

We had porridge most nights, after Father left.

Mother used to sing as she stirred the pot. She had a beautiful voice, as good as the women that sometimes sang at the markets or even better. I wanted to see her sing there, see the crowds clap and cheer for her, but she only sang at home. I would sit at the table and listen with my eyes closed, not wanting her song to end.

She looked sad when she finished.

I would always get the bigger bowl. Mother said it was to make me grow up strong like Father. She watched me while I ate and smiled. Sometimes she didn't eat anything.

The fire flickered as a draft entered the room.

"When is Father coming back?"

I knew the answer, but I liked the way Mother told it.

"In sixty days. He will ride through the gates with the others, and the whole town will celebrate with a great festival that lasts for days. There will be dancing and music and all the food you could ever want, and everyone will be happy."

It was always sixty days.

I loved the market. Every Saturday, the people from the town would pour into the square to browse the stalls of merchants, watch the performers and meet each other. It had become a real community since the Wars. Smaller, of course, but there was a greater sense of unity. Everyone from the town knew each other.

It was the food stalls you noticed first, the smell of home-made biscuits and cakes hanging in the air like the fruit of an invisible tree. If you closed your eyes you could pick them out individually by their scent. It was good, but the real thing was better.

Next you'd notice the performer in the centre of the market, crowds gathered in a circle to watch. Dancers, bards, sometimes even animals, either trained or charmed, took it in turns to entertain. Very occasionally, there would be a conjurer performing magic tricks. These were my favourite. Once I saw a white-haired man throw a ball into the air. It seemed to speed up, going higher and higher until it disappeared. He just stared up at the sky at where it had gone, arms raised and talking to himself. It was like that for minutes. When it finally started to fall again, it was a giant ball and it looked like it was about to crush him. People screamed, some even covered their eyes, but he didn't flinch. When it was just above his head, it burst into thousands of tiny petals, showering the crowd. We laughed and applauded.

Sometimes there would be people at the markets I didn't recognise, who were obviously not from our town but either visiting or passing through. It was easier to spot an unfamiliar face than a familiar one.

It was at the market that I first met the moth collector.

At first, he looked like a beggar. Crouching in a shaded corner of the market, wearing a tatty brown robe which didn't fully cover his legs. He wasn't *old*, but his face was worn like he'd travelled the world, and obscured by his long straggly hair and thick beard.

He noticed me watching him and waved, with a friendly smile. I took that as an invitation. Mother would not have liked me talking to a stranger, but she was busy talking to her friends, and I was old enough to be careful.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Michael. What are you doing in Stormreach?"

"Here for the market. Same as everyone else today." I had expected a gruff voice to go with his rugged appearance, but he spoke softly and clearly, although his accent I couldn't place.

"Oh. What are you buying?"

"I prefer to trade, actually." He rocked forward and grinned. "Got any moths?"

I jerked backwards, inspecting him. "Moths? But what would you want them for? I caught one once and put it in a box and it died, and Mother said they *all* die like that, because they don't live for very long."

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. I collect moths. I am a moth collector. My whole life is dedicated to moths."

"Really?"

"Yes. Do you collect anything, Michael? Perhaps we could do a trade."

I didn't, really. I thought for a moment. "Seeds."

"Ah, an excellent choice. And you have already caught moths before, did you say?"

"Oh yes, there are always some in my house."

"Excellent, excellent. Then you have no problem bringing me a moth or two. Here." He handed me a tiny purple bag. "Remember to throw this at the moths. See you next time, Michael."

We came back from the market without buying anything. I was excited about the moth collector. He would give me anything I wanted, and all I had to do was find moths. They were *everywhere!*

For the first time, I would be able to help Mother. What she couldn't afford for us, I would trade for moths. New clothes, new food. I couldn't wait to show her the garden, *grow* things in it.

I spent the next week catching moths.

At first I tried the garden. They sometimes flew there. I didn't have a net, and catching them in my hands was harder than I remembered. I was out of practice, maybe.

I used the bag that the moth collector had given me. Just a pinch at first, to see what would happen. It was enough. It plumed into a glittering cloud, and immediately the moths flew towards it. More moths than I even knew were in our garden. They twinkled in the cloud and stayed there, and I could easily cup my hands around them. I placed them in a shoebox, one by one.

I was so eager to catch the moths that I did not stop to think about whether it mattered if they were dead or not. I realised I probably should have waited until closer to the weekend to begin catching them. Alive would make more sense.

I didn't wait, though, and after just two nights I had a shoebox full of moths. They fluttered inside, their tiny wings batting in unison, producing a strange hum that gave the shoebox a musical quality.

The box kept buzzing until the weekend. None of the moths were dead.

The bag of powder was still full.

I decided he was no ordinary moth collector. By this I mean that he was not an ordinary collector, and they were not ordinary moths. He was not an ordinary collector of ordinary moths.

I could not hide the box from Mother, but I wrapped it in some old cloths to soften the sound and took it to the market under my arm. I would have said that I was going to try and sell the cloths, but she didn't ask. Just looked at me.

My eyes were immediately drawn to that shaded corner, where the moth collector sat alone as before. It looked like he hadn't moved. The box seemed to buzz with excitement. I waited until Mother was busy talking to the shopkeeper of a cheese stall, then went over.

"Hello again," he said. His voice again had that tonal quality, like a flute. He squinted to look at me.

I unwrapped the shoebox. Their noise was incredible now. I was afraid the whole market could hear.

"Ah yes, I see you have been busy. Did you use the powder, like I said?"

"Yes, it exploded into a cloud and caught the moths in it."

He grinned.

"And the powder - it's all still there. And I thought moths died when you caught them."

"There are many secrets about the moths." This is all he said.

I gave him the box. He sniffed it and put it on the floor beside him. I waited, expecting something in return.

He rummaged in his pockets, eventually producing a small spade-shaped thing which I presumed was a seed. There was only one of them.

"Don't let its appearance fool you," he said, holding it out in his palm. "It will grow into whatever you want. Just plant it and you'll see."

I was confused, but I took the seed from the moth collector and thanked him for it. When I returned to my mother, she asked me if I had made a good deal. I said I had, but she must have known I was lying because she only smiled, weirdly.

I had expected him to be more grateful for the moths.

I dug a small hole in the garden with my hands and dropped the seed into it. When it hit the soil, it seemed to fall through it as if it had suddenly become too heavy for the ground. I waited for it, as though it might come back up, but nothing happened. I scooped the soil back into the hole again. There were some moths in the garden, but I let them be.

Mother did not sing as she stirred the porridge.

"I don't want you to talk to that man again, Michael. Nobody knows where he comes from. People are saying strange things about him."

I looked down at the table. "Sorry. I was only talking to him. He seemed friendly."

She sighed. "Sometimes people seem friendly when they're not."

I wanted to tell her that I had made a good trade. But I kept it to myself because I wanted it to be a surprise. When she saw what was growing for herself, she would know I was right and would be happy.

I had to be even more careful about catching the moths after that. I left the house as quietly as possible at night so that Mother would not hear. I even caught some around the house, when I could, using only my hands. I then sprinkled the powder in the box instead, because I imagined that if I did this they would live for longer.

Nothing grew in the garden. I looked out regularly at the place where I had planted the seed, but could see no shoots growing. It looked as if the soil had risen slightly in a sort of mound, but I chose not to disturb it. I felt let down.

At the next market, the moth collector was not there. I hurried around in confusion, scanning the crowds in case he had left his usual corner. I didn't find him anywhere. I thought about what Mother had said, that nobody knew where he had come from. Maybe nobody had talked to him, like he was not welcome in our town. Why was he not welcome?

Why does he collect moths?

In one of the side streets I saw a man hobbling away from the market. He had long hair and a brown cloak, and looked strangely dark as if the shadows were following him.

Without thinking, I followed him too, keeping my distance and staying to the sides of the houses, so that if he looked back he would not see me. I held the shoebox close to my chest, and it was not buzzing but making a strange, frightened trill, something like the whimper of a dog.

He stopped outside the back entrance to a tavern, empty barrels of ale stacked outside. He descended the steps between the barrels, and I lost sight of him for a moment.

A warm, musty smell filled the air around the top of the steps. I looked down into the cellar, but could only see more barrels and a faint orange light that was probably from a torch. I had to go down. I felt a sense of importance in following this man.

There was nothing much to see immediately in the cellar, but the smell was overwhelming and I covered my nose with my hands, feeling as though I might choke.

I heard a noise behind a row of barrels, in the well-lit corner of the room. It sounded like creaking floorboards at first and, when I got closer, loud thumping.

I looked.

There was the moth collector, holding on to a young woman with long golden hair who was bent over against a table. They were both naked. I could see marks like grease on the woman's skin, where his grimy fingers had pressed.

I looked away.

I wondered what I was doing. I felt stupid, carrying a box of moths, to a man who was naked.

Then, footsteps. Fluttering. Buzzing, from me. I turned around.

Two more women who were almost naked. I noticed them first. But between them was a giant moth.

Giant like it touched the ceiling. Its wings held the women.

One of them held a shoebox. My shoebox, from last time.

She was eating a normal-sized moth.

It crunched in her mouth like a hard biscuit. She reached into the box and took another. Crunch.

The other woman took my shoebox. She sniffed it, then patted me on the shoulder. "Sorry, kid. You're too young for this business."

I didn't understand.