

## The Worry Witch

Arabeth hadn't meant to turn into a bird, but her body was geared towards the flight reflex.

"Get back down here!" The man yelled. The farmer had come for a cure for his son's fever but balked at the price after Arabeth prepared it for him. She had tried to talk with him about how the prices were set by the True Witch of Tradem. He yelled about how she was a poor replacement and Arabeth felt like someone had shoved knives made of ice into her shoulders. The man continued to yell while she was trying to calm him when her magic surged through her. In a puff of blue smoke, she turned into a bird and flew towards the rafters.

Arabeth couldn't speak and twittered at the man below her, still trying to calm his anger. Furious, the farmer took off his wool cap and swung it up towards the rafters. Arabeth fluttered away with a panicked tweet and up to another part of the store. The man followed her, intent on swatting Arabeth out of the sky. "Make a fool of me? I'll show you!"

"That's enough!"

The man froze and gripped his hat with both hands. Arabeth paused and looked towards the door, her body locked up in fear of the figure standing there. Briar stepped into the room, her presence like a rolling storm cloud. The farmer wrung his hat in his hands, distorting the shape of it into a knotted mess. Briar snatched the hat from his hands with a scowl that made Arabeth's bird blood curdle.

"This is how you treat someone who is helping you?" Briar growled. "You berate them and yell until you get your way? Are you a man or a boy to act in such a way?"

"I...I meant no offense. It's only—"

"There are reasons and there are excuses," Briar snarled. "Choose what you offer wisely."

"I have no excuse," the farmer said, bowing his head. "I haven't slept well with the worry of my boy. Forgive me."

"I will allow a transgression, but I am not the one you need to ask forgiveness from. What do you say, apprentice? Is he forgiven?" Briar inclined her gaze and saw Arabeth in the rafters. Arabeth nodded, twittering a little.

Briar nodded and took a few steps out of the man's way. "Pay and leave...think well about your behavior before you take the privilege of our business again."

The farmer bowed his head before dropping his coins on the counter and running out of the shop. Briar released a deep breath and looked up to the rafters. “Are you alright?”

Arabeth tweeted out an answer but stopped in the middle of her explanation. She took a moment and turned into another puff of smoke that descended to the floor of the witch’s shop. The smoke took shape and turned into the shy-looking apprentice.

“I’m sorry,” Arabeth said. “I didn’t want him to be mad and talk poorly about the store or you.”

“His reaction was understandable, but not acceptable,” Briar said, putting a gentle hand on Arabeth’s shoulder. “Are you safe?”

“Yes,” Arabeth nodded. “Thank you. That was... embarrassing.”

“It’s your magic trying to protect you,” Briar said. “I’ve always told you that your power is incredible, but your control is...”

“Abysmal?”

“I was going to say immature, but it is good to be self-aware.”

“I’m sorry you got stuck with a third-rate apprentice.”

“There is no apology needed,” Briar said. “Though it seems like it would take more than an irate customer to trigger such a response.”

“I got a letter,” Arabeth said, taking the sealed envelope from her apron pocket. “From the Council of Oaks.”

“Ah,” Briar said, “I see. What did they say?”

“I don’t know. I figure it’s still possibly good until I open it.”

“Arabeth...”

“Sorry, humor is my response to try and avoid fear.”

“So you’ve been summoned before the Court of Oaks. I suppose they’ve put some thought into your request for your family?”

“It’s been years. I wanted to keep them safe. I was a child and I was so scared they were going to—”

“Arabeth,” Briar calmly said, “you’re spiraling again. I don’t want you to turn into a bird for the rest of the day. Remember your breathing exercises.”

Arabeth nodded and closed her eyes. She inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her mouth. She took a few more deep breaths and forced her pulse to slow down. After a minute, she opened her eyes again. Briar was already preparing tea and invited Arabeth to a seat at the divination table. Arabeth brushed a few of the casting bones aside and folded her hands around the teacup.

“What happened was an accident,” Briar said. “And you’re not a bumbling child anymore. You’ve been training and learning to control your magic. Yes, you have a few...outbursts now and again. However, you’re not that little girl anymore.”

“But I still react to pressure,” Arabeth said. “I turned into an actual fawn not so long ago and I can barely have a conversation without something happening.”

“Improvement is better than perfection,” Briar said. “And you know that the Council of Oaks wants to help you.”

“I know that in my head, but I get this...feeling that I’ve done something wrong and there’s nothing that can fix it! How many people have turned their families into statues? I wanted them to be safe, but there was the fire and—!”

“Arabeth, calm...” Briar said, setting a cautious hand on her apprentice’s forearm. “You’re safe. They’re safe. We just need to break the curse and the Council of Oaks has been working to do it. This could be good news.”

“It could be bad news.”

“True,” Briar shrugged. “I guess we’ll live in the in-between until you decide. What will be will be until you take action to change it and—if you ask me?—trying beats not knowing.”

Arabeth nodded and took the envelope out of her apron. She could feel the cold grip on her spine as her magic threatened to turn her into an ice sculpture. Arabeth’s hand shook a little, but she steadied her hand with a slow breath, slid a finger under the seal, and broke the wax open.