

### The Thundering Migration: Part One

A few ravens peppered the sky, early comers and the first signs of the Thundering Migration. Even after all these years, the first ravens filled David with fear and wonder.

David had seen the Thundering Migration many times before. The first one he could remember was when he was three, but he had vague impressions from infancy. The dull roar of wingbeats, the deafening sound of cawing and screeches, the sky darkening so fast that David thought he may have been blind. The migration lasted a terrifying twenty to thirty minutes. The pilgrimage of mages who came to witness it could last weeks.

Every year, the mages would march in loose clusters, forming a city of tents around David's village. The magic users would congregate together in taverns, inns, and flood the food stands. They wore robes of their various sects, patched with furs, scales, and feathers as symbols of power. The more elaborately dressed and powerful the mages were, the more dangerous they were.

David had grown up seeing them standing in the town square, chanting together with their books open. He didn't like or trust the mages. Magic was suspicious and only used at the cost of great suffering to the rest of the world. People were enthusiastic about the accomplishments of mages, but David's family had experienced their cruelty firsthand. Mages never used spells in the town square, but their reputation made most people steer clear.

Few of the mages would bother staying in town, but the innkeepers were more than happy to take their money. Farmers would sometimes let the mages set wagons up in their fields for the promise of prosperity in the coming harvest. Some people even allowed mages to stay in their homes. The locals shunned those families until the mages left. David's aunt couldn't stand mages and kept David inside as long as they filled the fields around town. Mages were the reason her father was dead and David's aunt wouldn't let a mage set foot on her property again if it was the last thing she did. At the first sign of magic, David was confined within the homestead until the migration ended and the caravans moved on. Then it was back to work until the next migration. Nothing changed until he was seventeen.

Rain had been battering the windows for almost an hour when a knock on the door made David look up from the pool of dishwater. His aunt stood up from the living room, setting her book face down on the table. David wiped his hands and stood close to the wood axe they kept inside while the mages

were in town. Fearing the worst, David's aunt unlocked the door and slowly opened it, peaking through the crack. The door creaked and a rush of cold air made the fire flicker.

"Good evening, ma'am." The girl said, bowing her head. "I hate to intrude, but I'm wondering if you might be able to help?"

"Of course, dear!" David's aunt said, opening the door wider. "Come in, come in! Poor thing out in the cold cause the inns are all full, no doubt!"

"I'm afraid so," The girl said. She couldn't have been much older than David, maybe younger. She had fine hair like corn silk slicked down around her slim, oval face. As she came in, David's aunt took off her dripping coat, revealing a simple brown dress with a belt of beads around her waist. The visitor wrapped her arms around her chest and shivered.

"Come sit by the fire." David's aunt said. "David get this girl a cup of tea."

"You're too kind, ma'am." The girl said. "Alice Grey, at your service."

"Evangeline Haven," David's aunt put a hand on her own chest. "And this is my nephew David."

"A pleasure to meet you both," Alice said, taking her tea from David. She wrapped her long fingers around the mug, eager to retain the warmth as she sipped. "I'm sorry to impose like this—"

"Think nothing of it. The mages fill the whole town every migration! They give us just enough to keep the town going another year, but we can never find the funds for more accommodations. Happens every migration!"

"I hope I'm not imposing." Alice said between sips of warm tea. "I would have kept going, but the rain was making the road difficult to travel."

"You won't go another step tonight!" David's aunt affirmed. "Young girl like you? On her own in the dark? It's not safe!"

"I—"

"I won't hear another word of it!" David's aunt said. "You can stay up in David's room. He can sleep down here by the fire. Is that alright with you, David?"

David could only nod, still struggling to find the words for their night visitor. Alice mumbled her thanks, drinking the tea eagerly. She shivered more and David's aunt shoed the girl upstairs to get her

into some dry clothes. David stayed behind to finish the dishes. David's aunt put a thick blanket on the floor in front of the fireplace, unceremoniously dropping a pillow on top of the pile.

"She's sleeping already," David's aunt said. "Poor thing has been walking for three days, believe it or not. Brave, but a bit foolish. Don't know how she managed to make it this far on luck alone."

"Maybe the storm clouds will dissuade some of the migration watchers. Might have an easier time finding a room tomorrow."

"There's no need for that." David's aunt said. "I'd rather keep her here and out of their reach. That's the last I'll hear of it."

That ended the conversation. David's aunt had gone to bed shortly afterward and David went to sleep once he finished the dishes. David stretched out in front of the dying embers of the fire. He tossed and turned a few times, trying to find a comfortable position on the warm, wooden floor. After a few moments of rolling around, David sat up and went upstairs to find another pillow. He passed by his room and heard whispers. Curious, David pushed his ear to the door.

Alice was moving inside and he could hear muffled words through the thick door. After a moment of muffled speech, there was a strange warmth from the door. David pulled back and touched the door with his hand. The room was drafty at the best of times and the rain would make it worse. Yet, the door was warm to the touch, warmer than his spot downstairs by the fireplace. The light died and David carefully pushed the door open, a slow squeak announcing his presence.

Alice was laying in bed with her back to him. The room was dark, but he was almost sure he'd seen a faint bit of light coming from underneath the doorframe. David hesitated, but closed the door, dismissing the notion as exhaustion. The pillow could wait until morning. Settling in front of the dying cinders, David wrapped himself tightly in his blankets.