

Before the All-Dark

I peered out from the Burrow at a world gone chill and dim. Skeletal trees guarded the flat sky. Both suns hung low on the horizon, even this near to midday. The above-ground stretched as far as my eyes could see, full of nothing but shadows and frost.

The all-dark was almost upon us.

Gathering my poor store of courage, I tested the air with my tongue and, finding no trace of danger, slithered from the pyramid's shelter and into the sparse wood.

The ground felt rough and icy against my belly scutes. Just the touch of it made me drowsy, as if a heavy blanket lay across my scales. But the dream had assured me we still had a handful of days before the all-dark and our long annual slumber.

"Better keep moving, Sookahr." Kwirk popped out of the stone archway, rubbing his paws together and looking around with the jerky, lightning fast movements of rodent-kind. My trusty little mouse flicked his whiskers, tugged down his rough vest, and then scurried ahead before I could even register his words.

"Yes. Ground is very cold." I unfurled my coils and moved despite the heaviness in my long body.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be out." Kwirk chittered. "There must be a suitable all-dark offering in the Burrow's stores."

"This year I need something special." Flicking just the tips of my tongue, I brushed past my faithful attendant. Kwirk was many things to me, but he couldn't understand the need that pressed me now. My offering to the Sage this year would carry the weight of my future. I needed

to impress the god so that I might impress the world. A trinket bought from one of the Burrow's shops would not do. "Keep an eye open, Kwirk."

The breeze swirled between us, bringing a chill but not quite masking the mouse's mumbles. "Looking for what? Icicles? Hungry birds?"

I continued onward, but my head tilted up, high enough to fix my gaze on the unforgiving sky. Hungry birds. My scales rattled at the thought. Each gap in the branches looked suddenly large enough to admit an eagle.

"Stay under the trees."

"Yes. Obviously." Kwirk darted ahead, vanishing in the shadow of a tree and then appearing again as he bolted to the next, still muttering but managing a pace that would quickly leave me behind, alone and exposed.

Perhaps the stores were a good idea after all. I hissed and pressed forward, feeling the sluggishness drag at my every curve. I tasted the air again. It stung, prickled sensitive skin, and bit at the roof of my mouth, offering no secrets. No hint of what might lurk in the shadows where my mouse danced.

The creaking of dry branches vibrated against the sides of my head. The breeze increased, and what metabolism I'd left the burrow with began to shrink away. It was too late in the year to be about, and yet, the dream had whispered to me of a prize, a token worthy of the Sage's favor.

A favor I was determined to win.

My insides burned with it, with drive and a longing that had no outlet... yet. All I needed was one chance, an opportunity to prove myself. One shot at catching my teacher's attention, at showing my designs to someone that could actually appreciate them.

Someone who could appreciate *me*.

Slithering from one patch of fading sun to the other, my tongue barely flirted with the air. The wind shifted the branches, moving the shadows across the earth and bringing flashes of cold and almost warm. My tail brushed against dead leaves, adding a rustle and crunch to the snapping of twigs. The skymetal band around my midsection heated, a last-ditch hope against air that was too cold for serpents. A reminder that safety lay behind us. Ahead, something thumped against the earth.

"Kwirk?" The vibrations tickled my scutes. I froze, watching the patches of darkness.

"Kwirk!"

"Sookahr?" The mouse popped into a patch of light, twitching, shifting, never holding perfectly still.

"Did you hear that?"

Kwirk's round eyes widened. His whiskers hung at either side of his little nose. He gave a slow nod and jerked his paws toward the shadows.

I forced my tongue farther from my lips. The air tasted of wood and decay, of dry leaf and sharp mold. I turned to the sky again, but now the branches all looked like wings stretching, like talons and sharp beaks.

"We should go back." The mouse whispered right beside my head.

"Ah!" My body coiled away, heart pounding. How the little mouse moved so quickly in this chill was beyond me, but it felt as if he'd teleported, manifesting from thin air at my side.

"My apologies." Kwirk lowered his belly to the ground.

"Maybe we—"

The thump sounded again, sending a wave of trembles from my belly. The wind rose, howling between the trees and raining slender debris to the forest floor. A branch landed on my

tail, and I jumped forward half my length. The thought of returning empty handed pressed me low to the ground. The thought of placing a store-bought bauble on my altar to the Sage carried a depressing sense of failure.

I peered into the shadows, stretching my tongue out and out until the tips reached for the farthest air and began to numb. There was something there, soft and touched with rot. I tasted death on the wind, and an alien aroma that was both warm and unpleasant at the same time.

When the thump came again, I managed to ride the trembles without fear. Whatever the wind moved beyond the shadows was already dead. I breathed it in, steadying myself for the next thump, and remembering the dream's soft impulse.

"Come, Kwirk."

This time, I led the way. slithering between the ragged trunks with my mouse scampering half a step beyond my tail. We eased through the gaps between trees, around dropped branches, and loose stones. I smelled as we went, letting the stench of what lay ahead draw me onward.

Somehow, I'd decided my prize lay in that direction. Perhaps because it was the only distinct thing in this cold and crackly woods. The taste of death intensified as we neared the source of the thumping, but with it came a faint warmth that drew me into a faster slither.

Even dead warmth would bring welcome life to my sluggish body. Yet, only a fresh kill would retain that heat, and the thought of a lingering predator brought me up short again. Kwirk bumped into my side, placing his paws against my band to steady himself.

"What is it, Sookahr?" His voice was always squeaky, but now it trembled as well. He'd caught on to my caution, if not the reasoning behind it.

"Go with care." I eased around the next tree, rubbing my scales against the bark. "And if I say, run, you must head straight for the Burrow. As fast as you can. No looking back."

"You'll be left behind." Kwirk's voice reached me slowly. His high-pitched squeaking penetrated my head through a fog of lethargy. If he'd touched the words with concern for my well-being, it was lost by the time I heard them.

Not that it mattered. He would do as I ordered. Mice were obedient by nature, and Kwirk's devotion had been the single steady truth in my short life. If I told him to go, he would, and the least I could do is spare him if my folly led us into danger.

"I will follow as I can."

We went on, the ground thumping less steadily as the wind shifted. I could taste the dead thing much more clearly now, and through the shadows I perceived a lump of ground that might be more than just a heaving of the earth. Sure enough, when the wind swirled again, the shape fluttered, a tell-tale motion that could only be made by one thing.

Feathers.

Now I understood why the dream had sent me out in the cold. A feather offering would please any of the gods, make a tribute rarely possible for a society that lived in the below-ground. Even the noble *aspis* would have few such gifts to present. The Sage would notice. My pleas for recognition would be heard if only I could obtain a single plume.

Excitement fueled my muscles, brought life back to my coils, and sent me wriggling forward. I raised my head up, arching back while slithering as if I were, in fact, one of my *aspis* cousins. Though my fangs carried no venom, I opened my mouth and let a low hiss precede me. It might startle a smaller animal, might bluff my way to survival should whatever downed the bird still linger at the corpse.

I hissed again and burst from behind the trees. The carcass lay in a narrow gap between the forrest and a rocky cliff face. The latter only raised twice my length before giving way to lumpy

earth again, but the bird had definitely fallen off it. The twist of its legs and kinked neck suggested that death. It allayed my fear of predators for the moment, though my anxiety reminded me that scavengers would also smell their way to the body eventually.

It was a small variety of songbird, devoid of hooked beak and talon. Why its wings hadn't saved it, I couldn't have guessed, nor did my thoughts have room for anything at all aside from admiring the sad thing's plumage.

Fluff covered the corpse, as if the bird's scales had sprouted into a loose, soft growth. Longer blades ran along the edges of its wings and grew into a fan tail at the end of the stout body. I examined these closely, torn between fully extending my tongue to take in every aspect of the bird and an aversion to the stench that came with it.

The warmth, however, brought no hesitation. I coiled close to the fluttering carcass, not even flinching when the wind lifted the top wing, dropping it back to the earth with a now-familiar thump. Gentle heat emanated from the body, the effect of chemical processes inside. It might smell terrible, but that warmth could provide the energy I needed to make it back home.

I pressed my scales around the thing and went to work at choosing my all-dark offering.

"Kwirk?"

My eyes fixed on the long blades. Though the downy stuff appealed to my sense of touch, there was something more impressive, something rarer about the longer feathers. On the tail, they grew too hefty for Kwirk to carry, but there were shorter ones near the front of the wing. One of those, I decided, would suit my god of choice. I only needed a mouse's quick paws to pluck it.

"Kwirk?"

The second time he didn't answer, a jolt of fear shook my coiled body. He'd promised to run if I ordered it, but I hadn't made that call, and Kwirk had never been anything but obedient. My tongue reached for evidence of my attendant, stretching to its full length and waving there as I moved my head from side to side.

"Kwirk, I need you."

The crackling of the trees overhead answered. A stiff gust of wind drove me harder against the dead bird, but no mouse waited beneath the trees. A new cold crept under my scales, and this time it had nothing to do with the season or the air. If anything happened to my mouse... No prize for any god would be worth that cost.

Still, I hesitated to leave the carcass and search for my companion. Kwirk moved far faster than I could manage at this temperature, and the decay's warmth had glued me to the bird as surely as my desire for its plumage. If I could warm my muscles just enough, I'd have far better luck of tracking Kwirk and more energy to help once I'd discovered what had happened to him.

In the meantime, I could work on my prize. My skymetal band warmed at the thought, heating and helping to banish the chill from my body. I attempted to focus, but my fears for Kwirk rushed to the forefront of my mind. I listed a half dozen horrible ends, things that might have found him in the chill woods. Enemies that might have carried off my diminutive but devoted mouse.

A sharp pinching in my spine cleared my head, the skymetal doing its job. My band flared to life, humming softly and bringing my thoughts into focus. Mentally, I reached for the feather I'd selected. The down around it riffled. The fat shaft trembled, making the quill dance. I wrapped my desire around that stem and gave a soft tug, backed by the power of the metal ring around my middle.

The skin pulled, resisting more than the softening flesh did. There was a moment of struggle, a fatigue that settled into my skull and then wafted away when the feather popped loose. It hovered for the space of a breath, as if it longed to return to the body and its fellows, then wafted in my direction.

I nudged it along, one thought at a time. The heat building in my band spread through me faster than the warmth given by the rotting bird. My head clarified as the feather bobbed in front of my nose. I uncoiled from the dead thing and turned, scanning the tree trunks with a ball of nerves rolling through my stomach.

Kwirk. The chill had made me too sluggish. My poor judgment had put my friend at risk. If it had also doomed him, I would never forgive myself. Returning to the Burrow without the mouse seemed an impossible thing. How would I live? How would I function without those tiny, but so agile, paws?

Already the effort of holding my treasure aloft wore at the strength of both my mind and the skymetal ring. I would drop it before reaching home. Worse, my body would chill again, and without heat to move me, I might stop altogether, freeze beneath the trees or else, mind muddled by sluggishness, simply slither away with no direction whatsoever.

"Kwirk!" My panic echoed beneath the branches and I followed it with a low hiss of frustration. Where had he gone?

I left the bird carcass with a single feather bobbing at my side and a quickly fading warmth driving my coils. My tongue moved constantly, in and out. I flicked, and tasted, and found the stale scent of my attendant lingering in an invisible trail. The wind had erased the majority of Kwirk's passing, but if I pressed my nose near to the ground, I could taste a stronger scent, enough to give me a flaring of hope.

The mouse's trail led away from the path. I followed anyway, knowing it led me further from the safety of the Burrow. Kwirk had wandered at an angle, away from both the bird and our home. I tracked his scent along the rock ridge and into a terrain littered with debris. Rocks and branches stippled the landscape, and here the trees grew so close to the stone that the shadows made a dense, dark belt.

"Kwirk?" This time, I whispered, then hissed and called again. "Kwirk!"

The wind swelled, chill as ice but carrying a soft, familiar sound. Not quite a word. A groan or a murmur? I couldn't say.

It told me less than the shift in the air did. I could smell my attendant now, thick enough to drive me, slithering, deeper into the darkness. Only a faint heat emanated from the skymetal, just enough to keep my feather aloft. My muscles slowed already, and despite the need to hurry, I made a leisurely pace forward, over the poking of stone and stick, before arriving at Kwirk's dilemma.

What had drawn him away, I couldn't have said, but what kept him here was obvious. A branch, as large around as my own tail, had fallen across the little mouse, pinning him fast to the ground. He kicked his long feet in the air, twisting but making no progress toward freedom.

"I'm here." I slithered forward and coiled around the scene. "Are you injured?"

"Just pinned." He grunted the words, still managing to sound squeaky with all that weight upon him. "My apologies, Sookahr."

"Shh." I hissed and examined the branch. There was room near the mouse to slide my tail beneath it, and I did so quickly, straining physically to dislodge the weight enough that Kwirk might slip free.

He writhed more furiously at my effort, but the branch barely moved. My strength had ebbed with the cold, and even the treasured feather sank now, near enough to the ground that I had to twist around to find it. The skymetal gleamed against my scales, shining even without the aid of light. With it, I could free the mouse easily enough, but I would lose my prize in the process, and the winds gave no doubt as to the feather's fate should I release it.

I would like to blame my hesitation on a sluggish, cold brain, but the thought of abandoning my offering sent a different sort of panic through me. How long had I studied, pouring over musty drawings and ancient models? I'd lodged a permanent crick in my bones bending over the work of others, over my own sketches and plans, only to have them dismissed.

Ignored and overlooked.

With the Sage's favor, the dream made it clear that my life would shift toward a favorable fate. My whole life. And yet, here was Kwirk's hanging in the balance. It was a test I feared I was about to fail. A test of my resolution, my drive, perhaps.

With a last long flick of my tongue, I released my grip on the plume. Immediately, the feather caught the wind and flew up and away. The shadows swallowed it, choked out my hope of reputation or reward, and left me with only a dull aching in my heart.

I brushed this aside and turned to find Kwirk's round eyes regarding me. There was pity in those depths and also surprise.

"Hold still." I prayed his delicate, external ears could not pick out the gruffness in my tone.

All my will sharpened to a focus. The skymetal found life again, nearly burning my scales. I pushed against the branch with my tail. With my will, and my love for Kwirk, and with my disappointment as well.

The branch heaved aside, landing with a crack and a snap against the nearest rock. Kwirk scrambled to his feet, brushing at his vest and fur with those wonderful quick paws. Despite the loss of my feather, I felt a rush of relief, a soft relaxation that had only partly to do with the waning of the band's heat.

"Are you okay?" I heard the slowness in my voice but couldn't begin to worry.

"Thanks to you." Kwirk's hands fluttered, reminding me of feathers in the breeze.

"We must return." I tasted the wind without finding anything of interest. "I have little movement left in me."

"Let me help." Kwirk skittered to my side and, though he could barely gaze over the top of my back, threw one slender arm over my scales. His self-made heat, a magic that had always fascinated me, brought relief wherever his fur touched.

It reminded me just how lost I'd be without him. My throat constricted around that truth and I managed only to say, "Come."

We set off this way, me limping forward and Kwirk moving along my body as needed, leaning into me and providing enough warmth to keep my muscles functional. The wind beat at both of us, driving ripples in Kwirk's fur and slowing our progress even more.

The effort of lifting the branch had left my band chilly. After a few length's slithering, I could no longer feel where it ended and my scales began. Dimly aware that my tongue had stopped moving, I let Kwirk guide me. His little nudges and gentle pokes moved my body this way and that between the trees.

Dark and light blurred all around us. I settled into the lethargy and let the mouse think for me. Slithering automatically through the woods, I half-slept, only waking when a blast of fresh cold tapped at my flank.

"Kwirk?"

My head turned slowly, a fraction of a flick after my impulse to look. A streak of brown shot away from my side, leaving a cold emptiness where the mouse had been. I tried to puzzle it out. Had Kwirk abandoned me? Had I grown so still and difficult that the mouse had been forced to save himself? These thoughts came like thick mud percolating.

One slow sweep of my head from side to side told me that we'd neared our destination. The trees here bore a familiar pattern, and through the gaps between trunks I could mark the high pyramid where we'd emerged from the below-ground. I considered moving in that direction but made no effort to attempt it.

My tongue flirted with my lips but decided to remain safely hidden. I lowered my fore-length in defeat, lining out my full stretch upon the earth. More chill. More weight against my bones.

"Sookahr." Kwirk's voice reached me through the haze of sleep. "Move, Soo. Look what the wind brought you."

My vision cleared. I felt his words against my skull and forced my head up, just a little, from the ground.

"Look. Look, Sookahr."

"Tired." The effort of making that single word weighed like stone. Still, Kwirk's voice settled against me, squeaky and full of life. His body pressed against my side, and I knew a trace of heat again. "What is it?"

"Your offering." The mouse's paws fluttered, lifting my feather near to my eyes. "Caught on some bramble beside the path."

"Caught." My tongue slid free, carefully tasting. "You've found my feather."

"Yes." Kwirk brandished my plume between us, waving it so that my tips might sample the impossible truth. "Or it found us."

"The dream." I leaned into the mouse at my side and let the warmth spread. If there had been a test, it would seem we'd passed. My feather *and* my mouse had both found their way back to my side.

"Yes, Sookahr." Kwirk's eyes gleamed. He clutched the feather in one paw and threw the other over my back. "We're almost there."

My body argued that we were in no shape to move, but when Kwirk's paw nudged my flank, I slithered automatically. We went between the trees, until the stones around the Burrow's entrance became a clear archway ahead.

The view of home added a different kind of warmth, and I moved more fervently with the below-ground in sight. Safety, warmth, and something new awaited. Victory.

I felt it in the touch of a tiny paw at my scales, and I saw it in the flutter of a feathery plume. The Sage would hear my all-dark petition. This year, everything would fall into place. Like a feather on the breeze, I trusted that. The winds of change would lift me up, carry me exactly where I needed to be.

I slithered for home with my future a shiny beacon leading the way. The dream had only to be finished. I would make my offering before the all-dark, and then, I could enjoy a long and welcome sleep knowing, when I awoke, my future would be waiting