

### 39 – The Purpose for Existence

Back in the inn, Ward sat in one of the comfortable armchairs near the fireplace and took some time, using sheers he'd borrowed from Fan's kitchen, to trim his two spell pages and put them into his new spellbook. The copper sheet was so thin that the steel sheers cut right through it, and a little work with the tip of a knife made holes for it to slip into the book. The page he'd gotten from Maggie was already perfectly sized, so in just a few minutes, he buttoned up the spellbook, screwing down the silver thumb nuts to hold the pages flat in the binding.

He held the book up, turning it to see it from all angles, admiring the soft leather cover, the fine stitching, and the weird, barely visible runes that covered so much of its surface, especially inside the covers. It was about five inches by eight but only about half an inch thick with the current load of pages.

"Interesting book you've got there."

Ward looked up to see Fay had approached carrying a big glass of beer. "Yeah, I picked it up today. Was just thinking about whether it would be uncomfortable in my coat's inner pocket."

"Brought you some beer." When Ward took it, she leaned close and said, far more quietly, "I'm sorry I was being weird earlier. I know you don't have a thing with Haley; I mean, not like that. She told me. I think I was acting out 'cause I know you're leaving, and it makes me think about my life . . ."

"You don't need to explain." Ward sipped the beer, and as he swallowed, he shook his head. "You've been great. I probably should apologize; I'm sure I've missed some social cues and said some boneheaded things."

"You see? There you go again, saying the right thing, making me feel all flustered." She frowned, still leaning close. "Are you really going to leave tomorrow?"

Ward sighed, fearing the conversation was about to take a turn for the worse. "I'm not certain. We want to get after this Nevkin guy who stole from us and left behind these thugs to kill us, so, yeah, it's best if we leave soon. Depends on if Haley gets back with her horses."

"Well, if you're probably going to leave tomorrow, can I steal some of your time tonight? I'd like to make the most of it."

"Oh?" Ward hadn't expected that. "As in . . ."

"As in, let's take a walk, get something to eat, and see what happens?"

"How could I say no?"

Fay smiled, her new silver teeth winking in the light. Ward could see the tiny runes, so similar, yet so different from the ones on his spellbook, etched into their surface. "Meet me down here at six? Fan will let me go at about five-thirty."

"I'll be waiting." At his words, Fay leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. When she straightened up, she reached down and rubbed the spot with her thumb, grinning.

“You could use a shave.”

Ward’s smile broadened as blood rushed to his head and tingles danced on the nape of his neck. “I’ll get cleaned up.”

Fay winked at him, then, in a waft of lavender-scented air, she brushed past him back toward the kitchen. Naturally, Grace took that moment to appear, sitting cross-legged on the floor, looking up at him with an arched eyebrow. “Someone’s getting lucky tonight.”

“Aw, c’mon. I doubt it; she just likes to flirt.”

“I doubt that. Sexy stranger staying at the inn, making her horny all week, and now he’s leaving in the morning? She’ll make a move, mark my words.”

“Sexy, huh?”

“Oh, brother! I meant to her, Ward. Your stranger status bumps you up a few notches.”

Ward chugged the rest of his beer, stood, and stretched. “Stranger status, huh? I’ll take it.” With an undeniable spring in his step, he went up to his room and stripped down to his new undergarments. He was going to clean up, but first, he wanted to do some spell memorizing. He didn’t know how it would work to try to hold both of the spells he knew in his head at once, but intended to find out.

He sat on the rug beside his bed and opened his new grimoire to the back page—he’d put the copper spell page there. He studied the words and movements, and then, just as he’d done before, he meditated, working to clear his mind, focusing on his breathing, and trying to find his heartbeat. It came to him much more easily than the last time, and the progress encouraged him, buoying his efforts to memorize the spell. Once again, using his heart as a timer, he began to do the meditative positions, moving through the forms, focusing on the strange words of power, saying them over and over, like a mantra, “*Shrovak gnyrath*.”

Though he repeated the words in his head, they had an odd, irregular cadence thanks to the forms he was moving his body through and the timing marks tied to each syllable. Still, this wasn’t the first time he’d memorized this spell; it wasn’t the first time he’d built it in his mind, and things felt easier. Things came together more quickly. In only ten or fifteen minutes—he couldn’t be sure exactly how long—he felt the spell pattern snap together, solid and tangible in his mind. Looking at it, he felt some dread, felt like he was staring at something sharp he wanted to grab but knew it would cut him. “Well, that’s one down.” Ward flipped back to the front of his spellbook to the one he’d copied from Maggie.

“You already got the secrets one ready?”

“Yep. Seemed a lot easier this time—still looks dangerous in my head, though.”

“Well, you haven’t improved yourself since the first casting, have you?”

“Guess not.” Ward shrugged, studying the new spell, saying the words softly a few times, “*Ghruvon truvik prakhun*,” while he studied the timings. When he felt ready, he closed his eyes and slipped back into his meditation, finding his heartbeat, emptying his mind, and getting ready to start moving through the new forms. He knew Grace was watching him, but he didn’t care; as

soon as he got into the mantra of the spell, the movements of the forms, and the timing of his heartbeat, he lost track of everything around him.

The new spell was longer than the first, but it was far, far easier; the forms were much more comfortable, his body less contorted, the rhythm of the words' syllables seemed almost intuitive, and it only took him a few times through the process before he felt it—like a shiver down his spine and the relief of a sneeze, the spell snapped into solidity within his mind's eye. He could see it there, like neon-yellow curves in the darkness, hanging in the shadow of the first spell's sharp, glinting angles. Ward stared at the new spell, contemplating the words, feeling them itch the back of his tongue, wanting to be released. He didn't sense anything dangerous about it. "I can cast this one without being hurt," he announced.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah; it's like . . ." Ward trailed off, trying to think of the right words. "It's almost like it's a friendly, well-trained dog, while the other one's a bigger, meaner stray I found on the street."

"Colorful." Grace frowned, looking around the room. "You should get a sword. That spear's too big to haul all over the place, and face it—that pistol won't be much use as you move through the challenges. I wasn't too impressed with the bullet that guy made . . ."

"I mean, I'd buy one of the local firearms, but they're even worse. I'll keep my gun for now, but I get your meaning. I should find something a little more reliable. My knife's good enough for the moment, though." Ward stood, walked over to the chest at the foot of his bed where he'd put his belt, and drew the big buck knife from its sheath. "Let's see how this works." Grace leaned close as Ward stared at the knife. The blade was about eight inches long, single-edged, with a deep fuller down the center. It was made of steel, well-oiled, and damn sharp. Ward concentrated on the blade, then looked into his mind at the spells he had there.

He focused on the True Strike spell and said the words. They rushed to his tongue and flew from his lips, echoing off the walls and shivering against the glass windows as they *pinged* into the steel of the blade. Ward's eyes flew wide as he saw them etch themselves into the steel with bright yellow sparkles that slowly dimmed but never entirely disappeared. The knife quivered in his palm, ready to unleash the magic he'd put inside it. "Badass," he hissed, waving the eager blade before himself, listening to it sing as it sliced the air.

"That was very frickin' cool!" Grace's eyes zeroed in on the knife, staring at those glimmering runes. "It'll stay ready until you use it?"

"I guess so. According to Maggie's spell book, her old grandma or aunt or something kept the spell ready on a club she had by her front door." Ward carefully sheathed the knife, then he looked inward, surprised to see the spell still there in his mind. He was confident he could cast it again. "I still have the spell in my head!"

"Maggie said you'd be able to cast some spells more than once; the easier they get for you, the easier it is to remember the words."

"Nice." Ward gathered some clean clothes and the little leather shaving kit he'd bought the other day. It contained a piece of hard, earthy-smelling soap, a boar-hair brush, a straight razor, and a leather strop. Ward had a thick beard, and he'd spent far too much time in his life trying different ways to shave it. Electric razors never did the trick, and cheap disposables gave him a nasty

razor burn. He'd used shaving soaps before. He'd even gone through a phase where he'd spent a lot of time learning to use a straight razor without butchering himself, so the kit he'd bought wasn't as daunting as it might have been.

He took a washcloth with him to the tub, and when he was soaking in hot, steamy water, he draped the hot cloth over his face, letting his stubble absorb the moisture. He soaked like that for a while, taking much longer than he had to; he loved a hot bath, especially when it was cold outside.

"Too bad I can't shave you; I've been in mostly male hosts and witnessed thousands of shaves. I bet you'd sleep like a baby there if I could . . ."

Ward yawned at the mention of sleep, interrupting her. He chuckled, narrowing his eyes at her. "I'm not supposed to be sleeping. Any idea the time, by the way?"

"Still early afternoon."

Ward took the washcloth off his face, dipped it back into the hot water, and reapplied it. "Not looking forward to the straight razor. It's been a while."

"Just remember to let the blade do the work. Take slow, smooth strokes . . ."

"I know all that! It's just something that takes practice to get right."

"You know, Ward, I'm proud of you."

"For knowing how to shave?"

"No, dummy! I'm proud of you for not freaking out about me being here while you're in the tub!"

Ward sighed, looking down at his exposed body and then over at Grace, sitting atop the counter a few feet away. "It's a losing battle."

"Recognizing the futility of a battle is one way to win it!"

"I . . ." Ward shook his head, sighing again. "I don't think that exactly makes sense." He leaned forward, pulled the drain plug, and snatched up his towel. A few minutes later, he leaned over the counter, painstakingly shaving away his accumulated stubble. He got through the process a lot better than he'd feared. He wasn't sure why; maybe the razor was sharper, his hands were steadier, or his skin was tougher. Maybe it was some combination of it all. In any case, he only had to press the washcloth against a couple of nicks, and they stopped bleeding quickly. When he was dressed in clean clothes and had his belt and shoulder holster on, he swung his jacket over his shoulders, put his hat atop his head, and hustled out of the inn. He wanted to run an errand before his date with Fay.

"Where are we going?" Grace walked in front of him, taking backward steps, and even though he knew she couldn't bump into anyone, it made him nervous. His stress soon faded, though, as she managed to sidestep everyone they approached, and Ward remembered she could see from his eyes.

"I figured I'd buy her a flower."

“Oh, my God! You’re so *old!*”

“Ah, put a sock in it! You’re ten times older than I am.” Ward frowned. “At least! Don’t tell me Christina wouldn’t have liked getting a flower from a date.”

“Christina? She wasn’t interested in dates, but I suppose she liked flowers.” Grace grinned wickedly, and Ward braced himself for whatever twisted thought she was about to voice. “So tell me, Ward, are you planning to pull out or what?”

“Oh, Jesus!”

“What? If you get lucky, and I’m pretty sure you will, you know this girl will probably try to get pregnant. I mean, why else would she want to sleep with the mysterious, powerful stranger who’s leaving in the morning? A kid will give her a hold over you, a reason for you to have to return. Don’t blush! You’re not a choirboy. You know how these things work.”

“She’s not like that.”

“Okay, suppose you’re right. Accidents happen. Do you think she’s on any kind of birth control? Is that a thing in this world?”

Ward didn’t answer, but he frowned, annoyed that her words had struck a chord. Annoyed that the “date” he’d been looking forward to was suddenly tinted with dread. Did he want to ask Fay that kind of thing in the moment? Ward had made his way to the nearest market square, a stand selling herbs and flowers, his initial target. Now, he paused and looked around the square at the various stalls and then along the perimeter at the more permanent shops. He let his gaze pass over the array of businesses: a blacksmith, two bakeries, a butcher, a fishmonger, a leather shop, a stationary store, a dozen farmer’s stalls, street food vendors, trinket carts, and, finally, an apothecary. Ward strode toward it.

Inside, between racks of drying herbs, through a haze of odors he couldn’t begin to identify, he made his way to the counter and the black-haired, jackal-like proprietor. Ward cleared his throat and said, “Good afternoon.”

“Traveler.” The voice reminded him of the scavenger he’d met on his first day with Grace, the one whose brother he’d killed—Lizzy. Still, this person was older and shorter, so he tried to shake off the weird feeling of familiarity.

“I, uh, have a kind of awkward question.” Ward sighed and walked closer, wishing the shopkeeper had been a man for some stupid reason.

“I don’t have a love potion . . .”

“Uh, that’s not what I’m needing. I think the attraction is already there if you get my meaning.” She stared at him with big, glassy, unblinking brown eyes. “See, I’m from a different world, and things were . . . different there. Can you tell me, is birth control a thing here? Um, contraception?”

The woman's canine features gave her leering grin a particularly biting edge as she chuckled softly. "You're wondering if there's a way to prevent pregnancies? Do they not have barren-bloom essence in your world?"

"Barren-bloom?"

"Aye, silly lad. An alchemical mixture, a drink of which will render a man or woman impotent for up to a week, depending on his or her constitution." She eyed him up and down. "In your case, I wouldn't trust it more than three days or so."

"Oh really? Man or woman?"

"That's right. I don't sell it, but there's an alchemist on the next block, just north of here, who will have some. If you want it to work tonight, I'd get it quickly. It takes a few hours for full potency." She laughed and clapped Ward on the shoulder. "Do I know the lucky lass?"

"No idea. Um, I don't think so." Ward dug into his coat pocket, took out a five-glory coin, and set it on the counter. "For your time and discretion."

"Oh? Paying old Mezza for her silence? Might take a few more glories." When Ward put another coin down, this one worth ten glories, her wolfish grin widened, and she scooped it up. Ward smiled and left the shop, his neck hot, feeling annoyed that he'd been embarrassed at all. What the hell was he? A schoolboy? When he saw Grace standing there, grinning at him, he scowled.

"What? I don't know what the hell's going on with me, but I'm acting like a college kid about to get laid for the first time. I'm not loving it." Ward oriented himself to the north and started stomping that way before Grace could formulate a response.

"Ward, you weren't exactly getting busy regularly back on Earth, were you?"

"Nah, not regularly." He shrugged. "Still, I haven't been this . . ." He cut himself off, grimaced, shrugged his shoulders, rolled his neck, and furiously took his jacket off, suddenly feeling hot. "I haven't felt this wound up and, Jesus, I dunno, emotional in a long damn time."

"Your body's young again. You're full of hormones and energy! Your old brain's struggling against it 'cause you've got experience, and you know it's silly, but your instincts are telling you you're about to get a chance to propagate the species. As far as your body's concerned, this is the apex of your evolution, the purpose for your existence! Just take it slow, old man, one step at a time. If you play your cards right, we might just get lucky, and now you don't have to worry about leaving a kid behind."

"We, Grace?"

"Think about it, Ward." She winked at him, then turned and skipped ahead, disappearing from sight, leaving him with an open mouth. Suddenly, part of him hoped Fay would just flirt some more and leave things nice and platonic.