

# Wild Spirit

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*I dedicate this story to Eunice Vun, my friend and part-time editor, who inspired and helped me with ideas when I was stuck. Thanks a whole heap Eunice! Oh yes, and also Mr Gavin Marshall, known as Mr M, for pushing me to my greatest extent with word*

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<b>Chapter 1 - The Meeting in the Night</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Chapter 2 - The Raven's Story</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 3 - Danger</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 4 - Ambush</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Chapter 5 - Tavares</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter 6 - Planning</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Chapter 7 - The Evilness of Betrayal</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Chapter 8 - Rescue</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Chapter 9 - Revenge</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Chapter 10 - Wild Spirit</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Chapter 11 - - CAST -</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Chapter 12 - - GLOSSARY -</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Chapter 13 - - A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR -</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Chapter 14 - - REVIEW -</b>	<b>38</b>

# 1 - The Meeting in the Night

A lone person wandered through the Black Forest, the deadly silence broken only by the panting of breath and occasional curse from the person, probably from the voice, a female. She was tall, her black cloak, silver shirt, breeches and hooded head giving of an aura of foreboding, and even though her body fit, she had a limp of one who has been injured, though at the female's present state of mind, she was, in no means, going to tell anyone. She finally reached a clearing, the trees surrounding it so thick, that the moon was only just visible through the smallest tree tops. The female sat down in the middle of the clearing, and, without taking her cloak off, she sat crossed legged on the ground, her silver eyes taking in every single detail of the trees around her. She pulled her hood on her cloak further up, closed her eyes, and sunk into deep meditation.

The darkness of night lay thickly over the sleeping village, its occupants unaware of the happenings that would take place. So, the lone figure sat, meditating, hardly visible in the surrounding darkness, deaf and blind to the world. But not for long.

Two large owls sat perched above the female, having followed behind her all of her journey and into the forest, their large, round eyes drifting lazily over the shadows, keenly watching for signs of movement, even though there was none. One of the owls, black like the night sky, gave off a low hoot, and stared expectantly at the female.

"Be patient Shadow," she said to the owl, keeping her eyes firmly shut.

The silence settled again and everything was still once more.

However, the other owl, silver like the moon, hooted louder than Shadow, and swooped down at the female's head, the tips of her flight feathers grazing the top of the hood, drawing it back, and letting long, silver hair tumble out.

"Curse you Opal! I swear that you and Shadow are slowly making your way towards being taken to the Royal Aviary if you continue the way you have!" she shouted at the silver owl, scowling.

Both owls gave an indignant hoot, as if to say, "You would never. So there!"

She scowled deeper and groped around the dark ground for her staff. Giving up in exasperation, she leant on a tree, pulled herself up with the lower branches, and attempted to stand on both feet. She fell with a cry, swearing colourfully as she landed on her staff. Her slim fingers closed around the runes carved into the silver-birch wood, just missing the long glinting blade at the end as she heaved herself up. Even though she leant mostly on her staff, she was quite tall for a female, reaching the owl's perch in the lowest branches of an oak tree, and even though the darkness and shadows of night hid most her face, her skin was the unmistakable black, the mark of a Drow. Just below the blade on the staff, five letters were carved clearly and painted in silver; Rayne, the female's name.

Rayne surveyed the clearing through her silver eyes, more intense than before, inspecting each tree, running her fingers down trails of red sap where a woodcutter must have tried to cut some of the trees down, failing most terribly.

She limped from the clearing, making her way along an overgrown goatherd track to a hill over-looking the village. She sighed, knowing she could never get used to that life, never.

Quite suddenly, in a flurry of black feathers, Shadow left his tree perch with a sharp beat of his wings, swooping down to the low bushes at the far end of the hill, thrashing in the leaves and branches. When he returned, he held a squirming frog in his beak. It croaked noisily, struggling to slip out of the owl's beak to no avail.

Rayne gazed at the frog in Shadow's beak, looking as if she was deciding on something important.

"I'm not in the mood for games," she said dryly to the frog, after a while, as if were human.

It stopped struggling quite reluctantly, and Shadow put it down, eyeing it with great enjoyment and glee, though he seemed gloomy that he had lost his dinner. The frog hopped away slowly into the bushes, and sat, its eyes closed, while Rayne waited patiently.

Its skin started to shift, changing to a coffee-brown, and its body began to bend and expand into a human form.

In not much time, a young man stood before her. He was an impressive sight; tall, even taller than Rayne, slim with a flowing blue robe on under a white cloak. His fingers were laden with rubies and emeralds on thick gold bands. His dark brown eyes were young and full of life, his long black hair tied into a ponytail, his brown skin damp with sweat.

Rayne looked him up and down, walking in a tight circle, taking in his rich clothing and jewellery. They stared at each other for some time, Rayne cold and stony and the man quite bemused and shy.

"Name yourself," Rayne demanded sharply, still watching him closely.

The man looked nervously from her bladed staff, to her face eyeing her black skin with obvious fright. He had heard rumors about Drows...

"I am Xavier," he started shakily, "Imperial Mage of Mages, loyal servant to His Royal Majesty, Rowan, King of this land, Tavares, Duke of Brining, Lord of—"

She cut him off. "That will do, save your breath. Why are you here?"

"I have been ordered to seek and escort a powerful mage to His Royal Majesty, Rowan, King of this land, Tavares, Duke of Brining, Lord of—" He stopped and flushed a light crimson.

"Does this 'Powerful Mage' have a name?" she asked bluntly.

"Yes. He is known as The Raven," he said, equally as blunt, loosing his shaking voice and looking at her with visible wariness.

"I know of The Raven you seek Xavier of Mages," she said, mildly amused.

"You do?" Xavier asked, his face brightening.

"You are looking at her."

She held back her laughter at the look on Xavier's face, but only just. He stared at her, utterly shocked.

“But – you – lady – mistake – Raven - man! - I thought...” He took a shuddering breath. “Forgive me your Ladyship, but I, err, WE were expecting a, err, a...”

“Male?” she guessed easily, a frown twitching at her lips.

Xavier nodded his head weakly, attempting a lop-sided smile, which faltered and faded at Rayne’s fixed face.

“You and your King have much to learn. Why am I needed?”

Xavier fumbled for words, his eyes darting over the shadows. “I, err...” He closed his mouth quickly and composed himself. “I cannot speak of it here your Ladyship. Perhaps you know of a place where we could eat and sleep? We can talk then.”

Rayne smiled. “I know of a charming place to stay the night, and it’s always open to strangers.”

Her eyes sparkled with laughter.

“Perfect your Ladyship! Lead the way!”

“I’d prefer it if you called me Rayne.”

“Yes your Ladyship Rayne!” He said merrily, almost skipping on the spot.

“Not your Ladyship Rayne, just Rayne.”

“Yes...” he stopped short, visibly unsettled by calling Rayne by her given name.

Rayne started off at a brisk, limping pace, the owls flying behind them, Xavier falling easily into step with her, skipping slightly.

‘What a pair we must look!’ she thought silently to herself.

The trees twisted in, out and around the worn path leading from the hill down past the clearing, village crops and into the little village beyond.

They passed closed shops and an empty market place. A commotion was coming from one of the buildings they were heading towards, its bright lights burning into the night sky.

Xavier looked at it with apprehension, wringing his hands as they stopped at the door.

\* \* \*

## 2 - The Raven's Story

It wasn't a tavern really, but a type of rowdy inn. The windows had been thrown wide-open, noise travelling freely around the place. Two holes in the glass suggested that someone, or possibly, something, had broken it.

The tavern was busy, more so than usual. Drunks lay strewn across tables, benches and the floor, fist-fights breaking out every few rounds of drinks.

The smell was unbearable, ale, wine and rum taking over every clean breathing space possible.

Xavier watched uneasily from the window, and then slowly walked into the tavern, closely followed by Rayne and the owls.

People turned to stare at them, mostly at Rayne's complexion and Xavier's clothing. Women whispered and pointed at the Mage in his robes and Rayne's face from their gossiping groups. Men turned to glare at the two, their eyes glinting with malice and taunts, as if daring Xavier to talk to them with his finery, and Rayne to even think of touching them.

One man, reeking of ale, stuck his legs out into Rayne's path.

"So, we have a Drow among us," he roared, not bothering to lower his voice. "Go back into the shadows where you belong Drow," he hissed at her.

"Please move your overly large and ugly feet out of my way you great pig of an oaf," she said sweetly, hiding her anger behind a well-made mask.

The man looked dumb for a moment, turning this over in his mind. Recognizing what Rayne had said as an insult, he growled and lunged at her. She moved quickly out of the way of the bumbling arms. Rayne struck the drunk's chest with the blunt edge of her staff, smiling with a sort of grim satisfaction as he went flying backwards on his chair.

She went to sit down in a far corner of the tavern, Xavier trailing behind her.

He sat down opposite, pulling off his rings, looking at them with faint distaste, then stuffed them into his cloak.

"Charming place to stay the night," he mimicked her.

She gave him a stony look, which he pretended not to see, and busied himself with ordering as a barmaid came over.

"Let's see what's on the menu... Ale, rum, wine, water, juice, beef, pork and, ah! A salad... with lamb," he said, sighing heavily.

Rayne looked at the table, tracing the menu carved in its wooden surface, impatient to get on with what they had come for.

"One water, one wine and two salads if you please madam," he said to the barmaid.

Both owls hooted.

“And two drumsticks,” he added.

The women moved off and quickly brought their order, risking several glances at Xavier. The owls perched in the rafters, tearing hungrily into their drumsticks. Xavier sipped once at his wine and started to gulp down the salad, moving the lamb to the far side of the plate. Rayne stared into her water and picked at her salad.

Xavier smacked his lips and rested his head on his hands.

“Now, about our, uh, little business. King Rowan has had, uh, problems with the neighbouring lands, you know, Yuri, Lang He and Charest. They have been invading lately, just little parts of Tavares, the mills, cornfields, and Rowan fears that this will lead to the bigger villages, ones the capital is dependant upon. We have an army, but Rowan’s high mage is, ah, let’s just say he’s a bit laid-off. I was asked to seek you out and ask if we could be so honored as to have you join our forces. We have been told much about your powers in shape shifting, and Rowan feels they are an excellent asset to have in an army.”

He paused, looking at her uneasily.

She looked blankly at him. “So the king believes that a young lad, or lady so it seems at this point, will come willingly to join his forces, fight in his honour, and use her powers to defeat other lands that he says have been invading. All of this, and on a single discussion with his one of his mages. How touching and unplanned.”

She could barely contain her laughter.

“We have strong forces, but not as strong as the combined strength of powerful mages, such as yourself. When the time comes close to war, we will strike first, fast and hard. But enough of this talk and tell me. How did you become known as The Raven?” he looked at her

She hesitated, and lowered her voice slightly. “Have you ever seen a silver raven?” she asked, her eyes glittering with excitement.

“Never, I’m afraid not. It has been said that only one has ever been seen. But, then again, a farmer, working his maize fields, could have been suffering from overwork, or maybe not.” He shrugged. “We have no way of knowing for sure.”

“I am also a shape-shifter, like you. My favorite shape was, and still is I might add, a silver raven. Before raiders killed my Mam and Da, we lived with my sister in a cottage by a clearing, not far from where we met. Mam was a full blood Elf and Da, full blood Drow, so I took after Da while my sister took after Ma. Once, when I was young, I was bad and flew too high in my raven form, and a farmer saw me. I was punished severely after that. My sister, younger than me, called me ‘The Raven’, and the name spread through our village and beyond to who-knows-where. Wild rumours started that I had saved the entire crop from a plague of locusts, and even wilder than that. I suppose it kind of ‘stuck’ to me after that, though no-one who sees me knows that I am the raven. The name born from a whipping.” She added, and sighed deeply.

Xavier was staring at her again, abandoning his attempts to be polite.

“For you to change into a bird from such a young age, you must have power to that of the Master Changer himself!” he cried, forgetting to keep his voice low.

People turned to stare.

Rayne blushed, the crimson colour showing faintly on her dark skin.

She drank the rest of her water slowly, and finished off her salad along with Xavier’s lamb chunks.

“I am tired. Let us get a decent room before they are all taken.” She said after a while, breaking the awkward silence that had followed.

At that, both stood mechanically and walked up the staircase to the key wall, selected a suitable room, took their keys from the wall, and left, closely followed by Opal and Shadow.

Xavier fingered his key, and tossed down a few gold coins for the meal.

“Good night”, he whispered as he passed her door.

Shadow hooted once, and followed him into his room, his great wings brushing the edges of the hallway walls.

Once inside his room, he locked the door and lit a candle.

“This will have to do for the night,” he sighed to himself as he looked about the drab room once, and climbed silently into bed, the wood creaking, fully clothed.

\* \* \*

### 3 - Danger

Rayne tossed and turned that night, unable to find sleep.

Opal and Shadow had long ago gone out hunting, and would not return until mid afternoon, so she wriggled out of bed, grabbed her staff, the blade glinting in the moonlight, and limped out through the hall, passing Xavier's door, from which a soft snoring omitted.

She slipped out onto the roof, the wind ruffling her hair. She had not thought of bringing her cloak, and now shivered in her night shirt.

She let her eyes wander around the roofs sparkling with a light rain that was starting to fall. She closed her eyes, savoring the rain as her own, licking the raindrops that dribbled down her face to her chin.

The rain was blown about wildly, black clouds gathering and a storm was waiting to strike within. She stood up slowly, and started back across the roof, staff clunking dully on the stone.

Just then, lightning started, making streaks of gold flash across the sky. She paused to watch, her heart pounding with adrenaline and excitement at the golden streaks. The lightning wandered close to her, sending a shock through her body. She stumbled, dropping her staff, the rain lashing down at her body, her hair whipping her face in the wind. The lightning struck again, this time it landed in the middle of her back. She screamed with pain, the shock ripping into her body like thousands of sharp knives. Her screaming ceased as the lightning left her limp body.

\* \* \*

Xavier woke, sweating and panting.

He had heard a scream, he was sure. Grabbing his cloak, he hurried outside into the hallway, still dressed in his blue robe. A crowd had begun to gather.

He turned Rayne's door handle, expecting to find it locked, but the door creaked open easily. Her discarded covers told him that she was not there.

He went outside, heart beating hard. He walked briskly down the hall, restraining himself from running as fast as he could to the roof.

The crowd followed, murmuring to each other. He passed through the open roof door, his eyes scanning frantically for Rayne.

A crumpled body lay not far from the edge of the roof. He ran towards Rayne, his hands checking for her pulse as soon as he reached her. He found it, a very faint pulsing, hardly there, in her neck.

He gathered her up carefully, bringing her back into the tavern.

"Call for a healer!" he ordered the barmaid, who immediately swept out and into the rain.

He brought Rayne back into her room, laying her on the bed. Getting a towel, he began lightly dabbing her face, arms and legs. A woman timidly came in, snatched up a dry towel and took over.

Xavier sighed wearily, rubbing his temples. 'What a night!' he thought shakily.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Rayne still lay in a deep sleep, deaf to the world around her. Xavier was pale and drawn, tired from the night's events.

He hardly touched his food, and harassed the healer every given moment.



“How is she?” he said, wringing his hands.

“She’s lucky to be alive,” was all the barmaid could say.

He grew angry, and demanded to see Rayne.

“Sir!” the barmaid said. “I have been given orders by the healer! She said complete, undisturbed rest!”

Xavier sighed in defeat. “I understand. Thank you.”

He went outside to survey the damage the storm had caused to others. Houses had collapsed, roofs ripped off, fields burnt or flooded and trees ripped out from their roots, toppling onto the roads. He joined the helpers, bandaging heads and setting broken bones.

“If only Rowan could see me now!” he said to himself, making an effort to cheer himself.

A child, maybe about six or seven, came up, sucking her thumb, big, dark eyes filled with tears.

“Where is your mother?” he asked kindly.

The little girl said nothing but looked hopelessly at him.

He stretched out his hand, and the little girl took it, holding tight. They began searching the crowds, asking if anyone had seen the little girl’s mother.

One healer pointed to short, stout woman, who was calling her child’s name.

“Lisa! Oh Lisa! Where are you darling? Oh where are you?”

The little girl let go of his hand, and ran to her mother, hugging her tight. The mother bent down, cradling the child tenderly, tears running down her dusty cheeks. She smiled at Xavier. He smiled back. The smile remained as he returned to the tavern.

\* \* \*

Rayne stood in a dark room, no windows and no light, only cold, dark stone. She could not breath; it felt as if a heavy boulder was attached to her chest and she could hardly move her body, only a whisper coming out when she called for help. Slowly, very slowly, she sunk to the floor, weeping and gasping for air. She struck her fists against the wall, hitting it with all the strength she had left. She knew it was hopeless. She slid down the wall, eyes closed. Giving up trying to draw a breath, she closed her eyes as the place before her started to swim and blur. She felt sleepy, so sleepy...

Suddenly, a voice called out of the silence.

“Rayne, Rayne! Come back Rayne...”

‘What is that name? Why do I know it?’ she thought. She sunk into unsettled sleep, laying still and cold, not moving at all.

\* \* \*

Rayne’s eyes opened. How sweet the air seemed...

She looked around groggily, aware of a sharp throbbing in her head. Xavier was kneeling beside her bed, his face strained, while both owls sat on the end of her bed, gazing with their large eyes.

“Oh Rayne!” Xavier cried, holding her hand tightly.

“I was lost... I couldn't find my way back...” she whispered.

“Shh, be still.” He crooned softly. “Go to sleep.”

“If I go to sleep, I'll be lost again.”

He put his hand on hers.

“We will keep you from there,” he said softly.

Opal hooted with agreement.

Rayne closed her eyes, falling into dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

## 4 - Ambush

They left the tavern before the sun had fully risen the next day.

Rayne was quite shaken after her encounter with death, and she was silent as they left on horseback from the village, staring blankly ahead at the colouring horizon. The owls slept in shaded perches under Xavier's horse's belly.

He also, had remained silent, and she wondered if he was trying to forget it too.

His grey stallion, Prince, placid enough, was quite uneasy with the perches and the silence, whickering often to Rayne's silver mare, Moon.

Rayne broke the silence.

"Where are we going now?" she said stiffly.

"To a town, not far from the forest coming up," he replied, pointing absently at a vast patch of green a little way in front of them.

They had made good progress since that morning, pausing only to obtain horses and supplies from a trader in the village. They rode in quiet again.

Soon, they had reached the forest, which seemed to stretch for miles and miles across the dirt path.

"If you can't go around it, you have to go through it," Rayne said mildly.

She kicked Moon forward, going at a slow trot. Xavier grimaced and followed, glancing about him nervously.

The forest was dark, even in daylight. The owls rejoiced from the change, and flew from their perches, swooping about happily, screeching every now and then.

"Can you ask them to scan the area?" Xavier asked.

"They've gone silly from the change. I'll go."

She handed her reigns over, edging down from her horse. Her body began to change, shrinking and growing large wings, her mouth forming into a sharp beak, her staff becoming part of silver plumage growing steadily over her body.

"A silver raven..." Xavier whispered in awe under his breath as Rayne took off, fluttering above the canopy of trees.

Xavier rode in silence, uneasy with the rustling and screeching that came in short, loud bursts. He was now completely alone; Rayne mapping, the owls playing. All he had was the horses.

"Great help Rayne," he grumbled as Shadow perched on his shoulder, panting slightly. He gave a loud, alarmed squawk.

Xavier glanced over his shoulder. At least five pairs of dark eyes stared back at him. The soldiers'

horses charged forward, catching Shadow by his foot, knocking Xavier on the head, but not able to catch Moon's loose reigns.

\* \* \*

Rayne saw nothing but trees from the sky, trees, trees and more trees. 'Might as well turn back and go around,' she thought to herself.

Suddenly, Opal came careering out of the canopy, hooting in alarm.

A shower of arrows followed her, narrowly missing both of them by inches. They dove down into the forest, taking shelter.

"What on earth?" Rayne gasped once she had changed back. "What happened Opal?"

The owl flew off, hooting for Rayne to follow.

She limped after the owl, panting by the time she reached a thick bush, and her escaped mare.

"What happened?" she asked Moon.

Moon snorted, urging Rayne to mount her.

Rayne did, and Moon took off at a frantic gallop. It was getting dark.

\* \* \*

They had ridden fast, Opal flying behind, trees whipping at Rayne's face and Moon's sweating flanks. The horse slowed, treading carefully and soundlessly.

Ahead was curling smoke from a campfire. Rayne dismounted, treading as carefully as the horse, placing her staff on bare earth. She moved as swiftly as she could, scrambling up trees and going as close as she dared towards the camp.

Soldiers sat unarmoured around the fire, laughing at a tall figure chained to a flag pole. Beside the figure, a large black owl was squeezed into a small brass cage.

Men cheered as a smartly dressed man rode a bucking horse, half terrified with pain.

Rayne's face burned with anger as she slipped down the tree and, under the cover of night, went into the weapons' tent.

"This is for Shadow," she said as she changed shaped, growing scaly wings, sharp teeth and a long whipping tail.

"This is for Prince," she said as she gathered her fire.

"And this is for XAVIER!" she screamed as she let the red hot fire billow from her mouth, burning and melting the weapons.

She could hear shouting outside the smoldering tent, and just as she left it, it collapsed, making a fiery orb around the weapons. She lumbered over to Xavier and Shadow, cutting their bonds with her silver claws.

"Go and free Prince!" she called as Xavier's chains rattled to the ground.

Xavier, pale and frightened, stood frozen.

“GO!” Rayne roared, her dragon wings beating.

He ran towards the stallion, who had managed to fling his rider off, and was looking quite pleased with himself. Xavier spoke calming words and mounted Prince, taking up a discarded sword.

Rayne turned back to the soldiers who were quivering with fright in their boots. All they had were wooden staffs, and half of them had bolted out of the camp and into the surrounding forest. She frowned. ‘Where will they go?’ She thought.

Shaking the feeling off, she shifted back to her own shape, and took up her bladed staff, swinging it dangerously.

“Do you like to play?” she asked a soldier, who cringed and let out a whimper, to which Rayne grinned maliciously. “I hope you like playing rough then. Ladies first though...”

Rayne swiped the blade across the man’s stomach before he even had time to even move an inch. She whipped around, slicing down at the attacker creeping up behind her.

A cry of pain split through the air, making Rayne falter and look over her shoulder.

Xavier was kneeling, hand clutched to his side, sword embedded in a soldier’s chest. He had to use both hands to pull it free, and in that time, Rayne saw the blood.

The rest of the soldiers had fled, leaving behind their tents, horses, armour and food.

Rayne rushed over to Xavier, heart thumping in her chest.

“What happened?” She asked frantically.

“Slashed,” he replied shortly, gripping his side again. “Reach into my robes,” he commanded after a gasping breath, “and take out a green vial. Use it on the cut.”

Rayne felt around in his robes, and pulled out 3 vials. She took the green one, and poured a few drops onto his wound. He stopped clutching it, and it closed up, knitting the skin together.

“Thank you for that,” he panted, leaning back and rubbing his healed side.

Rayne smiled lopsidedly, and stood, looking at the ruins around them.

She took up her staff, and wandered over to the ashened weapons tent.

Prodding around with her toe, she found a number of boxes, badly burnt by the flames, but inside they were perfectly clean.

There were a number of sword, daggers, bows, arrows and even some throwing discs and darts, equipped with packs of poison.

She searched the soldiers quarters, dragging out pallets, blankets, armour, food, drink, clothes and some healer’s bag equipped with bandages, potions and things even Rayne couldn’t identify.

She dragged them into the middle, and both Rayne and Xavier began to sort through them, picking what they needed and what they could sell.

“We could take two more horses to carry everything, and sell them after. We can let the rest free. They were probably wild in the first place,” Xavier said once they were finished.

Rayne said nothing.

They packed everything, mounted Moon and Prince, and rode on through the forest. Shadow and Opal sulked on their shaded perches.

\* \* \*

## 5 - Tavares

Xavier was quite weak after his ordeal, the effects of the healing potion slight.

They had passed through a town, selling what they didn't need, including the tamest of the horses they had used. Rayne counted the money in her purse.

"20 gold coins, 16 silver, 12 copper, 5 loaves of bread, 4 water skins and 4 wine skins. Not bad at all," she reported to Xavier as they passed out of swampland.

Xavier was grumbling again, and mumbled something about never wanting to go near a swamp-toad again. Rayne grinned at this. The owls had departed long ago, and had not returned.

"The last leg of the journey," Rayne said, and Xavier breathed a sigh of relief.

The area was mountainous, the tall peaks rocketing out of the earth at steep angles.

After trying to lead the horses up the first peak, they found that both they and the horses slipped back down to the base.

Xavier went back to grumbling, inspecting the ground around the peak.

Rayne however, was thinking rapidly.

"If I can change my shape, why can't I change that of an object?" she said to herself, her mind racing with the possibility.

Glancing at Xavier, she sat down, cross-legged, and meditated, going deeper into her magic than she had never dared enter before. She imagined the stubborn peak, smoothing the surfaces down flattening them with her mind, doing the same actions with her hands to the air.

The ground about her shook violently, stone crumbling around her. She opened her eyes after the tremors had stopped.

Before her stood, or rather sat, a disgruntled Xavier, his arms resting on a flat peak.

Rayne grinned with satisfaction and mounted her horse, pulling Xavier up beside her.

"Hold Prince's reins. VERY tightly I might add," she told him.

He gripped the reins as she kicked Moon into a gallop.

As they passed over one flattened peak, they stopped so Rayne could flatten the next few.

After hours of journeying, they pitched the soldier tent and unrolled their pallet beds.

Taking out some bread, Xavier toasted it while Rayne searched for honey.

They ate in silence.

"This is the last time we'll have our freedom," Xavier sighed, looking miserable.

"Don't you want to go back to your Mage life?" Rayne asked.

“I suppose I do, but being out here, my life looks like a whole, drab waste.”

They looked at each other, imagining what the other was thinking. Their eyes met, and just for that one moment, Rayne’s eyes were soft, loving. Xavier stood and sat down next to her.

They looked at each other, seeing their longing for the first time. They entered their separate tents.

\* \* \*

In the morning, both were slightly uncomfortable. They started out with dragging feet, the horses worn to their last reserve of strength.

“Tell me about Tavares,” Rayne said suddenly.

“It’s a large capital, with large, bright houses, huge markets and stores, the most exquisite temple and of course the Castle. Adjoining the Castle is the mage quarters, training yards, stables, kitchens, aviary, page, squire and knight dormitories and the college.”

“A college? What for?”

“Well, the boys go there to learn magic and weaponry, and the girls go there to learn to be a lady...and lady type stuff.”

Rayne snorted in disbelief. “Why so different from the boys? Girls can fight as well as boys, maybe even better!”

Xavier nodded, smiling. “I suppose they never met you then.”

Rayne hid her blush inside her hood.

“I suppose you won’t be getting dressed up in a dress to meet the king?” he asked cheekily.

Rayne scolded at him. “I’m coming just as I was as you first saw me. A limping female with owls... Oh dear, they haven’t come back yet!” she cried.

“Shh, be still. They have probably gone on to Tavares, sick of us slowing them down. We will find them when we get there.”

“How long will that be?” she asked anxiously.

“We shall be nearly there by sunset, and we will arrive by sunrise if we hurry through the night.”

They trudged on through the rest of the rock lands, and by midnight, had covered a vast area of forest. By sunrise, they had reached their destination, Tavares.



\* \* \*

They had entered a large village, more of a town. The roads were cobbled, and carts and horses bustled through every lane and pathway they could find.

The markets were filled with women and children, hurrying to get what they needed before the merchants and traders blocked every throughway.

Xavier was smiling broadly.

Rayne stared around her at the busy town. Xavier had described it just as she saw it.

Red, white, blue, brown, yellow and cream houses lined the street that they now traveled down.

The castle loomed in front of them, a great, royal looking building.

Xavier had talked her into wearing a dress, which they had custom made at a shop in the streets. She now wore a white blouse and long silver skirt, which she had been forced into by Xavier. Her staff had been wiped down, the blade sharpened, and the owls, who they had found waiting for them at the gates, much to Rayne's relief, were now perched on her shoulders.

Xavier, who had taken his rings off long ago, and didn't put them back on. He wore a clean, emerald robe, and another white cloak.

They entered the castle slowly, their horses led off to the stables.

Rayne had pulled on her hood, just to make sure they didn't get any trouble.

Xavier walked boldly through the gates, waving an impatient hand at the guards who had stooped to bow.

"Open the door," he commanded a burly looking man who did so, though quite roughly.

They started off again, walking, or rather limping in Rayne's case, through the walls, laden with tapestries and portraits of the Royal Family.

They came to a pair of large, gold doors, which creaked open. The herald rushed to announce Xavier.

"Your majesty, Xavier. Imperial Mage of Mages."

Xavier bowed low to a man sitting in an elaborate throne at the end of the room. Rayne peeped from behind the doors. As she had first seen Xavier, the King looked rather impressive. Tall, dressed in robes of gold, scarlet and violet and his delicate fingers crammed with rubies, emerald, sapphires and diamonds on thick gold bands. His short chestnut hair was neatly combed and his green eyes twinkled with glee.

"Xavier, how good to see you, my friend!" Rowan said, his voice ringing through the room as he embraced Xavier with a hug.

"I have brought you our guest, Rowan. May I introduce the Lady Rayne," Rayne flinched slightly, "Or as her proper title, The Raven...And Shadow and Opal," he added, remembering how sulky the owls could get if left out.

He beckoned Rayne forward, eventually taking her hand and leading, half dragging her towards Rowan, avoiding the swipe of her staff.

She made to do a bow, but realized she was in a skirt, and attempted to do a curtsy, but stumbled. Opal hooted and took off, closely followed by Shadow. Rowan caught her just before she fell, and she

blushed so deeply, the crimson outshined her dark skin.

Rowan smiled, helping her regain her balance.

Rayne smiled back, awkward though it seemed. She gripped her staff tighter for balance and curtsied.

“It seems my judgment of a male mage was wrong, milady.” Rowan said.

“Yes your majesty, it seems so,” Rayne said quietly.

She glanced nervously at Xavier, silently asking what to do next.

“Shall I show her around the castle Rowan?” Xavier asked, breaking the awkward silence.

“I think I shall. I would like to know more about this young lady,” he said loudly, holding out his arm.

Rayne took it slowly, unsure of what to do next.

“What would you like to see milady?”

“I...I am told that you...you have an aviary, majesty,” she said timidly.

“Ah yes, my aviary. I see that you like birds,” he chortled, watching the owls.

“Yes your majesty.”

“Please, call me Rowan. Majesty always makes me feel so old...”

They left the room, Rowan helping her along after handing her staff to Xavier.

He now ran his hands down the wood, and then swept on out of the room, making for the college, frowning slightly.

\* \* \*

Rayne gazed around the aviary. It was larger and more spectacular than any other she had seen before. She said this to Rowan.

“Thank you Rayne. I am quite fond of all the birds here.”

He had taken to saying her name without milady, much quicker than Xavier... Xavier.

‘I wonder what he’s doing now...’ She thought as Rowan helped her out of the aviary to show her the castle grounds.

\* \* \*

Xavier was sitting in the college library, looking in all the ancient rune books he could find, looking up the runes he found on Rayne’s staff, then writing them down on paper.

So far, all he could find was ‘Shifter’, ‘The Raven’, ‘Owls’, and the colours silver and black. He also found a name, which made no sense to him, ‘Sahra’.

“It must say something about Rayne,” he said to himself, scratching his chin.

He scanned through the rest of the books, unable to find the rest of the runes.

He looked up at the person who was sitting opposite him. A man, as tall as Xavier, copper hair cropped at his ears, bright hazel eyes, dressed in a similar robe as Xavier, only they were indigo and silver.

“Hello Tristan,” he said dryly to the High Mage.

“Xavier! Back so soon? I expect you didn’t find The Raven? I told you he didn’t exist,” he said airily.

“Actually Tristan, I did find The Raven. She’s on a tour of the castle with Rowan right now,” Xavier replied tartly.

“He’s a she? Oh, I must go and meet her then!” and with that, Tristan disappeared in thin air.

“Show-off,” Xavier grumbled and went back to his reading.

\* \* \*

Tristan had indeed been true to his word, and appeared in front of Rowan and Rayne.

“Milady, it is an honour to finally meet you,” he said as he kissed her hand.

“It is an honour to meet you too...my lord,” she said, blushing again.

“Yes, I don’t believe you have met Tristan have you? He is the High Mage,” he added.

“It is an honour to meet you, my lord,” she said again.

“May I take over Rowan? I’d like to show her my college.”

“Of course Tristan!” Rowan replied brightly as Rayne took Tristan’s arm.

They disappeared into the air, reappearing in the college.

“Stop doing that Tristan!” Xavier said grumpily, then seeing Rayne, said “Hello, again.”

Rayne didn’t know if Tristan had caught the sarcasm in his voice, and frowned at him.

“May I have my staff please?” she asked, moving to take it. As she bent to take it she whispered into Xavier’s ear, “Not my fault,” and stood up, ignoring Tristan’s arm.

“I think it would be safer without that,” Tristan said, and without a word, he vanished the blade with a small pop as they continued to walk down the hallway.

Rayne limped next to Tristan, taking in only half of what he said, uttering ‘Yes, I agree’ or ‘Of course not’ or ‘Really?’ and comments similar to those. She was too absorbed in how Xavier had looked at her that she didn’t even listen when he showed her the books on birds and animals.

“And I think that concludes the tour of the library. The learning classes are forbidden to those who do not teach or learn,” he said.

“Thank you for showing me around,” she said, smiling at him.

“Will you be joining Rowan, Xavier and I for dinner tonight?” he asked her.

“Yes, yes I think I will,” she said, nodding profusely.

“Then I shall escort you to your chambers,” and in a second, they were in a large chamber, filled with expensive luxuries like a feather bed, separate bathroom and a large powder room with an adjoining wardrobe.

“A maid shall be around shortly to help you dress,” he said, closing the door behind him.

Rayne was sure she heard the click of the door locking, and went to check. The handle didn't turn. She had become a prisoner in her own chambers.

\* \* \*

## 6 - Planning

Just as Tristan had said, a maid came in. She was short with pale skin and short black hair. Her eyes were dark and sad, a complete opposite of Rayne, but strangely familiar. She racked through her memories, trying to remember when she had seen this girl while the maid helped her bath, and dress in a silver bodice and green silk skirt, powdering her face until it was a light tan colour. Her hair was twisted into a tight knot at the back of her head and opal drops were attached to her ears and a chain around her neck. A picture flashed into her mind, of a silver raven flying above a laughing child's head. As soon as she saw the vision, it was gone, and she was left wandering.

"Where have I seen you before..." she said.

She turned around to find that the maid had already gone.

Rayne looked into the mirror. A young 18 year old stared back at her, pointed ears delicately shown above her silver hair. Her eyes were filled with adventure and the determination to prove herself.

'Who is this person?' She thought, touching her painted lips and eyes. Who am I?

\* \* \*

The room in which they ate was richly decorated with gold, silver and precious jewels. She sat on Rowan's right side, and to her left was Tristan, who she had taken a great liking to, reminded of how Xavier had been so enthusiastic that very first time they had met. He had become remarkably cold towards her. Even though she sat opposite him, she barely got a word in from Rowan's and Tristan's questioning. She answered each politely, and when they had stopped, she was asked to dance with Rowan who was wearing silver and green robes to match her dress.

She could see Tristan talking to Xavier, who nodded absently, already taken to staring around the room. When their eyes met, Xavier looked away, seemingly interested in the carpet by the door at the far end of the room.

She excused herself after the last plates had been taken away, saying she needed to rest her sore leg.

"You must let me look at it one day," Tristan insisted.

"Maybe tomorrow," she said weakly. "Xavier, could you please escort me back to my chamber? I do not wish to get lost."

He got up silently, his face void of all emotion.

"Ah yes, Rayne, we start to discuss your position tomorrow," Rowan called after them.

Xavier and Rayne walked through the halls in silence, avoiding each other's eyes.

When they had reached Rayne's chamber, she remained outside, looking stonily at Xavier.

"What was all that about?" she hissed at him.

“What was all that about?” he asked, unable to find a look of bewilderment.

“You know perfectly what I mean. You’re jealous aren’t you?”

“Why should I be jealous?” he shouted indignantly.

“Because since I’ve come here, I’ve been most nicely taken care of by Rowan and Tristan, much more than you have done!” she cried. “And so what if I like them!” she said, lowering her voice. “Just because there is some... some... ‘Power’ competition between you and them, doesn’t mean that you have to ignore the whole lot of us!”

“I ignore you? What about me! You don’t have to ignore ME!” he yelled, a look on his face that she had never seen before. Anger. He turned on his heel and stormed away.

Rayne ran towards the door and yanked it open, closing it behind her and hearing the familiar click of the lock.

She put her ear to the cold wood to see if she could hear him, but no sound came through. She kicked the door in frustration, yelping as pain shot up her wounded leg.

“I really should let Tristan have a look at it,” she thought bitterly as she bathed and dressed into her night gown.

\* \* \*

Xavier stomped back to the hall, fuming at Rayne. How could she say that? He thought as he reached the hall. He paused at the door, hearing voices from within. Rowan and Tristan’s of course, but there was a new voice.

“...got more power than any of us...strange girl...” that was Tristan.

“...I know how...easy to lure...better if she could walk...” Rowan.

“...those owls go everywhere...easy to catch though...wait till you’re done...” The stranger’s voice.

Could it be? No, Rowan was certainly not overflowing with good, but he wouldn’t be overflowing with evil either.

Xavier hesitated, and then entered.

Rowan and Tristan were talking to the burly guard that had opened the door when he and Rayne had first arrived.

“Ah! Xavier, we were just talking to Hugh about the dungeons. They’re getting a bit dirty, and we were discussing whether to clean them or not,” Tristan said quickly.

“Bit of a waste of time really. Leave them,” Xavier said, and then yawning widely, he excused himself.

The voices continued their hushed conversation.

He didn’t think on the subject, pushing what he had overheard to the back of his mind.

\* \* \*

When Rayne woke, she found a note on her table asking for her to go to Tristan's study when she had been attended to.

Impatiently, she dressed herself, finding that the powder on her face had not come off properly, staying the same dark tan colour as Xavier's... She ignored this fact, and dressed in a white blouse and maroon skirt, pulling her bodice on with great difficulty. Eventually, she tried the door, and to her surprise, it opened. She limped out, having lost her staff in the room. The guard that had been talking to Rowan and Tristan stood waiting for her, though she did not know who he was.

"I have been asked to escort you to the High Mage's study," and he did so, leading her to a carved door, and waited outside.

She entered, and to her surprise, found herself in a room, much like her own, though it was crammed with books and scrolls.

Tristan sat writing at his desk, and looked up as she entered.

"Welcome Rayne. I have taken the liberty of researching about healing, and would like to examine your wound. It may seem that my room is a library, but I made a special effort to clean it best I could for you."

He motioned for her to sit and she watched as he rummaged in a drawer, taking out two vials, one a murky brown colour, the other, a green like the one... she pushed this thought away as she poured out some of the brown content and rubbed it into her thigh.

Tristan went back to his writing, humming a tune quietly.

A cold sensation ran up her leg where she had rubbed it in. The pain that had bothered her was gone.

"Did it work?" Tristan asked hopefully once she had stood up, testing her healed leg.

"Yes, what was that?" she asked as she walked over to Tristan.

"Crushed rose, lavender and daisy petals picked on the full moon and stirred in mud for one day and three hours. Got it out of an old scroll I found in the college library."

"I thank you sincerely," Rayne said.

"Just remember to use the green vial every night until it runs out," he added.

"How may I return the favour?" she asked, bending her knee to loosen the joints a bit more.

"May I escort you to Rowan's chambers?" he asked.

Rayne smiled. "Of course, I would be honoured."

They walked down the halls, Rayne almost walking as smoothly as a proper lady.

\* \* \*

They entered Rowan's chambers, already occupied by Rowan and Xavier. Rayne did not look at Xavier

as she sat in between Rowan and Tristan.  
Tristan stood and spoke first.

“Thank you Rayne and Xavier for attending this conference. The damage report is still small. Yuri has only attacked the Gretna’s Mill on the far east of Tavares, and we think Lang He and Charest have joined, for the reason that several farmers reported that the colours green and hue have joined white and madder. They have burnt 8 crops last count, and are camping in the Dark Forest, not far from here.”

“I have reason to believe there are other armies in that forest,” Xavier said idly, staring out the window.

Tristan and Rowan looked at him in mild surprise.

“On the way here, we went through that forest, and were attacked by an army in red and gold.”

Rayne was sure she saw Tristan and Rowan glance at each other.

“We shall look into that,” Rowan said eventually. “Thank you Xavier.”

The plans of battle went deeper, and to Rayne’s point of view, more sinister and sneaky. It was decided, or rather insisted, that she lead the large group of mages if it came to war. They talked for over an hour.

Eventually, Xavier escorted Rayne out, leaving Tristan and Rowan to talk as they requested. The guard, Hugh, did not follow, but slipped unnoticed into the room.

When at last Xavier and Rayne reached her chambers, they stood in silence outside her door.

“I’m sorry, about what I said-“Xavier started, but Rayne cut him off.

“Save your breath,” she said, mimicking their first meeting, and kissed his cheek.

Xavier stopped, and blushed.

When at last Rayne closed her door and it locked, Xavier went back to his own chambers, smiling like a child with a lollipop.

\* \* \*

Rayne slept deeply, and did not stir as her door opened, neither did she wake at the muffled hoots of two owls. The door closed behind a tall, thin figure with hazel eyes.

\* \* \*



## 7 - The Evilness of Betrayal

The next morning, there was another note on Rayne's table.

"Meet me in the aviary. The door is unlocked. Xavier." she read aloud.

She dressed quickly in her white blouse and maroon skirt, forgetting to rub the green liquid from the vial on her leg.

She rushed out into the gardens, making her way along the paths.

When she came to the aviary, the door was unlocked, so she entered into the large jungle.

"Over here!" a voice called.

She followed it, wandering off the path into the thickest part of the aviary.

Tristan stood in the little clearing, grinning widely.

"Glad you could make it Rayne," he said.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, looking around in confusion. "Where is Xavier?"

"Locked in his room, sleeping and unable to get out," his grin widened as he motioned with his hands to someone behind her, while he started to chant.

Hugh grabbed her round her middle, cupping his huge hand over her nose and mouth, making her unable to breathe.

She felt her body grow stiff. Her vision began to swim, and as Tristan finished his chant, she fell unconscious.

\* \* \*

Xavier woke and dressed, wandering over to the door to have his morning stroll. The door was locked. He called for someone, but no one came. He tried to spell the door open, only to have his spell rebound and propel him into the wall.

He sat there, winded and gasping for breath. Why was it locked? He thought. Where was Rayne at this very moment?

Something was wrong.

\* \* \*

Rayne was, in fact, right below Xavier, in a cell that seemed to feel like death. Only this was real, very real.

She pounded the walls and called for help, but was answered by silence.

Occasionally, Tristan or Rowan came down to put her back to sleep, telling her to shut her mouth or have it shut for her.

She was quiet after that. Rowan now came in to see her, coming into the cell, surveying her through stony eyes.

“That’s better. Nice and quiet,” he said mockingly.

Rayne lashed out at him, swearing and cursing him through gritted teeth. She changed her hand to a claw, drawing blood from his cheek.

“Well, I’ll have to spell you from changing now, won’t I?” he hissed at her, dabbing his cheek where blood was now streaming freely.

The spell clamped around her like a body bind, and she lay sprawled on the floor, panting from trying to fight it.

She shivered as he left, the cold feeling of the spell adding to the throbbing in her leg. So, she lay miserably, staring at the ceiling, when light footsteps drew her curiosity.

“Rayne...Sister...” a small voice called.

The vision of the child and the raven flew in her mind. She caught sight of a girl with black hair and pale skin, and the name in runes she had carved, long ago, came to her... Sahra.

“Sahra...is that really you?” Rayne breathed, unable to hold back the flood of tears in her eyes.

“Yes, but is that you Rayne?”

“Yes, it’s me sister. Help me, get me out,” Rayne cried as Sahra drew up to the bars of the cell.

“Will your mage friend come if I asked him?” Sahra asked inquiringly.

“Yes, Xavier! He will come, but Tristan said his door would be locked. Here, take this!” she called as Sahra made to leave.

She tugged a few of the silver hairs from her head, and with great difficulty that left her panting, handed them to Sahra through the bars.

“Take care, sister...”

\* \* \*

## 8 - Rescue

The sound of his door unlocking was distant to Xavier as he lay where he was, sleeping.

“My lord! My lord, wake up my lord...”

He opened an eye to find an anxious face staring down at him.

“Please my lord, Rayne is in trouble, you must come!” the girl looked close to tears, and very frightened.

“Who are you?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. “What trouble?”

“I am Sahra, Rayne’s sister. She is in the cells below us, my lord! She told me to come and get you to help her! She gave me these to give to you my lord!”

She thrust the silver hairs into his hands.

The name clicked. Sahra’s name, Rayne’s sister’s name, was carved on the staff!

Xavier stared at them, running this through his head.

What he had overheard Rowan and Tristan saying, after the fight with Rayne, it was about her...

He got up with a start.

“The owls, where are the owls?” he asked the girl.

“They’re in the kitchen, locked in a cage,” Sahra said, leading Xavier out of his room and towards the kitchens.

“How did they get in there? No, don’t try and explain, just get me those owls and take me to Rayne. I’ll wait here!” he called as she hurried off.

She came back with Shadow and Opal flying behind her. She hurried past him, calling him to follow and frantically explaining.

“I was told to bring food to a special prisoner down in the cells, and I hadn’t seen Rayne since I dressed her for the first dinner. I worried, and went down to check before she told me to come to you. She was in a terrible state, bound by that pig of a king’s spells and Tristan’s chants, it was horrible. She told me to come and find you. She said that you would help,” she added as they entered the darkness under the castle.

“Right you are Sahra...” he trailed off as they came to Rayne’s cell.

\* \* \*

“Xavier, is that you?” Rayne’s voice was weak as she called.

Opal hooted sorrowfully.

“Hang on, don’t move. There’s no keyhole so I’m guessing Tristan used magic.”

“Xavier, it was them. They did it. Watch out for the guard, he’ll call Tristan,” she called as she curled up in a corner, shivering.

Yellow bolts of magic hit the door, making it buzz and heat up. Xavier’s hands, coated with silver, started to strain at the hot metal, pulling it into a hole large enough for a person to fit through. At last Xavier had made a big enough hole for her to escape.

“Don’t try it yet,” he advised, “Or you’ll scorch your skin.”

Rayne looked through the hole, and watched as a figure moved out of the darkness.

“Sahra! Xavier! Look out!” she screamed as a giant hand connected with Xavier’s head, sending him colliding with the stone wall opposite.

Xavier fell to the ground, blood trickling from his head. He did not stir.

Shadow shrieked and dived at Hugh, making him blunder around, hands over his eyes to stop the owl pecking them out with anger.

Ignoring the burns, Rayne scrambled through the hole, her skin scorching where it met the hot metal. Taking Sahra’s hand they ran out of the cells, lead by Opal and Shadow, away from Hugh, away from Xavier.

\* \* \*

Rayne sat, staring at the wall while Sahra applied the green liquid to her burns and her leg.

“He’s gone, Xavier’s gone,” Rayne whispered, hardly able to believe what had happened. “He won’t come out. We must go back.”

Rayne struggled, her eyes darting frantically.

Sahra said nothing, whether she believed or didn’t believe Rayne could not tell.

Rayne stood suddenly, upsetting the owls next to her.

“Rowan...Tristan...They’re going to pay dearly for what they did. Opal, Shadow, you’re going to go to the stables and find Prince and Moon.”

The owls took off without a complaint.

The anger that she had contained for so long flared like a newly lit fire.

“They will be dead by sunset. I swear it upon my honour; those scoundrels will be dead by sunset.”

Rayne looked at Sahra, for it was she that spoke this oath.

“Yes sister. They will be dead by sunset.”

\* \* \*

## 9 - Revenge

They sat in Sahra's room, and she told Rayne how she had come to be in the service of the castle.

"...After you left to find a healer, I waited for you to come back, but you didn't, so, I went to find work. No one wanted a 12 year old for working, so I came to Tavares, where I asked an old maid if she knew where workers were wanted. She directed me to the castle, and I began my work as a scullery maid..." she trailed off, looking at the setting sun.

"It is time," Sahra said, and with that, both departed, heading towards the throne room.

"Sahra, do you still have your power?" Rayne asked, pausing by the kitchen door, picking up her newly bladed staff.

"I have been having secret lessons with the Master Defense up at the college," she said grimly.

Rayne raised an eyebrow.

"Perhaps another time," she said, grinning. "Let us see how well you have listened," and they both set off at a steady walk, their eyes intent on finding the King and Tristan.

\* \* \*

As they came close to each set of doors leading to the room, Sahra, out of excitement and anger, blasted them, leaving them burnt and swinging limply on their hinges. The splendour of the room had long ago worn off, and it wasn't worth reminding themselves of what they set out to destroy. They reached the last set of doors.

"Will you do the honours, Sahra?" Rayne asked.

"I most certainly will..."

\* \* \*

Fire engulfed the doors as Sahra let a fireball loose. Rayne and Sahra walked through the flames, a shield of red magic protecting them from the embers.

"Sorry about that," Rayne said, forcing herself to be calm at the sight of Tristan and Rowan.

"Ah, I see you are well Rayne?" Tristan spat at her.

"Very well Tristan, no thanks to you," she replied with distaste.

Rowan was sidling towards the door, unnoticed by Rayne. He was thrown forward in front of her by a blast of Sahra's magic. He yelped as he landed, blood gushing from his nose.

"How dare you..." he hissed at her, glittering black magic drawing around his fingers.

"How dare I, King Rowan? I dare to kill a traitor to the crown. That's what I dare to do. I dare to avenge Xavier. I dare to kill a spineless mage, who would be nothing without the essence of fear he creates," she spoke these words with such hatred that Tristan and Rowan flinched.

"And I, dear Rayne, dare to kill you," he lunged at her, black magic engulfing the two.

Tristan shouted in alarm, firing his own magic at the covered figure of Rayne.

Rowan's magic wavered, creating a hole in the sheet of black.

Before Tristan could let loose another bolt of magic, Sahra fired her last ball of magic, and true as her heart, it hit the centre of Rowan's back.

His screams were cut short as Rayne stabbed him hard with her staff.

She struggled out of the black magic, narrowly missing a bolt from Tristan.

She searched for Sahra, her eyes resting on her still body.

"No more magic to protect you, dear Rayne," Tristan hissed.

"No more magic left in you, dear Tristan," Rayne hissed back.

"It's just you and I then, all alone, no one to help you."

"Only two people can leave this room alive, and I am predicting that you won't be one of them," she sneered, glaring at him.

"Ah Rayne, how wrong you are. Only one person will leave this room alive. The first and second will both lay dead. I have decided that you will join your sister..."

Rayne's eyes widened with shock at the possibility.

Tristan took his chance at Rayne's hesitation, and threw his last ounce of power at her, a huge bolt of lightning, like the one from the tavern roof, striking her.

The room started to swim before her eyes, this was her last chance!

She took as best an aim as she could at the laughing Tristan, and threw her staff.

Blackness took over her as a scream echoed through Tavares.

\* \* \*

Rayne woke in a soft bed, her head fuzzy and sore, extreme pain in her back and leg.

"Lay still, sister," Sahra's face came into view, her pale skin bruised blue, black and purple.

"Sahra, you're alive..." she mumbled.

"Shhhhh, be still Rayne. Sleep..." Sahra said soothingly.

The darkness of sleep filled her head and she was at peace in her dreams.

\* \* \*



## 10 - Wild Spirit

It was some days later that Rayne was well enough to walk, though her leg was now unfixable, Tristan's last bolt of magic so filled with hatred, had damaged the repairs he had made with his vials of brown and green liquid, which she now applied everyday to keep the pain away.

A decision was passed between the newly formed council, and this was announced to the Tavarians that had come to listen.

"We have reached a decision about the absence of a Royal Family. Lady Rayne of The Raven, First daughter to Sir Jailan Sansei and Lady Camille Heatherton, shall take the crown, due to her parents close friendship with the late Rowan's father, having no heir."

There was an uproar of cheers from the crowd and Rayne stepped forward.

"Have you a decision Rayne?" the council head asked.

"I have. I am a wild spirit that can never be content living in a palace and imprisoned from the call of freedom. My destiny does not belong here. I will not take the crown, but pass in to my younger sister, Sahra. May you rule your people well, sister," her eyes glazed over as she placed the crown on Sahra's head.

She left quietly as the celebrations and feast began, leaving through the gates of Tavares in her silver shirt and breeches, scuffed black boots and black cloak, hood drawn back, just as she had always been. Her skin, dark again from days of rubbing, was damp with the night mists that started to roll in. A tear trickled down her cheek as she took one last look at the lights burning brightly in the sky.

"May I join you?" A voice asked from behind her, and without waiting for a reply, Xavier flung his arms around her neck and they held each other tight.

"How...how..." Rayne stuttered.

"Shh, be still. That is a tale that I will tell you on our way to our final destination."

"And where might that be?" Rayne asked, amused.

In reply, Xavier flung out his arms and shouted to the heavens, "EVERYWHERE!"

And they both walked off, laughing, into the forests, a black owl perched on Xavier's shoulder, and a silver owl perched on Rayne's.

\* \* \*

## 11 - - CAST -

### Moon and Prince

Xavier and Rayne's horses used to travel to Tavares

### Rayne

A shape-shifter and a Drow, she has great power and can change the shape of an object, including herself

### Rowan

King of Tavares, he is of Human ancestry and, even though he doesn't have The Gift, he can still do spells and enchantments using incantations

### Sahra

Rayne's younger sister, she came to Tavares seeking work and became a castle maid, and eventually, queen

### Shadow and Opal

Rayne's owl friends, they go everywhere with her

### The Raven

The legend name for Rayne, and also her favourite form when shape-shifting, it is part of her name: Rayne of The Raven

### Tristan

High Mage to Rowan, he is very powerful, and has a strong Gift

### Xavier

Imperial Mage, he works at the Collage studying, also has a strong gift, though not like Tristan's

## 12 - - GLOSSARY -

### Black Forest

A very dark forest, it is located two days ride of foot, and has very tall, sinister looking trees.

### Clothing

Some clothing mentioned in the story is from the medieval times; breeches, shirt, boots, cape, girdle.

### Dragon

A large fire-breathing lizard

### Drow

Drows, or Dark Elves, are considered evil, though Rayne, who in the story is a Drow, is not evil, but people seem quite racist against her.

### Elf/Elven

A person with pointed ears and quite powerful magic.

### Healer

Like a medieval doctor, they can't treat their patients with healing magic.

### Human

An ancient race of people that look like elves, but have rounded ears.

### Meditating/Meditation/Meditate

A deep, dream like state in which the person meditating can travel around their body or leave their body in a spirit like form. It is hard to stay in the meditation, because most minds are easily distracted by noise or movement.

### Royal Aviary

A magnificent walk-through chamber cage with hundreds of exotic and colourful birds, placed in the Castle gardens in Tavares.

### Runes

Ancient carvings that tell a story in a different language. They are very hard to translate.

### Shape-shifting/Shape-shifter/Shifter

This magic power allows the person to change the bodily appearance of him/herself and other objects.

### Tavares

The large town in which King Rowan lives. The setting of the story is also called Tavares.

### Tavern

A pub that also acts as a motel where people can get rooms and sleep and stay there.

The Gift

Strong magic of different kinds.

Yuri/Lang He/Charest

Neighbouring lands of Tavares.

## 13 - - A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR -

I started this story about 10 months ago, got halfway through chapter one, and, as I had run out of ideas, locked it away in the deepest computer folder I could find. Then, I found it again, 6 months ago. DUN, DUN, DUN! I sort of finished the first chapter, and then sent it off to one of the best writers in my year 6 class... EUNICE!!! Ok, so she corrected the spelling (HARDLY!!), added all these cool words, wrote a bit more, and sent it back. It went on like that till October, in which I got sick of trying to edit it and locked it back in the deepest computer folder I could find. But Eunice bugged me, made me write more, and drove me into a sense of insanity about it. So, I got it out again, finished it properly, and, after 3 weeks of trying to get the stupid layout right (that took a while), WE HAD DONE IT!!! Eunice and I had finally finished a proper short novel. Oh, how proud we felt! I give all my thanks to Eunice, who edited it, as well as wrote it and gave me more ideas when mine had dried up. This is the product of nearly 10 month's work in editing, writing, lay outing, spelling things wrong, getting bugged by Eunice, locking it away, screaming at it, correcting it and finally, finishing it. Hope you appreciate it, because if you don't, Eunice and I will hunt you down, brainwash you and MAKE you like it. MWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Alexa Haddow, akka AyJay, akka 'The Author of this very good story'

## 14 - - REVIEW -

"I really enjoyed reading this epic, a great plot, super descriptive, action... the lot! This is what stories are made of!"- Mrs Sheila Cooper, Alexa's Grade 6 teacher

Lol, only one, but oh well. Mr Cooper liked it anywayz ^\_^