

Alarick Brandon could recall the exact date on which love had fled from him. Nearly seventeen years to the day, love and compassion were replaced in his mind and heart by duty and control. The fight had not been easy, to be certain. Every day was a new struggle to control his emotions, to subsume every action under duty and excise love and even friendship from his mind.

He made certain no one saw his struggle, the potential weakness they might exploit. Others only saw the cold, hard shell of a man love had left behind. If they pitied him for it, they were wise enough to keep their pity to themselves. If they hated him, well, that was the idea, wasn't it? Their dislike kept him from even having to consider messy entanglements and emotions.

Duty bought Alarick to his desk one summer morning, as it did everyday, to work through the records and accounts of the Keep, the refuge he operated for displaced magical persons. A large castle filled with witches, wizards, and shape shifters didn't run itself. Alarick would not have chosen this responsibility and did not embrace it even now, but he hadn't run from it when it was foisted upon him.

Footsteps thundered down the hall, causing him to pause his scribbling and calculations.

"Sir! Sir!" the young messenger shouted well before he reached Alarick's office.

Alarick sighed at the disruption to the castle's peace. When the man pushed into his office, it took every bit of Alarick's hard-earned control not to remove his wand from his coat pocket and turn the disrespectful messenger into a toad.

"What is this about? I have work to do, in case you cannot see that," Alarick said, waving his hand over the piles of paperwork.

His voice was cold and deep, a magnificent drawling baritone that commanded absolute respect when spoken at normal volume, absolute fear when raised in anger.

The young man panted, hands on his knees in the office doorway. Alarick flicked his fingers, urging the man to get on with it. He thought this one's name might be Edward, but he couldn't be certain. At the moment, he did not care.

"I can see, Master Brandon, and I humbly apologize," he wheezed. He bowed before the man who was dressed from head to toe in black and seated behind the large mahogany desk. "But you wanted to know if there was another attack."

The messenger said nothing further. Alarick raised a dark eyebrow and set his quill aside.

"I did," he said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms. "Ideally, I wanted to be informed *before* the next attack. However, from your panic and your phrasing, I suppose it's too late for that."

"There was no warning, sir," the man began, the sweat on his brow now having nothing to do with his exertions. "We knew the Ministry was active in the Lake District, but we had no indications that they were targeting the village of Keldon. We were watching another village which we believed would be the next target."

"And you were wrong," Alarick said. It wasn't a question. "Very well. How many survivors remain in Keldon?"

"None, sir. None. Everything was burned to the ground. The residents were dragged into the streets and killed."

"And you searched everywhere? You checked for hidden bolt holes,

particularly those that might have been charmed or enchanted to disappear?"

"Sir, we are wizards. We cast every revealing spell we know. No life remains in Keldon."

Since Alarick hadn't yet turned him into a toad, the young messenger began to relax and dared to sit in one of the chairs that faced the desk. Alarick got to his feet and stood behind his desk, hands braced on the mahogany top. Only his pale fingers were visible, the sleeves of his frock coat extending all the way down to his knuckles.

Though the office was quite large, it seemed much smaller when Alarick leaned across the desk, loomed over the man, and said, "Yes, but we've had instances before where your skills proved ineffectual, have we not?"

It wasn't a question that demanded an answer. The answer was obvious. The messenger remained silent, although he shrank from the black eyes that bored into his soul, exposing every flaw.

"Very well. I'll go to Keldon and see for myself. It is possible you are correct, but it's equally possible that you are not," Alarick said after a moment.

Alarick swept out of the room, grabbing his cloak off the peg by the door on his way out. He swirled it over his shoulders and it billowed behind him as he strode up the corridor. The messenger scrambled to follow.

More messengers milled about in the castle's forecourt, all of them secretly grateful that they hadn't been the one to inform Master Brandon of their failure to prevent yet another attack. When Alarick appeared in the weak sunshine on the castle's steps, every man straightened to attention.

Alarick strode through their ranks and pointed to two older men. "You two. Come with me."

"Yes, sir," they answered as one.

The three men moved away from the group and drew their wands.

With a quick flick of their wrists, they transformed into carriage-sized falcons, each with a wand clutched in its talons. The rush of wind as they took off caused the other messengers to clutch their hats to their heads to keep them from flying off. The messengers watched until the falcons were out of sight, then hurried into the castle to find work elsewhere.

Alarick and the two men flew northwest, following the coastline to the Lake District. Keldon wasn't on any human map as it was a village for magical people. But Alarick knew every magical village scattered throughout England. Granted, there were far fewer to keep track of these days. They fell to the Ministry at an average rate of one per month, although that rate had increased of late.

Alarick tried to keep ahead of the tide of destruction, stationing spies and messengers up and down the length of England, but too often it was to no avail. The Ministry of The One Truth was masterful at keeping their plans and movements secret. Alarick had some success, but not enough. And he was running out of time.

If his calculations were correct, there were only fifteen magical villages left in all of England. Maybe a few more in Wales and Scotland, but not many. According to his sources, villages were falling at the same rate throughout the world. Despite his efforts and those of other wizards throughout the world, it wouldn't be long before all magical people were eliminated. Such was the goal of the Ministry.

After circling the smoking remains of Keldon for half an hour to ensure no Ministry remained behind, Alarick and the other wizards landed softly in the village center. As soon as they touched down, they transformed into men, wands drawn in defensive positions.

When no threats emerged, they spread out through the village. The buildings formed a circle around the central courtyard with side streets shooting off like wheel spokes away from the center. The village only covered a few acres altogether. Almost all the buildings were residences. Only one major shop sold the few things that couldn't be made at home.

This wasn't unusual in magical villages. Wizards and witches were a

resourceful lot and tended to grow and make most of their own food and textiles. There was farmland on the outskirts of the village, but no animals grazed there now. When the Ministry sacked a village, they took anything salable, including livestock. As Alarick passed the gardens of each home, he noticed that these, too, had been razed in hasty harvest.

All was silent. Not even a bird chirped in the trees, as though the animals were afraid to utter a sound lest they meet the same fate as the residents of this place. And what a fate it was. The Ministry was made up of non-magical humans who fought with guns and swords, not wands and spells. They left quite a mess behind. The crows and buzzards were already circling overhead. Alarick didn't avert his eyes from the bodies strewn through the streets, however. This was his responsibility now. He alone bore daily witness to the depravities of the Ministry. He crouched next to each body, checking for life. Nothing.

While bent over the mangled body of a young boy, he spied movement out of the corner of his eye. A blur of blue streaked by in the trees to his left. Without looking in that direction, he stood, unwilling to give away his awareness of the threat. Casually he turned and walked in the opposite direction.

Further down the street he caught the motion again, the same streak of blue in his peripheral vision. Someone was following him and doing a damn lousy job of it. If they sought to ambush him, he would make certain they were disappointed.

He kept his wand ready, but tucked inside his cloak, as he turned toward the threat. He slipped between two houses and emerged into the gardens behind them. Farther off the main path, these gardens had not been razed. The plants still stood tall, offering cover should Alarick desire it. A thin lawn separated the gardens from the forest beyond.

Alarick contemplated his position. Out on the grass, away from the shrubbery, he would be exposed. He headed for the grass. Let the bastards come for him. He was ready.

Alone and defiant, he stood on the grassy strip, yet no one raced out

to engage him. He strode down the row of gardens, gaze sweeping left and right, seeking the threat. Near the fifth house, he spied a slip of blue fabric poking out from under a row of plants. Without hesitation Alarick drew his wand, pointed it in the direction of the fabric, and said, "*Adligo*." A jet of yellow light shot from his wand and wrapped around whatever or whoever was under the plants. His victim hit the ground with a thud.

Alarick ruthlessly shoved the plants aside, flattening them in his haste to confront his pursuer. Facedown on the ground, a young woman in a simple blue dress fought to turn over, but Alarick's spell bound her legs and arms. He quickly flipped her over onto her back and searched her for weapons. Finding none, he stood back and gazed at her.

She wasn't as young as he'd thought. Based on her slight build, he'd estimated her to be in her teens, but she was clearly in her mid-twenties, a woman, not a girl. Of course, compared to his age of thirty-four, she was still young. Her hair was such a deep red that it was almost maroon, although the mud spatter made it a less attractive color than it might otherwise have been.

She glared at him, hazel eyes narrowed in anger, but he simply glared back and waited for her to speak. It didn't take long.

"Well, go on. Kill me," she said.

"Why?" he asked. "Are you with the Ministry?"

"No, but you're going to kill me, anyway. Why else would you be here?"

Alarick shook his head. "Stupid girl. Clearly you can see I'm a wizard," he pointed his wand at her bindings. "What reason would I have to kill you, if you aren't Ministry?"

The woman was silent.

"Exactly," Alarick said. "Now, who are you?"

She seemed to be debating talking to him further.

"Will it help if I release you?"

She nodded.

"Fine. But don't run. I assure you I know a great many more complex spells than that little parlor trick, and I will not hesitate to use them."

He flicked his wand in her direction and the bindings disappeared. She sat up and scrubbed at the mud on her face, giving her pale skin a healthy pink glow. Alarick looked away. Her appearance was inconsequential.

"Here," he said as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. She took it, but didn't say thank you.

"Appalling manners," Alarick muttered.

She tried to hand the handkerchief back, but he waved her away.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

"Elissa Stone. My house is, was, over there," she pointed down the street to a group of burned-out cottages.

"Were you here when the Ministry struck?" Alarick asked, squatting down next to her, pushing his cloak out behind him as he did so.

"No. I was away. I'd gone..."

She said no more. Alarick arched his eyebrow at her.

"Where did you go, Miss Stone?"

"I don't want to say. I don't know you."

"Fair enough. It doesn't matter, anyway," he said.

"If you aren't Ministry come to finish the job, why are you here?" she asked him.

"I came to see if anyone survived the attack. Since you apparently did, I'm here to make you an offer."

Elissa scooted back on the grass but Alarick laughed, a booming sound in the silence of the village.

"Not that kind of offer, Miss Stone. I assure you my interests do not lie in that direction. No, my name is Alarick Brandon. Do you know of me?"

She shook her head once, but stopped, considered. "Wait. Yes. My father mentioned you once. You run some home for displaced magical people."

"Precisely. As I assume you have no family left alive, I'm extending you an offer to come with me. I can provide food, shelter, and protection from the Ministry for as long as you need or want it."

"No, thank you," Elissa said.

Alarick, unused to being refused, stood quickly.

"Then you are a fool," he said, looking down at Elissa. "Do you think you can blend in with the normal humans? Go to London, find a place to live, and avoid the Ministry's notice forever?"

"No. I could try, I suppose, but no. I plan to stay here," she said.

The stubborn lift of her chin amused Alarick, as did her naiveté.

"Here?" Alarick laughed, but this time it was a cruel, humorless sound. "Let's assume that the Ministry doesn't come back to check for stragglers. They probably will, so you'll be dead within a week. But even if that doesn't happen, you want to stay here? With no food? No help? With dead bodies in the streets that will soon become infested with plague and pestilence? By all means, don't let me take you from such luxury."

He turned on his boot heel and strode back to the village center.

Alarick was already in the central courtyard when she caught up with him. The other two wizards were coming toward them from a side street. Elissa stopped and watched them cautiously.

"They're with me," Alarick said.

"If I go with you," she began, staring off at her burned-out home, "Can I bring something with me?"

"Of course," he said bowing slightly. "Bring whatever you need. Do you have a trunk or something with your belongings?"

"It's a bit larger than a trunk."

"Well, what is it?" Alarick asked impatiently. "We need to leave here before the Ministry returns."

"It's a library," she said.

There was silence in the town once again. The other two wizards had arrived and overheard her comment. They looked at each other and

Alarick incredulously.

"A library," Alarick finally said. "You are aware that the possession of books by a woman is forbidden?"

"By the Ministry. Of course I know that. But not by you?" she asked hopefully.

"No, not by me. But I'm more than a little curious how you managed to keep such a thing hidden. I would have thought the Ministry would have burned any books first thing upon arriving here."

"I'm sure they would have, had they found them," Elissa said, turning and walking quickly up the street toward her house.

Intrigued despite his desire to quickly leave Keldon, Alarick followed her. He motioned for the other two wizards to keep watch while he was gone.

Alarick was surprised when they walked past her house and into the forest beyond. He drew his wand, uncertain whether she was leading him into an ambush. They wound through the trees in seemingly aimless directions.

"I never take the same path, to avoid wearing an obvious trail in the forest," she said as they doubled back on a path they'd already taken.

Alarick said nothing. He was busy scanning the forest for threats, but his estimation of her intelligence climbed a few notches. Even some of his best scouts had difficulty with the concept of traveling different paths to avoid leaving a trail.

They finally reached a large tree with a gnarled, aboveground root system. Each root was the size of an average man's thigh. Elissa stood in front of the tree and removed a small leather-bound book from her dress pocket. She opened it to a page near the middle and laid the book facedown so the pages straddled one of the roots. She drew her wand from her pocket and tapped the book's spine where it rested upon the root.

"Resigno," she whispered.

Alarick didn't see how this was going to accomplish anything, but he

watched and waited. After a few moments, the roots began to shift and part, revealing a staircase carved into the dirt and leading under the tree.

"How did you—" he started to ask.

"That's my particular magic," she replied as they descended the steps. "My family wasn't strong, magically. We could all do little parlor tricks, as you'd probably call them. My mother could transfigure small things into other small things, and my father was a potions master. My brother was the best of us, but that wasn't saying much. He could cast some spells, but nothing grand enough to stave off the Ministry."

Her voice trailed off and hitched. Alarick couldn't see her face, but he knew she was stifling tears. He couldn't afford to have her lose control. Not when they urgently needed to get her little library and return to the Keep before the Ministry returned.

"To be fair, there aren't many wizards who can stand against them," Alarick offered. "And your magic is making hiding places out of trees?"

"Not exactly. My brother helped me with this part, with a little help from our mother. My magic lies with books."

"Books?"

"Yes. I can enchant them so only certain people may read them. If someone other than the intended reader tries, the book will either refuse to open, ensnare them in its pages, or release something deadly to destroy them. I can tailor the level of protection to the book and its contents. I can also make the books themselves indestructible, immune to fire, water, and tearing. Only someone designated by me, either by name or by blood, can access the protected works or undo the enchantments."

"That's not very useful magic," Alarick said.

Elissa shrugged. They reached the bottom of the steps and the opening above them closed. Elissa flicked her wand at the ceiling and floating orbs appeared, lighting the room in a blue glow.

"It is and it isn't," she said, answering Alarick. "Is it good in a fight? No. But it is useful for preserving books and keeping them out of the Ministry's hands."

"What possible use is such a small talent in the middle of a war for our very survival?" Alarick asked.

Elissa gestured and one of the orbs followed her hand around the room, illuminating the entire space. Seven wooden bookcases lined the room, each with seven shelves groaning under the weight of materials. Books, both large and small, were arranged neatly on every shelf, with unbound sheaves and scrolls of paper filling in every available space.

Alarick strolled around the room, glancing at the book spines and flipping through some of the loose documents. Grimoires, potion recipes, histories of magic and magical villages, and biographies of famous witches and wizards were the primary offerings, although there were obscure texts, maps, and children's books, as well.

"You can read these?" he asked.

Elissa rolled her eyes. "Of course. My father taught me to read."

"It's just that so few women can read, even witches. When the Ministry imposed the ban on women having books and access to education, literacy among females died off. Even literate parents don't educate their daughters for fear of reprisal. I've met maybe five women in my lifetime that can read. Your father must have been a brave man."

Elissa turned away, but Alarick heard her snuffle and the catch in her voice when she said, "He was, sir."

Sorry he'd brought it up and made her cry again, he turned back to the books.

"These aren't all magical books," he said, after finding a volume of poetry and a collection about the rise and fall of the Roman Empire.

"No," Elissa said. "I collect books by normal humans, as well."

"What in heaven for?" Alarick asked. "Pardon me, Miss Stone, but I do not understand the importance of this... collection."

"Then you're a blind fool, Master Brandon," she said. "It's not only us, in our persons and abilities, that the Ministry wants to eliminate. They want to eliminate anything we might leave behind for future generations. And they want to eliminate anything non-magical humans produce with

which they do not agree. That includes books, art, music, history, and any other form of culture that does not align with their agenda.

"Anything encouraging free thought, or which does not promote their god and their desire to control the citizenry absolutely, is subject to execution. Whether it is paper or person. I'm merely attempting to preserve some of it. Hopefully, somewhere in the future, the Ministry will be gone and there will be some who can use this knowledge to rebuild all that is lost."

Alarick looked around the room. He could see something of her point. However, he still thought the preservation of books frivolous in the face of the genocide he witnessed nearly every day.

"I think you're far too optimistic," Alarick said. "What's lost is lost forever. Are you aware just how few magical people survive? I am. Every day there are fewer of us. Your village is not the first I've seen destroyed. Your people are not the first I've seen murdered. We won't survive more than another year at the present rate. Books are not important in the face of those facts."

"Then I'm sorry for you," she said. "Knowledge is never unimportant. If you won't allow me to bring them to the Keep, then I apologize, but I cannot go with you."

Alarick rolled his eyes toward the sky and sighed.

"I didn't say we couldn't get your books there. I only said it wasn't important. But if you want your library, I certainly cannot begrudge you the little space it would occupy in the castle. I'll have to shrink it down in order to carry it all. And the shelves must stay behind. Is that acceptable, Miss Stone?"

She nodded. "More than."

"Very well. Pile the books and documents in the center of the room."

They worked together for a while, unloading shelves and creating seven toppling piles of books in the middle of the room. When it was all done, Alarick drew his ebony wand and prepared to cast a shrinking spell.

"Wait," Elissa said, darting forward and grabbing one book off the top of the nearest pile.

"Miss Stone, are you aware that jumping in front of a wizard who is about to cast is a great way to get yourself shrunken down to the size of a rat?"

"I know," she said. "But if something goes wrong, I couldn't bear it if this book was lost."

Alarick turned to look at the cover of the book she clutched in her hands. "Plato's *Phaedo*. Interesting choice. All about death and the afterlife, is it not?"

She nodded. "My father gave it to me. He told me to think on Socrates' arguments for the existence of an afterlife. Perhaps it would be of some comfort should we all die at the hands of the Ministry."

"Your father wasn't very cheerful, was he?"

"On the contrary. I find the work to be extremely comforting. You may cast, now," she said, tucking the small book into her bodice.

Alarick pointed his wand at the piles of books and said, "*Reformidos*." A blast of purple light shot from the wand and enveloped the texts in its glow. After a moment, the piles shrank until they were each no bigger than a small trunk.

"I need some help. Go get the two men who came with me," Alarick said to Elissa.

She raced up the stairs and, without a word, the ceiling opened at her approach. Alarick waited, looking at the piles of miniaturized books and wondering what he'd gotten himself into. Ah, well, he thought, if this library kept her busy and distracted while she harbored at the castle, it was likely for the best.

She returned with the two wizards in tow.

"We need to take these with us," Alarick told them, pointing to the piles. "Let's get them out of here and we can load them."

Each man grabbed a pile and carted it up the stairs, doubling back occasionally to fetch a book or manuscript that slipped off the top.

"Don't you have some sort of spell to bind them together?" Elissa asked Alarick after she chased down yet another piece of paper that had blown off a pile once they were outside in the open air.

Alarick resented her snippy tone. As if he were simply a laborer and not the most powerful remaining wizard in England.

"I do, but binding *and* shrinking often leads to damage. I thought you would prefer to avoid that. But if not," he brandished his wand.

"No," she said, darting between him and the piles of books. "No. I didn't know. I apologize."

"Fine." He turned to the two wizards. "Change and I'll load you both. Elissa, you'll have to load the last pile on me, so pay attention. Get it wrong and I'll get hurt."

The two wizards each pulled a leather pouch from their coat pockets and tied it around their necks. Then they changed into their falcon forms. The pouches expanded, becoming proportionate to their new size. Each bird bowed low to the ground, and Alarick packed each pouch full of texts, careful to balance the load evenly while leaving himself an equal share.

Alarick turned to Elissa. "Okay, Miss Stone. I'll change and you fill my pouch, then climb aboard. Make sure you spread the load evenly. Don't weight it too much to one side or the other." He pulled his pouch from his pocket and tied it around his neck as he spoke.

"And how do I... ride you?" she asked. Alarick arched an eyebrow at her phrasing but didn't embarrass her by commenting on it further.

"I'll drop a wing and you climb on. Carefully, please, Miss Stone. Don't tear my feathers. Get between my shoulders, just behind my neck. Use the strap from the pouch to hold on. I'll try to fly as slow and level as possible, but if we are attacked I may have to drop you suddenly. I'll try to be gentle, but it could be a rough landing," he said.

"I'll just hope that doesn't happen."

"Ready?" he asked, wand held ready for his own change.

Elissa nodded.

Alarick changed forms and Elissa gasped. Alarick turned his eye toward her and she reached out to touch his feathers. He tossed his head, reminding her to hurry. When he bowed close to the ground, she loaded his pouch, deliberately weighing each book in her hands to make sure she spread the load evenly. Alarick throttled his desire to poke her with his beak and hurry her along. He'd told her to be careful, after all.

When she finished loading the books, he extended one wing out over the ground and dropped it, forming a ramp for her to climb onto his back. Once she was seated and had hold of the leather strap, he and the other two falcons flapped their wings and soared into the sky.

Elissa screamed, once, and then quieted. She had quite a tight hold on the strap, though, and Alarick was grateful the Keep wasn't far. Otherwise, she'd probably strangle him before they arrived.

They flew over the countryside, the other two falcons flanking and protecting their Master. Alarick paid no attention to the scenery below. He'd seen it all before, knew the location of every human settlement and sacked village. Instead he focused on keeping himself level to avoid shifting the load of books or dropping Elissa off his back. He rarely flew with passengers or cargo, and it took some concentration to do it well.

When they reached the Keep, he glided over the forecourt a couple of times, analyzing the best way to land without unseating his passenger. He let the other two men land first, then followed them down. It was a struggle to keep himself level as he dropped, and he was tiring with the effort. As if it wasn't difficult enough, a sudden gust of wind threw him off even further.

After an alarming drop to the left, Alarick pulled up, flapping his wings madly to slow his descent. His back was now nearly perpendicular to the ground and Elissa was hanging on for dear life. And then he felt her fall away. Abruptly freed from her weight and weighted from the front by the damn books, he slammed forward and crashed inelegantly into the ground.

He lay there for a few minutes, too tired and winded to change back

into a man. The other two wizards had already changed back and were running to tend Elissa. She was up, though, and running toward Alarick.

"Are you okay?" she asked, crouching down near his head. "I could tell you weren't going to make it, so I dropped off. It wasn't far. I'm okay."

Alarick finally managed to change back and released the heavy pouch before he sat up.

"What did I tell you about keeping the load level?" he shouted. "You could have killed me falling off like that and leaving all the weight on my front."

"I'm sorry," she began. "I forgot about the books."

Alarick stood and brushed dust from his frock coat and adjusted his cravat so it was tight around his neck once again. Mortification morphed into anger. He towered over Elissa.

"You forgot about the books? How is that possible? An hour ago, you were content to live in a village full of dead bodies if you couldn't bring those books here and now you forget?"

He turned to the two wizards who remained in the courtyard, looking anywhere but at their Master shouting at the young woman.

"You take her and her damn books to the vacant room in the south wing," he said, flicking his wand at the pouches on the ground. Instantly the books returned to their original size. "I have work to do."

Alarick turned and stalked off toward the main doors of the Keep, leaving the three of them in the forecourt staring at seven piles of books and pondering the labor now required to haul them into the castle.