

## 34 – Clarity

Maggie's bright eyes widened, and a smile lifted her plump oval cheeks. "May I copy it before we begin?"

Ward rested a heavy hand on the copper sheet. "Let's talk a bit first."

"Fair enough, wanderer. Tell me, what can old Maggie teach you today?"

"Let's start with why the words are so hard to keep," Ward tapped his forehead, "up here."

"They're elusive by nature. Hard to understand. They're combinations of sounds that affect the mana, but that very connection to the essence makes them hard to grasp. You have to learn the words with more than just your memory; you have to learn them with your body and spirit. You can plant them more firmly in your mind that way, but even so, if you use them, it's like a release. The flow of the mana will wash away some of those connections you made."

"So, every time you use one of the words or, I guess, a set of words, you'd have to study them again?"

Maggie nodded, pushing her mortar and pestle to the side. "A master might repeat the same spell a few times before the connections are gone, but then she'd have to study her notes again." She stood and walked through the cramped space, pushing aside a chair hung with quilts to make way as she started shuffling about in her kitchen. "I'll make us some hot bitters."

"Bitters?"

"Oh, just some herbs and roots steeped in hot water. Sort of a tea, but I have a few ingredients most people don't. They're a little bitter, but not when I'm done adding the honey! Did you see my hives out back?"

"No, I didn't notice—"

"No matter." She fiddled with something on her little, round copper range, and flames flickered to life atop it. "Now, while this water's warming, tell me how you have more mana than I but don't know a thing about the words."

Ward sighed and leaned back in the wooden chair. When it creaked alarmingly, he quickly straightened and covered his embarrassment with a cough. "Ahem, well, the world I came from has very little mana. People there just don't know about it. When I arrived here, I was amazed to find clouds of it coming from the bodies of a pair of scavengers I had to fight off."

"And you managed to harvest some of it all on your own? You must be quite gifted. Tell me, what does it look like?"

"You don't know?"

"No. I can feel it, like a tickle on my palm, but I struggle to pull any in. This," she gestured to her eyes, "is the result of decades of trying. Nonetheless, you won't hear me complain; I've outlived everyone I grew up with and some of my children, too." She chuckled, but it was a rueful, almost bitter sound.

“It’s beautiful. Imagine motes of dust like you might see in a sunbeam, but blue and flickering—swirling in little clouds.” Ward heard the wonder in his voice and had to stop speaking lest he get too emotional; he hadn’t realized how profoundly his experiences with the mana had affected him.

“So, you’re a natural. That’s lucky for you, stranger.”

“I’m sorry. Haven’t I introduced myself—”

“Oh, you have, Ward. Forgive this old woman; I have my habits when it comes to speaking.”

“No worries.”

“So, you can see it, you can gather it. You seem to be holding more than most humans your age might. Now, you seek some understanding. Am I correct in my summation?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you ever used a word?” She gestured to the sheet still resting under Ward’s palm. “That one or any other?”

“I did. I was in the catacombs when—”

“Aha! I should’ve guessed. Is that where you got your shine? Your ability to contain so much so early in your life? Did you find a refinement?”

Ward didn’t see any point in lying about it, so he shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Things begin to make more sense!” She chuckled to herself as she turned to lift her now-steaming kettle from the stove, pouring the hot water into a stoneware pitcher. Almost immediately, Ward could smell whatever she had in the pitcher, activated by the hot water. The scents were heady—like herbs and flowers and things that tickled his memories but only vaguely. “Go on. You were telling me about a time you used the words?”

“Right. I was betrayed. Well, a friend and I both were, and the fellow who betrayed us used some words to turn into smoke and escape from a room, leaving me and my friend to battle with some monsters. We killed the monsters, but she was paralyzed, and I couldn’t get to her. When our former companion betrayed us and cast his spell, I heard the words, and, somehow, I used them again to get to my injured friend.”

“Truly? How much time had passed?”

“A couple of minutes.” Ward shrugged. The truth was, he hadn’t remembered them; Grace had. Wasn’t that right? The whole memory was a little foggy to him.

“And you’d never studied them?”

“Never.”

“So, did he disappear and reappear in the new location, or did you see the smoke traverse the space between?”

“I saw it flow out.”

“Either way, it’s a potent spell. I’m surprised the words didn’t kill you.”

“I think they would have; I had a healing potion I won earlier in the catacombs.”

“Aha!” Maggie leaned against her wooden counter, which Ward was just starting to realize was about a foot shorter than a standard kitchen counter. She stroked her smooth, plump chin, then reached up to twirl some of her long, disheveled gray hair around her finger. After a minute, she said, “Mana isn’t inert. It is, in a way, alive. I’ve read that need, desperation, heightened emotion, and other such qualities can affect a spell, making it work when normally the caster would’ve failed. You must have been very focused and very desperate to get to your friend. Otherwise, I don’t know how you would have made that spell work without prior study or meditation on the forms.”

“Like I said, I think it almost killed me.” Ward watched as Maggie lifted her heavy pitcher and poured it over a handheld strainer into two mugs. She lifted a clay pot, and Ward saw her scoop a generous amount of honey into each mug, stirring it well. She returned to the table and pushed a green and orange glazed pottery mug toward him.

“That’s my favorite mug; my granddaughter and I made it while she visited for Eldenhearth a few years back.”

Ward wanted to ask what Eldenhearth was but didn’t want to get further sidetracked. He lifted the mug, sniffed the concoction within, and, his tastebuds intrigued by the cloying, spicy scent, gave it a sip. “Hmm! I like it! It’s more interesting than tea, that’s for sure.” While Maggie smiled, nodded, and sipped her own mug, he held the warm cup between his hands and waited for her to speak.

“All right, stranger.” She grinned around her mug and shook her head. “Ward. Show me this page you won in the catacombs.”

He nodded and pushed the copper sheet across the table toward her. She turned it and stared for a long while. When she looked up, her eyes were bright with interest. “I recognize that first word. *Shrovak*...” When Ward flinched and his eyes bulged out, she laughed. “Relax, child. The words won’t do anything without focused intention, especially for someone like me who’s not studied them at all.”

“Ah! That’s good. I was afraid even saying them by accident would make blood spray out of my ears or something.”

Maggie sipped her drink, swallowing with a soft sigh. “As I was saying, I know that word. It’s used in spells to mean something like ‘show.’ The second word isn’t familiar to me, and, well, with the words of power, you need to know that they have different meanings based on connotation, so that second word is important. *Shrovak* could mean ‘show’ or ‘tell’ or ‘reveal’ or ‘uncover’ or a dozen other subtly different things. The good news is that we can learn what the second word means by performing these meditative poses, committing the words to memory, and experimenting. It’s all a matter of whether we can stomach the risk.”

“Risk?”

“Well, neither you nor I are exactly evolved sorcerers.”

“Evolved?” Ward was starting to feel like an idiot, repeating everything back to her, not understanding hardly anything.

“Didn’t I mention earlier that you were holding a lot of mana for a young human? So, when I say evolved, I mean people from other species with more exposure throughout their ancestry.”

“But you’re from here, right? You call yourself human, which is comforting, but that’s a rabbit hole I’ll go down another day. The point is this place has much more mana than Earth; why aren’t the locals, you included, more ‘evolved’ for mana?”

“Ah, I see your confusion. Humans are a young species, relatively speaking, and, no, we didn’t originate in this system. We came to Vainglory in great numbers, just as we’ve spread to many worlds, but,” she smiled and shrugged, “I’ve no idea where we originated. That,” she laughed, “was thankfully long before my time.”

Ward nodded. He’d assumed something similar; it didn’t make sense that humanity evolved so similarly on various worlds. They had to have an origin in common, and, as far as he knew, it could be Earth. “Or,” he finished his thought aloud, “the people from my world, my ancestors, could have come from another world. All we have are bones and cave paintings to go on.”

“Hmm, I see you’re thinking aloud. I’ll pose another question for you: Do you wonder how I can recognize this word,” she tapped the copper sheet, “if the words are fleeting?”

“I figured you must have a spell that uses that word and that you’ve recently memorized it.”

“Ah! Oh, you’re sharper than you seem.”

Ward laughed. “Should I be offended?”

“No, no. I’m just old and speak my mind too bluntly. So, are you understanding things better?” She set her cup down and turned the copper sheet sideways so Ward could see it more easily as she pointed.

“I’m not sure what all those dotted lines are. The little symbols lined up under the words. My friend said it seemed similar to her martial arts forms—”

“Gopah!” Maggie clapped her hands, nodding. “Indeed! The masters of the fire fist meditate using forms similar to these. It’s how they learn to coax the latent mana into their styles.”

“Right! I figured it must have something to do with mana. When I saw my friend’s fists radiating heat and exploding on the enemies she fought.”

“Just so. Now, look. Follow my finger.” She gestured to the first of the symbols. “These long, dashed lines are meant to represent your limbs. The dots beneath give you an idea of how long you should hold that form while you meditate; they each represent ten heartbeats.”

“So, I bend my arms and legs like this, then meditate for, let’s see,” Ward did the math in his head, “thirty heartbeats before moving to the next form?”

“Exactly. The tricky part is knowing what to meditate on.”

Ward sipped his drink, tilting his cup so the thick, honey-sweet sludge at the bottom rolled into his mouth. “God, that’s good. Um, I was hoping you might help with that part. I’m not any kind of expert when it comes to meditation.”

Maggie smiled, took his mug, and set it aside. “To use the words of power correctly and safely, you must internalize them. There’s a reason the forms are timed in heartbeats—one of the easiest ways to begin to grasp the complexity of the words is to focus on them while you quiet your mind and body to the point where you can feel your heartbeats.

“When I learned my first word, my grandmother told me to be still until the only thing I could hear was my heart. Once I accomplished that—no small feat for a nine-year-old girl—she gave me the word, and while I listened to my heart, I repeated it in my head over and over. It took time, but eventually, I had clarity; I felt the word’s true meaning in the context of the forms my grandmother taught me.”

“These?” Ward touched the five different symbols under the words.

“Yes, though mine were stick figures drawn on an old sheet of vellum, and my gran helped me to get them right.” She smiled and reached over the table to clasp the knuckles of Ward’s left hand. “You’ll get it. You’re sharp, and I’m sure you just need to spend some time alone with the words. Have I taught you enough? May I copy the sheet?”

Ward started to lean back, heard the creaking of the chair’s joints, and stopped himself again. He settled for folding his arms and sighing happily. “Yeah. I’d say you’ve made things a lot clearer for me. You can copy it, but can I ask you a few questions while you work?”

“Of course!” Maggie hopped out of her seat, surprisingly spry for someone so old, and hurried over to a dark, hardwood trunk that sat between a rocking chair and a rack of empty bottles of all shapes and sizes. She lifted the lid and took out a bundle. When she returned to the table, Ward realized it was a thin leatherbound book and a box of pencils, quills, and tiny, cork-stoppered ink bottles. “This is my book of spells, Ward. You should make yourself one. Mine’s wrapped in salamander hide—very resistant to fire!”

Ward reached over the table and ran his fingers along the smooth, mottled hide. “Well, I’ll be damned! That’s pretty neat.” He frowned, thinking about some of the less savory people he’d run into since he’d come to that world. “You should be careful; aren’t those worth a lot?”

“Oh yes, but you see these marks?” She pointed to a line of strange symbols burned into the dark leather cover. They were almost invisible against the dark hide.

“Yeah?”

“The artificer who made me the binding attuned it to me, using my blood. If someone else opens the book or tears out a page, it will appear blank. He promised me that it was nearly impossible to get around; even tampering with the runes or adding new ones would render the pages blank,

and you'd be wise to believe I've got a copy or two hidden around the graveyard." She winked at him.

"Maggie! You shouldn't be telling me things like that!"

"Oh, you're not bad. I'd know by now. I've got a good sense for people, and the potion you drank would've had you coughing blood if your intentions were evil."

Ward sputtered, reaching for his throat as though he could do something about the drink he'd already fully imbibed. "You—"

"Come now! I'm an old woman living by a cemetery; did you believe I couldn't brew a potion? Nothing to worry about, young wanderer—so long as your intentions are good, it's nothing but a delicious digestive aid."

"That seems really broad! I don't have good intentions about everything!" Ward could feel his throat closing, but he hoped it was just psychosomatic.

"Hush! Relax! I mean your intentions concerning me! 'Twas my blood in the cup, after all."

"Oh, Jesus!" This time, Ward really *did* gag, but all Maggie did was laugh, and he couldn't tell if she was teasing. Something told him she wasn't. She'd opened her little book to a blank yellow-white page, and he watched, still feeling a little queasy and horrified, as she meticulously began to copy the embossed copper sheet. After a while, his stomach settled down, and he managed to put the thought of drinking someone's blood out of his head enough to ask, "You think I could get a book like that made here in Tarnish?"

"Undoubtedly. I thought you said you had questions for me. Was that it?"

"Oh, no. I got distracted thinking about your potion." Ward chuckled a little nervously, then shook his head. "So, I've learned that the more mana you absorb, the more it alters your body, allowing you to absorb more. That's right?"

"Yes! Given time and mana, a person, even a simple human like you or me, could grow in power enough to use some words. Of course, refinement potions created by beings who are unimaginably powerful can help you skip decades of work." She looked at him, narrowed her eyes, and wriggled her nose to show she was teasing. "Don't worry, I'm not bitter. I never had the courage to go into those catacombs, never tried to visit any of the other challenges. I'm content." She reached into her box of pens and pencils and pulled out a little pouch. She pulled out a pinch of fine white sand and sprinkled it on the page, absorbing the extra ink. "Anything else?"

"Will I know if the words are too much for me? Should I try to cast this spell or not?"

"Not to worry! If you do the meditation faithfully and reach clarity with these words," she drummed her finger on Ward's copper page, "you'll understand if they're too much for you. It'll be like the mental equivalent of touching a hot coal."

"Huh. What'll it be like if I *can* use them?"

“There won’t be any discomfort—only understanding.” She pushed his page back toward him, and Ward slipped it under his shirt again.

“Thanks. That...” Ward sighed and shrugged. “Talking to you has made me feel a lot less like I’m lost at sea without a, uh, rudder or sail or something.”

She continued to smile, her smooth, rosy cheeks squeezing her eyes upward. “Was there anything else?”

“Yeah...” Ward drummed his fingers on the table, considering the question and how much it might reveal about him. Then, with a shrug that was meant more for himself than Maggie, he asked, “Do you know anything about hemographs?”