

# One

## *Best-Laid Plans*

A caged rat should have no worries, or so Carrol thought looking down upon his captive. He'd hoped the stench of the dumpster would be comforting, but the bar music pounding through the brick wall put the critter on edge.

"It's beyond your control now," he assured it. The skittery thing jumped at his voice. He wanted it to understand, so he pulled out his phone and typed "Translate English to Rat." The results were useless so he changed the search. Probably, it was a Norway rat.

"Snart blir du en helt," he read in clumsy Norwegian. *Soon you will be a hero.* He bowed his head a moment then covered the cage with a slab of stained cardboard and wandered up the alley toward the entrance of the Buckin' Bronco Saloon.

By offering to buy drinks, he'd lured Leonard Wilson out to help with the ritual. They were supposed to meet at 10:00 p.m. sharp, but Wilson would be late. So, he'd go in first to find a place to sit and the raucous Friday night crowd would grind him up like sausage. For reassurance, he pressed a hand against the warm bundle in his shirt pocket. Everything would be fine now that he had the talisman. After all his diligence and dead ends, his miracle was finally within grasp.

At the glass door, he paused, seeing his reflection. His dark hair spewed to one side in a corkscrewing mess. He tried drubbing it into submission but a group approached from inside. With a grimace, he ducked away and leaned against the grimy brick wall, playing it cool.

Two young couples spilled out of the bar, laughing. The odors of beer and stale popcorn flowed in their wake, along with wild, twanging music. When the door closed, muffling the clamor, they paused. One woman bit her lip. Her mousey-blonde hair looked dirty. She seemed familiar, so he nodded. The other girl snorted.

A guy sauntered up, extending his hand. "Hey, how ya doin'?"

Reflexively, Carrol grinned and reached to shake but the guy jerked back and stumbled away, slapping his head like he'd lost his mind. Both men guffawed and ambled off. Catching up to her boyfriend, snorting gal said, "You know who that is? He's the guy who ...." Carrol missed the rest but could guess how it ended. Slappy guy draped an arm around mousey girl, but she looked back, flashing a sad, thin smile.

He pressed his outstretched hand against the talisman again. Nothing new, being treated like a crackpot. He could take it, though. Everything he did was for them. Maybe tonight they would finally see.

Steeling himself, he entered and started shoving through the crowd, scanning for open seats. On his second circuit, two women vacated bar stools and he dove, earning twin glares. With an apologetic grin, he shuffled out of his beat-up leather jacket and spread it over one stool. Climbing onto the other, he ordered a double bourbon to strengthen his resolve.

Waiting on Wilson, he pulled out his phone again to scan his open webpages. Seven Modern Miracles ... Holy Magic Cloth ... Channeling Your Inner Djinn ... Spiritually Empowered Magic Ring ... Amulets of the Ancient Magians. Most of what sounded good in searches ended up being for video games. He didn't mind though. Games like that might leave people more open to believing in miracles in real life, and that made his crusade easier. Anyway, he could spot truth from fiction with his eyes closed.

He reached the page he wanted and jabbed the image so it filled the screen. A sketchy ink drawing on worn papyrus showed a figure on a distant ridge, arms outstretched. Above, a small object floated, crowned in swirling rays. In the foreground, the earth split, swallowing screaming soldiers with swords and shields. A caption superimposed over the image read, "Effectuation of Primal Prayer Talisman."

Feeling the warmth in his shirt pocket, he smiled. When he performed the miracle, there would be no death. Only rejoicing.

He savored a sip of rich, smokey bourbon, rolling it around his mouth until a hand slapped his back and he coughed, nearly spewing across the bar.

"Carrol, buddy!" Leonard Wilson yelled in his ear, climbing onto the adjacent stool. "Long time no beer!"

Carrol grimaced at his jacket, now pressed between Wilson's ass and the stool. "Hey. Thanks for coming."

"No problemo!" Wilson flagged down the bartender and ordered a beer. His thinning, ruffled hair made him look like he'd just woken up. Maybe he had. Carrol liked him, in part, because he was so unassuming. A smallish guy with a slight paunch who always wore a tired jean jacket with frayed elbows. It suited him. He flashed Carrol a grin. Deep crow's feet tempered the lines on his face.

Wilson didn't understand the crusade, but he'd be good company for the ritual. The talisman wouldn't be dangerous. Probably. If things did get out of hand ... well, Wilson was about the most grounded person he knew.

A smear on Carrol's glasses cast a haze over him, like a pale, cloudy aura. Removing them to wipe the lens with a napkin, he asked, "So how you been, man?"

They'd met last year. Laid off from the foundry, Wilson took a summer job at the elementary school where Carrol was lead custodian. Together, they'd scraped gum from desks and chairs,

and stripped and waxed floors. When orders built up at the foundry, Wilson returned to his old job.

While downing his beer, he told Carrol what'd he'd been up to since they'd last gone drinking, which wasn't much. Like always, he joked around without sharing anything too personal. Listening, Carrol wondered if they got along because they were both misfits and loners. Wilson would disagree. He did have a serious girlfriend once.

By the time Wilson's third pint arrived, he'd seemingly run out of things to say. Tight-lipped, he rubbed a thumb down the side of his glass, clearing a streak of condensation. He tilted his head and turned the glass to study his work then cleared another streak. And another. Sensing his opening, Carrol queued up his speech.

"Leonard—" he began, but Wilson interrupted.

"So, Carrol, I want to ask you something 'cause you're the only one I know who won't laugh."

"Ah, ok. What?" He didn't mind the diversion. People practically never asked his opinion. About anything.

"Well ... you ever feel like you're missin' something? Like maybe there's something really important you're supposed to do. Comin' fast, like a train down a tunnel. You gotta figure it out quick. Only, maybe it already passed, on a different track. Maybe it's already gone?" Cradling his hands, he pressed his lips against his thumbs.

"Yeah. Sure." Carrol scratched his chin. "I hear you. Like Destiny is stalking you, breathing down your neck, waiting to see if you're smart enough to figure it out. Only you got absolutely no clue. You're clueless!"

"Right." Wilson nodded. "Yeah, that's it. I'm tellin' you, Carrol, time's short, ain't it?" He turned his glass on the bar, clockwise then back, as if picking a combination lock. "I should scoot. I'm feelin' it and I, uh, gotta do brain surgery in an hour."

"No, no!" Carrol nervously spun his own glass, face puckered. "Listen. Leonard. This is perfect, 'cause I kind of have something big going on right now—"

"Oh, crap! I knew free drinks was t' good to be free. You want me to fight for truth and justice and girly ways." His words were starting to slur.

Carrol frowned. "Girly ways?"

"Which girly? Wavin' at *me*?"

"No. Never mind." He turned away. The bartender, looking weary, was serving raucous customers while a glaring waiter thumped his fist rhythmically on the bar. When he looked back, Wilson was draining his beer.

"Listen, man, it's not for truth and justice. It's a crusade to unite and advance humanity."

"Same difference," Wilson huffed.

He let it go. There was no point in explaining the crusade again. Wilson didn't need to believe in it; he just needed to come along to the bridge. Emptying his bourbon, he steered the conversation back on track.

"Listen. Leonard. I have kind of an adventure tonight and I was hopin' maybe you'd, you know, help out."

"Pffff! I'm not breakin' into no church with you. And I'm not getting' naked under the full moon or whatever." He fidgeted, rubbing his ass against Carrol's jacket. "Pf. What is it?"

Carrol smiled and pulled the talisman from his shirt pocket. A little smaller than a deck of cards, it was wrapped in an old, stained scrap of cloth. Holding it under the edge of the bar, he gently revealed it.

Wilson slouched for a better view. "Hey, that's cool."

"Yeah, it is. Understatement of the year, bud." Carrol withdrew the talisman to his lap, turning it with admiration. It was a flat jade pendant, covered with intricately carved symbols filled with silver. Each rune stood out on its own, yet the entire design flowed organically. Hypnotically. It bore scrapes and scratches worn smooth from centuries of handling. Through its warmth, Carrol believed he could sense its power. Rewrapping it, he returned it to his pocket.

"So, what is it?" Wilson asked.

"Ancient primal prayer talisman. About 2,500 years old."

"Pffff!" Wilson puffed again. "You said the same thing about that stick you bought online that one time."

"Whatever. That was a stick. This is the real deal."

Wilson tapped his glass with his finger. "Looks better than the stick, like it might be worth real money."

"I guess, man. To a collector or a museum. Somebody who knew what it was. But it's not for sale. It's not going to get locked up in a case somewhere. Know what I mean, bud?"

Wilson squinted. "No. Why not? An' where'd you get it anyway." Leaning in, he whispered, "You steal it?"

"No way! Bought it on online. Just came today. You can buy the world on the web, if you know what to look for. Leonard, half those people are selling stuff they inherited or picked up at some estate sale with no idea what it is! Shoot, this thing was listed as 'Large heavy green glass costume jewelry. OLD.' Can you believe it?"

"Ffooboy. That's crazy."

"Green glass costume jewelry my ass."

Wilson turned to the bottles of liquor lined up at the back of the bar. "You're still buyin', right?"

"Look. I'll buy you a six pack if you listen up. Then come with me to do something really important."

Eyes half-closed, Wilson gave him a sidelong look. "An' here we go. Gimme details or I walk."

"I'm getting to that."

"Am I gonna regret it t'morrow morning?"

The way he'd been drinking, Wilson might not remember much in the morning. Plus, if things went as planned, humanity could benefit immeasurably. Who'd regret that?

"Heck no. Absolutely not."

"Oookay. Twelve pack and you got a deal."

"Cool!" Carrol spat in his hand and reached out.

Fumbling under his seat, Wilson grabbed the jacket sleeve and extended it. "You want somethin' to wipe that on?"

"No, man. No, I don't." Carrol dried his palm on his jeans.

"Ok, so." Wilson dropped the sleeve and scrunched his brow. "You bought a green thingy on the computer that's worth lots of money, but you're not sellin' it."

"Right!" Encouraged, Carrol glanced around for eavesdroppers then leaned closer. "It's a primal prayer talisman. Super rare, man. People say they don't exist, but I've read about 'em in obscure texts and alternate translations on websites and stuff. This is the real thing. Believe me."

Wilson nodded. "Not like the stick?"

"Hell no, man. This probably dates back to ancient Persia, like 500 B.C. Made by a Median Magus in some secret sect. There was crazy shit goin' on then. Coups, imposters, conquerin' armies, you name it. These Magi were supposed to help protect the throne. You follow me?"

"Hocus pocus?"

"No, bud. Magi! Not magicians. You know, religious scholars. Doin' rituals and sacrifices. Raising spirits. Badass stuff like that." He paused as the bartender approached.

"How're you guys holding up?" she asked.

"Great, great," Carrol gushed. "How 'bout you?"

Wilson jumped in. "Hey, we should have a shot of somethin' from a green bottle. Just fer luck."

"Uh, like what?" she asked.

"You pick! Bartender's choice. Carrol wants one too!"

What Carrol wanted was to object, but he resigned himself to going with Wilson's flow. When she left, he continued. "So, like, you got invading armies and different sects of Magi picking sides. Some got power and protection from deities or demons, but that meant super long, complicated rituals. One bunch started thinking there must be a way to call up big power quick, when danger was already at the door."

The bartender returned, saying, "Hope you like 'em!"

"What is it?" Carrol asked.

"Bartender's choice." She winked and left.

Carrol sniffed his glass then clinked Wilson's. His first sip burned but the fire slid down his throat without smoky overtones. He could get to like it.

"Where was I?"

"Um. Crazy shit," Wilson mumbled into his glass.

"Right! They wanted instant power to be ready whenever crazy shit went down. So, they started into heresies and illicit sacraments and finally did a huge, pricey ritual with badass sacrifices to conjure the power. When it flared up, they seized it and bound it to somethin' they could use later. Like a god bomb, just light the fuse. Get it?"

Wilson's eyes narrowed and Carrol realized he actually understood. "You mean that green thingy."

"Bingo. I figure they made enough talismans so they each had one. Some of 'em never got used. A couple hundred years later, Alexander the Great invades Persia and kills tons of Magians. Destroys sanctuaries and stuff. Probably, if the sect that made these was still around, the last of them got wiped out too. If any talismans were left, maybe they got stowed away, but nobody really knew what they were anymore. Eventually they got lost, right?"

Carrol paused to press his hand over the warm talisman in his pocket. "This is one of 'em, though. The real deal. Man, I'll tell you what, this little doohickey's like a hotline straight to the power of God."

"Which god?" Wilson asked with surprising insight considering how much he'd drunk and how fast he'd drunk it.

Peering over the thick frames of his glasses, Carrol felt his eyelid twitch. "Don't matter, bud."

Wilson turned away and started picking at something stuck to the bar in front of him. Eventually, his brow furrowed and he grabbed his drink, gulping the last of it.

Carrol gave him a few moments to stew. Then, leaning in close, he added, "Either way, tonight you and me are gonna use it."

# Two

---

*Ripples of Sin*

Even in her sleep, Miss Joby felt the power of the words as they slipped from his mouth. On a wave of ether, it rolled forth, meddling with destinies and gathering ancient fervor in its wake. Clear of the village, the augury entered her forest, penetrated the rotting walls of her one-room shack to broach her soul. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Me,” she whispered, breathing in the earthy mold of her bedroll. “Not yet?”

How much time had she lost since succumbing to sleep? A week? A month? More. Too much.

The boding that woke her danced on her nerves; its meaning undeniable. Finally, terribly, it proclaimed the Advent.

Since first arriving on pilgrimage with her family, she’d sensed the approaching Advent echoing across time. Ominous and chaotic and humbling, it sang of remorse and inconceivable loss and the potential for unbridled destruction. For countless decades, the premonition buzzed at the fringes of her soul, wearing her mind thin with fear. She was as unprepared as ever. She would fail in her duty to those she’d murdered and, at last, their brooding ghosts would enact their vengeance upon her.

Groaning, she rose. Her frayed wool blanket dropped and she crossed her arms over her gaunt chest. A ghost of her sin would be hovering in a corner. Stalking her, even in her sleep. With a squint into the darkness, she spotted its shimmer, like a film in the corner of her eye.

Ghosts were oozing scabs on the unhealed wounds of Creation. She loathed them. The ghosts of Abdias haunted her to ensure she atoned for her sin, but she knew her duty without their harassment. Impossibly, she must stand alone against the Advent.

A lifetime of being haunted by ghosts had provided ample opportunities to study and experiment on them. Ghosts clung to the past, bound by lost obsessions. They were driven by instinct and mostly lacked free will. Yet, ghosts also bridged the divide between Creation and beyond. Miss Joby had learned to exploit this duality. She could compel them to peer beyond the veil of reality and reveal what they saw. She needed that insight now, but her haunters were ever so wary of her and skittish.

When she stared at this ghost, it shifted under her gaze, revealing its weakness. She would easily banish it to prepare in secrecy.

“Ah well,” she rasped, “must’ve been nothin’.”

Lying down, she drew the blanket back over her body and discretely slipped an arm off the edge of the bedroll. By touch, she found the leather pouch beside her makeshift bed, opened it and slid her fingers inside.

The pouch held a gritty mix of ground bone, salt, dried clay, iron dust, herbs and bat feces. It felt like it sifted through her flesh, and she cringed at its touch. She couldn't remember crafting it, but knew it would banish the ghost. Eventually, the spirit would resurface near its buried remains, but this would take days or months depending on its strength. In the meantime, a different ghost would take its place. Always just one at a time. The rest of the horde avoided her, though occasionally she'd spy one in the woods pondering its lost grave or the ruins of its home.

Fingering the powerful dust, Miss Joby struggled more than usual to stay focused. Shadowed memories tried to seduce her. Murmuring voices implored her to let go. To forsake her impossible duty. To accept the cool embrace of earth and decay. To sleep the eternal sleep.

But no. Not this time. Not now. She needed to expel the ghost. Prepare for its successor. Force that one to reveal what it could of the Advent. Then, form a plan.

"Gone, gone, gone," she whispered, tensing. Then, leaping from her bedroll, she dove across the room and flung the powder at the startled, helpless thing. "BEGONE wretched scab!"

The dumbfounded spirit could not evade her attack. Even the dust that missed curled back in the air as if drawn to a static charge on its skin, encasing it in a shimmering coat. The ghost froze. Then, slowly, dust began falling through as the form beneath dissolved. Initially, only trickles slipped through pin prick holes, but the holes widened and the flow quickened, cascading gently to the floor as the ghost faded.

Its head collapsed last, from back to front, just as its lips began moving desperately. Mouthing words she could not make out.

"What?" she cried. "Wait, scab! What are ye sayin'?" But the lips of the ghost dissolved as the last of the glowing dust settled to the floor, dimming to darkness.

Miss Joby stood tangled in her blanket, shaking. The ghosts never spoke to her. Why now? If the foul thing had a message it should have told her, saving her the trouble of torturing its successor.

"Bah!" She hadn't the time or mental focus to play games. Spitting at the depleted dust on her floor, she shed the blanket to don her deep-pocketed robe.

Though dreading the Advent for decades, she truly didn't know what to expect. Mostly, she sensed aspects of the truth. Whisperings from the fringes of awareness. Destroyer. World Changer. Collapse. Death. Loneliness. Sacrifice. In their own time, the Elders of Abdias obsessed over it. She assumed they meant to stop it, but they never told her what they knew. Then she killed them all. Now, too soon, she needed to understand.

Shuffling to a grimy counter, she lit a candle and pulled supplies from the cupboard below. Everything was where she'd left it. At least she could trust in that. Her cabin never changed, lingering in a perpetual state of rot and decay. She suspected only her will sustained it. When she finally passed, the cabin would collapse. She knew this with such certainty that her death felt more like a memory than a thing to come. In her mind's eye, she saw her corpse lying forgotten on the bedroll while the decrepit cabin crumbled around it, forever burying her tragedy.

It would be an apt ending. She would take her place among the lost souls duped by the Advent's false promise of destiny. Like a distant, glimmering light luring weary travelers, the Advent beckoned through time. For generations, prophets and mystics had come seeking hope and a deeper truth. Yet, upon arrival, they found only a sad sense of something wondrous and foreboding, tauntingly out of reach. Trapped by the lure of the Advent, they then stood by as ripples of destruction devoured their hope.

This pattern repeated through the whorls of history. She knew all the stories. Some she merely sensed; individual heartbreaks from the mists of ancient times. Others, she could practically relive, like the burning of the early forts on the river's edge and, later, the mass drownings in a frigid flood.

She suspected she'd absorbed these tales by working with the bones of the Elders. They'd lived through some of that history, after all. When the survivors of the flood rose from the muck to rebuild Bastion Falls, the Elders formed a new fellowship and withdrew to higher ground downstream. There, they founded the settlement of Abdias. To the villagers by the river, they were known as the Abdias Coven. The lost hope of Abdias now lay buried in the woods engulfing Miss Joby's decrepit cabin. All that remained were its ghosts.

She scowled at the path of her thoughts and forced herself to drop the pouch of bone dust she'd plucked from the cupboard. Even through the leather, the bone tugged at her mind, luring her to the past. Tightening her lips, she turned to the task at hand.

Before her were the elements of her charm: the pouch of bone dust; a length of fine silver wire; a clay jar closed with a cork stopper; a small platter; and a glass bottle of kerosene. Dusting the platter with ground bone, she added a thin film of the kerosene. Lard oil worked better, but she had to make do. With a wince, she pressed the tip of her finger into the mix then drew three slow circles through the gritty liquid, humming broken notes.

As always, the ground bone on her finger whispered of the frailty of dreams. The new bastion of wisdom and enlightenment envisioned by the founders of Abdias. The cabins built by the circle of scholars and students, on land they cleared. The sense of something coming, both terrible and magnificent. The brief period when the people in the woods believed their dreams were within reach. When pilgrims came to them, drawn by the power of that faith. By the power of the Advent. Among them was the family of a girl, Amara. Miss Joby's family.

Standing at the counter, she jerked, trying to pull her finger from the platter, but the power of the Elder's bones held her, forcing her to see her own true memories. Still, she would keep her distance from the pain of her sin and loss. They allowed her that. To see the girl, Amara, as a different person than herself. Someone who could still choose how to live and who to be.

\* \* \*

Amara's family believes in the strength of their daughter's spirit. Through hardship, they journey north to Abdias. She expects to grow in power, becoming a Vodou Mambo perhaps, but feels unwelcome. Not for the color of her skin, but for her ambition.

The Abdias scholars claim to seek enlightenment, not power. They offer to teach young Amara to find her own truth, but she wants more. She thinks they seek to control her.

While her father and brother help build cabins, hoping for their own soon, Amara struggles to find her place. On the cusp of womanhood, she finds none her age but for a homely boy who always watches her. She senses something imminent, just beyond reach, but the scholars keep their secrets. Her anger and resentment build. She scorns the Elders and their deceptions.

One day, others stumble into Abdias, sickly and weak from their journey. The Elders welcome them, promising to teach truths to end their suffering. Their words burn her. Secrets given so freely to strangers but denied her. They will never teach her what she longs to know. In fury, she storms into the woods.

The homely boy follows and she knows. His halting footsteps crush the leaves behind her. This burns her too. The only one attending to her is this thing of a manling. She turns and rushes him. He steps back, eyes wide. She grabs his shirt and jerks him to her, screaming, "What you want?"

"I – " he stammers. This is the first word he has spoken to her. This infuriates her more. She heaves him closer, shaking him.

"I be sick o' you followin' me! Tell me what you want, you ... thing!" Her breath spatters his face.

"I – !" Drawing a breath, he roars and violently lunges forward. She stumbles back, falling beneath him. He starts tearing at her clothes. Garbled words bellow from his bulbous lips. She understands only, "I want YOU!"

She curses him and screams. Fights back. But she is small and thin and he is taken by a wild destructive fervor. She kicks and thrashes and scratches but cannot escape from under his bulk. She knows what is coming. Even as her body struggles, her eyes roll back in her head and she tries to disappear into her soul.

When the unbearable weight lurches off her, she returns to awareness, numb with anger and

pain. Nearby, two figures struggle viscously in the leaves. Her brother on top of the other. Tasting blood in her mouth, she clenches her fists and stands, tugging at the tattered rags of her clothing.

Her brother is strangling the degenerate but his twitching fingers brush a rock. He grabs hold and bashes her brother's skull. As his strong body slumps, she knows her brother is dead. Her lips curl and she begins to growl.

The other crawls from beneath her brother's body. He is gasping, eyes bulging. He turns the body over, feeling it. "My God," he rasps. "My God. I—I think I can fix this. I think I can actually fix this!" A wave of vertigo flows through her and red spittle sprays from her mouth.

He looks up, sees her and pales. Rising to a crouch, he backs off. "No. Lord, no! I never—" He starts wailing, a horrible, keening sound, then turns and runs. Stumbling away from her. Away from Abdias.

Amara's fury erupts like lava from her soul. *They* have all done this to her. *Every* pretentious, self-righteous, contemptible person in Abdias is responsible. This loathsome thing performed the acts but she will have vengeance on them all. The destructive power of her rage seethes and she reaches for it, channeling it. In her extreme anguish and wrath, she reaches for her power and calls ... she calls down a PLAGUE upon them all!

\* \* \*

At the counter in the rotting cabin, the ground bones finally released their hold on Miss Joby, having reached the turning point in her life. From that moment forward, she readily claimed the history as her own.

A deadly plague did consume Abdias, devouring the small community. Surely, young Miss Joby caused it. In fury and arrogance, she delivered it upon the village and even on her own parents. Releasing the curse drained away her anger, giving rise to fear and confusion. Expecting retribution, she'd fled into the woods, enduring for weeks alone. Eventually, she crept back to the silent settlement and its overpowering stench of death.

Others also had fled, hoping to escape the sickness. Of those who remained, only a few had been buried. Some bodies were dragged from cabins in futile attempts to remove or contain the spread, but most lied where they died.

Miss Joby took residence in a one-room cabin, overlooking the rolling meadow and the distant river. Then she buried her family, feet pointing east. Over time she buried the rest of the festering villagers in unmarked graves, further back, at the edge of the woods. As the years turned to decades, the small structures of the village rotted and collapsed and the forest advanced, reabsorbing them.

Upstream, in the growing town of Bastion Falls, the passing of Abdias went mostly unnoticed. New dikes and locks stabilized the river and a railroad brought commerce and people. Yet, even

as the memory of Abdias dimmed, civilization kept its distance. If anyone wandered into the rotting ruins, they did not stay long. Miss Joby knew how to feed their fear. A cemetery took hold in the field below the dark woods and the dead were content to wait.

Miss Joby remained in the decrepit cabin, overlooking the cemetery, the river and the railroad bridge. No one knew because she hid herself well. She existed in isolation, shouldering the burden of Abdias in a tiring fog of confusion.

She sagged. Nearly every time she awoke, something would evoke these memories and they would hold her captive until they'd run out. Like a schoolmarm forcing the same lesson upon her again and again. But if there was a lesson to learn, she never understood. Nothing ever changed.

She glanced at the platter with its kerosene and bone dust. Her finger hung gently in the mix. Lips trembling, she struggled to recall its purpose. The Advent. The coming ghost.

Head bowed, she pulled the cork from the clay jar, releasing a faint odor from the herbal fluids within. Feeding all but one end of the silver wire into the jar, she replaced the cork and shook. Removing the stopper, she wound the dry end of the wire around the thumb of her right hand. The rest she wrapped around and between her fingers working from the index to the little finger and back. When she ran out, she twisted the tail end around her thumb.

Pressing her wired hand into the platter of kerosene and bone dust, she closed her eyes and mumbled a few words. Then, she raised her hand to the candle and lit it ablaze.