the new blood here."

Fikna tossed his hand on the table and sighed. "I dare say. There's more to this game than I first took notice of. A re-match, sweet but sneaky Glenys?"

She glanced at Rordan. "No. Your poor brother looks barely alive."

"I'm fine, really." He nodded repeatedly to the circle of looks from the group.

Vacia elbowed Rordan. "Get going on that love bed. We'll take care of Bounder here."

Fikna said, "Yes, bedtime for the boys while the men attend to business."

Nyah said, "If you can still talk, you haven't taken care of any business with us."

Eshe giggled to herself.

Vacia said, "I'm not waiting anymore for Fikna to get his package ready. It's going to be us three playing with each other, like usual."

Eshe wriggled around in her seat. "Promises, promises." She produced a smoke and lit it. Vacia grabbed a smoke from her own jacket and did likewise.

Glenys stood up and tugged at Rordan's arm. "Come on. I'll watch over you. Our problems will still be here in the morning."

Fikna said, “Good night and pleasant dreams Rord. I haven’t forgotten our predicament. We shall be together for our next encounter, I assure you.”

Eshe and Nyah shared a look.

Vacia said, “Goodnight you two love birds.”

Rordan rose from his seat and let Glenys lead him out of Nyah’s room. Borus stirred. The girl stretched, then followed behind them.

The door to Manissa’s room was closed. He unlocked his own door and stepped inside, with Glenys and Borus right behind him.

Stig’s half-unpacked baggage hadn’t been moved. Rordan sat on the bed and realized his clothes smelled like smoke. His tired eyes watched Borus retire to the closet and lay claim to the bedding. He sighed. In the light from the hallway, Rordan jammed some unused clothes into a pillowcase.

Glenys took the lamp on his desk into the hall and returned with it lit. She set it down and dialed it lower. “There now. What are you doing?”

Rordan looked up from the floor. “I’m getting ready to sleep. Fikna gets the bed.”

“No. He doesn’t.”

Rordan sat on the bed again. “What are you going to tell him when he comes in?”

Glenys said, “Shush. You let me worry about that. Here, take Nuzzler. Where’s Tedder?”

He accepted the stuff-friend. His arms dragged as he pushed off his shoes and shrugged off his vest. “Still packed. I didn’t get everything out yet.” Rordan rested his head on the makeshift pillow and pulled his waterproof coat over him.

Glenys snatched the coat off and tossed it on the desk chair. She spread her own blanket over him and said, “Stop doing whatever Fikna wants. Take my blanket and get some rest. You’ll need it.”

“What will you use?” Rordan found her resolution a reassurance and he relaxed. He noticed the woven string bracelet on her wrist and concluded he didn’t like the limits they represented to him.

She tucked him in. “I’ll take one of Fikna’s. Something tells me he could use the discipline. And I mean it; I’ll keep watch over you.”

Her presence brought a dull ache to his next breath. He wanted to confess to her so much. “I didn’t know you could fight. You cut that bugbear good.”

Glenys lowered her head and the lengths of her hair fell over her face. “My father taught me. I didn’t ever think it would come in handy.”

“You know all kinds of things. You’re so handy and clever. I’m glad you’re on my side.”

She closed her eyes and basked in his praise. “You’re like a dispensary.”

A wave of pleasure passed through his pride. Her words moved him.

“I hope my father and brother are okay. Demons are liars,” said Glenys. She raised her head up and took a worried breath.

Rordan said, “I just don’t know how people can defend against a monster they can’t see. I have to hope they can open their eyes and fight.

“I know my best friend Abrafo is tough. Then there’s Tora; she can take care of herself. Loban’s smart. His sister’s easy to underestimate. My folks are pretty slippery and Fikna’s can be nasty in a corner.”

He closed his eyes and took in the scent of Glenys’ blanket and stuff-friend. They smelled like her and soothed him into semi-consciousness.

Glenys took the illuminated paper from her line bag and placed it on his desk. “You’re lucky to have so many friends and family. I haven’t got as much as you back home.”

“You made a lot of friends today.”

She breathed out. “You’re the only one I feel comfortable with.”

Rordan said, “I didn’t say everything that happened on the voyage. There’s other stuff.”

Glenys said, “I know. You’ll talk about it when you’re ready.”

A warmth enveloped Rordan and he sank into unconsciousness. His last thoughts were of a negative score on a ledger, a mediocre hand, and secret closets in the bathroom that everyone knew about but him.