

chapter 1



Listen.

It's twilight, as only twilight was in First Times, a long, hushed, magical stretch. A halted breath between day and night. First Time Owl glides through a forest dark as death and silent as the delicate descent of falling snow. It is the beginning of the long evening hunt.

There is little that First Time Owl's probing orange eyes miss as he scans the thick mat of brambles and branches. Something dark darts between two towering spruce, and with barely a twitch of his gray-and-black striped feathers, Owl changes course and slides between the trees.

The dark shape separates from the trees and

takes the form of Great Crow. Within his beak he carries a bundle of twigs. In his talons, he clutches a wad of grass and bulrush down. Owl continues following at a distance, undetected, until at last he sees Great Crow stop to deposit the twigs, grass and down into a sheltered hollow in the crook of a balsam poplar. As Great Crow arranges the twigs, Owl retreats, quiet as mist rising from the river at dawn. Chuckling softly to himself, he thinks, “Oh ho, I needn’t come back here tonight. Now that I know where Great Crow’s nest is being built, I can return later for a longer, larger, much more satisfying meal. First the eggs. Then the mate. And finally Great Crow himself.”

But just as there is no real beginning to a story — only the continuation of an earlier tale — nor any real end — just the brief pause for breath before the next account begins — know this: while Owl is watching Great Crow, he is part of a longer, more complicated story. He himself is being watched.

Who is watching? Great Crow’s mate, Kaynu, and as FirstTime Owl flies off, thinking his private, hungry, owl thoughts, she leaps from the pine where she has hidden herself and flies directly to where Great Crow arranges the twigs. Quickly she informs him of what she saw. “Shouldn’t we,” she asks, “abandon our nest?”

“Abandon it?” Great Crow muses as he tucks a twig firmly into place. “No, but maybe it would be useful to build another.”

With that, Great Crow and Kaynu fly deeper into the woods, to where light and warmth penetrate the twine of leaves and branches only rarely. There, above the confusion of coiling vines and creeping mosses, they commence assembling another, even bigger nest in a teetering, towering, thick-trunked fir.

Not to be deterred, Owl follows this activity as well. He sees the new nest and understands that Great Crow and Kaynu may have chosen to relocate. He congratulates himself on his watchfulness and says, “Patience is the father of every good meal. I will bide my time. When their nest is well and truly chosen, and their brood laid, then I will satisfy my hunger.”

Are these the only participants in this story, then? No. The woods are dense and stretch in all directions. Animals roost throughout that twist and tangle, some in the trees, some in the rushes and some in the deep, dark cavities and cracks in the earth. Down among the bushes, near the thrusting roots of trees, paces restless, hungry Pine Marten. Able to scale tree trunks like a squirrel, able to skip a branch as nimbly as a chipmunk, he is always, always hungry, and he too eyes this second nest. His

pink tongue traces the tips of his furry lips as he recollects that there is nothing he enjoys better than dining on egg. Like Owl, he bides his time and decides to return when the nest is built.

So, each day First Time Owl quietly loops back to check on the first and second nests. Each day he watches both growing steadily until, at long last, one spring day Great Crow appears to decide. Kaynu, heavy with eggs, heaves her immense body in among the carefully arranged twigs of the second nest and settles. Great Crow darts back and forth between the nest and the forest floor, carrying good eating of all kinds, and Owl nods his massive round head and snaps his beak shut. “This one,” he chants to himself. “This one. This one is the very one.”

So that night, late, in the dimness of the dark six, Owl returns, quiet as fear, quiet as grief, quiet as unspoken dread. He circles the second nest and finds no one. “All the better,” he concludes. “Raid the nest first, savor the freshly laid eggs, then take the occupant when she returns.”

He drops to the outer edge of the nest and peers down. Within that sacred circle he finds branches and brambles, feathers and mouse bones, fibers from the milkweed, fur from the rabbit’s breast, thread from the spider’s web — but not the slightest trace nor taste of egg. Irritated, he crouches closer, and

discovers something he hadn't expected but that often arrives unexpectedly — his own death.

Pine Marten, so lithe and silent and supple among trees, had perched still as stone on an overhanging branch, awaiting the return of Great Crow and Kaynu. Sensing activity, he hadn't bothered looking, but instead pounced jaws agape upon that broad unprotected back of First Time Owl.

As he scampered away into the night, feathers fluttering from his toothy mouth, he reflected that Owl meat is perhaps not so sweet as Crow — but then again there's so much more of it.

And what of Great Crow and Kaynu? What of the eggs and the hatchlings and yearlings to come? Owl and Marten, so intent on the development of the large nests they saw growing in the tops of the trees, never thought to look for the third and smaller nest they hadn't detected in the dense brush of the tangled lower reaches.

Flight is only one of many ways to escape an enemy, my Cousins. Great Crow and all his descendants would never have lived and thrived if wit and will hadn't also played their part.

Let that sacred story guide us as we invoke this account of our latest desperate events, for there are many parallels. Flight through darkness, the use of one's wits, unlooked-for fortune and equally unlooked-for death.

Draw closer, Cousins. Draw closer and listen well. When we tell others of these past events, when we inform our chicks, when we gather at night with our Clan around us to remember, we should recollect everything.

So remember with me how this journey began. Remember our flight from the Plague. How sickness trickled and twisted into our life, as sap seeps from trees. How it clung to us as sap clings. How it issued after us, caught us and killed us.

Remember, Cousins, how our flocks were scattered by the sickness. How we flew without plan or preparation. How fate blew us from one roost to the next. How a new Clan and a new journey formed as we searched for this one that was lost: Kym ru Kemna ru Kinaar, captured by the human.

Remember, then, the discovery of Kym and the other unfortunates held captive in the deep, enclosed confines of the human roost. Remember the journey into the roost through tunnel and stealth. The escape out of the human's roost with fire and death.

Remember how in searching for one, we returned with many.

Retain every wing stroke of this long journey, each feather, each quill, the fortunes and misfortunes that eventually led us to this particular fork on this particular branch of the story.

Perched among the trees at the center of the sprawling, massive human colony. Having escaped from the fire and the fear of the collapsing human roost. Scouts from the Collection — Kuper's immense flock of Crow fanatics — sent to find us, captured. Kyp injured. All of us wondering how to proceed, and where.

Kyp ru Kurea ru Kinaar, his already lean body made leaner still by his recovery from the fire, perched, thinking. His feathers singed, his lungs seared, his throat scarred.

I studied him as he clung to the branch that day, seeming especially frail. A hard gust rattled the tree, and he teetered briefly to his left side, the side of his shorter leg. He gripped the perch more tightly as he addressed us.

“Before we fly,” he rasped at last, “we must come to a decision. These two” — he nodded at the two scouts — “sent by the Collection to find us and report back. What should we do with them?” He glanced around.

“What should we do?” Erkala repeated grimly, looking up from her preening. “Kill them, of course,” she pronounced in her curious, clipped accent and whetted her beak against a branch.

Thinking back, I probably agreed with her. It wasn't something I would welcome. It would be bad luck to start our flight from the human's colony in

this manner — but what other solution was there? Kaf sniffed his disapproval but said nothing. Kym looked as though she might have wished to speak but didn't feel she had earned the right yet, having just joined the flock.

Kyp shook his head. "No. I don't want to do that."

Erkala's glance took in the rest of the council. "They can't be allowed to return to the Collection."

Kyf traced a faint line in the perch with one claw and shrugged reluctantly. "I agree with Erkala. What other choice have we?"

Kyp cleared his throat. "So far, the Collection hasn't caught a single one of us," he argued. "If we kill these ones now, when we don't have to ..." He stopped and shook his head. "How do we explain that to ourselves later?"

Kyf snorted. "That big one. That Chooser one for the Collection. Kuper, who calls himself Urku. Don't tell me he didn't *try* to kill you."

"But he was unsuccessful," Kyp pointed out, "and now what we have to resolve isn't what Kuper did or didn't do, but how we will act." Nobody seemed to have anything further to add, so Kyp flew to the branch where the scouts perched.

"Listen to me," Kyp began before halting again, wracked by painful coughs. He paused to swallow, then recommenced. "The council says kill you. My feeling is we haven't come to that. Tell your

Chooser, Kuper, we're leaving here. Tell him he has no reason to concern himself with us. We reject his invitation now, as we did before. We have no interest in joining him. We're finished what we set out to do, and he won't see us again in this territory. We're returning home, many flights out of his range. Tell him we'll be far away by tomorrow. Do you understand?"

The two Crows nodded, too frightened to reply.

"If we see you again, spying on us. If you fly after us, if you trouble us in any way, and we catch you, I won't stop these others. You understand me?"

Erkala stared intently at Kyp as he spoke, then hopped forward on her perch. "You can't just let them go," she warned, her voice even.

Kyp met Erkala's gaze, and an unspoken struggle between these two continued through the silence. Suddenly Kyp turned and leaped upon the strangers, his neck outstretched and his beak gaping. The two scouts shrieked and squirmed, but surrounded by us, they didn't dare put up any fight. In a flash he had plucked feathers from their tails and wings. The two hollered with alarm and pain, and then, as Kyp returned to his perch, looked to see if the rest of us were going to attack as well.

"Now go!" Kyp commanded after dropping the feathers from his beak. "I'll be setting these younger ones after you in a few moments, to make sure you

haven't lingered. If they catch you, they can do with you as they like."

The strangers examined their damaged wings.

"Go!" Kyp shouted, even louder, his voice raw.

The scouts leaped from the branch but, after executing a few frantic, ineffectual strokes, lurched only as far as the next tree. It was clear their ability to steer or direct flight had been ruined by Kyp's attack and would remain impaired until their next molt.

I watched as they continued their pathetic zig-zagging journey from one tree to the next and nodded to myself. "It'll take them forever to get back to Kuper like that."

"If they get back," Kyf added. "Any hawk that catches sight of those two will eat well."

Erkala studied their departure a few moments, then abruptly turned, dropped from the branch and flew away.

An uncomfortable silence followed as we watched her leave. Kaf turned back to Kyp and shrugged. "Still. It's likely that they'll eventually reach Kuper. When they do, the Collection will come."

"Of course, they'll come after us," Kyp whispered, trying to save what little voice remained. "Kuper knows where we came from. He'll expect us to fly back that way."

“Which,” I continued, after thinking a moment, “is why we’ll be heading south instead.”

“That’s right,” Kyp agreed quietly and turned to Kyf. “Gather everyone. Put out the call to those still foraging. We’ll fly from here within the next sixth. At least that much of what I told those scouts was truth. I want to be as far from here as possible by the time those two get anywhere near Kuper.”