

RAVEN BOY

BOOK II

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The Baby

Somewhere in the depth of the forest, Old Nim was kneeling in the middle of a clearing. Tall, wild plants and flowers randomly grew around her, nearly hiding her from view. The place was her garden, even though it looked like anything but. Nor did Old Nim look like a gardener: small, thin, and very tiny, she had long, naturally golden hair, and a wrinkled face lit by a warm inner light. Her smiling, sky-blue eyes were still beautiful, reflecting both calmness and childish curiosity. Graciously kneeling among the tall herbs, the woman looked like some sort of fairy or a fantastic illusion.

It was one of those sweet summer evenings when the air is filled with the aroma of flowering heather and the relaxing hum of bumblebees, and when the sunset pours its honey over the grass and the trees, drawing their long shadows across the ground.

That sweet and calm evening, Old Nim was gathering herbs; her long, thin fingers ran along every plant, carefully studying them and sensing the smallest details that no ordinary person could notice. Proceeding so, she selected only what she needed, leaving no trace of her gathering and remaining in harmony with nature.

Suddenly, her hand froze over the leaf she was about to touch: a barely perceptible trembling of the ground under her knees told her that someone was approaching. No sound was audible yet, but years of experience had made her absolutely unparalleled in reading nature. She

remained motionless for a while, her eyes closed, as if taking a quick pause, and then calmly resumed her work.

Meanwhile, the noise appeared, first as a distant humming, and then as a clear, alarming clatter of hoofs. A moment later, a foaming horse hectically stopped at the edge of the forest, right before the clearing. Its rider jumped to the ground and ran across the clearing toward Old Nim. It was a young woman. Her beautiful face was covered with dust and her long dark hair fell loose on her shoulders, spilling over her rich but torn and blood-covered gown.

Reaching Old Nim, the woman fell heavily on her knees.

“Nim,” she called, panting, “help me!”

For the first time, Nim turned to face her, and her sky-blue eyes widened with concern and surprise.

“It’s a nightmare!” sobbed the young woman and burst out crying, covering her face with her left hand, while her right arm tightly held a bundle.

Old Nim stood up on her knees and gently hugged the woman, patting her shoulder. “There, there,” she said quietly, “calm down, for emotions blur your mind...”

The woman abided, yet it took her some time to regain control over herself. Finally, she stopped sobbing and straightened her back.

Nim just silently waited, her blue eyes shining with compassion and patience.

The young woman drew a deep breath and started talking, her voice coming out quiet and strangely distant, as if she was in some sort of trance. “Father died right after midnight. Po wants me to marry him and to rule

with him. I refused—it would have made no difference anyway for me, or for my people. So Po organized the rebellion against me—” she stopped and her blank glance widened with horror. “So many people died! It was... It was... I never imagined they could be so cruel to their own brothers and neighbors!” She closed her eyes, clutched her fists as if in agony, and growled painfully, like a fatally-wounded animal.

But Nim didn’t let her dwell on the pain. “And your husband?”

The question had the effect of a slap to the face: the young woman straightened and looked at Nim, her glance so alive and so full of strength and fury.

“Po’s got him. Now I’m sure. I saw it in his eyes. Po will not just kill him. That evil man wants to separate us forever... Nim, I have to do something!”

In front of the boiling emotions of the young woman, Old Nim remained incredibly serene and undisturbed. She had lived long enough to learn how to remain calm in any situation. Still, her voice was firm and serious. “How can I help you?”

The young woman was expecting these words so much that when they finally came, she found it hard to gather her thoughts. She swallowed and held her bundle to Nim.

“I managed to save Anna...” Carefully unfolding a sheet, she lovingly caressed the tiny face of the baby. “My daughter... the incarnation of our love...” she murmured with pride and affection before raising her eyes to Nim again. “Nim, I need you to take care of her.”

Nim didn't say a word and her face showed no new emotion, so the young woman went on. "I know I'm asking a lot, but you are our only chance! What Ronen is facing is worse than death. I must try and save him." The tears that were filling her eyes spilled again and fell on the baby's cheek. She hurriedly wiped her eyes with her sleeve, but the baby woke up and opened her clear blue eyes.

The mother bent and kissed the baby's forehead. "Anna, I love you," she said quietly. "And your father loves you. Very, very much." She kissed the baby again, and then spoke to Nim, without taking her eyes off her daughter. "Nim, you are the only person I trust enough to care for her. If I do not return, she will be safe with you. I want her to grow up pure and honest, like a real daughter of her family, like a real granddaughter of her glorious grandfather!"

Nim thoughtfully stared into the young woman's face for a while. Then she slowly nodded and held her arms to the baby.

"I've never had a child on my own. I am honored by your trust. Melaina, I promise you, I will do anything to protect her."

The young woman tried to smile, her lips trembling with emotion. Blinking rapidly to chase the tears, she muttered, "Thank you, Nim. I will never forget it."

They remained silent for some time, both looking at the baby who was watching them with interest. Then Melaina bent to kiss her daughter for the last time and carefully gave the baby to Nim. Wiping the tears, she

stood up and hurried toward the horse that was waiting right where she had left it.

When she got in her saddle, Nim called to her. “Melaina...”

She looked back.

“You are the best magician I ever knew. Stay calm and listen to what your heart tells you. Gods help you!”

A sad smile lit Melaina’s face. She waved her hand in a final good-bye, forever engraving in her memory the picture of the old woman kneeling in the middle of tall heather bushes and holding her only beloved daughter in her arms.

When Melaina was gone, Old Nim didn’t linger. Quickly finishing her gathering, she put all the plants into a simple linen bag. Then she carefully hid all traces of human presence in the clearing, and was gone.

Moving noiselessly and unusually quickly for an old woman, she left no visible trace behind her. The forest was her home, her element. She had been living there for ages and no one was able to find or catch her there.

Soon she came to her hut, disguised with branches and plants. There she stopped to give the baby some fresh milk and to gather her most important possessions, which she fixed on the horse’s back.

As night fell, her small procession started their long journey east. It looked weird and somewhat unreal: a small, fairy-like woman with her fair hair shining in the moonlight and a baby in her arms, with a horse and cow walking closely behind her.

Nim was leaving. She didn't know whether she would ever come back, but she gave her word to Melaina, and was determined to protect the child by any means, even if she had to bear the pain of leaving home for the second time in her life.

The Comeback

Anna grew up with Nim in the middle of a vast forest. The fairy woman taught her how to talk to animals and plants, cast spells, make potions, and survive. At the same time, the girl had a truly royal education: she could sing, dance, play flute, read and write, and she knew good manners and the hierarchy of her people's society.

She looked more and more like her mother, except for the color of her eyes: sky-blue, like her father's.

Nim taught her life through stories and tales, and told her all that she knew about her parents.

When Anna was ten, Nim decided that it was time for them to go back, to try to find out what had happened after they left, as well as to have a glimpse of the present situation.

The girl was happy to travel and asked loads of questions all the way.

"Aren't you tired of talking?" sighed Nim, finally.

Anna rolled her eyes. "How can one get tired of talking? It's so little effort—you are only moving your mouth! ... Tell me more about the sea! What are the good spirits living there?"

Nim kept answering for a while longer, but then concluded, "Now it's my turn to ask questions. Tell me, which plants are you going to gather at full moon?"

Anna moaned with disappointment, but answered, "Mistletoe, wild rose, lily of the valley, sea-buckthorn, melissa, three-part beggarticks, inula, bearberry and ledum."

"Yes, and also thyme. Don't forget it."

Before Nim could say anything else, Anna asked, “If you are making potions at black-moon night, are they going to affect the soul?”

“Not necessarily.”

“But you said black-moon nights are for dark magic!”

“Yes, but dark magic does not deal only with souls.”

“But you said the worst thing that can ever be done to someone is touching their soul!”

“Well, yes: if you kill the body, the soul is still alive, while if you harm the soul, you harm that person’s existence in the Universe.”

“It means that the person will not be able to live another life?”

Nim sighed, annoyed. “Possibly, I don’t know. But not all dark magicians are that evil, and most importantly, very few of them are powerful enough for such spells. It’s a very advanced, powerful, and dangerous magic. You should know about it, but make sure you have no other solution before trying it.”

Anna thought for a while and went on with new energy. “Is Po evil enough? Does he deal with souls?”

Nim didn’t answer right away. She thoughtfully studied her small hands and frowned slightly. “I can not tell for sure. I haven’t seen Po for many years now. He may have acquired that secret knowledge, for he used to experiment with complex dark spells and rituals.”

She looked up and met Anna’s curious gaze. “This is another reason for us to be very careful and alert. I don’t want you to be scared or to panic, but remember that the less attention you attract, the better it will be for us.”

Anna nodded. She remained silent for some time, but soon her questions resumed their merciless rate.

“Can a soul be destroyed?”

“Yes, in theory. But as far as I know, no human has ever done it. Generally, dark magicians would simply try to gain control over a soul, or to imprison it somehow.”

“Can you do it to a living person?”

“When you take control over a soul, the person must be alive, otherwise it’s useless. It allows you to make the person act according to your will, generally doing some terrible things. You can recognize the affected people by the very drastic change in their behavior and by looking into their eyes—their pupils are always dilated, for their soul remains in the dark.”

“And if you imprison a soul?”

“To imprison a soul, you must kill the person and catch the soul at the moment it is leaving the body. Then you have to put it somewhere and to surround it with spells that will hold it there. But it is very hard to do, because a soul is not a physical object.”

“And is there a way to get free of it?”

“Hardly, if the dark magician knows what he or she is doing. But then, I don’t know for sure. It’s another reason for you to remember your protective spells, young lady. Come on, recite...”

Anna heaved a sigh. “Okay, you win again... First there is...”

By sunset, they arrived at Nim’s old house. It stood there as before; only now branches and tall wild herbs were completely hiding it, as if the hut had grown into the tree, becoming an integral part of the plants.

Nim and Anna dismounted and carefully walked toward the hut. They looked like sisters playing an exciting game: the same height, the same dresses, waist-long freely-floating hair and a similar slender shape. But Nim's hair was bright golden, while Anna's was black, and Nim's thin face was covered with lines, a reminder of the several hundreds of years that she had lived on earth. Anna examined the place with obvious excitement and admiration, while Nim looked alert and tense, like a wild animal coming to the river.

They silently approached the hut from behind and made their way into the stable. There was a hidden door leading into the hut. Anna didn't notice it, so when Nim suddenly pulled it open, she gasped in amazement.

Nim ordered the girl to remain in the stable, while she carefully stepped into the hut and started examining it. She had an outstanding memory and knew exactly where everything had been left.

To her surprise, it looked like no one had been there after she left. There was no trace of Melaina, or of any other intruder. Prudent as she was, Nim checked the hut for any spells or traces of magic, just in case. But it was clean.

"May I come in?" Anna begged impatiently.

"You may now," Nim allowed, and the girl hurried inside.

The hut was very simple. It had two small windows, now completely hidden by wild plants, and just one room that was a kitchen, a dorm, and a living room all at the same time. There was a small fireplace and minimal

furniture. The place was abundantly covered with dust, but Anna loved it instantly.

“Where can I make myself a bed?” she asked eagerly.

Nim, who was busy smelling the potions that had remained there during all those years, looked at her with studied irritation. “Don’t you think we ought to clean the place first?”

Anna shrugged innocently.

“I wasn’t intending to go to bed right now...”

The next morning, Nim took Anna to the sea. Anna had never seen it before. When they got to the rocky coast, Anna froze, speechless. Blue waves rolled toward the land from the very horizon to hit the rocks and fall down as white foam. Seagulls flew over the sparkling water and their screams echoed around them. Anna took a deep breath, filling her lungs with salty air.

“Come, there is a beach down there,” called Nim. “We’ll swim.”

Together Nim and Anna swam and played in the water until Anna’s lips turned blue with cold. Then, they lay on the sand sunbathing. Nim showed Anna some edible mollusks and algae and explained how to eat them.

In the afternoon, they went to the clearing where Nim last saw Anna’s mother. The clearing looked just as it did before—randomly growing tufts of heather, their sweet smelling pink flowers attracting insects and bumblebees.

Anna walked the path over and over, trying to imagine her mother doing it, trying to feel her thoughts and emotions at that moment.

“Do you have any idea of what could have happened to them?” she asked finally.

Nim gave her a quick glance from behind a bunch of flowers that she was gathering. “Well, that’s what I’m intending to find out here. There is no doubt—Melaina never came back here, or to my hut after that day.”

Anna’s eyes sparkled with hope. “What can I do to help you?”

Nim didn’t answer straight away. She carefully lowered her flowers on the grass, then stood up and walked toward the girl. She put her hands on Anna’s shoulders and met her gaze. “Anna. I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “None of them are alive. I do not pretend to be the best magician, but I can surely feel when people dear to me die. And I felt Melaina dying. I don’t know exactly what happened that day, or whether or not she was able to save your father. All I know is that she died willingly. And it may be important for us to know why.”

Tears filled Anna’s eyes. “Why can’t I feel that?”

“You certainly felt it! You started crying, and I was unable to calm you for about an hour. But you were too small to remember it.”

The girl swallowed and looked away. “Do you think I need to become the queen?” she asked after a while.

“I wouldn’t advise you that. At least not yet.”