

Stolen Spells

by Denise Vitola, 1957–

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On the sign hanging outside Bareen Tykar's shop, there was the symbol of a spinning wheel and below it the words *Country Spell Crafts and Implements for Daily Living*. I cast my gaze over the door, noting the deep, rich color and the carving of a twisted tree. It was a beautiful piece of art, gloriously old and fashioned from timber found only in Cormyr. The man who owned such a door would have money enough to buy a magical lock that would keep thieves like me standing out on the street.

I had just arrived in Kendil, a quiet hamlet in the foothills of the Sunset Mountains, just east of Asbravn. The village had a mercantile look about it; the majority of the buildings were well-kept, whitewashed affairs edged with flower boxes, each decorated with a quaint, homey motif. An inn fronted the swept cobbled street, and farther down the way, there was a tiny shrine honoring Sune Firehair, Goddess of Beauty and Patron of Love.

I felt inside my jerkin pocket to check the bits of helpful magic I carried. A thief is never far off from his tricks and spells, and knowing that I had come to this place adequately prepared made me feel more confident about meeting the proprietor of this shop.

Entering the establishment, I paused to glance around. The place was empty except for an old, fat clerk wearing a green apron and brushing a beefy hand through his shock of white hair. He stood before a wall of shelves arranged with rows of glass jars, tins, boxes, and intricately plaited baskets. The light from thick, stubby candles set among the goods gave these mundane treasures a bright sparkle, but there was so much dark wood that the large room had an oppressive feel to it.

The man squinted at me as I kicked the door shut and halted to smooth my beard and braid. "Bareen Tykar?" I asked, stepping up to the polished stone counter.

"Aye," he answered, "and who would be asking?"

"My name is Arek Adar. You sent a message along the trade route to Triel about wanting to find a certain elixir from the Sunset Mountain region. An elf named Latine Fire-walker spoke with me."

He didn't reply immediately. Instead, he studied me. Finally he smiled. When he did, his lips disappeared into the bag of wrinkles that made up his face. "Firewalker came by earlier and said to expect you." Leaning forward, he continued in a low voice. "He tells me you locate hard-to-find objects, objects of some antiquity."

I nodded. He made it sound as if I were a bona fide dealer of heirlooms, but the truth of it isn't nearly so mundane as that.

I'm a thief of magical objects. I've stolen icons from all the cities clinging to the edges of the River Chionthar. My adventures have even taken me to Cormyr and beyond, and yes, I love antiques. The old spell-stuff had such romance to it, such charm. Nowadays, it's different, what with mages by the hundreds flocking into the Heartlands hawking their crude, magical wares. How dull.

"It's true, then?" the merchant asked.

"Perhaps."

He pursed his lips, and I saw the tip of his tongue dart out to wet them. "Look around you," he said. "In this shop, I sell magical teas and balms. These things are drubbed up by the people of the southern range of the Sunset Mountains, and while in the past these elixirs were held in contempt by the elite living in the big cities, that's no longer true. I employ several agents and they travel into the lesser-known places looking for things for me to sell. One of them returned from a trip to the village of Urlok, and he told me about a brew called Spring Tonic. It's so potent that it revitalizes a man and takes him back to the spring of his youth." "I've not heard of it, nor have I heard of Urlok."

"I can supply you with a map."

"Traveling the Sunset Mountains in unfamiliar territory can be dangerous. Zhentarim, you know. Red Cloaks. Monsters, too."

Bareen Tykar shook his head. "Yes, yes, I understand. Your commission will reflect the added cost of danger. Are you willing to try?"

"Tell me more about the Spring Tonic first."

"Apparently, this brew is drawn from a hidden pool. The people of the Sunsets have kept the location of this spring a secret, as much a secret as the spell employed to create the tonic. My colleague is sure it's the reason for the health and vitality of the people in Urlok."

"Why doesn't your associate just go into the mountains and buy it for you?"

"We've tried this, but Jig Elbari, the dwarf who blends it, is unwilling to sell it."

"So you want me to steal it?"

"That's right."

I always take a moment to prime the client by pretending to be wary of him and his request. Folks expect thieves to be suspicious. It's part of the little dance we do to get a better price for our services and silence. I've found it is also a good way to drive the bargaining my direction.

He turned to pour a cup of tea from a free-standing samovar, finally filling in the quiet between us. "All right. I'll make it worth your time and risk. If you find the Spring Tonic, I'll triple your fee. That should salt the soup a bit, don't you think?"

Two days later, my black war-horse, Stealth, and I traveled a narrow trail through the southern range of the Sunset Mountains on this mission for Bareen Tykar. The path was barely visible, blanketed with autumn leaves, moist from the silky mist curling low about my horse's feet. It was a heavy, dark wood we passed through, and dusk was coming on. Night bugs started to peep and twill about me, greeting the evening with a heralding symphony.

I had seen many abandoned dwarf-dug mines along the way. Passing through these places where the hemlock hid the sun, my imagination fed my anxiety. At one point, I thought I heard the echoes of ghostly workers breaking rock with pick and mallet. To make it worse, Bareen Tykar's map did little to point me toward Urlok.

I was entertaining thoughts of camping for the night when Stealth turned a bend and stopped with a snort and a head shake. Just beyond the path, guarded by an outcropping of boulders and a low wall of tangled undergrowth, a large glade opened. I squinted through the trees to see the bobbing light of small, hand-held lanterns. Laying an ear that direction, I heard excited voices and the rattle of armor.

Urging Stealth forward, I used the shadows from the rock altar to hide our cautious advance. I halted to blink several times—a thief's trick to adjust to the contrasts of bright and dark.

Goblins. Sure as I had stolen swords from their kind, I knew the commotion in the grove was caused by goblins. Ugly, stinking, cowardly goblins. Where were the Red Cloaks when you needed them?

Goblins are some of the best highwaymen in the Realms, and they don't care whom they attack. I glanced about, looking for those who might still be concealed in the creepers and vines bordering the path. I even looked overhead, thinking they might drop out of the trees on me at any moment. Except for the ruckus in the glade, all was still. I dismounted.

Clinging to the boulders, I came close enough to count six goblins and one female dwarf. She was trying to keep the group at bay with grunting shouts and a wooden staff. The goblins poked back at her with their swords. One swung a club.

She ducked this attack, jabbing at another with her staff. He fell, and she assured he stayed down by punctuating her parry with a savage kick.

Being that I'm not given to heroics, I'm the first to admit that I thought of turning back down the trail and running away from the problem. I was here to find Spring Tonic, not to save people from nasty, little ravagers. Besides, where there was a goblin, there was sure to be a bugbear or an ogre or two. A shiver jittered through me when I considered the possibility.

Still, leaving a maiden—any maiden—in distress is not a thing I could forgive myself for easily. And as I considered the situation, I realized, too, that frightening the life out of a few of those monsters was a prospect I would enjoy. A plan suddenly figured in my brain as I remembered the light catcher I carried with me.

I'd picked it up while doing a second-story job on the house of a minor lord in Scornubel. The light catcher was a precision item, styled with a spell that allowed it to capture a flame at a hundred paces, even as it created shadows so black that a panther from Chult would have a hard time seeing. Shaped like a tube, it was fashioned from hammered brass and was as thick as an elf's forearm.

I returned to my horse and quietly unbuckled my saddlebag, doing it by feel as I scanned the darkening forest for lurking ogres. My fingers found the light catcher and I hurried back to the rocks again.

The receded daylight became my ally as I padded closer to the fray. I could see the goblins taunting the dwarf, and their game made them oblivious to my approach.

Stopping beneath the drooping overhang of a willowy tree, I aimed the tube and murmured the simple incantation that freed the magic. Instantly, the lanterns lost their charges and the glade was thrown into utter blackness. The goblins screeched in unison. I moved quickly, my own eyes barely adjusting to the darkness before I contacted the jaw of my first goblin. He screamed out and when he did, I brought the end of the light catcher toward the noise to bang him full in the face. My instincts drew me around into a lunge as I felt the breeze of an arcing sword and saw the hint of movement. I tackled another goblin, slamming him into a tree. The others dashed from the glade, barreling down the slippery path.

I may not be much for heroics, but I do like a good brawl, especially when I know I can come out the winner.

I spoke the light catcher incantation backward and those lanterns left behind flickered to flame, forcing the shadows to recede. I bent to pick up a lamp, glancing at the terrified dwarf still wielding her staff.

"I won't hurt you," I husked. "I'm not a killer."

She stared at me for several heartbeats. I noticed that she had a beard as blond as mine, and I couldn't contain a small smile. I tried to cover it by whistling for Stealth.

"I'm obliged to you, sir," the dwarf said, lowering her weapon. "If you hadn't come along, I'd be dead now."

"You're welcome," I answered.

"What might I do to make us even?"

"You can tell me if there are any inns nearby. I don't want to camp in the woods tonight with goblins about."

She nodded and pointed up the path. "The village of Urlok has an inn. It lies a league or so up the trail, but it's hard to find, being hidden in a deep hollow. I'll show you."

I nodded and, catching Stealth's reins, fell in beside her. We walked a while in silence before I thought to ask her about the dwarf, Jig Elbari.

"I've heard of him," she said. "He's a secretive old man, though. A hermit."

"I understand he has some old spell-stuff."

"Yes, that he does. He brews up tinctures and elixirs for folks. Used to be a doctor for one of the mines hereabouts, so I guess he's knowledgeable in the ancient ways."

"Do you know about his Spring Tonic?"

She laughed. "Everyone in these parts knows of it." She paused to consider me with a long look. "You're not from here, so you must be an agent for one of those lowland merchants. They keep irritating the blazes out of us!"

It was late the next day when I found the deep ravine that the innkeeper at Urlok said would lead me to Shimmer Hollow, where Jig Elbari lived. I reined in Stealth to consider the fern- and lichen-covered corridor ahead. The trees had closed in around me and the sun was at a long slant. In the distance, I heard thunder.

Such isolated, gray places give me the jumps. As a youngster, I'd heard stories about how these areas should be avoided. In reality, I know it was just a way to keep a mountain boy obedient and safe, but I couldn't shake the uncertainty that these wilderness alleys led to holes entering the Underdark.

A moment's thought of turning back had me brace my legs against Stealth's sides. He snorted and pawed the mossy ground, as if chiding me for my cowardice. Yet, common sense told me that those in Urlok may have lied about the route to Elbari's homestead. They hadn't willingly given up directions to Bareaen Tykar's agent—that was why I was here. Though the dwarf I had saved from the goblin pack had made a sound plea to the innkeeper to help me, I couldn't be sure he had.

Pulling a deep breath, I tapped Stealth's reins and we moved forward into the trench.

It was cool inside this furrow, almost cold, but despite the chill, sweat beaded on my forehead, seemingly stealing the moisture from my mouth. The tiny sounds of the forest closed in around me and with each whistle and burble, my stomach clutched tighter. The thunder grew closer.

Stealth's hooves struck through a stream bubbling through the ravine. The water sang softly, filling in the background noise and mellowing my anxiety. I concentrated upon the sound, but still kept an eye out for such horrors as might hide in this place. An hour passed before I could take another good breath.

The innkeeper said there would be a house at the end of this little canyon. When the ravine opened up, I did find the house—a shack really, all broken stones and rotten wood. I believe the most protection the owner had from the elements was given by the surrounding trees. They formed a high, thick canopy overhead. Still, the land was muddy and wet, and Stealth slipped twice as I guided him down the steep trail leading to the homestead.

"Hello?" I called. "Anybody about? Hello?"

The breeze ruffled through the hollow, but no voice overlaid its current. I nudged Stealth forward, deciding to follow the stream onward past the dilapidated barn.

In the years spent roaming the Sunset Mountains, I've come across many such hovels. There was a time in my early youth when I would charge into these places hoping to find treasure, but I mostly found the wrong side of a protection spell. I learned that trying to enter such homes uninvited was just too much trouble.

The ravine resumed and the huge ferns closed down the wan light again. My horse was forced to move slowly, the noise from his steps gentled by the water where he strode. After a while, the stream fed into a quiet pool. There, surrounded by a legion of glass bottles, an old dwarf hunched over the water's edge.

My approach startled him. He reared back, losing the conical-shaped brown hat he wore. It dropped into the pool and floated there like a parchment boat, the sail shot through with holes.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Arek Adar. Are you Jig Elbari?"

He nodded.

"I've come seeking your wisdom for my grandmother. Her eyesight is failing."

He stared at me for a long moment. Abruptly he began to laugh, punctuating his guffaws with squeaks and whistles.

"Come seeking my wisdom? A human? I doubt that. Tell me the truth. What do you want from me?"

"I can pay."

"Of course you can, young man." He dipped back down toward the pool to retrieve his hat. Plopping it on his head, he considered me with hard, dark eyes. "You one of those merchant-fellows from the lowland?"

A thief can sniff a mark from ten paces off, and with Jig Elbari, I knew he was a perfect setup right away. Maybe he was bored or lonely. Whatever. It didn't matter. He was already playing the game.

He didn't wait for a reply. "Well, if you have the money, I have the tincture. Coming out this way says a lot about your courage. See any ogres or trolls as you came through the fissure back there?"

"No, sir," I answered, feeling the hair rise on the back of my neck.

"On the return, you probably will." He cackled again.

I watched as he filled each bottle with the pool's clear liquid. "You know about Spring Tonic?" he asked, after a bit.

"I've not heard of it," I said casually.

"It's right expensive, but the price is worth it. One flask can make a man young again. It's the water, you know. There isn't much of a spell spliced to the tonic, but most folks seem to think the words are what gives it the power. It's nonsense." Jig grinned and pulled at his hair. "You've got to bottle the water during the night of a blue moon, and only once a year does Selune go full twice in the same month. We'll see it again during Midwinter, but not until."

"Still for all that, I can't see why the tonic would be expensive. You could have several bottles of it stocked away."

"I do, but it's not that easy," he answered. "The elixir has to age. You take it before it strengthens up all the way, which is about fifty years, and nothing will happen. Besides, not only do you have to mix it on the night of a blue moon, you've got to drink it during one, as well."

"How can you tell if you have an aged bottle?"

He laughed. "You can't. That's the whole trouble, don't you see? Most people want assurances. They just plain don't trust me when I say it's the good stuff."

"I suppose you have a bottle that's properly aged?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, I do. Are you a decent judge of moral character, young man? Do you trust me to be fair and honest? Would you be interested in buying my Spring Tonic?"

"I might."

"Then follow me to the house, and we'll talk about it." He scooped up his jars and clinked on by me, disappearing into the fern hedge.

I rode in behind him, and he invited me into his hovel without another thought to it.

A small bit of light came from a miner's lamp sitting on the board of a dry sink, but it was still a gray, little place inside, decorated with tattered chairs and two crooked wooden tables. Every available square inch and flat plane in the room was covered by a bottle. The containers were everywhere, glinting and sparkling in the lantern's shine. Elbari dumped his new load into the seat of a lumpy recliner.

"Is all this made from the pool?" I asked.

"Yes. Blended with different mountain herbs and the water is good for whatever ails you." He led me to the smallest of the rickety tables and picked through the bottles. Finding what he sought, he handed one to me. "This is some of the elixir. That's the only potent brew I have now."

"How much does it cost?"

"A single bottle is thirty thousand tricrowns."

No wonder Baren Tykar wanted me to steal it. "Are you mad? That's outrageous!"

"I told you it was expensive. Is your grandmother worth it to you? With Spring Tonic, she'll get back her sight and her youth."

"I can't afford it."

"And you can't be sure it will work," he said.

"If it's the real thing, then why don't you take it yourself?" I asked.

"I'm not interested in being young again. Once around in this life is enough for me. I'd rather have the money." Rubbing his long, crusty beard, he cast a look across the room. "Well, it was worth a try, anyway. We can at least help your grandmother get back her sight. She'll need some rootwart balm enhanced with a brightening spell."

He stepped toward the dry sink, and I saw my opportunity.

Most thieves carry the mundane things of the trade—lockpicks and glass cutters. Some also use whatever enchanted items they can lay their hands on—things like magical pouches complete with spells to shrink large objects for easy transport. Yet, with all that, the one thing a good thief depends upon is natural-born ability. In the years that skulduggery has earned me a living, I've always

found my talent for sleight-of-hand the most useful. With the dwarf looking away from his precious bottle of Spring Tonic, I found my chance to nip the goods.

I made a small movement, turning a bit to the side to hinder the dwarf's full view of the table. Scraping the bottle against the wood, I pretended to return it to its square inch. In the few seconds it took, I gently fingered a neighboring container closer to the relinquished space and slid the Spring Tonic into the inside hem of my cape sleeve.

Elbari moved to search the other table. "Yes, here it is," he said, turning back to face me. "For five pieces of gold, your grandmother will get her eyesight back. She'll need to use the balm three times daily."

"I'll see that she does." I answered with a smile.

After visiting Jig Elbari, I knew one thing for certain: Bareen Tykar was a liar and skinflint. He could have bought the tonic for the right price, but instead thought to steal it. I can't fault a man for resorting to these tactics. If they didn't, I wouldn't be in business. Still, such people give me concern when they're not up front with their motives.

I stood in the center of his shop, and took my weight low in the legs in case I needed to spring toward the door. Bareen Tykar licked his lips and looked at his two associates. They were moon elves, and in their silver-tinged beauty they appeared like stone statues waiting to be freed by some wizard's spell. Stationed to either side of the old merchant, each elf leaned on a glittering scimitar, the point of which ground into the wooden floor. To crystalize the scene, a hundred candles sparkled on the shelves behind the counter. The effect was beautiful, but my wariness didn't allow me to enjoy it.

"You have the elixir?" Bareen Tykar demanded.

"Do you have my commission?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Show it to me."

"After I see the goods."

"No."

He snapped his fingers and the two elven statues animated. They raised their weapons, approaching. "Search him," their master ordered.

I slowly retreated, meeting their advance by unsheathing my hunting knife I could feel the taut pull of my riding leathers along the inner sides of my thighs, and I took a heartbeat to wonder what tricks I had buried in my boots. The elves were on me before I could remember.

I sliced at one, but my blade fell wide of its mark, cutting empty air and enraging the fellow. He smacked me in the face with the flat of his hand and pain shot through to my ears. I growled, kicking his partner in the stomach. He buckled for an instant, recovering with a snarl of his own. Backpedaling, I tried for the door, but they wedged me against the wall, instead. I was pinned there while they searched me for their elixir.

"He doesn't have it on him," one elf said.

"Where are you hiding it?" Bareen Tykar asked.

"The bond is broken between us, Merchant," I barked. "You won't get it from me. Send one of your thugs back to the mountains to find it for you "

"You were going to take my money and run."

With that, I received a slap to the head, and the room spun.

"One more chance," Bareen Tykar said. "Where is it?"

Spitting blood, I cursed him. "To Shar with you! May the Lady of Loss dog your every step!"

My answer only made matters worse. "See that he doesn't steal again for a long while," Bareen Tykar ordered.

I squirmed against the strong arms pinning me down. My knife was gone, snatched from my grip, and my legs were wound up with those of my assailants. One elf grabbed my hand. Before I could react, before I could untangle myself, he yanked on my wrist and twisted hard. Stabbing agony ran up my arm, and I screamed out. They tossed me into the empty street, shutting the door on my cries.

I lay in the gutter staring up at the heavens. For how long, I can't say. A street sweeper brushed by, ignoring me, intent on his evening duties. All the while the pain in my broken hand grew, and with it, my rage. Finally I rolled to a stand and returned to the carved door of Bareen Tykar's shop. Glancing in the window, I saw that it was dark and empty inside, the old merchant and his bodyguards gone out some back way.

Reaching my good hand out, I felt in the darkness for the intersection of the twisted wood design of the door. Gouging my fingers into the deep recess, I pulled out the small bottle of Spring Tonic I had hidden there.

Revenge smudges the sensibilities. Nothing matters except getting even, and as far as I was concerned, I would hurt Bareen Tykar. He would suffer a thousand times for what he did to me.

My hand had been mangled. The cleric with all his healing magic wasn't sure I'd ever get full use of it again. I was lucky to have a storehouse of goods to sell, so while I tried to recover my mobility, I could at least earn a living. After hearing the prognosis, I returned to my lair in the Sunset Mountains.

The moon courted me as I rode toward the wall of shrubs and boulders hiding the entrance to my retreat. A stream-fed waterfall spilled over the granite face of the mountain's upper brow, and I angled toward its gentle sound.

Stealth stepped into the wide groove formed by several huge rocks and stopped when he neared the lair's door. I paused in dismounting to breathe in the cold, fresh air, filling my lungs and reviving my spirit as no spell-slicked Spring Tonic could. My horse nickered, seeming to agree. Grunting when the wrappings on my hand snagged on a saddle buckle, I slipped off, slapping Stealth gently on the rump. He made for the overhang of his stone barn.

My lodge was situated in a deep cave on the ridge overlooking Oak Island, a spit of land breaching into a high, wide lake. Here, in snacks and shanties, were the remains of the village where I grew up. I returned here often, though the mountaintop had long turned toward ghosts and memories. The people were all gone, my family included, trading the freedom of alpine life for a living in the lowlands.

A rock slab set on a swinging pinion served as the door to the lair. Tipping back the recessed handle, I entered, immediately comforted by familiar surroundings.

I lit the lantern on the shelf by the door, tapping the stone portal closed with my shoulder. My mood brightened as the flame glow picked up the wondrous things I had stored in my burrow. I moved into the room, and as always, lingered to touch these ancient magical objects. Many had been created in the Heartlands and many had come to the Sunset Mountains by the old trading routes.

I'd stolen artifacts from peasants and aristocrats, alike. The gentry had rare, fanciful items that I loved and used to adorn my home, collectibles such as the banquet board cut from northern wood and fashioned in the Year of the High-mantle, when Azoun IV took the throne of Cormyr. It was rubbed to an exquisite luster by some craftsman of long ago, and the spell, too, was laid on like silk. Three short, lyrical words pronounced while standing at the long end of the table made the magic come together and the finest, tastiest foods appear.

Such classic antiques were in great demand, but high in price. The merchant class of the Heartlands couldn't yet afford them, so they settled on buying those more homespun objects I collect from the peasants. Their particular fancies were spell-sewn quilts that kept a person warm on the chilliest days, and cinnabar leaves once grown in the long-dead city of Shoon and used by their magicians to conjure feng shui-good luck.

I flamed up another lantern and flooded the cave with soft, orange light. There was one item here for which I had come specifically. Opening the top drawer of my storage chest, I unwrapped the delicate packing paper surrounding my favorite possession. I carefully removed it from its parchment nest, lifting out the ancient, hand-sewn shawl.

Spun through with gold and platinum, and strung with tiny bronze beads, it was shaped like an arrowhead, lacking fringe or ruffle-edging to mar the simplicity of its lines. The weaving's antiquity and worth? Beyond comprehension.

I stole it and the incantation from a mountain wizard who used the shawl to capture his enemies. With a little ingenuity, it was possible to trap a person's life-force in the very fibers of the weaving. When I claimed the shawl as my own, I discovered that it had imprisoned many people already. By reversing the spell, I released them whole and complete. They went away thankful for their freedom and the chance to retaliate against the man who had done them wrong. Emptied, the cloak was packed away, though I knew that one day I would have an opportunity to try its magic on someone like Baren Tykar.

Thieves can be masters of disguise. It helps to deflect the possibility of being recognized when out and about on business, and I, for one, take such things seriously. I move around too much in the towns and cities of the Heartlands to risk being recognized by my many enemies.

This night I walked through Kendil wearing coarse, brown linen. My long blond hair and tight beard were stained dark. I had added the tracks of a false scar along my cheek and an eye patch to balance the look. Sporting a limp, I hoped to distract attention from the filthy bindings wrapping my bad hand.

I entered Baren Tykar's shop just before closing time, waiting silently by the door until he'd finished with a customer. The old man stared at me, and it looked as though he was going to summon his thugs.

Lowering my voice and wheezing a little, I spoke before he could call them. "You're the owner of this store?"

"Aye. So?"

"I just came to town and there be people here who tell me you like to buy old things."

"Who said that?"

"Some moon elf over at the inn. He was into his cups, but I thought I'd check it out. The year's been hard and funds are down. I'm selling off my personals, you see."

He stared at me-silent, calculating, distrustful. After a moment, his curiosity won over his caution. "What do you have?"

I shuffled up to the counter and grinned, making sure I breathed on him as I leaned close. The smell of onions and brown bread made him flinch. "What I have is a shawl," I said in a conspiratorial tone. "Struck through with powerful mountain magic."

"Let me see it," he said.

I opened my carry sack and gently pulled out the shawl, spreading it on his stone counter. The weaving glistened in the shop's candlelight. Bareen Tykar's eyes grew wide for a moment, then, as if he remembered his bargaining stance, he pasted on a bland expression.

"What does it do?" he asked.

"It'll mint you coins' gold and silver and platinum and copper."

His mouth came open a bit on those words, but after a sputtering inhale, he shook his head. "I've never heard of such a thing as this shawl. It's a fake."

"No, it's not. See these filaments in the weaving itself? Look how bright they are with the metals. It's through these fibers that the magic works to make the coins. I can't do much with it anymore, though."

"Why?"

"With each speaking of the incantation, the shawl's power wanes. It'll give up only so much gold, silver, and platinum per owner. I've used my turn, you see, and all I get now are copper pieces and not many of them."

He leaned in again and touched the shawl lightly. "You say this shawl is old? How old and from where does it come?"

"It belonged to a dwarf living in the Sunset Mountains and was made before the first Orcgate Wars in Thay."

"That old, then, is it?" Bareen Tykar asked. "Do you have letters of authenticity?"

I laughed. "From a dwarf? Are you mad?" I smoothed my chuckling into a glaring frown.

He snorted and crossed his arms, propping them on his huge stomach. "I'll require a demonstration. If copper is all you can make, then do it so I can see if this shawl really does what you say."

I counted to ten before nodding. Straightening. I took the shawl from the counter and placed it over my shoulders. It was a gossamer delight, so soft and billowy. How it sparkled against my linen shirt. I twisted slightly to pick up the candlelight as I slowly wrapped myself in it. The man's nostrils flared in response.

Being the careful man I am, I'd spent time planning out this encounter. I made a small, leather bag, designing it so it would easily fall open after pulling a slender, almost invisible thread attached to the clasp. This delicate task took me days with my bad hand, but in the end it worked well. I could place several coins inside it and by regulating the tension on the string, I could dump a few at a time. Before coming to Bareen Tykar's shop, I had slung the pouch over my shoulder and packed it beneath my coat.

Standing in the middle of the room, I muttered a useless incantation and released the copper pieces. Three fell clear and rolled across the floor.

The old merchant frowned. "Do it again," he said.

I repeated the motions and the nonsense words, dropping the rest of the contents from my bag. It looked good, like the shawl actually worked.

"I'll try it now," he said. "Give it to me."

I did as he commanded, watching him as he fitted the cloak around his body.

"What are the words I need to speak to make gold?" he demanded.

Digging into my britches pocket, I pulled out a small tear of parchment. I had written down the incantation that triggered the shawl's real power. "Can you read?"

His response was to grab the paper and whisper the ancient words to the spell.

The shawl began to shimmer. From where I stood, I could feel the warmth coming off it as the magic surrounded him. In the candle glow, I saw a distinct, woven texture forming on the skin of this encasing bubble. It sparkled and glittered. At one point I had to glance away from the brightness. A minute passed and it was, then, too late for the merchant to escape without my help.

He realized he was trapped. His growing panic fed the constricting power of the cloak and he began to beg for mercy, but the shell around him muffled his voice. I watched as the tears of anguish rolled down his fat cheeks, then finally, he squeezed his hands against his temples and opened his mouth to scream. Before he could, the shawl captured him.

He disappeared in sparks and glitter, the cloak falling to the floor with a soft flutter. I picked it up and felt the heaviness as the man's very being settled into the threads. Throwing it about my shoulders, I sagged beneath this weight, but after another moment slid by, the weaving grew delicate and silky again. Turning a slow circle, I smiled, then laughed. Such sweet revenge!

Bareen Tykar will remain in this filament prison for years, aware, yet helpless. It's only after I've grown old and think I've seen my last blue moon that I'll finally release him. When I do, I'll make him watch as I drink his precious Spring Tonic.

