

The Corvid Regis

by K.L.A. Hyatt

The old woman had been drawn out to the patch of corb wort in her garden. She'd hardly stooped down to pick it when the shadow of a bird passed over her, momentarily darkening the clear blue sky.

She grabbed a handful of the rough leaves and shoved them in a pocket of her loose tunic as she stood up, looking at the now empty sky. She mumbled to herself as she hobbled through the glade to the tumbled rock that served as a gate to her domain. She went slowly, her old knees locking up with each step. She stopped to check on various herbs and plants that grew in her warm dell.

At the opening between the rock walls she stood to one side and leaned over to surreptitiously peer through the gap. Heavy winter snow lay on the clearing outside. The slice of sky she could see was thick with storm clouds. It would likely snow that night.

Dotting the snow were the ink black bodies of crows. Dozens of them. More and more landing every minute. Not an everyday occurrence. She thought she knew why they were there.

She hobbled back to her cave, more quickly now, crushing the corb wort in her pocket, her hand becoming sticky with its gum.

Back inside her cave home, she set about her usual tasks. There was nothing she could do now but wait for her visitor. It was growing dark, so she stoked her fire and took her familiar seat near the cave's mouth to do her work. She didn't have to wait long.

At first it was one jackdaw that flew through her rocky gateway. It flew right at her where she was sitting, splitting reeds. It swooped by her and then landed on a slender birch close to the glade's entrance. It cacawed four times and then it was silent. "That was the herald," she thought, her fingers moving nimbly, tearing the reeds.

Two crows flew in next, made flourishing circles and landed on each side of the path that led from the gateway to where she sat. "Those will be the soldiers," she was thinking.

Two more birds entered following the same pattern. This was repeated a dozen times until the path was lined on each side by crows. Finally, the last pair flew in, landed, and clacked. They were only a half dozen feet away from her chair.

She felt, by this time, she should show her respect, so she put her basket to the side of her chair and rose on her rickety legs. At last two final crows flew through the gate and landed just inside on the path.

Standing behind was a normal looking crow, except for the bracelets of shiny metal on its legs. In front of it, was the largest crow the old woman had ever seen. Easily twice the size of the crows lining the path, it moved slowly on its feet, giving her time to observe. It was solid black, except the white wingtips. There

were tufts of feathers that stood up around its head giving it the look of a crown. As it moved, she could swear she saw a third leg moving out of time with its two real legs.

As the giant crow neared, she put her hands together and made a slight bow. It never hurt to be respectful to visitors. It also gave her the chance to whisper a quick spell so that when she parted her hands, she parted the glamour that surrounded the giant crow. What she saw confirmed her suspicions.

The giant crow stopped at the end of the line of its soldiers. With a slight dip of its head, it began, “We understand that you are the Moon Witch. Are we correct?” She nodded. “We are the Corvid Regis, ruler of the crows and keeper of our magic.”

The witch made a slight curtsy, “Your Majesty.”

Pleased with the show of respect, the Corvid Regis went on, “This is our consort Kwanach.” It twitched its wing in the direction of the bejeweled crow behind it. “We come to you today as we are in need of a talisman that is in your possession.”

“I will help where I can,” said the Moon Witch.

The Corvid Regis examined the witch and her cave, taking its time. All of its entourage were still and silent. The witch waited patiently, as was her duty, even as she wished the Regis would get on with it. She didn’t have much time left.

Finally, the Corvid Regis focused its attention back on the witch. “We are looking for the Medallion of Hiber. From what our sources tell us, it came to you some years back from a sorcerer of the Madagar.”

“I know of the talisman you are referring to,” the witch said pleasantly, with only a slight hesitation betraying her dismay.

“We would like it now,” said the ruler of crows, assuming it would get its way.

The Moon Witch measured her words carefully. At the best of times, crows were not creatures to be trifled with and this crow, the monarch, wanted something that was not hers to give.

“Your majesty,” she began, bowing her head slightly. “Could you tell me the nature of your need for the medallion? I cannot give it outright, only as part of a spell.”

“Nonsense,” said the Corvid Regis, “We will pay you for it, of course. We have many fine things with which to trade.”

The old witch, getting older by the second, breathed deeply. “I cannot trade the medallion as would a merchant. Just as I cannot leave this glade for more than a few moments, I cannot give away the things in my care. That is the nature of the curse that keeps me here.” All the birds stared at her with their black eyes. “If you tell me what it is you need the medallion for, we can come to an arrangement.”

A throaty crwaach came from the Regis's throat, "We will have the medallion. We see it right over there." It nodded to the witch's right. She knew where it was. It was strung along a stick, with other talismans and drying herbs, wedged into the cave walls. "It is the third from the left."

There was a pause while the Corvid Regis and the Moon Witch eyed one another. Then, without the slightest provocation, the whole murder sprang into the air, shrieking. The noise and chaos disoriented the witch for a moment. Only the Corvid Regis and Kwanach did not move.

Out of the whirlwind, four crows flew right at her, but she pulled the corb wort from her pocket and held it out in front of her. The flying crows changed course, flying wide circles around her.

The Regis said, "You were prepared to meet us, we think."

Holding the corb wort out, the Moon Witch hobbled towards her drying rack. Several crows were there trying to take the medallion off the rack. Two were plucking at its ribbon, two were trying to lift the stick by talon and wing, another was maneuvering a smaller stick with its beak trying to dislodge it.

She reached through the crows and grabbed the medallion, yanking it off its ribbon, stuffing it in her pocket. The chaotic crows shrieked once more then began to settle. Still, the Corvid Regis and Kwanach did not move.

The Moon Witch hobbled back to where she had been standing. "Your majesty, my magic is bound by rules just as yours is. Taking it from me will help neither of us. If you tell me the nature of your need then I can help. Otherwise . . ." she left off.

The Corvid Regis stared at her for several long minutes. She stared back, though she was feeling weaker by the second. Even during that short span of time, she noticed her eyesight begin to dim. The giant bird cocked its head to the side as if listening to some unheard song.

"The moon's dark is only a few hours away," the Regis began, "We think that you will be more willing to share after the moon turns course." It made a motion with its white tipped wing and it and Kwanach took flight, leading their entourage through the glade and out into the real world.

The Moon Witch reached out for her chair and sat gingerly. She had so little time left and now she had to worry about retribution from the crows. She looked at the basket of reeds she had left by the chair. Those could wait. The infusion of blue arangy oil could not. The other spells she was working could wait too.

She got up then and attended to the infusion, setting the spells that would continue to work even while she was incapacitated. Afterwards, she did some light cleaning, as she always did at this time. She was thinking hard about what defenses she could set to waylay the crows. Her curse would not allow her to bar the entry into her glade. Even incapacitated, she had to be available to help any that came her way.

She could spell the medallion itself, but if the Corvid Regis came for it, there were likely no spells that would stand up to its magic. She could hide it, but where? She hobbled down the path to the gate, now having to use a cane she kept for just that purpose. As she suspected, the snowy field was still littered with black crows.

As she returned to her cave, moving slower, she realized that it was too late for any complicated spell work. In less than an hour the moon would cease to wane and would turn new. She had to do her last-minute preparations.

Yet, there was possibly a simple solution.

She stoked the fire and laid the spell that would keep it burning for the next several days. She bathed herself. She could barely stand at all now. She wrapped the Medallion of Lemures around her waist then wrapped herself as tightly as she could in a padded quilt, tucking in the crumpled corb wort. She lay down on her pallet. Even as she grew weaker, she adjusted the blanket so that it remained tight around her as she shrank, the medallion underneath her.

Then she lost consciousness.

She awoke with a wail. Her tiny fists pushing at the loose blanket around her. Her pudgy legs and feet flailing. Then she took a few quick gulps of air and settled down. This was always the worst part of it—trapped inside the body of an infant. In a few hours she would be able to sit up and then stand, but it was the better part of a day before she could walk and talk again.

This was when she was the most vulnerable.

The Moon Witch fell asleep again. She was awoken by a squawk very close to her ear. Instinctively she cried out as only an infant can. She looked about her and saw several crows around the edge of her pallet. One loomed uncomfortably close. She punched her tiny fist towards the crow. It hopped back. She scream-cried again and the crows sprang to wing cawing from the surprise of her loud voice.

‘It must be just past the new moon,’ she thought. She had very little control over her limbs. When the crows saw that she posed no threat, they landed again and resumed poking around her pallet. Beyond frustrated, the Moon Witch had to bear it while the crows searched her home. She just hoped they had the good sense to stay away from her brewing infusion, otherwise they would all be in trouble.

She fell asleep again—it was so frustrating that infant bodies needed so much sleep. When she woke, she sat up. Several hours must have passed because she could crawl now. She turned towards the expanse of her cave and began to cry and wail again. There were no crows in sight, but her home was in ruins. It would take her days to clean up the mess and years to replace much of what had been broken, torn, or damaged.

The only reason the crows left her alone, she thought, was the corb wort she’d tucked into her blankets. Or maybe it was because she had badly soiled herself while incapacitated. She frowned. It didn’t always

happen, but was a frequent unfortunate occurrence. She moved the soiled quilt around and made a comfortable nest for herself and went back to sleep.

When she woke next, she was able to walk. Avoiding looking at the devastation the crows had left, she clambered off the pallet and waddled over to the bathwater she had left just hours before as an old woman. She climbed in to bathe again. The spell she had left over it had kept the water mostly warm. Scrubbed as well as her short, uncoordinated arms would allow, she dried and put on her smallest tunic. The sleeves went well past her hands and her feet tripped over the hem, but she was still hours away from being able to do anything that required real coordination.

She climbed into the soft chair she kept near the fire, pulled a lap blanket over her, then went back to sleep. The tingly sensation of someone coming through her gateway woke her. Her magic was growing and she was beginning to feel the spells, charms, and general witchery around her.

She yawned and stretched, her legs just reached the edge of the chair. Three crows circled her cave then came to stop before her. They looked at her, cawed and clucked as if they were pleading with her. She distinctly felt they were acting desperate.

If that was the case, she was pleased to know they hadn't found the medallion. "I cand hep you, you know," she said to them in her baby voice. "Only da Coovadd Reejus."

With angry cries, the crows flew off, each searching again a different part of the cave room. The Moon Witch sighed and pulled up her blanket. She fell asleep to their noise.

The next time she woke, it was silent in the cave. The fire was beginning to die which meant it had been nearly two days. Her feet dangled over the side of the chair now and her hair was long enough to fall over her eyes. She was big enough to get to work.

She hopped off the chair, adjusting her tunic, then stoked the fire. When she turned towards the main part of the room it was hard not to get upset, but she took a deep breath and went to fetch oat cakes, scattered on the floor, and water from the cistern. Stepping gingerly over the littered floor, she made her way to the glade and out to the opening between the high boulders. She peeked out. Fresh snow had fallen recently and it was hardly marred by crow feet. The only crows she could see were three huddled together at the tree line some forty feet away.

She skipped and jumped her way back to the cave and rushed over to her pallet. She thought she ought to begin by cleaning the mess she made herself. Her blanket was just gross. The crows must have really terrified her when she was in infant form. Wrinkling her nose, she pulled the blanket off the bed and walked it to the bath water. She incanted, waving a hand over the water and in no time it was steaming hot again.

Trying not to touch the mess directly, she angled the blanket around until she found the medallion on its ribbon. It had taken the brunt of her filth and was in desperate need of a scrubbing. She shook it into the water. With another few mumbled words the water began to shiver then swirl in several mini eddies. The

medallion tossed and turned about for a few minutes, its ribbon coming free, then popped out of the water shining and clean. She used a broken string to hang the medallion around her neck, carefully folding it underneath her tunic. Then she got to cleaning.

It was slow going, for there were things she couldn't reach yet. She created a path along the floor by picking up or pushing away the detritus—scrolls, linen scraps, crockery—her neatly organized workspace all mixed up.

She gasped when found the mess of herbs, minerals, and powders. A collection of hundreds of them had been hanging in small bags from a screen. Nearly every bag had been broken even though each of them was smaller than the Hiber Medallion. Even the partition that held them was broken. The birds had done it only to be spiteful.

It took several hours to make right some of the lesser damaged areas. When she felt the tingle sensation again she was sitting on her high stool next to her drying rack arranging her magic talismans and the drying herbs. Only a few moments later she was approached by the Corvid Regis and consort. They made a pass of the cave and came to land on the ground some five feet away.

The Moon Witch did not acknowledge their arrival. She continued with her work.

The Corvid Regis cleared its throat. She looked down at the birds. Kwanach looked as stoic as ever, but the Corvid Regis looked sheepish, if one could say that about a crow. “Come to survey your handiwork?” She noticed that her childish lisp was waning.

Kwanach nudged the monarch with its beak. “Our consort has made us understand that we may have acted in haste.” The Regis's beak opened and closed silently. Kwanach nudged the monarch again. “To have your home destroyed, we have made an impulsive mistake. We did not think you so formidable. Yet we see that we were wrong.” It began its ducking gesture again.

“I accept your apology,” the Witch said retying a ribbon to the rack from which dangled a particularly intricate carved stone with a knight battling a dragon.

A soft rumble came from Kwanach, the Corvid Regis looked at the bird annoyed. The Regis continued, “As our consort points out, we should compensate you in some manner.”

“What I would really like is some help cleaning up this mess and restoring the items that were lost,” the witch said coldly. “But I think your beaks and talons would not be so suitable for fixing things.” The two crows looked at the ground.

She continued, “I want two of your wing feathers. The white tipped feathers.”

Both birds clucked in dismay. She knew it was very presumptuous to ask birds for their wing feathers, but they were so useful in spells and incantations. The wing feathers of the holder of all crow magic would be among her prize possessions.

Kwanach nudged the Corvid Regis again. Seething, he spread his wings, “Take what you will.”

A smile spread across the witch’s face. She hopped down from the stool and carefully chose two feathers, one from each wing.

“Thank you.” She took a long piece of string and carefully wrapped the ends of each, binding them together. She climbed back on the stool and hung them with her other talismans.

“I imagine that you are still troubled with the problem you had when you first came to see me. Perhaps I can help you.”

The Corvid Regis fluffed its feathers huffily. “The medallion could help me, nothing more.”

“Why don’t you at least tell me?”

Kwanach made a clacking noise. The crow sovereign clearly looked ashamed.

The witch came down from her stool and knelt at the pile of grass that edged the cave. “Please tell me and I’ll do what I can to help.”

With great trepidation, the Corvid Regis said, “We are more than seventy years old and have been the Corvid Regis for more than fifty.”

“I could see through your magic that you were of great age, but you must be four or five times as old as a normal crow,” she said somewhat amazed.

“We thought that you may have seen our true age. The Corvid Regis is blessed with long life in order to be an effective ruler of the corvus kinds. Kwanach is our third consort and the most attractive and kindly of them all. Kwanach is still young and we are very fond of our flock, so we have held on to the magic longer than we should have.” The Regis briefly glanced at the consort. “Our magic is beginning to loosen from our bones, from our feathers. Some of the young ones begin to challenge our rule. We can’t hold onto it for much longer.”

“Ah, that is why you need the Hiber Medallion,” she said, absently adjusting the string hanging from her neck. “You realize, of course, that the magic it holds would only last a few months, then it too would fade.”

“We know, but we are desperate.”

The witch looked at the monarch with pity. Growing old and dying was a thing she was intimately familiar with, but she always had the chance to begin again. She had never had to die for good. It must be such a fearful thing, especially for those not ready to let go.

“You always knew that I couldn’t help you,” she said gently. “Your time has come and neither of us have the power to stop it.” They stared at one another for several minutes and seemed to come to an understanding. She lifted her hand into the air, palm to the side, and made two quick chopping movements. Then she blew over her fingertips at the Regis. The glamour in which it was hiding its true form melted away.

Gone was the tall, noble bird. Before her stood a decrepit old thing. Its beak had chips in it, it had bald spots and spindly feathers. Kwanach let out a cry, then began to nuzzle the monarch, preening its feathers.

“My dearest one, this is my true form,” the Corvid Regis’s breathing became labored. Kwanach glared at the Moon Witch and bobbed up and down. “No, she has forced me to really look at myself, feel the little strength left in my wings. It’s alright.”

Kwanach took a step back. The witch thought she was going to burst into tears, if crows had tear ducts. Kwanach took in the whole picture of what was left of the Corvid Regis and slightly dipped its beak.

“It will be alright my dearest one. The magic goes to Nimoach who should have taken the mantle of Corvid Regis many years ago.” One of the Regis’s legs bent, unable to hold the weight of the slight bird.

The witch grabbed a spare linen cloth, littered on the floor nearby, and slipped it under the former monarch as it continued to fall. Propped up only by its wings, it said, “Thank you witch, you could help me after all.”

It fell onto its side, its breathing at once more rapid and shallow. Kwanach launched into the air with a mighty caw and then landed next to the former monarch beating her wings, grief torn.

The witch began to pick up the corners of the cloth, but Kwanach wouldn’t let her. “The Corvid Regis is close to death, shouldn’t it be amongst your own kind out in the world? This is no place to die.” Kwanach relented so the witch picked up the wizened bird and carried him to the gateway. Being careful to keep a foot inside the barrier, she gently laid her burden on the snow outside. Kwanach was already in the air calling to its kind.

Watching from inside the gateway, the Moon Witch saw four of the Corvid Regis’s soldiers fly the fallen monarch towards the trees, each holding a corner of the cloth. That was the last she saw of the crows before walking back through her glade, back to her work.