

Ulune's Daughter: Raven Woman

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Kellan

"Woman, slow down," Rach complains.

I lift my head from where I'm focused on the contents of my cauldron. "Whaaa?"

Rachel waves her hand over her cauldron, wafting bluish smoke around her face. Her hot-pink hair has gone frizzy from the steam.

"Rosemary," I tell her.

How do I know her potion needs more rosemary? I don't know. I just do.

Rachel scans her workspace, crowded with herbs, crystals, and other ingredients. Rachel's what I'd call a seat-of-your-pants spellcaster. She does minimal organization before she starts brewing and wings it as she goes along. Her spells usually turn out well regardless, which says something about the nature of magic, but it's no surprise when she forgets an ingredient or skips a step.

She scoops up a handful of rosemary and adds it to her cauldron. My nose twitches as I register the improvement in the steam's smell.

"Let it simmer for a minute, then we're going to stir and chant," I say.

The other witches standing in a loose circle around me nod. Teddy shifts on the stool she's perched on and I lift my eyebrows at her. I suggested she sit out this month's Circle and let her husbands brew for her, since she's looking puffy and drawn. She scowled ferociously and said that bearing twins never kept her out of a Circle, so having Gabe's baby certainly wasn't going to. I held up my hands and backed away. I learned early in her first pregnancy not to argue with a pregnant Teddy.

It wastes my time and annoys the Teddy.

She sighs. "If I admit you're right, you're not allowed to gloat."

"I would never gloat." I would, of course, but not when she's obviously uncomfortable. "Want to use it as is or get one of the guys to finish it for you?"

Her mouth thins. A warning sign. She's either about to get really stubborn or snark.

She doesn't get the chance to be either, because Darwin and Gabe appear, walking down the tunnel that leads from the surface. Gabe gets a glimpse of Teddy's face and blurs to her side. He eases her off the stool.

"Manhandle me and I'll unman you," Teddy warns. "Your bits have served their purpose."

Chuckling, Gabe kisses her into submission as he carries her to the day bed in one corner of the cave. Darwin takes Teddy's place at the cauldron without a word.

"Okay." I pick up a silver spoon and hold it up. Darwin, Rachel, and Darwin's sisters, who are working at the two other cauldrons, pick up their silver spoons. "Three times widdershins to clear the way and then three times clockwise to lay the new path."

I lead them in stirring and chanting. For our monthly Circles, I lead. It's Teddy's hearth room, and Darwin pays for all the expensive stuff, so I'd step back if Teddy ever wanted to lead, but she never does.

Once we've finished stirring and chanting, we hold our hands over our cauldrons and let our Elements flow into the potions. Once everything feels right, I nod and we decant the potions into bottles to cool. I try not to waste a drop. This is a powerful ward. It should be respected.

Ladling my potion into the four flasks I have lined up at the edge of my workspace, I notice the color's different from usual. It's usually olive green. Today's potion is a much brighter green, with lines of black like veins running through it.

Darwin picks up one of his flasks and inspects it closely. He sniffs it, raises his eyebrows in surprise, and puts it back down.

"Smell bad?" I ask. Things can go wrong during casting.

Darwin shakes his head. "Smells like the night breeze. That's more you than Teddy. Her potions always have a trace of minerals. All I'm getting is petrichor." He leans over the flasks and takes another sniff. "And maybe a hint of juniper."

"That's what Isla Cedros smells like," I say, picking up a cloth I purified the night of the last new moon and wiping out my cauldron. Everyone copies me. I pick up a small bucket and carry it over to the pool in the corner of Teddy's cave. Thanking the Mother for her bounty, I fill the bucket and carry it back to my cauldron. When everyone's back at their cauldron, I raise the bucket and pour it very carefully into the cauldron, not spilling a drop of the Mother's waters.

While the water heats, I ready my workspace for the next spell. This isn't one of our usual new moon spells. It's an unbinding to facilitate Evan's release. We've cast unbindings for him many times, but they've all failed. With what Teddy and Rachel told me when I arrived for our Circle—that their meeting with the Aedis Astrum was a success and they're hopeful Evan will be released by Yule—I think this year's unbinding has more chance of success.

I add three handfuls of rosehips to the cauldron and two handfuls of geranium petals. While I wait for them to steep, I check the fire underneath, which is burning merrily. I put on an extra piece of yew kindling to keep the temperature high.

Rachel's humming to herself as she adds rosehips to her cauldron. Sounds like that song by Usher. Something about daddy's home.

"Hey, daddy," I croon at the appropriate spot.

Rachel grins. "It's going to work this time. I can feel it."

I nod. I really hope so. "Let's peel the lemon with intention."

We all pick up our ritual knives and strip our lemon's yellow rind away from the flesh within. I take a handful of lemon peel and hold it over my head while I lead the chant of unbinding. We drop the lemon peels in and follow the lemon with salt for clearing. Then we all pick up our cauldrons either with magic or, in Darwin and Orlaith's case, their hands since they're Fire-mages, and carry them outside. We walk quickly to the stone wharf that separates Teddy's cave from the two-hundred-year-old canal and pour our potions into the dark water while calling on the Night Mother to release Evan from his chains.

As we return to the cave, I feel a heaviness loosen in my chest. I glance over at Rachel. Her face is wet but she's grinning. She bounces on her toes as she walks.

"Definitely worked," she says.

"Definitely," I agree. "What's the first thing you're going to say to him?"

She grins. "Something to earn a spanking."

I can't help but return her grin. I know that feeling.

"Okay, I've been patient," she says. "Spill the tea."

Rachel is many things, but patient is *not* one of them. "What are you talking about?"

"Last time I saw you, you were down at the mouth about the swimmer. But either you've fixed things or shit got real at the fires because you're glowing."

Am I? I check my hands, which are all that's exposed by my long-sleeved, black hoodie. The weather's turned cold on both sides of the Atlantic and although Teddy's cave is a pretty even temperature all year round, it's freaking damp and chilly, so I bundle up before we brew.

Other than the long, blue claws—which might be hag claws but I'm definitely not calling them that—my hands look normal. No glow.

"No, I'm not."

Rach scoffs at me. "You totally are."

"Okay, I might have met someone—"

"I knew it!" Rachel grabs my arm and do-si-does with me down the path. I throw my head back and laugh. The night wind chases my laughter, setting will-o-the-wisps glowing among the trees. Smokeberry and fae lanterns growing among the trees light up, their blue glows rising to dance with the will-o-the-wisps.

The path in front of me opens like I've torn open a door into the Fae Ways. But it's not the World Wood that rises in front of me. It's a castle. A ruined castle. The doors and windows gape darkly. One of the towers has lost its turrets, the stone jutting up like a broken tooth into the moonlit sky.

In front of the castle stand hundreds of still forms, their furry ears pricked, huge shoulders blocking out the stone behind them.

They lift their heads as one. A clear, pure note rises from hundreds of throats.

Rachel tugs me backward and the vision collapses.

I reach for it, tears rushing hot to my eyes and spilling down my cheeks.

"Kells, no," Rachel cries.

"Bu-but, it's—"

"You're not rushing blindly into Faery," she says firmly. "Where even is that? I've never seen that castle before."

I drop to my knees, crouching, trying to think. I reach for my Element to anchor me, bring order to my whirlwind thoughts.

The night breeze rises. Grows teeth.

“Get back to Teddy’s cave,” I growl at Rachel, Darwin, and his sisters.

“Kells—” Rachel begins.

“Back to the cave! Now!”

She runs from me.

I stand and throw my arms wide, calling the toothed breeze, keeping it away from my friends. It swirls around me, sinks its teeth deep into my flesh. My blood streams and eddies around me. The breeze stops biting. Warmth drapes me, rustling around me. When I raise my arms, huge black wings flap.

I lift off the path and shoot skyward.

Hours later, I land on the path to Teddy’s cave, the raven cloak settling around me. Lightning flashes through the clouds overhead. It strikes in the woods close by, releasing the scent of burning yew and smokeberry.

With a flick of my claws, I smother the fire before it can spread.

Rachel, Darwin, and Charlie wait for me at the mouth of the cave. When I walk toward them, Rachel opens her arms and starts forward. I hold up my hand. The cloak of raven feathers rustles around me.

“I don’t think hugs are a good idea right now, Rach.”

“Your, whatever it was, set Teddy off,” Charlie says. His deep voice is laced with worry. Worry I caused. “She’s having Braxton-Hicks. Probably not the best time—”

I nod. I wasn’t planning on going back into the cave. I’m just saying goodbye.

“I’ll make myself scarce for a while,” I say. Rachel starts shaking her head but I wave her into silence. “Rach, you know I’m doing the right thing. Whatever’s going on with me—and I haven’t one fucking clue what it is—is throwing off a lot of power. I don’t want to cause Teddy to go into labor prematurely. And I sure as fuck do not want to open some pocket dimension into an unknown part of Faery right next to her hearth-room. I’m going to stay at Bevvv for the foreseeable future. If you need me, just call. I’ll be here in a heartbeat.”

Charlie leaves the shadow of the cave and strides toward me. Despite me backing up a step, he throws his arms around me and hugs me hard.

“That’s from Teddy,” he tells me. “She’s furious we won’t let her out of the cave. She’s worried about you. Call her tomorrow.”

I hug him back. “I will. I’m sorry if I scared you all—”

“Don’t apologize,” he insists. “And don’t disappear. We all care about you. If you need *us*, call. Teddy will skin us if we stay away just because something spooky’s going on with you.”

“That was spooky, wasn’t it?” I step back and rub my forehead, my claws trailing over my skin. “I don’t even know where I’ve been. I just . . . flew. For hours. And I’m not even tired. I’ve never flown like that before. With . . . wings.”

Charlie nods. “Really fucking spooky. Still is.” He nods at me, still draped in the cloak that I didn’t summon and have no idea how to get rid of. “Gabe’s going to come see you once he’s calmed Teddy down. See if he can help sort out what’s going on

with you. Teddy says he's expendable since he's fulfilled his procreative duties, but, you know, we kind of like him so try to send him back to us in one piece."

I shake my head at him. "I'd never hurt Gabe and tell him he's relieved of duty. Carrie and Jane are both Air-witches. They'll help me figure this out."

Charlie pats my shoulder. "Okay, I'll tell him. He might still come, if just to escape Teddy's nagging, but keep us in the loop. We're not kicking you out, Kells. We're just—"

Protecting their pregnant wife. Which I should be doing, too.

"I know, Charlie. Don't feel bad for a second." I look over his shoulder to where Rachel's still standing by the cave mouth, tears painting her cheeks. "Rach, I'll call, okay? It'll be fine. Don't worry about me. Focus on Evan."

She nods. "I know you'll be fine because you're always fine. A shark god nearly ate you and you were fine. I just want you to be fine *with* us instead of without us. I missed you while you were on that island in the middle of nowhere."

I smile tearily. I missed her, too. I missed all of them. And despite what Charlie says—what my own rational mind is telling me—I am being kicked out of their circle. Because I'm a danger to them right now.

I'm a danger to everyone.

"I'll just be at Bevv. That's not the middle of nowhere. And when I get this figured out, we'll have a girl's night at my place. All the spicy tequila you can drink," I tell her. Looking back to Charlie, I say, "Tell Teddy I love her, okay?"

He nods. "This is not goodbye," he says firmly.

I nod, but it is and I feel it right down in my heart. This is the path less traveled.

And I have to walk it alone.