

THE **QUEEN**
OF
CROWS



Sample file



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Sample file

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Sample file



The Queen of Crows

a short story

Written by Monica Valentinelli

Tse knelt beside the small fire at the center of his Azáy-be' hogáhn and hung his head in shame. Tonight, there would be no one to sing with him, eat with him or pray with him. Protected by the darkness of the new moon, his entire tribe would be scattered — but safe. *I hope I am right*, he thought to himself and shuddered. *Otherwise, many will die*. His people, the Diné, had entrusted the safety of their entire tribe to him because they believed the spirits spoke to him. “They were half-right, holy man,” a female voice whispered inside his head.

“Only I am no spirit, am I?”

“No, Mahochepi,” Tse spoke aloud, turning instinctively to the Southern wall of the domed hogáhn where she often spoke to him. “You are not a spirit, but I still do not know what you are.”

“You must be an invisible chíndi, trying to play tricks on my mind.”

The walls of the eight-sided hogáhn were made of wood; each wall had been fitted with different-colored stones that glowed when the sun struck the wall from the outside. To honor Chóostaigi, the Fire God, the southernmost wall had been encrusted with red gemstones. Tonight, there was no sun to make the wall shine, but it shone red anyway when Mahochepi spoke to him. “Your will is strong, Tse of the Diné, almost too strong,” Mahochepi’s voice scolded him as if he were a child. “Have you not seen the crows that greet you in the morning?”

Tse stood up and faced the red wall, searching the gems for the features of her face. He thought he saw the outline of a beak, but he wasn’t sure. “Yes, Mahochepi. I have seen the gághi fly about in the sky, but that is no different from any other day.” Smiling, he thought he had finally figured out what she was. “You must be an invisible chíndi, trying to play tricks on my mind.”

The red pattern on the wall blazed fiercely. “A devil? You should have more sense than that, man-child. Why would a chíndi tell you that the soldiers were coming? Why would I offer to help you?”



In the dream, where Mahochepi had first appeared to Tse, she had told him that the same soldiers who had come for their neighboring tribes were coming again — for them. This time, they were bringing something else with them, something important that could help his people.

Taking out his knife, Tse hummed softly as he sharpened it. “We will see if you are right. If you are, I will finish singing the Corpse-witch’s spell and give to you what you are owed.”

“I look forward to your sacrifice.” The shining red stones faded to a dull gleam, leaving Tse alone with the smoldering fire.

Tse had first seen Mahochepi in a fever-dream, after he had fallen ill last winter. Around the same time, a Corpse-witch came to the village and asked to speak with him. Normally, he would not have allowed her to enter the medicine hogáhn

because her magic was bad for the tribe, but she wrung her hands and pulled at her hair, begging to speak with him. She was afraid of something and would not give him her name. That was a bad sign, because a Corpse-witch was usually not afraid of anything — even Death.

Ordering everyone out, the Corpse-witch began to cry, telling him that she was just doing what Mahochepi told her to do. Then the woman pulled some healing herbs from a pouch on her belt and told Tse that she would heal his illness, but she needed to teach him a new song — a spell that would help him in his hour of need. That worried Tse, but he decided to work with the witch anyway. If something happened to him, the warriors of his tribe would hunt down the witch and kill her. He did not think this woman was that stupid.

After she was done teaching him her song, she told Tse that when the time was right he would need his enemies to complete his spell. He did not know what she had meant by that. The Corpse-witch said she did not know what the spell was for, but he did not believe her. Who would sing a spell and not know what it did?

That morning, he did not dare sing the sacred prayers because he did not want to anger Sky Father. For the first time in many a moon, he did not face the rising sun and chose, instead, to hide in a corner of his hogáhn while his tribe prepared to leave.



Tse could not admit it, but he was ashamed to speak to the others because of what he had said and done to convince them to leave.

Over many moons, Mahochepi had given him many visions about the future, confirming what the Corpse-witch had told him. All of those visions had ended about the same. She often showed him two paths stretching out before him as far as the eye could see. On the left, he saw his tribe marching with many enemies to a barren, rocky place. On the right, he watched his people stay and fight, their village and fields burnt to the ground. Both paths led to starvation and death. It would take a long time either way, but many people would die.

During that time, some of the other elders had heard stories about what the soldiers were doing to neighboring tribes, so they spent many nights huddled around a fire discussing what they should do. Although many warriors in the tribe wanted to fight the soldiers, it was Tse who told them not to. "The rabbit survives not by being the strongest, but by being the quickest," he had warned them. "Earth Mother has heard our prayers, for the first snow has yet to fall and the nights are still warm. She is telling us that we should not fight now, but should wait until the spring."

Some of the younger tribal members had argued politely with him, saying that the White Man was in league with the witches, and their homes would be cursed when they returned in the spring. Shaking his head, Tse remembered that he had told them

"Mahochepi," he whispered aloud, his tired body shivering from the thought of so much death. "Was there no other way?"

that even the Corpse-poison witches were afraid of losing their homes to the White Man. This was a lie, because the witches did not have it in their heart to sacrifice themselves for the people. "You all wanted to know what the witch told me," he addressed their solemn faces. "She told me that I should combine my magic with hers, that together we can keep more of our people safe."

There had been much arguing. Tse had watched the moon grow brighter in the sky and declared that the orange moon was an omen — something had to be done. It was about that time, when they were dancing and singing under the full moon, that two large crows landed on Tse's shoulders. Before he could shoo them away, the others stopped singing and started to shout at him in amazement. Not long afterward, the tribe reluctantly agreed to all of Tse's wishes. Many of the members were afraid of the new magic that Tse seemed to possess, but Tse was even more afraid of what the spell would do if he actually finished singing it. Even at that time, he did not want to sing the spell, even though he felt he had to.