

## KING OF CROWS

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THE DAY had been hot and dusty, the sky a wide bowl of blue overhead, when Johnny Fahey walked into the canyon. His parched lips parted in surprise at the sudden sweet taste of water in the air. Along the high walls of the canyon, the wind whistled in the deepening crevasses and scattered drifts of pink sandstone. Johnny smiled and then he sighed, his exhalation a dry puff.

He'd walked much of that day and the day before, always on the lookout for the mining camp, the lonely settler, and the small towns with their weddings and wakes. Johnny Fahey had left home many years since, left the green of his own country to wander across the sun-bleached West, the dry flat roads of the plains, and the dark rugged mountains. But no matter where he traveled, stranger though he was, he was never at a loss for words, for he needed none. The music of his fiddle spoke for him, and it was welcomed wherever he went. Doors opened at its sound, a place was made by a campfire, and food and drink appeared. It was a free life, one that chased forward like the sprinkle of notes, each connected for an instant but not remaining.

In a patch of grass, Johnny sat down to rest in the shade. He leaned his back companionably against the rocks and took off his hat. The wind played through his damp blond hair and cooled his forehead. At thirty-odd years, Johnny had the face of a child with china-blue eyes and an easy smile. His cheeks had reddened beneath the sun's glare, but the skin of his forehead, protected by his hat, was white, and no lines creased the smooth brow beneath the straight fine hair.

He took from his pack a small canteen, shaking it first to hear the splash of its contents. Not much left, came the echoing reply. He opened its lid and drained the last few sips of water. The canyon would provide more. If there was grass, there must be a spring or a stream, he reasoned, somewhere in the heart of the canyon. Johnny

closed his eyes and rested, feeling his limbs sink into the yielding grass. It was peaceful after a day's walk.

But he didn't rest long. The wind that tugged at his hair brought with it sounds.

Johnny opened his eyes and cocked his head to the wind. There it was again—a sharp shrill call. A bark, he guessed, imagining the coyotes taking their pleasure like himself in the unexpected grass. No, he thought, uncertain now as the wind brought the sound closer. Not a bark, but the harsh cawing of crows, their raucous voices rising from the hidden basin of the canyon.

Johnny stood up and, shouldering his pack and fiddle, walked deeper into the canyon. The road twisted and turned through the high-walled corridors until at last the canyon opened into a wide grassy field. Spread across the field were crows, fanning their black wings over the grass. He stopped, awed at the sight of so many, their necks thrown back as they called to one another. The swirling flocks settled themselves uneasily, stalking through the long grass, their heads reared to catch the sunlight. And with a common cry, they shook their feathers, beaks breaking and limbs stretching until they had shaped themselves into the semblance of human form. Now standing before him were men and women striding over the green, their wings transformed into cloaks of black silk and velvet.

And among them was one who caught Johnny's gaze. Her face was moon-white in the night sweep of her long hair. Across her forehead the black brows arched over eyes of glittering jet, and her pouting lips were stained mulberry. A black velvet ribbon fluttered at her white throat. The black cloak was draped over her rounded shoulders that perched above small breasts and a slender waist. As Johnny Fahey gazed at her, music burst in his head into a loud and joyous peal, the reels tripping over the stately waltzes, the fast jigs into the slow aires; and the more the music tumbled, the more his heart felt driven by the girl with black eyes and the moon-white skin. He had no fear of the strange assembly, for the music coursing in his veins had chased it out, and, without another thought, he walked into the green field where the crows stood arguing in the rough shouts of human speech.

“The King must name his successor!” cried a man whose dusty black cloak carried a border of gray diamonds. “Before it is too late!”

“He has a daughter!” cried out a woman, her hands curled tightly around the billowing folds of a rebellious cape.

“But she must have a mate! The law requires it. And she refuses!”

“Do you blame her?” a younger woman cackled to her companion. “Not one among them would I choose if it were up to me.”

“It isn’t up to you anyway,” the second snipped in return. “But who would you pick?”

“The one with the loudest voice, who else? To be heard over this!” the companion answered, shaking the folds of her light cape.

“Rilka has to choose among us!” came a new chorus. “She must marry! There must be a new King crowned before the end of the season.”

Johnny felt the earth tremble through his feet as he approached the court of crows. The whistled wind was hushed beneath their loud cries, and the crickets were silent between the rocks. Johnny bowed his head, the sounds of their rising arguments clashing in his ears. They did not listen to each other, but each voice shouted more loudly until they merged into a single cacophony.

The crows parted at Johnny’s approach, some turning astonished faces at his unexpected presence, but never stopping in their cries. It wasn’t until Johnny stood before the girl with the white skin and the black hair that the violent arguments subsided into grumbles and then at last into an uneasy silence. The girl stared at him with curiosity, her head tilted to one side as the glittering eyes fastened on his face. A smile crooked the edges her mouth, and the arched brows drew together in a challenge.

“Who are you?” she asked, voice sharp as a scythe.

“No one as grand as you,” he answered softly.

She lifted her chin proudly, the sweep of black hair flowing over the curve of her back. Opals sparkled in her earlobes like tiny stars, and around her waist she wore a belt of turquoise and fresh water pearls.

“What are you?” she demanded, shoulders hunched and face thrust forward.

“A musician,” he said, arms resting at his sides.

The cloaks of the crows fluttered in the rising wind with a dry chaffing noise.

“Play for us,” she ordered.

“Rilka, we’ve no time for this!” a man barked. Johnny Fahey turned to the man, hearing immediately the authority in this voice. A singular voice after so much discord. The man was old, the plumage of his cloak speckled at the breast and dull and ragged along the hem. But circling his forehead was a narrow crown of silver, set with turquoise. There was still power in his carriage, the heavy body leaning over his hips, his shoulders arched back. In one hand he held a scepter made from a fresh stalk of corn that gleamed as bright as newly minted gold. Johnny had no doubt but this was the King of Crows. He looked back at the girl called Rilka, and the music in his heart stumbled as he realized that the girl with moon-white skin and black hair was the King’s daughter. No chance for you, the sad chords played, no chance this haughty creature could be charmed by the fiddle’s song.

“I want to hear it, Father,” the girl demanded, “if only to hear something other than their bickering,” and she tossed her head toward the line of men who stood glowering at the quiet figure of Johnny Fahey.

The King rolled his eyes to the blue bowl sky.

“Spoiled bitch,” came a nasty whisper followed by snickering.

“Play then!” the King roared, turning on the restless court to silence them.

Rilka lowered her face, the shadow of her hair on her cheek not quite hiding the angry blush. Johnny winced seeing how the insult cut her pride to the quick. But he took out his fiddle and tucked it under his chin. He rested the bow over the strings and waited a moment more to hear what the wind would bring him. A tune came from listening, knowing what was already playing in the hearts of those gathered. He thought he could well guess at the tunes a crow might wish — something wild, with the harsh rasps of the double-stops. Then Rilka lifted her face, and he saw in the dark eyes an unexpected hint of longing, of gentleness.

The soft whisper of her sigh touched him, and without intending to, he lowered his fiddle again and began to sing slowly in a clear tenor voice.

I met a fairy woman  
At the river’s eddy.  
And I asked her  
Would anything unlock love?

She said to me in whispered words,  
When it enters the heart  
It will never be released.

There followed a silence, filled only with the rise and hollow of the wind in the grass. Johnny Fahey heard the slow beat of his filled heart. Abruptly he put the fiddle beneath his chin again and played a reel as fast as his song had been slow. He might gain her, the notes sang, but how could he keep her? He might lose her now, but she would be forever in his thoughts. Amber rosin smoked over the strings and the white hairs of his bow broke like the strands of a clinging web. He drove the tune, as if to empty the sight of her face from his heart, and yet as he finished the last notes he looked up and her glittering eyes snared him.

“Teach me to do that!” she demanded.

Johnny gave a weary smile. “To play the fiddle?” he asked. “It’s not that easily done.”

“No, not the fiddle,” she answered shaking her head, her black hair shimmering blue in the sunlight. “Teach me to sing.”

The King, silent until now, threw back his head and roared with laughter. Around him the court followed suit, their strident cries glancing off the stones and circling the air. Rilka’s white face flamed and she turned angrily to the King, her fists clenched.

“Laugh if you want, but I won’t choose a mate until I have learned to sing!” she proclaimed.

“You already sing well enough!”

“No, not like that. A sweet voice, that’s what I want.”

“No!” the King protested. “You are my daughter, a crow, and must call with a crow’s voice.”

“I’ll learn to sing, or I’ll not be married!” Rilka cried again, stamping her foot.

The King frowned, his expression sour, but his daughter crossed her arms and stood stubbornly facing him, the flaming cheeks adamant.

Johnny gave a slight smile. “I’ll teach your daughter to sing,” he said quietly. “But on one condition.”

“A waste of time,” the King said gruffly.

“I’m in no hurry,” Johnny replied.

“What’s your condition?” Rilka asked, eagerly.

“That if I succeed, I be made the King of Crows,” Johnny said, surprised by his own boldness. But how else to gain her? he thought.

The King laughed again and the court followed in a clamoring chorus. The King’s cloak snapped fitfully in the rising wind and he lunged toward Johnny. A gnarled fist grabbed Johnny around the collar of his old shirt and lifted him up on his toes. The King searched Johnny’s face, the black eyes piercing.

“You think she’s a woman. Make no mistake musician, she is a crow. And harsh though her call, she’ll be no other thing but what she is. Your offer is foolish and has the mark of a man stupid enough to love a creature beyond his reach.”

“And still I make the offer,” Johnny said calmly, though his heart was pounding. The King slowly released his hold and Johnny felt the soles of his feet returning to the earth.

“Fair enough. You will have until the end of summer. If you succeed I will relinquish this crown to you, though I’ve no fear that this will happen. And when he fails,” the King turned to his daughter, “I’ll choose your mate, and the matter will be settled once and for all.”

Rilka opened her mouth to speak, but the King’s upraised hand commanded silence. “Think well on it, daughter. You’re a crow, the daughter of the King of Crows, and there is no musician that can alter that truth.”

“I’ll learn to sing,” Rilka said tartly.

“And then what?” the King asked. “Whom will you sing for? For us?” He opened wide his arms to the court of crows.

“I’ll sing for myself.”

“Then you’ll sing alone, my daughter,” the King replied. “But so be it, you’ll learn the hard way what you are.” The King looked over his restless court and exclaimed, “I am done here.”

All around him the waiting court burst into noise, the shrill cawing and harsh scraping of their voices breaking the spell that held their forms. Their cloaks flapped wildly, lifting the dust from between the bladed grass, and in the swirling clouds, they

gave themselves over to flight. Johnny held his hand over his face to protect it from the seething dust, glimpsing in the turquoise sky the black veins of their parting. And then the winds quieted, the dust was exhaled back to the earth, and the sky shone clear again. Johnny Fahey found himself alone with Rilka, daughter to the King of Crows.

“What are you called?” she demanded.

“Johnny Fahey.”

“What sort of name is that?” she asked, head cocked back as she looked up at him with her sharp eyes.

“One without shame,” he shrugged.

“And where did you learn to sing?”

Johnny smiled remembering. “It was all around me. I had only to listen. My mother —”

“— Just listen?” Rilka interrupted. “That doesn’t sound right. Surely there were people who taught you, gave you the know-how so you didn’t make a fool of yourself. That’s what my father says. You have to get the way of it from someone who knows, otherwise you’re stuck, flying in a circle with just one wing. Have you ever seen the deserts from up high? Of course you haven’t. You can’t fly. Well, I have and let me tell you— ”

And on she went, not stopping for a breath or pause, scarcely caring whether he answered her rapid questions or not. Johnny’s face turned slowly to stone, the constant rattle of her voice hammering against his ear. It amazed him, for on the one hand, as a crow she had seen a great deal of the world and was only too willing to talk and talk and talk about it. In small spoonfuls, it might have been interesting. But the words poured from her in a deluge as if all her life she had stored them up, waiting for this moment to release them.

The sun rose higher in the sky, tinting the green grass to a fallow gold, and still Rilka talked. It was only when the sun had reached the lip of the high canyon wall that Johnny stuttered to life and caught the girl by the shoulders.

“That’s enough for today’s lesson,” he blurted out, exhausted.

“But you didn’t do anything,” she said peevishly. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You did quite a bit,” Johnny said. “And now it’s time to end. Tomorrow I’ll try again.” Johnny stumbled wearily to where his pack lay and made camp for the night. Rilka watched him and then, in a flurry of angry wings, she transformed herself and flew away into the dimming sky.

That night as he lay beside his fire, listening to the sound of the dry wood sigh itself into ash, Johnny wondered how he was going to reach beyond Rilka’s chatter. She talks, he thought, because among the crows listening is not valued. She talks, he thought, because no one has ever listened to her. Until now. Did he have the patience, he wondered, to listen while she talked, while she emptied herself of all the words she needed to say before she could listen? He would have to teach her how to listen without words. He stirred the fire and in the black coals rimmed with white-hot flames saw her cheek against the black hair. He chuckled, knowing himself to be smitten, and for that, he would listen a long time. And maybe there were small things, gestures that might gentle her tongue and make her settle into quiet. Only then would she be able to hear the songs that waited inside her voice.

When he woke in the morning, Rilka was beside him, stirring up the campfire. He got up from his blanket, shyly, and she laughed at his hair that stuck out over his head like so much thistledown. He combed it with his fingers good-naturedly and offered her coffee. She nodded yes and began again to talk. She chattered on about the world, about the tops of the mountains, the sea, the stupidity of the court, even about her own beauty. The morning sun caught her face, and the white skin glowed. And in Johnny Fahey’s heart, the day began.

Johnny said not one word, but did his work. Moving slowly round her, where she sat on a stone by the fire. He mixed the dough for biscuits, he ground the coffee beans in their burlap sack between two stones and set them in a pot of water to boil. He soaked the beans and bacon in a second pot and set them over the fire. He hummed as he worked, his voice a subtle background to the constant prattle of her voice. He touched her hand from time to time, putting a cup in it, a biscuit, every gesture in the rhythm of his hummed tune. The flow of Rilka’s words broke and stumbled with the touch, but just as quick returned. Only Johnny heard the moment her speech began to flow with the rhythm of his tune. She smiled now as she spoke, almost without realizing that his song carried her along, changed the harsh tone of her



chatter into a sweeter babble. But babble it still was, and Johnny was glad when they ate, for it gave him a moment's respite from all her talk.

And so it went throughout that day and the next and the next; Johnny saying little, only a nod, a murmured reply between the softly whistled tune to show that he heard her. He wondered that it didn't drive him away, so much empty talk. But something in the soft pleading of her eyes, in the need to speak so much, stayed him. And gradually, he heard the torrent of words begin to exhaust itself. Passages of silence broke in, like sunlight sparkling in a cloud break at the end of a long storm. One day she sighed, folded her hands into her lap, and said nothing for a long time.

"Is it done, you are?" Johnny asked, taking out his fiddle.

Rilka nodded.

Johnny smiled and put the fiddle beneath his chin. He played a sweet aire, slick as new grass and sad as the bent bough. Rilka heard it and tears gathered in her eyes. Johnny stopped playing and put away his fiddle.

"Come on, then," he said, giving her his hand. "Walk a ways with me."

They walked through the canyon walls, then climbed the back of the high escarpments. Along the rim of the canyon, Johnny whistled a tangled tune, and far in the distance, coyotes yipped.

"Can you hear it?" he asked her, the flow of sound touching him. A jig, he thought, to shape the barks of the coyotes.

"Hear what?" Rilka asked, puzzled.

Johnny touched her softly, a finger gently tracing the outline of her ear, inviting. "It's there," he whispered.

She raised her face, waiting, almost afraid. And then her eyes hardened. "I hear nothing."

"It'll come," he promised, and let his hand hold her chin. Her upturned mouth was so close that he leaned in to kiss her.

She pulled her head free from his hand and bristled. "But I want to sing. Make me sing!"

"Rilka," he said softly, stepping back from her. "You will sing, but first you must hear."

"That's ridiculous! I'm sure I hear well enough," she replied.

“If you can hear the tune, then you can sing it.”

“Is that all there is to it?” Rilka threw back her head, her white throat to the sun, and opened her mouth to sing. But out came only the harsh cries of a crow, and the harder she tried to sweeten her voice, the louder she croaked and cawed. At last, stamping her foot in frustration, she leapt from the canyon wall, and in the open air transformed into a crow. But Johnny saw her face just before the black feathers claimed it, and it was hurt and sad.

“Well,” he muttered as she flew away, “you’ve unraveled that.” And he walked slowly down the trail to the camp.

He couldn’t bring himself to leave the canyon just yet. He’d enough food and water, and so he remained there, one eye glancing hopefully at the horizon for sight of her. Almost a month passed before Rilka returned again. She came one morning early, walking through the long grass, dew spangled on the hem of her dress. Her expression was pensive, her hands clasped together.

Johnny nodded in greeting and quietly set about making coffee. He mixed the dough for biscuits and set the beans on to boil. And when it was done, he held her hands lightly before he gave her the coffee cup and touched her on the shoulder when he handed her the biscuits. She sighed deeply and shook out her long hair.

And then she talked again, her voice hard-edged but not hurried as it once had been. She talked about the court, about her father’s wish to end his reign, and about the life that was being shaped for her among the court of crows.

Johnny heard the somber pitch of sorrow in her voice. He wanted to hold her and shelter her from whatever sadness had brought her to him now. She was proud, but her pride had bowed before defeat. There was no eagerness, no arrogance in her voice, and she sat hunched, arms folded over her chest.

“I am to be married,” she declared at last. “For I sing like a crow and will never be anything other. Or at least my father has told me. I don’t like the mate he has chosen, but he has a strong voice and will be heard over the racket of the others,” she added bitterly.

Johnny trembled as he took her hands between his, rosin leaving a pale gold dust on her palms. “No,” he said, “no, give it more time. Give yourself another chance yet. At least until the end of summer.”

She gazed sharply at him. “It would be a waste of time. I learned that on the cliffs.”

“No that isn’t true. Listen to me, Rilka.”

She stiffened, pulling her hands free of his grasp. “No. I couldn’t hear it then, and I won’t hear it now,” she said angrily.

She started to stand but Johnny held her by the shoulders and kissed her on the mouth.

On his tongue her soft lips tasted of elderberries, and her cheek smelled of sage. At first Rilka didn’t move, startled Johnny thought, as was he, by his boldness. And then she leaned into the kiss, her face tilted up to meet him. Her hands circled his neck and Johnny felt her cool fingers lace through his hair. He embraced her, pulling her body close to his chest, to hear the rapid beating of her heart and the soft murmured sighs of her throat. It was a long kiss, and when they broke apart, there were no words to match its fire. He stroked her cheek, his eyes never leaving her face. She held him by the waist, and smiled.

They stayed together that day, wandering through the canyon and marking the slow passage of the sun. In the night Rilka lay beside Johnny, and in the moonlight, the length of her bare skin blazed like a comet beneath the black velvet cloak. He called her name over and over and it carried a tune all its own. She answered and the words breathed from her mouth into his and back again until it was all one song. And late in the night, when both grew weary, Johnny laid his head against the pillow of her white breast and slept, hearing the wind shiver through the long grass.

He woke in the morning to find himself alone. He sat up, confused, not knowing when she had left him. He walked through the grass, following the trail of dew-damp footprints until they disappeared abruptly. He searched the pale morning sky and knew, by the utter silence, that she was gone.

He stayed another week, stubbornly refusing to believe that she had returned to the court of crows. But the wind shifted, growing colder, and he felt the summer come to a close. If he remained much longer in the canyon, hoping against hope to see her again, he would be trapped when the winter came with its blinding snowstorms. Reluctantly he packed his dwindling food supplies. He filled his canteen at the spring, and with slow, heavy steps he left the canyon.

On the following day the court of crows returned. They flapped their wide black wings in the air, descending into the grass with their shrill caws. Once transformed into human form, they continued bickering, tugging at wedding gifts and challenging each other for the right to stand beside the bride and groom.

The groom preened himself, stopping now and again to crack out orders to his attending men. He was tall and stood erect, his inky hair slicked down over his proud head. He shook out his cloak, straightened the fine embroidered vest and glanced occasionally where his bride stood, silent among the noisy throng. He frowned at her, wishing she'd more to say for herself.

Rilka looked around in the canyon. She had not thought to see any signs of Johnny Fahey, and yet his absence pained her terribly. She knew how much she had silently hoped for another sight of him. Her arms felt heavy at her sides, her hands empty. She raised her hands, looking at her palms, seeing again the faint dust of rosin from his touch. And then she remembered with a smile that he was always putting a cup into them, or a biscuit. Always giving something of himself to her without a word. And she heard in her ear like the sudden lilt of the thrush the constant tune he had hummed. She shook her head, the black veil rustling, and this she heard as music. He had taught her to listen, not by words, but in his deeds and touch. Her constant chatter had deafened her to his message and she had fled, humiliated by her own ugly voice. She had blamed him for her failure until that last day when she had come to see him once more. In a single day he had surrendered everything of himself to her, his body, his love, even the music. But she had held back, fearing the ugliness of her crow's voice. It was her vanity that made her leave him in the morning and not return.

Her serving women crackled and grouched, pulling her dress into place, lowering the black veil and smoothing the train behind her. But all Rilka could hear now was the sorrow in her heart. Her vanity had cost her Johnny Fahey's love; it had made her deaf to the music. And now she would marry a man like herself: a crow, sharp-tongued and loud. Through the burn of tears, she recalled Johnny's smile and she touched her lips through the veil remembering the soft fullness of his mouth, the breath that even as he kissed her carried a tune. And as Rilka swallowed, her throat was filled with the thick sweet taste of wild honey.

"Wait," she cried to the assembled court.

“For what?” demanded the groom.

“I will sing,” she said softly.

“Rilka, enough of your foolishness,” the King of Crows declared. But already summer had aged him, and his voice was subdued.

“I will sing, Father, and we will see who is the King of Crows.”

Rilka lifted her veil and brushed it back from her face. She gazed up into the sky, blue as Johnny’s eyes and started to sing. She knew at once the words and the tune; it was his song. He had sung it often to her when they had sat together by the fire or walked along the rim of the canyon, though she had scarce heard through her chatter. Now it was in her ear as clear and insistent as the sweet piping of finches.

Her voice rose in her chest and traveled the length of her honey-coated throat until it issued forth beyond her lips. Not a crow’s voice at all, but a low hollow sound, sad and haunting as she continued to sing. The black veil faded into a fine ivory lace and the black wedding dress softened into a pale smoky silk. Rilka let the song change her, bleed the color from her shining black hair and her jet black eyes until her cloak was a soft gray and her eyes red with weeping.

And before the astonished court she shuddered out of her human form and took the air as a dove. She flew over the high walls of the canyon, and her mournful cry was carried aloft by the wind.

The court of crows disbanded, for according to the King’s own bargain, Johnny Fahey was the rightful King of Crows and he could not be found. The crows searched, but every time they met, they scrabbled and fought, and news that might have aided their search was dropped like useless scraps.

Johnny Fahey had made his way through the mountains until he had come to a small farmhouse nestled in a grove of cedar trees. There he met a woman with hair the color of wheat and an easy grace. He married her, and the children came, one, two and three. He played the fiddle for the weddings and the wakes, and in the winter months he played for his family.

But always in the spring, when the birds returned to the cedar grove, Johnny Fahey would find himself alone late at night standing on the porch of his house. His wife and children asleep, he would listen to the sad song of a mourning dove hidden

among the fragrant trees, and without knowing why, he would lower his head and the tears would come.