

It was mid-morning when Ward rang the little bell on Maggie's gate. He could see and smell the smoke coming from her little chimney, so he knew she was up and about, but it still took her a few minutes to open her door and peer out with one bright green eye. When she saw him, though, she pulled the door wide and gestured for him to come up to the house. "Good morning, traveler."

Ward smiled and wiped his boots on the rough wicker mat. "Morning, Maggie."

"Have you had breakfast? I was just about to fry up some leftovers with Rippa's morning gifts."

"Rippa? And, no, thank you, I've eaten." Ward doubted he'd ever eat or drink anything that Maggie gave him again.

"Rippa's my hen!" she said with a laugh, pushing the door closed and gently shoving him further into the house. "Sit at the table, then, and we can talk while I cook." Ward, stooping low to duck under a string of drying herbs, moved into the kitchen and sat in the same chair he'd used before. "Back so soon, hmm? Trouble with the spell?"

"No, the opposite, actually." Ward pushed some half-full jars of what looked like colored sand to the side, making room in front of him on the table. "It worked well."

"And it didn't harm you in the casting?" Maggie looked away from her frying pan to raise an eyebrow in his direction.

"It was like you said; I could sense how dangerous it was, almost like how you can feel the temperature of a hot pan by holding your hand close. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I also knew it wasn't going to kill me. Even so, let's just say it was a good thing I had a healing tonic at hand."

"Ah, I see. Give your body a bit more time to gain strength, absorb a bit more *anima*, and before you know it, you'll be casting that spell with nary a bit of bleeding."

"That's what I'm hoping, yeah. So, the reason I came out this morn . . ."

"Gonna try to pry my spells from my clutching fingers?" Maggie cackled as she spoke, interrupting Ward's attempt at smoothly asking her for her most precious treasures.

With the wind taken from his sails, Ward decided to try a bit of logic on for size. "Yeah, well, look, Maggie, I'm new to this whole thing, but I understand the value of these spells. I know part of the reason people hoard knowledge is to have a monopoly on it; they don't want to create competitors for themselves. I'm about to leave town, and I doubt I'll come back this way anytime soon, if ever. I'm not going to set up shop selling potions or cures or whatever it is you do with your magic. Heck, as you can see, I don't even know if any of your spells would be of use to me. I'm just asking, though, if there's any magic you might be able to teach me, anything that might help me survive or help other people, well, would you consider it? I have some money, probably not enough, but . . ."

Again, Maggie interrupted him with a short, barking laugh. "What a charming supplicant! So altruistic! 'Please, dear old Maggie! Couldn't you spare a spell so I might survive the harsh wilds and help the poor, innocent country folk?' Hah! Most o' my spells I earned through hard, dirty work that left a taste of shame in my mouth for months and years. Why, I'd say the one you

brought out here the other day was the easiest one I ever laid my hands on.” She stopped speaking and continued to stir the sizzling vegetables and hunks of fatty meat in her skillet. Ward was wondering if he should say something, try another approach, but she *tsked* and shook her head, clearly thinking, and he didn’t want to interrupt the process on the off chance she was quietly convincing herself to help him.

He was considering offering her some kind of labor or a favor when she finally sighed and began to speak again, “There’s a way to these things, you see? A kind of history or tradition. Spells can’t be let go cheaply or easily. You’ll find I’m not the only one who feels this way. Why, even a mother wouldn’t give her daughter all her spells just for being her daughter. She’d make her earn ‘em, which is what I did. I had to pay dearly for every spell I got from my ma and gran. The ones I got from strangers . . . well, I won’t talk about that. Other than yours, that is. I suppose I did take that one from you far too cheaply. A bit of advice about magic was all I gave ya, and that didn’t cost me a thing other than the company of a handsome stranger for an hour or so. No, I suppose to right things I need to pay a bit more. I’ll share one more spell with you, one that cost me dearly.”

“Thank you, Mag . . .”

“That’s it, though! After that, you’ve got to leave old Maggie to her secrets. It’d be different if you were sticking around and wanted to become my ‘prentice. I’d take the cost out of your hide and teach you slowly over the years.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll give you ten minutes with the spell sheet. You copy it down, and then you’ll need to be on your way. I have a feeling my old nan’s going to be angry with me, and I’d rather be alone out here when she comes calling.”

“Your grandmother is alive?”

Maggie laughed, a deep wheezing laugh that had her bending and slapping her knee. “Oh, silly man! I wish that were the case.”

Ward wasn’t sure how to take that. Was she getting visits from ghosts, then? He supposed he’d heard crazier things since Grace had dragged him away from Earth. “Well, I really appreciate the gesture, Maggie. Thanks.”

“I’m just doing what I know is right. I don’t want some kind of karmic imbalance, you see? Don’t go calling me nice or sweet. Now, come stir these onions, and I’ll fetch my book. You have something to write on?” When Ward opened his mouth, an unmistakable look of chagrin shaping his expression, she laughed. “Fine, fine. I’ll give you a piece of parchment, too.” Ward took over for her, pushing the onions, chopped carrots, and hunks of fatty pork around in her pan, ensuring nothing burned while she left the kitchen.

He heard her grunting as she moved things around, and then, only a minute or two later, she placed her spellbook on the table and opened it to a particular page. Before it, she set a blank parchment and a quill. “Don’t touch my book; eyes only. Understood?”

“Understood,” Ward said, handing her the spatula. He returned to his seat, scooted close to the table, and stared at the spell on the open page of her book. It looked more complicated than the

one he'd gotten from the catacombs. It seemed to involve three of the words, not just two, and there were three more positions in the meditation diagram. Printed in a spidery scrawl beneath the spell were someone's notes:

*The words mean strike true with power. Touch an object while you cast this spell. One time only, the object will hit whatever you aim at, and it'll do so like a giant struck the blow. Nan Olive keeps it cast upon a shillelagh tucked beside the front door. I'll use it for hunting that white buck. Renny swore he'd marry me if I made him a coat from its hide. Poor boy doesn't think I can do it.*

"Did you write this one?"

"No. Them's my auntie's words. It's tradition to keep the notes how you found 'em when you get a spell. Feel free to add your own, besides."

"So, true strike? I could cast it on a rock and then throw it at something, and I wouldn't miss?"

"That's right. You must be able to see what you're aiming at. That's how the magic knows how to help you. You don't have to throw it, however. Put it on a spear or a sword, and your next strike will do terrible damage." She began cracking eggs, adding them to her skillet with a hot sizzle, then looked at Ward and winked. "Start writing, sir; clock's ticking."

"Shit, right!" Ward had almost forgotten she'd given him a time limit to copy the spell. He got to work, writing the three strange words, muttering them to feel their shapes on his tongue, "*Ghruvon Truvik Prakhun.*" They didn't seem particularly difficult to say, but he knew they'd sound and feel different after he meditated on them and built the spell in his mind. As he began copying the little stick figure drawings of the meditation positions, he asked, "You think this one's easier or harder than the one I gave you? I mean, you think I'll need a healing tonic ready if I try it?"

"It's easier. The spell you gave me is stronger because it's more of an open-ended magic; it can do many different things. This one does a specific enchantment every time you cast it. Not only that, but it doesn't create something out of nothing like some other spells. This one just brings out the hidden strength in an object and sweet talks it into acting a certain way. Those are easier kinds of spells to master."

"Sweet talks? Like in my example, if I cast this on a stone, would that mean the spell is talking to the stone?"

"More like it's talking to the bit of spirit in that stone what's connected to the rest of the universe. It gives the stone purpose."

"Huh. I like it. So getting an existing object to do something is easier than creating an object out of nothing."

"An object, an element, a spirit, aye."

"But the reveal secrets spell doesn't create . . ." Ward stopped speaking, remembering the weird phantoms who'd shown him the secrets of his room at the inn.

"That spell digs things out of people or objects, and it looks deeply. I tried it once after you left. Cast it on my dead sister's favorite comb." She shuddered. "Learned something I wish I hadn't. Also bled from my ears for an hour!" She laughed and then scooped the contents of her pan into a big wooden bowl. Carrying it over to the table, she asked, "Almost done?"

"Yeah, just checking to make sure I didn't make any mistakes with your little stick figures."

"Don't forget the timings."

"Nope, got 'em." Ward folded his paper in half, then scooted back from the table. "Sure you won't let any others go?"

Again, she laughed. "Not for anything you'd be willing to bargain!"

Ward knew better than to press his luck, and he felt pretty good about the spell she'd given him; it sounded useful in a thousand different ways. "Will you be offended if I don't stay to visit?"

"Shoo! Go on! Get out there and take care of your important business." She smiled the whole while she waved him off, so Ward wasn't worried she was upset.

He made his way to the door and called back to her, "I'll try to stop by again before I leave town."

"Do that! Also, get yourself a good grimoire before someone pickpockets those spells off ya."

"That's just what I'm planning to do right now." Smiling, Ward slipped out the door. It was swollen with moisture, and he had to pull hard to get it to close properly. Brushing his hands together, he turned to the gate and briskly walked back toward town. As he put a little distance between himself and the hut, Grace appeared, walking beside him. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. That went well, didn't it? I was impressed the old lady gave you that spell for free."

"Not for free, Grace. She gave it to me 'cause I was a shitty bargainer when I went there before."

"Well, she still could've charged you. I would have."

"Yeah, but you're not nice. I'm nice, which makes normal people want to be nice back. See how that works?"

"Whatever. So, where next? The magical dentist?"

"Hah. Yeah, I guess so. He's an artificer, so I can ask him about a spellbook while I'm checking on my bullets. What do you think of this spell I got?"

"It certainly sounds good. If you can cast that spell on a bullet . . ." She trailed off, clearly savoring an imaginary scenario. "I bet you could make quite a trick shot."

"Even if it doesn't work on a bullet, I could enchant my spear. The first guy who messes with me is going to regret it, right?"

“Seems like it. Let me ask you something: When you do that memorizing thing—you know, the meditative dance routine—can you tell which movements are for which words?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ve only done it once, for one spell, so I’m not sure it’s always like that, but when I was shifting from position to position, I could tell what words resonated. It was like . . . a harmony, I guess. I could feel when the word I focused on was responding to the movements. Why?” Ward nodded to the guard on duty as he walked through the gate. Traffic was light, and he wondered why that was. Were there certain days people brought things in and out of the city for trade? Were there market days?

“Well, if you start to learn more and more words and learn how they work, I wonder if you couldn’t start to build your own spells.”

“Huh. Maybe I could! I mean, I’ll know what kinds of movements to make with each word, and if I try to use them in ways similar to spells I’ve already mastered . . .”

“Exactly! At first, at least. You could try to experiment more broadly as you gain more power. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“That’s what I was going to say. Never know—I might pick up enough new spells to keep us both happy and busy. Maybe I’ll twist something out of Nevkin when I catch him.”

“Woah!” Grace laughed. “Starting to sound more and more like me. I love it!”

“All right, I’m lost. Can you guide me to the guy’s shop?”

“The guy?” Grace pointed to the left side of the next intersection. “Turn that way. His name’s Mr. Frine.” Ward followed her directions, and after another ten minutes of pleasant strolling, he walked through the door accompanied by the ding of a distant bell. He went straight up to the counter and was already standing there, leaning one elbow on the wooden top, when the artificer stepped through a side passage obscured by a burgundy curtain.

“Ah! Mr. Dyer, I’m pleased to see you. I’ve finished one of your bullets, but I thought we should test it before I go through the trouble of crafting more.”

“One, huh? Have you been waiting long to test it? I’d have liked to get those bullets in hand by tomorrow.” Ward tried not to frown, but he was annoyed that the man hadn’t asked him to come to test the bullet sooner.

“Oh, um, I only finished the casing yesterday, and my friend took a bit longer than I’d hoped to get the mix right on his alchemical fire. If it works, I should be able to do the other nineteen casings all at once, and they only need twelve hours or so to absorb enough *anima* for the inscription to catalyze.” When Ward only nodded, frowning, he continued, “Would you care to come back to the alley to try it out? You have your pistol?”

“Yeah.” Ward pulled on his lapel, opening his jacket to reveal the pistol’s grip. “Should I walk around outside?”

“No, just follow me.” He gestured toward the rear of the shop, and Ward followed him out, through his little stock room, and then into the back alley. Small crates were stacked against the

building beside the door, and Mr. Frine picked one up and took a few paces down the alley until he stood behind his neighbor's rear door. "I'll set this crate here. If you can it, the bullet should slow enough as it passes so it won't bounce far off the cobbles."

"No, no. Put it there in front of that barrel full of scrap. That'll keep the bullet from bouncing through someone's window." Ward wondered at the guy's idiotic perception of bullet ricochet mechanics. It made him want to go and buy a thick metal helmet and breastplate—who knew when some idiot would decide target practice down an open alley was a good idea. As he thought about it, he wondered why he didn't hear more shots going off. There didn't seem to be any law about it. As Frine moved the crate, he pulled his gun from its holster. "Hey, I never hear people shooting around town. Is this illegal?"

"Not, per se, but the guard would likely frown on it. We'll be back inside before anyone knows where the explosion came from, don't worry."

"Explosion?" Ward looked around for Grace, wanting a conspirator to share in his snark. She wasn't visible, though.

"Well, what do you call it when a bullet explodes from a barrel?" Mr. Frine asked as he returned, holding out a silver, rune-etched cartridge in the palm of his hand. The lead bullet was flat and shaped very much like the bullet he'd given the man as an exemplar, making it a close match for his other .357 rounds. It felt right in his hand and looked like a work of art with all those runes on the casing.

"Pretty," Ward said, taking it and holding it up in the light. "I'd call it a gunshot, Mr. Frine," he said off-handedly as he popped open the cylinder of his revolver, put the bullet into the chamber just left of the top center, and then snapped it shut. Ward pulled the hammer back with his thumb, rolling the cylinder so the round was under the hammer, and then he pointed the gun at the crate and gently squeezed the trigger. A thunderous *boom* sounded, a black cloud of smoke erupted from the gun, and a fist-sized hole exploded in the barrel above and behind the crate. He'd missed a shot he could've made blindfolded with proper ammo. "Jesus Christ." Ward opened and closed his mouth, trying to get his ears to pop.

"It works!" the artificer crowed, clearly pleased with his work. Ward popped open the cylinder on his gun and held it up, turning it left and right, worried he'd damaged the firearm with the unorthodox ammunition.

"I guess, technically. It ain't pretty, though." Ward snapped the cylinder shut after pulling out the casing. "Doesn't look like it damaged my gun, but maybe you could lighten the load on the next ones you make. Like, twenty percent less powder."

"Powder?"

"Yeah, the, uh, alchemical fire."

"Oh, it's more crystalline than powdery, but sure, I can do that. I'll just pack a bit more cotton fibers into the casing to keep it from jostling around."

"Yeah, that's good. Listen, I didn't notice anything off when I looked at the bullet, but you have to be sure the thing is *exactly* the same size as the example I gave you. If the lead is just a bit too

narrow, it'll fit in the gun and shoot through the barrel, but the rifling won't work right. It's got to be perfect, okay?"

"Understood, sir. I'll have them ready for delivery tomorrow at noon. While the casing enchantments are catalyzing, I'll cast the bullets and be sure to measure them from every angle. In the morning, I'll load your twenty bullets."

"Perfect. Now, before I leave, you wouldn't happen to know anything about grimoires, would you?"

"Grimoires?" He looked confused for a second, but then he laughed and shook his head. "Spellbooks! Of course I do! I keep all of my artificing runes in one. Anyone who works with *anima*, be they artificer, enchanter, alchemist, or animancer, strives to keep their secrets safe from prying eyes. Come into my shop, and I'll show you a book I have for sale."

Ward followed him back inside, setting the empty cartridge on the counter when they got back to it. Mr. Frine pocketed it, then went back to his stock shelves, rummaging. "That seemed really loud. Do you think it damaged your gun?" Grace asked, suddenly sitting on the counter beside him.

"Nah," Ward said. "It was louder than my other bullets but didn't kick any more than usual. I think it's just the way that shitty explosive sounds."

"What was that, sir?"

"Nothing. Just musing."

Grace smiled, gently tapping one of her polished nails on her chin. "I am sort of like a muse, aren't I? That's what I should have called myself when we first met. I wonder how your attitude would change if you thought of me as a muse and not a devil?"

"Personally, I'm glad you didn't lie. Let's keep things honest, yeah?"

"Sure." Grace turned to regard Mr. Frine as he returned and set a sturdy, black leather book on the counter. It had fine silver hinges on the cover and four silver posts topped with knurled nuts going through the binding behind them.

"The book is designed so you can add and remove pages as needed. See?" Mr. Frine loosened the knurled nuts on the posts, then opened the cover to show Ward how the pages were loose and could be lifted off the four posts. "You just put holes in your page and slip them onto those posts. I have fifty blank pages in here, but you can remove or add as many as you can fit inside the cover."

"Nice. And is it enchanted to keep people from reading my stuff?"

"Oh yes! Look here." He showed Ward a multi-layered spiral diagram of weird runes inside the cover and, at its center, a dime-sized inlaid circle of silver. "Place a drop of your blood on this ritual circle, and the book will become attuned to you. Anyone else who tries to open it will find naught but blank pages."

Ward grinned, closing the book and pulling it closer to him on the counter. "Very nice, indeed, Mr. Frine. Now, let's talk glories."