

David woke with a streak of sunlight in his eyes. He groaned and sat up, surprised to see Alice already awake and walking around the kitchen barefoot and in her now dry clothing.

“Hope I didn’t wake you...” Alice whispered. “I was trying to be as quiet as possible.”

“Unless you moved the sun, I don’t think I can blame you.”

“Still, I apologize,” Alice said. “I was hoping to surprise you both with breakfast. You’re so kind for taking me in.”

“My aunt reads a lot of folk tales. The stranger at the door is usually a generous spirit or a malicious trickster, neither of which she would want to scorn. I’m sure you’re more than welcome here.”

“Still, I believe in putting in my fair share. Would you mind helping me find my way around the kitchen?”

David walked Alice through the kitchen and pointed out all the storage spaces hidden beneath floorboards and in the walls. Alice was giddy with enthusiasm as the two prepared a simple breakfast together. As Alice cracked eggs and seasoned the bacon, David struggled to get a fire going. On one very hard strike, his fire starter snapped in his hands. “Damn.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” David sighed, examining the two pieces. “Just another expense around here we don’t need. I might have a spare somewhere...”

Alice walked over and examined the fireplace while David searched for a fire starter. After coming up empty in the most likely of the hidden cabinets, David prepared to admit defeat. As he turned around, Alice was already tending a moderately-sized fire.

“There was a tiny little spark in there,” Alice said, grinning at him. “It took a bit of nurturing, but I was able to keep it going until it caught.”

David shrugged and closed up the wall cupboard he was looking in. He could have sworn that the fireplace hadn't caught before his start broke. Still, at least the breakfast wouldn't go to waste.

“Why did you come all this way?” David asked while he and Alice ate. “You didn't get a chance to say.”

“I came for the Thundering Migration,” Alice said, taking a small bite of bacon. “I've heard it goes right over this town in such a high concentration it blocks out the sun.”

“It loses its charm with a large company.”

“You don't care for mages?”

“I'm sure they're fine on their own,” David shook his head, “but put too many of them in one place and you're asking for trouble.”

“You don't trust them? I mean, there are some bad mages, but—“

“Some? Right, I'm sure. There might be some good mages out there somewhere, but I'd rather not risk finding a bad one.”

“What about your aunt?”

“She doesn’t like them either. Mages harassed our family for three generations. They exploited our farm for its proximity to the Thundering Migration. When my grandfather took a stand, they killed him. I think King’s Soldiers got involved, but as far as I know, they’re still out there and my grandfather is in the dirt. That’s why he built all the secret compartments. So he could hide family valuables when the mages came snooping.”

“I’m so sorry that happened,” Alice whispered, putting a hand to her mouth. “I’ve had only good experiences with mages, but I suppose there could be some bad ones out there. You can’t let that shape your experiences with everyone, though.”

“Oh no?” David grinned, poking at his eggs with his bacon. “I’ve heard enough stories to keep my curiosity sated for a while.”

Alice didn’t press any further. “Is there anything I can do? You and your aunt have been so nice, I’d like to repay you.”

“It’s a farm,” David smiled. “I’m sure we can find something to keep you busy.”

Alice turned out to be a good worker, eager to show her value to the strained household. By the time Aunt Evangeline came downstairs, most of David’s chores were already done. As they worked, David caught snippets of Alice humming

while she dusted the tops of the counters and tops of the bookshelves. It was a welcome change from his normally silent chores.

“Many hands make quick work,” David’s Aunt chuckled as the pair finished working around the lower level of the house. “Why don’t you two head into town for some supplies? I know I’d feel more comfortable if you didn’t go anywhere alone.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Alice beamed. “I came here on such a dark and dreary night, I don’t think I could see the village!”

The village center was full of bodies wrapped in fur robes, feathers, and patches of reptilian scales. Alice carried the basket stocked with their supplies. David had managed to barter for spools of thread, knitting needles, fresh spices, and some screws and nails that would hold them over for the migration.

“I should grab a new fire starter,” David said, scratching his chin. “We could get by until the end of the Migration, but a warm breakfast makes the days a little more bearable.”

“Must be exciting,” Alice smiled. “Seeing the Thundering Migration every year? What’s it like? This will be my first.”

“I’ve already seen a few signs,” David said. “Big ravens with dark wings. When the rest of the flock arrives, it’ll start to block out the sky. You’ll think there’s a storm coming, but you start to feel a trembling in your chest as the wingbeats pound against the air around you. Then everything goes dark and all you can hear

are wingbeats and cawing of crows. Some of the birds will dive down to the ground and take a swing at you as they go by. Aunt Evangeline got a bad scratch one year and I almost lost an eye when one got me bad there.” David pointed to a scar over his right eye from where a large, angry raven had struck him.

“Why did it do that?” Alice asked, examining the wound.

“Angry, scared...just plain mean? Aunt Evangeline thinks it was a mage’s doing, but I don’t think they’re that powerful anymore.”

“You’ve never heard of a Mage’s Familiar?”

“Oh, mages come by the bucketloads to try and get one.” David waved a hand. He chuckled and switched to an old, raspy voice he’d heard from the mages gathered in the square. “A raven of the Thundering Migration? That would make a fine addition to my menagerie! Think of what one could learn!”

“You don’t think you can learn from animals?” Alice said.

“I think you can learn as much watching them as you can keeping one,” David said. “Besides, what mages do with their familiars? That’s not learning. Making them fly high to catalog the stars? Or swim too low to try and get a glimpse at the abyss? Familiars are tools to mages, not teachers.”

“There must be—“

“Some good mages, I know,” David said. “And I’m sure there are. All I know is, I’d hate to meet the one who tries to claim a Thunder Raven as a familiar. Power like that isn’t natural.”

A trio of dark-robed mages blocked David and Alice from entering the shop. David tried to sidestep, but the lead mage raised a hand. It would take a show of force to scare the mages off like David had done in years before. Instinctively, David's hand reached for the knife at his side, but Alice stopped him. She stepped forward, bowed her head and the mage touched her brow. The mage was silent for a moment, his lips moving, but the sounds were strictly between him and Alice. Eventually, he turned with his fellows and walked further into town.

“What did he say to you?” David asked.

“Nothing,” Alice shrugged. “A small blessing.”

“You...you understood him?”

“We had a trio of Silents outside of our church at home,” Alice said. “They're barely mages...more like well-wishers. One of the few groups of people I've ever known who give something for nothing—aside from you and your aunt.”

David turned and watched the three robed individuals walking away. He'd never heard of a Silent before, but the calm demeanor of the man in pure black robes that hid their faces made David feel unsafe around them. Still, Alice seemed untouched by their spell and David decided he would keep an eye on her. Aunt Evangeline didn't need to know everything in the market.