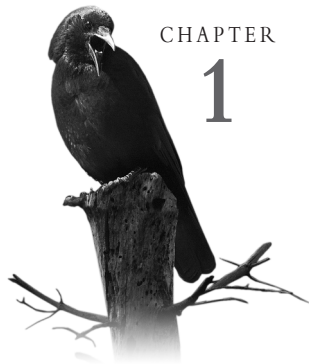


The four souls of the victim reside in his saliva, blood, bile, and bone marrow. By consuming them, whatever life the victim would have had now belongs to the Raven Mocker.



CHAPTER
1

THE OLD CHEROKEE UKU sat at the edge of the precipice high above his village as daylight waned and darkness approached. Sister Sun relaxed as she ended her long journey across the sky vault and breathed a cooling sigh sweeping away the sweltering heat. It was not the darkness of night that disturbed him, but the dark world of witchcraft now confronting him. Adanvdo Alsgia, “Dances with Spirits” closed the gap on his white, feathery cape and ignored the tickle on his nose as the feathers danced in the chilling breeze. He listened closely to the footsteps shuffling across the well-worn, rocky path. The intruder paused quietly behind him saying nothing but audibly breathing heavily. The old Uku could sense the nervousness and dread of his visitor. “Come sit with me, Grandson. Tell me what troubles your heart.”

The young apprentice approached and awkwardly lowered his tall, lanky body to sit beside his great grandfather. Rocking noisily back and forth, he pulled his heavy bear cape out from under him enough to enshroud himself. The old man waited patiently for him to get

comfortable. He knew the question the young man had come to ask; the question he had dreaded answering; the question that could change everything.

Young Ahyeli-a had been the ideal student all his life. He had earned his name “Mimic” as a child because of his amazing memory and ability to repeat verbatim the stories told him by his grandmother. He had tagged along with his great grandfather faithfully absorbing all that the wise old Uku could teach him about medicine, conjures, connecting with the spirits, restoring balance and harmony to those who had faltered or had the “thing put under them” and needed help returning to wellness.

Ahyeli-a had mastered the white way and in time would become a wise healer and perhaps even replace his great grandfather as Uku, the highest position a medicine man and priest can achieve in his village. But, his training would not be complete until he also mastered the dark ways. To defeat witchcraft, the Uku must know the dark ways as well as the witch. But the dark ways had tempted and turned many attracted to the allure of its magic. This was what Adanvdo feared.

“Who is Kalanu Akyeliski? Why is he called Raven Mocker?”

The Uku shifted uncomfortably, “Tsigili.” he whispered, spitting out the word in disgust. He wanted there to be no doubt that a “witch” was something to be despised.

Ahyeli-a frowned and studied the old Uku as he waited for the explanation. His teacher took a deep breath to control his hatred before starting his curious apprentice down that dark path of knowledge.

“He doesn’t MOCK the raven, he BECOMES the raven.”

Adanvdo shifted and pulled his cape even closer, using the cape subconsciously more for security than for warmth. He anticipated the question his great grandson dared not interrupt him to ask. “You will be able to distinguish him from a common raven. When he flies, his wings and tail blaze, leaving a trail of sparks.”

A fiery meteorite streaked across the sky catching the attention of the two, on edge because of the troublesome subject. Ahyeli-a looked questioningly at his mentor. The mentor’s gaze remained on the spot where the streaking, fiery stone had flamed out. He didn’t believe in coincidences and he had taught that lesson to his apprentice. But, he wasn’t sure himself what the meaning of this occurrence was. Was it significant? A sign? It was in any case awkward timing. He decided to store the event in the back of his mind and consider its significance later.

For Ahyeli-a’s benefit, Adanvdo shook his head dismissing the event, refocused on the fading mountain peaks in the distance and then continued the lesson in a whisper. “The Raven Mocker seeks out the weak or frail and enters their house unseen to torment them—to literally scare them to death. Invisible, he may shake their bed, pull things from the wall, or even pick up his victim and hurl them to the floor. He may shape-shift into a ferocious panther or horrifying bear. Then, at that critical moment of death, he sucks their dying breath from them as he plunges his fist into their chest to extract their heart, liver and rib bone.”

Remembering the look on his great grandson’s face when they examined the Raven Mocker’s latest victim, he was compelled to explain, “Afterwards, no trace of the entry is visible on the chest of the victim.”

He anticipated his clever student's next question ... "The four souls of the victim reside in his saliva, blood, bile, and bone marrow. By consuming them, whatever life the victim would have had now belongs to the Raven Mocker."



On a rocky crag cut into the face of a sheer cliff, Kalanu Akyeliski, the Raven Mocker, sat beside a sterile pond staring into the water-covered crystal shimmering in his bluish, diseased hand. Within could be seen images of the two men perched high over the precipice. Sadly, he placed his dripping crystal back into the netted pouch of his necklace. "Is that what I am, Adanvdo?"

How had his life come to this? He had never intended to become the most dreaded and hated tsigili ever to walk the face of the earth. Sadly, the lonely, decrepit old witch pushed himself up and pulled his tattered, black, raven-feathered cape tightly around his chilled, withering, fragile body and limped into his small, seven-sided hut.

He stoked the smoldering embers in his hearth until they glowed red and ignited. He laid a handful of twigs on the fragile flames followed by a small log. He had dealt with loneliness all his life. His proud, stoic father had been a loner who spent little time with him. His flighty, self-centered mother had treated him as a nuisance and a pest. Living deep in the woods and far from any village or other family, he had been forced to find solace alone in the forest.

His mind drifted back to his thirteenth summer. A time before his journey down the dark path, before his

name was Raven Mocker, when he was known as Ugidahli Unega, “White Feather”. The summer when his father had failed to return one night from a hunting trip, and his mother had, against his objections, taken him forcibly into the village to stay with his mother’s family while his uncle led the search to find his father. He had despised the village with its precocious residents and complex social customs. Then the decrepit old witch smiled at a memory. “That’s when I first saw her.”