

CHAPTER 2: BUNGLED ROMANCE

Rordan stared into the street and breathed in the night air. The last few days of cooler weather were unsettling. He closed the door and locked it.

A thrill coursed through him as he moved through the darkness of his home. He knew every step by heart and maneuvered with the briefest of touches. Rordan grinned with his lower jaw. He enjoyed how an intruder who moved through the clutter without light would make noise and risk injury.

Rordan checked the supply of coal-nectar by touch and found one bottle. He thought it would last. They were in the home stretch of the evening and soon the nectar would crash everyone out. He grabbed the last bottle and brought it back to his room.

Tora giggled to herself. Rordan remembered she had gotten into his Doctor Skulky lessons. He placed the bottle beside Fikna's mug and contemplated her discovery.

The material in the lessons qualified as marked. Rordan found the comedic techniques useful and didn't want his secret learning to get out. The writer's mockery of the Seltan heartland and Emphyreans would get him on a griller list.

Tora looked up at him and said, "You have to pay to learn how to think?"

He smiled at the line. Rordan knew what chapter she read from. “If you can’t pay, you don’t get to know anything.”

Tora giggled. She read a different section of the lesson. “Are you different? Are you a human being?”

Rordan knew it by heart. “That’s too bad, because everyone hates your guts.”

“Wake up, you’re out to lunch. The owners want to keep you working for the machine.” She glanced at him and waited.

Rordan said, “Stop the press. Refuse the yoke. Toss the boot.” He sat beside her on the arm of the Puff Couch.

Tora said, “Where’d you get this? It’s a riot.”

Rordan said, “Feldtun. There’s a dawdler colony there. I first picked up a lesson in a mart stand, along with some funnies. I found the whole series in the chapel archive a few years back.”

He paused, and comprehended how many marked lessons had gone up in the flames. Rordan would miss that smut manual he hadn’t the courage to open.

“Once you get past the initial hooks you’re reading, the stuff gets really hard to understand. I still don’t get a lot of it.”

Tora went through several pages at once. She glanced at the lewd pictures and chuckled. “There’s a chapter on cramming called the final battle.”

Rordan tightened his face at her profanity. Tora could be herself again. “Yep, pretty rude stuff. How’s your dad?”

She sighed. “He’s okay. Always asks me what I’m doing here. He thinks I’m kissing out with you guys. Probably wants me to get hitched and move out.”

Rordan said, “Do you?”

Tora tapped the lessons against her palm. “Maybe someday. But there’s so much out there to do. I want to have fun. I want to go to Ciriceval with you...and Fikna.”

Rordan lowered his head and frowned. “How’s your brother?”

She shifted around on the Puff Couch. “He’s chasing an eatery attendant who’s an airhead. My pop thinks it’s great. He’s giving all the attention to Ruben and it’s driving me crazy.”

He pushed aside his pity for her and said, “Thank you for the funnies. Fikna and I will need stuff to read on the voyage.”

Her gaze rested on a doodle and she uttered a single giggle. A line of smiling farmhands stared forward, while a monstrous demon picked them up one at a time and ate them in a single bite.

He smiled. The doodle disturbed him.

Tora said, “Can I take this with me? I want to read more about the backmonkeys and drudgets in my life.”

Rordan shook his head. “No way. Your dad finds that and I’ll never get it back from you. Hold on a second.” He reached into his stack of lessons and pulled out one illustrated with Doctor Skulky’s surprised face. He handed it to her.

“Take this. It’s the original lesson I got and summarizes the first two chapters. It’ll give you an idea of where Doctor Skulky was coming from.”

Disappointment showed on her face. She took the lesson and put it into her inside jacket pocket. “Was?”

“Yep. According to Doctor Skulky, he died a few years ago. I believe it was faked. His last big word was he’s dead and it’s up to you the reader to carry on. If you mess up, then the bad guys win. Only you can do the ridicule of Deuce-uno, Stick-boy, and his machine-men.”

Tora sputtered with laughter. “That’s making fun of Deiwos and Emphyreans!”

He put a finger to his lips and widened his eyes. “Yep, bad news if anybody finds out. That’s why you should keep this quiet. It’s bad to own stuff like this.”

She pouted. “Fikna wouldn’t like it if you called him a machine-man.”

Rordan frowned. “He’s not a machine-man. That’s his thing. Doctor Skulky is talking about people who say they’re Emphyreans, but just use it as an excuse. The drudgets and the backmonkeys use it as a cover to take your brainjacks. Then they train you to become like them.”

Tora's face lit up with excitement. "That's what it feels like. The drudgets are stealing my brainjacks. I need more brainjacks."

"I know. I always feel like people are sucking them out of my head. That's why I use the Dunser arts of laughery and foolpoots to confuse them, allowing me to get away."

She laughed.

He laughed with her, enjoying how simple honesty played across her face. An urge to kiss her crept into his thoughts. Fear of missing her even more terribly when he left held him back. For now, in his room he could forget about Fikna's lark. The Hearth Bunch remained together for a little while longer.

Rordan sat with her and lost track of time. They read and laughed at the catch phrases of Doctor Skulky.

He heard the sound of the front door unlock. Rordan checked the lamps and guessed nearly an hour had passed. Fikna and Abrafo were back from dropping off the Gretlahs.

A flash of regret passed through him. He felt an opportunity had passed him by and he would never know what it was. "Looks like they're back. We're going to play some ranc and be guys for a while. If you want to hang out, go ahead. I know fortune games aren't your thing. But if you want to join in, you can."

She made eyes at him. "I'll sit here and read more of the Doctor."

“Yep, go for it.” He hid his bafflement at her strange look behind a smile.

Fikna walked into the room with a scowl on his face. Behind him followed Abrafo, who looked pleased with himself.

“Rordan you missed it,” said Abrafo. “Your brother ticked off a yokel and got chewed out. It was hilarious.”

Fikna sat down in his chair and put Faru’s lantern on the table. “Yes, an enormous laugh of epic proportions.”

Rordan gave his friends a puzzled look. He got up and opened the bottle of coal-nectar.

“The big clown here...” Abrafo cracked up with laughter.

Fikna said, “Enough, you scoundrel. I shall relate the tale. We entered the mart after having escorted the Gretlahs. Abrafo asked me to wait for him at the overhang while he obtained the sugar-sticks. Naturally unsuspecting, I followed his direction.

“Shortly, a churlish man rudely berated me for blocking the way as he pulled a cart through the street. I attempted to move aside, to no avail. The yokel became angry and berated me.”

Abrafo laughed at his friend while Rordan gaped in disbelief.

Fikna waited for Abrafo’s laughter to subside. “I finally moved aside and he passed me. However, by then I’d entered a most disagreeable state of mind. Abrafo

returned with the sticks. With a look of pretended innocence, he asked what was the matter.”

Abrafo said, “I didn’t think the guy would still be doing deliveries at this time, but it was worth the chance. You should have seen how mad Fikna was.”

Rordan admitted to himself Fikna looked annoyed.

Without looking up Tora said, “You were ambushed by the drudgets and lost some brainjacks.” She giggled.

The conversation stopped and Rordan froze in place.

Abrafo said, “You didn’t actually let her read any of that, did you?” He shook his head solemnly.

Rordan looked guilty and rolled his eyes to the side.

Fikna said, “Never mind what she said, my aggravation is the main point. What an embarrassment to be treated so poorly. If I hadn’t been surprised, I’d have given the yokel a reproach.”

“You should have tossed the boot.” Tora chuckled to herself.

Fikna looked at Abrafo and Rordan in confusion. “What could she possibly refer to? Toss what boot?”

Abrafo gave his host a stare.

Rordan said, “Uh, okay Tora. That’s comedy stuff. Maybe you should read to yourself, okay?”

She eyed him for a second, then continued to read.

Fikna shook his head. “You manage a peculiar sense of humor at times, Tora. Now then, break out the ranc cards and let’s attend to business.”

Rordan grabbed a small wooden box from his shelf of lessons. He handed the box to Fikna and pulled up a stool. Fikna took a deck of cards from the box and shuffled them. Abrafo emptied a small paper bag of reddish, jellied sugar-sticks into a pile on the table. He divided them out evenly into three groups. Rordan refilled Fikna's glass and Abrafo's mug with coal-nectar, then poured himself some.

Tora held back a giggle. She muttered to herself. "Knowledge costs money."

Fikna said, "Take your booty piles, gentlemen."

Each of the players grabbed a pile of sugar-sticks. Fikna dealt the first hand.

Rordan took up his cards and examined them. The classical illustrations of Magi Star, Awakening, Moon Damsel and Bungler stared back at him.

He puffed. "Bungle." Rordan put his otherwise strong hand into the central discard pile.

Abrafo said, "Yoh. Looks like you're on your way to being the Bungly Man already."

Rordan gave up a sugar-stick to the stakes pile and sulked.

A steady, muffled series of rings sounded outside.

Fikna said, "They utilized the central archive bell, then. How regrettable; it's such a dingy sound. I hope they recover the chapel bell or this will be an eccentric autumn."

Abrafo said, “You want to talk zany, how about that Gretlah family? The mother wanted to talk your ear off. I bet she wants you to marry Lewinna.”

Tora said, “Share juices with the smut object of your dreams.” She giggled uncontrollably.

Rordan pursed his lips together and resisted the urge to wince. He regretted his decision to let her look through his Doctor Skulky lessons.

Fikna stood up and said, “Tora, that’s quite enough. Would you please control yourself or I shall request your departure. You are becoming unsettling.”

“I can’t help it, this stuff is funny.”

Abrafo spoke before Fikna could respond. “Yeah, yeah. Rordan writes some rude stuff for his routines. But we’re trying to play here.”

Someone made a series of knocks on the window shutters. Fikna ambled over to the window and said, “Songster?”

A hushed voice replied. “Shocking the Deuce.”

Fikna said, “What’s the request?”

“A bite and a snooze.”

Fikna looked at Rordan, who stood up and joined him by the window. They lifted and moved the bed close to the Puff Couch. Rordan kicked his things back under the bed. He moved the old, broken bolt aside and opened the shutters.

A young man holding a guitar case stood outside the window. He bowed in greeting.

Rordan said, "Welcome. Come inside."

Fikna and Rordan helped the songster climb in through the window. Rordan closed the shutters and carefully replaced the broken bolt.

He glanced at the young man's face. If the guy turned into a poor guest, or the patrollers found out, it would be a bad scene. Rordan decided his guest was okay. Tora was here and besides, the fresh music couldn't be beat.

He decided to be very polite. "Rordan's fire is bright."

The songster said, "It's Nenne you see before you."

With a slow nod, Rordan pretended to regard him with a skeptical look. The young man wore a transient jacket similar to Tora's. He was dressed in a sky blue, long-sleeved crop top and denim trousers that ended above the knee. His sandals were bright green.

Nenne exchanged a brief conversation with Tora. Rordan didn't speak their language. He guessed by the songster's voice that the young man was scoping the situation. Rordan understood. The risk cut both ways.

She looked at Rordan and replied to Nenne.

Nenne said, "The fire's warm." He clasped Rordan's hand.

Fikna seated himself. "Rord, obtain for your guest a stool and some sustenance. Refreshment too, if it can be managed. Say there Nenne, are you capable of playing Deep Uirolec?"

The songster nodded.

Rordan grinned. He seized Faru's lantern and let his friends finish their hand. His guest needed to be provided for right away.

In the hall, by the light of the lantern, Rordan's thoughts returned to last spring. He'd first heard songs by the songster from East Kgotla at a pupil hangout with Fikna. The songs they'd heard were already several years old and had blown both of them away.

He wondered if his guest knew any of the new Deep Uirolec. Rumors had spread that the songster party had compiled a fifth set this year.

Rordan knew Abrafo couldn't stand them. His friend preferred the dark and depressed music of Central Kgotla. He didn't mind. Rordan identified with the gloom too.

He entered the kitchen and gathered together a tall earthenware cup and a plate. His search of the cupboards revealed half a loaf of bread and some butter.

"Dang it."

His mother's kitchen skills mystified him. She seemed capable of summoning food by magic, for he could never find anything but containers in the cupboards. Unless she left food for him on purpose, he had to scrounge.

Rordan sliced four uneven pieces of bread. He buttered them and put them on a plate.

Somebody bumped into a picture frame in the hall. Rordan brought the lantern over and spotted Tora.

“What’s up?”

Tora said, “They kicked me out.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth and nodded. “Need an escort? It’s past curfew.”

Tora said, “I’ll be okay. I’m going down a few streets to Abeni’s. The mains will gimmie enough light.”

She gave him a strong hug and he felt the protrusion of her knife in its ready location. “Don’t be sad. I’ll see you tomorrow before you go.”

He opened the door and watched her sneak out into the street. Rordan made a silent prayer for her safety. Reluctantly, he closed the door and locked it.

He returned to his room to find Nenne had acquired his stool. The new guest accepted the empty cup and plate of buttered bread.

“You can sleep on the carpet under the table when we crash,” said Rordan. “Bed goes to my bro’ Fikna here. Couch goes to my friend Abrafo. I’ll sleep on the floor over there by the door. You’ll have to bug out early in the morning before the folks wake up. That cool?”

Nenne agreed. He ate a nibble of crust and put the plate next to him on the bed.

“I’ll get you a pillow and a blanket so it won’t be raw.”

Nenne looked inside the empty cup. “Got a drop?”

Rordan said, “Wait a second.” He put down the lantern and poured his guest a full cup from the bottle of coal-nectar.

Disapproval showed on Abrafo's face.

Nenne took a short sip and nodded. He nudged the bread over and placed the cup on the plate. With focused confidence he tuned his guitar.

Abrafo trounced Fikna in the current hand and collected the booty in the stakes pile. He gathered up the cards.

Fikna groaned and shook his head. "Nenne, Deep Uirolec please."

Abrafo frowned. "No more than two. Then some Pounder Otieno. Hey, can you play Otieno?"

Nenne said, "Sure can."

Fikna scowled. "If you insist. Rather unsettling subject matter this late at night. Rord, you in or out?"

"I'm in." He closed the door to the room and lowered the thick curtain hanging above it. The faded white fabric had been imprinted with lively Dunser patterns and caricatures of management figures. Satisfied, he grabbed another stool and joined his friends.

Fikna shuffled and dealt out the cards.

Abrafo grinned.

The anthemic chords and lush lyrics of Deep Uirolec, played at a low volume, filled the room. Rordan immediately recognized *This Witness Wanders* and smiled. It came from Uirolec's fourth set and told a story about a lost soul finding its way home.

He studied his hand and took a gulp of his beverage. A collection of lesser cards this time and The Bungler stared him in the face again. His favorite card, the Cup Kid, made the bad luck personal. Irritation clouded his face.

Rordan said, “Bungle.” He discarded and tossed in his stake.

Abrafo covered his mouth and cracked up. His eyes widened as he stared at Rordan’s discarded hand.

Fikna smiled. “I declare, not your night.”

With an exasperated look, Rordan stood up and went over to his shelf of lessons. Tora had put the Doctor Skulky lessons back in disarray. He settled onto the Puff Couch and worked on putting them back into order.

Abrafo said, “I’m telling you Fikna, you’ve got to dork that Tora girl of yours. She needs to get dorked.”

Fikna scoffed.

“I’m serious. I want to hear how big those doobers of hers really are. And while you’re at it, get going on that Gretlah girl. She’s also got big doobers. How do you do it?”

“Do what?” Fikna contemplated his hand.

Rordan gave up on his lessons and sat back. He listened to his friends. The girls were gone and the time had come for the usual talk about them. He sucked on his tongue. The nectar aftertaste had turned sour to match his thoughts of the current topic. The crashdown loomed.

Abrafo said, “How do you sit there without staring at their doobers? Both of them are stacked.”

Fikna said, “I’ll agree they are both blessed, especially Tora. But such physical attributes are not the reason I associate with them. They’re only friends. I never think about their appearance in the manner you are accustomed.”

Abrafo looked at Rordan and eyeballed in Fikna’s direction. “Your brother is nuts. How about you? While we were gone, what did you and Tora do?”

At Rordan’s blank look, Abrafo rocked back in his stool and shook his head. “What? You didn’t dork her? You didn’t do anything? You were alone with a girl ready to go. What in ruination is wrong with you?”

Rordan opened his mouth to speak and nothing came out.

Abrafo snickered. He trounced Fikna with a strong hand led by The Deucers. “I’ve got to get you two eunuchs a panderer.” He took his booty stakes and bit one of the chewy candies in half.