

Juliet Marillier

# RAVEN FLIGHT



A SHADOWFELL NOVEL

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Excerpt from the second book in the Shadowfell series, *Raven Flight*.

The old men watched us go. Halfway up the hill I looked over my shoulder. The two of them were back on their bench, gazing out over the water, where a single fishing vessel moved on the swell, a mere speck in the immensity of the sea. Looking back eastward, I saw the humps of the bigger isles, part-veiled in sea mist, but I could not see the mainland. It was a strange feeling to be thus cut off from the rest of Alban. Something inside me longed to stay here, to ride out the storm in safe harbour as so many of the Good Folk had chosen to do when Keldec's rule plunged our peaceful realm into darkness. To leave cruelty and hardship, wars and struggles for other people to deal with.

'All right, Neryn?' Tali was climbing the track with her usual ease, seemingly not in the least tired by the trip.

'Fine.'

The gull flew above us, moving in slow circles to keep pace. An ordinary bird in every respect, complete with webbed feet. But nothing was ordinary here. For now, as my legs reacquainted themselves with solid ground and the queasy feeling subsided, I began to feel the strength of Ronan's Isle, an old, old strength. Magic breathed from every stone. The air was alive with it. The sea that circled the isle whispered tales of wonder. There were Good Folk here, no doubt at all of that.

'You should wrap up your weapons now,' I told my companions. 'I feel uncanny presences here. The Hag may be close.'

In fact Flint was carrying no visible weaponry, though I doubted he would go anywhere completely unarmed. Tali took out the cloak she had put in her bag, slipped her knives from their sheaths, wrapped them in the garment and stowed them without a word.

We climbed the hill, and found ourselves on the edge of a broad, treeless area that must surely be Lanely Muir. There was indeed not a soul to be seen here, only some tough-looking sheep with wool in long twisted locks, grazing with new lambs by their sides. To the south, at a distance, a cluster of low stone dwellings huddled behind protective walls, and between them and us stood stacks of peat drying in the wind. I could see the dark gouges in the earth where folk had been digging, and here and there a patch of water shining amid the brown. Above the moorland the spring sky was alive with birds.

The gull led us, now winging ahead, now alighting on a stone or a stretch of tumbledown wall to wait while we caught up. We made our way across the island to the

west, where the rising land of the moor gave way, with shocking abruptness, to sheer cliffs. There had been cliffs on the Northies' map, but nothing could have prepared me for this. The height was immense – surely we had not climbed so far? The cliff edge was gouged with crevices, its uneven surface treacherous. Here and there sections had broken away to stand alone, craggy giants with the ocean washing white around their feet far, far below us. Each solitary stack was crowned with a colony of nesting gannets, and in the nooks and crannies of the precipice more birds roosted. The noise of their voices filled the air, a constant screaming. Birds dived to the sea below and rose with fish in their beaks. Others circled above, perhaps seeking their own young among a myriad of squawking, jostling creatures.

'Stop, Neryn!'

Flint's sharp warning startled me. I was not so very close to the edge, but the look on his face made me step back.

'What now?' Tali had eased off her pack and was looking along the cliffs, one way then the other.

'We wait. Perhaps not right here.' I recalled the tiny Twayblade seated on the very edge of the cliff, dangling his feet over the mind-numbing drop. 'We might sit over there by the wall.'

The dry-stone wall had probably been erected to keep the livestock from coming to grief. It seemed whoever had built it had run out of energy quite soon, as the wall stretched only a short distance along the cliff top. We sat, our backs to the stones, our faces to the endless sea. The gull flew off with a squawk.

'Couldn't we explore along the clifftop?' asked Tali. 'Maybe look for some sign of her? I don't know where a Hag would live, but you mentioned a cave. She's hardly going to come strolling along looking for us.'

'We wait because that's what we were told to do. We don't go exploring. There's always the danger of blundering in somewhere we're not welcome and causing offence. I'm here seeking a big favour. I need to approach it in the right spirit.' It occurred to me that when I'd met the Master of Shadows, he had indeed come strolling along looking for me, if in a somewhat roundabout way. I had not sought him out; he had approached me.

Silence, then. Flint was beside me, his legs stretched out, his hand right beside mine. I found myself wishing, unreasonably, that Tali was somewhere else.

'Tell me more about this change in the Good Folk,' Flint said eventually. 'I thought your friend Sage was unusual in her support for the cause. But it seems the tide has turned far sooner than anyone expected.'

We broke the news to him that Lannan Long-Arm had set a time limit on his support. We explained the council at Shadowfell, and the Good Folk's belief that a time of change was upon all of us.

'Sage and Red Cap left Shadowfell to spread word of the rebellion to their own kind in the West,' I said. 'The Good Folk of the north, those who live under Shadowfell, were going on a similar mission. And there was talk of using birds, or fey folk who can fly, to carry the message. I was wondering if word had travelled ahead of us. Now that we've found you, I'm sure of it.'

'Birds. Extraordinary. But then, you have a habit of making the extraordinary happen.'

Tali told him about Regan and the others: where they had gone, what they hoped to achieve before next winter closed the paths. Flint listened in silence. Of his own business he told us nothing. The sun moved into the west; the shadows began to lengthen. Flint took off his cloak and put it around my shoulders. Tali was restless, getting up, walking a few paces, sitting down again.

'Gifts,' I said, realising I had forgotten this important aspect of dealing with the Good Folk. 'We should make an offering to show goodwill!' The Master of Shadows had seemed satisfied with the warmth of my fire and a share of my food, limited as my supplies had been that day. Perhaps it had helped that I'd offered this before I'd known he was more than a blind old man.

'You think the Hag's going to come out for a scrap of bread or a strip of dried meat?' Tali sounded unconvinced.

'Could we make a fire? Perhaps find some herbs and cook some kind of soup?' A Hag, I thought, might have few teeth left; I imagined her dipping the bread in the warm soup to soften it. It would be a comforting meal in the chill of the sea wind.

My warrior companions tackled the task with the same calm efficiency they'd applied to sailing the boat. Tali went off and helped herself to a supply of peat, which she carried back in her cloak. I hoped there might be some way we could repay the islanders; in a place that had so little, everything would be precious. A second trip yielded the withered remains of a bush that had succumbed to the winter weather, and Tali soon had a camp fire burning on the landward side of the low wall. Meanwhile I went out onto the moorland in search of herbs, returning with a better harvest than I had expected, for sage and thyme both grew here, sending their roots deep between the rocks, and by a lochan where long-legged birds waded I found a supply of early cresses.

By the time I got back Flint had water boiling in the small cook pot he carried everywhere, and various ingredients ready to add: a handful of oats, the dried meat shaved into slivers, some wizened mushrooms that had seen better days, shreds of vegetable matter that might have been carrot or turnip.

'I thought it best to wait for your approval,' he said, looking up with one of his rare smiles.

'That looks good to me. You carry vegetables in your pack these days?'

'I brought a few things from Pentishead.'

A sharp memory came: Flint feeding me as I lay grievously sick. Flint so patient and kind, at a time when I'd believed him my enemy. How much had changed since then. And how little time we had. Only two days. Let there be time alone. Let there be time for me to talk to him properly, to touch, to tell him ... So much to be said, and none of it possible with Tali present, Tali who was always quick to remind me that soft feelings were chinks in a warrior's armour. I felt, already, that she was watching us.

'At the very least, the three of us will get a good supper,' I said.

Tali came to crouch by the fire and warm her hands. 'I hope the plan isn't to sleep out here on the cliff top if nobody comes.'

I said nothing. If nobody came, there was no plan. We would spend some time on the island, I supposed, and I would try to find some Good Folk here and ask if they knew where the Hag was to be found. I could call them to help me if I must. But I would not call a Guardian. That would truly be over-reaching myself.

'Someone will come,' I said with more confidence than I felt. 'If it's not until tomorrow, we can sleep in the shelter of this wall.'

Tali's expression told me what she thought of that suggestion. The wind was blowing hard now, stirring up the ocean all around the island. Out to the west I could see a small, cliff-bound isle I remembered from the Northies' map. Today it wore a collar of white. I imagined wild breakers lashing the rocks. Not even seals would go in there.

'Does that island have a name?' I asked Flint.

'Far Isle. Populated mostly by seals.'

'It looks too steep even for them.'

Flint seemed about to speak, then apparently thought better of it. Instead he took up a stick and gave the broth a stir. I leaned across and dropped in the herbs I had been shredding. The mixture smelled good.

'I'd have liked some fish,' Tali said. 'Tomorrow, maybe.' She glanced at Flint. 'You should take the boat. You'll need it.'

He watched the fire, saying nothing. His jaw was tight. I wondered if his mission was to kill, or only to seek out information for the king. I wondered if his readiness to leave us the boat meant his business lay here on Ronan's Isle, where he had old friends.

'That decision can wait until tomorrow,' I said.

'Mm,' murmured Flint, his gaze on the glowing peat, the flickering flames, the mixture simmering in the pot.

Time passed. The broth smelled ready to eat, and I realised I was hungry. The sun was low, setting a gold light on Tali's strong features. Flint sat silently by the fire, wrapped in his thoughts.

Suddenly Tali's gaze sharpened. She rose slowly to her feet, putting up a hand to shade her eyes. 'What in the name of the gods is that?' she said.

It was a cloud; a swift-moving cloud approaching over the sea, from the lonely cliffs of Far Isle. Birds. A great throng of birds, a flight to dwarf the flock that had heralded our arrival on this shore. And below them in the water, sleek and elegant as a swan, came a boat.

'I thought you said that place was only inhabited by seals,' I murmured as the hairs on my neck prickled with awareness of the uncanny.

But Flint said not a word.

We stood near the cliff top watching as the craft approached. It came in a gliding motion, passing over the turbulent waters as if on a tranquil loch: a long low vessel with a high prow, its sail of a shimmering pale fabric that should surely have been torn to shreds by the sharp westerly wind. The great cloud of birds cast a shadow on the sea, and yet where the boat cleaved the water there was no shadow, but pale light.

'A woman,' Tali said, narrowing her eyes against the sun. 'Dressed in a hooded cape. A big man with her. Or is it a creature?'

'Is she old? Young?'

'I can't tell,' said Tali. 'Her hair is long. Could be white, could be fair. She's sitting very straight. Broad shoulders. Looks tall.' After a moment she added, 'The boat seems to be sailing itself.'

The air around us throbbed with magic, a dangerous magic the likes of which I had not sensed since the Master of Shadows revealed himself to me in Corcan's Hole.

'It's the Hag,' I said. 'I can feel her power.' I was both elated and sick with terror.

Flint stood close beside me. He still hadn't spoken. Now, as the uncanny boat came nearer, he put his arm around my shoulders, heedless of what Tali might think. I closed my eyes. My fear eased; my heart quieted. I felt the warmth of his touch in my whole body. *Store this up*, I told myself. *Keep this feeling for when he's gone*. And at the same time I thought that if the Hag lived on Far Isle, and if her boat could take us there, perhaps Flint and I might snatch some time alone together. That place was so remote, so unlikely, surely Tali would be prepared to relax her guard for a while. Even overnight. I rested my head against Flint's shoulder; he whispered something I did not catch.

'Turn, turn,' muttered Tali urgently. I opened my eyes and realised I had been in a kind of dream. The boat was very close to land now and showed no sign of slowing. 'Black Crow's curse, what is she doing?'

The cloud of birds was almost upon us; the boat went out of sight, somewhere down at the base of the cliffs.

'She'll be smashed to pieces,' Tali said in flat disbelief. 'There can't be a landing place down there.'

The birds passed over us, not squawking and crying, but silent. They circled then landed, a sea of white along the cliff top and all around us. On the wall close by I spotted a gull wearing little boots.

'We must do something – fetch help – ' Tali moved perilously close to the cliff edge, craning her neck.

I looked at the uncanny bird. It turned its head to one side and stared back.

'We should wait,' I said. 'That was no ordinary boat and no ordinary sailor.' When I'd seen the Guardians in that vision, in Corcan's Hole, the Hag had said, *Be fluid as water.* 'If it's the Hag, her strength is water magic. Maybe she doesn't need a landing place.'

'How can we just wait? What if ...' Tali fell silent as Flint and I moved back to the fire and sat down, side by side. After a little she came over and stood beside us, arms folded. 'I hope you're right,' she said. 'If we could have saved someone and did nothing ...'

'If an ordinary fishing boat went in under there the crew would be dead before you could fetch help,' said Flint. 'Or are you suggesting we descend the cliff on a very long rope?'

'That's just it,' said Tali. 'Even if they do land, how will they get up?'

'Smells good,' someone said. All three of us started in surprise; the person had come from nowhere. She was standing behind Tali now, long silver hair flowing down over her shoulders, rivulets of water running from her robe to pool on the rocks around us. We rose to our feet.

The woman was certainly tall. She could look down on both Tali and Flint. Her stance was proud. Hers was a strong face, the nose jutting, the cheek bones prominent, the jaw firm. Her eyes ... They were odd indeed, elongated in shape, and of many colours, deep green, seal grey, the blue of a summer sky and the blue of the sea under winter clouds, all at once. Her mouth was wide and thin-lipped, her expression calm. A hag? I would not have called her that. Perhaps she was old, but she seemed more ... ageless. Her skin was not the wrinkled parchment my grandmother's had been at the end, but pale and unblemished.

'Welcome to our fire,' I said when I had found my voice. 'Will you share our supper?'

Tali made a little sound, and I saw someone else come up behind the woman. If she was human in shape, save for those eyes, her companion most certainly was not. He stood as tall as she, but his form was rounded, massive, sleek under a cloak of shining weed. His face was something between a man's and a seal's, and though his bulk was formidable, he wore an expression that could only be described as kindly. My grandmother had told me stories of selkie folk, beings that were part seal, part man or woman, creatures that changed their shape between land and sea. But here we were on dry land, and the being was neither man nor seal, but ... himself.

'You are both welcome,' I said shakily, regretting that we had not taken the time to catch some fish while we could. 'Please, sit with us awhile.'

The Hag, for I was sure this was she, sat down gracefully by the fire, her hair a pale shawl over her shoulders and down her back. Her robe was of shifting green and had many layers. Its fabric seemed rough, the edges tattered and torn, but the effect was

pleasing. It was as if the garment had not been made, but had grown around her as naturally as foliage on a plant. Her companion lowered himself to the ground beside her. I tried not to stare. The creature had limbs like a man's, he sat like a man, but no man ever had such a strange, compelling face. After a moment, Flint seated himself beside me. Tali remained standing, her staff in hand.

'There is no need to stand guard,' the Hag said. 'Unless, of course, you have a particular fear of birds. Sit where I can see you.'

Tali opened her mouth to argue, then thought better of it. She took a place on my other side. There was nothing relaxed about her pose as she met the Hag's penetrating gaze.

With Flint's assistance I ladled the brew into bowls. We only had three among us. Seeing this, the Hag turned her head to meet the strange eyes of her companion, and from somewhere within his swathing weed-like draperies he produced a pair of half-shells.

Nobody said another word until we had finished our meal, Flint and I sipping the brew direct from the shells, the others using bowls and spoons.

'So,' the Hag said, setting down her empty bowl. 'A long journey for you, and barely begun. Word came to us that you'd had a bit of help along the way.' When I looked at her blankly, she added, 'One of the river creatures.'

'Oh. Yes, I ... we were attacked, and I had no other choice. If the river being had not come to our aid we would have been killed.' I hesitated, not sure how much to reveal so early. 'I try not to use my gift unless I must. I know how perilous power can be when not properly controlled.'

'Aye? Then you know something, at least.' She examined me, her changeable eyes drawing me in. 'Neryn, is that your name?'

'Yes. My guard here is Tali, and ... this is my friend.' Flint used various names, and he might not wish to be introduced to a stranger by any of them.

'Oh, aye, we ken who the laddie is.'

That was the second time I'd heard my formidable man called a laddie. So she knew him; or knew of him, at least. Perhaps she knew every creature that walked these isles, animal and human, canny and uncanny. I cleared my throat, not sure whether to get straight to the point or spend more time in preliminary niceties.

'You'll be wanting to come over to the island, then.'

Clearly the Hag preferred a direct approach. 'I was hoping you might be prepared to teach me. To begin my training in the wise use of my gift. I see you have been told some of my story already. Did the ... messenger ... explain why it is I need to learn this?' *Come over to the island.* So the Hag did live on that lonely, cliff-bounded rock out there, the gannets' roost. A formidable place. Isolated. Uncanny. Safe. A place where Flint and I might be left alone for a day, a night, another day, to walk together, talk together, perhaps to



sleep side by side as we had done before, but not quite the same, because each of us knew now how precious those times were ...

'Aye,' said the Hag, startling me out of my daydream. 'When one of your kind steps up like this there's only one reason for it, and that's a change in the pattern of things. As for teaching you, I'll be wanting to find out how much you know and how much you need to know. That will take time.'

'How much time?' Tali asked the question I had decided to hold back.

The curious eyes turned to meet the dark ones of my guard. 'Long enough,' said the Hag mildly. 'Longer if we sit about here exchanging the time of day. We should be on our way.'

'So we do have to sail over to that little island?'

'Afraid of the sea, are you?' The Hag's eyes were the grey of ocean under storm as she gazed at me.

This question was a test. If I pretended to a courage I did not possess, she would see through it instantly. I thought quickly and gave her an honest answer. 'I would be foolish not to be afraid, since the sea is many times more powerful than any human woman.'

'Neryn can't swim,' put in Tali. 'It's not unreasonable for her to be scared of boats.'

'Gather your possessions,' said the Hag, getting gracefully to her feet. Her strange companion also rose. 'My vessel stands ready.'

A crazy thought came to me, that she might bid us jump from the cliff top. The Master of Shadows had once commanded me to leap into deep water, after all. And how else were we to make our way to whatever anchorage lay at the cliff's foot? How had she and her companion reached us so quickly, save by magic? No path could safely traverse such a sheer drop.

She turned to walk away along the cliff top. After a few strides she halted, and the rest of us halted behind her. The Hag turned.

'One companion only,' she said, looking at me. Her glance moved to Tali, then to Flint.

'No,' I breathed, and my heart clenched into something tight and painful. 'No, that's not -'

'You may bring only one. Choose quickly.'

Flint had become suddenly still. I looked up at him. His face was a stony mask. 'There's no choice about it,' he said. 'Tali is your guard and companion. She must stay with you.'

Hot tears flooded my eyes. To wait so long, and then not even have time to talk to him properly, not even to have a moment alone, not ... I wanted to say it wasn't fair, but that would be a child's complaint, and this was not a child's business. I forced myself to turn toward the Hag and give her a respectful nod. 'I understand.' Try as

I might, I could not keep my voice steady. 'Please may we have a few moments to say goodbye?'

The Hag folded her arms. I could almost feel her counting.

Tali reached out to take my staff from me. She jerked her head toward the stone wall, indicating that we should go a little distance away. This unexpected kindness made the tears spill from my eyes. We moved away from the others, Flint and I, until we were standing up by the wall. Tali turned her back and stared out to sea. The Hag and her companion simply stood there waiting. Whatever I might want to say to Flint must be said within their hearing. *Don't show her your anger, I told myself, or she might refuse to teach you, and then where would you be? Don't let your feelings get in the way of the cause.* That had never been so hard as it was now.

'I'm sorry,' I whispered, taking Flint's hands in mine and wishing he would let that mask slip, just for a little. 'I wanted this more than anything ... time together, even a day, after so long ... I had hoped you might be there in spring. At Shadowfell!' Old habits were hard to break; I found myself glancing over my shoulder before I spoke this name. 'Thank you for bringing us safely across.' I couldn't say anything of what I felt, I couldn't speak a tender word, I couldn't tell him how I missed him and feared for him every day, how I longed for him to be close, how my dreams of him confused and troubled me even as I clung to the glimpses they brought me. 'This is hopeless,' I murmured, freeing a hand to scrub my cheeks.

'Be safe,' Flint said. 'Tali will guard you well. This is a rare opportunity, Neryn; seize it with all your strength.' There was, perhaps, a very slight unsteadiness in his voice. But maybe I only imagined that.

Silence for a few heartbeats, no longer. We stood with hands clasped, looking into each other's eyes. Then the Hag said, 'Time to go.'

'I wish –' That was all my tears allowed me to say.

'I too, dear heart,' said Flint, and now I heard in his voice what his exemplary self-control had kept from his face. He felt as I did, as if his heart was being wrenched out of his chest. 'Perhaps this is best. We are each other's weakness.'

'We are each other's hope,' I said, and although every instinct urged me to throw my arms around him, to press my body against his, to hold him close, I withdrew my hands from his and took a step back. To be a warrior of Shadowfell was to put the cause before all else. 'Be safe. Dream of good things.'

He said nothing, but I felt the weight of his gaze as I turned and walked away, down to where the Hag stood tall and quiet, waiting for me. Tali had been transferring items from Flint's bag to her own, fastening the straps. Now she put my staff in my hand.

'I'm ready,' I said. I did not turn back; if I looked at Flint now I would fall in pieces.

'Farewell, comrade!' Tali called to him. 'Safe journey.'

'Farewell,' he said quietly, and it was the saddest thing I ever heard.

'Come,' said the Hag. 'Follow me.' She spread out her arms, raising them high, and there was a whirling sensation, as if sky and sea, cliff top and flock of birds were turned and tumbled in a great wind, and we were turning and tumbling too, helpless before its power. I clutched the staff, wondering if we might be blown all the way across to Far Isle. But no; the wind stopped and the whirling motion ceased, and here we were in the boat, putting out from the foot of the cliff with the gulls wheeling and dipping around us, their shrill voices raised now in an echoing chorus. The waves crashed against the rocks behind us; wherever the boat had been moored, it surely could not have been there. But there was nowhere else. Tali was pale with shock; I imagined I looked even worse, red-eyed, sniffing, startled and sad, not to speak of the way my stomach was protesting about the movement of the boat. The Hag sat serenely beside me, amidships; her selkie companion was in the stern, half-reclining on a padded bench. Gulls perched all along the rails, their heads turned uniformly westward.

When we were some distance out from shore I looked back, craning my neck to find the spot where we been on the cliff top. Was it there, near that deep fissure that sliced the rock face like a mortal wound? Or there, where I thought I could make out a short length of dry-stone wall? I could not see him. Not anywhere.

'Look forward, not back,' the Hag said. 'All is change. Do not regret. Instead, learn.'

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## **Juliet Marillier**