

SPELLFALL

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extract from chapter 1

Saturday morning, October 24th

Natalie saw the first spell in the supermarket carpark. It was floating in a puddle near the recycling bins, glimmering bronze and green in the October drizzle. At first she thought it was a leaf, though as she drew closer it began to look more like a crumpled sweet wrapper. A very interesting sweet wrapper. *Pick me up*, it seemed to say, glittering intriguingly. *Surely I'm worth a closer look?*

She shook her head and hurried past. She was wet and cold and had more things to worry about than picking up someone else's litter. But the trap had been baited by one who knew a lot more about spells than she did. Before she knew what she was doing, she'd put down her chinking carrier bags and gone back for it. As her hand closed about the wrapper, a voice behind her whispered, *"Innocent enough to crawl through the Thrallstone."*

Natalie pushed her glasses up her nose and stared round uneasily. Anyone close enough to have spoken was either hurrying to their cars with loaded trolleys or still driving in circles like her stepmother and stepbrother, looking for a space to park.

"Who's there?" she said sharply.

Rain danced on the metal roofs of the bins. No answer.

Skin prickling, Natalie stared across the river meadows at the wooded slopes beyond. The carpark was on the edge of town, and the recycling bins were in the corner furthest from the supermarket. This might have seemed bad planning for an eco-friendly development like Millennium Green, except the original plans showed a housing estate built on the meadows. The official excuse was that the floods would cost too much to divert, but everyone at Natalie's school knew the truth. People didn't want to live in the shadow of Unicorn Wood because it was haunted.

"Tim?" she called more sharply. "Is that you? Stop messing around!"

Still no answer.

She shook her head, feeling foolish. It wasn't likely to be her stepbrother, anyway. He'd stayed in the car so he wouldn't get his new jacket wet, in a deep sulk because his mother had insisted he help with the shopping today, and Tim never liked giving up a moment of his Saturdays to help with anything. It wasn't really Natalie's turn to recycle the bottles. She'd done them last week and the week before that. But when Tim had started on his usual argument - "It's your dad who drunk 'em all, not mine!" - she'd volunteered to avoid the inevitable shouting match.

She looked more closely at the wrapper. It had a warm, waxy feel. Raindrops shimmered on its surface. The colours shifted eerily, like a hologram. She changed her mind about putting it in the nearest bin and instead stuffed it into her anorak pocket, which was where she kept things she didn't want other people to see. The pocket was already occupied by her pet spider Itsy, but one of the advantages of having a spider as a pet was that they didn't take up much space, even in a matchbox, so there was plenty of room for the wrapper.

She retrieved the carrier bags and hurried to the bottle bank. A quick look around to check no one was watching, and she fed the empty beer bottles into the brown hole as rapidly as possible. She was small for her twelve years, so she had to stand on tiptoe to reach. Her hood fell down, her pony tail worked its way out in a silvery froth, and drips from the top of the bin went down her neck, but she didn't pause to cover herself. The crashes echoing inside made her cringe. As always, she imagined everyone in the carpark counting under their breath ...*seventy-six, seventy-seven, seventy-eight...* "Two less than last week, Itsy," she whispered to the spider in relief as the final bottle tinkled to the bottom of the bin.

Her stomach was just beginning to unknot itself when the same voice as before said, "Couldn't read this notice for me, could you, my dear?"

The prickling sensation returned, twice as strong as before. This time a figure was lurking in the shadow of one of the bins, watching her.

An old man, she decided. He leant on a curious stick with its handle carved into the head of a bird. Rain dripped off the brim of a battered trilby hat and darkened the scarf that hid most of his face. Then he took a step towards her and *shimmered* - there was no other word for it. For a moment, the old man grew erect and tall with a hooked nose, flowing black

hair and piercing yellow eyes. While Natalie stared, suspecting the rain on her glasses, he gave her a long, very uncomfortable stare in return. Then he was old again, shuffling forwards, the hat pulled down to hide those strange eyes. "Can't see as well as I used to," he explained.

Natalie relaxed slightly. No doubt he'd been there all along, camouflaged by the bad light and the dark colour of the bin. His hands trembled, and she couldn't help feeling sorry for someone whose eyes were worse than hers. Then she remembered how he must have watched her putting Dad's bottles in the bank and heard her talking to Itsy, and her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

Quickly, she examined the bin he'd been hiding behind. She didn't remember seeing it last week, but the Council were always adding new ones. First it had been bottles, then cans, then paper, then plastic, then clothes. She looked curiously at the new one. At first there didn't seem to be any notice at all, but after a moment she spotted some curly silver letters at the very bottom. As she crouched to see better, the words

SPELL BANK

shimmered into focus. Just that. No instructions, explanations or lists of what should or shouldn't be put into the bin.

Natalie frowned. *Spell bank*? A shiver ran down her spine, before she remembered they sold silver spray-paint at the garage on the corner.

She turned back to the old man. "I can't see a notice, must've come off. Vandals... I'm sorry." She waved vaguely at the graffiti, then wondered why she was apologising.

The stick whipped out, and its handle encircled her elbow. "You can't hide it, you know," hissed the man.

Natalie's stomach fluttered. His voice wasn't quavery any more. It was strong, menacing almost. Maybe he was an undercover security guard? They had them inside, watching for shoplifters. Why not in the carpark, watching for car thieves and vandals?

"It wasn't me," she said quickly.

The man chuckled. "What are you afraid of? That I'll tell on you? You and I are of the same blood, the ancient blood that sees what men do not. That's why I asked you to read the notice for me. It was a test - which you passed, by the way. Most people can't see the spell bank at all."

Natalie blinked. Obviously, he was quite loopy.

"Excuse me," she said firmly, extracting her arm from his stick. "Julie... I mean, my stepmother's waiting for me over there." She pointed to the supermarket doors, which suddenly seemed very far away, and stepped between two cars.

The stick swung round so fast, she barely saw it move. "Careful," said the man, hooking her back by the other elbow. "You'll get yourself run over like that. I'd hate anything to happen to one who shows such promise."

"Let go of me!" Natalie's heart pounded. "I'll scream."

"Just looking out for you. All those windscreens steamed up like they are, people won't see you until it's too late. And you wouldn't want your little familiar to get hurt, would you? What did you call him? Itsy? Can I see him?"

"No!" Which was being rude, she knew. But the way she saw it, the old man had been rude to her first. She made another try for the traffic, only to be tugged back again.

"Tut tut. In such a hurry, and you haven't even asked me about the spell yet. Aren't you curious to know what it can do?" He gave her a little smile that chilled her more than anything he'd said or done so far.

With more difficulty than last time, Natalie disentangled herself. The bird's head handle had a curved beak that dug into her elbow, and its horrible little eyes were bright yellow like its owner's. "Will you leave me *alone*?" she said. "I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"Is that so? I saw you pick it up." His tone hardened. "Let's stop pretending, shall we? I want you to join my spellclave, and you know exactly what I mean, or you wouldn't have been able to see the spell in the first place. I left it there for you as part of the test. And now I want it back." He opened his hand and waggled his fingers.

He means the wrapper, Natalie thought in relief. She felt in her pocket and almost let him have the thing. But something stopped her. Suddenly she was angry with the whole wet, miserable world. With Tim for lying about it being her turn to do the bottles, with Julie for letting him get away with it, with Dad for drinking so much beer, with the rain for ruining the half term holiday. Especially with the crazy old man for scaring her so much.

She set her jaw. "You shouldn't drop litter," she said. "It's your own fault you've lost it, whatever it is. And if you touch me again, I'll tell the police."

He glared at her from under his dripping hat and said in a hard voice, "You'll be sorry you didn't join us willingly. Now give me back my spell!" His stick slammed into the side of the bin, trapping Natalie's pony tail. The clang vibrated through her entire body, stopping her heart.

Before the echoes had died away, she'd dived into the traffic. There wasn't time to look one way, let alone both. Brakes squealed. Drivers blared their horns. Cars swerved. There was a loud CRUNCH behind, followed by the tinkle of breaking glass. "Stupid kid!" someone yelled. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Natalie ran faster, one hand in her pocket to stop Itzy's box from bouncing out. *Don't look back*, she told herself firmly. *Whatever happens, don't look back.*

Natalie does not escape for long! Soon she is a captive of Lord Hawk's spellclave and finds herself in the enchanted world of Earthaven, where unicorns roam and giant trees talk. Read about her adventures in "Spellfall", a book that spans two worlds.