

CHAPTER 20: SOME SECRETS COME OUT

Rordan made his way back to his room from the Boant Oak kitchen. He carried a cup filled with dirt, in which the plant now resided. The door to Manissa's room remained shut. He tried his own door and found it unlocked.

He opened it and stepped inside. A shapely, tawny-skinned girl stood by the window, outwardly withdrawn but quietly alert. At his desk sat a Dimmurian teenager. She had blonde hair tied back by a bright red cotton strip. Stig sat at his own desk while Vacia stood beside him.

Stig said, "It's a hoot now." He scoffed.

Rordan said, "Hey there." He looked inside his closet and saw no sign of Borus.

Vacia smiled. "Look what the cat dragged in. Hi Boner, how's tricks?"

"I'll tell you in a minute." Rordan entered his closet and closed the door. The cup and daypack ended up on the dresser. He peeled the clothes off his damp skin, then pulled on a fresh set.

Rordan noted he chose to wear his red shirt with the black and white salamander. Thoughts came back to him of the last slam with the Hearth Bunch. His heart ached for their presence now. If Varan were right, he could learn to see if they were okay.

As he combed his hair, he heard snippets of a musical loyalties discussion outside. Vacia's distinctive voice

came through the flimsy wooden door separating them. Rordan decided her voice sounded like a young man's.

With a soft sigh, he grabbed the daypack and exited the closet. Rordan extended his hand to the Dimmurian and said, "Hi, I'm Rordan."

The spry girl gave him a firm shake and said, "I'm Klara. I ran into your friend Borus earlier. Thought I'd see who he was staying with."

He suspected she was the same Klara on Nyah's list of negligent points. "I hope he didn't hassle you. He's struggling with a lack of speech."

Klara laughed softly and easily. "No, he was cool. He heard me singing and hung out. He's a good audience."

Rordan nodded. He extended his hand to the girl by the window, whom he believed was a dryad. Nervousness made his voice sound edgy. "And what's your name?"

Her large, dark blue eyes studied him. "I'm Doncia. I also met Borus, or he met me. Your friend came into my room and disturbed my prayers."

He lowered his hand. "Oh, sorry about that. He's an odd guy, but he means well."

Doncia said, "I keep running into odd guys. Seltish boys don't know how to behave themselves."

Vacia returned Rordan's look and said, "There seem to be a lot of dong warriors at the academy right now."

Doncia said, "This particular example I had to chase out the door."

Embarrassment welled up in Rordan's stomach and his nausea stirred up again. "Hey Doncia, I'm really sorry you were upset. I don't know why Borus bothered you, but it wasn't on purpose."

Doncia gave him an even look. "If there's a next time it gets personal."

He swallowed.

Stig laughed with detached interest. "Nothing like the threat of violence to show us who the feathers are."

Vacia chuckled. "That's why you need several dong substitutes, right?"

Stig shrugged. "Hey, nobody's going to catch me with my fly down. World's full of claim-jumpers."

Klara shrieked with laughter. "Ain't it the truth?"

Stig sang a brief, plainchant melody.

Rordan said, "I got to run folks."

Klara said, "Sure, we can hang out later."

He waved and left the room.

Vacia shouted after him, "Be careful out there Boner!"

He made his way up to Glenys' room. His conversation with Doncia unsettled him. The thrill of meeting a dryad from Faria face to face had soured into a slip-up over Borus. He didn't like it. Rordan decided the argument was a symptom of the gnarring between their two heartlands.

The closed door to Glenys' room gave him pause. He remembered they'd agreed to be elsewhere to give Sinna

some space. Rordan considered the likelihood of anyone still being at the Grill against how much time had passed since dinner.

He secured the daypack against his shoulder and made his way downstairs, then out the front door.

Rordan walked at a brisk pace and considered what he might do with his lucky stone. Work on his creative imagination had been scarce. He'd done hardly any routines or bits since leaving home. The realization annoyed him. He had to get slammin'.

His thoughts turned toward the results of the exam. He wouldn't know until tomorrow if he would take performance or a crummy formula class. The thought of seeing Master Beag in his office again scared him. He didn't want to be stuffed in a jar and disappear when he had another mentor meeting.

Exhaustion clutched at him and his insides felt faint. Foreboding came over him. He worried his burdens were too many, too complicated, and too tough for him to endure.

A pair of older pupils passed by him and he returned his attention to the present. The path he walked now was the site of the previous ambush. His eyes searched the darkness of the trees for demons and the chill cloud, but nothing stood out to him.

He reached the Grill. Amateur music played from within. His insides tingled with the suspicion of being watched. Rordan opened the door and peered inside.

A teenager made an attempt at a folk loyalty performance. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat over his long hair, which was dyed green. Rordan lightly clenched his teeth at yet another person coloring their hair.

Glenys, Fikna, Borus, and an unfamiliar teenage girl sat at a table together. He had the sense of studying a rival for his bro's well being. She wore a simple brown dress with full sleeves and had shoulder-length, curled brunette hair under her hood. A long, best-friendship braid of hair fell down from behind her ear to her chest. Her rich, nut-brown eyes looked up at him as he stared.

Fikna waved. "Rord, come forth and be seated among us. We were wondering if you would appear."

Rordan pulled up a stool and sat down. His bro' had rings under his eyes and a drag to his movements. Fikna no longer carried Trad's knife, which worried him. Glenys looked beat. Borus, on the other hand, looked pleasantly invigorated.

The youngster wore a twine necklace. A whelk shell sealed with beeswax and decorated with dabs of red paint hung on the end. Borus' clothes had eight small rips and tears in them. A small bloodstain marked her left sleeve.

Glenys noticed Rordan's puzzlement and shrugged at him.

Fikna said, "Blai, allow me to introduce my foster-brother Rordan. Rord, this is Blai Mageoc. She is studying to be a sage in Chief-speech."

Rordan said, “Nice to meet you. Any friend of Fikna’s is a friend of mine.”

She smirked. “Fikna’s done nothing but brag about himself the whole time. I was hoping you’d give me the real dirt on him.”

Rordan laughed.

Fikna said, “Here now, Rord has only marvelous recommendations to make concerning my character.”

“It’s not his character you should be worried about,” said Rordan.

Blai cackled and Rordan laughed with her. Fikna smiled. Borus watched their reactions with steady interest.

Glenys said, “How are you, dear? You had us worried.”

Fikna said, “Quite correct, Rord. The two of us grew most alarmed for your well-being. We have been involved with adventures concerning our unusual friends, if you understand my meaning.”

Blai said, “You mean you actually have friends?”

Rordan knew what Fikna referred to. “There’s a bunch of people who keep bothering us.” He turned back to Glenys and said, “I’m okay, though I don’t recommend going into the woods alone. Or at night.”

Blai said, “Oh, the Fantom Forest?”

Rordan said, “Are you jesting me? That’s what it’s called?”

Blai looked smug. “That’s what I hear. There’s a Farian next door to me who calls it that. He could probably tell you all about it. He says he goes there all the time.”

Fikna said, “Does this fellow have a name? Most assuredly he might offer up some pointers. If Rord’s going to gallop off alone into hazardous forests at nightfall, advice is warranted.”

Blai said, “Sure, I’ll introduce you. His name’s Tono.”

Fikna said, “Imagine, a dryad gentleman in a mixed dormitory. The situation astounds me.”

Blai said, “Don’t worry, I’ve got a lock on my door. And that’s Farian, not dryad.”

Rordan said, “There’s a...err, Farian girl too. I ran into her with a bunch of other people in my room.”

“Then you’ll need a deadbolt on your door,” said Blai.

Rordan concealed his frustration. He wanted to speak openly with his friends but Blai got in the way. “So what happened after I took off from dinner? Did you come here and wait all this time?”

Fikna shook his head. “After pursuing our own agendas, we reassembled in your room for a while. Our hope was you would venture by on your way to the Grill. Instead, Blai paid us a visit and we decided to come here for a bite without you.”

Rordan finally noticed the used trays at the table. His stomach growled. He felt out of it.

The young gallant stood up. “Blai, permit me to escort you back to your room. Now that you’ve become acquainted with Rord, you can plainly recognize how you may rely upon my judgment. Shall we?”

Blai rose from her stool and extended her hand to Fikna’s. “Of course, I would be delighted.”

Rordan said, “Hey bro’, where’s Trad’s knife?”

Fikna said, “I passed the blade to Glenys’ safekeeping. We shall speak later Rord. Blai?”

“Nice to meet you Rordan. Good evening, everyone.”

The two of them departed together.

Rordan watched the door close behind them. “Are they an item?”

Glenys smiled. “Sure looks like it. I’m happy for Fikna. But tell me what happened to you. I see a great change. You’re giving off all sorts of wonderful, strange energy.”

Borus pushed her empty tray forward and stared ahead.

“Why’d he give you the knife? There are demons around.” Rordan struggled to comprehend.

She smiled at him. “He doesn’t need it. And I’m better than him with it anyway.”

“What?”

Glenys said, “He doesn’t tell you everything, dear.”

Rordan sighed. “Okay. I went into the Fantom Forest, which is also called Unruly Wend. I ran into

Master Beag. He tried to kill me with a pigsticker, but I dodged him at a crossroads. Probably because he really is a vampire.”

She put her hand on his. The gesture soothed him and he smiled at her. “I had to find another way out of the forest because it was getting dark. I ran into all these short fantoms doing whatever they do. And this wacky fantom girl. I asked her for help and she led me farther into the forest. There were these old stones in a triangle, where she tried to capture and eat me.”

The curiosity on Glenys’ face turned into concern.

Rordan puffed. “This is where it gets really weird. She says she turns into a spider at nightfall. I can’t get away because she surrounded the place with fantom threads. I start cutting my way out with Kea’s dagger and she roughs me up pretty bad. Bites me and says I’m poisoned.”

Glenys drew a breath. She put her free hand to her mouth and looked down at Rordan’s side. “That’s not good. Fantom poison can only be cured by a fantom physic.”

Rordan deflated inside. “I tried to appeal to her hospitality, but she wasn’t buying it. My blood must have tasted funny, so I used that to trick her into thinking I’d poisoned her for breaking trust as a host. I told her that in exchange for a kiss, I’d tell her where I’d dropped a non-existent cure. She bought that and I used the time to cut free and escape.”

Glenys pulled her hands to her chest and withdrew into herself, closing her eyes. “Damn it all to blazes, Rordan Mannlic. You can’t go walking blindly into a fantom wild at night. I can’t protect you if you pull stunts like this. You’re lucky to be alive.”

She glowered at him and he shrank from her.

“Do you hate me for doing it?”

Glenys said, “No. But you can’t go through a pass, I mean an ordeal like that and not be majorly changed. I don’t know how to react.”

Rordan tried to recall what he had learned. “I know. It makes me a weird guy and how do you talk to someone like that? But I have to see who I am. I went into the woods because I had to. It’s the way I figure things out.”

She peered at him. “Have you ever thought about what you would do if you don’t like what you are? What if what you see is horrible? What then, Rordan?”

Her gaze unsettled him. He looked away and glanced at Borus. The youngster rested her head upon her folded arms on the table. “I’m sorry about what you had to see in yourself. I didn’t realize what it meant until you had your first vision. Maybe for some people it’s better that they not look at all.”

Glenys’ eyes flared.

He intuited the mean side of him had changed the subject, just because he wanted to see someone else struggle.

Rordan said, “I got to see a piece of myself that I’m not happy about. We can’t go back to being asleep again. I had no right to hope that you would see what Fikna and I see.”

She closed her eyes.

He watched her draw strength from a hidden inner depth.

Glenys opened her eyes and spoke with a determined voice. “You aren’t responsible for me, or my choices. If my problems were your fault, we wouldn’t be talking now. I care about you, so deal with it. I’m not angry with you, but you’ve upset me. I couldn’t bear it if you got hurt and I wasn’t there to help you. You’re so...infuriating!”

She composed herself. “Fikna and I talked about our visions while you were gone. We both see how ahead of us you are on this journey. We feel like we’re standing still. Give us a chance to catch up.”

Rordan experienced a pang of guilt.

She pressed her hands to her chest and closed her eyes. A fluorescent red aura crackled into existence around her.

He found himself aroused and cowed by her at the same time. Her body radiated fiery sensuality and the gestures of her limbs became charged with wanton suggestion.

“What did you do?”

Glenys said, “You aren’t the only one with powers, dear. I can only guess what mysteries have been revealed to you.”

Rordan gaped for two seconds. “I haven’t quite figured out what they’re for. But yep, sometimes I can do things.”

She smirked at him with a coy glance and he felt himself sweat.

“We’ll figure this all out together,” said Glenys. “Don’t worry about me or what you saw. There are things about me I have to do on my own. I still need your friendship; it means a lot to me. Don’t get yourself eaten by spider fantoms, okay?”

Rordan stumbled over his words. “I know I was dumb. But what I saw in you, I needed to cope. I didn’t know it was so horrible in the forest. I’ll be more careful now.”

Glenys said, “Long as I don’t drive you away completely.”

Her words floored him. Rordan found himself wanting her in ways that made him shake. “No chance of that. I felt bad after I watched Fikna go through this the first time. I’ve been having second thoughts. Maybe this change that follows me around isn’t as good as I believed.”

“Don’t feel bad. I have no regrets and neither does Fikna. It’s a good thing that our third eyes have opened. As long as we stick together we’ll make it through this. That’s why we all met each other.

“I know you looked into my private self and you let me be. That restores my confidence. I saw into you too and it humbles me how sad you are without having lost hope.

“Another thing. I first began to see things that night you gave me the flyer. It wasn’t a flyer, was it?”

Rordan felt his throat grow sticky. In another minute he would do whatever she said, get on his knees and beg her to love him. “No. It was this magic page given to me by my fantom friend.”

Glenys eyed him. “You’re going to have to tell me about that one. Is it okay if I see your map and the magic page at some point?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes. Any ideas on how to handle Kea?”

Glenys laughed once. “None that don’t involve committing an offense.”

Rordan grew alarmed, half expected her to ask him to harm someone and not knowing what would happen. “You aren’t thinking it’ll come to that, are you?”

“That’s why I have the knife. I don’t have any other ideas. She’s as much a baffling nemesis to me as she is to you.”

Quietly, Rordan said, “Really? Are you two connected somehow?”

Borus shot to her feet.

Rordan turned around to look at what his friend gritted her teeth over. Two bugbears stood just inside the

front door of the Grill, leering at them with a fierce visage. Rordan recognized them as the ones he'd met earlier.

The one on the right said, "The goose and the simpleton, with mutilated bungler on the side."

The one on the left hissed. "Get ready to pay up losers."

Borus crouched. She dashed at the bugbear on the right and struck the demon's head with a series of rapid smacks. The bugbear uttered a high-pitched shriek and fell to the ground clutching its head.

The other bugbear charged Glenys, its claws extended toward her neck. The aura shot out a reddish-yellow tendril at the bugbear and the creature disappeared in a puff of flaked pink ash on the table. Glenys' aura went out and she slumped forward with a long exhale.

Borus stomped on her opponent, who deflated like a sack of air. The demon's empty skin disintegrated into tiny pieces of dry pink dirt. Borus made a chattering grunt.

Rordan looked at Glenys. "That was some trick. Looks like you can blast them too."

She rubbed her eyes. "Not really; it's more of a boundary thing. I become bad luck to mess with. But it's tiring."

"Yep, it is." Rordan looked about the Grill. No one took any note of what had happened. The songster continued to play awful music. It perplexed him how

easily people stayed asleep. He guessed they remembered only in dreams what they had seen, but refused to admit.

Glenys stood up and stretched. “Dear, lets get out of here. I suddenly feel exposed.”

Rordan got up and grabbed his daypack. “Sure. Borus lets go.”

The three of them made their way back to Boant Oak.

They reached the site of the previous bugbear ambush. Rordan thought they needed to find a new route, even if it took them longer to walk.

He felt a chill at the base of his spine and realized his thought had come too late. They were getting jumped again in the same place as before.

Borus chattered.

Ivixa, Flann, Noss, Ulidia, and Kea stepped forward from behind the trees and out of the shadows. Except for Noss, who appeared ill, they all wore their monster masks. The women were armed with heathen-looking axes while Flann and Noss each held a crowner.

Noss said, “I warned you about keeping him on a tight leash.” He sweated and looked barely able to stand, yet his limbs moved with manic strength.

Rordan watched a faint pink cloud of fog rise up around all of them. He heard the sound of a creature walking out of sight behind the trees.

“Yuck. The masks have got to go.” Glenys opened her line bag and pulled Trad’s knife out. She assumed a

fighting stance, though her bandaged hand had difficulty holding the knife.

Kea said, “Using a clumsier blade, are we?”

Ivixa and Ulidia snickered.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Kea. “You’re all going to vanish and never be seen again.”

Rordan reached into his pocket. His hand found the lucky stone easily and he pulled the token out. He faced Kea and kept his back to Glenys and Borus.

Noss laughed. “Is that your plan? Fight us with a pebble?”

Flann chuckled. “That’s pretty sad, pup.”

Borus’ chatter became a hostile chirring. Tensions rose in the assailants.

Glenys said, “Rordan, scream fire with me.”

Ivixa said, “Nobody’s going to hear you.” She and Ulidia edged closer, their axes in an easy pose.

Kea made a chuckle. “You didn’t think you were going to get away with everything after what you’ve pulled? This is the end of the road, chumpion.”

Ulidia’s eyes showed a sparkle of merriment. “Nighty night.”

Rordan held the crystal tight and recalled what magicians were capable of. A phrase came to his mind—about magicians being able to shape things as they are or might be except their own end.

His intuition told him this didn't count as his end. Varan had said he could have helped Pasiphaea if he'd been stronger or wiser. He wanted to help Kea now and believed she must be the key to this struggle.

Stroma's words came back to him. He opened himself up to the song of nature and listened for the sound of his own chord in the song. The sound of it came to him and the passion of his own river of fire flowed through his weary body like a rising thrill.

Rordan slid into the easy trance of performing a part before an audience. With a measured and rascally voice he said, "You know, Kea. If you like me and want me to notice you, all you have to do is be nice to me."

His actions perplexed the attackers and they hesitated.

He took a quick breath. "Really, all this fuss just to get some attention from me? I know I'm weird and hard to get to know, but it's all my way of showing off."

Kea put a hand on her hip and laughed lightly. She glanced at her accomplices.

Rordan took a practiced breath and conjured out of his speech an image of his version of events in the minds of those listening. His gestures were exaggerated and flirtatious as he edged closer to her.

"I'm sorry if I make you nervous. The truth is, I've never been good at noticing when a girl is trying to tell me she's interested. I'm a little slow."

He sensed his story had to reach a conclusion he could make use of in the next few seconds. Rordan chose

outright flattery and spoke from an unfair observation of the heart.

“Kea, you’re a dazzling beauty with a deep abiding loyalty for your friends. You have an enchanting manner that could soothe crying babies to slumber. No wonder you have so many admirers. Stop pretending to hate me and admit you like me.”

Kea said, “Let me guess, you’re going to ask me out for a date?”

Rordan made a sly chuckle. With a wave of his hand, he said, “Of course. Are you so surprised? Somebody has to make the first move.”

Ivixa stifled a laugh.

As she spoke, Kea’s voice lost a trace of confidence. “That’s the stupidest story I’ve ever heard.”

Rordan shot back, “If my story is stupid then make it smart. Let’s go out and make friends. I’m weird outside, but inside I’m a warm fluffy blanket.” He stared her in the eye with a smirk on his face, placed his hands on his hips with palms pointed outward, and bent his knees in a rooster-like stance.

Kea stared in shock through the eyeholes of her mask.

Her accomplices waited while Glenys breathed rhythmically into a state of readiness.

Kea stepped back. Her voice sounded shaken. “Okay, I’ll let you off the hook.”

Recognition crept into Flann’s expression. “Wait a minute, you’re falling for that?”

Kea said, “He recognizes me. That’s all that matters.”

Ivixa changed her focus and eyed Kea for a moment. “Oh, I get it now. This feud of yours is a dodge.” She glanced at her friends. “She’s coveting.”

Flann laughed.

Noss stared. He shivered, strength leaving his body.

Kea strained to keep a straight face.

Ivixa said, “You made it up. You were really coveting this pup. Specter-shooter Kea, scariest conjurer in Gwanmyne.”

Flann said, “Hoo-boy, what a stoss too. Got you all out of your mind, smooth talked you into admitting it. Oh, I feel like a chump!”

Ulidia giggled. “Somebody’s got a stitch coming to them.”

Flann grinned. “Yeah, after all you made us go through—Dalla especially. This pup’s got it coming to you.” He layered his arms in front of his chest, still holding the crowner.

Kea crossed her arms and looked away. “Fine. I admit it.” She laughed to herself. “Ror, what’s your stitch?” Her gaze turned towards him, burning with curiosity.

Glenys struggled to say something to Rordan.

“I want that date. You and me.” He leered at her.

Ivixa said, “Do not miss Rordan’s date.” She waited for a response that didn’t come, then made a gesture with

her left hand which Ulidia and Kea mimicked. Flann made a slightly different gesture with his right hand.

Kea laughed with a trace of disdain. “Only a pup would let me off that easily.” She turned and walked away.

The cloud broke apart and the others stood around in awkward silence.

Noss said, “What the blazes just happened?”

Flann put his crowner away in his coat. “Later Noss. Let’s blow. If Kea is cool with pebble pup, so am I.”

Ivixa and Ulidia put their axes away under a fold in their shirts. Ulidia said, “Somebody has to make the first move.” They looked at each other and giggled.

The assailants walked away and disappeared into the night after Kea.

Glenys eased her breathing down. “You’re going to have to keep that date, dear. And depending on how far that covet goes, I suggest you be ready to get close.”

Rordan bobbed and made a nervous squeak. “What?”

She stifled a laugh and returned Trad’s knife to her line bag. “She’s been after you in a certain way. And you called her on it nicely. Stealing her dagger isn’t so bad now, nor is her taking your shirt. In fact, it means you’re flirting with each other.”

Borus stopped watching for the return of their attackers. She turned around and listened to Glenys and Rordan talk. Her eyes held a strained look of comprehension.

Rordan said, “I didn’t know what else to do but turn it into a love fest. It’s the only thing that made sense all of a sudden. She’s been crazy for me and this proves it. But she’s still working for Master Beag. I don’t want to get a knife in my back while we’re kissing out.”

Glenys said, “Dear, I know. Coveting never makes sense, but it explains some of how she’s been acting. Your mentor probably wanted her to kill us, but you convinced her otherwise. Hrm. We might be able to use her feelings for you to our advantage.”

Rordan said, “What does that mean, covet?”

“Oh, it means she’s taken by a kind of madness. She has to possess you in some way as an end in itself.”

“What did Flann mean by stoss?”

Glenys lightly massaged her bandaged hand. “That means you tricked her. Got her to admit her coveting in front of everyone by giving her what she didn’t want to admit to herself. By doing that and doing it well, you got the jump on her.”

Rordan suddenly understood what he had agreed to with Kea. “I don’t know if I can do this lechers thing though. That monster mask will get on my nerves.”

Laughter billowed out of Glenys. “Oh please, dear. You’re a guy, I’m sure you’ll find a way to bear it.”

“Very funny,” said Rordan.

Glenys said, “Sorry, this whole thing has had me on edge. I’m only teasing.”

“What’s a pup?”

“An immature boy. It’s not a flattering term. I’m sorry they called you that.”

Her words formed an idea in his mind and he realized Glenys had to be one of them. Rordan touched his lips with his fingers. The sensation of Pasiphaea’s lips on his own returned. He felt his blood heat up.

Borus looked at him funny.

Glenys knuckled Rordan’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll be buying us time.”

He beamed at her gesture. “Time for what?”

“As long as Kea isn’t shooting specters, I mean demons at us, that’s one less problem. I have some things to take care of and so does Fikna. You aren’t alone in all this, remember?”

He shouldered his daypack. “Come on. Let’s go see if my bro’ is free yet. We all need to talk in private.”

The three of them walked the rest of the way back to Boant Oak. As they came to the side door, Rordan noticed Kea’s witch mask on the grass. The strap had snapped in two.

Rordan said, “Hey, check it out.”

Glenys and Borus spotted the mask.

“It’s Kea’s,” said Glenys. “She must have broken free. That’s good news. Yuck, what a nasty thing.”

Borus stomped on it with her foot. The mask crumpled as if it were made of frost. She beamed a wide-eyed smile at Rordan.

They continued into Boant Oak.

Rordan contemplated Manissa's closed door. He entered his room. Stig spoke with a teenage Farian with chestnut hair and an unshaven face. The guy was dressed in a short, light colored outer coat extending to his knees over dark trousers.

He acknowledged his bunkmate first. "Hey Stig." Rordan extended his hand to the Farian. "I'm Rordan, Stig's bunkmate. These are my friends Glenys and Borus."

"Tono." The teenager shook Rordan's hand and regarded him with a reserved expression.

For a moment, Rordan feared Tono had shown up on Doncia's behalf. He sat on his desk chair while Glenys stood near the closet. Borus peered from behind her with a series of curious glances.

"Oh, you're Tono. Okay. Blai told me a little about you, said you were a fan of the Fantom Forest."

Tono said, "Yes, that place gets down. It's filled with lots of cool critters. You have been there?"

Rordan said, "And how. The northern side is pretty nice. The western side is huge though—and scary."

Tono made a faint smile. "That's why they call it Fantom Forest. It's not Happy Fun Forest."

Rordan chuckled. "True. Hey, Stig. You seen Fikna around?"

Stig said, "Haven't seen the mother-scratcher."

A frown creased Rordan's face. He turned toward Tono and said, "That's my foster-brother. He's a gallant."

Tono said, "Then I know where your brother is. I saw him hanging out with Blai at her door. By their talk, I don't think you'll see him for a while." He shrugged.

Glenys said, "So much for catching him up with tonight's latest gossip."

A sensation of losing control passed through Rordan. He wanted to check on his bro', but knew he hadn't the strength. His need to be invincible crumbled inside of him; he found himself feeling unexpectedly okay.

Borus uttered a chattering noise. She made her way into the closet and wrapped herself up in the warmers and weave.

Tono said, "Does he sleep there?"

Stig shook his head in slight disgust.

Rordan ignored Stig and said, "Yep. So far he likes the closet. Makes him feel safe. I'll have to see how that all works out over time." He found himself too tired to socialize and stood up. "I'll be back. Glenys, will you come with?"

She nodded and the two of them left the room. Rordan closed the door behind him.

Glenys said, "Where to?"

Rordan lowered his voice. "Lets hit the Upper Trow snug. We need to chat before I collapse."

They reached the snug and found it unoccupied. Glenys sat down on one of the plush chairs and waited. Rordan lit one of the snug lamps from the hall and brought it inside. He closed the door and the windows, then sat down opposite her.

“Glenys, I’ve been meaning to ask something.”

She looked sideways at him. “I had an inkling. What is it, dear?”

Rordan said, “I know you can’t answer because of super secrets and all that. But you’re one of them, aren’t you? That’s how you knew so much about what Kea was doing.”

Glenys hesitated. “You see so much.” She pouted in thought. “I’ve been struggling with a decision all day. But if you could break Selvage with Dalla and live, then I shouldn’t have doubts.

“Dear, because you are precious to me and because I have a hunch you’re one of us, I’ll talk. Yes, I’m different. We call ourselves Lamians. Non-Lamians, whom we call clumsers, know nothing about us. We’re people going through a major change right now. We often feud with one another. For now, keep what I tell you to yourself. I still need to talk to my sponsor about your situation.”

Her explanation relieved him and he nodded. “Okay. Should I not tell Fikna?”

Glenys said, “I’d avoid direct questions from him, for now. Fikna can’t see us. Anyone who isn’t a Lamian and

finds out, dies. We call it Selvage. It's a rule all non-Lamians have to follow.

"I don't know how your brother fits in with us yet with his third eye. It's better to be quiet in case he's at risk. If you are one of us you will have to learn a lot of rules. So please, keep it to yourself for now unless I say it's okay."

Rordan considered her words. "I'll keep quiet. But he's already guessed a lot of what you've just told me."

"He can guess all he likes. Don't give him any facts. The moment he finds out something real, he'll probably get sick and die a slow death."

"What makes you think I might be one of you?"

A heavy sigh escaped Glenys. "We've been scattered for a long time. Part of our belief is that we'll find each other and be a free people again. So we're always looking for the missing Lamians. They're called spore-flakes.

"I don't know what you and Dalla discussed, but I'm betting it was enough. You do look pretty bad, so we won't know for certain until several days have passed."

She noticed Rordan's look of worry and took his hand. "You'll be fine. The other thing is that you seem to know our ways without ever having been taught them. You know the motheroine's signs. All that remains is for one of our mooncombs, a kind of spokeswoman, to decide it's official."

Rordan rubbed his temples and yawned. "What a crazy day. Were you and Kea feuding over me?"

Glenys said, “She never explained what the fake feud was about. I’m not part of her group and I’m a guest at someone else’s word. She could accuse me of anything and she’d be right. But now that you’ve revealed her covet and stitched her for a date, the matter looks closed until then.”

Rordan said, “What does that mean, that I’ve stitched her?”

“A stitch is a rule we have to take seriously. Because you bested her, you got to change her life a little. You said she has to go on a date with you. That’s a kind of stitch. She has to do that within a year or die. There are ways around it, but if she’s coveting you I doubt she’ll try. Your consent seems important to her. After that, who knows?”

“Consent?” said Rordan.

Glenys said, “If you’re one of us, to consent means you accept her dominance over you. You agree to do what she says. If you’re not one of us, you don’t get to say no.”

“Dalla said Noss was her chump. What’s that mean?”

She looked sad. “He’s not one of us. She’ll use him until she gets tired of him.”

Rordan frowned. He didn’t much care for her revelations. “I don’t know how I feel about calling my bro’ a clumser. That doesn’t seem right.”

Glenys said, “That’s the nicest name we have. Some of us want to use the term ‘newcomer’ to describe non-Lamians, but it’s controversial.”

“This is so complicated,” said Rordan.

She squeezed his hand. “Our people are complicated. Don’t fret about it now. Kea’s covet is out, we’re still alive, and you haven’t fallen into her clutches yet.

“Think about what you’ve been through this day. I thought your rustic display was sassy and sweet. The mask means you broke Beag’s hold over her. That makes me happy. It’s less specters to fight.”

Rordan said, “Specters? Oh yeah, specters.” He felt himself drowning in knowledge and hoping he could remember it all in the morning.

Glenys said, “I’ve been calling them demons because that’s what you and Fikna would accept. Specters are harmful spirits. They have the power to know things about their victims. Kea’s a spectress, a conjuror who practices in their ways.

“Anyway, we have a rest. Our foe isn’t done for, though. We still have to worry about the Huncher.”

Rordan said, “I know. I’m so tired. You know, it’s weird. It’s like these powers come and go like lighting and putting out a lamp. I feel really dim now. I’m a million miles from where I was when I started this voyage.”

Glenys purred. “It’s like a blazing wildfire for me. I’m all burned out now.”

Rordan shivered. “Oh. I got a very clear image of that field just now, with the blowing wind and overcast clouds above the grass.”

She smiled. “You should have seen what happened afterwards.”

Rordan laughed to himself, joy merging with tenderness in his heart. He remembered his feelings for Glenys and wished he’d asked her out on a date instead. “I wonder what it’s like for Fikna.”

Glenys said, “He described it to me as peaceful, nighttime starlight. Everything grew bright and hot when he felt himself grow weaker.”

Rordan said, “Whoa. Then there’s Borus. I wonder what he saw when he left? If only he could speak.”

Glenys rubbed her eyes and sat back. “I have a feeling your friend will find a way to talk to us soon. He’s learning from us.”

“Yep. Hey, that shell must be his magic present. What treasure did you discover when you saw yourself?”

Glenys said, “You mean like your map, or Fikna’s candle? I haven’t received my magic present yet. I’m itching to find out what it will be.”

Rordan said, “Cool. Will you show it to us when you get it?”

She smirked with mischief. “Yes, of course.”

He gave her a look of naked affection.

She turned her face away from him and clasped her hands together in thought. “It’s so difficult.”

He noticed a sudden tension between them. “What’s wrong?”

Glenys glanced at him. “How we’re going to have to act toward one another. The way you’ve changed my life. How I feel. It’s not going to be easy to sort out.

“Dear, I’m going to see if I can get in my room now. Today has been a thrilling adventure for me. Now I’m ready for a nap. I have a sense that tonight will be safe for all of us.” She touched his hand and rose to leave.

Rordan had a sensation that an opportunity had died out suddenly. He shivered from a chill at the back of his neck as she closed the door.

In the dim lamplight of the snug, he stared out the window. Across the academy field was another part of forest to the south. Rordan decided it looked desolate and sinister.

He heard the sound of crunching bones and crackling ice, and froze into weary fear. Outside, he caught a glimpse of the chill cloud moving through the trees.

This time, a low noise like an oscillation of hungry purpose accompanied it. Rordan watched the stagnant pink sparkles disappear from view and a sensation of smallness surrounded him. His experiences seemed empty and meaningless now.