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opening extract from

Fire Dreamer

written by

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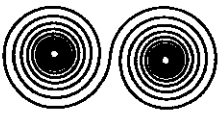
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1. Admidios



He shivered in the desolate remains of his great hall. Only two blackened walls still stood where once he had feasted with his warriors. No thatch clung to the twisted remains of the charcoal beams.

Rain lashed on Admidios's face as he nursed his malice and resentment. He had always been denied the power and honour he deserved.

Bitter memories flashed through his head: his noble father, his slave mother, his younger brothers who took turns to wear his crown; the great Emperor Caligula who befriended him, but who was murdered; then the new lords of Rome who sneered at him.

The relentless winds flung a fresh blast of rain into Admidios's face. He tried to light a fire, but the kindling

was soaked. Feeble trails of wet smoke faded with the evening light.

His fingers dug under the chin of the newborn lamb as he jerked its head right back. The creature gave a strangled bleat, but was bound too tightly to struggle. Admidios drove his knife into its throat. Air and blood gushed and bubbled as the creature fell limp.

Admidios's warm, slippery fingers dropped the blade. He spread his hands to the skies: 'Come to me, spirits of hate,' he screeched above the storm's whine. 'Give me the power to defeat all who despise me.'

There were other memories too: a baby boy, screaming and kicking inside a cloak, then hidden in a basket and taken from Britain to Rome. There, Admidios had been the boy's guardian. Those years had been good. He had been greeted as 'Magistrate' in the street. But the obedient child had grown into a rebellious youth.

Admidios snapped a twig and wished it was his nephew's neck. 'If I cannot have his obedience, I shall have his title! Power *will* be mine!'

He stood. It was almost dark and the hall's ruined beams groaned and swayed, threatening to fall on him. He wiped the animal's blood across his face and threw back his head. The wind flapped and tugged at his cloak. 'Spirits of anger and loathing, take my body for your own!' he called.

The storm sighed away. Silence echoed in the empty ruin.

A demon had heard him. A demon that longed for vengeance as much as he did. A demon who had recently been defeated . . . by a mere girl.

Will you give me your soul? It whispered.

Admidios lowered his arms and looked around as the darkness swallowed the ruins. 'If you give me my desires, I will serve you through this life and all my lives to come!' he swore.

In return, you must do something for me.

The voice thrilled him as it trickled like warm sand into his mind. 'Anything, Lord!'

Find the raven-haired one. Harness her power into my service.

Admidios fell to his knees. 'Just show me how!'

When the time comes, the voice came again. *Meanwhile, you must walk in the shadows and wait for me there. I will send you a servant of mine you can trust. For now, I give you a gift. Use it wisely.*

The presence had gone, as had the wind and rain, leaving only night.

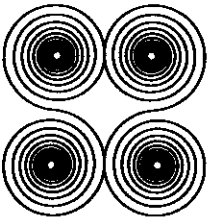
Shaking, Admidios groped around for the unlit pile of wood. He struck flints together once more. 'Obey me and bring fire!' he hissed. A spark caught in the damp kindling. A flame leaped. He cried out in pain for the light hurt more than if it had burned him.

He stamped at the orange and gold tongues until they died.

In that moment of light, he caught sight of his gift.

It was a shrunken human head.

2. First Flight



The uneasy spirit shifted inside the unfamiliar body. She wasn't used to her new form yet – in fact, she didn't even realize she had been reborn. She only knew she was a young raven peering over the edge of the nest and looking down on a world that seemed . . . *wrong*.

The early summer spread before her in a mist of tiny foliage sprayed with frothy white and pink blossoms. Warm sun made her feathers feel good. She yawned and stretched her wings. Just then, her mother landed on the edge of the nest and, seeing a wide-open beak, she pushed a strip of flesh into the waiting throat. The young bird swallowed and eyed her hungry siblings with beady malevolence, daring them to complain.

They squawked with jealousy, but she didn't care. She swallowed and rearranged her feathers as she continued to

watch the world below. She didn't know what she was looking for . . . a grub maybe, a chick fallen from a nest?

. . . Or a human in a blue dress, long black hair spreading out behind her as she ran, chasing a giggling child and a large mud-coloured dog.

Suddenly the raven knew she had to do something important. *Now.* She scrabbled up the nest until she swayed unsteadily on the twiggy rim. The breeze teased and lifted her rainbow-black plumage as she stretched her wings to their fullest. She relished the cooling air under her flight feathers as she surveyed the world below. She wasn't frightened. She knew that was where she must be: down there with the dogs and cats and rats and all the other terrors her parents warned her of.

She fanned her tail and *quorked* to the sky. Delight. Delight. Now. She must do it *now*!

At that moment her father landed shrieking behind her. 'Stop! You are too young. Your tail is scarcely grown . . .'

But the spirit was not fond of waiting and good counsel. She had been created from resentment, self-will and the desire to rule. She let the wind catch under her outstretched pinions and launched herself into the air.

But a long branch of crab apple loomed in front of her. It caught in her left wing, she lost her trim and tumbled in an ignominious ball, next to the human in blue.

The girl put out her hand. 'Are you all right? Let me look – I won't hurt you . . .'

The raven jabbed her beak at the five fat worm-shapes thrust towards her, grabbed the middle one and tried to snap it.

'Ouch!' the girl yelled, shaking her off. 'Let go, you beast, I was only trying to help!' She jumped to her feet and sucked at the blood that beaded from the cut.

But the raven lifted her head and spread her ruff of neck feathers. She liked the taste of that blood. What was more, now she was on the ground things began to look 'right' again. She recognized the world from this angle. Trees were *meant* to be seen from this way up, as was the human girl.

The bird braced her feet as a band tightened around her puffed-out chest.

That was familiar too.

It was hate.