

CHAPTER 13: MAGIC AT THE GRILL

Rordan stood in line with his friends at the counter. A hearty smell filled the Grill. Pupils carried away large portions on wooden trays. Beyond the counter, he saw a young woman in a scullion apron make flour fry-breads, which were then stuffed with tomato sauce, cheese, and herbs. He decided they looked delicious. Rordan felt a bubble of gas move around in his gut and realized how bad his meal had been earlier.

He examined the inside of the Grill. A series of lanterns set with warm-colored lenses hung from the walls. They provided an illumination rich in cozy shadows. On the walls hung cheap statement hangings and genuine paintings of an abstract loyalty. Wall leaflets announced a songster. He couldn't make out the face because the print job had been botched. Most of the small wooden tables and stools were occupied. Small groups of people sat on a tier of carpeted steps along one wall.

From where Rordan stood, an empty stage a foot higher than the floor dominated the far side of the Grill. Behind the stage, a closed door at floor level granted backstage access. At his end, a counter with a sliding window allowed access to the adjacent kitchen. Next to the counter was a large rubbish bin and table of used trays. An open door beside the bin led into a Dorus Elm hallway. The entrance door of the Grill was in the opposite wall.

His eyesight didn't spot Kea or any of the other passengers from the voyage.

Borus whistled at him.

"It's okay," said Rordan. "We're safe here. This place has got good energy."

Rordan caught Glenys smiling at him. He bathed in the sight of her and smiled back. His insides tensed and tingled at the same time, then turned into butterflies of dizziness.

Out of his depths rose a passion of wild love for Glenys. The passion seized a hold of his heart and a piece of him cracked. The shock of an icy stream flowed into his body. The sudden cold and pressure hurt him and he shook with the ache of a body part dying off.

The ache became a blinding light, accompanied by a deep roar in his ears. The flood of sensation poured out of a dark nothingness at the back of his mind and marked him with a painful cut. From the pain of that wound came a vision of his nature.

Inside his body lived a fearless desire to give and receive without reservation, to take good and bad no matter what the consequences. The mere sight of a loved one moved him to accept despair and experience bliss in the fires of suffering.

Rordan marveled at the mystery he beheld and awe overcame him. Through his love for her he beheld both damnation and salvation. His lips kissed the rotten face of death and tasted the honey of life at the same time. The expanding beauty and horror of his injury burned

with furious sparks and he stared back at the nothingness from which it had come.

The nothingness returned his gaze and an echo resounded beyond his knowledge.

Rordan came out of a stunned trance that might have lasted a few heartbeats or an eternity. He hadn't known the depths of his feelings until now. Every crush, every lustful desire, each and every secret wish had been ripples on the surface of fearsome currents. Rordan realized those currents could pull him under at any time. They could injure his soul and scar his spirit forever.

Glenys' brow creased. "Are you okay? You looked strange for a second."

He cleared his throat and answered her on the second try to speak. "I'm just really hungry all of a sudden. I'm starved so bad I could eat anything right now."

Glenys said, "You poor dear. Don't worry, you'll eat soon." She laughed at what Rordan believed was a secret joke.

He intuited his body expressed the shock as hunger. The wounds on his feet and the scratch on his arm had exchanged soreness for stiffness. His body felt weighed down.

The line moved forward. Rordan stepped up and made an order for a gulper, which Fikna paid for. He noted his bro' had a frown of deep thought on his face. Nyah had grabbed a table near the entrance and was gathering stools.

While Fikna and Eshe made their orders, Rordan saw a pair of untaken stools in the far corner by the stage. He went for them and Borus followed after him. As he bent forward to pick them up, he noticed a look of recognition in the youngster's eyes.

A vision flashed in his head of a sleeping kitten on a pillow. The image belonged to a statement hanging he'd seen on a toll depot many years ago when he was young.

Borus nodded.

Rordan said, "You see as I see, don't you?"

Her eyes widened and she stared hard at him. The girl moved her lips but no sound came out.

"It's okay," said Rordan, "I know you can't talk yet. I don't know how, but I feel I can continue to send you light to guide your path."

Rordan closed his eyes and strength passed between him and Borus like before. The sudden flash of light passed and he knew the bond between them had grown stronger.

The voice inside him said, "All the way back to the beginning of time."

A question formed in Rordan's thoughts. The voice answered him before he could articulate it.

"Your friend knows a secret too."

Borus put her hand on his shoulder.

He nodded. “Cool, you understand. When the time comes, we’ll talk.” Exhaustion crawled forward from the back of his mind.

Borus made another attempt to talk and lowered her hand. She made a small nod.

Rordan believed he saw kindness in the youngster’s eyes. “I’m so tired. I know I should ask you something, but this stuff is so hard to do. It makes me weak.”

She picked up a stool.

He gaped at her with a slight smile. Rordan took the other stool and they returned to their friends’ table.

Fikna said, “Finally Rord, you return. What were you accomplishing over there? Attempting to communicate with our mutual pauper?”

“Something like that.” Rordan placed his stool and sat down. He watched Borus imitate his action and take a seat beside him.

Eshe said, “Did you get him off the street?”

Nyah laughed. “Ethie don’t say that, it’s impolite.”

Eshe shrugged her shoulders. “I’m sorry. I have to ask or I’ll never know.”

Fikna gave a brief explanation of how Rordan had brought the pauper with them on their voyage.

“That was a kind thing you did,” said Glenys.

Eshe shook her head. “Yeah, it’s a just deed. I know there’s no way I could do that.”

Nyah took out a smoke and lit it on the table candle. “It’s awesome. There’s more to our little Rordy than meets the eye.”

The pupil who had taken their order appeared in the window and announced their food was ready. Rordan got up and delivered the trays to the table. Everyone had ordered a gulper, which turned out to be the flour fry-breads Rordan had seen earlier.

Fikna said, “If I might venture to ask, where’s this songster of yours? I thought our tardiness would prevail. However, it appears she will be the one who misses the appointed time.”

Nyah shrugged. “These things happen.”

“Vacía is never on time,” said Eshe. “She might even flake. But it’s worth the chance to hear her play.”

Fikna said, “What are her loyalties?”

Eshe said, “She sings girlpower folk. Mostly Brave Mocuxsoma and some Blue Iamicilla. But she has her own formula and it’s good. If you’re lucky she’ll share some of it.” She handled her hot gulper with ease and slurped in a hot bite.

Nyah raised her eyebrows and nodded.

Rordan took her reaction as a sign Eshe made an understatement. “Does she have a hight?”

“Smoldering Vacía,” said Nyah.

Fikna pulled small utensils from his inside pocket and started on his gulper. He took a bite and stared while he rolled his lips back and forth.

Nyah chuckled.

Glenys said, “May I have a bite?”

Rordan beamed. “Sure, go for it.”

She plucked a stray piece of molten cheese from his gulper and popped it into her mouth.

He noticed Borus’ hungry stare. Rordan tore open a piece of the bread and burned his fingertips. “Yeow!”

Nyah laughed at him. “Rordy, gulpers are served molten. Give it a chance to cool before you perform anything crazy like breaking it up.”

Rordan borrowed Fikna’s knife and cut the gulper into pieces. He handed a hot piece to Borus, who wolfed it down with a loud sucking sound. She smacked her lips and licked the grease from her hands.

The door to the Grill opened. Noss and Dalla walked in. They had washed and changed into clean clothes. Both of them wore their rider hats. Noss had shaved.

Their improved appearance stunned Rordan.

Noss spotted his stare and came over. “Looks like you’ve made some friends already. Glad to see you’re fitting in, man.”

Fikna answered for Rordan. “You’re looking well. How’s Kea?”

Noss smirked and glanced quickly at Eshe and Nyah. “I wouldn’t know. Haven’t run into her since we all got here. But I’m sure I’ll see her again. Once she’s through

hooking up with all her old friends. I'll mention you were asking about her."

"No need to trouble yourself, I wasn't asking out of interest. Merely curiosity as to whether you were still in one piece." Fikna cut himself another bite of his gulper.

Rordan watched Dalla chuckle to herself behind Noss' back.

"Thanks for caring. When you grow up, I'm sure you'll be able to handle a girl too." Noss tipped his hat to the women at the table and got into line at the counter. He steered clear of Borus, who watched him with a guarded readiness in her posture.

Nyah and Eshe looked at each other and nodded in unison. They both said, "Dong warrior."

Rordan laughed. "That's some word."

Nyah said, "That's some creep. I'll bet his papers even say dong warrior on it."

Eshe said, "You sure know how to make friends. What's he sore about?" She took out a smoke and lit it.

Fikna swallowed his current bite of food and grimaced at the heat. "We both pursued the same prospect and he got the better of me. The miscreant is merely rubbing it in."

Eshe took a long drag. She exhaled and said, "That munches. Look at it this way; you're still free and in the clear. He's become a complete back end. Imagine it. You could be a dong warrior like him and not sitting with the cool people."

Her self-satisfied grin pulled a smile out of Fikna. “What you say resonates with truth. I rather prefer your view of events.”

Nyah adopted a voice of jest and patted Fikna on the hand. “We’ll take care of you, Fikky-honey. We love you very, very much.”

Glenys eyed Dalla out of the corner of her vision.

Noss and Dalla placed an order, then went to sit on the tiers with a group of people. Rordan didn’t recognize anyone in the group. He saw a husky mengan guy and two young women. The short, sturdy woman was restless and talked a lot. The soft-eyed, cool mannered woman wore a large rider jacket and had long hair.

Rordan considered what Abrafo had said about mengans of Kgosian parentage. His friend had called them gaifs and said they were simple-minded weaklings. Looking at the large guy now, Rordan believed Abrafo must have been talking about something else.

Nyah noticed Rordan’s interest in the group. “The long-haired one is Manissa. She lives across from you. Kea’s staying with her. The short one is Ulidia, kind of out of it. She lives in one of the singles garrets on Upper Trow.”

He pursed his lips and considered how many friends his adversary might have. Avoiding trouble would be hard if Noss was ready to get in his face at every chance.

Rordan finished off his meal. His tongue and the roof of his mouth felt burned. He stood up and grabbed

everyone's empty trays. While he put them in the pile next to the rubbish bin, Dalla approached him.

She had a serious face. "Kea has gone crazy. All she can talk about are your problems. Stay away from her." Dalla left before Rordan had a chance to say anything.

He felt a clutch of panic. His head raced with unformed thoughts. The Stinge might have done worse, but crazy people went on rampages. He had no idea how to stay away from Kea when she lived right next door.

Rordan sat down at the table again.

Glenys whispered to him. "What happened? I saw an exchange go down."

He whispered back. "Dalla warned me that Kea has gone nuts."

She gritted her teeth. Glenys stood up and grabbed him by the sleeve.

As she drew him away, Rordan said, "We'll be right back."

Nyah cackled at him.

She led him through the open door and into the hallway beyond. They went up some stairs and into a central lounge. Glenys sat Rordan down on an armchair, beside a well-supplied hearth that crackled with a low fire. She moved the wire screen and placed a pair of sectioned logs onto the flames. They were alone.

Glenys said, "I say it's time we did a reading and got an idea of what's after us. And you especially." She took out her fortune cards and shuffled them.

Her low tone of voice surprised Rordan. She sounded commanding to him. He realized his understanding of her was about to deepen.

Glenys separated the deck into three piles and said, “Choose the pile that feels the strongest to you.”

He decided on the rightmost pile and she took three cards from it in quick succession, face up. Rordan considered the illustrations as Glenys looked at them intently.

The first card depicted a woman sitting at a table outside a cottage with a man standing next to her. The pair looked sinister to Rordan. On the table were four gold coins the size of dinner plates. The woman held the fourth coin upright to face the viewer like a mirror. She sat locked in thought while the man whispered into her ear.

The second card revealed six swordsmen with blades drawn. They moved in two straight lines toward the sea where a rowboat waited. The two men closest to the boat pointed at it, the two men closest to the viewer put up their hands as if to bar the viewer from going any further, and the two middle swordsmen were split between the two groups of two. One looked at the farthest group, the other at the closest.

The final card bore the title of Mountebank. Rordan identified it as a form of the Bungler card. The Mountebank traveled toward a mountain castle in the distance with a knapsack over his shoulder and a small

mongrel leading the way. He headed into rough terrain, but his face suggested someone drunk or witless.

Glenys sat back and closed her eyes.

Rordan waited.

She opened her eyes and looked at Rordan directly as she spoke. “The card with the coins on it is in the past. Two people are deciding how best to manage the coins they have before them. Coins are physical. They represent things you have to deal with in the real world. Time, money, appointments, chores. The woman in the card must be Kea and the four coins represent us. Me, Borus, you, and your brother. We’re problems that have to be dealt with.

“The coin the woman is holding upwards is probably you. There seems to be a personal connection between the two of you. This man isn’t the guy we just ran into. In the card he seems to be a power behind the throne, convincing the woman to take action. Since she’s sitting at the table, she’s the one who has to deal with us. He’s standing and free to move on elsewhere, which makes me think there’s someone behind Kea’s actions. Maybe that’s why she’s going nuts.”

Rordan swallowed. Her skill at stargazing made him nervous.

She pointed at the next card. “This is in the present. The two people in the coins card have already made their choices. Here we have six people. I’d say that this is the same number of people as in our group now. The four of us, plus Eshe and Nyah. Some of us want to run away,

some of us want to stay and fight, and some of us don't know yet what we will do. We're all on the same side, but not of the same mind. Whatever threat is causing this orderly, yet undecided meeting is unseen. It must be dangerous for everyone to have drawn their weapons out like this.

“Blades represent thoughts, ideas, and mental states. Decisions, knowledge, and understanding are a part of their symbolism. I wonder if the danger to us is going to appear soon. At least it will happen while we're together. We'll have to make one or more decisions.”

She repressed a smile. “I know which one I am. I'm near the front. I'm saying, ‘come and get it.’ No running for me.”

He marveled at her bravery. Rordan knew he'd flee for the boat. “What else is in the card?”

She studied it again. “That boat looks awfully small. It couldn't hold more than two people. So whoever escapes, the others will be left holding the bag.”

Rordan said, “Or they could all face the danger together.”

“Or the danger might finish them all off. Better that two people escape than none.” Glenys fixed her eyes upon Rordan. “I'd stay behind to make sure you and Fikna escaped.”

He sighed and sat back. His gaze rested on the cards without focus.

Glenys said, “The last card is major. It gives us a hint at the future and what to expect. The Mountebank is a traveler and a performer. A freeloader. He’s always the one who does the unexpected.

“You and the Mountebank share something in common. You’re a rustic like he would be. You’ve come a long way through travel. You’re far from home and looking for your goal. Whatever happens, you’ll do something surprising. Maybe that’s why you are on Kea’s mind. Whatever plan she has, you might be the one to change it.”

She looked at the card up close and squinted, then nodded to herself in satisfaction. “At least, that’s what I see. We’re in a real pickle.” Glenys looked up at Rordan and her eyes blinked at him.

He gazed at the cards and took in their meaning. “Maybe with my third eye I’ll be able to see a solution. A way out that will guide us at the last minute. Or maybe I’ll get another vision of something fantastic that will help us.”

Glenys said, “I sure hope so. Because if things get bad you’re getting on that boat.” She eyed him.

Attraction and worry mixed in his heart. He wanted to kiss her and he didn’t want to be rejected.

They heard cheers downstairs at the Grill.

Rordan said, “I guess that means this Vacia has shown up. Do you want to go back? Or do you want me to row out of this?”

She looked at the front doors of the dormitory. “Let’s see what happens.” Glenys gathered up the cards and stashed them in her line bag.

They stood up and returned to the Grill, which now held a sizable crowd.

Fikna waved at them. “By Welkin, seat yourselves in these stools. It’s become a chore to preserve them.”

Glenys and Rordan sat down.

“Thank you for being so considerate,” said Glenys.

Fikna smiled. “You’re welcome. I was wondering if you would return. However, if I had investigated I risked losing my seat also. I did promise to escort these lovely ladies.”

Eshe took a puff of her smoke and said, “Thank you Fikna. You’re a fine gentleman.”

Rordan noticed the lanterns not by the stage had been dimmed way down. A young mengon woman—a berserker—sat on a stool onstage. She wore songster clothes and a brand new rider jacket. The jacket had buttons on the inside. She tuned her guitar and made small talk with the crowd in front.

Fikna tugged at his sleeve and leaned in close. “Kea showed up shortly after you two departed. She’s over there with her group of admirers.”

“Got it. Glenys and I did the stargazing. It was really cool. All six of us are probably going to be involved in something tonight, so be ready.”

Fikna placed his hand on Rordan's shoulder for a second.

Vacia played her guitar and sang without a warm-up.

Rordan watched Nyah and Eshe listen with the fondness of friends. He sank into enjoyment of her talent. Her chords and voice soothed him into a state of relaxed awareness.

In a trance, he spotted a teenager wearing a dry, brick red ogre mask. She sat down with a pair of male friends. Annoyance flashed through Rordan at the approach of more visions.

He looked at the people in Kea's group. A cold, pale pink haze hung on them. Ivixa and Kea had their masks on.

The short and sturdy Ulidia wore a reddish-white ghoulish mask with cracked skin. She moved with difficulty. Her breaths came in slow gasps and she pulled at the skin of her arms on and off.

Noss' skeleton glowed with a rancid brown light through his flesh. His movements were sluggish and weak.

The husky mengans wore a wolf mask of yellow and brown colors. Droplets of crusted blood stained the fur in places. The rims of the eye sockets glowed orange.

Manissa and Dalla both sat as if they were pulling away from Kea. Neither looked like they belonged and the haze hung on them as if it were losing its grasp.

Rordan hoped they would pull free. In Dalla he noticed a mighty, hidden passion and a willpower of solid iron. He admired her.

Dalla's mouth tightened at something Kea said and the haze frayed about her in a scattering of misty tendrils. The tension became too much for Rordan to witness and he looked away. Dalla's tenacity for life unsettled him.

Rordan returned his attention to Vacia. She sang about devotion in a relationship. One of the lines compared her to a champion defending a ladylove from harm. Rordan froze in fascination. His thoughts shot back to his studies.

He had read mentions of women champions in his lessons. The Kgosians honored a female champion as one of their local heroines. But usually such figures as Prophet Oluchi were unthinkable in today's Heartland. As dangerous as it could be to sing about them, the presence of it here didn't surprise him. The permissiveness of the academy seemed natural.

Could there be gentlemen-in-distress, then? He'd read some interpretations of sovereigns-in-waiting that lent credence to the idea. The prevailing attitude would be, in the words of Abrafo, 'bent'. Rordan frowned.

He considered what Glenys had shown him in the cards. The thought of a villain behind his adventure with Kea hadn't crossed his mind. Now that he knew of the possibility, his troubles made a certain amount of sense. Somebody must have made sure Kea had always lurked nearby. That person must also practice witchcraft. If

witches were real, he was sure the male witches known as warlocks were real too.

The vision of friendship around the table he had experienced earlier came back to him. He understood his personal insight applied to this larger group gathered in participation of a shared ritual.

Rordan turned his head to look at Borus. The boy enjoyed the togetherness of people in this place. He sensed his friend felt at home based on a feeling of safety, warmth, and food. His intuition told him the boy's experience stood closest to the truth. The combination of Borus' comfort and Vacia's talent resembled the sacredness of what Rordan believed a chapel ought to bring forth. He bowed his head in weary admission of a mystery beyond his mind's eye.

The voice inside him said, "Belonging may strike at any moment, even to the lonely outsider."

By the rubbish bin, he noticed a tall humanoid figure with a reptilian head and enormous, phosphorescent eyes. The figure was swathed in a wine red, hooded cloak and wore a monk's robe underneath; black with silver trim and of a design Rordan would expect a dryad fanatic to wear. The reptile-man stood unobserved as he watched the people in the Grill.

His mouth held rows of shiny, small teeth and his skin was a layer of tiny scales the texture of sand. He smoked a short-stemmed clay pipe that gave off a pungent and leathery aroma. The inside rim of the pipe glowed a golden red.

The reptile-man directed a keen gaze at him and said, in a voice that shook Rordan's mind with worry, "Who is there?"

The voice carried through Vacía's music and Rordan measured the reactions of everyone in the room. Only Borus and he heard the reptile-man.

The girl stared at the tall figure and snuffled.

"Me, Rordan."

The reptile-man considered Rordan's answer. "What do you want?"

"I don't know," said Rordan. His insides tingled.

A puff of smoke issued from underneath the hood of the reptile-man's cloak. "How is it you don't know?"

Rordan gulped. "I hadn't thought about it. I didn't know I needed to want anything.

"You are a fool, then. Would you like to know what you want?"

Rordan cringed inwardly. A hint of danger lurked in the question and he feared a trap. "I'll find out on my own, thanks."

The reptile-man made a small laugh. "That's more painful and a risky prediction to make."

The sound of the laugh made Rordan feel small and insignificant. He cleared his throat and struggled for words. "Who are you?"

The reptile man made a short bow. "Among those who do not know me, I am called Varan."

“Pleased to meet you Varan. My name is Rordan. This is my friend Borus.”

Varan spoke through a cloud of smoke. “The pleasure is all mine.”

An awkward silence formed between them. Rordan forced himself to speak. “How is it that we speak, but no one else can see or hear us having this talk?”

Varan said, “People see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear. Right now people don’t want to see or hear themselves. You and your companion are different.”

Rordan committed Varan’s words to memory. “You mean—because Borus and myself want to see and hear ourselves, we can see and hear you?”

The reptile-man puffed on his pipe. In the shadow of the cloak, his phosphorescent eyes glinted with golden fire. “You are correct. It is hard work to listen and learn. Sleepwalking through the darkness is much more comforting than seeing the truth about yourself.”

Rordan shuddered. The depths within him could erupt any moment.

Varan said, “You grasp a little of what I am speaking of. Imagine each person in this room carrying secrets within themselves like yours. Life is an abominable burden. People would rather someone else carry their rood for them than walk with their eyes open.”

Madness oozed into the back of Rordan’s mind. Despite his weariness he resisted, then decided he would

let it into his head. “I want to know things. I want to know myself. I don’t know what Borus wants. I can’t speak for my friend.”

Surrounded by smoke, Varan felt for an object underneath his robes. He produced a piece of paper, then stepped forward and presented it to Rordan.

He accepted it from Varan’s clawed hand. The piece of paper was a page of illuminated vellum with an illustrated cover sheet that flipped upwards. The page’s backing had a small silver stud in the middle. The surface of the coversheet gave off a sharp, musty odor.

Varan said, “An ingenious artistic creation for self reflection. I warn you; it is dangerous. A tool is only as useful as the knowledge of its wielder.”

Rordan felt he’d been handed something lethal and valuable at the same time. “Thank you. I don’t understand why you decided to give this to me, but thank you.”

Varan said in a low voice, “You won’t be thanking me later, should you choose to look inside.” The reptilian face regarded him with hungry anticipation.

“No. I’ll be thanking you later Varan. Maybe not now. Maybe not for a long time. But I feel it. I’ll do something for you, somehow. To show that I do care about this.” Madness bubbled into Rordan.

Varan’s expression became unreadable. He touched Borus’ shoulder. “I will take my leave now.” He departed out the entrance door of the Grill.

Rordan felt the exit significant. He didn't think Varan had been offended. Their exchange had been deeper than he understood. He looked at Borus. The boy held a glum expression.

“Sad to see him go? I believe we'll see him again.”

Borus bowed her head and nodded once.

He took in the activity of the people around him. “Was this what he meant?” Rordan turned his head to look at Borus. “This must be what it's like for Varan. To be pushed off into some other place where no one notices you or pays attention to what you say. To be ignored or forgotten. It must be lonely.

“You know what, Borus? I'm starting to believe there's a whole bunch of these characters walking around that nobody knows about. You and I are the only people who can see them. I'm not convinced you just look at yourself, though.”

He examined the multi-layered paper. The jagged, uneven edge suggested a page torn from a book. Reflective decorations and metallic inks highlighted the penmanship of the cover page. The style reminded Rordan of a crier-poster.

The scene depicted an enormous tent, painted wagons, and tall poled-pennants in a breeze. A tripe-covered butcher held the tent's entrance flap open and beckoned with a finger he thought resembled a bloody sausage. The butcher stood on a cement block sunk partway into the ground. On either side of him stood a Seltish attendant in a lewd outfit.

Rordan raised the page cover. The attendants were displayed near the edges of the internal page in scenes of torture. He averted his eyes and glanced at the arcane script along the top and bottom of the inside page. The characters and style matched the text on his map.

The centerpiece consisted of an illustrated gambling-wheel with a window cut in the paper at the top. The silver laminated window displayed a miniature painting of Glenys in her underclothes.

A sweet, fervent odor invaded his senses. The madness soaked his mind and immersed him in unconsciousness. Borus watched him lose his marbles with a look of curiosity.