

JOSEPHINE slowly became aware of the distant sound of someone knocking at the door, and she hoisted herself out of her chair to answer. After making her slow way across the hall, she opened the door to find a young man and a small child.

“Thomas Cole!” she exclaimed. “And little Locke!”

The latter flung himself towards her, his tiny but strong arms wrapping enthusiastically around her legs.

“Oh goodness, Locke, be careful,” she warned him, before turning to Thomas. “Well, this is a lovely surprise.”

“We were in the area,” he explained. “Locke was desperate to see you once he realised. I hope it’s no trouble –”

“Not at all,” she assured him. “I’m always delighted to see my grandson. And you too, Thomas! Will you come in for some tea?” They looked thin, both of them. She should have expected it, but she sometimes forgot what the effects of the itinerant life could be.

“Um – I actually – I was hoping you might watch Locke while I pay a visit to –”

“Oh. Yes, of course. No trouble at all,” she replied. “You take all the time you need. I’ll keep this little one entertained.”

Thomas smiled and adjusted his bandanna: a nervous habit that she’d noticed in him years earlier. “Thanks, Josephine,” he said. “I’ll see you later.”

She watched as he hurried away, and then shut the door.

“Now, Locke,” she said to the boy, who seemed to have become interested in the contents of her occasional table, “what

would you like to drink? Milk, orange juice?”

“Juice, please!” Locke replied in delight. She took his hand – it was the easiest way of making sure it didn’t get into places it shouldn’t – and let him lead her into the kitchen.

Locke took the cup of juice with both hands and sipped from it carefully. Josephine observed him as he did so. Thomas was certainly teaching the boy manners, despite their somewhat difficult living conditions. He resembled his father closely already: the lively brown eyes, the messy hair, the spirited grin. There was almost nothing of his mother in him. Perhaps that was good for Thomas – any resemblance might have been a painful reminder.

“Looks like it’s time for a story, then,” she said, sitting at the kitchen table and carefully lifting the boy into her lap. “What do you want Grandma to tell you about today?”

“War of the Magi!” Locke replied.

She’d half expected the answer – during his last visit, he’d seemed strangely taken by the tale. Still, she was concerned that the subject matter was a bit too heavy for such a young child. That said, though, Locke had already been through plenty of hardships in his short life. A thousand-year-old story of doubtful veracity surely couldn’t hurt.

“Very well,” she consented. “Legend has it that humans and espers once lived side by side ...”

She’d almost finished the story by the time there was another knock at the door. “That’ll be your daddy,” she said to

the boy, lowering him gently to the ground. "I'll just go and let him in."

Back on the doorstep, Thomas seemed a little resentful. "Nobody's looking after it," he complained. "There's weeds everywhere –"

"I know," she said. "I've been trying to get the town council to do something, but they always say they don't have the funds. I'd get down there and clear it up myself if it weren't for my arthritis."

He frowned. "They ought to show some respect. She's not even the only person buried there. Don't the other families mind?"

"I don't know if they all visit," she admitted. "But I go every week. I always tell her you and Locke miss her. Did you talk to her?"

"Felt kind of stupid," he said. "But yeah, I did."

She nodded. "It does help, I think. As much as anything can."

There was a noise behind her, and she turned to see a gleeful Locke holding one of her fancier necklaces aloft. "Locke!" she exclaimed, more impressed than annoyed. "How did you manage to find that? I keep those in a very private place –"

She turned back to Thomas, and the event seemed to have cheered him; he was looking at his son and grinning. "Sorry," he said. "Takes after me."

“I can see that,” she replied with a smile. “You know, if you ever want him to have a more settled life – if you think he might do well to attend a school – you’re welcome to bring him to stay with me. It’ll honestly be no trouble.”

“Thanks, Josephine,” he said. “I know it would be better for him – but I can’t give him up. He keeps me going. I hope you don’t think I’m being selfish –”

She shook her head. “I understand. I think I’m being a bit selfish too by asking. He’s your son after all, Thomas.”

He nodded, relieved. “I’d protect him with my life. You know that.”

“I do,” she said, and made the effort to turn the conversation to a lighter subject. “You’ll stay for dinner, won’t you? You’re all skin and bone, both of you. Let me try to get a bit of flesh onto you.”

“Dinner!” little Locke cried in glee. “Will it be anguiform soup?”

“It just might,” she informed him.



### **Around ten years later**

Josephine had taken to sitting in the kitchen during the day – it was closer to the front door, which made receiving guests less of an effort. On this particular occasion, if she’d

been any further from the door she might have failed to hear the soft, timid knock.

“I’m coming,” she murmured, as she reached for her stick and made her way to the front of the house.

She thought at first that it was Thomas Cole on the doorstep – a welcome surprise, as she hadn’t seen her son-in-law in years. She gradually realised, though, that this man was much younger than he would be – still a teenager. The resemblance was nonetheless striking, and she finally concluded, “Locke?”

“Grandma?” the boy replied hesitantly. “I – I didn’t know if I had the right address –”

“No, it is me, Locke! How wonderful to see you.” She stepped forward to hug him, and felt an uncertainty in his response – but that was normal, they hadn’t seen each other in years. He probably barely remembered her, and most teenage boys weren’t keen on publicly embracing old ladies anyway.

“Is your father with you?” she asked, when the brief embrace was over.

“I – he – he’s dead,” Locke whispered.

She felt a sudden chill. “Oh, Locke. I’m so sorry. Come in and sit down. Would you like a cup of tea?” It seemed a poor consolation, but she felt she had to offer him something.

“No thanks,” he mumbled, and followed her into the kitchen.

Once they were inside, she could see more clearly that the boy was in shock – his eyes were wide, and he sat in his chair stiffly, hardly moving at all. He must have travelled there on his own from whatever part of the world his father had been killed in, and she was sure it wouldn't have been an easy trip, especially in that state. "I'll make enough tea for both of us," she informed him, "and you can have some if you like." She slowly set about putting the kettle on.

Locke remained silent while the water boiled, and after Josephine had set the teapot and two mugs on the table, she sat down opposite him and gently said, "What happened?"

"We were camping near Doma," Locke replied. "We heard a noise outside the tent, and Dad told me to get out. I didn't want to, but he made me. So I ran off and hid behind a rock, and this whole gang – there were about six of them – they all went into the tent and – I don't know exactly what happened. I wanted to help Dad, but I was too scared. Too much of a fucking coward – sorry –"

She inclined her head to excuse the profanity.

"So I just stayed hidden there until all they all came out again, and then I went in, and he was lying there, and there was blood everywhere –" He stopped and pulled his scarf over his face.

"Oh Locke, that's terrible," said Josephine gently. Her curiosity had got the better of her, though, and she couldn't help asking, "But why did they go after him?"

Locke lowered the scarf and took a few shuddering breaths. “We took something of theirs,” he admitted. “Well, a few things – we were getting low on supplies and we needed something to barter with. We got some stuff to start with, and then I took this jewel they kept, and –” He covered his mouth with a hand, and she had to force herself to concentrate in order to make out what he was saying. “Dad said maybe we’d gone too far, but I said it was their own fault for not keeping it guarded if they cared about it that much, so we took off with it and then –” He stared at her despondently. “It was my fault! I’m the one they should have killed! I was too stupid to help Dad –”

She watched as he let his head sink into his arms and began to cry noisily. “He wouldn’t have let you,” she said. She was sure of that, at least. Thomas had always been ready to give his life for his son. It was almost a surprise that it had taken so many years.

He continued to sob, and she reached over to him and rubbed his arm as the tea grew cold.



Locke stayed with Josephine for a few weeks, and his distress gradually became more manageable. Soon, she began to see flashes of the lightness of spirit she had known in her son-in-law. She almost suggested to the boy a few times that he visit

his mother's grave, but the cemetery was in such an appalling state that it embarrassed her to think about it. Besides, Locke probably barely remembered her, if at all. Instead, she made sure he was kept well-fed. Cooking was sometimes a struggle for her these days, with her failing mobility, but she stuck to simple, filling dishes. It had probably been years since the boy had had a proper meal.

As he stayed longer, she considered really trying to make an honest man of him. She could teach him to read and write, and maybe encourage him to learn a less risky trade. But as his grief grew less acute, it became apparent that living in a proper house wasn't right for him. He found the walls and roof too constricting, and preferred to spend the nights under the stars. Eventually, he announced to Josephine that he planned to head back onto the road, and she couldn't very well discourage him: being indoors was making him restless, and that got her agitated as well. He set off a little less thin and quite a bit more content than when he had arrived.

The next time Locke returned, a few years later, Josephine's house was empty; she had slipped away quietly in her sleep only a couple of months before. He mourned her loss, but knew she'd had a good life, and was glad she could be at peace. He had something to look forward to, anyway; he was passing through on the way to Kohlingen, where he would be visiting his new girlfriend.