

CHAPTER 17: NIGHTMARE TREE

Rordan followed Fikna upstairs and Borus trailed behind. They knocked on Glenys' door and went inside at her acknowledgment. She sat upon her bed, against the wall, and held a mug of what smelled like root-stock tea.

Fikna said, "Hello Glenys. Say, you seem distracted. Are you well?"

She gave them a warm smile. "I'll manage. Had a run-in with that Kea character of ours, so I'm simmering on that."

Fikna said, "Yes. Rord had his own uncomfortable experience with her. She's been getting around, I fear." He placed Rordan's lamp on her desk.

Glenys crinkled her face at them. "I'm not surprised. Kea's not all there."

Rordan sat at the foot of her bed while Fikna remained standing and Borus sat on Glenys' desk chair.

Fikna said, "Rord discovered the identity of our real enemy. A tutor of this institution is the villain behind our troubles. His mentor as a matter of fact. Kea answers to his evil power."

Glenys turned her eyes to the side. She sat upright and slid to the edge of her bed. "How did you find this out?"

Fikna said, "According to Rord, he paid a visit to his mentor for getting papers attended to. The meeting started off agreeable. Then the tutor changed into a

madman wearing a vampire mask. Declared our happiness belonged to him. We were to allow his demons to collect our delight next time without interference.”

Glenys took a swallow of her tea. “Interesting. How is he controlling Kea?”

At Fikna’s glance Rordan said, “He went on about his agents and that we were stopping them in some way. If we didn’t just take it, there would be problems. I assumed Kea was under his control because of the card reading we did and because of something I saw Kea do to Fikna.”

“What did you see Kea do?”

Rordan said, “When we were stopped at the island, I watched Kea and Dalla weaken Fikna with some kind of witchcraft. Ivixa stepped in and magically moved blood from Fikna’s neck to her mask, which then disappeared. I saw this with my third eye. My bro’ and I had just had a fight, so I couldn’t bring it up.

“My guess is that these witches are under my mentor’s power and don’t know it. When I confronted Kea over this, she didn’t know what I was talking about.”

He watched Glenys move her mug about, swishing the tea inside. She appeared lost in intense thought. “Kea said you scratched her up. I saw her getting her arm bandaged by Manissa.”

Her expression revealed amusement. “Is that what she said?”

He nodded.

Glenys said, “I ran into her at the pupil affairs office. I was looking for a job and she came up to me. Started asking all these questions about you.”

Fikna said, “About what?”

“Mostly about my relationship with Rordan. At first I tried to be nice, but she started laughing at me. So I told her to leave me out of her problems. That’s when she started telling me I didn’t realize how crazy you were. I excused myself and left.”

She smiled. “Later, she sent one of her buddies to threaten me. I ran into him at lunch.”

Fikna said, “Would you describe him? Was he one of the people at the Grill the other night?”

Glenys nodded. “He was the big guy with the large muscles.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. “What did he say to you?”

She gave him an intense stare and laughed to herself. “That I shouldn’t get involved between you and Kea. He left me alone after that. Oh, and I found a job as a practical in the archive. That’s been my day.”

“That’s splendid news on your employment,” said Fikna. “However, this matter needs to be brought to the Council’s attention. They ought to know a pupil has been threatened. Did anyone witness what happened between you and Kea?”

She shook her head. “It was empty in the hall where I met her. And at lunch, only words were exchanged. It was so noisy there that I doubt anyone heard us.”

Rordan frowned. “We should still tell them. Bro’, if only you had some arms and a shield.”

Fikna looked glum. “Carrying those on the grounds is out of the question. We must utilize our current resources. If they begin a struggle, we can always claim self-defense. All the more reason to let the Council know.

“I’d keep your shiv readied Glenys. You were remarkably useful with it last time we had trouble. Most extraordinary. Your father train you?”

Glenys nodded with a smile. “He used to train me a lot before my mom cheaped him. I kept up with a friend in school.”

Fikna said, “I apologize. I intended no disrespect.”

She smiled at him. “It’s okay. My mom’s a sore subject, but I’m learning to deal with it.” Glenys faced Rordan. “What was the uncomfortable encounter you had with Kea?”

Rordan said, “I was going to my room after some really crazy stuff and the door to her room was open. She was there getting bandaged up by her pal. Started talking to me before I could duck out.”

Glenys said, “Did you see a wound?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t go inside even after she tried to get me to come in. She said ‘look at what your friend

did to me' and 'do you know how messed up she is'. I told her she was full of dump and she went nuts, walking around repeating everything I said. It was crazy.”

She took another sip of her tea, then put the mug on her desk. “I’m sorry you had to see that dear.”

He shrugged and rolled his eyes. “Yep. Not much I could do. That’s when I brought up her being my mentor’s agent and she didn’t know what I was saying. Her friend got sick of her and walked out. I tried to get her to admit she was nuts and she just kept spouting off.”

Fikna gave him the eye.

Rordan sighed. He pulled out the ruined shirt from his daypack. “Kea took off and left the door open, so I went inside and searched through her bag. I found this. My shirt, with stinky stains all over it.”

Glenys narrowed her eyes. “Don’t bring that near me. I can smell it from here, yuck. Now we know how she’s been able to get a hold of you so easily. But you shouldn’t have broken her host’s hospitality. That was very bad.”

Fikna smiled. “Exactly what I told him. I’m pleased to know I haven’t taken leave of my senses.”

Glenys said, “Rordan, I’m surprised at you. Was it worth it to get your shirt back?”

“I don’t know how these things work. But it gets on my nerves that she stole my shirt and ruined it. That’s not all I got a hold of.” He put away the shirt and pulled out the dagger. Rordan held it in both hands and showed

her. “I also took this. Is this a witch weapon or what? Might even be a sacrificial blade.”

Glenys stared for a moment, then shook her head. “Oh, dear. You stole her dagger.” She laughed. “This is getting so confused.”

Fikna said, “Does the dagger hold any meaning?”

She placed a hand to her face. “The dagger’s a private object between friends. She’ll want that back. I don’t know if I’d return it though. I...never mind.”

With a puzzled look, Rordan put the dagger back into his daypack. “I figure she’d want it back. Maybe this will give us the edge and make her magic weaker.”

Glenys said, “Even though she’s not being kind, you shouldn’t steal. And breaking into her host’s home? That’s wrong.”

“I know it is. But I had to do it. Some part of me just got mad at her complete stupidity.”

She looked away. “It was still very, very bad.”

Rordan clenched his teeth lightly. He regretted his actions and hoped his bro’ or Glenys wouldn’t start to distrust him. “What’s our next move, bro?”

Fikna put his right hand to his chin. “What I proposed earlier. We report this matter to the Council. They should decide how to proceed from here. If your tutor has threatened us, the situation has become serious. However, I still find it difficult to consider an academy official attempting a struggle with pupils.”

Rordan said, “Are you jesting? After what you saw earlier? How do we know this guy wouldn’t just grab us and throw us in an invisible dungeon somewhere?”

Glenys said, “What do you see?”

Fikna puffed and turned to look away. He paced the room.

Rordan slumped forward. “We had a crazy vision together. I believe it’s catching. Maybe you’ll have one too in a while. I don’t know.”

She looked at Fikna with an intrigued smile. “You mean you can see what he sees now? How exciting!” Her eyes flashed with interest and she bounced on the bed once.

Her reaction pleased Rordan. He liked that side of her better than her disapproval. “I hope you’ll see this stuff too. But what I meant was that an idea came to me. All the tales of getting lost in fantom lands I’ve read about. What if the beings of the invisible world can pull us into their world, so that we can’t be seen by people? Maybe that’s what my tutor meant by accidents.”

Fikna turned to face them. “Certainly appears a possibility now. Either way, struggle or supernatural kidnapping, we would come to harm.”

Rordan stood up. “Let’s get going then. We need to drop a line on our Council friends. Get things going. If we disappear, at least they’ll know who to suspect.”

Fikna said, “I concur. Glenys, are you strong enough for a stroll? I prefer not to upset you if you are strained by your experiences.”

Glenys looked resolute. “Oh, I’m in. Pass up a chance for adventure? Not on your life.” She grabbed her line bag.

Borus stood up with a look of excitement. She made a whistling sound.

The young gallant took Rordan’s lamp and led them downstairs to Nyah’s room. He knocked on her door and she answered. “Esteemed member of the Council, we possess information of interest to you. May we come inside?”

She peered at them with a smirk. “Sure.”

Nyah shut the door behind them and everyone but Borus sat down. The girl stood by the window and stared at a tree on the other side of the open field.

Fikna said, “Nyah, we have arrived to update the Council on what we have discovered. We have reason to believe we are in danger and may disappear. Therefore, it is imperative a record exists upon which to form the beginnings of a proceeding.”

Rordan realized he’d have to relate his thievery again. His shame would become general knowledge soon—a fact he didn’t approve of.

Nyah took out a smoke from her desk drawer. She lit it off her lamp and exhaled a puff of smoke. “Let fly with what you got.”

Fikna assumed a refined poise. “To summarize. Master Beag, Rord’s mentor, threatened him with violence if Rord did not obey his desires. Specifically, in the matter of Kea’s witchcraft upon our person. His command was that we offer no resistance. To allow whatever demons she unleashed upon us to act unhindered.

“Meanwhile, Kea confronted Glenys and harassed her. Glenys ended the conversation and left. A friend of Kea’s visited her at lunch and threatened her to stay away from Rord.

“Kea then proceeded to harangue Rord about Glenys’ behavior. She made up a story about being attacked by Glenys. Rord has informed me he has no intention of surrendering to this tutor’s demands. It is likely, given deteriorating relations, the tutor shall be forced to make good on his promise.”

Nyah raised her eyebrows. She tapped out ash from her smoke and took another long drag. “Man, that’s heavy. I’ll pass the word along. Rordy, you haven’t been here more than two days and already people are fighting over you.”

Rordan chuckled. “I know. It’s weird.”

Fikna said, “There is one other matter. After Kea harangued him, she departed. Rord entered Manissa’s room in breach of hospitality. He went through her bag and found a shirt she had stolen from him. Likely used for witchcraft purposes. Also a sacrificial dagger. He has both items in his possession.”

Nyah sputtered. “Rordy you bad boy!”

Glenys said, “That’s what I told him. Very, very bad.”

Rordan watched Borus stare out the window. He started when he realized everyone looked at him. “Oh, sorry. Yes it was not a smart thing to do. Here Nyah; check them out.” He opened his daypack and showed her the two items.

Nyah laughed at the shirt. “That’s pretty nasty. Nice shirt though.” She took a drag and blew smoke out the side of her lips.

He smiled. “I know. I’m mad to lose it. What a load of dump.”

Fikna leaned forward. “Therefore, as you can plainly see the affair is growing serious. I do not envision how anything might be accomplished. If you would advise us it might prove most helpful.”

Nyah leaned back. “What’s going to happen next is one of us—well two actually—will try and talk to the parties involved. Get a dialogue started. Figure out why the people making threats are doing it; what their side is.”

Rordan said, “What happens if they don’t talk?”

“If they don’t talk to us it’ll look bad for them. But they’ll talk. Might make something up, but it’ll happen.”

“And what if while they’re talking they attack us?”

Nyah said, “Rordy, if they do anything bonkers like that the patrollers get involved. I don’t feel they’re that nuts. More likely they’ll get you to do something. Like breaking into somebody’s stuff.”

Rordan scowled. He felt stung. “So that’s how it works. Provoke us. Clever.”

Nyah nodded. “She’s a real trull, your Kea. But sounds like she’s calling the shots.”

Frustration and disappointment pulled at him. Rordan got up and looked out the window.

Fikna said, “What has you so distracted Rord? What are you and Borus witnessing?”

Rordan saw a blight nested beneath the bark of the tree. A pair of blazing, muddy eyes opened in the trunk while a vertical maw of spine-like teeth peeled open below the eyes. The maw spilled a drool of decayed black pine needles and the eyes beamed menace at him and Borus.

He shied back. The menace felt hard and invincible. His intuition told him the tree had been ruined. He imagined the taint of it erupted outwards in this display of horror.

Fikna stood up and looked out the window with them. He gasped. “By Welkin, what a monster.”

Nyah and Glenys came over to the window.

Rordan said, “That tree. It’s gone bad, or is sick somehow. It’s occupied by an evil creature.”

Nyah said, “I want whatever you guys are on. I don’t see anything, but I do get bad ripples from that tree.”

Glenys glanced at Rordan. “I don’t see anything.”

Fikna backed away from the window.

Rordan grimaced. “Hey, cheer up bro’. At least you can see it now.”

“I cannot manage this,” said Fikna. “It’s madness. This entire situation is impossible.”

The tree trunk split open at the base near the ground and yawned wide. Out stepped a young man with a sportsman’s figure. His clothes blended him in with most pupils. The young man gave no sign that he saw them. He walked down the field and around to the front of Boant Oak.

Rordan said, “Come on, let’s see where that guy’s going.”

Glenys said, “What guy?”

“A guy came out of that evil tree. We have to see where he’s going.” Rordan went out the door with Borus close behind him.

Fikna said, “Excuse us Nyah.” He went after his foster-brother and Glenys followed.

Rordan rushed down the stairs and out the side door. Borus kept up with him. He ran down the path to the street in front of the community hall. The young man came up the path on his right. There were several academy pupils walking about on their own business.

He blocked the young man’s path. “Who are you?”

The young man’s voice had a plain quality to it. “Someone who will mess you up bad, bungler.” His eyeballs were literally flat and the pupils darted about in a nervous fashion.

Borus chirred from the base of her throat and hid behind Rordan.

“Don’t make me blast you,” said Rordan. He felt unsure about his ability to do so and hoped the man wouldn’t call his bluff.

“You pathetic loser,” said the young man. “You couldn’t blast a chamber pot.”

Fikna and Glenys appeared. The young man waited until they caught up.

Fikna said, “What’s going on here? Your name, if you please?”

The young man said, “I’m the guy who’s going to beat both of you senseless.”

Fikna said, “Look here. If you insist on rudeness, we shall turn you in to the patrollers.”

The young man moved in an instant. With one hand he pushed Glenys several feet backwards and she tumbled sideways on the gravel path. Her line bag rolled with her and came to rest at her leg. His other hand grasped Fikna by the throat and bent him backwards.

The young man said, “I know you Fikna. What happened to you can happen again, only worse. I can even look like her to make it extra exciting for you.”

Fikna’s face turned an unhealthy shade of red and his eyes pulsed to bloodshot. He appeared on the verge of passing out.

Horror paralyzed Rordan. He watched Glenys draw out the shiv from her line bag and stand upright into a ready stance. Her eyes looked focused and alert.

The young man watched her approach. “Hello Glenys, still fighting with half a heart?”

With precision strength she stabbed the young man in the wrist holding Fikna and cut along the length of the man’s arm to the elbow. No blood came out and his grip on Fikna never faltered. She readied a stab at the side of his abdomen.

“Hey Fikna, watch this.” The young man caught Glenys’ hand with his left in mid-thrust and squeezed the weapon from her grasp. He shoved Fikna to the ground and caught the shiv in mid air.

Fikna collapsed sideways with a loud gasp. He rolled forward and coughed phlegm onto the ground.

Glenys twisted her hand against his grip, eyed Trad’s knife at Fikna’s belt. She readied for a stomp at her attacker’s knee.

The young man released her and she stumbled backwards. “Give it up fly-speck. You should have brought the real thing.” He bent her shiv into a right angle and dropped it with a laugh.

She steadied herself and fought against the shock of her injured hand.

None of the passers-by took notice of the violent scene unfolding not five feet from some of them. Rordan found the absurdity of it terrible.

The young man looked at him and said, “They can’t see what I do. No one ever wants to see the kind of things they let happen. But you can, bungler. And you’ll see every detail as I perform my specialty on Glenys. Watch me crush her dreams into cruor for the bugbears—”

Glenys moved for Trad’s knife.

Borus rushed forward. She smashed her fist into the young man just below the ribcage with a dull thump. Rordan felt himself grow weak.

The young man staggered backwards. He regained his feet, then ran away in the direction of the woods by the manor house. His speed matched that of a horse at full gallop.

They watched their assailant disappear from view.

Glenys said, “Nice one Borus. We live to fight another day.” She held her injured hand to her chest and gave herself a visual examination.

Fikna struggled upright. He held a hand to his throat.

Rordan rushed over to his bro’s side and extended a hand. Fikna took it and pulled himself to his feet. The pupils who passed by glanced at them with curiosity.

The young gallant retrieved Glenys’ ruined shiv and studied it. He said with a hoarse voice, “Demon has a rough set of hands.”

Glenys gave him a gentle look. “Dear, you’re hurt. Don’t speak.” She retrieved her line-bag and examined it.

Rordan envied his bro' the look. He decided not to discuss what the young man had said. His mascot's advice came back to him and regret at his stupidity took over his thoughts.

Fikna whispered in Rordan's ear. "Come now, Rord. Let's return Glenys to her room. I think she requires rest." He coughed once.

Rordan nodded. He didn't agree with his bro's assessment. Glenys looked better off and had put up a bigger fight. He helped Fikna back toward her room while Glenys and Borus came up behind them.

Fikna said, "Next time, I'll immediately begin stabbing with Trad's knife. No person wields such strength." He cleared his throat.

Rordan said, "I don't believe it would do any good. You saw how he ate Glenys' shiv for breakfast. And I really don't want to lose Trad's gift."

"I quite understand." Fikna coughed to himself for a minute.

They reached Glenys' room. She crouched down with clenched teeth and pulled out an earthenware bowl from underneath her bed.

Fikna became confused. "Anything we may acquire for you?"

"Some chewbies if you have them. My knees and elbows hurt almost as much as my hand."

Fikna said, "I'll retrieve them from our mercy kit. Lend me your key, Rord."

Rordan dug his key out and handed it to Fikna. He watched his bro' depart. "I guess if the fairer side is involved, he's happy to be the attendant."

Glenys placed the bowl on her desk. "He's a good brother. You should be proud of him." She went into her closet.

Rordan said, "Except when he argues with me. We fight sometimes."

"All siblings do." She brought a large earthenware pitcher and a washcloth over to her desk. She looked at Borus with respect and smiled.

The girl smiled back.

Glenys said, "Thank you for saving us. That was a good thing you did."

Borus sat down on the foot of Glenys' bed. She made a series of whistling sounds.

Rordan said, "What are you going to do?"

Glenys said, "I took a fall in some gravel. I need to clean my cuts and scratches or germs will take root. And my hand could use some cool water to ease the pain."

"Are you okay?"

She regarded his concern. "It's nothing. I'm more worried about your brother. Chokeholds are nothing to sneeze at."

Rordan felt guilty. "You heard what that demon said, didn't you?"

"Yes. I caught every word."

He glanced at the closed door. “We’ve never told anyone this and don’t tell my bro’ I told you. When we were kids, he was beaten up in front of me by a family member. I’m saying this because I trust you. And because I want you to be okay if that demon says anything else.”

Rordan looked down. “I don’t know how that demon could know, but he made me feel like I was back in that time. My bro’ took it rough, I know he did.”

Her expression softened. “I’m sorry dear. Talk to me.”

Rordan tried to smile. He felt uncomfortable. The way the demon had harmed Fikna struck too close. He had thought the past far enough away to maybe let his bro’ go. Now he was unsure he would ever see Fikna healed.

“It’s okay to feel messed up about what happened. Remember it’s not your fault and it’s not Fikna’s either.” She extended her good hand to him.

He took hold of it with both hands. “I know.”

“Next time there’s a demon that looks like a person, let’s follow it instead.”

“Yep. That was a mistake. I thought I could blast him or something. I didn’t think he would be so tough, that he could kick us around. Thank Welkin Borus drove him off.”

Glenys shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known what would happen. If he said

some bad things about us, it's only what we haven't dealt with yet. You may be right about the third eye being contagious. Being with you is changing the way I look at the world. I don't regret being there because I got to fight a withy demon."

Rordan marveled at her. He thought about what the demon had said about her and half a heart.

"What's withy mean?"

"Powerful. Not easy to break." She smiled to herself and growled.

His bro' came in with the kit and the lamp they'd left with Nyah. Fikna dug out a pair of chewbies and handed them to Glenys. She chomped on them and swallowed, then drank the last of her cold tea.

The young gallant handed the key back to Rordan. "Have you any information concerning the demon we faced together?"

"I'm afraid so." She placed her injured hand over the bowl and poured water from the pitcher onto it. Her breathing quickened and she winced in pain.

Her anguish struck Fikna dumb and he stared.

Rordan swallowed.

Glenys repeated the process and a fierce determination showed in her eyes. Her face grew flush as her breathing grew tight.

She took a moment to rest. "It's a powerful demon called the Huncher. They're called to terrorize an entire neighborhood."

Fikna looked at Rordan. He cleared his throat and covered the front of his neck with the heels of his palms.

“Don’t look at me bro’. I don’t know anything about these things. But from what I saw, if scaring the academy is its purpose that demon will be good at it.”

Glenys placed her injured hand in the bowl of water and exhaled through clenched teeth. “It’s worse than that. The Huncher gets into your head and talks you into giving up your dreams. Women are its preferred target, but it’ll go after anyone.”

Rordan puffed. “That’s just great news. How do we stop it?”

“There’s supposed to be a written agreement with an illustration. That agreement gives the Huncher permission to stay in this world.” She dropped the washcloth into the bowl.

“So destroy it and the Huncher has to go.” Master Beag’s office came to the forefront of Rordan’s thoughts. He tried to remember if he had seen anything like an agreement with a picture.

Fikna said, “Not a single thought of breaking the hospitality of our enemy Rord. Even to go searching for this agreement. Your mentor won’t be so thoughtless as to leave it on his desk.” He coughed twice.

Rordan frowned.

Fikna said, “It occurs to me the appearance of this demon fits my theory of a major spell. I am afraid the villain has succeeded in saving up enough cruor.”

“Yep.”

Glenys said, “Cruor? Details, guys.”

Rordan said, “The witches steal fun for Master Beag. The fun looks like blood to me, probably because it’s life to people. My mentor called it cruor and has been saving up this fun for an evil spell.”

She nodded. “I follow your logic. It explains the Huncher’s appearance.”

Fikna said, “What springs to mind now is how Dalla and Manissa fit into our predicament. Are you certain in your belief they are against Kea?”

Rordan said, “I’m pretty sure, yep.”

Fikna said, “I find the possibility of regular witches and crazy witches a little hard to consider. I thought they were all dedicated to destruction and misery.”

“I know, weird isn’t it?” Rordan scratched his head. “But my talk with Dalla and the way Manissa acted. They make me believe there’s a difference.”

Glenys said, “You talked with Dalla? When?”

Rordan slapped his forehead. “It must have slipped my mind. While I was waiting to sign up for my exam I ran into her. She was with a friend. We had a quiet talk where she basically threw herself at me. Said if I shacked up with her she could protect me.”

She gave Rordan a look. “Aren’t you sly. Causing trouble everywhere you go.”

He smiled at her. “She said there were things she couldn’t tell me and that I shouldn’t call her kind witches. She also said she hadn’t been involved with last night. I got the feeling she was jumping ship.”

Glenys nodded. She rolled up her sleeves and examined her elbows. They had taken a beating and lost some skin, but didn’t appear dirty.

Fikna said, “I think you uncover the truth with your earlier comments Rord. Perhaps what we’re dealing with is a secret society. Similar to the pastorals, only more insular.” He cleared his throat.

Rordan said, “Seltans are insular too bro’. There’s just more of us so we don’t stick out like they do.”

“Quiet Rord, I’m thinking. Hmn. Maybe Kea should be considered the real witch. That would make the others merely members of a secret society of heathens living amongst us. The shepherd kings captured entire tribes in the old days. It isn’t impossible some of them managed to blend in.”

Glenys listened while she examined her knees.

Rordan said, “Or their beliefs were adopted. The shepherd kings weren’t Emphyrean originally.”

His bro’ paced around the room. “Which means we have yet to obtain a glimpse of the coven itself. Kea and Master Beag might be the only ones we’ve seen.”

Rordan said, “No, I don’t believe it. Master Beag is the big cheese. I’ve read that covens can be as small as

two. Maybe they start recruiting once the Huncher gets going. Evil attracts evil.”

Glenys said, “Where did you read that?” She squeezed out the excess water from the washcloth and cleaned the wounds on her elbows. Her body shivered with each application of the washcloth. She maintained a stone-faced expression against the pain.

The display disturbed Fikna and he looked the other way. “Rord is extremely well read. As a rustic he does research for routines. However, lately I’d say he’s gone into retirement.”

Rordan grimaced at his bro’s comment. “I have some lessons that go into arcane subjects. I don’t know how much of it’s true. A lot of it seems like old wives’ tales. But I fish out the bits that seem useful or sound true.”

Glenys said, “What are you going to do?”

Fikna sat down on Sinna’s bed. He clasped his hands behind his lower back and stretched. “Oof. The Huncher sure inflicted a knocking about on my person. We’ve spoken with the Council. I’d venture our next step is to wait for them to draw our enemies into negotiation.”

Rordan said, “What about the Huncher? Glenys is a sitting duck here.”

Glenys said, “I’m a sitting duck anywhere. Unless Borus can drive him off again, I don’t see what any of us can do.”

Her confidence puzzled Rordan. He looked at Borus. “Hey, will you stay with her? Glenys might need your help.”

The girl’s attention shifted to him. She stared at Glenys, then nodded several times in rapid succession.

Rordan gaped at her.

Fikna said, “By Welkin, he understood! Rord I must say I am impressed by your progress with this youngster.” He covered his throat with the heels of his palms again.

Glenys said, “You have any bandages in that?”

Fikna handed her the mercy kit. “Help yourself.” Relief showed on his face.

She opened the kit and gave it a careful examination. “Nice. I like a kit that sees use. Now all I need is a friend to bandage me up too.” Glenys cast a teasing glance at Rordan.

“Sorry, I’m no physic.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

Fikna said, “Hmn. I fancy a test of this third eye I’ve acquired. I think I’ll go investigate the sanctum.”

Rordan got up. “Sounds good. Let’s go.”

Fikna said, “No Rord, this is private. You remain here. I think you’ve had enough excitement today. I recommend you pay a visit to the baths downstairs. We shall meet again later.”

Rordan became crestfallen.

Fikna smiled. “Cheer up Rord. Once I’m satisfied, I shall search for you here or in our room.”

Glenys said, “Be careful. And if I were you I’d get a real look at your throat. The academy physic lives on the grounds and has an office in the community hall.”

Fikna said, “I shall endeavor to make a stop there. And careful shall be my watchword.”

Rordan watched his bro’ bow and take his leave.

Glenys shook her head. “Gallants.”

A sense of shame came over Rordan. “Do you think romance is dumb?”

She stopped unrolling a bandage and stared at him as if he had been improper. Rordan watched her fight back emotions and compose herself.

“Romance is life itself for Leo. Have you ever been in love?”

The question pierced Rordan’s heart. For the first time, he realized he’d never had any more than a crush that had worked out poorly for him. Emptiness surrounded his feelings and drove his thoughts to failure.

Rordan realized his bungling extended to matters of romance and Abrafo’s mockery became clear to him. The shame constricted his vision.

He returned Glenys’ gaze and her eyes numbed his insecurity. His vision of wild love for her came back in a torrent and he knew he had fallen in love with her. A steady pressure throbbed in his head. Rordan intuited the rest of Glenys’ unspoken question with a thrill of insight.

“And lost it?” He choked on the words. His intuition told him he would know what she knew about love and he could do nothing to stop it. He had given love permission to enter as surely as if he’d invited a vampire into his house.

Glenys put the bandages back on the desk and sat down on the side of her bed. “Oh. Dear, I’m sorry. You know what it’s like. I had no idea. I keep thinking I’m the only one. My Leo selfishness”

She looked at him and he stepped backwards.

“It’s okay,” said Rordan. “I just...I mean. You sounded like you were making fun of my bro’. He takes it seriously.”

Glenys said, “I know. But I don’t need a gallant looking after me, putting me on a pedestal.”

“What do you need, then?”

Her face grew sad. “A miracle.”

Rordan heard Abrafo’s laughter and saw a bungler card flipping upright over and over. “Borus, keep an eye on her. I’ll be back.” He took the lamp and turned to walk away.

“Rordan.”

His face turned toward her. “What?”

“I don’t think romance is dumb.”

Borus stared at him, then at Glenys.

Rordan saluted them and walked away. In the hall, he thought about checking the poisoned tree. The risk seemed too great to him and he decided against it.

At the top of the stairwell he spotted Kea walking out of Middle Trow. Rordan stayed out of sight with a silent tread, the lamp held away from the doorway. He imagined the nighttime shadows of his cottage in Nerham concealing him.

Her face was awash in sincere worry. “What’s happening?” she said to herself. Then she passed from his view and range of hearing.

Rordan returned to his hall and passed by Manissa’s closed door. His thoughts of sneaking in to replace the dagger were crushed.

He entered his room and closed the door behind him. Rordan noticed Stig’s clutter had expanded to fill half the room. He sat at his desk and set down the lamp, then took out his writing kit and the new journal.

His talk with Glenys replayed in his mind as he stared at the wall in a trance. He twisted open the ink jar, assembled his pen, and peeled open the first page of the journal. Rordan wrote about his conflicted feelings.

A jumbled mess of emotions poured onto the page by his hand. Half-remembered quotes were put on paper to get his feelings into context. He strained to express a number of half-formed impressions about Glenys.

His exercise finished, he read his entry. The words were earnest and confused to him. He’d written about how the song of nature had broken him beyond repair.

One passage told about sensations of being watched by a person just out of his sight.

Rordan took out the illuminated map and studied the details. The map had changed since last he looked at it. In one box he had thought blank there now existed a scene of two people talking. One figure untied the other's hands of a thick rope.

A paper door had sprung up past it where there hadn't been one before. His finger plucked it open and behind the door he saw an illustration of a fearsome, robed monster holding a torch. The torch appeared to be made of human bones taken from another figure.

A spiral with an arrow pointing inwards at the line where the spiral began to coil hovered above the human figure. The display had been well crafted with colored inks. A tiny spot of gold had been glued to the central part of the spiral. To the side, a richly crafted brush stroke had created what appeared to be a plant stalk beside the human figure. The rainbow colors dazzled him.

The brush stroke had been accomplished through a heavy-handed use of ink at the right moments to mimic the natural segments of a plant stalk. Rordan guessed the ink held a solid mixture to give it more texture than normal. The result made the plant look more realistic and gave it a three-dimensional quality.

He closed the paper door. As Rordan marveled at the magic of the map, he noticed a lengthwise illustration of

an ocean seabed at the bottom. A mixture of icons and objects littered the sand beneath the waves.

Some were half-visible while others remained inscrutable. He made out an elaborate silver key inside a cratered moon, a bolt of brilliant lightning in the form of a spear, a splintered rod with a flower bursting out of it, and a sun with a feminine eye in the center.

Rordan put away the map and pulled out the illuminated wheel page. The cover sheet hadn't changed. He readied himself for a shock and raised it.

The scenes of torture had changed. The figures were all absent and the engines of torture were empty. The colors had changed into subdued hues and the painting of Dalla had been replaced by a framed message in the same arcane script as the rest of the wheel page.

He chuckled. "Come back later." There must be a limit to how much you could look at yourself in one day. He put the page away and his journal back in the daypack.

A knock sounded at the door. Rordan stood up and answered it. Stroma stood before him.

"Hello Rordan. May I come in?"

He smiled. "Sure, come right in. What's up?"

Stroma closed the door behind her and took a seat at his desk. "I hear you've been having some troubles with Kea, Manissa's guest."

He ran his hand through his matted hair. "Yeah, we aren't exactly getting along. She seems to have it in for me. I admit I'm having trouble putting up with it."

Stroma said, “Have you tried talking out your differences?”

Rordan realized this was an informal hearing and he eased into the mask of a reasonable person. “Yep. There seems to be some basic break between us. It’d probably take a third party to put out some common ground. I sure don’t know how to resolve it.”

Stroma nodded. “Is there anything you might have done or said that would have upset her?”

“I did a lot of funny things on the voyage here. Any of those might have upset her. I’ve already tried to talk to her about it and she went nuts. She even went off on my friend Glenys.”

Stroma said, “I heard. Maybe she’s insanely jealous of her.”

Rordan pulled up Stig’s desk chair. He sat down and said, “Jealous? Of what?”

Stroma said, “You’re a handsome guy who comes across really unusual. That can be intimidating to a girl. Especially if she likes you.”

His mind blanked at this concept.

Stroma smiled. “I bet you don’t even notice the effect you have on others. Your brother might be an obvious charmer, but you have a quieter gift of attraction. People want you to like them.”

Rordan said, “You’ve got to be jesting me.” He laughed, both flattered and confounded.

She gave him a warm smile. “You know I’m right. Try to be a little less strange and a little more attentive.”

“Kea already has a sweetheart. Some guy named Noss she met on the voyage.”

Stroma said, “Maybe that was to get your attention. Girls do funny things to make a guy notice them.”

He clenched his teeth lightly. Stroma’s counsel twisted the situation in a way he hadn’t counted on. “I guess. But that doesn’t make much sense to me. Why not just be upfront about things?”

“To you maybe. Imagine you’re attracted to a guy for reasons you can’t explain. And he’s strange! That can be hard to be upfront about.”

Rordan said, “I guess. That just seems weird to me.”

Stroma said, “Exactly. It seems weird—to you. Think about it. I’ll try and see if I can’t find out where she’s coming from. You might have some common ground after all.”

“Hey, anything you can tell me to make sense of this would be great.”

Stroma got up. “That’s what I’m here for, Rordo.”

He smiled. “Thanks for dropping by. I really appreciate it.”

She smirked at him. “Oh, and don’t think I didn’t notice your absence at the floor meeting. The next one will be mandatory.”

A sense of mild embarrassment came over him. “Sorry. My bro’ and I kind of had Depressing Club duty. I’ll make sure we make the next one...or something.”

Stroma peered at him. She departed and closed the door behind her.

Rordan decided he liked her a lot. She was kind and firm at the same time. He found a lot to admire in her.

He had a sudden attack of discomfort and turned around. A bugbear scrambled through the window, having swung in from the roof.

The bugbear spoke with a bitter, strained voice. “I thought that do-gooder prune would never leave. Time to pay up bungler.”

A flood of heat welled up in Rordan and he stretched his arm out toward the bugbear. A snap of brightness enveloped the room and the bugbear hurtled backwards. The demon managed a shriek before it evaporated mid-air into oily pink smoke.

Satisfied, Rordan said, “How about a blast instead?” It occurred to him his decision had become final. The bugbear had been on a collection run. He had told Master Beag to get lost and it would go to the next level of ugly from here.