

The story so far...

Raven leaves Dunsgow and flies upriver. Her goal is the high reach, where magic is said to be stronger, and where she hopes to master her talent as a bird mage. On her way, she plans to deliver a message for her friend Fireboy, whose father and little brother are still bond servants on Baron Cutter's estate.

When she reaches the manor, Raven comes upon her mother, Roxaine, and decides to confront her. They were supposed to run away from the estate together four years ago, but her mother never came to the rendezvous. Raven wants to know why. She discovers that her mother has a new baby, Raven's half-sister, Sarita, and that the father is Baron Cutter himself. She and her mother argue loudly, attracting the attention of Jan Steward, the Baron's right-hand man.

Pursued by Steward's son, Loyal, Raven flies to the estate's farm, where Fireboy's father is the breedmaster. She is hidden by Fireboy's little brother, Leo, a small but feisty boy whose nickname is Hero. Hero works with his father in the breeding barn, and has a remarkable ability to understand and calm the animals.

That night, the Baron dies. Sarita is his only heir, but he and Roxaine were never married. Jan Steward, claiming that he is Sarita's rightful guardian, sells Roxaine's bond to Baron Stoner and sends her away, under guard, with Loyal as envoy. Raven overhears Steward plotting Sarita's eventual death and determines to save her little sister, but she is injured and captured in the attempt.

CHAPTER 8

Raven hurt. Her head, her neck, her back; everything right down to her feet hurt. She moaned.

"She's waking up," someone said. The words stabbed the insides of her ears.

"Lie still," another voice said. Raven thought it might be her mother's maid, Louella.

"You took quite a fall."

A fall. Raven remembered falling. She couldn't remember landing. She opened her eyes and winced at the blinding lamplight. Wincing made her wince even more. She closed her eyes again and tried to go back to sleep.

The door slammed open: more light, more pain. Steward strode into the room. His footsteps drummed in Raven's head. He loomed over the bed, twirling a black feather in his fingers. One of her flight feathers. Anger burned in Raven's throat. She tried to lift her head, but it hurt too much. She sank back.

He chuckled. "Not so quick to flee now, little blackbird?"

Raven tried to ignore him.

"Can she walk?" he asked.

"She shouldn't."

“Move her out to the cell,” he ordered. “Let her mend in there, where she can’t fly away.” He leaned so close that Raven could smell his breath. “You owe us a great deal, little bird: a boat, a fireboy, not to mention your own bond. I promise you, I will collect every bit.”

Raven forced out a single word, Roxaine’s curse: “*Zomenswi.*”

“Just like her mother,” he sneered.

Am not, she thought, too weak to say it aloud.

“Get her out of here,” he snapped.

“She really shouldn’t be moved,” the maid said. “She almost died.”

“Unfortunate. She would have looked good on the mantle with Cutter’s trophies.” He strode away, slamming the door hard enough to rattle Raven’s teeth.

The maid held a cup of water to her lips. Then four men appeared with a litter. Every joint in her body cried out as they shifted her from the bed. She fainted.

When she woke again, it was completely dark. Her body still ached. Her throat was parched. She reached out, but her hand jolted against a stone wall, sending a hot stab up her neck. She reached out her other hand and bumped a bowl. Gratefully, she rolled over, took it in both hands, and downed a long, healing sip. She fell back, but the movement actually seemed to have helped. Cautiously she reached out further. And hit another wall. She ran her hand over the coarse stones. Her heart beat faster. She knew exactly how small this place was. She had been here before, as a girl, locked in more than once by Steward or his wife for talking back, for spoiling laundry, for hiding, for any trifling reason the snake-hearted family could invent.

Raven drew her arms over her chest. She was panting. She closed her staring eyes and tried to slow her pounding heart. Tried to think of somewhere else. But she hurt too much. She lay there, breathing stiffly, all too aware of the walls, until the dark the pounding ache faded into gray and she lapsed back into sleep.

She woke again to more pounding. No, it was tapping. Someone at the door.

Raven sat up too quickly. A sharp pain ran up her spine and kicked the back of her head. She slowed way down, rolling to her knees so she could crawl the two short steps to the door. Silvery light seeped through the cracks. The tapping continued.

“Raven.” A high whisper from the gap beneath of the door. “Wake up!” It was Hero. The little jackdaw had followed her. She didn’t know if that was good or bad.

“Quiet,” she hissed, bending close to the gap. “I’m awake.”

He spoke even louder. “Are you all right? The maid said you were almost dead.”

“Close enough,” she said, feeling all the aches anew.

“You were asleep for a whole day!”

“That long?”

“And half tonight! I thought you’d never wake up.”

“Hush! You’re too loud.” Or maybe it was just her headache. She huddled by the gap, breathing in the cool night, trying to ignore the tight stone cage around her.

“Stay awake!” he demanded. “We’ve got to get you out.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” she said. “What’s the plan?”

There was a pause. Then, “Can’t you just change and fly out?”

“Change into what? I can’t fly through stone.”

“Well, if it was me, I’d change into something real small and crawl under the door.”

Like a mouse or something.”

“I’m a bird mage, calf wit. I can’t change into a mouse.”

“Oh.” He sounded disappointed. “A...a hummingbird?”

Raven thought about it, then felt the gap under the door. It was wide enough to slide a bowl through. It wouldn’t fit a raven, but...

“I can try,” she said. “Here.”

She slid off the blanket and fed the corner under the door. Hero pulled it through. Shivering, she closed her eyes and tried to blot out the ache in her head, the lingering pains in her joints. She had never changed herself to anything so small before, never smaller than a robin, and that had felt tight enough. But certainly no worse than the pressure of this tiny stone cell. She just had to concentrate, blank out the walls, forget the pain.

She imagined a hummingbird as clearly as she could. She spoke aloud the words of change, carefully shaping the gestures her mistress had drummed into her head over three years of apprenticeship – a ritual she could almost ignore when she changed to raven. Her bones crackled as she started to shrink. Her brain felt squeezed. The pressure increased and her pain grew worse, as if she were being jammed head first into a small jar. She stopped, the spell only half made. Left on its own, her body changed back. She was on her knees, head down, panting.

“Raven?” Hero’s voice seemed far away.

You can do this, she told herself. You have to.

Not so small, idiot, she argued back. You’ll kill yourself.

She took a deep breath and tried again. She pictured a robin, because she knew she could manage that. She spoke each word carefully. She tried to ignore the popping joints, the growing pain. She had to do this. And somehow, she did.

“Raven? Are you all right?” The question echoed in the dark room, deep and slow.

No, she chirped. She hopped uncertainly to the gap under the door. She ducked her head and sidled under. The rough edge of the planks pressed on her back. Her legs collapsed. She was wedged between the door and the cold stone threshold. She struggled, cheeping feebly.

Huge hands reached under the door and grabbed her, squeezing her wings against her sides. Hero pulled, and she skidded free, leaving at least one feather stuck in a crack in the wood.

“Got you,” he crooned, voice booming right beside her.

She chirped angrily.

“Sorry,” he boomed.

He set her down on the grass. Raven settled to the ground, closed her eyes. She had to fight to think, to remember words. She forced out the reversing spell. The change back was agony. She was down on her knees again. Tears stung her eyes.

“Blazing mages,” Hero whispered.

“Aching mages,” she groaned. “Give me the blanket. And food. Do you have food?”

He had brought a sack with bread, cheese, and nuts, along with a flask of water. She gobbled it all in the shadow of the cell. “Now let’s get out of here,” she said.

“What bird?” Hero asked. “Owls? I was going to say wildcats or maybe foxes, but you only change birds so I guess we have to be—”

“Keep your pants on, midge,” Raven said. “You’re not changing into anything. We’re sneaking over this wall and back to your father.”

Outraged, he stood straighter, trying to stretch an arm's length into a fathom. "I can take care of myself," he declared loudly. "I got you out of that cell, didn't I? I brought you food and, look, a rope." He held out a coil. "And a knife and—"

A dog began to bark in the kennels. Then another.

"Hush!" she said. "Stop shouting!"

"I am not shouting!"

A light appeared in a window of the house. Raven groaned.

"Hurry!" Hero cried. "Change us!"

A door banged open. A light bobbed into the yard.

"No time," Raven said. "Over the wall."

She shoved him against the stones and pushed him onto the roof of the cell, then dragged herself after. The blanket tangled in her arms and legs and she was forced to abandon it, along with his bag. Hero scrambled to the peak like a cat.

"Keep going!" she snarled, groping for handholds. Hero grabbed her shift, slipped, then sank his fingers into her hair. Raven yelped, but managed to snag the edge of the wall and hoist herself up.

"Jump!" she ordered, and he grabbed her hand and did.

The jolt made her cry out again. Hero heaved her up, and together they raced for the windbreak. The bright moonlight lit them plainly as they fled. A voice shouted behind them. Another answered from the gate. Then Raven saw something move at the very edge of the trees ahead of them; a man. She cursed.

"It's my father!" Hero panted.

Raven couldn't see how he knew, but she dragged herself the last few steps into the windbreak. It was indeed Phillipe.

"This way," he said, his low voice amazingly calm. He led them through the trees, then stopped at the other edge and pointed right. "Go that way," he said. "I'll lead them off."

She grasped his arm, shaking her head. "They'll catch you," she panted.

"I can deal with them," he said. "They need me too much in the barns." He glanced toward Hero, then back to her, his gentle eyes suddenly fierce. "Him they'd send to the prison farm as soon as blink. Go! Get my Leo away!" Before she could argue, he turned and charged off, making a terrible racket in the branches.

"Wait!" Hero called, and would have raced after his father.

Raven grabbed his arm just in time. "No!" she whispered. "He's right. They've seen you. Steward will have you whipped in an instant, and then locked up. This way. And quietly!"

She pulled him in the other direction. He cast one last look after his father, then turned and followed. His eyes shone brightly in the moonlight.

They hadn't gone more than ten paces when their pursuers crashed into the trees. Raven and Hero flopped to the ground in the shadows and lay still, listening as the men hared off after Phillipe. Raven thanked the mages that they hadn't loosed the dogs yet. She gave them a good head start, then pulled Hero deeper into the shadows.

"Don't say one word," she whispered.

She led him along the windbreak until it ended at the lane to the barns. There was no sign of pursuit.

“Ready?” she whispered. “We’re going to make a run for the next line of trees. We have to find a place where we can hide for awhile.”

“What about your sister?” he demanded.

“I can’t try that again. They’ll be watching for me.”

“What about your mother?”

“I told you—”

“She’s your sister’s mother, too, you know!” he cried. “You can’t let them send her away! And she can too help you, no matter what you say. Besides, they’re watching for you now; you just said so yourself. Maybe by the time we save your mother, they won’t be watching anymore.”

“Hush!” Raven didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t leave Hero here; Phillipe was right about that. Even if they hadn’t seen Hero clearly, their pursuers would guess as soon as they captured Phillipe. She was pretty sure Steward would send both of them to the prison farm, too, breedmaster or not. Maybe it did make sense to rescue her mother. Together they could rescue Phillipe, and then the three of them could save Sarita. Assuming Sarita lived that long.

“You ought to at least try,” Hero said.

“Kah!” There were too many maybes! No matter which way she went, someone was likely to suffer. Her mother, at least, was on a boat downriver, with that dolt Loyal Steward, who had no idea of what had happened here at the manor. That gave her the element of surprise. So: her mother first, then Phillipe, then her sister. And then to the high reach, no matter what!

“Right. My mother. Take off your tunic and breeches,” she ordered.

Hero’s smile flashed white. “You’re going to change me?”

“We have to move fast if we’re going to catch up with her,” she said. “Come on, down to your shirt. Let’s hope it’s light enough.”

He began yanking off his tunic. “Owls?” he asked hopefully.

“No,” she snapped. She couldn’t imagine Hero turned into something as ornery as an owl. “I don’t have time to shape the spell. I’m going to let you change into your natural bird form, whatever it is. Something small and quick, I hope. Think about something small and quick.”

“I’ll try.”

“Don’t just try, do it. I’ve never changed anyone else before.”

His eyes went huge. “You’ve never...” He grew very serious. “Right, I’m ready.”

She looked at his little half-naked body and hoped she could make this work. At least he was willing; that was half the battle.

She raised her hands and began sketching symbols in the air over his head, intoning the first words of the spell. She’d had it done to her often enough by her mistress, and had done it to herself more times than she could remember. But this was different: This was Hero. It was mostly a matter of believing she could do it. And him wanting it. She could feel it working, magic flowing to the tips of her hands, surrounding Hero in a shimmer like heat above burning coals. She felt herself weakening as the shimmer increased. Slowly, Hero contracted. His face grew smaller, his outlines blurred. There was an odd scrunching sound.

“Ouch!” he squeaked.

Raven’s arms fell to her sides. She couldn’t have held them up longer if she’d wanted to. Her shift was drenched in sweat. Her head throbbed. But there at her feet, almost invisible in

the shadows, was an oversized and very surprised looking chickadee.

“*Dee dee,*” it said.

Raven squatted wearily for a close look and couldn't help smiling. It had worked! Here, on the middle reach, without her mistress mage to help, she had changed Hero to a bird. And somehow it seemed a perfect fit: small, bold, bright, and full of mischief. She held out her hand, but the chickadee refused the offer. He fluttered clumsily to her shoulder.

“*Deedee!*” he chirped.

“Hush!” she hissed. “It's too dark for bird song.”

“*Dee dee?*” he asked.

Raven realized this was going to be a problem. It had taken her weeks to learn to speak when she'd first become a raven, and ravens had a natural talent for mimicry. Chickadees didn't. They had a fixed set of sounds. He might never learn to speak human words. And she couldn't command him the way she could a real bird, sensing its thoughts and directing it by will. He was still Hero, even if he was shaped like a chickadee. Odds were he couldn't even understand a real chickadee. Blazing mages! There was so much about this she still didn't know. But as long as he listened and did what she said, they should be all right.

“I've got to change now,” she said. “Better get off.”

“*Dee dee,*” he said, and zipped into the trees.

“Don't go too far!” she hissed. “Stay in sight!”

But he was nowhere to be seen.

“Great mages, what am I doing?” she muttered. She took a deep, weary breath and changed herself.

She didn't feel half so bad as a raven. Her insides had taken on a different shape that somehow relieved the pains a little. But she was very tired.

“Hero?” she croaked, peering up into the trees. There was no answer. “Hero!”

With a whirr of wings, he flashed out of the branches and landed beside her.

“*CHICKA-DEE-DEE-DEE!*” he cried merrily.

She jabbed at him with her beak, but he hopped nimbly aside. “Quiet, chatterbox,” she croaked. “I told you, chickadees don't chirp at night.”

“*Dee-dee,*” he agreed.

She sighed. “Let's get going before they...” She couldn't say *catch your father*. “Before they come looking for us,” she finished lamely. As if to help make the point, Cutter's hounds began to bark and bay from the manor. Their charging pads rattled the pebbles on the drive leading out the back gate.

“Go!” Raven croaked. She spread her wings, but Hero was already off in a tiny blur. She hurried after him as quickly as her sore body would allow, across the lane and into the next line of trees. Hero swooped from branch to branch down the windbreak, pausing to rest as she caught up, then darting off again. The belling of the hounds fell behind, fading into a frustrated chorus of yips and whines. Now Raven cawed worriedly at Hero to slow down.

There were any number of reasons chickadees didn't chirp at night – hungry owls, for one. As soon as they could chance it, she was going to stop and change him into something a little easier to protect.

By dawn they were well downriver. Hero was finally slowing down, and she actually managed to catch up and grab his tail feathers in her beak. He settled his wings meekly.

“Time for a break,” she mumbled through his feathers. “Understand?”

He nodded, and she let go warily. He stayed there, with what might have been a penitent expression in his little black eyes.

“*Dee-dee dee?*” he asked, cocking his head.

“What?” she grouched.

He spread his wings and fluffed his feathers.

“You’re cold?”

He shook his head.

“You’re hungry?”

He started to shake his head, then stopped and nodded vigorously.

“I am, too. But first I need some sleep. We’ll find something at the next cottage.”

She led him higher and deeper into the tree, then hunkered down and tucked her head under her wing. He leaned against her and tucked his own head in with her. Raven was too tired to chase him out. Her last thought was how strange they must look. Any other raven would have swallowed him whole.

She awoke with a start a few hours later. The sun was high and the day almost warm. She looked around blearily, wondering what had roused her. Then she realized – Hero was gone!

She croaked his name and heard a faint *chicka-dee-dee-dee* some distance off. Raven flapped hard toward the call and came to a small farmstead, with a paddock behind the barn and a whole flock of chickadees darting in and out to snatch grain from a feed trough for an old plow horse. Raven spiraled above them in dismay, trying to figure out which one was Hero. Then she spotted him, a bit bigger and the only one sitting still. He was right on top of the pile of feed, stuffing himself, ignoring the placid horse as it nibbled around him. And totally oblivious to the ragged farm cat creeping along the shadow of the paddock fence.

“Hero!” she croaked.

He chirped a happy *dee-dee* and went on gorging himself.

The cat put its ears forward and kneaded the ground, eyes intent on the tempting fat chickadee waiting in the trough. Its tail twitched. Its hindquarters shimmied.

“Fly, you twitter-brained dolt!” Raven screamed.

She stooped on the trough just as the cat pounced. They reached Hero at the same instant, only he was gone, whirring away in a flash of little wings and a chorus of indignant chirps from all the other chickadees. Raven found herself gripping the cat’s tail in her talons. It yowled in outrage. She flapped madly backward, yanking the tail to keep the cat off balance. A paw caught the side of her head. Raven croaked and swooped away before it could get in another swipe. She flew to the ridge of the barn and threw a stream of curses at the cat and Hero both.

“*Dee dee?*”

A chickadee had landed at the other end of the roof and was eyeing her uncertainly.

“You had better be Hero,” she croaked, “or I’m going to have chickadee for breakfast.”

The little bird hung its head.

“You’ll be sorry all right, you little stuff-guts. Follow me!”

She led him back into the trees and landed on the ground. As soon as he landed beside

her, she changed back to human, then changed him. She was dismayed at how it tired her, but soon enough he stood in the broken light under the trees, boy again.

“Hoi,” he said, stretching. “My head hurts! That’s too small.”

“Serves you right,” she told him. “Now get this straight: If you are going to come with me, you will do what I say and only what I say. You were a pinfeather from being cat food!”

“I knew he was there,” he said. “The horse told me.”

“The horse—?”

“Besides, I could hear him mumbling when he got close.”

Raven stared at him. She remembered him with the bull and calf in the breeding barn. Maybe he did have his own talent.

“That doesn’t matter,” she snapped. “You still waited too long gorging yourself. Blazing mages, do you know what it would have done to you? Cats like to play with their food before they kill it! And a fox will take you live back to its young. Even a red squirrel will eat a chickadee if it can catch one sitting still like a fat, lazy, brainless pile of dinner! When I say fly, you fly! Understand?”

He nodded silently, eyes down, the picture of contrition.

“Right,” she said. “You have to be something else, something not quite so easy to catch. So I’m going to change you to a raven. Then we can fly together, and you can at least take on a cat with some hope of escaping the menu. Get it?” He nodded. “Good. Now concentrate. Think about what you want to become.”

She began the spell, wearily closing her eyes to picture a raven. The image of a cat mauling a chickadee popped into her head. She shuddered and forced it aside. She felt magic tingling in her hands, and tingling back from Hero, as if reflected. No: even stronger, as if he were making the magic himself. She was sure then that he had mage talent. She almost stopped in amazement, but the spell was going too well. She welcomed his talent, and let it mingle with hers, grateful for the help.

Finally it was done and she opened her eyes, panting from the effort.

There on the ground before her crouched a snarling black cat.