

CHAPTER 21: FEAR OF FAILURE

Rordan stood outside the archive classroom where he had taken the exam. He searched the tacked up papers on a cork bulletin board for his name and the check mark that would say either pass or fail. His bite wound oozed and itched under its dressing.

He mapped out today's chores in his thoughts. First, a sign-up for whatever class he ended up in, followed by the purchase of lessons from the academy supplier. Tomorrow his studies would begin. During his normal activities, he would need to remain watchful for specters and the vampire.

Hunger gnawed at his stomach. He wished the egg pancakes he'd scarfed down this morning had stayed down. Rordan hoped the poison's sudden attack of vomiting was temporary.

He thought about the tiny, pinprick blemish he'd noticed on his upper lip in the mirror. His lips still burned a little. The bruises ached, especially his lower back, but not as much as his whole body when he recalled Pasiphaea's mouth on his.

The Huncher joined him. "Hello, pea-brain. For your information, last night I kicked Kea into a deep well. You know, the kind where the lights never come on. You wasted your time trying to fix her. But better you waste your time than me. She was about used up anyway. Saved me the bother of cleaning up when she burst."

Rordan wanted to give the specter a blast, but knew he had nothing. The light of his inner lamp remained low. He spoke like a mouse. “You killed her?”

The Huncher said, “She’s much better alive than dead, for us. Get more yield out of her that way. She’s in expert hands for as long as her rotten fruit of a body holds up. Which can be a real long time. Thanks to you, her panic is back on the best-of list. Got to hand it to you.”

Rordan felt his empty stomach turn queasy. “I’m going to destroy you and then I’m going to find her.”

The Huncher made a fake laugh. “I’m a spirit who will be around long after your clock has ticked its last. And you will never see her again.”

Rordan’s throat tightened. He struggled against the urge to weep. “Why do you do it? Don’t you ever get tired of hurting people?”

The Huncher said, “You sure ask a lot of stupid questions. No wonder your suffering in blazes is so pathetic.”

Fear sped up Rordan’s heartbeat. His mind flailed against blind panic.

“That’s right. The best part about this moment for me is seeing your stupid, clueless face when I say that. Because I know when you realize you are in blazes now, that dumb look is going to be smashed to pieces. Just like I knocked out most of Kea’s front teeth.”

Rordan's vision blurred and an icy crackle filled his ears.

“And she's only the backstage warm-up I'm giving you the scoop on. The master's got a special hoot in mind for all the little girls' dreams this season. So go ahead and keep looking at yourself. I'll be looking at your buck-toothed grimace as the master crushes every last drop of life from your damaged soul.”

The Huncher turned and left.

Despair and a sensation of freezing cold penetrated Rordan to his heart. He refused to give up. The river of fire within him surged with passion and saved his life. He coughed.

Rordan turned around. He watched the crowd of pupils walk about their business. Despite everything he'd done to solve his problem with Kea, it had ended poorly. He had to get charged up so he could take on this crazy specter before it harmed anyone else.

Stig appeared in the crowd and moved toward him. “Hey man. You pass?”

Rordan croaked a little and shrugged his shoulders.

Stig gave him a curious look. “Man, you look scared. What's going on?”

Rordan cleared his throat. “I can't look. I was getting the shakes.”

Stig snorted. “No crap. Let's see.” He searched the list with a focused stare.

Rordan joined him, his eyes having trouble seeing the names.

The teenager found Rordan's name first. "Looks like you passed." He made a laugh. "I'm surprised. You looked so out of it that day."

Stig saw his own name and said, "Smash! I passed too. See you man." He walked away and towards the observatory.

Rordan spotted his name. He nodded to himself. A performing class it was.

He closed his eyes and imagined the song of nature playing always and everywhere, filling him with the deepest pleasure. But his will to listen lacked strength and the song remained distant.

He opened his eyes. The cold in his chest subsided enough for him to walk. Rordan made his way back to the community hall. The thought of getting his papers approved gave him the strength to keep walking.

A pupil going the opposite way walked into view. She had glitter on her skin and bright, reddish-orange pigtails like two giant horns above her forehead. The girl frowned and moved with difficulty.

As she passed he saw a bugbear hung onto her daypack, its sharp teeth sunk into the back of her neck. The teeth inflicted a spreading trail of rust-brown rot on her skin instead of gushing bloody incisions. The girl didn't notice the creature's existence.

The bugbear looked up from her neck and said, “How’s that inner chamber pot of yours, bungler?”

Rordan pretended not to hear and walked on. The fact of his limits hit him in the chest and he strained to breathe. He wished Glenys or his bro’ were here.

His walking slowed. If Kea had been taken prisoner, then someone else had summoned the specter he just saw. Master Beag could probably do it. His intuition told him his foe had found another person to continue collections. Depression came over him and he sulked.

Blai appeared, walking the other way. She spotted him and approached. “Hi Rordan. Fancy meeting you here.”

“Hey Blai.”

“How’s it going? Seen Fikna around?”

Rordan managed a smile. “He went to the haven to see about a job. The Skipper we came here with offered him one.”

She grinned at him with a perfect set of teeth. “I got one myself this morning. As a practical in the writing cottage. You better pick one up while you have the chance. Not many left on the job board.”

Rordan hadn’t considered the need for a part-time job. “I guess I’ll check it out then. First, I have to get myself going on this sign-up thing.”

Blai said, “You pass your exam?”

“Yep, and boy am I relieved. It was so close I wasn’t sure.”

Blai smiled. “That’s ace news. I’ve got to go check out my results, so I’ll talk to you later. Good afternoon.”

Rordan waved and continued on his way. She seemed like a nice girl to him. Could he let his bro’ have her? His urge to protect Fikna wrestled with a need to let him go. He entered the community hall and reached the sign-up line.

The wait proved hard. He raced his thoughts around in his head against the shock of his encounter with the Huncher. He had almost died at the hands of mindless, cold-hearted evil. Rordan feared it hopeless to imagine the defeat of such a menace.

His mascot said, “You finally managed to get through to Kea. That had seemed hopeless too.”

Rordan muttered to himself, “So what? After all I went through, she ended up in a well. Like in *Sworder of Fate*.”

The mascot said, “How do you know? You only have the Huncher’s word for it. He tapped into your deepest fear of failure and tried to kill you with it.”

Rordan said, “What about me being in blazes? I thought I heard your voice say something like that a few days ago.”

The mascot said, “Unfortunately, that part is true. If you live long enough, you’ll know what the Huncher meant.”

Rordan said, “Am I really one of those weird Lamians? Is that what the demon meant? I’m a witch and going to blazes?”

The mascot said, “Yes, you’re a Lamian. That’s the reason I’m a mascot. But even if you weren’t, you’d still be in blazes because that’s your destiny.”

“I don’t feel like I’m there. Well, I do feel like blazes, but that isn’t the same thing is it?”

“That’s right. You’ll know it when it happens.”

Rordan said, “Why is that my destiny? I don’t understand.”

The mascot said, “I don’t answer why questions, remember? Talk to you next time.”

With a deep breath, Rordan mentally pushed aside his embarrassment. He hoped he didn’t run into anyone he knew.

His turn in line came up. He got his papers taken care of and acquired the necessary list of lessons. Master Beag’s signature no longer glowed.

Rordan ducked down a less traveled hallway and made his way back to Boant Oak. The buying of lessons could wait. His need to escape to a private place grew urgent. He hoped he didn’t crack up too bad.

He approached his room. Manissa’s door stood open and Rordan peered inside. Manissa straightened up the clutter. She appeared unhappy. The room looked emptier than he remembered.

“Where’s Kea?”

Manissa said, “Took off last night. Said she was packing up, moving out. Left a note for you. Here.” She reached toward a pile of lessons on the floor and picked up a folded piece of paper.

He took it from her outstretched hand. His hands shook as he unfolded the paper to reveal a brief, hastily scribbled note. It read:

Dear Ror. Sorry I was so rough on you. I know you were right about something being done to me. Hitting the road to get some help. Nothing I can't handle. I'll be around in time for our date. Love, me.

Rordan nodded. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Hold on a second.” Manissa opened her desk drawer and pushed a wad of papers aside. She pulled out a small tie bracelet. The bracelet had woven sky blue and dark blue strings. A knot had been woven near each end.

“Take this and tie it onto your left wrist. It’ll let anyone in our force know you’re with us. Anyone gives you sauce, tell them Pontustel wants to see them. That’s my name, by the way. My arcane name, not my clumser lie.”

Rordan let her tie the bracelet around his wrist. Glenys’ bracelet suddenly made sense to him. “I guess this means you’re sponsoring me or something?”

Manissa said, “Yeah. Kea’s covet has everyone confused. I’d like people to cool it. Been driving me crazy.”

Rordan said, “Thanks again; it means a lot to me. I’ll be back.”

“Okay, bye.”

He went into his room. Stig wasn’t there and Borus still slept in the closet. Rordan read Kea’s note again and thought about Manissa’s actions. He placed the note in his journal and stared into space. The expected tears didn’t come. His heart had been hollowed out by the attempt on his life.

Rordan felt like a big dummy. The sweetness of the note moved him. It pained him to think the Huncher had gotten a hold of her, just when he had wised up. His bungle got worse the more he thought about it.

How long would he be a bungler? His father’s words rose out of the dark and clutched at him, “Don’t be a lowlife like me.”

He pulled the ruined shirt from his daypack and examined it. His view of the stains and the smell had changed. Rordan believed there was a story behind them. He thought about Kea’s motivation for stealing the shirt. Part of it might have been a secret desire for a gift. For all her mockery of chivalry, she may have been in need of it.

Fikna was the expert at the rules of romantic courtesy. Rordan decided he needed to ask his bro’ some questions.

Putting the shirt aside, he examined the plant. The stalk had darkened in color and developed a grainy texture. The end of the sprout had changed into a bulb-like swelling. He decided not to disturb it. His limit for conversation with phantom beings had been reached.

Rordan put down the daypack and glanced at his bunkmate's desk. A piece of paper with crude daubings and scribbles caught his attention. He pulled the paper out from under the small pile of lessons.

The paper turned out to be the same guide-map every pupil had received. The crude daubings were crosses, arrows, and crescents located near the archives and the amphitheater. Beside those locations were scribbles in Dimmuric.

He remembered seeing these kinds of symbols in code lessons relating to treasure maps. The exact meaning of the symbols eluded Rordan. Again, he felt the lack of his full lesson collection.

Rordan gathered together his own copy of the guide-map and his writing kit. He duplicated the symbols and what he could make out of the scribbles onto his copy. The thought of Stig catching him in the act made his weary heart pound.

Satisfied with the duplications, he placed Stig's guide-map back where he had found it. Rordan let the ink on his own guide-map dry and sat down.

His mind boggled at the discovery. He needed to know what Stig was doing here for real. The guy must be

looking for buried treasure. If the illuminated map also led to a treasure the two might be connected.

He remembered Stroma had said the manor was built on an old lod shaft and had suggested the tunnels were accessible. Or at least, enough to have a punishment for being found down there. Master Beag must know about them too. If there was a treasure, Rordan suspected the vampire guarded it.

The Huncher said Kea had been thrown down a deep well. The specter might have meant a section of the lod shaft. Rordan realized an expedition was in order. The attempt would have to be made at night.

According to Varan, a mother spider walked the grounds at night. She must dwell somewhere during the day. Probably at the courtyard where his mascot had told him to run for cover.

His lod star had also said to expect a word from Pasiphaea's relatives. He'd first seen Pasiphaea outside the forest. If the whole family could walk the grounds during the day like her, he was in trouble.

He didn't want to imagine what might happen if he ran into any of them. The expedition would have to include plans to dodge spider fantoms.

Rordan tried to recall what the plant had told him. He remembered a diamond child growing within him. His feelings struggled with the concept. He decided it must be symbolic and related to his growing up to leave childhood behind.

The map and wheel page must have more clues he hadn't picked up on yet. Rordan looked at his daypack. Only a blank emptiness came forward.

A touch of poison gripped him and brought on an attack of nausea. He gasped for breath while his body shivered. The thought he might die drowned out all other thoughts.

The nausea passed and he regained some composure. His imagination strained to grasp at meaning. Pasiphaea's poison and kiss worried him. He hoped he could figure out a way to solve those problems before they finished him off. Glenys had mentioned a fantom physic. He'd have to ask her about that.

No matter how he looked at it, his life could only get more complicated if he went on. His journey might last for a long time, which meant more visions and fantoms along the way.

Rordan considered how much further he could look within himself. He didn't know what was humanly possible, nor did he know what would happen if someone stopped. The situation resembled a maze to him, with dead ends and many different twists and turns.

He took out his lucky crystal and held it in his hand. The token reminded him of his change into a magician and the need to practice his imagination. A nagging intuition told him the encounter with Pasiphaea had opened up the door for him. Kea's change of heart had been the result of a skilled act and a display of sincerity. Both had sprung from his rustic skills.

He thought of the invisible shine from which he received secrets. Rordan decided things changed as a result of a power he carried inside. The mascot had mentioned an egg and called it a treasure. He hoped he would find out when and where he had picked up this treasure. The power in the egg had made him a rustic in a weird performance. He intuited the next move would be his to decide.

Rordan gazed at the crystal. The song of nature came forward and a passion seized him. His body felt part of the song, part of nature. A singing voice called out to him from a great distance.

He noticed Borus standing at the entrance to the closet.

She smiled at him with wide eyes and said, “No cry. The woman strong. We find.”

Her powerful voice stunned him. He let understanding sink in. “You’re a girl.”

Borus said, “You smart. Found voice and make talk.”

Rordan said, “Oh, wow.”

She came over to him and placed a palm on his shoulder. “You and I search. Crazy friends.”

He looked up at her and said, “Yep. We’re crazy friends all right. What are we searching for?”

Borus said, “Happy time.”

“What does happy time mean?”

She stretched her arms up wide over her head, eyes shining with joy. “All happy here and there.”

He found her description unsettling and alluring at the same time. “That sounds cool. Let’s do that. What’s our next step?”

A playful grin spread across her wide mouth. “Wait and hear. More song come.”

Rordan agreed with her. There must be a period of waiting involved with how things unfolded. Her own third eye must see along those lines.

“Will my friends be able to hear you talk? See you’re a girl?”

Borus said, “Glenys see me. Fikna closed.”

Excitement pushed Rordan to the brink of exhaustion. “Have you been talking to Glenys already?”

She paused to think, a comical expression playing across her face. “Her ears fast. You slow, make talk.”

Rordan said, “What’s your name?”

She smiled. “Borus. You give name and soul back.”

“Why didn’t I see you’re a girl?”

“Dwarf land sick, I hide. Lone boy safe.”

He considered her answer. “I got it; a girl traveling alone would be noticed. But does that mean you can change shape?”

Borus said, “I hide, dwarfs see false. Tough land, bad food and no talk. I lose name and soul. Trunk go sick.”

“Wait, what do you mean dwarfs?” His head pounded with fatigue.

She made a series of long, drawn out gestures. “You dwarf. This dwarf land. Dwarfs eat ghost land, make more dwarf land.”

“I’m a dwarf?”

Borus nodded, pointed to him and then to herself. “You dwarf. I thing.”

“What kind of thing?” He refused to believe the growing possibility that his buddy was some kind of fantom. The implications were too much for him now.

“Things live ghost land,” said Borus. “Hide and dwarfs see false. I hear song, make well. You help, we search.”

Rordan closed his eyes. “I’m tired. I must be making talk for you. The magic is wearing me out. I’m sorry.”

“No cry. Rordan rest. Dwarfs make soul weak. Things know. You smart now.”

He crawled over to his bed and lay down. Borus placed a dryad weave over Rordan and tucked him in.

THE END