

## CHAPTER 11: NEW FRIENDS

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Rordan followed Stroma out of her room. His thoughts noted with satisfaction the things he'd learned. He now knew where his mentor's office could be found, where he would be signing up for his exam, and the location of the meal hall.

She pointed to a small room at the end of the hallway. "That used to be the attendant waiting room. You go there to get away from it all and study. On the other end of the floor is our snug, where we have floor meetings and revels. The meeting tonight will take place there."

He took this in with a nod of his head. Stroma led him downstairs to the basement level.

"There are four levels to Boant Oak," said Stroma. "This is Radix Trow. The three floors above are Lower, Middle, and Upper Trow."

Rordan noted the foundations of the building were of an old, dark grey stone. The stone reminded him of his dream the night before he left home.

"What's up with this stonework?"

Stroma said, "The manor and its original buildings were built over an old Dimmurian lodeshaft. There's still supposed to be tunnels under some of them. But it's expulsion if you get caught trying to enter."

Rordan perked up. "Are you serious? Which buildings?"

Stroma gave him an unamused look. "Don't go getting yourself expelled. You're my responsibility now."

She crossed her arms and said, “Rumor has it the manor, community hall, sanctum, archive and Boant Oak are all supposed to be linked by tunnels the Director had his servants use.”

He took a moment to consider what she had said. “I keep hearing the word sanctum. What is it?”

Stroma said, “Oh, that’s what the shrine is called. The Dimmurians wanted a different name when the place was commissioned.”

She made quote marks in the air as she said the word ‘official’. “That’s the official name, so nobody gets offended. The archive was done in the same style. The community hall, Boant Oak, and observatory are all done in nonconformist style though.”

Rordan looked at the academy guide-map. “It says you have an amphitheater here, but I saw one near the neighborhood mart. Who pays for all this?”

“There’s big money in the reserves,” said Stroma. “Lots of sovereign families send their kids here secretly, to give them a non-conventional education. Everyone else is window dressing. You’ll hear rumors that service agents get training here, or printing press stewards learn their craft. Very traditional.”

The revelation dumbfounded him. “So my admission here is just to pad the student body? So a few rich kids can get their closet papers?”

Stroma nodded. “You bet.”

He chuckled. “I feel so special.”

Stroma said “Spe-shal”, with a lisp while making quote marks in the air.

They both laughed.

She led him halfway down a long hallway and slid open a thick wooden door on the left. Rordan smelled the rotten egg stench of sulfur.

“This is the highlight,” said Stroma. “The Dimmurian ancestors had an indoor bathhouse here. The academy builders restored them with the help of consultation from the Dimmurian Trust. Our commissaries at work. There’s a hot springs not far from here. The baths take the water and mix it with a reservoir in the park next door. Those four baths and eight stations can fill up quick. It’s first come, first served around here.”

Rordan studied the sophisticated stone and cedar apparatus that worked the water system. The steam-filled layout had a primitive quality to it he found appealing. The open arrangement made him pause. He tried to place what made him hesitate and failed to identify it.

“Oh yeah,” said Stroma. “The water carries germs, so don’t get any in your nose. Every few years a pupil catches flame-brain and dies. Usually because they were drunk.”

Rordan laughed once. “Wow, thanks.” He continued down the hallway with her.

“Down this hall...and past that second stairwell is the hang-out. As you can see it’s a personal amphitheater. We hold pamphlet slams here.”

The possibility of his own personal stage made Rordan smile. “Cool, I’m a rustic. Slams are my specialty.”

Stroma gave him a look of appreciation. “Like a real rustic? There are only two others in the academy. Things should be a lot more entertaining around here.”

Rordan lightly clenched his teeth. The thought of other rustics brought out feelings of competitiveness. The old saying about the only way to offend a rustic was to be another rustic passed through his mind. He knew it was only typical for rustics to be territorial, but he couldn’t help it.

The basement hangout had tiered steps centered in an L-shape around a small, raised section of the floor. Windows near the ceiling at the outside ground level provided some light. Rordan pointed at a solid iron door in a corner. “Where’s that go?”

Stroma said, “Oh, that? It’s a door to the dorm hearth. When it gets real cold, they shovel in the fuel. Try and keep the place from freezing. But that’s only down the line. Come upstairs and see the main lounge. It’s got a fireplace and kitchen. And it’s where meetings are held when the dormitory esquire wants to set a policy.”

“There’s a dormitory esquire too?”

“You bet there is,” said Stroma.

She led him up a different flight of stairs. Rordan saw the front doors, a foyer, and a large room to the side he supposed was the main lounge. The lounge contained a fireplace and a number of well-worn, plush couches. A

kitchen could be seen beyond the lounge and behind the fireplace.

Stroma went down a side hallway and Rordan followed. She came to a carved oak door decorated with announcement flyers and knocked. Beside the door, a message kit hung from the wall.

A middle-aged woman with a serious demeanor answered. Beyond the door was a cluttered quarters of good size. The sound of children at play could be heard in an adjacent room.

“Hi Stroma. This one of your new recruits?”

“Sure is, Daalny. His name’s Rordan. He told me he’s going to study alchemy. He’s also a rustic.”

Daalny extended her hand and he shook it with a vigorous grip.

“Pleased to meet you Rordan. Hope you enjoy your studies here. You’ll find as long as you respect the rules in spirit, we’ll back you up. When the Depressing Club finally gets a hold of you, chat with me about anything.”

Rordan chuckled a little. He liked Daalny immediately. “Yep, I’ve heard about it. Can’t wait to be a member. But wow, you have a really neat-o place here. I lucked out big time when I landed Boant Oak.”

She smiled and gestured them inside. “Won’t you come in?”

Stroma and Rordan followed in after her. Potted plants filled a long windowsill, a few of which had small plush dolls sitting in them looking out the window. Wool

hangings covered the walls in a variety of warm browns, and rich red and violet patterned rugs covered the floor in overlapping layers. A pile of wooden toy blocks and a dozen painted clay figures littered a section of the floor. Rordan felt a family atmosphere at work.

Daalny searched a thick wooden shelf. She moved aside a carved wooden owl and several piles of lessons. “How was your travel here?”

“A bit rough, but me and my bro’ made it here in one piece.”

“You came here with your brother?” She looked around the room and crossed her arms.

Rordan said, “Yep. I came here with my foster-brother, Fikna. He’s here to make his fortune in society. I’m putting him up until he can get his own place.”

Daalny came to the desk covered with papers and decorative toys. She dug into the left drawer and pulled out a bound journal, which she handed to Rordan.

He flipped through the blank pages. They were made of a thirsty, durable paper.

“Thank you. Is there a special purpose for this you’d like me to keep in mind?”

Daalny said, “It’s a custom. I give a journal to new pupils I like, or who ask. They can record their experiences here; use it as a sketchpad. Whatever. Most keep with it for a few days and then forget about it. Some end up as communal journals in the main lounge. Whatever suits them. You look to me to be made of

good material. And I've seen them all here. I hope you find it useful during your stay here."

Her generosity touched him in a quiet, shy part of his heart. Rordan said, "I hope that I prove worthy of your gift. Thank you."

Daalny gave him a smile he felt had a thousand years of hard trekking behind it. "You're welcome. P.L., you may continue with the tour."

Stroma said, "Thank you Esquire. Rordan? Last stop: The attic that is Upper Trow."

He made a slight bow, then went with Stroma down the hall.

She pointed at a side passage down the hall on the first floor. "The attendant quarters and laundry chamber is down that way. It's first come-first served and can take a few days. The pupils on this floor have an advantage as you can see. Try to be nice to them. Otherwise, you might find your clothes having issues."

Rordan said, "Are we going to meet them?"

"They don't like to be disturbed. You'll meet them soon enough."

Stroma led him upstairs to the top floor. The construction appeared newer than the rest of Boant Oak he'd seen so far. The main hallway ran under the arch of the roof. A pair of garrets big enough for one person to dwell in lay at either end of the hallway.

Stroma said, "This used to be the attic. It was re-built to accommodate additional pupils. The garrets are study

turrets that were converted to single rooms. They're given out by lottery at the end of every year. The snug on this level has an incredible view of Mount Coaming, the nearest peak."

He repeated the name to himself. The snug looked comfortable and the view of the peak from the window was breathtaking.

They passed by an open door to a bunkroom. Rordan noticed a teenage girl inside, reading a pamphlet with a cover he recognized.

"Hold on a second Stroma." He knocked on the door and looked inside the room. The ceiling followed the slope of the roof and gave the room a subtle, claustrophobic feel.

Her eyes came into view above the pamphlet sheet as she lowered it. For a moment, she stared into the depths of his being. Rordan recognized in her a kindred quality he'd never experienced before. He struggled to imagine what she might be seeing; he didn't know himself what lay within.

She reclined on her bed and read the first volume of the fantasy pamphlet *Doomdy-gloomdy*. Rordan considered it a lost classic. The printed covers were all distinctive and hard to miss, but the series could be difficult to find. He had obtained and read them all, though he felt the first three volumes the best.

The girl wore a soft gray dress. Her eyes were large and expressive, and the wavy strands of her fine dark hair came down to her shoulders. A thin chain necklace with

a sun at the end, both made of copper, hung from her neck. On her left wrist was a small bracelet of woven sky blue and dark blue strings. A knot had been woven near each end.

“Hi, I’m Rordan. I uh...noticed you’re reading *Doomdy-gloomdy*. Great pamphlet. Sorry to intrude like this, but I’ve never seen anyone reading it before.”

Her amused puzzlement showed. “I’m Glenys. And it’s okay. I left the door open as an invitation. I thought the same thing—that I was the only one who knew Subsio’s pamphlets. Now I feel like my secret has been uncovered.”

Rordan pursed his lips and tensed his eyebrows. “Sorry about that. I mean, I love the series. But I hope you aren’t offended if I share it with you.”

Glenys giggled. “I always knew other people were reading. But as long as we didn’t actually meet each other, you know—it was okay. Now I’m ruined.”

He assumed a look of horror. “Oh no. I didn’t mean to ruin you, I mean the series. Just pretend I’m a madman going on who hasn’t really read the thing.”

Stroma peered at him with sly understanding.

Rordan said, “Who did you like the most in the story?”

She pondered with a forefinger to her chin. “I always wanted to be the daughter. Tragic girl who went out with a bang, but I would have done better.”

Rordan nodded with the middles of his lips pressed together. Her every movement brought a thump of blood to his skull. “I always liked the monk. He made it all the way through. And he carried the artifacts to the castle at the end.”

Glenys gave him a weird look and pouted. “The monk broke all his vows and lost his faith. He died of old age, but was he happy?”

He had a sense of having given a wrong answer. “I felt he was the only one who understood the main character. Besides the clairvoyager, that is. And the daughter knew that. She made her last speech to bond the two of them together.”

Glenys looked down and buried her face beneath the pamphlet. “I’m still ruined.”

Rordan cleared his throat. “Um, got to go. Tour and everything. But I live here now. Room eight, second floor. Feel free to drop by, or maybe I’ll run into you between classes. See you later.”

She waved goodbye and watched him leave.

Rordan followed Stroma down the hallway. He heaved a long breath.

She smirked back at him. “Already flirting. You don’t waste any time, do you?”

Rordan gulped and tried to appear innocent. “I don’t know about that. I uh, just had to meet her.”

Stroma nodded. “Mm-hm. That’s how it starts. I’m going to have to keep an eye on you.

“Now, out this door is the fire escape down to the field behind Boant Oak. People play sports out there. Everyone uses this stair-ladder as a shortcut. Past those trees is the next dormitory. You can make out the roof from here. And this is the other singles garret.”

Rordan looked out the door and noted the steep decline of the iron stairs that descended to the ground below. He shivered, not appreciative of the height.

“That’s the tour,” said Stroma. “You’ve got all of the next day to get your exam taken and your classes assigned. I’d talk to your mentor first. Don’t hesitate to call on me if there’s a problem.”

Rordan nodded. “Sounds good. I believe I can handle it.”

They returned to their floor and Rordan went back to his room. Borus continued to sleep in the closet. He eyeballed the travel chest and realized there was still work to do.

His bro’s damp towel and old clothes had been tossed in a corner beside the desk. The backpack had been opened and rummaged through. A smile played across his face. Fikna had found the shower stations and taken advantage of the luxury.

With rising excitement, he grabbed his own towel and soap jar from the backpack, along with a fresh pair of clothes. Rordan returned to the shower stations and found them deserted. He had a quick, private rinsing and wash to his satisfaction.

Rordan put on the fresh pair of clothes and returned to his room. His body felt much better with most of the layers of travel grime removed.

He hung up the towels in the closet and stashed the old clothes in a laundry bag. Rordan unpacked the rest of his bro's everyday clothes and put them in the top two drawers of the closet dresser. He hung his bro's surcoats and jackets on the hangers above Borus, who slept through all the noise and fuss.

Rordan unpacked Fikna's personal effects from the chest. He put away his bro's shoes, undergarments and accessories. Fikna's various soaps and unguents went into a cabinet above the dresser. He unfolded his bro's daypack and hung it by the straps from the back of his chair. By the time he had finished, the daylight outside was failing.

He wondered what his bro' could be up to. It couldn't take all day to introduce one's self to everyone in Boant Oak. Rordan hoped the witches or a bugbear hadn't gotten him.

His own things needed organization. He decided to finish that chore before he looked for Fikna. Rordan supposed he'd have to see about some temporary clothes for Borus from his own selection. Fikna would grow upset at having to volunteer any gallant outfits. He unpacked his clothes and put them into piles. They could be gone through later.

Rordan frowned; his Deep Uirolec loyalty shirt hadn't been packed. He could have sworn it had gone in with the rest of his favorites. A puff of air escaped his lips.

He assessed the bedding situation. The weaves and warmers would need to be washed. He'd brought pillowcases, but a walk to the mart-post for pillows would be necessary. Used clothes would have to do as stuffing until then.

A knock at the door interrupted his chore and he went to answer. Stroma waited in the hallway.

"Dinner is being served," she said. "If you want to see how bad the food is, now's your chance."

Rordan threw up his hands. "Sure, why not?" He grabbed his papers and daypack.

Fikna showed up in the company of two young women. He wore a fresh set of slightly wrinkled clothes. Under the Deep Uirolec loyalty hat, his damp hair hadn't dried all the way.

"At last I locate you Rord. I've spent considerable time with a pair of fine and cultured ladies. To our good fortune, they dwell on this very floor. Nyah, Eshe, please meet my foster-brother Rordan."

Nyah had a plump, shapely frame and bushy, reddish-black hair held back by a bow. Her mouth showed an overbite.

Eshe maintained a stately poise and had very short, frizzy black hair. She wore hose under her knee-length skirt and a pair of broken-in, outdoor travel boots.

Rordan clasped their hands lightly in politeness. “I welcome you. So, has he bored you yet with his charm?”

Nyah rolled her eyes and did a mock impression of Fikna. “Why yes, I so declare. I am knocked out by his well-groomed hair.”

She then spoke with a shrill voice. “And I’m sending him straight to blazes the lousy scum!”

Rordan cracked up.

Eshe made a reserved smile. “Fikna’s your live-in, eh? We all have one at some time or another. Let’s sit together for dinner.”

“That would be great,” said Rordan. “I want to see what our meal plan is going to be.”

Nyah looked at him with mirth in her eyes. “Tonight’s dinner will be slop soup, bug biscuits, and dreg dumplings.” She did an impression of someone vomiting.

He found the performance good enough to make his own stomach nauseous. Rordan decided to join in with his spastic Poop Dunce routine. He depicted a well-refined and bawdy character with an endless bout of explosive, painful trots. “Oh my, Poop Dunce alert. Slop soup gut agony. Here comes the outhouse donation, aiee!”

The routine mortified Stroma. The other young women laughed.

“Wicked.” Nyah stared at Rordan with crazed delight. “Fikna, you didn’t tell us your brother was so talented.

I'm going to have to tweak your paps as punishment. After I throw up again.”

Fikna laughed into a bow. “As it pleases you, good lady.”

“Eek, I forgot my handkerchief!” Rordan shrieked, widened his eyes, and made rude gestures with his movements. “It’s going to spray onto the carpet and I can’t stop it, oh no.” His routine concluded with a long array of realistic toot noises.

Stroma’s face grew flush and she held a hand to her mouth.

Stig came around the corner from the stairwell and entered the hallway. With indifference he said, “Who the hell is going to the crap-house?”

Rordan raised his hand. “That would be me. I’ve been eating the food here and my buttgut has come loose.”

His bunkmate looked nonplussed for a moment, then laughed lightly at him. “It’s a good thing we’re going to get some more of it to eat then. You all hitting the food track? Okay, then I guess I’d better get my papers.”

Rordan showed his own papers to Stroma. “This, right? Can I sneak in Fikna?”

She nodded, dabbed at her teary eyes with a cotton handkerchief.

Nyah said, “Have him go through the side door. They only check if you go through the line.”

Fikna patted his stomach. “Excellent. I’ve eaten little save trail fare these past few days. I’ve yet to manage a proper lavatory visit—oh! Rord, your routine is rubbing off on me to my detriment.”

Eshe slapped Fikna on the arm. “Don’t worry. This slop will have you loosened exactly like Poop Dunce in no time.”

Stroma pouted. “I don’t believe you guys.”

Nyah grinned and fluttered her eyes at Stroma. “Don’t you love our disgusting way of talking? Aren’t we foul? But you love us, right P.L.?”

Composure returned to Stroma. “Do I have a choice?”

Nyah screeched in mock anger, “No, you don’t!” She laughed, her grinning face radiant with mischief.

Rordan laughed along with her. “You’re a marvel.”

“Thank you Rordan,” said Nyah, all sweetness. “Now let us go eat...slop.” Her eyes turned wistful.

Stig returned with his papers and they all walked together out of Boant Oak. The loose group headed toward the community hall structure.

Eshe and Nyah spoke in Kgotlan amongst themselves, about something that sounded serious. Rordan wished he could understand what they said. He thought Eshe behaved like a proper Kgosian girl, but didn’t dress the part. Nyah did dress properly, yet her outrageous behavior went past normal Kgosian boldness. Intuition told him the two women were more than they seemed.

The community hall consisted of a two-story stone structure built with a mixed architecture. Rordan found the columns and walls made to familiar styles. The ornamentation and layout looked like old Dimmurian to him.

Nyah directed Fikna to an exit door on the side of the hall. “That door leads to the meal hall. I’ll let you in once we’ve passed through paper check.”

Inside, a small line of pupils waited at an open doorway while a custodian examined their papers. A sour meat odor came from the meal hall. The group meandered to the back of the line and waited.

Rordan produced his papers first. The middle-aged, thick-necked practical stamped them with an ink mark. The man stamped Stroma next, then glanced at the rest of the group’s papers and waved them through.

They passed into the meal hall. Nyah opened the exit door for Fikna. While the young gallant reserved a table, the rest of them got in the mess line.

Rordan picked up a wooden tray and some utensils from a nearby pile. He studied the available choices. The food consisted of a bland mix of options, with only some parts recognizable as a slice of meat or a piece of carrot.

He decided on the gray-brown shreds of meat covered in clumpy tomato sauce and took two helpings. A short attendant passed him a wooden cup of warm beer. Her pale skin was covered in a mixture of sticky sweat and tiny globules of grease.

His thoughts went back to Fais and a sense of tightness clutched at his breathing. He offered her his beerskin and she refilled it.

“Thank you.”

She ignored him and served the next person in line.

Rordan snatched up two hard pieces of bread from a bowl and made his way over to the table. Behind him came the others as they were served.

Fikna received his portion and the cup of beer from Rordan. “Thank you Rord. No doubt this will disappoint my palate. However, the mere act of sitting down to dinner is enough to begin my recovery.”

“No jest.” Rordan passed his bro’ a pair of damp utensils. He watched everyone take a seat.

Stroma said, “Stig, where are you from?”

The teenager had chosen a lump covered in sticky cheese sauce. His face showed contempt as he cut at it with his fork, revealing a meat-pie with grainy brown sauce for a filling.

“I’m from Wulvil. My father was a trawler. My mom is a homesteader. My sister works at the lodeshaft in the neighborhood. We both might work on cutter boats if I get back for a break. I played a lot of ranc at home with my buddies. I own a trained dog at home named Guts and a prospect named Carina. Whom I think the world of. How’s that?”

“That’s great. Your turn, Fikna.” As she listened, Stroma cut the meat on her plate into smaller pieces.

Fikna stood up and took a small bow. “Please excuse my still despicable appearance. I have yet to fully settle in from a long voyage. My name is Fikna Somor the Third and I have arrived from Nerham.

“My parents are traditionalist Emphyreans. My father was in the printing press business. I’m Rord’s foster-brother and have been close to him since we were children. I have arrived to make my fortune in society. Therefore, I am staying here until I can manage my own quarters. The rest I leave to my talented brother to relate. Thank you.” Fikna sat down.

Nyah clapped politely and made an uppity face.

Rordan picked at his food. The mess on his plate looked like an attempt to bread a steak and cover up the failure with stale tomato sauce. Everyone stared at him.

His attention snapped back to the group. “Oh, right. Thank you bro’. I’m Rordan and I’m a rustic. Yes I do pamphlet-slams. I’m here to study alchemy. My mother is a scribe at the neighbor...uh, local archive. My father right now is a carter for a warehousing shop. I’m not a traditionalist like my bro’. And uh, that’s all.”

Stroma looked over at Nyah and Eshe.

Nyah held up her hand and said, “Pick me. Oh please, pick me.”

Stroma said, “Okay, go ahead.”

Nyah fluttered her eyes. “I’m Nyah Jelani. I already have my secondary papers. My parents work in the iron

business. I live in Ciriceval, I like clang-clang loyalties, and I'm a dawdler."

Rordan said, "You too? What's your dawdle?"

She looked demure. "Rainbow coal-sticks and ink-paints."

An image of the mediums appeared in Rordan's mind. He nodded. "I dig it."

"Only one person left," said Stroma.

Eshe sighed and her shoulders slumped. "I'm studying literature. No real interests aside from reading and fortune games. Oh, right. My name is Eshe and I'm from Sangham. My father is a beaux who made his income in fashion. My mother is a dame. And that's all." She made a forlorn smile and nibbled at her meatpie.

Stroma finished her warm beer. "Thank you for sharing your stories. We have a great floor this year. I'll bet we'll have lots of fun together."

Curiosity tugged at Rordan. He wanted Stroma to volunteer some details about her life. Her slight authority over the rest of the group seemed to dissuade anyone from asking.

Stig gave up on the meat pie and tried his bread. He watched it crumble in his fingers. "What's the story on your tramp friend in the closet?"

Rordan swallowed a bite of his food without chewing and grimaced. "Oh, that's Borus. I picked him up in Sangham. I had a vision that told me to take him with me." He noticed Fikna make a face at him.

Nyah's mouth gaped and her eyes widened. "A vision? Cool, so you toke?"

Stroma said, "I don't want to hear this, lah lah lah."

Nyah rolled her eyes. "I meant, I see visions too when I'm studying hard."

Fikna peered at Nyah. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"No, nothing like that," said Rordan. "I mean an actual voice in my head kind of thing. So I took him along and he's been a great friend."

A cunning look crossed Nyah's face. "Is he retarded? Does he have a disease? Is he an escaped outcast? Is he a smut offender? Because those would be cool if any of them were true. Especially if they were all true."

Stig scoffed and shook his head.

Rordan squished a piece of green bean with his fork. "I believe he's deformed. He can only say weird noises. I suspect he's simple-minded, but not stupid."

Eshe said, "Which means the floor now has a streetside idiot." She popped a scrap of bread into her mouth.

Rordan uttered a laugh. "I suppose he is. But he's a good friend. I'm hoping to get him cleaned up and wear better clothes. He knows how to relieve himself in the bushes. So far, he's stayed out of the way for the most part."

He pursed his lips. “Anyone here know a girl named Kea? She’s staying with whomever lives next to my room. She was on the boat Fikna and I took here.”

Nyah said, “That freeloader who showed up, right? ”

Stig’s lip twitched.

“Yeah, she was on our floor last year. Got her secondary papers and took off. Doesn’t talk much. Never hung out with her. Why, do you like her?”

Rordan put up his hands. “No-no-no. I was just wondering, is all.” He looked at Stroma. “Who’s she staying with?”

“The room belongs to Manissa,” said Stroma. “Friend of Kea from last year. Manissa gets her primary papers this year.”

Stig squirmed and shifted in his chair. “So where do you go around here for kicks?”

Nyah said, “What kind you after? Eats, dancing, sweetwater, what?”

Stig said, “What’s close?”

Nyah said, “The Hideaway Grill is the nearest thing if you want eats. They have songsters sometimes. In fact, we’re heading over there tonight to see a friend who just got back. You’re welcome to come.”

“What else?” said Stig.

“The best drinks and pamphlet slamming are at a barrelhouse called Sitric’s Croaker. Best tavern is Pasty Hamlet. You can go there after dancing at The Scintilla.

The Bread Closet makes some good cooking if you like Sulian's recipes."

"The Bread Closet?" said Rordan. "Is there one in Ciriceval?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "There's talk of one, but if it exists nobody knows where. Lots of locals will tell you a story for the price of a drink. Usually about how they or someone they know found it and lost it again. The tavern is only cashing in on the name."

He looked at Stig and said, "Do you know anything about a bread closet around here?"

Stig said, "Rordan, I'm lucky I can still remember my real name. Let alone what's left of the Dominion and where. You brownies and peacocks didn't leave a whole lot standing."

The table grew quiet. Stig sighed and pushed his plate away. "I guess I'll have to check things out myself. Don't they have an amphitheater in town?"

Nyah watched Stig with interest. "Sure do. A clang-clang loyalty is playing there in a week. Crunch Crotus."

Stig performed a series of violent gestures. "Smash it down! When?"

Nyah said, "In a few weeks. Want to go with my bunkmate and me? She's a big Crunch loyalist."

Stig got up and said, "That's all the way. Count me in." He waved to everyone. "See you around." His dishes remained on the table where he'd left them.

A demure expression appeared on Nyah's face. "Isn't he cute? Like a little monster. I could eat him right up."

Eshe said, "With hot sauce?"

"And pickle-dickles," said Nyah.

Fikna tried to dissect his meal further, then gave up. "Unbelievable. This sustenance reveals itself as disgusting as is possible to identify. Rord, I am astounded you are paying for this offal." He looked at Stroma. "Is the Hideaway Grill any better?"

She swallowed her current bite of food. "It is. But you have to pay for it. That's how they get you here. Pay tuition and get lousy food. Or not eat it and pay extra for edible food. But the choices there are limited. It's all Kgosian—gulpers, sugar discs and milk bursts."

Rordan burped. "Ugh, I'm really going to become Poop Dunce after this swill."

Nyah guffawed. "Can I be your poop girl?" She smiled at him.

"You sure can," said Rordan. "How about dibs on my chamber pot? I'll top it off for you."

Stroma stood up. "Oh-kay. I'm so glad I could introduce you. I'll leave you to your own talk about poops."

She added Stig's dishes to her own and maneuvered her way to the dish drop.

Nyah noticed Fikna's concern. "She's fine. Stroma pretends to be stuck up, but she really gets it. You two are here for the duration? Neat. We all need to hang out.

Once you're done with the cheek-rag paperwork, I want to see you drop by every day."

She drew out a pair of smokes and passed one to Eshe, who accepted it with a nod. Nyah lit her smoke with the table candle and Eshe did likewise.

Fikna protested. "You aren't allowed to smoke in public. The rules forbid such behavior."

Nyah said, "The rules can bite my bum! Now that we have that out of the way, I now formally welcome you into the Depressing Club. You both look like fine additions." Her voice became shriller and more agitated as she spoke on. "I want you to get an early start, churning your academic career into a handy disposable napkin!"

Fikna gaped with shock.

The profanity made Rordan laugh. "I'll be jumping a move on that one. But I haven't even started my studies yet. How can I get depressed so soon?"

Nyah said, "Eat your slop froggie. I was saying. As of now, your careers will be spent wasting time with us. And washing any studies you have into the dumper! The time to start is before any nasty assignments arrive and keep you from sliding."

Eshe said, "That's where the depressing part comes in. Your grades go into a depression, a slump. You know, a long string of low numbers?"

Fikna chortled. “My word, I’m dumbfounded. What about myself? I have no plans to participate in any study, therefore I shall possess no grades to depress.”

Nyah shook her head and exhaled a huge plume of smoke at Fikna. “Don’t worry. We can still use you to bring the real pupils into the club. Kind of like a role model.”

Fikna said, “I understand.” A slight smile appeared on his face.

Nyah puffed a cloud of smoke over toward Rordan. He pretended to cough. “Your first show of good faith to the club is tonight,” said Nyah. “You shall accompany us to the Hideaway Grill.

“Forget about the stupid floor meeting, that’s for losers. Nobody but the greenies will be there. At the Grill we will listen to our friend play girlpower folk.”

Nyah dismissed them in a sudden, harsh tone of voice. “That is all!” She cackled to herself, then got out of her seat.

Eshe stood up and blew the two brothers a kiss. She joined Nyah in heading for the dish drop.

When they were out of earshot Fikna said, “My word, Rord. Quite an exceptional group of gryphons we’ve fallen in with, wouldn’t you say?”

Rordan nodded. “Yep. They both seem well off. Maybe they’ll help introduce you to someone.” He touched the unappetizing mess on his plate with his forefinger. The meat had reached room temperature.

Fikna smiled. “Superb, a capital idea. In order to make a fine impression on them, we must escort their fair personages.”

“Sounds like a plan to me bro’. I’ve got time to kill until tomorrow, so why not? You done there?”

Fikna glanced at his dish and utensils. “Quite. Shall we?” He got up.

Rordan also rose, then gathered up their dishes on the tray. Together they made their way to the dish drop, where they encountered Glenys.

“Hello, good to see you again.” Nervous elation crept into Rordan. He motioned with a shaky hand towards his bro’. “Glenys, this is my foster-brother, Fikna.”

She deposited her dishes in the holding tank, then curtsied to the young gallant. “It’s very nice to meet you. I met Rordan earlier over a discussion on a mutual interest.”

Fikna bowed. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my dear.”

Rordan put the dishes away and deposited the trays. “We were going to go to the Grill with a bunch of friends tonight. See a friend perform. Want to come along?”

He sensed Fikna cringe.

She flashed Rordan a honeyed smile. “No thanks. I was going to take in a bath and fold some laundry before I go to bed. But if you like, I’ll drop by and tell your future.”

A look of surprise crossed Fikna's face. "You're a stargazer? What splendid luck, so is Rord here."

Glenys smirked. "Rord? How cute."

An urge to hide came over Rordan as he shook his head. "I just have an interest in it. Not much more than that."

"We can still talk shop if you like. I have all the best lessons and insider secrets."

Her response emboldened him and he nodded with nervous excitement. "That would rule."

Fikna said, "Enough light banter, you two. Let us return as a group to our esteemed quarters."

The three of them walked out of the meal hall together and into the night darkness of the academy grounds. There were streetlamps along some of the major paths, but the trees blocked light in most places. Some of the paths were dimmer than others. They crossed the street and made their way along the main path toward Boant Oak.

Rordan said, "You ever hear of Modwenna?"

Glenys gave a soft laugh. "Of course. She's a top sage in the art. Which lesson collections do you have?"

He gulped. "I didn't know she had more than one."

A light chuckle escaped Fikna.

Glenys said, "Her best work is the Romance Collection. In it, there's about every point she ever wanted to make. And she references all her other

collections. I'm guessing you have the Stellar Collection. That's the one most disciples know about."

"Yep, that's the one."

They approached the door to Boant Oak. Across the field on their right, Rordan noticed a luminescent pink, towering figure shamble into view. The light of the streetlamps revealed the figure to be a shriveled and bony corpse.

Rordan pointed at the figure and said, "What the blazes is that?"

Fikna and Glenys looked over in the direction of the figure, then back at him in confusion.

The young gallant grew aggravated. "Very inconvenient, Rord. You aren't having another of your visions, are you?"

Glenys struck a serious tone of voice. "Visions? Rordan what do you see?"

"Glowing pink corpse. Coming toward us like it just woke up. Uh, really scary and doesn't look friendly."

She looked right at the figure. "Where? I don't see anything."

Rordan said, "Nobody can see it but me and Borus. It's getting closer. Fikna, give me Trad's knife."

Glenys shook her head. "Wait." She pulled a small pouch from her dress pocket and undid the drawstrings. Inside were some grayish-brown mineral salts. "Take a handful of this and throw it onto the thing. Might banish it."

Rordan held out his hand and she filled his palm with a half portion. He approached the corpse with Fikna and Glenys a little behind him.

“Try not to get too close to whatever it is,” said Glenys.

The corpse made a constricted grimace. Its eye sockets were empty. The glowing pink body lacked clothes and the legs moved with an unsteady tread.

It uttered a choked shriek at him. Of the few pupils who passed by to and from the meal hall, none reacted to the sound.

The outpouring of emotion sounded like desperation to Rordan. He fought back an urge to panic and flung the salts.

The corpse took a direct spatter from the chest to the face. Where the salt hit, it stuck to the tight, shriveled skin and pink smoke erupted with a hiss. The thing cringed, uttering a dry rasp from the back of its throat.

Rordan intuited a clutch of fear in the noise it made.

Glenys put her right hand to her mouth and the other hand close to her chest.

Fikna’s eyes bulged and his breath grew quick. “Something! By Welkin, what is it?”

Rordan backed away from the creature and said, “Okay, you sound like you know something here. What do we do? What is this thing?”

She mastered her surprise and came to attention. Glenys strained her eyes and said, “It’s a demon. Fikna,

your knife should be able to destroy the body. Hit it a few times. Demons are vulnerable in this world.”

Fikna readied Trad’s knife. He moved ahead of Rordan and Glenys.

The demon recovered from the discomfort of the salt toss. It jerked a shriveled hand toward Fikna’s throat.

The gallant ducked his slower opponent. With a brief dash of footwork, he moved behind the demon to land a solid thrust into its lower back. Dark pink ooze squeezed forth from the wound.

The demon turned to keep up with its attacker.

Fikna readied himself for another strike. In that moment, Glenys emptied the rest of the pouch onto the creature’s back. The demon immediately collapsed into a pile of rotten flesh and slimy pink bones. A rancid stench exploded forth. All three of them were knocked backwards to the ground by the smell.

Rordan felt a thin string of puke rise to his throat. He swallowed furiously while his eyes watered.

Fikna covered his face with the bend of his right arm. “Deiwos, a monster!”

Glenys waved in front of her face as tears streamed out of her eyes.

The air cleared and the remains decomposed into a pile of glowing pink filth.

Rordan thought at this rate there would be a lot of stained areas of grass. He took in a few ragged gasps of air and blew out his nostrils. The stench had gotten up

inside his nose and hung there. Snot beaded at the edges of his upper lip. Aches and pains moved throughout his body.

A pair of teenage guys came over. The gangly one wore a loyalty shirt Rordan didn't recognize and the shorter, raggedy dressed one had cut all the hair off the sides of his head.

The gangly one said, "You guys all right?"

Fikna waved them off. "Only a bit of performance practice. Sorry to alarm anyone."

Glenys got to her feet. "Yes, I think we overdid it." She giggled to herself.

The two guys glanced at each other.

The gangly one said, "Okay, but be careful okay? We thought you three had been in an accident."

"Don't worry. We got carried away is all," said Glenys.

The gangly one nodded. The guys waved and went on their way towards Boant Oak.

Rordan scrambled to his feet. He rushed over to his bro' and offered a hand.

Fikna got to his feet with his foster-brother's help. "Yech. That experience proved foul beyond measure. I feel doused by the contents of an outhouse." He picked up Trad's knife and checked it. "Difficult to say in this meager light. However, it appears none the worse for wear, with no trace of gore."

“Good. I was worried there for a second.” Rordan turned toward Glenys and said, “That was some nice stuff you had there. I hope you have more.”

She stuffed the empty pouch back in her pocket. “Old recipe from mom. I’ll have to make another batch, which will take time. I hope we don’t run into the Stinge again. Whoa, and here I thought I was going to be a bored little pupil.”

Rordan said, “The Stinge?”

“The demon’s name,” said Glenys.

Fikna stared at Rordan with wonder. “I daresay that was uncommonly real. Only a blurred figure presented itself to me. However, the figure felt solid when I stabbed it. Glenys, I implore you to elaborate on the contents of that pouch.”

She shrugged. “It’s just an old wives’ charm. Supposed to drive off evil, not reveal it. Rordan saw the demon in enough detail to get a sure-shot. You ought to explain that one to me, dear.”

Embarrassment took hold of Rordan. His gaze rested on the brown, flattened area of grass where the Stinge’s remains had vanished. “Ever since Fikna and I started our voyage here, weird stuff has been happening. I can see things that aren’t there.”

Glenys studied his face. “Like what?”

He looked down. Her full attention stirred him in ways he couldn’t explain. “I see these monsters everywhere. I see people who look differently from how

they seem. I sometimes see places that aren't really there."

She crossed her arms and lost herself in thought.

Glenys said, "You have, for some reason or another, been gifted with a third eye. The third eye allows you to see the hidden world of the fantom lands. Most of us can sense these things only in rare moments, or in small ways. I've read there are sages who have developed the third eye with long study. And there are sometimes people born with the third eye. But most of the time it's a gift given to people by fantoms."

Fikna sheathed Trad's knife. "What enabled us to notice this rancid demon, then?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know. I've read tales of catching the fantoms by surprise and making them visible. Once their trick is discovered, they can be seen. But that doesn't make sense here."

Rordan smiled. "I'm glad you were able to see it too. But how were we able to beat it so easily?"

A shiver passed through her. "Lets go inside. I feel unsafe out here. We can all sit down and talk."

The three of them returned to Boant Oak and took over the Upper Trow snug. Fikna and Rordan sat down while Glenys closed the door. She sat with them, holding a hallway lamp for light.

Glenys said, "The Stinge is a demon sent here to murder people. It has great strength and kills by choking

you to death. Only the souls of really evil people get to embody this demon.”

Fikna assumed a glum face and rooded himself.

Rordan said, “How did it get here? And how do you know so much about it?”

Sadness came over her. “I’ve studied many corners of the occult. You can’t seriously study stargazing without getting near marked knowledge.

“As I understand it, demons are always being sent to this world for harm. Most are not as dangerous as the Stinge, though some are worse.

“Their bodies aren’t real like ours. Even a small bruise or the right thought can banish them. I didn’t think of it at the time Fikna, but your sign of the rood might have also worked.”

The young gallant nodded. “A handy piece of knowledge to have.” He noticed a grass stain on his trousers and bit his lower lip.

Rordan looked at the carpet. “But how do they enter this world? Are they summoned by witches?”

Glenys looked at Rordan in surprise. She faced him with a look that made him uncomfortable. “Every time a person curses another person, it opens up a doorway. Some sages know how to make that doorway a little wider and send demons on a specific mission.”

“Kea,” said Rordan. “She sent that bugbear against me and Borus earlier.”

Glenys said, “You mentioned Borus before. Who’s Borus? And you said a bugbear? This isn’t the first time you were attacked?”

Rordan said, “That’s a long story. There’s this girl named Kea who was on the voyage with us. And ever since we started hanging out with her, bad things have been happening. When Borus was attacked earlier, I saw Kea in the window of our room watching us. Then she walked away.” He looked at his bro’.

Fikna stared ahead. He held a naturally formed, mineral rood at the end of his leather necklace between thumb and forefinger.

Glenys looked intently at Rordan. “Is there anything you may have done to make this person angry? Angry enough to curse you?”

He thought back to the events of the voyage. “I don’t know. She just seemed crazy from the moment we met her. Kea started off by making fun of us and got meaner. Maybe she’d sent something after us before. But the bugbear was the first time I knew for sure.”

She nodded. “A bugbear is another demon. Your common variety harm-causer. Repeated visits can be fatal, though their bodies don’t cause harm the way we might expect. How did you know what it was?”

Rordan smiled. “I’ve done some reading too. I’m not totally useless.”

Glenys smiled at him with softhearted concern. “I’ll help you. I don’t know what I can do, but the two of you

won't be alone in this. The Stinge was meant for all of us and that means we'll be better off together."

"Sounds great Glenys. Goodness, I was lucky to run into you."

Fikna returned from his thoughts and nodded. "Yes, quite correct. Although why you should be in danger is a mystery to me. We only recently made your acquaintance."

She shrugged. "It might have been whoever was with you on general principle. I've read demons can be hard to control."

Rordan stood up, "Borus. I'd better go check up on him."

The three of them left the snug and made haste to Rordan's room. They found Borus sound asleep.

Glenys saw a teenage girl. She kneeled down and touched her on the shoulder. "Is this your friend?"

Rordan said, "Yeah, he's been here all day. Maybe the bugbear drained him?"

She held still for a moment. Glenys chuckled softly to herself, then stood up and faced them. "Meeting the supernatural can be hard. The bad ones always swallow the energy around them. I feel tired myself."

Fikna nodded to himself. "Such an explanation sheds light on my sudden fatigue."

Glenys said, "I'll fetch my cards. We can do a reading of this situation. Then we all stay here tonight. You can

fill me in on more details about your voyage. I might be able to remember more useful information. Agreed?”

Rordan gave her the ‘thumbs up’ sign. “Sounds good to me.”