

Stormcrow and The Deer

by Beverly Henderson

For thousands of years, the Stormcrow had watched over Mankind, traversing countless planes of existence, manipulating the infinite time streams, moving from planet to planet in a never-ending struggle against the darkness that constantly threatened to overwhelm them.

He, alone of all the Ancient Ones, had chosen to live among those he guarded, keeping the delicate balance between good and evil by example as well as by action.

As the millenia slowly rolled past, he involved himself in the histories of hundreds of worlds, living with the people he chose, loving some of them, taking a few to wife, only to watch them grow old and die. For all his powers over time and the strength of his magic, for all his wisdom of the ages and knowledge of the lore of countless worlds, he was helpless against the never-ceasing march of time. With the passing of each of his companions, his heart grew a little sadder until the time came when he said to himself, *No more!*

So, he set out once more across the planes of existence, slipping into various time streams searching for a world that needed his care. There, in the dark nexus of time, he found a new world, its balance of good and evil in danger of sliding into the darkness he always challenged. He peered into the hearts of the people and found that good still lived within them but that they were sorely tempted by the lures of evil.

So he decided to stop on this planet, convinced the king that a castle in ruins guarding his northern border was of no use to good to him. And so he came to The Keep on the edge of a forest so ancient and imbued with magic that it reached out to him with the promise of benevolent support and aid. Two years later, with the use of his powerful magic, the castle was repaired.

There he lived for fifty years, tending his people, fighting when evil threatened and exploring the depths of the magic forest. His people thrived and stayed with him out of love and respect, their pride in him boundless, their loyalty unquestioned, their obedience legendary.

But the king was jealous. The Stormcrow had magic. The king didn't. He sent a message throughout the land summoning magicians, but only small-powered, petty ones came forth. The king used them to create the Wizard's Council and, with their help, finally had a daughter. But he grew

old, fighting a few battles with Lord Crow, other times without him. Calling the Stormcrow to his deathbed, the king tried to get him to swear total loyalty to his daughter. The king was in great pain and Lord Crow was close to doing so until the little girl came into the room - rude, arrogant, demanding her father's time and the beheading of some servant over a trivial offense. Lord Crow sent her from the room and watched the king take his last breath! That was 20 years ago.

One spring, a wizard's duel was held. The Stormcrow went to observe, for the winner of the duel was to become leader of the council and Lord Crow hoped he could ally with such a man, one geared more towards the protection of the kingdom than the Queen's desires. Forced to join in the duel, he proceeded to win, humbling the Queen and all her wizards. That's why the thousand-man army of the Queen marched against him. The saddest part was the Kahn; gathering his army together and watching the coming battle, ready like a vulture to swoop down on them all.

The Stormcrow quickly saw that there was more hope for his adopted world under the hand of the Queen than there would be under the heel of the Kahn. So quickly, he laid his plans and called his men together, knowing that success depended on the whims of a selfish, spoiled woman.

And he felt old. For the first time in his long life, he felt old and tired, each year of his long life weighing heavily on his shoulders. He took to soaring high above the forest, his spirit drawing comfort and peace from the promise of hope from the quiet forest.

The night came that he found her.

For one day, wandering through the forest, a deer came across a clearing that seemed very fair and inviting. It wasn't large, but the grass was very sweet and a stream bubbled its merry way through it. She found herself attracted to the clearing. It had water, good forage, and gave her a sense of security. One night, after a day grazing and basking in the warmth of the sun, as she slept curled in her nest of leaves under the tall, ancient oak at the edge of the clearing, a shadow passed overhead.

Waking thirsty, she stumbled toward the stream, shivering in the night air. Pausing at an unfamiliar sound, she looked up, seeing the dark shadow of a large bird pass overhead. Blacker than the night sky it was silhouetted against. Shuddering from more than the chill air, she moved quickly to the stream and bent her head to drink.

She froze.

That was not her face in the stream! This face was human! Fair skinned, hazel eyed, brown hair, the face stared back at her with a stunned

expression. Hearing a noise behind her, she turned to see the black bird landing on the large rock that sat next to the stream. Trembling, ready to flee, she watched in amazement as the crow changed into a blonde hair man. Slowly, hesitantly, she stepped toward him, each step taking her further away from the safety and security of the ancient forest into the world of human emotions, little knowing where the path would lead her. Never dreaming of the heights of passion she would soar on or the depths of despair she would plunge to, completely unaware that those few steps she had taken had carried her beyond an unseen barrier that would never allow her to regain the simplicity and tranquillity of her former life.

Midnight. A bell sounded somewhere deep within the castle. The Deer sat on her bed in her room, watching Abby and Mari bustle about, lighting the fire as well as a few candles. Trying to recall all that had happened. The cheers, the endless names that she knew would only come with time.

Trying to remember all the food, all the wine-----The wine, strong, potent for her first taste. She was beginning to understand why her mind was fuzzy. Lying back on the bed, her head spinning, she closed her eyes against the light. The noise of the girls fades into the distance and she drifted off toward sleep...

A surge of magic. She also remembered a surge of magic - not hers and not the Stormcrow's. Trying to remember where that had come, she opened her eyes, staring at the ceiling. She tried to remember the evening exactly. She couldn't. She remembered the bath and the dressing and the lovemaking. She remembered stepping on to the balcony with the Stormcrow and nervously facing the waiting guests and servants. She remembered descending the staircase and standing next to him at the head of the table and someone placing a goblet of wine in her hand. Ah, yes, the strong strangely sweet wine. She recalled sipping it curiously and thinking that it tasted of fruit left too long on the vine, then sipping it again.

Sleepy from the wine and food and tired from the tension of the evening and stress of meeting so many people, she wavered unsteadily, longing only to climb between the sheets and snuggle down. Instead she moved to the chair in front of the fire and sat down in it, curling into herself and staring at the fire as the girls finished their chores around the room.

Abby picked up a blanket and wrapped it around her and the chair, warming her as she stared into the fire. "If you need anything else, anything at all, there is a rope hanging near the bed. Pull it and we will be here quickly, my lady." They left, gently closing the door behind them.

Staring into the fire, she watched the flames and thought of how she came to be in this frightening place, held only by her deep love for the Lord Crow. In the leaping flames, she saw him - In the castle courtyard, standing next to a man on a horse, holding on the reins of the horse, speaking to the man urgently. She saw the man riding off into the darkness with fifty others, quickly, but as silently as possible. Then, the fire lulled her tired mind. Slowly, unable to keep her eyes open, she drifted off to troubled dreams.

She heard, in her dream, a quite voice, murmuring in the night, a surge of power swelling into the cloud covered sky. Afraid, she opened her eyes to see the Stormcrow standing by the window, staring out, into the darkness, his back to her, the voice coming from him, a language so ancient, long forgotten on many worlds. The power rising in him, she heard only one word she knows---Phillip.

Sitting quietly, wrapped in her blanket, unmoving, she watched him by the window, trying to calm her troubled heart. Waiting for him to turn, she sought the source of her disquiet, but found the details of the dreams eluded her even as they frightened her, leaving her once more with the urge to change and flee the castle.

He stopped his power. "It is never easy to send men off to die! I've done it many, many times. Most of the time, it was necessary; sometimes, it was stupidity; but I have *never liked it*. His shoulders tightened as he stared into the flames.

Banishing her fears firmly and standing up, she moves to stand behind him, wrapping her arms around him, laying her head against his back. Sighing, he turned to hold her close, tilting her head up for a gentle kiss filled with love. Then he stopped and looked at her. "You are beautiful in firelight, more beautiful in moonlight. And I am a very lucky crow." Staring somberly into his eyes, she stared back at him, her heart in her eyes along with her fear for his safety and her need for reassurance. Smiling at her, lifting her into his arms, he told her, "My deer, do not let the ramblings of this ancient man frighten you. This battle is already won. It's just sad the Queen doesn't know it yet!"

Stretching and turning toward the man beside her, she reached out with her hand to make a gesture. And stopped herself, sighing guiltily. As much as she longed to, she could not do it again - She could not warp and twist time to suit her own desires and needs no matter how dire the future seemed. She had kept back the morning and the pending battle for too many nights now. He would be angry when he found out what she had done - If he did, but she did not regret a moment of the past nights. They

had been too sweet and precious in their passion and love and too valuable in the growth of her magic and ability to manage it.

He moaned in his sleep, the dreams filled with passion - with love. But darkness also filled those dreams. He turned slowly, not yet awake and calls her name. Putting her arms around him, pulling him to her breast, she kissed his hair and shushed him softly, tears forming in her eyes, her heart aching and heavy.

Sleep kept him still. His dreams aided in his plans for battle. Long ancient memories of battles past, flashes of far flung future battles, weapons capable of mass destruction.

There was a soft knock at the door, the voice of Abby outside. Sighing, she slipped from the bed, reaching for and slipping into the blue silk robe of the night before. Looking back at his sleeping form, she moved soundlessly to the door and opened it but a crack, looking out at the serving girl. "Is it time already? He has had so little rest."

Abby, with Mari behind her, softly enters the room, gently laying a tray of fresh fruit, meat, and warm bread on the table. Mari smiled up at her as Abby restarted the fire. Smiling, she puts a huge kettle over the fire, warming water for the bath.

Looking guiltily at his sleeping form, curled on his side in the massive bed, she bit her lip. Turning away, she moved to the door into her room and intending to slip quietly through it.

"Don't leave, deer. I'm awake."

She turned to greet him and looked into his eyes. Horror flowed through her as the Stormcrow's plan flew into her mind- He was going to use her - Making the Queen's army believe he was still here, while behind them, he would be driving them against the walls of the castle. His men prepared---but wait! He plans to lose the castle!

Freezing halfway to the doorway, she closed her eyes against the vision of wholesale slaughter she saw in her mind. Turning slowly, her eyes dark with anticipated pain and suffering, she grasped the doorjamb and held herself up. Most of his men would die. Some - Phillip and his five riders as well as ten bowmen - had already escaped.

Her mind reached out to him. Knowing he had the power to stop this dreaded Queen and her army, she asked, *Why?* A more powerful vision filled her mind, a huge army on the march. A dark man on a large horse would lead thousands here. The Kahn was already across the border!

Pain flitting across her face, she lifted her head proudly, anger flowing

through her, stiffening her backbone as well as her will. Her chin out, her face set, the last of her innocence fled, she met his gaze with one of stony determination.

"Very well."

Smiling proudly at her will, he rose from the bed and walked up the stone steps to the balcony, beckoning her to join him. Trailing him, climbing the steps slowly, unwillingly, wishing she had made just one more night - knowing that it was too late to go back, she stopped just behind his shoulder.

Looking out over the activities of the army beyond the walls, he turned to her, kissing her lips lightly. "They will not attack today. They cannot. See, they start to build their machines now - the siege towers, the catapults, cutting down my forest to do so!"

"Damn! But," he sighed, a hatred growing in his eyes, "it is important that she loses very little here, for she must be able to stall the Kahn's army here for a while!"

Looking down at the queen's army, she said soberly. "T'would be best if she lost nothing here at all. Nor you. T'would be best if she fought an army of illusion when she did attack."

He looked at her, his eyes lighting up, thinking. "We still have a day. All could have escaped except you and I. Illusion will still kill. After all, if you believe a sword is in your heart, you will die. But less will die! You and I will have to keep the illusion going for at least two days. Then word of the Kahn's army should reach here!"

Laughing, he whistled loudly, a note of joy in the tone. The trumpeter above them blew a series of notes and the scene in the courtyard changed from one of waiting to one of movement.

Looking into his eyes, she drew herself up. "I can do the illusion by myself, Lord. It will be outrageously easy. The woman out there fears you much more than she fears the Khan. She already believes that she cannot defeat you." Smiling, he looked deep into her eyes, "I know you can. You and I both have been abusing the time stream far too much as of late! But, there is something the Queen must lose here - And that is my job!" Laughing again, he turned and walking down the steps, yelling out to Abby and Mari that they'd better have the bath ready.

The castle was quietly abustle. Her mind became aware of a great underground waterway, a stream that led through underground passages to a huge waterfall far from the castle. Many boats were even now taking

off, hidden from prying eyes. As she watched the Crow sink into the hot water, steam rising from his body. She closed her mind to the bustle of the rapidly emptying castle and to the Stormcrow himself, and slipped into the bath next to him.

Smiling, his hand reached out, touching her cheek. "The Queen's army must fight your illusion for two days - starting tomorrow. But the Wizard's Council, which travels with her, must be, uh, distracted. Perhaps even destroyed, or the illusion will not stand, and her army will leave here too soon, allowing the Kahn to march over her with no shelter. This castle becomes her last stand! We must allow her the chance, but without magic! The Kahn is protected from magic. It only empowers him. Therefore the Council must be gone from here before he arrives. That is my job!"

Smiling, his hand caressed her neck, as he leaned toward her. Then he pulled back, sensing her closed mind. Looking at him, she slipped closer to him in the water, knowing that she needed to distract him from his thoughts in order to protect her decision. She reached for him, letting her hands slide over his wet chest.

Kissing her, his lips tasted hers, his mind still open, floating. She saw a strong army - Huge, weatherworn veterans of many battles, known only as the Black League. They are hunted, haunted in their world. Outlawed by all kingdoms around them. For when they sign a contract, they stick to it, no matter what - Honor: duty above all - But their world is now nothing but enemies to them. And she sees that they have a new contract, on another world - Signed with Lord Crow.

Pulling back, looking at his face, knowing his mind is not with her, she sighed and sat back in the water. Picking up the softly scented soap, she began her bath.

Dressed in a simple dark blue robe, she stood on the landing over looking the great hall. All day, she had watched the army gather through her window, then, as night fell, she saw the many campfires. The Crow had given a feast again tonight. She had known it was for morale, but she hadn't felt like attending. Looking down now on the empty hall, the Stormcrow outside walking the walls one last time, she wondered what tomorrow will bring. Climbing the stairs to the parapet once more, she stood and looked over the firelit scene below fear a familiar knot beneath her breast.

A soft whisper. She looked up. There, perched on the tower wall, sat the Crow. He fluttered down to land on her shoulder, but even as the familiar warmth touched her, she sensed his mind is out there, watching the

enemy camp. Reaching up absently to stroke his feathers, she let her mind wander farther a field, lightly touching minds here and there, slipping away as quietly and quickly as she slipped into them. From mind to mind she flitted, finding a wide array of emotions.

Smiling, feeling her powers and relishing them, the crow whispered, "Want to play?"

Drawing her mind back and shifting her attention, she turned her head and kissed the Crow. "I always want to play with you, Lord."

Laughing, his beak stroked her cheek. "Not quite what I meant, my deer. That army's been on the march for three weeks, just to get here. Tomorrow they'll have to start building siege towers and other siege weapons, destroying my forest! I just don't think they should get much sleep tonight, do you?" She turned back to the survey the camp below, her face hardening. "Your forest? No, I don't think I can let them do that." Eyes narrowing, she stared at the flickering fires. A sudden gust of wind swept through the camp causing fires to leap to new life, following in its wake a shrill piercing shriek arose.

Stunned for a moment, his mind reached back to the camp. Watching as the horses run, fleeing the heat of the enlarged campfires, smiling, a grim light in his eyes, his magic joined hers and the campfires danced, moving on their own, but not to hurt anyone. Just towards the supply wagons, burning them one by one. Watching in dark satisfaction, she reached further and touched the minds of the maddened horses, magnifying their terror and directing it toward the humans. She sent them racing into the night, swerving and changing directions to avoid all humans.

Smiling, Lord Crow whistled. She heard the chuckles of the men on the walls, then the loud thwop of the arrow catapults, three weapons of the crow's design - One hundred arrows flew off into the encampment. Not a great aim, more for terror than for damage. Yet still, there were screams from the encampment. Looking over her shoulder, she turned back to the encampment. Letting her mind race toward the forest that had been her home once, searching for minds with a familiar, dreaded touch, she found what she was seeking and quietly, urgently prodded them toward the human camp. A hundred, eager, hungry minds converged on the outskirts of the camp, their eyes glowing in the darkness. A howl arose around the perimeter of the camp carried by a chorus of wolfish voices. Shuddering, hearing the howls, his body started to react, changing into a huge black wolf, ready to hunt. Then he stopped and withdrew his magic, and the man stood next to her.

He turned to her. Reaching out and wrapping his arms around her, he whispered, "Let it go, for now. We will need more of the magic tomorrow. But they now have no horses, no breakfast and no sleep, with a lot of work ahead of them." Locked in a trance, she didn't hear his voice, only the howls of the hungry wolves. Straining forward, she longed to join them, not afraid of them for the first time in her existence. Feeling the warmth of his arms around her, she broke free from the trance and leaned against him shivering.

Alone, tired. Hell, exhausted, she wandered the keep in the early, pre-dawn light. Two days ago, the Stormcrow had flown away, and, since, she alone had been fighting the battle. Several times, the Queen's army had stormed the castle and been beaten back by the phantasmal army she had created. She had managed to kill very few of the Queen's army, while allowing hers to be destroyed, over and over. Once, the walls dangerously breached, she had used the firewall Lord Crow had taught her and several of the Queen's army fell, but it was a small dent in the thousand she had.

Worn out, unable to sleep, afraid she had reached the end of strength, she wandered the dark halls, heading for the balcony. Walking through his room, she stared longingly at the bath, the mat on the floor, wishing he was here, to give her strength, power. To hold her for a while.

She knew the first part of his goal had been achieved, for no magic assailed her from the enemy camp. The Wizard's Council, then, was gone. But she knew he traveled to a far distant plane, the desert world of The Black League. The Black League and their code of fulfilling any contract no matter the cost filled her with dread. She knew - hoped - he would return to her, but she feared the contract he had signed to draw these men and women from their own world. Slowly, she reached the balcony, looking out over the battlefield as the first rays of the sun begin to warm her heart, still cold with dread for what she would see. There, on a black stallion, sat the Queen, crowned, beautifully robed, her breastplate gleaming as the sun hit it.

"Damn you, Crow! The Kahn's Horde is half a day away! We've already engaged some of his scouts. Let me in, you bastard, so we can try to save this day!" With a smile on her lips, she waved her hand, raising the gate. The Queen rode into the courtyard, stopped under the balcony, looked up at her for a moment, looked around at the empty castle. "He's not even here, is he, my dear? Left you here all alone to face me?"

A voice came from behind her on the balcony, the deep male voice of Phillip, as she saw Lord Crow's men taking up their posts around the walls, surrounding the Queen.

"My Lady," he smiled at her, then looked down. "Your Majesty," his voice dripped with hatred, "You had best get your men in here with you, so we can close the gates and prepare for the Kahn. Lord Crow's only desire of you is that you hold the Kahn's army here for one day. I hope your men are up to it!" She snarled, "Damn him! Fine, we'll fight his battle for him. I will not see the Kahn sitting on my throne!" Whirling her horse, she rode out to her waiting army.

Phillip turned to her, smiling. "You rule here, my Lady, but allow me to take care of these small matters of diplomacy. You have done a beautiful task, one for many ballads to come! Rest now. I will send Mari and Abby to your rooms, with some hot food."

Stumbling, she let him help her down the stairs. With one look back at the Queen's army marching on the castle - No longer to destroy it, but to use it for their own safety, and the safety of the kingdom - she leaned on his arm for support as he guided her towards her room, the renewed hustle of the keep a welcome warmth after the loneliness of the last two days.

Phillip walked the battlements in the pre-dawn light, looking out over the many campfires of the horde, sure that the pits of hell had this same appearance. It had been one hell of a day. Waking up this morn, after the long day of getting his and the Queen's armies prepared, only to watch the Kahn's army pour into the valley like water rushing from a broken bowl. Rushing to the Lady Bambi's room only to find her gone! Preparing the defense.

The Horde knew nothing about proper siege warfare. They just tossed their ladders up and began climbing again and again and again. They had men to waste. He did not.

Around midday, they rest, supposedly to take a meal, and he began to assess the damages. Half his and the Queen's men gone, one of the three field-arrow catapults broken beyond repair, and Abby and Mari gone! He assumed they went after the Lady Bambi. He sent two silent messages to the gods of war - One hoping those three ladies were okay, and another praying Lord Crow would show soon!

The afternoon wore on, worse and worse. Some fell magic poured into the keep. A fireball of some size destroyed the other two catapults and the men who operated them. Without the rain of arrows, except from his small group of archers, the Horde came on with a vengeance, and slowly began to break through. He rushed around, supporting his men, trying to fill every breach. Then, late afternoon, he looked over and saw the Horde

pouring over the east wall - No one there to stop them. He cried loudly, warning his small army.

Then he saw her.

The Queen, alone, her armor glistening in the setting sun, her sword flashing through flesh, as she stood, filling the breach alone! He ran, a few men with him, as fast as he could, trying to see through the sweat and smoke. When he got there, he and the men with him were able to drive the Horde back.

As the sun dropped below the horizon and the Horde retreated before the demons of night could destroy them for making war during their time, the Queen laid among many bodies, broken, dead. She had ruled unwisely, but the royal blood had boiled in the end, and she died a death the bards would sing of forever, if he could but win this day.

So he looked out, watching the first rays of the sun peeking out over his last day of life. All night, Phillip's men - all twenty of them - had helped him work out his last ruse, the last ploy to stall for time for the Crow. Men in the Stormcrow's livery, some in the Queen's - all his now, had worked until exhaustion, knowing that it would only buy them a little more time. Then, about an hour ago, he had told them all to leave, to escape the doomed keep. Not one had left. His men.

A messenger rode up to the broken keep from the Horde, as Phillip knew he would, and began reading the last message from the Kahn to the army of Lord Crow's. "This day, you may live, if you lay down your arms. For know that the great and glorious Kahn is merciful. If you do not, then know----"

Phillip's laughter broke through the man's speech, scattering a few carrion birds feeding on the dead below the keep. "Fool! Go back to your master! Your army is worthless! It can not even keep the reinforcements from sneaking in through the night!"

His men cut the ropes, and the messenger saw three hundred soldiers spring up behind the battlements, looking down at him, armed, ready for battle. "Return to the Kahn, tell him we will fight this day! Tell him that more men will be here in the morn and more the next day! Every day, the countryside will rise up and join us against him, until his whole army lies broken on this field! Go, tell his men to sing their songs of death!"

The messenger turned and rode towards the camp of the Kahn.

Shuddering, Phillip turned, looking at his "army" - the many upon many dead bodies that now guard the battlements, rigged with the

springs and ropes that made them rise one last time, in hopes of stalling the great Horde before them, their eyes vacant, empty. Smiling, he climbed the battlements down for some water, only hoping that it worked...For a while.

Phillip watched the campfires flicker out, the mustering of the Khan's horde did not give him much hope, but they seemed to be up to something. Any little time allowed his few men a little more rest, a little more time to prepare for death. A brief breakfast on the walls, then there was a stirring in the Horde's camp. Men marched towards the wall, close, but out of bowshot.

Shuddering, Phillip called for his men to be prepared. It was not long before the Horde began their charge! They came quickly, some carrying the ladders to climb up the walls, but most just running, screaming, ready to die for their gods, ready to kill all in the keep. They hit the walls hard, the ladders reaching the top as the men began to swarm over Phillip and his army. Hack, slash, fighting for the last moments, the last battle.

Then, the rain began. Not soft summer rain, cooling in the heat of the day, but a rain of death. Phillip looked out as a rain of long, black-feathered arrows poured from the forest, piercing the Horde nearest the walls, a killing destruction.

Then, the thunder began. The pounding thunder of huge horses, rushing from over the hills in a cloud of dust. Huge riders in full black armor, lances shining, sharp. They crashed into the Horde, breaking it, crushing bodies under hoof.

The marching men that came forth from the forest were both a dream of salvation and a nightmare of war. Tall, heavily armored, they marched through the Horde, maces crushing bones. Killing. The huge black banner of crows and lightning flew overhead.

Looking up, Phillip saw a shadow overtake the morning sun. The huge, winged shadow that he knew so well. The Stormcrow had returned!

All was over in the matter of hours. The Black League was an evil foe and a dreaded friend as all on their desert planet had learned.

Resting in the trees, not far from the keep, she felt the need to return, but she didn't know why. Shaken by the strong feeling, she began to fly back, only to see movement in the darkness below her. Slowly flying down, she was surprised to see Abby and Mari, moving swiftly through the forest, away from the keep. Landing in front of them, she swiftly changed forms, and confronted them.

"My lady, we knew we would find you!"

"Unfair and cruel, Lady Bambi! We know you have to leave, but it is cruel to leave us behind! We are sworn to serve you, protect you!"

She smiled a little at their love, their loyalty, and her smile told them what they needed to know, that she would not leave them behind. Laughing in the darkness, she quieted them for they were still too close to the Horde's army. Enfolding them in her magic, she surged, changing planes, and taking them to the only safe place she knows - the only place where she wished to have her child --- The Nest.

The first few weeks, she spent exploring the nest, changing it somewhat to fit the needs of herself and her two friends.

A small hole in the mountain, behind the waterfall, only large enough for a crow or magic to fly through, was the only entrance to the nest. It led into the poolroom - the cool bathing and swimming pool where she and the crow had spent many hours in lovemaking. Smiling at the memory, she went up the stone steps into the hallway.

The second door on the left was her bedroom with its fireplace, four-poster bed, and bathroom to the side that would make any woman happy.

The first door on her left she knew - stone steps leading down into the dark dungeon with its wooden table where he had----

Shaking her head to clear it of the memories of his lovemaking and cool the flush of passion that surged through her body, she moved to open the third door on the left.

Here was an empty cavern, dark, hollow, huge. A thought came to her and she spent an hour changing the room, adding to it, furnishing it. The last thing she added was a door from her bedroom into this room. Then she closed the door on her nursery, knowing that their child would have a safe room of his own. The third door on the right was another empty cavern, waiting for her mind to shape it, mold it into what she needed. When she closed the door, she hoped that she had made everything comfortable for Abby and Mari.

Smiling, she continued down the hall.

Leaving the security of the nest had not been easy for her. Leaving her child to Mari and Abby had been even harder, but the knowledge that he was well cared for and adored by the two young women had helped her immensely. That and the danger she knew she represented to the babe. There were powers in the Universe that would stop at nothing to destroy a

child of Stormcrow's - His existence must be kept secret until the child was old enough to protect himself - Or until his father returned to stand between him and their enemies.

Sitting on the parapet, kicking at moss growing on the ancient stone wall, She watched the western sky for signs of her lord. The sun was low on the horizon and cast strange shadows towards the west as it sank into the Eastern Sea. Soon she would have to retreat to the warmth of the great hall and supper, but she wanted to remain on the ramparts as long as she could.

From somewhere inside the keep, a gong sounded and the noise of the huge stone drawbridge being raised and the portcullis being lowered. Shouts echoed from tower to tower as the guards sounded their evening checks. Standing up, she dusted off her red velvet skirt and sighed.

Taking her seat at the head of the table, she nodded to the majordomo. Moving to the middle of the floor, the man tapped his staff on the floor, commanding everyone's attention. "In the absence of Lord Crow, Lady Bambi, Regent, declares the day's end and bids all to break their day's fast." As he retired from the floor to his place by the door, the servants brought in the food: platters of roasted meat, and large bowls of vegetables, loaves of fresh baked bread. Other servants filled goblets with sweet red wine.

Lifting her goblet to her lips, she sipped the sweet wine absently, her eyes idly trailing over the people gathered in the hall. They were all that was left of the gallant band that held the Queen's army at bay for three days while Stormcrow went for the reinforcements. Many had been lost, but their deaths had bought valuable time for the kingdom. Now they had regathered at the keep many months after the defeat of the Khan by the Queen and the Stormcrow's combined forces.

Now, they went about the day to day tasks of restoring the keep to it's original state, repairing the masonry, restocking the larders, finding livestock to replace that slaughtered or scattered. All those that had survived the battles and could had returned to the keep except for the lord of the castle himself. No one seemed to know where the Stormcrow had flown. Some claimed to have seen him at the keep shortly after the final battle, but none knew where he had gone. In consequence, she spent every evening sitting on the parapet, watching for him, waiting for some sign that he was still with them. She had done this for three months now. It would soon be one year since he had flown out of her life. Four months since she had left Abby and Mari in charge of the next savior of the kingdom.

She was struggling now, out of her depth, but unwilling to give up and fail to fulfill Stormcrow's wishes. She intended to have the Keep ready for his return - Once more a happy working castle, full of contented, industrious workers. But it wasn't easy. She had no experience with the restoration or maintenance of a large property, but she had found in the last few months that the best method was to find competent people and trust them to do their jobs. So, when the old retainers started trickling back, she had found those that knew the workings of the Keep and put them in charge of those things they did best. And the system was working. The keep was repaired and the crops were in the ground and the cattle had been rounded up. Everything was as it should be, except for the Keep's Lord.

The year passed quickly. The crops were harvested. The winter came and passed. Spring brought more planting and new calves. The Keep was flourishing. And she was dwindling.

It was draining her. The wait for him.

She remembered the moment he left her, promising to return. She remembered the moment she left the Keep, the secret under her heart more important than her happiness. Every moment, every word, every glance they had exchanged since their meeting in the clearing was permanently etched in her memory - A memory that began with him.

There were nights she woke up with a physical longing to be next to him - A need so great, she felt pain as acute as that of birthing.

There were times when the loneliness became so overwhelming that she retreated to her chamber merely to cry - To give voice to the emptiness and despair inside of her. There were times when she faced the darkest of her fears and admitted that she might never see him again. These were her darkest hours - Sitting alone in the night-drenched room, she often yearned to revert to the simple woodland creature she had been before that enchanted night he had taught her the meaning of human love - Yet she knew she could not.

Too many depended on her. Tied down by the ropes of responsibility and dependence of others, she could not even seek release in the far-seeking form of the raven that he had taught her.

Bound so tightly to the keep, she changed. Not minutely, not gradually. Being a magical creature, her body was not bound by the physical laws of human kind. Her struggles to cope with the routine and trials of daily life in the Keep began to show in her physical aspect. Her rich brown hair grew streaks of gray. Her brilliant green eyes grew faded, their color

washing out to a murky gray. Her fine skin wrinkled and - to her sense of irony - crow's feet developed around her eyes.

Her people noticed and began to whisper, worried and concerned. For their love for their lady had grown with each passing day she had labored in their behalf. As they became more self-confident and self-sufficient, her motivation and drive dwindled.

Now, standing alone in front of the mirror in her chamber, she looked at herself critically and knew that she would not last much longer.

It had been fall verging on winter when he had come to her and soon it would be that time again. The crops were harvested and stored against winter's need and the sheep had been shorn and their gift of wool had been woven and knitted into the warmth their human attendants would need in the coming cold.

This year, there would be nothing for her to see to - Nothing that could not be handled by Phillip.

Dear, loyal Phillip. He deserved so much more for the sacrifices he had made and the pain he had suffered in service to his lord and country. And he would have it.

Looking into her own sunken eyes, stark desperate hunger staring back at her, she formed in her mind the document that would name Phillip Lord Regent of the Keep, giving him control over the Keep and its lands until Lord Crow's son could safely claim his heritage.

She turned sadly from the mirror and crossed the room to the door that led into his chamber. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it, fighting the pain the thought of their baby had brought.

Kestrel - Her son - His son. The child was too powerful, too important to be raised by his parents. The child would never know a mother's love or a father's guidance. At least, he had Abby and Mari.

Herself a magical creature, born from his father's need and love, she was dying without it. Fading - becoming more indistinct, more gray with every passing day. And now, approaching her second winter without him, she could feel the end of her existence before her. Soon, as fall slipped into winter, she would slip back into her natural form and the forest would reclaim her.

Then, yes, then, Abby and Mari could bring the child to the Keep and they and Philip would raise the child in ignorance of his parentage until his unique talents were required. Then Lord Kestrel would spread his wings and cast the same shadows of protection over the land that his

father had.

Seeking the narrowness of his cot, she laid down wearily, not bothering to remove her gown, and, turning to face the cold stone wall, let her despair overcome her.

Crow! she cried into the silent night.

And on the battlements, loyal Philip heard the anguished echo that whispered through the stones of the keep and shivered...

The End