

Clear Heading

I fled Salem in early May. They had taken my sister and my father, so it was only a matter of time before they took me, too.

I had done my best in the small town, but I could feel the cold gaze of the Puritans turn to me as my father's and my sister's feet dangled loosely above the ground, the morning dew dripping from their toes. Before my family was buried in the ground, I was gone. I took nothing but a photo, a blanket, a hidden brewers' book, and the barn cat, Kiki. He had been my father's familiar before me, and a good witch would be lost without his companion.

That was almost seven months ago, now. I had found an abandoned home out in the woods, far enough away that the Puritans would be too scared to venture out and find me if they really wanted to. Some poor lumberjack likely didn't make it out here on his own. But I was more resourceful than he must have been, and I was a witch, too, after all. My people needed to be trained for any situation because you never knew when the noose would find you next. We were never safe so long as people feared the unknown.

Winter would be here soon, and I had just finished sprinkling a water spell over the potato plants. My store was coming along nicely, and for now, I only had to feed Kiki and myself. The tabby watched me from the window as I finished my work checking the carrots. His long hair shifted slightly in the wind. "It's going to blizzard soon."

"Yeah? How do you know that?" I replied, not looking up at him as he swiftly licked his chest.

"I can smell it." I finally gazed up at him, then turned my attention to the sky.

"Better get the hearth going, then. You go find something to hunt. You're going to need something to eat."

"I already found a mouse sniffing in the storeroom."

"How'd it get in there?"

"Well, Caleb, if you bothered to fix the slat in the corner of the wood, it couldn't have." He retorted before slinking back inside.

"Of all the familiars Dad had to pick, he just had to choose the snarkiest one." I huffed. I placed a quick illusion spell around the borders of my property before stepping inside.

That sort of precaution was necessary while I still suckled off of Puritan land. If they found me living here with plants growing unreasonably well for this time of year, I'd be hung for sure.

I cast a fire spell on the hearth, and Kiki stretched, flexing his front claws in the rug, his fur rippling along his large body as he sprawled out in front of the warm, snapping flames, exposing his pale brown belly.

I glanced outside as I stirred the stew I was making over the stove and saw Kiki had been right. The snow was starting to come down in heaps, the white fluffiness blanketing the forest surrounding the cottage.

Suddenly, Kiki's head shot up in an alert posture in front of the fire. He was looking in all directions. "Kiki? What is it?"

"Someone tripped the protection spell."

"That can't be right. Someone can't possibly be out in this weather. Are you sure it's not a deer?"

"Positive."

Without another thought, I rushed to put on my deerskin coat and thick-lined boots. "Wait, are you going out there?" Kiki padded up to me, looking up with his deep amber eyes.

"That person must be freezing out there. The closest settlement I'm aware of is Salem, and that's a good distance from here."

"But what if it's the Puritans looking for you again?"

"That's a risk I've gotta take, Kiki."

"But—"

"It's what Dad would've done. Our people didn't get by for so long in this world by letting the helpless die. That was never the Occult's code. Stay here."

I thrust open the door, and it almost slammed off its hinges by the force of the wind and snow. "Caleb!" Kiki made one last attempt to stop me, but I was out the door and thumping through the thick icy ground before he could do so.

I could hardly see once I made it past the light of my cottage. The snow was blinding, and if I weren't careful, I'd lose my way. The snow was mixed with ice, and I could feel my movements begin to stiffen as I felt icicles form on my hair and clothes. I just knew I had to go east for a bit, and I'd stumble across where the protection spell was tripped, but I was hoping whoever did this would be closer rather than farther.

I looked around. Maybe I could listen for some noise, any hint of life. But all I could make out was the frozen tree branches lightly clinking together in the wind, making a harmony with the sounds of the snow in the air meeting its companions in the ground. I was the only sign of life from what I could see.

But as I looked east, something looked hazy in the snow. It's as if my eyes were looking at everything but what they wanted to, and a headache started to pierce my senses. I stood and walked closer to the spot, although I was reluctant to do so for whatever reason. Then suddenly, when the headache was becoming too much to bear, I stumbled and fell. I swore as I impatiently wiped the snow from my eyes, the tiny crystals feeling like they were cutting up my face.

A loud screech lifted my vision to the trees. A large raven, the largest I'd ever seen, was leering at me from atop a barren tree. I glanced between it and the spot my eyes refused to look at in the snow. I reached up, covered my eyes with my palm, took a deep breath of stinging air, and cast a true-seeing spell.

When I looked back down, I saw a woman in the snow lying unconscious. She was face down, and her long brown hair was splayed out across her back. She must have had an invisibility spell cast on her.

I reached out and rolled her over. Her skin was pale, but her face bright red from irritation. The raven swooped down to us and landed on her stomach, flapping its large wings to try and shoo me. "Hey, don't worry, I'm a friend!" I rushed out. "I can help her; I have a cottage nearby. Is she still alive?"

The raven began to calm down, looked down at the woman, then back up at me. It nodded.

"Good. Now, come along." I lifted her up gently and shivered at how cold to the touch she was. There was no telling how long she'd been out here like this.

I ran as fast as I could in the thickening snow, my joints sore and aching as the raven flew alongside me, never straying too far from their companion.

Relief filled my tender chest as I saw the lights from the cabin come into view. Kiki was there in the window waiting for me, and he placed his front paws against the glass as soon as he noticed me running in the snow.

The warmth from the homey cottage welcomed me with open arms as I slammed the door shut behind me. "Took you long enough! You have any idea how worried I was about you?" Kiki reprimanded me, sliding down from the kitchen counter as I placed the unconscious woman on my bed, taking off her cold, wet, outer layers. The raven perched itself in the windowsill above the mattress, watching me intently. Apparently, it was a familiar of few words, unlike Kiki.

"Hold on, she's a witch?" Kiki realized, finally noticing the sizable bird.

"Seems that way. She had an invisibility spell cast on her." I replied hastily, spreading a blanket over her.

"Will she wake up?" A deep, somewhat raspy voice called our attention. It was the raven.

"We can only wait and find out. I'm not advanced enough to know any healing spells. Although, Kiki, here can help a little."

"Come on, you want me to do that in front of the bird?" Kiki grimaced.

"No other choice." He rolled his eyes at me and jumped up onto the bed, curling up next to the woman, and began to purr.

"The healing magic a cat familiar has should be able to help her a bit," I explained to the raven. "Can you tell me your names?"

“My name is Jeriah, and my lady is named Hannah. You’re a witch as well?” I nod.

“I am Caleb, and my familiar is Kiki. We fled from Salem several months ago and have been hiding here since.” I stood and made my way to the kitchen. “You should rest, too Jeriah, you’ve been through a lot tonight.”

The following day, I woke on my couch to someone shaking me. My senses came in slowly. Someone was standing above me, and I could make out something shining at my neck. I jolted as I realized the woman, Hannah, that I had rescued the night before was standing above me with one of my kitchen knives to my throat. “Who are you? What am I doing here?”

“Whoa! Hey! Calm down! It’s okay!” I scrambled to lean away from the blade, eagerly waiting to slit me open, but it followed me steadily. “My name is Caleb. I found you in the woods! I’m a witch too. It’s safe!” She looked me over, her hazel eyes examining me with caution. Now that the color returned to her face, I could tell she was quite beautiful. “Look, you shouldn’t be up and about just yet. Your body still needs to rest. And I’m assuming you haven’t eaten yet.”

At the mention of food, I could hear her stomach growl. “Look, just take the knife away from my throat, and I’ll fix something up for you, okay?” She didn’t say anything at first, but I kept her level gaze. After a moment of debating in her head, she pulled the knife away from me, and I could feel my heart start to calm down.

I served her a bowl of the stew I had cooked the night before, and she ate it hungrily, and I tossed some chopped potato slices to Jeriah. “It’s Hannah, right?” I sat across from her, eating my own fill while Kiki sat beside me, the tip of his tail twitching curiously. “Your familiar told me your names.” She nodded. “I’m Caleb, and this is Kiki. He helped keep you warm last night.”

“Why’d you come out in the storm to save me?” Like her familiar, her voice was level and cautious, as though she made a million calculations in her head before speaking. She intrigued me. I’d never met another witch aside from the Occult Society members in Salem. And they were few and far between these days.

“I knew that whoever found themselves caught in a storm like this must be in trouble. The nearest settlement is Salem, and that’s a good ways off.”

“But still, to risk your own life for someone you don’t know? I could have been a witch hunter for all you knew.” I shrugged.

“I’d rather die by a witch hunter than wonder if I let an innocent person freeze to death in the snow.”

She paused for a moment. “So, why are you on your own?” She asked, finishing her bowl of food.

I bit the inside of my cheek and looked away for a moment. No matter how hard I try, I can’t get the image of that hanging tree out of my head. “I’m from Salem.”

Hannah nodded in understanding. "I'm from just north of there. Puritans are relentless at times."

"You on your way anywhere?" She shook her head.

"They were gonna burn me in the morning."

I frown and look back up at her. For once, she didn't meet my gaze, just focused on smushing a broth-soaked potato at the bottom of her bowl. "Well, you can stay if you want."

All eyes in the room looked up at me. "Caleb, you sure about that? More than one witch can draw attention! Besides, I can't sit around with a bird!" Kiki protested.

"Winter is here, Kiki. Any extra hands can't be turned away. Especially a fellow witch." I replied. "Well? What do you say?"

Her eyes searched mine for a moment, then, for the first time since I brought her in, a small smile came to her face. "Sure."

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Dissonance was beginning to rise in the New England colonies, and the feeling was no more palpable than it was as we crept onto the boats at Griffin Warf. I looked to the leader, and he directed us to distinct positions on the ship. My breath crowded around my face in the frigid December air as the others intimidated the ship captain and crew, ordering them to hand us the cargo. One by one, the crates were lifted onto the deck of the ship, and we opened each one with an unlocking spell.

We of the Occult Society of Boston were in danger with the presence of this tea, and we were going to do something about it.

I picked up a teabag, its weight solid in my hand. My familiar, Mary, a petite raven, perched at the edge of the ship next to me, helping to keep a lookout. The aroma of the leaves was savory and tempting if I didn't know better. With the cue from our group leader, I wound back and hurled the first tea bag into the harbor. Then, one by one, the members of the other two ships join in, and the crashing of the crates into the ocean echoed through the cobbled streets, and we began to cheer.

The English parliament was afraid of us, and rightfully so. I hated to think of the devastation that would come to our people if we hadn't gotten the intel from the East India Company sooner.

This tea was brewed to be poisonous to witches. And they were planning on eradicating us all.

People gathered along the streets, watching as crate after crate of toxic tea leaves were tossed into the icy-cold waters of the Boston Harbor.

Three hours passed until finally, the last bits of tea bags were soaking in the bay, making a salty concoction in the ocean water.

Just as quickly and quietly as we arrived on the ships, we departed, each heading for our own homes in the city.

I quietly shut the front door behind me and made to go upstairs to my bedroom when someone cleared their throat in the kitchen. Startled, I whipped around, an attack spell at the ready, but the magic around my hands fizzled when I saw it was only my parents. They were sitting at the table, both of their familiars sitting beside them. My father with a furry black cat, and my mother with a toad. “Lydia. Where have you been?” My father asked, his brows furrowed over his hazel eyes. I looked between my parents. It was a rhetorical question, for the most part, they knew exactly where I had been. Perhaps they just wanted to see what lie I’d come up with.

“You were down at the wharf with all the others, weren’t you?” My mother huffed when she finally got impatient.

“And what if I was?” I retorted, suddenly getting a bit more courage as I stepped into the light in the kitchen.

“Lydia, what are you thinking? What if one of those red-coats saw you? Or one of the witch-hunters around town?”

“No one saw me, okay? I used an invisibility spell on my way back. Besides, I had Mary there if anything were to happen.” I rolled my eyes, scratching under Mary’s chin as she sat on my shoulders, getting uneasy in the tense atmosphere.

“That’s not the point, Lydia! By going out there, you have put all of us in danger!”

“And what if I hadn’t done anything? We’d still be in danger, then! Having that poisonous tea around here. The rest of Boston would be fine, but us in the Occult Society would be maggot-food.”

“We would have been fine! We would just have not bought any!”

“Sure, our family would be okay, but what about the others? What about other witches who wouldn’t know? I can’t bear to think only of myself in a time like this.”

“But what if you were caught, huh? What will happen if the British come into our home and arrest us for being witches? What if we’re all wrung by our necks, and it’s because of the Society’s foolish recklessness?” My father was raising his voice.

“Noah, that’s enough.” My mother placed a hand on his arm. He did have a tendency to get riled up. It’s where I got it from and often caused us to butt heads on issues like this.

“But Esther—”

“I said, that’s enough, Noah.” She cut him off again, a little more forceful this time. She looked up at me, her blue eyes looking a bit softer than my father’s.

“Lydia, your father and I are just worried about you and about our family. If we’re found out, we may not be able to run so easily.”

“And I understand that Mom, but...” I took a deep breath. “but times are changing, now. The world is getting bigger and bigger by the minute, which means things are getting more dangerous for our people. But here, in the United Colonies, things are starting to change! The colonists are starting to see our uses, how strong we are, and that’s why the British are trying to oppress us.” I searched their eyes as I spoke, “The Occult Society believes that if things keep trending this way, us witches and the colonists can fight our common enemy! With the use of our powers, we can get what we want from the British. People here can accept us.”

“How naïve.” My father scoffed, crossing his arms. “Has the Occult Society already forgotten about our history? Both in Europe and here in the Colonies? My father didn’t flee persecution in Salem just for us to suddenly work together now that he’s gone.”

“Dad, don’t you see? Just because witches have fought colonists in the past doesn’t mean that we can’t work together someday! If our people keep holding onto revenge and resentment our whole lives and make no effort to move forward, then what’s been the point of our struggle? Do you really wanna tell me that you’re content with suffering our entire lives because that’s the way it’s always been?”

My father didn’t reply, and I seemed to have struck a bullseye.

“Because that’s not what I want, that’s not what our people want. Things are changing, Dad, and I want us to change with them.”

“But what comes after all this? What happens after our common enemy is gone?”

I shrug, letting my arms flop to my sides. “I don’t know. I really don’t. But I’m at least willing to change some minds if I can’t change them all.”

I sensed that was the last word and turned, walking upstairs. As I reached my bedroom, I just now realized how tired I was. I could feel the soreness sinking in after hauling crates overboard for three hours, and the cold sure wasn’t helping. I changed out of the raggedy clothes I borrowed from another Occult member and slumped onto my bed.

“Do you really think something’s gonna be different? What if your Dad was right and soldiers show up here?” Mary asked, settling into her birdcage.

“Not sure,” I replied, my voice muffled by my pillow. The feathers were displaced in the cushion, making it feel lumpy, by my bones were too tired to care. “I guess we’ll have to run again. Maybe New York this time. Who knows.”

I was young, and maybe my father was right; I was naïve. I’d only ever lived in Boston. I didn’t know what he and my grandparents had to go through moving here after Gramma and Gran-pop fled the Puritans up North. And I never would. I’d never know what they had to do to be safe, but I did know I was going to do whatever I could to continue their legacy and the legacy of my people.

I looked out the window from my bed and saw the sunrise begin to paint the city in a dusty golden light. It'd be a bright day, and I could already feel it in the air as my eyes began to flutter closed, despite my spiraling thoughts.

If there was one thing I was sure of, it was that one morning I'd wake up, look out on my city, and smile at the fact that things were changing for my people.