

RAVENLORD

a short story

By

Amanda R. Hamlin

Flame red and golden, the leaves drifted from the branches, carpeting the ground. Caught in the crisp October wind, they rose and danced, forming a swirling vortex around the legs of the woman as she strode quickly along the street, smart black boots peeking out from the narrow legs of her stylish jeans. She walked with a swift, steady purpose, her steps clipped, heels clicking on the pavement. The sky overhead was gray but, in the east, there was a faint, bloody flush. The days were already starting to get shorter but it was not bad yet. In the months to come, the air would be crystal cold and the sky black until long after she was shut inside the mall. But, now she hurried, not out of discomfort, but a perverse habit of efficiency. The bus would arrive at the stop down at the end of the block at precisely 7:30, as it did every day. Reaching the spot sooner would change nothing.

Raw cries startled her and, looking up, she saw the skeletal limbs of a tree, already bare of leaves, and a black raven clinging to them. But she did not stop to look longer, heeding the noisy birds no more than the eddies of leaves circling her. As usual, she reached the stop with plenty of time and, as usual, it was deserted. The old woman who always wore long, drab colored dresses and kept her hair tied back under a scarf only rode the bus on Wednesday and Fridays. Julia liked to imagine this woman was a nun from the nearby old Gothic style church, though, admittedly, this was highly unlikely. The church probably wasn't even Catholic.

Boarding the bus, she sat near the middle, avoiding both the priority seats and the boisterous teens—probably cutting class—in the back. The bus went careening off down the sleepy neighborhood street and, in no time at all, had left the boundary of the town. Beyond lay acre after acre of flat open fields, now filled with the brown and rotting stalks of summer's harvest, twisting and falling over each other like a mass of leprous serpents. Away from the shelter of the houses, fog was rising, dangling white curls oozing from every dividing stream and roadside puddle. They shrouded the decaying fields in a murky haze and spiraled against the windows of the bus like the grasping fingers of ghosts.

Watching the swirling vapors numbed her into a sort of trance so that she almost fell back asleep and only shook herself out of it with a start as the bus was pulling into the mall parking lot. Once again, she hadn't seized the chance during the commute to get some reading done on her new steamy adult fantasy novel. In fact, she'd only opened the book once since she'd gotten it. But, beyond the fact that reading would be good for her, the book had been a gift from her friend Velma who might be offended if she took too long to get around to it. No good worrying about that now. She was already opening the mall doors and, from there, it was only a short walk to "Radiant Beauty Treasures." Time to get her head into the mode to work. It wasn't that Julia disliked working at the salon. She was good at what she did, her own personal little form of art. She loved the silky feel of freshly washed hair slipping and slithering through her fingers. Even the chemical odors of hair spray and dyes made her feel glamorous. And working at a full-service salon meant that, in addition to hair service, she could get make-overs and mani-

pedis from her co-workers during down time.

“Morning, Julia.” Velma waved at her with more than usual enthusiasm, looking up from setting out her tools on her manicure station. Julia smiled back with her mouth, hoping the sourness in her heart did not show in her face as she remembered Velma's excitement likely stemmed from the fancy hairdo Julia had promised her. Normally, Julia had no objection to working on Velma's hair. She was a good friend. Besides, her hair was perfect, a real stylist's dream. Deep, coppery red, it took highlights well and, reaching just past her shoulders, was the ideal length, long enough for creative styles but not so long weight became an issue. But this time, Velma wanted her hair done for an upcoming date with an exciting new beau and Julia felt, not jealousy, not resentment, just some vague sensation that was sour and sad.

Moving to her station, she did a quick scan to make sure everything was in place, the curling iron, flat iron, the various picks, brushes and combs, three sizes of scissors, the jars of elastic bands and bobby pins, and various dyes, gels, papers, and applicators. She pumped the styling chair with her foot, tested the water pressure from the hair wash sink, and absently tried the various blowers and function buttons on her station's hood, then lifted her huge hair spray bottle, frowning at its lightness. Sure enough, a quick shake by the ear revealed it was almost empty and would need to be replaced by a new one out of the back room.

By the time she had solved this issue and made it back to her station, Velma had finished her set up and was sitting in Julia's salon chair, obviously waiting for her. “You want to go out this Friday?”

“I'm not sure,” Julia said uneasily. “Friday might be Garrett's day off.”

“His day off from work?” Velma asked almost enviously.

“No, Warcraft.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I'll ask him what his schedule looks like.” Secretly, Julia was half glad for an excuse not to hang out with Velma who, she knew, was looking for an opportunity to gush about her upcoming date and Julia had become increasingly uncomfortable sharing life details with her friends as her own life went on and on with no change. She felt old and “out of it,” like she was proving all those stereotypes about how getting married makes you boring. This made her angry and, by extension, cranky and antisocial around those whose lives were more conventionally exciting than her own. Fortunately, her first client of the day arrived at that moment, so she was spared discussing the matter further with Velma. But, all through the day, she kept fuming to herself about the twisted values of the world around her. Why should dating random guys be considered superior to having a stable home life? Even if none of the guys turned out to be abusive or cheaters, they could still be downright boring. Based on Velma's reports, nearly half the dates she went on were so dull they didn't warrant a second try. It kind of reminded Julia of people who wasted lots of money on lottery tickets, which she had never understood either. But then, gambling was big business these days so people must get a thrill out of putting something at risk whether it was their money or their sex life. She just wasn't one of those people.

Walking home, she saw the ravens were still in the tree, at least some of them were, ruffling their feathers to dry them after the recent shower. One leaped from a branch, spreading wide its wings in a

flourish of shimmering feathers. Twice it circled in the air, its graceful flight mimicking the movement of the leaves, which were blowing again, before coming to land on the edge of the curb. Then it hopped awkwardly out into the street, a grotesque jerking motion, one shoulder higher than the other, until it reached a packed mass of fur and flesh in which the blood had already faded to an anemic pink. The thick, gunmetal beak stabbed down and emerged with a long elastic strand of flesh and muscle. The raven waddled back, keeping a firm grip on its prize, yanking it once or twice, until the rubber thread tore, then slurped it up like a noddle. Julia walked on, feeling slightly queasy.

As she stepped through the door of the house, everything was quiet and dark, this being one of the days she got home before her husband, Garritt. Then there was a wild clatter on the stairs and a flying ball of snow hurtled towards her, impacting hard in her midsection. As Julia slumped back against the door, Sylvanus, their Maltese puppy, put her paws up on her leg, wiggling her tail crazily. “Easy girl,” said Juila, scratching her behind the ear as she slid off her boots and moved towards the kitchen. The quesadillas were in the pan and she was mashing the guacamole when Garritt came in.

“That smells delicious,” he said, grinning, coming over to plant a kiss on her cheek before hanging up his coat.

“Do you want to go for a walk tonight?” she asked when he came back, flipping the quesadillas out onto their plates.

“Sure, if nobody wants to run a heroic tonight.”

Julia wrinkled her nose. It wasn't that she disapproved of Garritt's *World of Warcraft* guild. It was certainly much better than having beer drinking football fans regularly take up residence in the living room. It was just that, “You did that yesterday, and the day before that you were raiding, as you will be tomorrow too.”

Garritt smiled ruefully. “I know and I'm sorry. You know the content patch just dropped and we really need the gear for the new dungeon that got released. This pace won't last long, and, after, I'll take you out to that new, fancy restaurant I know you've been eyeing.”

“Oh.” Juila felt her cheeks color and was too embarrassed to make further protest. She had, in fact, been itching to try a new restaurant Velma had told her about but she hadn't yet mentioned it to Garritt. He often seemed to just know things about her. Had he snooped on her computer, or did he possess some uncanny ability to read minds?

“That's what I thought,” he said, winking at her and leaning in for another quick kiss.

Predictably, there *was* a heroic scheduled that night, or two...or three. In any case, Julia spent the rest of the evening alone, and not knowing quite to do with herself, she spent it sorting laundry and cleaning the bathroom. It seemed just days before that she had last done so but she did it again, just for something to do and, though the prospect of finally visiting the restaurant she fancied was quite appealing, she knew it wouldn't turn out to be the romantic evening she imagined. Somehow, whenever Garritt took time away from Warcraft for her it always seemed to correspond with something going wrong at his job and he was too stressed to properly enjoy it. The one time this hadn't happened, *she* had been too stressed after having an angry client scream at her for hours that day.

The next day, Velma was still glowing over her date the previous night. But then she noticed how gray Julia looked. “Would you like me to lend you a romance novel?” she asked sympathetically. At least she wasn't saying anything about the almost romance novel gift book.

“What would be the good of that? It takes two to tango and, when there's always a raid or a crisis at work, no one's going to get on the dance floor.”

“How do you tolerate all that raiding? I don't get it.”

“It's not really so bad. I spend at least as much time with Garritt as you have with any of your boyfriends. The only thing is that it's scheduled...so I can't booty call him.”

“See, that's what you need a romance novel for.” Despite her frustration, Julia had to laugh. Still, it had been a close call. As soon as she boarded the bus after work, Julia took out the almost romance novel gift and forced herself to begin reading. There was no way she was allowing her friend to find out what a slacker she had been, especially because she wasn't being as supportive as she ought about Velma's new relationship. The book was called *War Bride* and was about a princess whose castle was besieged by nomadic barbarians and, as part of a peace treaty, was given as a prize to their leader. Of course, lots of other things happened in the book as well, such as the fact that the giant lizards the barbarians rode on were dying of a mysterious disease which the princess might be able to cure with her culture's more sophisticated medical knowledge. But none of that was important. The whole point of the book, at least in the eyes of Velma and Julia, was the way the princess simultaneously hated and looked down on and was overcome with desire for the barbarian chief.

She had finally reached the scene where they met each other for the first time, the princess in her fine silks and disdainfully putting her feet on the muddy ground of the barbarian camp, the leader, clad in skins, smelling rank like an animal, as he appraised her with calloused and tattooed hands, as if she were breeding livestock. The Princess was enraged by the insult and rough treatment but, at the same time, she... Julia slammed the book shut. She didn't dare read on. Why risk arousing desire that would only be flushed down the drain by yet another heroic? Or, worse, what if she read the most juicy scene imaginable and still felt nothing? A cold sweat broke out on the back of her neck at the thought. The book drooped on the edge of her lap, a cold finger marking her place between the pages. She was paralyzed, too afraid to read on but angry and ashamed at her fear.

Fortunately, she reached her stop soon, giving her a perfect excuse to put away the book. The crisp air outside was refreshing after the stuffy interior of the bus but didn't set her thoughts racing as it might once have done when she had imagined the wind whispering her destiny in her ear. She walked as quickly as she could. With any luck, she would be home in record time, where there was dinner and other tasks to occupy her mind.

As she passed the old church on the corner, the bells began to toll, ringing brazen voices reminding her of the summer vacations to Europe her family used to make when she was a teenager and had felt wild and free and so very, very alive. Every hour, every half and quarter hour, the bells would shake the narrow winding streets of the old cities and she could believe they had become lost in an older, more romantic age, where you could buy magic rings in the curio shops and adventure waited around every turn. Once they had stayed in a tiny attic garret without heat where, even in the summer, she had to

huddle under down quilts to sleep and the owner of the house delivered fresh eggs to them every morning. Julia could believe herself a poor, struggling artist, eking out an existence up here in the windy garret atop the hill of the old castle town. One wrong move, one spell of bad luck and she could become a beggar or a whore, but just to feel the sun on her face was precious. To feed on creamy yellow sheep's cheese, fresh bread and ripe peaches was a feast of sensual delight.

But all that was gone forever now. It was only a year ago when the bells had tolled, passing bells, funeral bells, even when, as now, they marked as well the passing of the old year. And now, she was thirty, the matriarch of the family, and she felt old, old and wilted. No sap flowed in her. All was dust. The grief was still a dull ache but, also, it was a mark of the passing of time, the passing away, an autumn to be followed only by eternal and bitter winter. How could she be so old at thirty? Both she and Garritt were, at least mostly, happy and successful in their careers. They had more than enough money to meet their desires... Hell, most of her friends couldn't even hold down a steady relationship, still stuck in the in the awkward and emotionally draining date search phase. And here she was, already married to a man who, in so many ways, was a perfect fit for her. Oh sure, the raiding thing got annoying sometimes but, it was still leagues ahead of being stood up at a creepy bar. Her life was really about as good as could be and yet there was something, some special spark or flare that was missing, like she'd been transported into *The Wizard of Oz* and saw the world in black and white instead of color.

The bells rolled through her. Almost, she could feel her body vibrate to their tones as she walked, letting them pass through her, remembering and feeling old. How long had it been? Only a few short years since she had looked up at the blank windows of castle towers, at the spires of cathedrals piercing the sky, and known that, for once, only time and not the distance of vast oceans had separated her from her dreams. She had stood beneath the arches of stone, built by human hands but, magically, soaring up to vanish in the shadows. As she drank in all the intricate carvings, beasts and dragons, great battles, and brutal martyrs there was one scene that stayed in her mind the most: the last judgment with its wild tangle of bodies mingled amid the flames, the people praying for mercy and the demons ever more pleased to deny it. Considering that they were religious images from a very pious age, it was rather scandalous and thrilling to see images of naked women being groped on the wall of the church. Apparently, the fact that the groping was being done by a demon with a beast's head, in a flaming pit, made it all okay. She had always found the demons fascinating and, she now realized it was because they reminded her of the Ravenlord, that malignant yet majestic being from her past. Perhaps, the ravens in the tree yesterday had stirred her memory.

She remembered years ago when she had loved the Ravenlord. He had been her first object of desire, even when she was a young teenager, before she had her first period. When all the other girls had swooned over movies stars or the latest boy bands, papering their walls with posters and never missing the latest DVD or album release, she had spent her days longing dreamily for this creature, part bird, part god, and all man, who would seize her in his talons and carry her away. There were no pictures of the Ravenlord for her to hang in her room, so she made her own, filling an entire sketch book with drawings of his dark hair and savage eyes. And she had something none of the other girls had. She had also drawn pictures of herself in the sketch book as well, of him carrying her through the sky, soaring over rugged mountains, the two of them beside a waterfall in the wilderness, him taking her in his arms and kissing her while the wind blew through their hair, equally long, so that it twined wildly together. And, as she had grown older, she had drawn other things as well, things she now blushed to recall.

She could no longer even remember where she had first encountered the Ravenlord. Probably

something in a song or a book had first sparked the idea in her mind. But she knew he had swiftly acquired all the qualities she had dreamed of. He was brooding, ruthless, majestic, iron willed. Her shy, fourteen-year-old self, had no need to worry about trying to draw a lover to her. The Ravenlord would simply *take* whatever he wanted, though, in most cases, his commanding presence would dissolve the resistance of any woman. Cold and brutal, he had no concern for the feelings of humanity and yet, his very strangeness and danger made them irresistibly drawn to him: Messenger of Winter, Messenger of Darkness, Messenger of Death. Julia watched, almost enviously as her younger self rapturously panted out his long list of titles: Evil Sorcerer, Grim Reaper, Dark Lord, Master of the Underworld.

It had been years since she had felt such intensity of longing. The endless grind of her job had left her weary and prosaic. There was no time or energy for engaging in fantasy and, with little opportunity to read the right kind of books, there was nothing to fire the imagination. Garritt was even worse, though she could hardly blame him, as his job was still more demanding. It had been months since they had gone to bed together, not that she missed it since, on the rare occasions when they did, their coupling was, likewise, perfunctory and prosaic.

When she got home, she went immediately to the hall mirror, dodging the incoming missile of Sylvannus, who then came bounding along at her heels. Squinting into the reflective glass, Julia searched for something, she wasn't sure what, some sign she was still the same person she had been years before. In truth, there was little to remind her of her high school self, with her immaculately made-up face and sleek, sophisticated clothes. It wasn't that Julia didn't like the way she looked. She thought her style made her sexy, urban, and worldly. But it didn't make her feel wild or free or young. She no longer looked like the bride of the Ravenlord. Was it any wonder she didn't feel like it either? An expensive leather jacket and high heels weren't for making love out in the forest under the moon.

Almost dreamily, she put out her hand to open the door of her closet, reaching far into the back. There, under the plastic dust bags, hung the dresses she had collected as a teenager, that she had worn in college when she first met Garritt. There were so many, peasant shirts with gathered sleeves, full skirts that twirled when she moved, even some corsets with alluring lacing and bones to make her rapturously breathless. And then there were the accessories to match, the rings and necklaces of dragons and Celtic knots, plus a few circlets, one set with a real opal that Garrett had given her for an early anniversary. But it had been ages since she had worn any of it.

And in the final bag...Julia caught her breath. This dress was her prized possession. Professionally tailored, okay made as a gift by a friend going into fashion design, it was a perfect replica of the style of dresses in sword and sorcery movies. Jet black, it rippled to the floor, nipped in at the waist by laces, the fabric specially chosen so it would cling like a second skin. The skirt was full, with yards and yards of fabric that pooled about her feet and trailed into a short train behind her, and she remembered the heavy, silken flow of the material against her legs, while the sleeves hung, swinging like great dark wings. She had never told her friend what had inspired her design, at the time she had not even fully remembered, but, unquestionably, this was a gown meant for the consort of the Ravenlord.

Back then, the sight of the dress had made Garritt want to rip it off of her, but it was too valuable for that, so she was shoved against the nearest wall, the vast skirts gathered about her hips, feeling like a war bride. Now, she cradled the material against her, remembering how, once, simply wearing the dress could make her inflamed almost beyond thinking. And now, even within the plastic wrappings, the smell of her dorm room still clinging faintly to the fabric, she felt nothing, so that her life seemed like the walls

of a prison closing in around her. The dress hanging limply from her arms like a fully vampirized corpse, she slumped over against the closed door and sobbed, tears trickling down her face and the convulsions of her body so close and yet so far from what this garment had inspired in the past.

She had meant to try the dress on, to look at herself in the mirror and see if that might, possibly wake something. But now she lacked the heart. Instead, still holding the gown in her arms she shuffled over to the window and stood there, staring dumbly at the dying leaves of the tree outside as her tears dried and became cold again.

This was how he had always come to her in the beginnings, in her old dorm room, when everything was new and fresh and intense, him grabbing her from behind to surprise her and make her squeal. Later, in their first apartment, when the frequency had decreased, it had become a sort of charm. She would stand with her back to the door, looking out the window, waiting and hoping that this would be a form of sympathetic magic to draw him to her. When she heard his steps in the hallway, she would hold her breath and then they would pass, and her tears would start to fall in helpless rage and frustration. Then there were the times when he would come into the room and she seemed about to die of joy, her heart frozen by the reincarnation of hope. And then his hands would come around her, gentle, loving, the hands of a husband, not a conqueror, and all the feeling inside of her would wither and die, the tears bled into dust, which was fortunate so Garritt would not see them fall while he made love to her.

And over the years this disappointment, this frustration and hurt over and over again, had hardened into something deeper. She had, she now realized, stopped allowing herself to feel. The desire had withdrawn behind a heavy shield to escape the pain and, there it had withered, shriveling like an unused limb, and now, for all she knew, it had atrophied into nothingness. She sat, staring blankly at the wall, not moving. There was no point anymore. Without passion, without romance, there was nothing. Julia, who had been born for fluorescents and metallics, could not live in a black and white world. She wished that time would stop so she need never again concern herself with feelings or her lack thereof.

But, then, her eyes, focusing in a brief, painful moment of lucidity, happened to fall on the alarm clock on the bedside table. Garritt would be home any minute and explaining the situation to him was the last thing she wanted to do so she forced herself to her feet, put the dress away and went to warm up dinner. But even this couldn't stop her mind from racing back over and over the same agonizing ground, like Sylvannus dementedly chasing her own tail. When had she so completely lost her feeling? It hadn't happened all at once but had gone a little bit, year after year, like silt gradually chocking a river, which is why she hadn't noticed, every realistic, adult decision she had made adding more detritus to the pile. Fair maidens didn't need to get up in the morning to go catch the bus for work or worry about paying the gas bill on time. In her teens, she had been racked by sexual frustration to the point of utter distraction, where she could not sleep or study and was almost prepared to claw her flesh to pieces, if only it would stop the mad craving inside her. She had never thought she would wish for those days again but now, part of her admitted that even being in constant burning torment, was, in some ways, better than being dead inside.

“Why don't you go to sex therapy?” Velma had asked about a year ago. But she couldn't do it. How could she begin to explain to her friend, much less to the therapist, that what she really wanted was to be buffed by wings, torn by talons, born to the ground by more than moral weight...

Then, abruptly, Julia stopped dead in her tracks and gasped, a tight, strangled breath, as if she had

been punched in the stomach for, suddenly, after all this time, those images had awakened a twitch, a quiver, something, deep inside her. It was very tiny, faint as the ephemeral flutter of a moth's wing, but it was there and something, anything at all after so much nothing, was precious beyond words. A shudder passed up and down her spine at the marvel of the gift and she threw back her head with lips parted. "Oh, Ravenlord," she whispered.

That night when Julia drifted into sleep she had a dream, not as explicit a dream or even as clear and vivid as it would have been in the past, but it left her with no doubt that she had received a message from the Ravenlord. She remembered nothing concrete from the dream or, rather, there had been nothing concrete in the dream, just a black mist, shot through with the fire colors of falling leaves in which she was floating. A cool wind blew, setting her hair flying, brushing ticklingly against her skin all up and down her body for, in the dream, she was naked and her hair was much longer, the ankle length mane she had always dreamed of. And, carried on the wind, came the crowing of carrion fowl. Each cry pierced deep into her and she could feel them pulse in her heart, under her belly and down, down, each a burning needle of desire. As the cries grew wilder and more raucous, the surges within grew more powerful until she felt she would break asunder.

She woke the next morning, the blood still singing in her veins, and stared at the ceiling for several minutes before she remembered where she was. Then she felt Garritt turn over next to her, the warmth of his body spreading out to envelop her. Memory stirred inside her of the long-ago days when they would waken in that heat and fumble together, still half asleep, too eager to wait for full waking. And Julia felt the sweetness of her dream ache slightly as she watched the rise and fall of his breath. Then his lashes flickered, he opened his eyes, and smiled at her. "Hello, Julia."

"Good morning." She bent towards him and, like sleeping beauty in reverse, put her mouth on his. It seemed ages since she had dared, or wanted, to kiss like this and Garritt didn't withdraw, he kissed back, but only half-heartedly. There was none of the hard, biting sharpness of the beak for which she yearned but, for the first time in ages, she wasn't going to give up so easily and kissed even harder in an attempt to reach and wake whatever might be inside him. She wasn't even quite sure why she did so. Her own desire still wasn't fully wakened but enough, so she wanted to try.

He laughed and put his arms around her but it wasn't a wild, delighted laugh as he would once have given. It was affectionate but also nervous, as if he sensed something was expected of him that he might not be prepared to answer to. "I love you too, Julia," he said, giving her a squeeze, though it lacked energy.

"Would you like me to make pancakes for breakfast?" she asked, trying to keep her voice cheerful despite her disappointment.

"Na, I have to leave right away to get ready for a morning meeting. I am sorry though. You make such good pancakes." He kissed the part in her hair, chaste as chaste, and stood up. Part of Julia was furious, but she had become too proud to fight long ago. Besides, the deep, shuddering wonder of her dream was still there. Even if Garritt refused to share it with her, she could still feel it surge through her like a wave. Even if her feelings might be slight in the grand scheme of things, she had been so long with nothing that even this left her breathless and dizzy. She could feel her heart race as she prepared her own breakfast, simple granola, not pancakes, and then packed her purse and stepped into her boots. Finally, she opened the door, and the wind struck her in the face so that her carefully brushed and slicked

down hair began to fly around her. There had been some rain in the night and the odor of the damp leaves was as heavy as perfume in her nostrils, sending her desire spiraling through her like a bonfire in the wind, so that she had to hold the door post and steady herself before she could walk on.

The smell and feel of autumn had always had the power to stir her blood, even in the most horrible of circumstances. She and Garritt had met in the fall, years before, and she had always thought that was the reason, that her senses carried her back to the nights when they had talked until four in the morning, wandering their college campus under the black sky, wading through piles of wet leaves, the way they had become instantly obsessed with each other and had jumped into bed, scandalously too slow for a one night stand but too quickly for anything else. Now she wondered if it wasn't something much deeper and older, the long-forgotten power of the Ravenlord, that called up these feelings in her. Perhaps it was even this that had so intensified her immediate infatuation with Garritt. In the beginning, he had suited her well, had seemed to possess all the power and passion she longer for. Was it just that *life* had crushed it out of him, or had the glamour of the Ravenlord been on her, making her see things that existed, not in reality, but only in the black velvet world of her inner longings?

She twisted her hands miserably. The question, in one form or another was always eating at the back of her mind, so frightening she usually kept it firmly in the subconscious, only rarely, like now, becoming condensed enough to allow it to slip free. Suppose she had imagined it all. What then? Would she have to go forever unsatisfied? There was no way she was going to consider divorce or even separation, especially since she would then have to explain to everyone that it was because he didn't measure up to the evil bird-god of her fantasies. Even the first option was fraught with worry. How could she ever wake the fire in him again? The weary grind of business meetings and being nagged to pick up his dirty dishes might have forever slain the dark spirit within. Even if it were only deeply buried, she had not the faintest idea how she would release it from its armor, thick and tough as rhino hide, growing ever harder, more pitted and unyielding as the years added rind upon rind of new growth, like the unbreachable bark of an ancient tree. Many was the night as an adolescent and still, sometimes, as a teenager, when she had stood outside, hands straining to the sky, in all weather, beneath slicing wind or lashing rain, shivering in the shining white winter, whenever she felt lonely or unloved or angry, and cry with every aching fiber of her being, "Oh, Ravenlord, come for me, come for me now."

"How's the book going?" Velma asked over Julia's shoulder as she was grabbing a quick lunch between clients.

"What book?" Julia gasped, jumping in shock.

"The one sticking out of the corner of your purse. The one you were eyeing longingly over the top of your sandwich."

"Oh, that," said Julia lamely, reaching out quickly to shove the book back into her purse but realized, just in time, how foolish this would look and changed it to a clumsy grab for her make-up. She could feel her cheeks burning and anger flamed in her at the sight of Velma's lip curling.

"Looks like you like it quite a bit," said Velma conspiratorially, not mockingly and Julia's anger melted. Here was someone with whom she could share her new feelings, at least in a small way.

"Oh yes I do," her voice dropped lower, almost to a whisper. "I haven't gotten far yet, but I know

I'll be able to read more tonight.

"I'm glad I know your tastes so well. Speaking of taste, can Garritt spare you this weekend? I need some advice on a new dress."

"Sunday afternoon I'm always free," said Julia, biting down her anger that this was because it was raid time and hoping Velma wouldn't remember the time she had claimed she was busy at that time because she had a fight with Garritt and didn't feel like talking about it.

Fortunately, Velma did not. "It's a plan then. Enjoy the book." She clapped Julia on the shoulder before turning back to work.

As soon as she got on the bus for the ride home, Julia opened her book to read more. But, as the bus jounced along, she found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. The bus was crowded and the position she had to keep her legs in to keep them tucked out of the way of the people standing in the aisle was making her pants feel decidedly tight and uncomfortable. A loose flowing skirt would be far preferable. And then it came to Julia, when she got home and changed out of her work clothes, why not put on something from the back of her closet? Something subdued, something she could, at least in theory, wear in public without being mocked. She didn't have the heart to go for anything like the black dress, at least not yet, but she did have clothes that would only raise a few eyebrows, more likely to be viewed as hippy, rather than ren-fair nut.

This anticipation gave her the lift she needed to tune out the mess around her and focus on her book. By the time she reached her stop, the warlord had returned from his battle and the bride realized how afraid she had been for his life. But, when they were reunited, she was too proud to admit it and, angry at the weakness of her feelings, was all the more determined to resist him. This was going to be good. But Julia forced herself to put the book down so she could change her clothes. She chose a full circle skirt and the top in soft fabric with a scoop neck, back lacing, and long hanging sleeves. Garritt had gotten home before her but was busy putting the finishing touches on dinner, so Julia was able to complete her change of clothes in peace. Then, her throat tight, she approached the kitchen. What would Garritt say? Would he see it as a come on and, if so, what would he do?

"How was your day, Julia?" he asked, kissing her on the forehead and she felt a dark foreboding, remembering her recent fears that his desire was forever lost or even might never have been. He said nothing about her clothes.

"My day was fine and yours?"

"Oh, annoying." He spooned ravioli onto her plate. "One of the new employees opened some spam and a virus got all over the system."

"I'm so sorry." If he were stressed from work things became even more hopeless than the impossibility they already were.

"We got it under control." He opened two cans of pop and pushed one across the table to her. "But, after that, there was no time to prepare for the meeting about the upcoming system overhaul." He went on at some length, but Julia soon stopped listening to his words, many of which she couldn't

understand anyway, and, instead, paid attention to his voice. By his animated tone, as well as his expression and the way he leaned back in his chair, she could tell he was more satisfied about having solved a problem than he was irritated about the extra work that had been caused. She looked down into her plate and pushed her remaining ravioli around, a sick lump congealing in her stomach. Though it had been a long time, she still recognized the sensation. This nauseous jello was what she would choke on every time she was about try and fail to ask someone out. “Julia, you okay?”

“I was wondering...I mean...would you like to go on a walk after dinner?” she asked shyly. She wanted to experience more of the exhilarating power of the fall weather, and she wanted to experience it with him. She hadn't quite made the jump from feeling desire inside herself, longing for the vast, intangible qualities symbolized by the Ravenlord, and feeling, or daring to feel, the same urge towards the reality of Garritt but, if anything could bridge the gap, this would be it. Maybe Garritt still carried some of the same memories of their first nights together that the wet leaves and biting wind could wake in him as well.

He smiled at her, a welcoming smile, not sexual but not obviously adverse. “I'd love to,” he said, and she strained her ear for the darker, richer note in his voice, the one that had always made her heart rise into her throat for him. “But I can't tonight. We've got another heroic scheduled.”

“You never told me about that last night,” Julia said coldly, feeling her heart harden in defense even as she spoke.

“Radin's daughter got sick so he had to drop out of the raid tomorrow night and the only sub we could find was a new guy who doesn't have the right gear yet, so we have to get him stuff tonight. I didn't know until I logged on quickly when I got home.”

“You could have said no,” Julia thought bitterly but she said nothing aloud. He would point out, rightly, that he would have had no way of knowing she had anything special planned and that, since she almost never did, it was a safe guess to make that she did not. She could have countered with the argument that she had given up on plans since his schedule was too unpredictable and difficult to work around but that would have been starting a pissing contest just to be spiteful and she was too tired to be spiteful anymore. But it was so unfair. Garritt has seemed at least semi-interested. If his guild had left him alone for just one night, something might have been made of it. And tomorrow was the big raid night so this was her last chance for a while. Julia sat with her hands in her lap, curling and uncurling among the folds of her beautiful full skirt, as the rage swelled up inside her until she trembled from the energy as Garritt continued to talk unconcernedly about his day at work and the problems with the guild. But her anger was impotent, and she knew it. A few minutes more and he rose to leave, never knowing how deeply upset she was. He kissed her on the forehead again as he turned to go and that nearly broke her.

Left alone, she could bear it no more. It was as if the walls were closing in around her, shrinking as if to crush her. Desperate for air and space, for her soul as well as her body, she rose and dashed for the front hall, not bothering to look and see if Garritt had come after her. Such romantic notions had been slowly but relentlessly crushed out of her. Besides, she knew his gaming headphones would fully block even the loud clatter of her distressed exit. As she wrenched open the door, the brisk wind struck her in the face, raising prickles on her skin, thick with the threat of rain and the smell of decomposing leaves. And then she ran, feet pounding the pavement, hair licking behind her like a comet. It was a block and a half to the park, and she ran the whole way, weaving around leisurely dog-walkers, elderly

couples or friends out for an evening stroll, and local shoppers carrying their grocery bags. Some stared, make exclamations of displeasure, or even hurled curses, the dogs barking and snapping at her heels, but she flew past them before sight or sound could register.

A fence of heavy wrought iron, or imitation wrought iron, circled the park. It was only a block and a half to the edge of the park but considerably further to a place where there was any kind of break in this barrier. Julia was in no mood for the delay and, catching hold of the top of one of the fence posts, leaped upwards. The fence was about the height of her shoulder and her leap was not nearly as high as she had intended. Rather than clearing the fence, she found herself spread across it in an extremely ungraceful manner, with the decorative spikes on top of the fence posts, blunt but still highly unpleasant, digging in her, her right leg hanging from another spike where her shoe had snagged, while a pair of smartly dressed women walking towards her exchanged looks and put their hands to their mouths as if whispering or giggling. Hauling with all her might, her arms burning, she managed to drag herself up over the wall like a bag of wet laundry.

Frantic to get away before the women got close enough to let her know exactly what they thought of her, she failed to control her descent, catching her skirt on one of the spikes, then pulling loose so she tumbled with a hard thump on a pile of leaves on the other side, the breath whistling through her teeth. But she dragged her bruised legs under her and kept on running, the leaves falling from her with soft hisses and whispering about her feet as she went on. She knew exactly where she was going. Near one end of the park was a hill, treeless and open to the sky. Even now that the branches were mostly bare, there was still the black criss-cross and interlace, like skeletal hands reaching for one another, between her and the open freedom of the stars and moon. As she approached the hill, the ground sloped upward, gradually at first, then more and more steeply, so that her breath rasped in her throat after her long run, her feet scrabbling for purchase on the damp grass, sliding out from under her so that she was thrown forward, her hand sinking into the wet dirt and clammy remains of dead grass. At last, she was almost on all fours, clutching at the ground in front of her to steady herself, looking down at her feet, not up at how far she had left to go.

And so it came as a surprise for her when, suddenly, there was no more hill for her hands to grab and she came stumbling out onto the small level space at the top, the limpid moon swimming in the sky above, a full harvest moon, its light almost yellow as it flowed down on the tangled trees below, making each twist and crook of the branches stand out sharp and black and shining. Up here, the wind struck with full force, above the shelter of the trees and buildings. Her hair rippled and snapped behind her like a tawny flag and the sleeves and full skirt of her peasant dress fluttered wildly about. But the fabric plastered itself tight against her body as she faced into the wild blast, feeling the sweat drying on her body and her tears on her face. And then, caring not who heard, she flung up her arms and cried aloud, "Ravenlord, Ravenlord, take me away with you."

The force of the wind doubled, almost knocking her flat and, in its wake a cloud came scudding across the sky, cutting off the moon's light. For a moment she was aware only of disorientation and panic, blind groping, a feeling almost like falling and the roaring in her ears. Then it was all over. The wind died completely, not even a gentle breeze remaining to stir the branches below. The moon came out from behind the cloud again, washing the ground with pale light. A few blocks away, the church bells tolled the hour, eight o'clock. Julia stood alone on the hilltop in her pseudo-medieval dress, hair wild, streaked with sweat and mud and tears, feeling rather foolish and utterly, utterly crushed. Her husband would not play the Ravenlord, or lay hands on her at all it seemed, and the Ravenlord himself declined to answer her call. The last thread of hope had been pulled from her tapestry of fantasy.

Garritt was still running his heroic, or a new one, when she returned so he didn't hear her, but she no longer cared. Slowly, wearily, she dragged her way up the stairs, stripping off her wet and muddy dress, balling it into an angry wad, then stuffing it savagely into the hamper in the linen closet. For a moment she stood in the hallway, bitterly naked, goose flesh creeping across her body, as she idly wondered what would happen if Garritt walked out of his room at this exact moment and saw her like this. Then she plodded into the bedroom, feet dragging, and struggled into a pair of shapeless sweats that also served as pajamas. Though it was still too early for bed, she crawled under the heavy comforter, groping for the remote, and pressed play, starting a DVD of nostalgic 80s cartoons, perfect for numbing, mindless forgetfulness. Turning off the light and pulling the covers up to her chin, she let her eyes glaze over as her brain and heart switched off. Sometime later, Garritt came in and attempted to be friendly, but she pretended to be extremely interested in the show, not taking her eyes from the screen and answering his questions in monosyllabic grunts. Eventually, he just came and sat next to her, slipping his arm around her shoulders and she relaxed into him, let her head slide to his shoulder while, inside, she was crying, her heart a hollow going on and on forever.

The next day, she was still depressed, unfocused at work, almost cutting a client's hair at ear level when she had wanted it shoulder level. Only a burning itch on the back of her neck which forced her to set down the scissors and scratch, giving her time to collect her thoughts, saved her from an embarrassing and potentially job threatening error. There were no ravens in the tree today. As soon as she got home, she immediately changed out her tailored, fashionable clothes, throwing them in the hamper as well to bury the evidence of last night's tragedy, then put on a shapeless house dress, soft, faded blue, the kind her grandmother would have worn. Taking a deep breath, she let her lungs expand fully, the fabric so light against her skin she could barely feel it.

Sylvanus wined eagerly, wagging her tail, as she pressed her warm, compact, furry body against Julia's now bare ankles and Julia felt a stab of pain. "I'm so sorry, puppy," she said sadly. "I've been so caught up in my own things I've been neglecting you." Reaching down to scratch Sylvannus behind the ear, she was rewarded by happy bounds and licks until, overcome with feelings—happiness, guilt, loneliness, love—she snatched up the wiggling form and held it close against her. For a long time, she held Sylvannus, sitting in her favorite chair by the window in the living room, her fingers threaded through the silky white fur. The dog made little wuffing sounds and snuggled into the hollow of her arms so Julia was filled with a sweet wrenching ache at the realization that this creature at least loved her unconditionally, overflowing her heart and leaking out her eyes. It was a quite peaceful weeping. Even as the tears slide silently down her face, dropping to form dew like globes in Sylvannus's fur, she was smiling, a wry, bitter smile. She was still sad, yes, but also at ease in the love she felt for this other living creature.

She made goulash that night, largely as an excuse to give some of the ground beef to Sylvannus. While she was preparing it, Garritt called to let her know he would be home late from work which she said was fine and, really, it was. She didn't need Garritt reminding her of what she couldn't have. It was much more satisfying to savor her own meal while watching Sylvannus do the same, putting Garritt's portion in the warming drawer for him to find. She wasn't heartless, not even angry anymore, just vaguely numb and sore, as if her whole body was a bruise.

Going upstairs, she decided to spend the evening cleaning out the storage closet in the spare room, where they threw everything that had no obvious immediate use, and, now, it bulged with junk, the

removal of which, like her new clothes, would help her feel lighter. Sylvannus followed at her heels, racing around the room and, eventually, getting in a fight with a ball of crumpled tissue paper from some long-forgotten gift. The autumn day had already been waning while she ate. Now it was dark enough that, even on the second floor, she had to switch on the light.

As she worked, she heard Garritt come in the front door and go to the kitchen to pick up his dinner. Sylvannus had succeeded in defeating the tissue paper, pink scraps of it clinging to her fur, as she tilted her head from side to side, ears raise to pick up the sound from below, then dashed off, her feet pattering on the stairs, to greet Garritt in his turn. Julia sighed, heaving herself to her feet, and switched off the light. After a quick trip to the bathroom, she made her way down the hall to the bedroom. Cleaning the closet had been hard work. She would sit on the bed and rest a little, maybe do some reading, before going back to tackle a second round. But, before doing so, she stood for a moment, watching the sky outside go dark and the bare branches of the nearby tree scrape the window.

Suddenly, she heard the door open behind her and felt herself stiffen internally, frozen in weary dread at the sound of Garritt's footsteps coming in from the hall. Somehow, without being able to say precisely how, she knew he was coming to have sex with her. Some sixth sense born of long familiarity told her. It was the old charm, standing with her back in the door, and she'd not even realized. They had been celibate for almost six months now. Why, why, tonight of all nights, did he have to impose this? Julia remained facing away, in the futile dream that, if she never moved, nothing would happen. Another step, then two, and now he stood behind her so that she could feel his breath on her neck, see him faintly silhouetted in the reflective window glass. An old, sour taste rose in the back of her throat at the thought of submitting yet again to his lackluster advances. The spark that had at long last leaped into flame inside her again would be crushed and bruised so that it retreated back beyond reach, falling to cold ash. She could not let that happen, not after she had learned again how sweet desire could be. Julia took a fortifying breath and felt her hands clench into fists as she turned around to tell him no.

But, before she could, he reached out and grabbed her arms with crushing strength, fingers digging into the flesh as he pulled her tight against him. The feel of the pressure, the nails, was like a black sunburst in her brain as she tilted back against him. He bent his head towards the hollow of her jaw and his dark hair, loose as it so rarely was these days, came rippling forward over her shoulder, snake like and silken against her ear and throat. Every muscle in her body seemed to lock and melt at the same time and then his hands came wrapping around her, palms pressing hard, fingers splayed. One trailed down over her belly, the other up to her breast and, as they did, the lips against her ear whispered, "I am the Ravenlord. I have come for you."

By now, Julia was so stunned and inflamed she could no longer even think clearly. It was beyond her to unravel how or what or why and she no longer cared, having only wit enough left to gasp, "I am yours," as she twisted herself around, flinging her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. His mouth on hers, his hand against her back, he moved to tumble her back onto the bed as he had not in months...years. Hands knotted in her clothes and pulled them off of her with such force she could almost have sworn they were being ripped.

The room was dark, only the faint glow of street the lamp down the block filtering dimly through the shifting leaves outside the window, so she could barely see to begin with but, beyond that, her eyes were mostly screwed tight or unfocused beyond comprehension by the waves of elation surging within her. But, though she could not see, she could feel with excruciating clarity and what she felt surpassed

her wildest dreams. In addition to his inky rivers of hair, tracing and tickling across her skin, she could feel curved, hard, cold talons against her and the wind and then the razor keen, down soft brush of beating wings.

When all was done, she lay blind and paralyzed, her brain whirling to catch up to where the rest of her body had been swept away to. There was a click in the darkness and a pool of slightly yellow light appeared as the nightlight was switched on, casting its glow on Garritt's face, his cheeks flushed, hair snarled, eyes still a little bit wild.

“How did you know?” she whispered, still partially stunned, as she rolled onto her side to regard him with dreamy eyes.

He shrugged. “I just knew. I don't know how but, something told me. Besides,” he looked at her and the corner of his mouth twisted in a half smile, “there wasn't much to know. Once I stared, your responses told me everything.”

She sat up slowly and gingerly, shaking her head as if to clear it. “I thought you were raiding tonight,” she mumbled muzzily.

“Still am. Raiding doesn't start until eight, you know.”

“Oh,” she said, disappointed, as she glanced over at the clock on the nightstand. “You need to go soon then.”

“Yes, but don't worry,” he added quickly, seeing the disappointment in her face. “This isn't the last time.”

“Then you liked it too?” she cried, greedy for reassurance.

“Of course I did. Though our weary grind may last day after day, seeming endless, when the days turn towards winter, the Ravenlord will always return.”

“And I will always be waiting for him.” With a deep sigh, she collapsed into his arms, and he held her close for a moment before getting up to go. Later, much later, when the dizzying high had finally retreated, at least to the point where some form of rational thought was possible, she wondered what had really happened. Had Garritt actually been possessed by the spirit of the Ravenlord, morphed in the hybrid creature able to stimulate her with claws and feathers? Or was there a more realistic, if not a simpler, explanation? He could have snooped in an old diary of hers, a diary so old even she and forgotten where it was, and then decked himself out with two full sets of Goth metal finger sheaths and some feather construction shaped like a wing. But that would have taken time and it wasn't like Garritt to plan something that intricate yet never show a flicker of interest.

And where would he hide the stuff? In the days and weeks that followed, Julia poked around all over the house, especially in the basement and the garage, but she never found anything. Garritt could be sneaky but, if this was a trick, it was in incredibly well executed one, that deserved a compliment. But she knew him well enough to know he would never admit the trick, if trick it was, unless caught red handed.

In the end, it didn't matter how it had happened, only that it had. Julia's age-old dream had come true in a way she could never have imagined. That joy alone should be enough. Why look a gift raven in the beak? She still had weary days of work and bill paying, lonely nights during raids but, in spite of this, the heart pounding rush of being abducted by the Ravenlord, even just dreaming about it, kept a part of her firmly rooted in fantasy and the fantastic. With her desire and her imagination, the color had come back into the world. The rolling of the bells, the croaking of the birds, could make her shudder to her core and just thinking of what could be waiting for her when she reached home was like a flash of lightning down her spine. True, she didn't get a visit from the Ravenlord every night, sometimes not even once in a month. But, even if it were only a certain look Garritt would shoot her out of the corner of his eyes as he disappeared into his study to raid, she was never without a sign that she had not been forsaken

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