

Finding a fire starter proved more difficult than David had first thought. As usual, almost everything was bought by forgetful mages in their grand caravans. In the final shop on the lane, Alice was shoved to the side by a mage as she was looking at candles.

“Excuse me!” Alice chided him, far louder than David would dare speak to such a mage. “It is impolite to push a lady.”

“And?” The mage turned and glared down at her. He was tall with light hair and a square jaw, dressed in long fur robes lined with alligator scales.

“And you should apologize.”

Something about Alice’s presence changed as she spoke. The mage had been sneering, but his expression paled. His lips parted slightly, but David hadn’t seen an involuntary tick from a mage in his entire life. In David’s eyes, that slight part might as well been a scream. “I am...sorry,” the mage stammered. “It—it won’t happen again.”

“Take care that it doesn’t,” Alice said, seeming to be more like her usual, sweet self. “I’d hate for someone to get injured because you weren’t paying attention.”

“I—yes, of course. Excuse me...” the mage lowered his head and rushed passed Alice. David watched the mage scamper off, checking over his shoulder as he walked into the crowd.

“What was that?” David asked. Alice turned and grinned, tucking some of her hair behind her ears.

“You know what they say: A stranger slights a woman only once.”

“Well, yes, but that’s supposed to be more for manners. He looked afraid of you.”

“They say death is in a woman’s stare.” Alice smiled. “I’d show you, but I enjoy your company far more than his. Oh, look! Fire starters!”

Purchasing his fire starter, David and Alice started the slow walk back to the house. David felt like Alice was still herself, but the surprise of the mage in the shop and the trio of Silents had put him off. Still, when he saw a few large shadows in the sky, David pointed them out to her. “A couple firstcomers,” David pointed. “They’ll be more frequent as we get closer to the big migration.”

Days passed as David and Alice prepared for the arrival of the Thundering Migration. Despite David's protests, Alice wanted to watch the Thundering Migration from the farm roof with him. She had also insisted on baking a set of honey cakes special for the occasion, despite how good they smelled.

On the third day Alice was with them, David woke up to the cries of carrion eaters. He rushed upstairs and woke Alice, eager as a child on a holiday morning. His aunt stayed in bed, uninterested in the annual swarm.

David and Alice climbed up to the roof and ate soft honey cakes as the stray birds passed overhead like clouds. Then, David pointed westward. Like a storm cloud, the cloud of birds approached like a wall. Even from here, David could feel the wind from charging birds and the dull roar of their wings as they approached.

“Do you still fear mages, David?”

David turned to Alice. He could only bring himself to lie on her behalf. “You’re not.”

“I am.” Alice looked at David, staring into his eyes. “I have been since I came here.”

“You’re not like them.”

“Why?” Alice said.

“You haven’t let them corrupt you. You aren’t...teeming with power.”

“You think I don’t have power?” Alice snarled, standing. She raised her arms and the black swarm shifted as it approached. The raven flock split apart into two columns of birds, bright sunlight shining down between them. She closed her hands together and the two storms clashed together. Pulling her hands close to her chest, Alice focused as the birds surged forward. David staggered a little and backed away from the coming cloud. Alice thrust her arms up and the birds soared above, like a wave smashing against the shoreline. Throwing her hands down, the cloud of dark-colored birds circled the farm like a cyclone. Alice turned to David and panted as the ravens swirled around them.

“Who are you?” David asked.

“You said that we could learn from animals,” Alice said, looking to the swarm around her. “And that is true. A Mage’s Familiar fuels their magic. I did not lie to you, David. This is the first time I’ve seen the Thundering Migration in your town.

But I've seen it a thousand times from a thousand lives...through the eyes of the Migration herself. A mage who collects familiars like dusty books? He learns nothing. But a mage who lives as part of their familiar? She learns more in a year than other mages do in a thousand. My familiar...my flock? It sees everything. A mage with one of the storm ravens as a familiar? They are powerful...but not as powerful as the mage who has the storm as their familiar!"

Alice raised her hand and the birds swirled upwards taking their place high in the sky above her. As she lowered her hand, the birds resumed their regular flight, heading eastward fast. In all the times he had seen the Thundering Migration, David had never seen a mage command the swarm.

"Your family was hurt, David," Alice knelt by his side, taking his stunned hand in her warm fingers. "But not only by mages. Ignorance wounds your family. You nearly pulled your blade on a trio of Silents. They do nothing but bless others. There are bad mages in the world, but if you call all mages evil, the good ones may not be so willing to help."

"Wh—what are you going to do?" David asked, his voice shaking. Alice reached out and held his neck in one of her long-fingered hands. Slowly, Alice pulled David's head close to hers until their foreheads were touching.

"I'm going to go, David," Alice told him. "But I implore you...do not hate for the past of a few. You can hate the mages responsible—and I swear to you I will

find and punish those who are—but show kindness to mages. We are the magic makers and those who keep the world spinning.”

Alice released him, letting David back away. She stood taller and looked upwards. The last members of her familiar flying lazily behind the Thundering Migration. Alice looked down at David once more.

“Will you ever come back?” David asked. It seemed silly, but all he wanted was to see Alice again. Alice smiled and touched David’s forehead again.

“Look for my coming with the precursor ravens,” Alice whispered and climbed back into the farmhouse. By the time David was able to come back into the house, his room was devoid of any of Alice’s belongings.

Every year since David watched for the coming of ravens. He saw mages, asking them questions and surprising himself with answers. They were magic, but they were still people. His aunt begged him not to talk to the strange visitors anymore, but even her prejudices receded. They would usually host one lone mage like Alice who had forgone the pomp of ceremonial robes and manufactured status. The ones who earned David’s friendship were humble and kind.

Ten years after Alice’s visit, David was sitting on their roof, watching the oncoming swarm. One of the precursors arrived and landed on the roof next to him. It squawked once and David turned to it. The bird opened its claws and dropped a thin cord threaded through what looked like tiny beads. On closer

inspection, David saw they were teeth. Four teeth for four foul mages. In all truth, David didn't care what happened to the rest of those mages.