

## A Familiar Comes Knocking

The scratching at the door made her pause, but Camille didn't get up from her couch until the crow started pecking at her window. The bird perched on her flower box, tapping at the glass with its obsidian beak so hard that Camille worried it would crack. She rushed to the window hoping to stop the crow before it hurt itself or smashed through her window. She opened the glass pane, letting in a wave of humid, summer air with a chorus of crickets chirping as the bird ruffled its feathers and shook its head.

"If you'd be so kind," the crow squawked, "to let my colleague in through the front door?"

Camille had heard about familiars. At Bridgefolds School of Magic, her enchantments professor had a familiar that he rarely used. The sour iguana slumped over the back of the instructor's high-backed chair. The grumpy lizard only ever spoke when it caught a student cheating on a test and the one time it had bitten a boy for getting too close. The crow's manners and pleasant tone were a far cry from the iguana's curt "That's what you deserve!"

"Of course," Camille said, walking over to the door. "But why didn't your witch simply--?"

As she opened the door, a lithe orange and white tabby cat slipped through the tiniest opening and rushed inside. Shaking itself, the cat freed a few sticks and leaves that had gotten stuck in its coat. "It's gotten all in my fur!" The cat complained, rolling on the floor and getting dirt on Camille's carpet. "The outdoors are all well and good for Fibix, but I am an indoor cat!"

"Fibix?" Camille asked.

"Present!" The crow said, flapping into the room and perching on Camille's lamp. "And this is my associate, Braxton."

Camille kept the door open, but there was no witch to claim either of these animals. Curious, she closed the door and looked back at the two animals as the cat feverishly cleaned himself. Fibix rolled his eye and glared at the feline.

"Forgive his lack of decorum," Fibix said, gesturing to Braxton with a nod of his head. "What he lacks in manners, he makes up for in cleanliness."

"You're both...familiars?" Camille asked. "Where are your masters?"

"That's a bit of a story, I'm afraid," Fibix said. "But first, would you be so kind as to feed two weary travelers? Been some time since we first started on this road and while I have a flexible palette, I do prefer a nice meal now and again."

Camille nodded and went to her fridge. Fibix helped her find some suitable for the two animal companion. By the time they returned, Braxton was rubbing up against the sofa leg with a wide grin. Providing her guests with a plate of deli meats and a dish of water, Camille folded her legs and watched the two familiars carefully. As Fibix ate, Braxton hopped up into Camille's lap and wound himself into a tight ball in her lap.

"Ah, warmth..." Braxton purred, relaxing under Camille's hand. "And a gentle touch...nothing like that bear we found ourselves mixed up with a few days ago! I still have fur that sticks up from when she tried to groom me!"

"It was a sign of affection," Fibix assured him. "The bear had a bit of a crush on old Braxton. Suffice to say, it would ever have worked between them."

"Not to be rude, but where are your witches?" Camille said. "I'm happy to have a guest, but I don't want to keep you from your owners!"

"Well, that's the bad luck of it, I'm afraid," Fibix said. "Braxton and I find ourselves in a bit of trouble. Our witches have been...well, they misplaced us."

"Abandoned!" Braxton perked up, sharp claws digging into Camille's leg. "Left us to rot in the woods!"

"That wasn't the case and you know it!" Fibix said. "Besides it was all Wimble's fault!"

"Who's Wimble?" Camille asked.

"Wimble's the mouse," Fibix said.

"Can we...start from the beginning?" Camille asked. "My name is Camille. I'm a student over at Bridgefolds."

"A pleasure, Camille," Braxton purred flexing and rubbing against her leg. "We are in your debt for relieving us of the not-so-great outdoors."

"We're not abandoned, exactly," Fibix said. "You see there were three of us...and our witches. Florence, my witch, had suggested to Braxton's witch, Willow, that they should expand their circle to a third witch who had just moved to town."

"We're from Grindold," Braxton piped in. "Not a great number of witches that far north, so any that do stay in the area tend to form covens."

"Grindold? I hate to tell you both, but that's at least two days drive! What got you down here in the first place?"

"We were doing the old work," Fibix said. "There used to be a great number of witches with all sorts of familiars. There was a snake, a duck, a couple of cats...that one witch even had an anteater. But, those witches all went and got jobs in other cities...other countries! A great number of them left that part of England entirely, leaving just Flo and Willow to tend to things."

"Brilliant witches on their own," Braxton said, "very talented. Could have charged the leylines and kept the magical forces in all of England flowing alone. And it seemed to be going fine until that damned mouse came!"

"Yes," Fibix sighed, sadly, "obviously, Wimble had reservations about being so close to one of his natural predators. We all took a camping trip together to rebind some old leylines that had drifted too far from their course. Construction in the area had weakened those lines and was disrupting the flow."

"London office was furious about it," Braxton agreed. "Called Willow three times a night until we managed to get down there."

"Bigger spells are easier with more witches," Fibix continued. "And so we brought Maggie along. Fine enough girl, but that mouse didn't trust Braxton or me. So he set against us."

"I don't understand," Camille said. "A mouse forced your witches to get rid of you?"

"Not so," Braxton said. "He tricked me and Fibix away from our witches while they were doing a spell. Familiars are useful for finding leylines and wells of magic, but we can't contribute to those spells. So, we were waiting for the spell to complete and we could all be with our witches again, close to the fire and eating a delicious dinner. Wimble ran off and Fibix and I went after him. It didn't seem safe for the little guy to go off on his own, but I wish a hawk had eaten him, looking back on it."

"He rushed across a branch," Fibix said. "We went to follow and Braxton isn't as light as a mouse, obviously."

"Obviously?" Braxton scoffed. "What's that supposed to mean? Are you saying I'm fat now?"

"You're a spoiled house cat," Fibix squawked with laughter. "There's more rolls on your belly than a dinner table for six."

"About the mouse?" Camille said, soothing Braxton before his claws dug into her leg again.

"Yes," Fibix said. "Anyway, the branch snapped and Braxton went in. And I wasn't about to leave him to the whims of the river, so I flew after him. Eventually, I was lucky enough to find a tree branch: supple, but strong enough, and gave Braxton something to grab. I managed to help get him back to shore, but it was pitch black. By the time we got back to camp? They were all gone with nothing but a pile of ashes marking the campfire."

"We've been trying to find our way home for days," Braxton said. "Fibix has been leading the way, but I've only managed to slow us down. Needless to say, when we happened across the school campus, we needed to find someone who could help."

"Well, summer break starts tomorrow," Camille said. "I'm only here because my flight home isn't until Monday. How many houses did you try?"

"Yours was the first we saw with lights on," Fibix said. "Though there was a very rude chihuahua a few doors down that tried to take a bite at me through the window. Feral, that one..."

"Well," Camille said, "perhaps it's fate then. Do you know the address of your witches?"

"We do!" Braxton said, hopeful. "Will you bring us home?"

"I'd be happy to drive you," Camille said. "I'm afraid I haven't quite gotten to teleportation work in my classes, but I do have a car. We'll leave first thing tomorrow. Do you have a phone number I can call? To let them know you're safe."

"We're not so great with numbers," Fibix said, sheepish. "And sadly, there's very little need for last names between familiars and witches."

"But if you can take us to Grindold," Braxton said. "We can reunite with them! And then I can go back to lounging by the window sill with catnip fish and a belly full of traitor mouse!"

"Oh, stop it," Fibix said. "He's in a bad mood, sorry..."

"Perhaps a good night's sleep indoors will help," Camille said. "By the Witch's Code, what's mine is yours...and that extends to familiars as far as I'm concerned."

"Any chance you have any cream?" Braxton asked, rubbing against Camille's chin. "All that's been getting me through this ordeal is the hope of a nice bowl of cream and it would help me sleep so much better."

"Of course," Camille laughed. "Happy to help."