

Raven Saga I

The Hunters of the North

Kolani

With the coronation of Aris as ruler over the newly named lands of Aryon, Year Zero of the new calendar began—the dawn of the King’s Reckoning.

What was once meant to unify the entire continent fell apart due to the resistance of a rebellious group of Sumen who fought for their freedom and the sovereignty of Kolani. In the year 65, they succeeded in driving back the royal army.

Since then, an unwritten law has prevailed: the north of Kolani is untouchable. A natural river separates the two realms, cutting off all direct land routes.

Yet beneath the surface, the old conflict still smolders, and not all wounds of the past have healed. History, it is said, falls silent only to catch its breath.

The Sumen

The Sumen possess extraordinary abilities, revealed by an innate instinct known as the Collector’s Drive. This drive typically awakens around age ten, unveiling to the young Sumen their destined path. With this revelation comes a unique magical gift that allows the Sumen to pursue their calling with supernatural power. There are two types of drives: manifesting—also called “outer”—drives, and mental—or “inner”—drives.

Manifesting drives relate to the physical world. A Sumen with this gift might freeze water into ice, accelerate the growth of plants, bend metal, or even mimic the abilities of other living beings.

Mental drives, by contrast, affect the mind and soul, granting the ability to read thoughts, influence emotions, or heal their own body through sheer willpower.

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Hugin and Munin
Fly each day
Over the spacious earth;
I fear for Hugin,
That he come not back,
Yet more anxious am I for Munin.

The Poetic Edda

Part I

The Beginning



Sam swung his sword high, deflecting the blow with a resounding clash of steel. His arms trembled under the force of the impact, the weight behind it threatening to bring him to his knees. Calen's height and broad shoulders gave him an advantage, but Sam was quicker on his feet. Before his opponent could overpower him, Sam turned sideways and leaped back, the blades screeching past one another with a grating metallic scrape.

Calen's sword dropped to the ground with a jarring thud, and in the same instant, Sam's wrist twisted at an unnatural angle, pain shooting up his arm like fire. His weapon slipped from his grasp, and he stumbled backward, his face contorted in agony. He shook his hand, trying to will the searing ache away.

Damn it! Sam clenched his wrist, drawing in a sharp breath through gritted teeth.

A raven swept over the roof of the training hall and settled on a post by the horse paddock. It flapped its wings, scattering water droplets from its feathers, then fixed its watchful gaze on the yard below.

If only I could fly, Sam thought, though his next breath brought a grim reminder of his condition. His body felt as if his bones had turned to lead, and ever since he dragged himself out of bed, a sluggish, heavy weariness plagued him, clouding his thoughts.

"Get on with it!" Calen's impatient voice cut through his reverie.

The clang of clashing swords snapped Sam back to reality. Around him, the men and women of Pahann city sparred, their blades ringing out in a symphony of disciplined violence. A cold wind swept down from the north, carrying the tang of impending rain. The slate-gray afternoon sky loomed heavy with clouds, and somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbled—a low, ominous growl.

Sam inhaled deeply, trying to imagine the air mingling with his blood, infusing him with lightness and strength. He bent to retrieve his fallen sword from the trampled dirt, raindrops beginning to spatter his back. Straightening, he braced himself, his lips quivering with the effort. Even his unbandaged fingers looked pale, the veins stark against his ashen skin.

What a miserable day.

Calen had his hair braided back on one side, where a large scar adorned his face. He stood before him, sword raised, waiting for Sam to return to an offensive stance. “Pull yourself together already!” he snapped, shaking his head in frustration.

Sam clenched his teeth, forcing himself to lift his sword again. The tip quivered slightly under his grip. Calen didn’t wait. With a swift motion, he struck. Sam managed to parry the first blow, then the second, before retreating again. His strength was failing him. The blade dipped lower until its tip brushed the ground, and Sam braced himself against his thigh, panting for breath.

But this time, Calen offered no respite. Sam barely deflected the next strike in time. His movements were slower, his reactions dulled. By the second blow, he was already retreating once more, the weight of the fight pressing down on him like a crushing tide.

“Don’t make me angry!” Calen shouted. He caught sight of Kato’s attention drifting toward them and pulled his shoulders back, gesturing toward the lead Sumen trainer with an exasperated shrug. “You can’t train like this. He’s not focused at all!”

“Sam,” Kato growled, his arms crossed as he stood motionless, his gaze cold and unyielding. “Enough of this nonsense. Fight properly!”

Sam leaned on his sword for support. “But I am fighting properly.”

Calen threw up his hands in frustration. “I can’t take this anymore! How long is this supposed to go on? He doesn’t belong here!”

Kato’s expression darkened. “Then show him that.”

“You heard the master,” Calen snapped, raising his sword again. His eyes burned with renewed determination. “This time, I won’t hold back. I don’t care how weak you are—I won’t go easy on you!”

Before the last word had even left his lips, Calen lunged, his attack swift and unrelenting.

Sam deflected the first strike, then the second. On the third, he sidestepped, but Calen had anticipated the move and pivoted with him. Suddenly, Calen swung his sword upward. As Sam jerked his head back just in time, the blade’s tip grazed his lips. A sharp sting followed, and the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

He quickly widened the distance between them, reaching up to touch the wound with his fingers.

That was close.

“Show me what you’ve got!” the blond Khamen barked, his voice sharp with disdain. “Or is that really all you can do?”

Sam wiped the blood from his mouth with his bandaged hand, gripping his sword tightly in both hands. He raised the blade, muscles aching with every motion. His body felt stiff and unresponsive, like a block of wood, but he forced himself to mask the pain.

Calen charged again, mirroring his earlier attacks. This time, it was easier for Sam to block the third strike, but no matter how he tried, he couldn’t break out of his defensive

stance. Blow after blow, Calen's strikes came harder and faster, his frustration mounting with each failed attempt to land a decisive hit. Sam found himself steadily retreating, the relentless onslaught forcing him closer to the edge of his endurance.

When a rare opportunity for a counterstrike opened, Sam lunged forward, his sword poised for an attack. But a sharp, searing pain ripped through his forearm mid-motion. His weapon slipped from his grasp, clattering to the ground as he instinctively turned away from Calen.

The blow had landed. His left arm burned, where the sleeve had been sliced open and the bandages shredded. Blood streamed from the wound, a deep gash stretching from his wrist nearly to his elbow. The pain hit him a moment later, a white-hot wave that stole his breath. Sam gasped, clutching his injured arm tightly to his chest.

Behind him, he heard the unmistakable sound of Calen sheathing his sword. The sharp click was followed by the familiar crack of Calen's neck—a ritual of readiness for another round.

Sam barely managed to lift his head before a fist slammed into his face, sending him sprawling backward onto the ground.

"Your grace period is over!" Calen snarled, leaning over him. He grabbed Sam by the collar, hauling him up just enough to rain blow after blow onto his face.

As Calen drew back for another punch, Sam twisted to the side and lashed out, driving his shin into Calen's back and dragging him to the ground. He had reached his breaking point, where helplessness gave way to fury.

Caught off guard, Calen immediately rolled over, but Sam seized the moment. He delivered a fierce kick to Calen's chest, sending the Khamen sprawling again. Calen gasped, clawing at the dirt for stability, while Sam staggered backward, pressing his wounded arm to his side. Blood trickled down his

temple and over his lips, warm and sticky. Out of breath, he spat to rid his mouth of the metallic taste.

“You!” Calen roared, his voice dripping with rage. He had regained his breath and charged low, tackling Sam around the waist and dragging him to the ground. “I’m going to destroy you!”

Sam had no strength left to resist. Each blow from Calen sapped what little energy remained, until he couldn’t even raise his arms in defense. Satisfied with Sam’s submission, Calen got to his feet, unleashing a series of vicious kicks to Sam’s side.

“Aren’t you going to intervene?”

The voice came from Torjn, a Sumen and Calen’s best friend, distant and yet impossibly close, cutting through the haze of Calen’s attacks and Sam’s ragged gasps. Sam’s vision blurred, but he made out the shapes of the other hunters gathering around, murmuring among themselves.

Amid the low rumble of their voices, one sound emerged—Kato’s gruff response to Torjn’s question, barely audible yet heavy with indifference.

The wind had grown fiercer, and thunder rolled overhead. Rain soaked the training yard, turning the dirt into thick mud that clung to everything. Sam felt the cold muck against his cheek. Another brutal kick from Calen struck his stomach, and he curled in on himself, the agony tearing through his core. This time, it felt as if something inside him had ripped. He gagged, choking on the sensation, just as someone yanked Calen away from him.

“Let me go!” Calen screamed, his voice a feral snarl, lost in a bloodthirsty haze.

Sam lay motionless, the rain pelting down on him in a relentless torrent. Blood streamed down his face, mingling with the water. His body felt like a boulder, immovable and impossibly heavy, while his drenched clothes stuck to him like

chains. Fire burned through his left arm, the pain radiating to his shoulder, eclipsing the bruises and cuts that covered him.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. The figures around the yard were already dispersing, their interest waning as quickly as it had risen. A pair of boots stopped directly in front of his face.

“Get up,” Kato commanded, his voice low but unyielding.

Summoning the last reserves of his strength, Sam propped himself up on his uninjured arm, managing to sit upright. But that was as far as he could go. His body refused to respond further.

Kato crouched, grabbing a fistful of Sam’s wet curls and yanking his head back sharply.

“You’re a disappointment. In every possible way,” Kato hissed. “You’re weak. If you weren’t a cursed Winter Moon child, someone would’ve killed you by now—maybe I’d have done it myself. Now get out of here. I don’t want to see you in these training halls again. You’re a disgrace, Samiel. To the Sumen, to the hunters, and to every Paha in Pahann. You stand here as a living testament to weakness. Weakness that has no place here. And you know it.”

Sam stared at the Sumen, holding his breath. The intricate tattoo curved ominously around Kato’s left eye, its crescent shape ending on his cheekbone, where it morphed into a blade-like line that pointed sharply toward his jaw.

Sam’s lips trembled, but the rest of his body remained frozen. Somewhere deep inside, though, he felt a flicker of relief, warm and disarming. When Kato finally released him, Sam flinched.

Torjn appeared, sliding an arm under Sam’s shoulder to haul him to his feet. Sam clung to his former friend, his grip desperate, and looked up at him. Torjn didn’t spare him so much as a glance. Instead, he dragged him off the training ground without a word.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Torjn muttered, his voice cutting and cold. Raindrops cascaded down his face, over the tattoo on his cheek—a mark of three vertical lines, stark and rigid. “And they call you a Winter Moon child.”

Torjn pulled Sam through the narrow path between the training halls and out onto the main road. There, he planted a firm kick in Sam’s back, who toppled forward into the mud.

“Don’t ever show your face here again,” Torjn snarled, before stomping back to the training yard.

Under the weight of his soaked clothes, Sam struggled to his feet. His face stung, and his head felt foggy from the blows he had endured. He cradled his injured arm against his chest, treating it like a fragile log about to slip from his grasp. The pain brought tears to his eyes, and he spat out blood-tinged saliva. For a moment, he stood motionless, tipping his head back to let the rain wash the blood from his face. Behind him, the metallic clang of swords rang out. Without looking back, he left the training grounds and headed toward the main road that led north into the town center.

Kato was right. Being excluded from combat training felt like a blessing. He had tormented himself with it for years, hoping it would one day make him stronger. Outwardly, he didn't appear weak. He was tall and broad-shouldered, yet something in his blood drained his energy. There were days when he felt so tired and weak that he could barely drag himself out of bed. But on the good days when he felt fantastic, he had the strength to run through the woods from morning till night. On those rare days, he wasn't just hunting game; he was chasing a feeling of weightlessness, leaping over logs and flipping through the air. In those moments, he felt like a true hunter, a real Paha. These experiences made life worth living, even though they were so infrequent.

Sam pressed his arm tighter to his side, hoping to dull the pain in his ribs. Calen had kicked him so hard in the flank that he might've broken a rib. The thought of missing out on a hunt

during one of his good days was unbearable. Hunting in the forest was the one thing that brought him joy.

Though drenched to the bone, he pulled his hood up, keeping his head down as he crossed the main street. He slipped through the crowd like a ghost, disappearing into a narrow alley in the herbalist district.

Many of the Trudners there specialized in different remedies. The winding streets were also home to a large number of quaint bookshops, each filled with treasures brought from the northern tribes to Pahann. The timber-frame houses stood so close together that the alleys were dark and cramped, but even as a child, Sam had often visited the bookstores, hiding in dim corners to read northern sagas by the light of a small oil lamp. The booksellers had always let him stay, perhaps out of pity, which only made him more determined to take advantage of the privilege.

But the bookstores weren't the only reason he often roamed the herbalist district. Since childhood, his mother had frequently taken him to the healer who lived on the eastern edge of town. For years, Sam thought it was normal—that every boy had to see the healer once a week. It wasn't until much later that he realized his visits were because of his seer abilities, which required special treatment.

The healer's house was the last one on the street. Like the other timber houses, it was built close to its neighbor, but its entrance faced east, offering a clear view over the fields. In the front yard was a small herb garden, and in the summer, two towering birch trees bloomed, though now they had lost most of their leaves to the coming winter. The white timber house, like most in Pahann, stretched up three stories high.

Sam climbed a few steps to the door and knocked. Inside, there was no sound, and no lights were on. Although the east side was sheltered from the wind, Sam's teeth chattered, and his entire body shook. The rain had eased up, but the cold was

sharp. With a trembling hand, he turned the knob. The door was unlocked, so he stepped inside.

“Old man?” he called out, closing the door behind him. “Are you here?”

A small oil lamp flickered by the entrance, but the corridor was shrouded in darkness. The door to his left stood open, leading to the room where he’d often waited as a child while the healer prepared. It adjoined the open kitchen, where a large, dark blue tiled stove still radiated warmth. Sam removed his wet coat and laid it on a bench, then inspected the cut on his arm. He needed to stop the bleeding and scanned the kitchen for something useful.

A large pot hung over the cold hearth. On the wooden shelves were bowls, bottles, and tinctures. Animal skulls hung over the windows, and bunches of dried herbs lay beside the plates. On the counter near the hearth, he spotted a cloth. He wrapped it hastily around his bleeding arm. It would have to suffice until the healer returned. He could easily mend the wound himself.

Suddenly, Sam heard the front door creak open. Though he’d done nothing wrong, he spun around in alarm, moving quickly toward the corridor. But it wasn’t the healer—it was a man, his back to Sam, quietly closing the door.

“Hiji!”

Sam flinched at the insult, a term once used for old, scarred hunters. But the man said it in such a low, soft voice that it sounded more like he was calling out to his grandfather.

Dressed entirely in black, he wore a hooded cloak that reached his knees. His jet-black hair hung in unkempt strands over his face. His skin was pale, with soft features, yet sharp enough to be distinctive. Narrow, pitch-dark eyes—a trait belonging solely to the ancient tribes of the far north—peered out with a quiet intensity. He couldn’t have been more than four or five years older than Sam.

When the man turned to face him, the air in the house grew colder, and the atmosphere turned icy. His eyes narrowed as he glared at Sam as though he knew him and held a grudge. His gaze was like that of a wild animal, ready to pounce from the shadows. Sam's breath caught at the man's unsettling presence. Summoning his courage, he took a step forward, a faint sense of recognition stirring in him.

"I'm Sam," he said, bowing his head politely.

The man said nothing. His lower eyelids twitched, and he tilted his head slightly, shooting Sam a look of contempt.

"I-I'm looking for the healer," Sam stammered, raising his injured arm as proof. "I thought he was..."

The man dropped a linen sack onto the floor, spilling a few walnuts. Without a word, he turned and walked out of the house.

Sam stood bewildered as he watched the door slam shut.

"Wait!" he shouted, hurrying after him. "Do we know each other?"

But when he flung the door open, the man was nowhere in sight. He couldn't have disappeared so quickly, Sam thought, glancing left and right.

He really did feel like he had seen that man before, but he couldn't place him. Some said the healer was sometimes accompanied by a young man, but he was like a ghost—no one could clearly remember him. Even now, Sam sensed the man's face slipping from his mind, fading into mist.

Maybe he's a mage? After all, I am some kind of seer myself, though not much of one.

Dizziness washed over him. He leaned against the wall, feeling lightheaded. Maybe he'd lost too much blood. He had already felt weak that morning, but this was the final blow. Staggering back to the kitchen, he sank onto the bench beside the tiled stove, resting his head against the warm stone. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The clang of swords echoed

in his mind, along with the crazed look on Calen's face as he attacked and Kato's harsh voice telling him he was useless.

Why can't I just be normal? Sam thought, succumbing to his exhaustion.

A soft crackling roused Sam from the darkness of his sleep. At least, he believed he had been sleeping. Or he could have lost consciousness. The crackling sound came from the stove. Someone had added wood and stoked the fire. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

Standing beside him, the healer raised his hand. Sam instinctively flinched, lifting his arm to shield his head. The healer gave him a reassuring smile and gently placed his hand on Sam's forehead.

"You've got a bit of a fever," the old man said, brushing Sam's cheek and examining the cut on his lip. "We can fix the wound, but you'll likely have a scar on your lip."

"And this?" Sam asked as he carefully unwrapped the cloth from his arm to reveal a gash.

"Boy, what are you doing to yourself?" The healer shook his head. "Come on, let's take a closer look in the other room. Can you stand?"

Sam's limbs were stiff, and he struggled to keep his balance. The healer offered him another warm smile and helped him, ensuring he didn't topple over. Sam clung to the older man's arm as he was led to the adjoining room, already bright with the glow of candles and oil lamps. He sat down on the wooden bench by the window.

"Can you heal it now?" Sam asked softly.

"A wound like this takes time," the healer replied as he pulled a small wooden table closer. Sam rested his arm on it, rol-

led up his sleeve, and gingerly peeled away the blood-soaked bandage.

The healer stepped into the kitchen and retreated with a cloth and a bowl of water. He moved cautiously to avoid spilling anything—perhaps also in accordance with his age.

Yet Sam had always sensed that the healer, despite his gray hair and wrinkles, wasn't quite what he appeared to be. Whenever he lifted a heavy soup pot without minding his aging back or knelt like a young man to tend the fire, Sam couldn't help but wonder: Was he putting on a show, or was he really that spry?

Sometimes, there was a mischievous gleam in his eyes, as if he were younger than he let on. Perhaps his healing powers kept him youthful? Still, since Sam only noticed these things when the healer thought he wasn't being watched, he had never dared ask him.

Are you a young man trapped in an old man's body?

For nearly twenty years, this healer had been his doctor. It would never occur to Sam to call him a fraud.

The healer set the bowl down and dipped the cloth in lukewarm water, cleaning Sam's wound and easing some of the tension in his arm.

"You've used your healing powers on me before," Sam said. "Can't you use them now?"

"That ability is for emergencies only," the healer said with a satisfied smile. "You know that. You would've bled out otherwise."

From the wooden dresser, he fetched a small glass jar of brown ointment. After pressing the cloth into the wound once more, he filled the gash with the sour-smelling paste. Sam grimaced at the familiar, stinging odor that had been seared into his memory since childhood.

As the salve hardened, the healer retrieved a fresh bandage from a drawer and placed it beside Sam's arm, which still lay

limp on the table. The healer paused, then slowly turned Sam's hand over, inspecting the back of it.

Thin strands of scar tissue extended from between his fingers like a star, converging into a two-finger-wide white line that wrapped around his wrist and spiraled up his forearm. Without a word, he gestured for Sam to place his other hand on the table. There, he removed the dirty bandages, revealing identical scars.

"Since we're at it, let me check the rest. How do they feel?"

"They tug sometimes," Sam replied, peeling off his damp shirt. "Probably has to do with the weather."

The healer took the wet garment and set it aside before examining Sam's upper body.

The scars wrapped around his arms, crossed beneath his collarbone, and traveled over his shoulders, reappearing on the front of his chest and spiraling downward.

"Where do they pull?" the healer asked, signaling Sam to stand and turn around so he could inspect his back. The scars crossed between his shoulder blades, winding forward under his arms.

"Mostly around my knees." Sam unbuckled his belt and let his pants slip down, the scars trailing down both legs.

"Here, I assume?" The healer touched the back of Sam's knee.

Sam flinched, more from the coldness of the healer's hands than the pain.

"I'll soften the tissue a bit," the old man said, placing a hand near the skin without touching it.

Sam felt the warmth spread through the area, loosening the tension. Still, he clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. He hated having his scars treated. Even though he knew it was necessary, it always made him feel like a helpless child again.

He didn't care much that his body was covered in scars.

Sure, some days he felt like a disfigured monster and wished them away, but long ago, he had accepted them as part of him.

What bothered him more was his inability to control what had caused them. That made him feel like more of a failure than anything Kato or Calen could say.

“You don’t have any new injuries, I see,” the healer remarked. “Does that mean you’re gaining control?”

“No,” Sam admitted sadly. “I just avoid people as much as possible. There are too many wild ones I can’t control. And on bad days, I can’t concentrate enough, and my skin splits open. I’ve figured out how to channel the scars, but I still need more practice.”

“Who have you been practicing with?” the healer asked, standing up again.

“Nahn,” Sam muttered, feeling ashamed.

The healer handed him a dry blanket. “Here, place this over your legs. You need to warm up.”

Shivering slightly, Sam wrapped himself tightly in the warm blanket, pulling it up to his chin.

“Does your brother know what you’re doing?”

“No, I only do it while he’s asleep.”

“Maybe you should tell someone about your condition.”

Sam sat up abruptly. “No! I can’t. You know that. You promised my mother. It’s enough that Nahn knows.”

“Sam,” the healer said with a hint of sadness in his voice, “you’ll be twenty soon. The tribal marriages are approaching.”

Sam hung his head, clutching the blanket even tighter. “Please, don’t remind me.”

“Here.” The healer handed him another warm cloth. “Wash your face.”

Sam wiped the blood from his cheeks and pressed the cloth against his split lip for a while. The healer then applied the same brown salve to his wounds.

Outside, a raven cawed, and Sam glanced out the window. The bird landed on the wooden fence around the herb garden, shook its wings, and stared toward the house.

Sam's heart sank. The tribal ceremonies were approaching, and soon he'd be married off as a Winter Moon child. As if living in Pahann hadn't been prison enough, marriage would seal his fate. His life would be a chain of obligations. Before he could spiral deeper into his thoughts, he pushed his hair back and sat up straight.

"Just don't think about it," he whispered to himself. "I'll find a way."

"What do you mean?" the healer asked.

"Freedom," Sam replied. "I'll find it. I'll break free from this stupid tradition. It can't be that the only reason I'm still alive is because I was born during the Winter Moon. That doesn't make sense."

The healer blinked in surprise. "You're searching for freedom?"

"One day, I'll be free," Sam said, pointing out the window. "Like that raven." But as quickly as the energy surged through him, it faded again, and he let his arm drop, exhausted. "If only this body were stronger," he added quietly, burying his face in his hands.

"Sam, you know," the healer said gently, "there is a way. You can become a raven if you want."

Sam looked up, frowning. "You're speaking in riddles. I'm not looking for healing—I want freedom."

"How arrogant of you to dismiss me when I can heal your wounds in no time."

Sam stood up, gathered his wet clothes, and, though still shaky on his legs, returned to the kitchen to spread them out on the warm tiled stove to dry.

"You think I'm mocking you," the healer said, following him with the basin of water and dirty cloths.

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know what lengths you’ve gone to in your search for freedom, but I’d bet you haven’t made much progress. Your time runs out the day the tribal weddings happen. And believe me when I say, I’m the only one who can help you.”

Sam stood by the stove, staring at his clothes laid out to dry. “What if I still have hope, but no longer trust people?”

“It’s not people you need to trust. It’s the gods.”

“Oh, old man,” Sam sighed, exhausted. “You should know by now, we don’t believe in gods here. Those are just old myths to us.”

“Come with me.”

Sam followed him out of the kitchen, into the corridor, and up the stairs. The farther they got from the stove, the colder it became, and Sam wrapped the blanket more snugly around himself. Memories of being bedridden as a child for weeks, waiting for his wounds to heal, resurfaced.

Upstairs, the healer guided him into a room filled with shelves stacked high with books. They reached up to the ceiling, crammed with ancient tomes. Sam inhaled deeply, the scent of old leather filling his nostrils. This room had always been hidden from him. He hesitated before stepping onto the creaky floor, moving to the center of the room. The rug beneath was warm and soft. Silver light from the cloudy afternoon filtered through the window, where once again, the raven appeared on the sill.

“That bird seems pretty curious,” Sam noted.

“That’s no ordinary bird,” the healer replied, standing before one of the shelves. “That’s Kro.”

The raven cawed, bobbing its head and spreading its wings to reveal the silver-tipped feathers on the ends of its flight feathers.

“Annoying little thing.”

“He grows on you,” the healer assured him as he retrieved a large tome from the shelf. “Hemon, the bastard son of the god-

father Aradan, keeper of the rebels and lord over prisoners, kept two ravens. Their names were Kro and Hak. Memory and thought.”

“You named your raven after a dead god’s pets?”

“Kro’s not much for memories,” the healer exclaimed, flipping through the pages.

Sam stepped closer, peeking over the old man’s shoulder. The book’s margins were decorated with black ornaments, and on the left page, a drawing of two black birds was displayed, while the rest was written in a small, flowing script in a language Sam didn’t recognize.

“Hemon’s first captives were the two ravens. He turned them into his mercenaries, forcing them to help him subjugate the world. Thus, he shackled freedom itself. Not even Aradan or the Mother Goddess Hea had the power to break free from this prison. Gods die by being forgotten, and so Hemon’s name was erased from most of the books. But the people had forgotten what true freedom meant. Even though Hemon and all the other gods had long since faded into oblivion, the chains that bound freedom had never even begun to rust.”

“And what does that have to do with me?”

The healer tapped his finger on a passage. “If you want freedom, these birds are the key.”

“And what do I have to do?”

“It says here, you capture a bird—preferably a raven—break its wings, smash its beak with a stone, and eat its heart.”

“That’s nonsense,” Sam muttered in exasperation, glancing toward the window.

Kro had vanished.

“How do you know if you’ve never tried it?” the healer asked.

Sam eyed the book skeptically, wondering if he was truly desperate enough to make a fool of himself. Heat pulsed through his head, and his arm throbbed in pain.

“I should leave,” he said, exiting the room with his head down.

Although his clothes on the stove weren’t fully dry, he sat on the bench and pulled on his pants.

“You know I’ve never made a fool of you,” the healer said from beside him. “Your distrust is understandable. It’s fine, even good. But you’ve already endured too much in your short life for me to just ignore what happens to you.”

Sam stood with his head hanging, fists clenched. “Do you have any dry bandages?” he whispered.

“Of course.” The healer fetched some linen strips from the next room.

Without the bandages, Sam felt exposed and more vulnerable than usual. He carefully wrapped a long strip around his wrist, letting two ends hang loose. One end he wrapped around his forearm, the other around his hand. On the injured arm, the bandage provided some extra support.

“Won’t you stay and eat something?” the healer asked, concerned. “You’ve got a bit of a fever. You could rest upstairs.”

“No, thank you,” Sam replied, pulling on his damp shirt and stepping into his boots. He finally looked up at the healer, who had been standing beside him the whole time. “I’m going home to rest.”

“You know you’re always welcome if you need anything.”

Sam nodded, put on his coat, and stepped out into the cold.

The clouds had darkened the afternoon so much that lanterns had already been lit in some alleys. Sam ate the last bite of a hot pitchroot and leaned against a wall, watching as the remaining merchants pushed their carts away from the marketplace. Only a light drizzle fell now, but the earlier downpour had been so heavy that half the market square was still flooded.

On the steps of the ceremonial hall, a lantern-keeper lit the lamps that lined both sides of the staircase leading up to the entrance. The thought of having to climb those steps soon to present his bride to the Paha sent a cold shiver down Sam's spine.

When a horse-drawn wagon passed by, he turned away, pulling his hood deeper over his face. It was better not to be recognized. This way, at least, he had some peace.

He felt slightly dizzy and weak, and though he'd just eaten, the lightheadedness persisted. Maybe he should have taken the healer's offer and rested in one of the rooms. A feverish fatigue seemed to slither through his veins, making his limbs feel as heavy as logs.

Suddenly, the clatter of hooves echoed across the cobblestones. The hunters had finished their combat training and were returning to the city. Sam immediately turned and slipped into a side alley.

To get home, he'd have to pass through the metal district, which was risky at this time of day—he might run into one of

the boys. Though most of them would head to the taverns in the barter district on the other side of the market, some took a detour through the metal district to drop their weapons off at the blacksmith's for sharpening. No matter which path Sam took, fate seemed to keep throwing him into the paths of Calen and Torjn.

Keeping his head down, he sneaked past the smithies and ducked into narrower alleyways, where horses couldn't follow. Before rounding each corner, he listened for familiar voices. Like a thief in the night, he darted across the streets, staying close to the walls.

As he left the metal district behind and was only three streets away from home, someone grabbed him. He was yanked between two buildings and slammed against a wall. Before he could react, the person ripped his hood back and kissed him.

It was Arua. She pressed one hand on his chest and gripped his injured wrist with the other. Sam felt the last of his strength being drained from his lips. Just when he thought he might collapse, his blood seemingly pooling in his legs, he pushed Arua away, shoving her against the opposite wall, barely two steps away.

"Stop it!" He clutched his aching forearm to his chest and wiped his mouth with his bandaged hand.

Arua glared at him, pouting like a scorned child. Sam knew that look and was aware of the danger it posed. Crossing Arua could have dire consequences.

"What are you doing?" he asked, irritated, hoping to distract her from her anger. "Why ambush me like this?"

Arua stepped closer, tilting her head slightly. The floral tattoo that ran under her eyes and across her nose emphasized the mossy green of her irises in the dim light. Despite her soft features, her gaze was sharp and angry. "You know I only need to call the animals, and they'll come to me," she said in a smug tone, tossing her damp, shiny auburn braid over her shoulder.

“So, I’m just another animal to you?” Sam was fully aware of the darkness that lurked behind her smile.

Arua burst into shrill laughter, as if she had been joking the whole time. “Did I do that?” She reached out to touch his split lip.

Sam recoiled and slapped her hand away. “You wish.” Despite Arua’s stormy temperament, she wasn’t one of the wild ones he couldn’t control, but he still hated it when she touched him.

Her laughter faded, and she crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing as they shifted to his left arm, which he cradled against his body. “And what’s that?”

“None of your business.”

“Oh, it is my business!” she shot back. “We’re getting married soon, after all! Now show me!” She roughly seized his hand and pulled up the blood-soaked sleeve, exposing the bandage’s edge, where blood had seeped through. “You’re so weak,” she hissed. “It’s pathetic. And you call yourself a Sumen?”

“You know I’m not a Sumen!” Sam yanked his arm away.

“Yeah, yeah...” she said dismissively, waving her hand. “Your father is Sumen, so it’s only a matter of time before your drive kicks in. You’ll get the tattoo before the wedding, don’t worry. I’ll make sure you get a band under your eyes, too. It’ll bring out your pale blue eyes and distract from that scar you’ll have on your lip.”

Sam’s face darkened. Since discovering Arua’s true nature, he couldn’t stand being around her. Ever since he saw her memories, he’d been haunted by images of her skinning squirrels, weasels, and badgers, hanging them upside down, displaying their bones and fangs in nooks near flickering candles, and the stench of rotting pelts on her cave floor.

This woman was insane, fooling everyone around her.

Snatching his hood back up, he moved to leave, but Arua blocked his path.

“You’re just going to leave me here?” she asked in disbelief. “Show your future bride a little more passion!”

“Passion?” Sam frowned.

“We could go to my place, have some fun,” she suggested, though the seriousness in her tone sent a chill down his spine. “You don’t want to disappoint me on our wedding night, do you?”

“I’ll do everything in my power to disappoint you,” Sam said without hesitation. “Now let me through.”

Arua laughed again, but this time, it was a haughty, condescending laugh. “You’re such a coward! If you only knew what I have planned for you, you’d have run far away by now!”

Sam swallowed, trying to maintain his composure under her deranged gaze. She might fool everyone else, but he knew what she was capable of. He couldn’t even explain to himself why he hadn’t run away—surely no one in Pahann would have stopped him. Maybe deep down, he knew he didn’t have the strength for such an arduous journey.

Frustrated, he shoved her aside and walked back onto the street.

“You can’t go home,” she called after him.

“Why not?”

“Sumen talks. Our fathers are negotiating the wedding gift as we speak—after all, I’m not just anyone.” When Sam turned to face her, she planted her hands on her hips, striking a seductive pose. “Are you sure you don’t want to practice a little?”

Why today? Sam thought miserably. Why now, when all he wanted was his bed?

“I could patch up that cut for you. Make sure the scar isn’t too bad.”

“Why can’t you just—”

“Just what?” she snapped angrily. “Am I not good enough for you? Or do you think you’re too good for me?”

With a frustrated sigh, Sam rolled his eyes and stormed off. “You should be grateful when your drive finally kicks in!” Arua shouted after him. “Maybe then your life will have some meaning!”

He had to find a way out.

No bride, no gift, was worth marrying Arua.

He’d pleaded with the Great Council for another match, but that had only made him more of a joke.

Everyone knew that in Pahann, the Winter Moon children were assigned based on their ancestral clans. Though his mother was Tanha, his father’s lineage marked him as a Sumen—and that heritage trumped all else, even if his Sumen drive hadn’t yet surged. No one among the Sumen knew what their powers would be until it surfaced, and Sam didn’t even want to imagine what might happen when his finally did. As proud as the Sumen were of their powers, Sam felt relieved to take after his mother and have none.

Pulling his hood lower, Sam disappeared into the next alley. He needed to get far away from Arua as fast as possible. Since he couldn’t go home, he kept strolling through the district until he reached the city’s outskirts.

The few empty coins in his pocket should be enough for a goblet of wine at Bon’s. There, he could hide in a corner and rest.

Bon’s tavern was the third-to-last building on the road leading out into the woods. Before going inside, Sam glanced down the path, thinking he’d heard something. The raven with the white-tipped wings flew overhead, cawing as it left the city.

“Kro?” Sam whispered, watching the raven until it vanished behind the rooftops.

Sam walked farther down the street until the fields came into view. From a distance, he’d lost sight of Kro, but the field was full of ravens pecking at worms in the loose soil.

You catch a bird, preferably a raven, break its wings, smash its beak with a stone, and eat its heart. The healer's voice echoed clearly in his mind. *You can become a raven if you want.*

With his arms crossed and his head resting against the wooden wall, Sam sat in the darkest corner of Bon's tavern, half-asleep. A fire crackled softly in the hearth, and the warmth had turned the room into a cozy den. He liked Bon's tavern because the young hunters considered it too run-down and tended to avoid it. That made it a perfect hideaway for him. As long as he ordered a drink, Bon would leave him alone. Sam had spent whole afternoons, evenings, and nights nursing a single goblet of wine. He had tried to sleep, but the healer's words had taken root in his mind, turning into an obsession he couldn't shake off.

Catching a raven is easy, he thought. After all, we're a nation of hunters.

Kato would have said the same thing. Every Paha had hunting in their blood. Sam had grown up with a bow and arrow, but catching a raven alive would be a new challenge—he'd never aimed to keep his prey alive before. Using his bow posed too much risk of injuring the bird fatally. He needed a different method to catch it alive.

A hand touched his arm, catching him off guard.

"Samy?"

It was Nahn, his younger brother, the one person who knew Sam sometimes hid out at Bon's. Though calling it "hiding out" was more accurate than hanging around.

Nahn had the same wheat-brown hair as Sam, though his was straight, not curly. He kept it shorter, which made it stick

out in all directions. He inherited his green eyes from their mother, and when he smiled, dimples appeared in his cheeks. Nahn's Sumen tattoo was a swirl of vines stretching from one side of his jaw to the other and winding down his neck.

Nahn waved at Bon, signaling for wine as well. He pulled down his scarf and sat beside Sam on the bench, giving him a good view of the tavern.

"What are you doing here?" Sam asked, sitting up.

"What happened to your arm?"

"How did you—?"

"I can smell the infection. You should clean that wound by tomorrow at the latest."

"Right."

Sam sometimes forgot that Nahn's sense of smell was sharper than any animal's, even though it only worked within a radius of three to five paces.

Nahn's Sumen powers had emerged when he was fifteen. For two weeks, he had been constantly sick, throwing up until he got used to it. His talent for detecting poisons had earned him an apprenticeship with a Trudner, an expert in toxins and antidotes.

Bon set a goblet of wine in front of Nahn and shuffled off. Nahn took a sip, then crossed his arms and leaned back with contentment.

"Who was it?"

"Calen," Sam replied. "I was excused from training."

"That must've made you happy."

"Yeah, but it still felt like a defeat," Sam muttered, taking a drink from his wine.

"I've got training tomorrow," Nahn said. "Kato told me to focus on swordsmanship. I think that's a good idea. I've never been good with a bow."

"Your eyes. You've always relied more on your sense of smell than your sight."

Nahn grinned. "Yeah, I guess my vision isn't that great. Mom said my father was practically blind."

Sam also smiled, though his was a sadder one. It had been nine years since their mother passed away. He found it hard to even think about her, but Nahn spoke of her as if she were still alive. Sometimes, Sam didn't know if he envied or resented his brother for that. In the end, he loved Nahn more than anything. Nahn was the only one who knew Sam's secret and had kept it all these years.

"Well," Nahn said, wrapping his scarf around his neck again, "I just came by to check on you. I take it you're not planning on coming home? Here," he added, sliding his nearly full goblet of wine to Sam and placing two empty kin on the table as payment. "You can finish this. I'm going to bed."

Nahn often acted more like the older brother than the younger one, but Sam didn't mind. The memories he shared with Nahn were the best ones he had.

With a wave goodbye, Nahn hooded himself and left Bon's tavern. Sam crossed his arms again and leaned back against the wall.

Alright, he thought, turning his mind back to the birds. *A different method.* He needed something that could knock the bird out without hurting it too badly, something to stop it from flying away before he could grab it.

He already had an idea.

6

Sam!" a voice called out.

It was Bon, blowing out the candle on his table and placing it on the tray in his hand. "We're closing," said the broad-shouldered innkeeper as he returned to the counter.

Sam straightened up and rubbed his eyes awake. The pain in his left arm had lessened, but he still felt a slight fever. He reached for his goblet and savored the last sip of wine. By the time he left the dim tavern and stepped out onto the street, at least his clothes had dried.

Though the night sky above him was still a deep, cloudless blue, the horizon in the east already glowed with a soft orange light. Surprised, he ruffled his hair and put his hood up. He felt better than he had the day before—stronger, more energetic, though a little hungry.

He glanced down the street that led out into the woods, then turned and headed in the opposite direction toward home. Paghann was just starting to wake up, and there were hardly any people on the streets yet.

Everything was still dark at home. He entered the house, part of a row of black-and-white half-timbered buildings, and quietly closed the door behind him. Moving with caution, he proceeded through the hallway and climbed the stairs to his room. No matter how carefully he moved, the wooden floorboards creaked under his boots. The scent of cold smoke lingered in the air. At the top of the stairs, he paused and listened.

From his father's room, he could hear the steady sound of snoring.

Good.

He followed the hallway to the room he had shared with Nahn since they were kids. It was spacious, with two windows. As they grew older, they had hung a curtain between their beds for privacy, but it was usually left open.

Sam knelt by the chest beside his bed. He removed the stack of books that had accumulated on top and placed them on the bed. They were leather-bound, given to him long ago by his mother. After her death, they had sat untouched in a cupboard for years, but the closer his wedding ceremony approached, the more desperately he searched their pages for answers. While they had taught him much about ancient hunting techniques, he ultimately realized there was no way to escape a tradition based on community and peace.

Quietly, he opened the wooden chest. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim light. He rummaged through his collection of bandages, gathered over the years, until he found his old slingshot—the one he had used as a kid for target practice. It should be enough to capture a full-grown raven without harming it. He slipped the slingshot into his coat pocket and kept searching.

At the bottom of the chest, he found a leather pouch. Inside was a small sax knife, its blade etched with decorative patterns, alongside a horn handle engraved with animal designs. Though he'd need to sharpen the short blade at some point, it came with a leather leg holster, which seemed far more useful than the larger sax knife typically used for hunting. He strapped the holster on, ensuring the knife was securely in place.

He closed the chest and returned the books. Before leaving the room, he glanced at Nahn, who seemed to be fast asleep. The vine-like tattoos on his chin and neck looked almost real

in the twilight. He lay on his side, the blanket over his shoulder.

“Practice,” a voice in Sam’s head urged. *“You need to learn to control it.”*

Sam crouched beside Nahn’s bed. When Nahn slept, he wasn’t as focused on his sense of smell, which made it easier for Sam to test his abilities on him. Besides, no one knew Nahn better than Sam, which greatly reduced the risk of being torn apart by the process.

He loosened the bandages around his hands, letting the long strips of fabric dangle from his wrists. As he gently placed his right hand on Nahn’s forehead, he noticed his brother’s head was warm, a reminder that people weren’t the cold, soulless creatures Sam often encountered—those who usually met him with nothing but hate and disgust. It also reminded him of how much he longed for warmth, a need he had long buried deep in his memories.

A tingling sensation shot through Sam’s hand and traveled up his arm. It spread through his body like a warm wave, and a blinding light filled his inner vision. He braced himself with his left hand on the floor, focusing on his breathing. The scars on his hands glowed red, and he could feel the energy of Nahn’s memories flowing through the scar lines on his body.

Sam closed his eyes and peered into the light.

It was the winter sun over Pahann, pouring its bright light over the herb quarter.

Nine-year-old Nahn raced through the narrow alleys, pushing people aside.

“Out of the way!” he shouted. “Out of the way!”

His father followed closely behind, carrying a bleeding Sam in his arms as they made their way toward the edge of town.

“How much farther?” his father called out.

“Not far! The last house on the left!” Nahn shouted back.

“Go ahead!”

Nahn darted past the people, flung open the wooden gate, and sprinted to the door, banging on it with his fists.

“Healer!” he gasped. “Healer!”

The door swung open, and an old man emerged. “What is it?” he asked, startled. But when he saw Sam bleeding in his father’s arms, his expression changed. “This way,” he said, leading them to the treatment room adjacent to the kitchen. He thrust chairs out of the way, clearing the table of cups, lamps, tinctures, and notes.

Sam’s father laid him on the table and stepped back, his face pale with fear. His clothes were soaked in Sam’s blood, and he was on the verge of tears.

“Damn spirits! I tried everything, but it just kept getting worse!” he cried.

Nahn stood beside Sam, who was unconscious on the table, and placed a hand on his head—the only part of his brother not covered in blood.

The healer grabbed a pair of scissors and cut Sam out of his clothes, leaving him in nothing but his underwear. His body was covered in long wounds, as if someone had tried to flay him. The old man stared at Sam for a moment, too shocked to move.

“Is my brother going to be okay?” Nahn asked, fear in his voice.

The question jolted the healer into action. He rushed to the kitchen, returning with a bucket of water and some cloths. Sam’s father stood so far away now that the healer didn’t even bother asking for his help. The old man hastily wiped away the blood and hovered his hands over the wounds without touching them.

Nahn watched, wide-eyed, as the injuries slowly turned white, as if a thin layer of skin was growing over the open flesh and stopping the bleeding. Bit by bit, the healer worked his

way down Sam's body. He carefully turned him over and did the same with the wounds on his back. Nahn didn't leave Sam's side, while their father paced nervously around the room.

"He'll make it," the healer said, pulling bandages from a drawer. "He's lost a lot of blood, and it'll take time for him to recover his strength. I'll keep him here for a few days to make sure the wounds don't reopen." He then wrapped Sam's entire body in bandages.

"That was the worst day of my life," Nahn said.

Startled, Sam jerked his hand back and fell to the floor. The memory faded, and the glowing red scars on his body returned to their usual white.

"Spirits above!" Sam exclaimed, horrified as his heart pounded wildly. "You're awake?"

Nahn sat up and rubbed his face. "What are you doing?"

"I..." Sam stared wide-eyed at his brother. *Damn!* "I...your memories..."

"I noticed, but why?"

"I need to practice," Sam said, placing a hand on his chest. The shock subsided, and his heartbeat gradually returned to normal. "You saw which memories I..."

"Yeah," Nahn said. "That was the time you almost died."

Sam ran a hand through his hair, stunned. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to—"

"And your scars glowed like the sunrise."

"I can control it," Sam said, wrapping the bandages back around his hands. "I found a way so it doesn't tear me apart anymore."

Nahn smiled. "That's good."

"Aren't you mad I used you like that?"

"No. I'm just glad it worked. This must mean a lot to you. It'll change your life."

"I wish," Sam said, tightening the bandages. "I'm still cursed—still a Winter Moon child."

“You should visit a maid and spend the whole night running your hands over her body. You’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

“Nahn!” Sam said, embarrassed.

Nahn just shrugged. “I’m serious. Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve flinched at every touch. I know the bandages help, but you should take the next step. You just proved it’s possible. Your fear of those wild ones is too strong.”

“I’ve clearly told you too much.” Sam stood up. “Get some more sleep.”

“Where are you going?”

“I need to try something.”

“The pleasure houses don’t open until noon,” Nahn teased.

Sam shook his head, smiling, and left the room.

7

Quietly, Sam crept through the underbrush, scanning the treetops for raven nests. A few birds were already flying about, carrying worms back to their young. Sam pulled out his slingshot, searched for a few stones, and knelt on one knee. The bird couldn't be too far away—if it recovered from the hit, it would fly off before he could grab it.

About ten steps away, a raven landed on a branch, preening its feathers. Sam sat completely still, watching the bird for a while. I could be a raven myself, the healer had said.

Whatever that means, Sam thought, drawing back the sling. If it brings me closer to my freedom, I'm ready to do anything.

The cut on his left forearm flared, making it hard to hold the sling steady for long. He aimed at the bird and fired.

The raven dropped like a sack of flour onto the leaf-covered forest floor, lying still. Sam hurried over, holding the bird by its legs. It was a full-grown raven with glossy, jet-black feathers. Regaining consciousness, it screeched and flapped wildly. Sam could feel it wriggling free of his grip, but he stood frozen.

I could be a raven too.

But first, I have to kill this one.

Get it together and just do it!

With a quick motion, he slammed the bird to the ground and knelt down. Flipping it onto its back, he pinned its wings to the damp forest floor. The raven's cries grew louder, piercing Sam's ears. He slowly shifted his weight forward, pressing

harder on its wings until he felt the crack under his right hand. It was like snapping a twig, no thicker than his own fingers. The quiet sound was drowned out by the bird's screeches. He shifted his weight to the left, and the other wing broke.

What now? he thought, staring down at the bird without releasing its wings. *What now? There's no going back, is there?*

His hand trembling, he pulled out the largest stone he had collected for his sling.

Stop screaming!

Just stop!

With a single blow, he shattered the bird's beak. Its skull cracked, and the awful cries ceased. Sam trembled all over now, grimacing at the sight of the dead raven. Its earlier screeches had consumed so much of his focus that the silence now felt even more unsettling.

Don't stop, he told himself, drawing the knife from its holster. He placed the blade near the raven's breastbone. But suddenly, an invisible force made it impossible for him to strike. This was the first time he had hurt a living creature in such a cold-blooded way, and he had never imagined he would be capable of it. Maybe his hesitation, his inability to drive the knife in at that critical moment, was his conscience whispering that he still had a choice—to stop.

He could take the bird to the butcher, who would only laugh at him since the Paha didn't care much for birds. But the desperation Sam had carried for years, like a dark shadow over his life, was too great. If he backed out now, he'd stray even further from the freedom he so desperately wanted—even if this whole raven thing was just nonsense, and the healer had made a fool out of him.

There's no way I'm marrying Arua.

I've got nothing to lose.

Applying more pressure, he drove the knife into the raven. Carefully, he cut open its chest and took out its heart, which

was about the size of a walnut, blood-red and warm in his hand.

He hesitantly bit into it, which was tough and squeaky between his teeth. A revolting mixture of his blood and saliva congealed in his mouth, but he forced himself to swallow the heart.

Luckily, the effect kicked in right away, stopping him from vomiting. His pulse raced, and a hot wave surged through his body. It felt as if his blood was boiling, with sweat pouring from every pore as Sam felt the fever draining out of him.

Something magical coursed through his limbs, making it impossible to stay kneeling. It was an energy that consumed him, charging every cell in his body. The crippling weakness vanished, as if evaporating from him, and the exhaustion faded away. Fueled by this surge of power, he leaped to his feet and started running.

His body felt weightless, as if he needed no effort for jumps and flips. His senses sharpened like never before. He smelled the sweet scent of the earth, the pines, the firs, the resin, and the roots. He heard jays, woodpeckers, and owls; the trill of a wren in the distance; the sharp cry of a hawk above the tree-tops; and the rustling of mice, beetles, and ants beneath the soil. Overhead, a loud caw rang out. It was Kro, who seemed to enjoy following Sam's chase through the forest, though his harsh cackles sounded more like anger.

Sam continued sprinting, deeper into the forest, where no hunter on horseback would find him. All day long, he ran without stopping.

Was this the strength he needed to break free from his life?

As a Winter Moon child, he was bound to Pahann, and his frail body had only made life harder. But now, he felt like he was floating, as if the energy surging inside him would lift him off the ground. Even on his best days, he had never felt such power.

Nothing could stop him—not hunger, not thirst, not any human need.

Though his mind was still tethered to his body, he felt free, almost euphoric.

Was this the freedom he had longed for so desperately?

Could this really be the solution to all his problems?

What price would he have to pay?

He knew about the tricks of the Trudner, who sold powders in the herb quarter for all kinds of ailments. Many operated dens in the basements of their houses, where some hunters had entered and never returned. But Sam was certain no powder could cause this kind of rush. And besides, birds flew free. He could take as many raven hearts as he wanted. No Trudner would come asking for payment—these birds belonged to no one.

The energy coursing through his veins propelled him further and further. All day long, until evening, when the sun sank behind the trees and night fell. Only when the moon rose did he start to feel the exhilaration fading. His body became sluggish, and as though his veins filled with lead, his limbs grew heavy like logs. The overflowing energy drained from him, and he collapsed, lying where he had fallen.