

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 shooed 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.

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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.

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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 the 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.