

Raven's Haven – Lydia, Year 8, VIC

Raven inched slowly along the edge of the cliff. Her golden eyes were locked on the sprig of starbloom that sprouted from a nook below. A shard of rock broke away beneath her paws. Startled, she scrambled to steady herself, trying not to look down at the deadly drop. She breathed a sigh of relief, before turning her focus back to the plant. It was so close, just a few more careful pawsteps and those pearl-like flowers would be hers.

Suddenly, the rocks in front of her gave way, leaving only a precarious bridge between her and the starbloom. When she thought things could get no worse, an icy pinprick hit her muzzle. And another one. And another. The fuzzy sound of cascading rain filled her ears.

Raven grimaced. "I must get the flower before the stars cloud over and they lose their magic!"

She could see the iridescent glow of the petals already starting to fade. She reached for her staff, gripping its rough wooden surface in her jaws. Leaning forwards, she gently looped the crook around the plant. She yanked it back, flinching as a droplet of rain hit her eye.

Raven crouched over the bunch of flowers, rain soaking her midnight fur. She shook the starbloom flowers, their flickering white petals scattering star-freckled pollen. She scooped up the pollen and sealed it in a small glass jar, storing it away in her satchel amongst other trinkets and potions. Under her soggy, drooping witch's hat, she purred contentedly.

Despite being at the top of a cliff, the sky blurry with rainfall, she was at ease, for she had found the final ingredient for her Master. Raven had dreaded her quest for starbloom pollen for many moons because of the treacherous hike, but it was over now. She knew not what potion the pollen would be used for, but every time her Master looked at it in her recipe book her eyes lit up, so Raven knew it was important. She would return to the hut and please her Master greatly.

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Raven looked back up the mountain, it was hard to imagine just a few hours ago, she had been at the summit. She turned to face the forest; its canopy was a welcome shelter after the dangerous trek down in the midst of the storm. With the light of fireflies in a jar that dangled from her staff reflecting in her eyes, she sprinted off through the forest, each tree and turn familiar.

As she ran, disturbed autumn leaves swirled around her, brushing past her silver needle whiskers. She stopped occasionally to pluck a pretty pebble or to swipe a spider web, soft as silk. Raven's mind was brimming with possibilities; the potions she could make, the concoctions she could brew. The warm smile she knew would be plastered on her Master's face when she saw the night's haul kept her going. By the time she had rounded the great oak and saw lanterns swaying in the branches ahead, her pouch was brimming with gifts of nature.

Raven sped up the rickety ramp, her staff clacking along beside her. She hooked it around the doorknob and the door creaked open. Immediately, she was flushed with warm air, her ears licked by the wisp of a fire, her nose flooded with a sweet tingling aroma. Home.

“There’s my kitty! Good girl, Raven! Oh, let me see what you have gathered!”

Her Master instantly jumped up, dress twirling, arms wide open. Dropping her staff, Raven hopped into her Master’s arms, burying her face into her wild red hair. Her Master smiled lovingly, before placing Raven by the brewing pot and opening her pouch.

Raven stretched, shaking her ebony pelt and eagerly peering over the rim of the cauldron. Pumpkin stew.

She heard her Master exclaim with joy, “Starbloom pollen! Oh, Raven, what would I do without you?”

Raven chattered excitedly. *What would I do without you?* she wanted to say. She knew there could be no witch’s cat without a witch.

Raven bounced onto the ragged yet homely armchair. The crackle of the fire, the bubbling in the cauldron and the flutter of pages in a cookbook were all music to her pointed ears. The familiar song lulled her to sleep, her tail curled around her and her witch’s hat cocked to one side of her head.

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CRASH! Raven instantly woke. A blood-curdling scream sounded. The fire was out and rain beat down on her face. She tried to call for her Master, but instead choked on the water pouring in.

The room was dark, except for a faint light seeping in through the roof: the ceiling had collapsed, planks of wood and rubble strewn along the ground, a cracked lantern flickering out. A shadowy figure leapt in through the hole and disappeared into the kitchen.

Raven cried out, wishing for the nightmare to end. Her vision was clouded with fog and rain; the sound of wind growing increasingly loud. Thunder echoed through the sky.

Where is Master? Where is my staff?

The small cat leapt off the armchair and padded along the soaking floorboards, her hackles raised. She caught a glimpse of the figure again, rummaging through the drawers. The cauldron had been spilled over the ground, pumpkin stew lapping at her paws.

Raven screeched, protective instincts taking over. She aimed for the figure’s leg and hurled herself. But it was too late. The hut was silent, with the rain and thunder fading to background noise. The figure was gone.

Raven breathed quickly; her eyes wide with fear. Then, a new smell arose.

Blood.

She skirted back to the living room, stepping over crushed coal and puddles. There was her Master. Dead. Raven gasped. *Please! Wake up! What did they do to you?!*

Her mind flooded with pain, she was overwhelmed and scared. The hut felt haunted, the last scrap of homeliness gone. Raven sat alone, tears running down her muzzle like a river in the night. Gasping for air through cries and whimpering, she hunched over her Master. She placed a paw pad on her Master's face. Cold. Gone. Empty. Finally, she gave into the draw of sleep and rested her head on her Master's chest.

By morning, the rain had cleared. The hut was a mess; every inch of floor covered by water or rubble. And in the middle lay Raven. Her head felt heavy; dry tears clung to her face. Birds twittered outside; frogs croaked.

Raven hissed angrily. *How could the world be so happy? Why do I feel so lost in my own home?* She knew the answer. Without her Master, nowhere was home.

The little black cat eventually clambered to her paws. She decided it was time to investigate. She discovered that all the ingredients she had collected the night before were gone. Including the precious pollen.

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Years passed. Raven lived on within the wreckage of the hut. Ivy crawled up the walls; the cracks filled with moss. The armchair sprouted flowers and the fireplace became home to spiders. The cauldron became a cavern, where a murky green pool formed and frogs dwelt. Raven slept by her Master every night, until there was nothing left but a pointed hat, corset and dress. Even then, Raven curled within the empty clothes.

She grew old; her muzzle peppered with grey. She recalled her last thought before the tragedy; before the cruel figure came and stole her life away. There is no witch's cat without a witch. With this in mind, she went to rest, at ease knowing that she would soon be reunited with her Master. For no matter how many rabbits, birds and frogs filled the hut, they were no substitute for her beloved Master.

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Raven opened her eyes. She was in a forest. Sunbeams warmed her back. She heard distant laughter. Her ears pricked with the sound. With realisation, she tore off through the forest. It was unfamiliar, yet she knew where she was going. Through meadows of daisies, clover and grass, over logs and babbling streams, until she could see her. Hair like a wild fire, hat pointed like a mountain. Raven meowed and leapt into her arms.

"Raven! You're here! You're really here! Oh, Raven...what would I do without you?" Her Master embraced her warmly.

Sometimes the two still wondered who that figure was. Whether they had intended to cause harm or were simply blinded by greed. But it mattered not. Raven had found peace. For she was home. Finally.