

The Raven Prince – chapter 5 – Astus

By Martin S. Beckley

Exhausted after flying all night, Raymond settled in a tree. The horizon sparkled as a prelude to the rising sun and Raymond descended into a disturbing dream. His family could not accept him as a raven and drove him out. He had only been asleep for an hour when a gunshot woke him. Another shot ricocheted off the hills and Raymond leapt from the tree. He circled high, searching for the source of the gunfire. Below, he saw a hunter strolling towards his kill. Raymond circled a few more times watching the hunter scoop up the dead rabbit in his thin agile hands.

The dream made Raymond more determined to find the second stone. Not far away he noticed a temple; its broken door hung open invitingly. He glided down and cautiously stepped inside. Light from the windows pierced the gloom, illuminating a face carved in the far wall. Two amber jewels nestled in the eye sockets. The jewel in the third central eye flashed red. Raymond knew that it must be the displacement stone. He scratched and scrapped with his claws and hammered with his beak, but the jewel would not come free. He was making so much noise he did not notice the shuffling footsteps approaching. 'Get out of it,' yelled the hunter. He pulled a dagger from his robes and waved it toward Raymond. 'These are mine, you thieving bird. I'll get a good price for these.' Reluctantly Raymond moved aside and watched the hunter release each jewel with a practiced twist of the dagger. He stuffed the jewels down the dead rabbit's throat. Raymond dove at the rabbit, grabbing it in his claws and fled. The rabbit was too heavy and fell to the floor. The hunter's dagger flashed past Raymond's head and thudded into the door. 'I'll take that,'

the hunter said picking up the rabbit and marching from the temple. Raymond followed him to a fortified encampment. Two guards stood outside the gate. 'Hay Astus, you are the worst hunter I know. How can you earn enough from selling just one rabbit?' 'I've never seen him come back with more than two,' the other exclaimed. Astus smiled at them and replied slyly, 'I get by.' 'Let's have a look then,' the first guard demanded. The rabbit was attracting more interest than Astus wanted but he held it up nonetheless. The first guard reached out but Astus pulled the rabbit away, 'No touching unless you're buying.' He held it up again. 'Who'd want that?' joked the guard. Raymond was unaware of the other eyes above him eagerly watching the rabbit. Raymond's best chance of getting it was now whilst Astus was busy with the guards. He swooped down. An eagle rushed past him and wrenched the rabbit from the hunter's bony fingers. Raymond gave chase but the eagle pulled away with ease. It disappeared into the distance along with Raymond's only hope of freeing his friends and transforming back into a twelve year-old boy.

