

# PLAQUE

THE

# PLAGUE

*Feather and Bone*



*The Crow Chronicles*

*Clem Martini*

KCP FICTION

*An Imprint of Kids Can Press*

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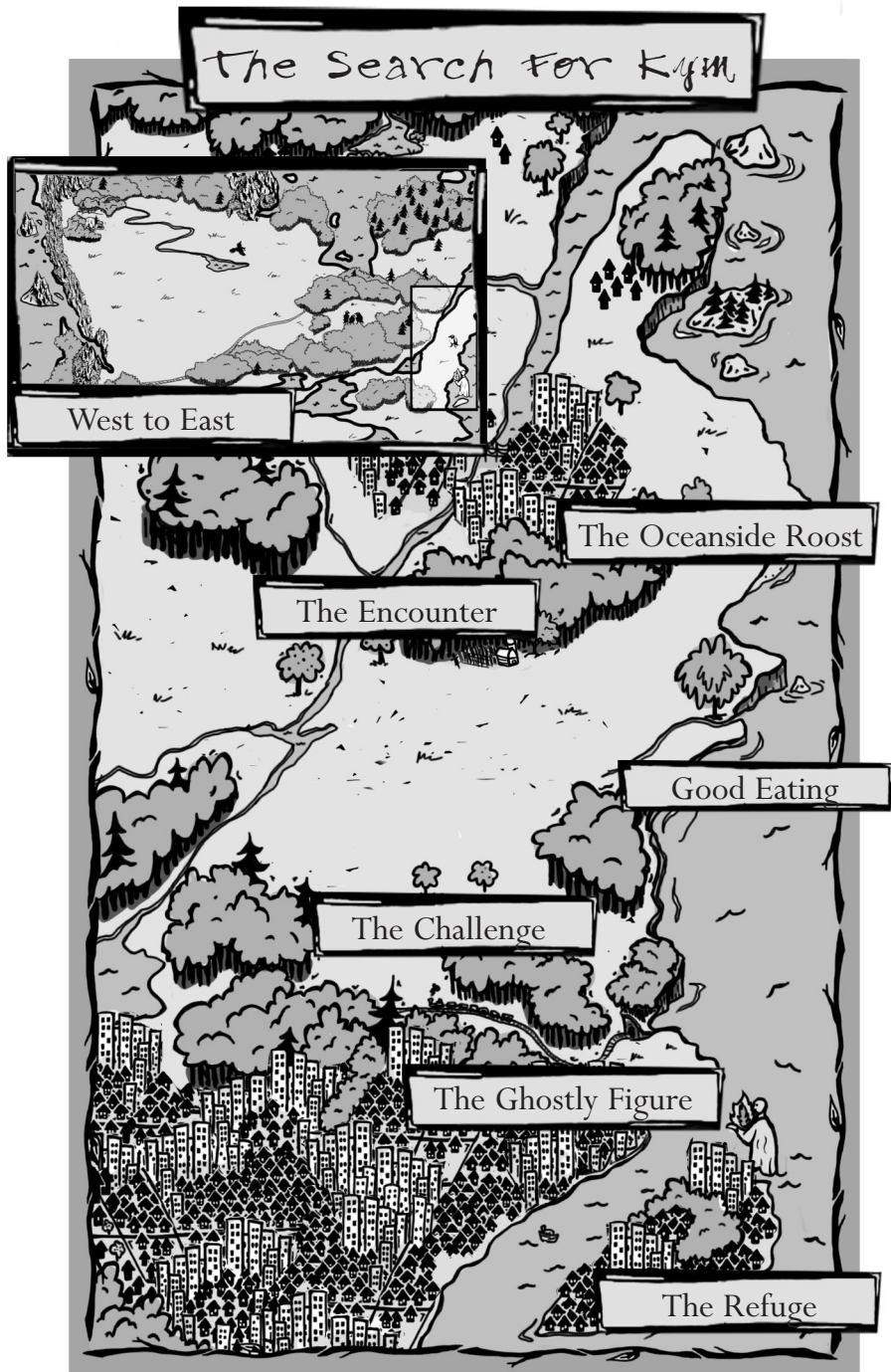
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Crows are the strong survivors they are partially because they are such a fiercely loyal, adaptable and resilient bunch. My own, much treasured family also possesses these traits in abundance. Cheryl, Chandra and Miranda — many, many thanks for your support. All my love to you, and as always, Good Eating!



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Part One



## Chapter 1



Draw in, find your place on the branch and know this: Dreams are sacred.

When we sleep, we see life as the Maker first saw us. We are, after all, what the Maker dreamed in her long night alone. The stories revealed to us when we dream, then, aren't just images shaped by night and mist, but things we must grasp and remember. Once we wake, who knows what action we will be directed to take?

Cousins, listen! Some of the things I will tell you I have lived.

Some of the things I will tell you I have dreamed.

Some of the things I will tell you may have dreamed me.

And that may make them all the truer.

Dream with me now, and see how I have seen things, dreamed things, and come to this place. Watch with me as three Crows approach across a stretch of rolling hills. It is late spring. The sun glitters low in the west, and from a distance they are not immediately distinguishable one from the other, three black crescents flickering in the glare. One flies with the slow, energy-saving strokes of the elderly. A younger one flies with thoughtful and direct strokes immediately beside the elder, her head cocked in his direction, as though listening to something being said. And the third flies with urgency and impatience, rushing above, over and ahead of the other two, then slowing for them to catch up.

These three approach low over tall grasses that ripple and shimmer like waves before wind on the surface of the ocean. The shadow of each bird stretches and races ahead, long and lean. Listen. As they fly, their voices lift and rise across the field and across time as well, because these events have occurred in the past.

“No,” the restless one argued and swept back to join the others as he made his point. “No, it’s not —”

“That’s not what I’m saying, Kyp —”

“Kym, are you saying —” he interrupted her, only to be interrupted in turn.

“How can you possibly tell what I’m *saying* when you aren’t even *listening* to me?”

“I *am* listening. I am listening and, are you saying — are you saying, because it sounds like this is what you are saying — are you saying that *no* ceremony can be changed —”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Kym snorted. “Of course that’s not what I’m *saying*.” The way she said “idiot” was fond. These were friends disagreeing.

“Well, have you been listening to me?”

“Have either of you,” the older one interrupted patiently, “been listening to the other?”

“Because,” Kyp continued, “because if we can’t *change* anything, then we can’t *fix* anything either, and *something* has to change. Three good Crows were Banished just this winter. And for *what*?”

“I know, and I’m not saying that things can’t change.”

“Good. Because they’ve got to, Kym. They’ve *got* to change.”

“And they will, Kyp. And we’ll make those changes. But not all at once. We can’t just push these older ones out —”

“Calm yourselves,” Kalum interrupted again. “Some things will change and some won’t, and you will be surprised to discover how much and how little you have to do with either. You will both have to deal with more pressing situations than this —”

and lead in a calmer and more reasonable fashion than either of you have demonstrated here.”

“I’m sorry, Kalum,” Kym apologized immediately.

“And I’m sorry,” Kyp echoed. “It’s just that there are so many things to be done.”

“Well. Let’s move on to something else,” said Kalum. “Tomorrow there is a Naming. Which of you can be expected to lead the Family in the Recollection of Names?”

“I could do that,” Kym offered, after exchanging glances with Kyp, “if you’d like, Uncle.”

“Very well,” Kalum said and nodded. “And what is the first thing that must be done after the Family is assembled for the ceremony?”

“I will lead the Family in prayer.”

“And then?”

“And then we will recite the Long Flight, Chooser to Chooser from the First Nest on.”

“Very good,” Kalum murmured. “And you can recite it, of course, Kyp?” A silence followed. “That would be *you* I was asking, Kyp.”

“I *think* so,” Kyp answered hesitantly.

“Think?” Kalum repeated.

“I just have some trouble with the middle portion —”

“*Middle* portion?” Kalum sighed. “There is no *middle* portion. That’s your trouble. You think of it as a list,

but for it to live in you it has to become *more* than a list. More than a series of events.”

Kyp returned a glance that said he understood nothing of what had been said.

“But it *is* a list,” he maintained. “A long list.”

Kalum squinted at Kyp and then began patiently. “Your name is you? That’s correct? That is, it describes you. Yes?”

Kyp nodded.

“So, tell me, which of your names is you? Are you *Kyp*, or are you *Kurea*, or are you *Kinaar*?”

“All of those things.”

“*Exactly*. All of those things. All of those things is not a list. It is *you*. You. You are not *Kyp* or *Kurea* or *Kinaar* — you are *Kyp* of the *Kurea* Clan of the Family *Kinaar*. One Crow. What you deliver to the Family isn’t a list, it is a Chant of Remembrance, and *everything* in it is connected from beginning to end. Do you see?”

“I think so,” Kyp said hesitantly.

“Well, I’m not sure that you do. But perhaps by repeating it one more time you will begin to understand it more fully. Let’s go over it as we fly.”

Kyp stifled a sigh and began. “From the nest of Great Crow came the First Brood —”

Kalum nodded his approval, glanced up and over a shoulder, then abruptly turned and broke left.

“Fly!” he shouted.

The Crows scattered over the prairie grass. From above, a thunderbolt of feathers and talons struck, snapping a clump of grass and dirt through the air. Out of the cloud of debris and dust, a scream of frustration sounded, and an adult golden eagle emerged, wheeled, recovered and without hesitation selected the oldest and slowest of the Crows.

chapter 2



There is almost nothing to an eagle that isn't talon, wing, muscle or beak, so there's no point trying to outfly them — they're that much stronger, larger and better equipped than we are. A single outstretched wing of a mature eagle can eclipse an entire Crow. But if an eagle can't be outflown, it can be evaded.

The three Crows plunged down a gully and dropped into a tangle of scrub poplar and willow, cutting and swerving between stalk and stem. The older Crow pulled ahead and slid between an upraised fork. The eagle grasped air, effortlessly flipped sideways and slipped through, closing the gap. As it did so, Kym folded her wings and dropped

from above, knocking the eagle on its right shoulder. The eagle narrowly avoided a tree limb, screamed and launched itself at its attacker. Kym dodged a slash of its hooked beak and cut through a twisted knot of vine and debris dangling from a poplar. When she appeared on the other side, the eagle had already arrived.

Kyp swooped under a branch and emerged beneath the eagle, tugging at its left flank and throwing it off balance. It recovered and quickly struck at Kyp with a talon. Kyp looped overtop the slash, rolled over the wing and rapped the side of the eagle's head. A willow suddenly loomed, separating Kyp from the struggle. Kym slid in and plucked a beak full of feathers from the eagle's left shoulder. The eagle spun much more quickly than Kym had expected, and all at once she found herself wedged between the trunk of a poplar and the eagle's outstretched wings, with no room to escape. Kyp crashed through the branches above onto the eagle's broad back and settled on the right wing, plunging his talons into its upper shoulder. The eagle screamed, jerked its head around and caught Kyp, throwing him sprawling against the tree trunk. Then, free of all three Crows for the moment, the eagle banked right through an opening between willows and, with a final glance backward, disappeared.

Kyp, Kym and Kalum spun and wove through the trees until they were certain they were no longer being chased, then dropped to a perch, panting and gulping air.

"Well, that," Kalum said between gasps, "was careless of us. Anyone hurt?"

Kym spied scattered red drops gathering on a branch. "Kyp, you're bleeding."

"It caught me with the tip of its beak on the edge of my left wing."

"Let's see," Kalum said and moved closer to inspect the cut. After a moment, he relaxed. "It's not deep. It should stop shortly." He glanced up at Kyp. "But, Kyp, that wasn't necessary. That eagle wasn't even gracing us with its full concentration. We could have led it in and around the trees in a game of tag until it was so dizzy and tired it would have been happy to return to its roost for a little nap."

"But —"

"Listen to me," Kalum continued patiently. "No one will ever question your bravery — we all know you're brave. You proved yourself many times over when you battled the cats in the tunnel last year. But you have to learn to avoid a fight at all costs. You are only as strong as a single feather. One snapped plume in your forewing, or a couple

of feathers plucked from your tail, and you are no longer able to fly — and if you can't fly, you can't fight, lead or escape. Fight only when you absolutely must, and above all do not let your opponent choose the battle. Never fight an eagle like an eagle. Unless you fly — and fight — like a Crow, you will always, always be at a disadvantage."

Kyp nodded. "I understand."

"I'm not sure you do. But perhaps in time you will." Then the old bird spread his wings and flinched. "Look at that," he clucked, shaking his head. "A sure sign of my sad decline. I didn't engage in any of the wrangling, yet I've managed to pull a muscle in my left wing." He glanced about at the grove of alders they had come to rest among. The trees formed a tiny, tangled solitude. "I'll roost here tonight."

Kym shot him a glance. "Alone?"

"No, niece. I spied your disapproval. Kyp, you'll stay with me and help an old fellow out. We two poor invalids will keep each other company. Kym, fly back to the Gathering Tree and let the Family know I'll return tomorrow by first sixth, in time for the Naming."

Kym leaned in next to the older Crow and then flew off. Kyp followed Kym a little way. They stopped at the edge of the open prairie to perform one last survey.

"Thanks," Kym said in low voice. "I know you threw yourself at the eagle because you thought I was in trouble."

Kyp shook his head. "He was right. I was careless."

"Listen to me. I'm telling you something. *You* were right, too. You were right for reasons Kalum couldn't see. And I'm trying to thank you for it. Now, are you okay? Is that cut bad?"

"No. It's just a little sore. It's already stopped bleeding."

"Well, keep your eyes open. You smell of blood, and who knows what that might draw out here tonight. Roost higher in the tree. You'll catch more wind, but —"

"We will."

"And keep a watch above. Uncle was right — that eagle was just testing us. It might try something more serious later if it thinks you're not alert."

"Don't worry," Kyp assured her. "And we'll join you by second sixth at the latest."

"All right. I'm going." She raised her wings and grimaced. "Eww. I feel exhausted after that chase."

Briefly they rested their heads against each other. Kym murmured "Good eating," then dropped from the branch and slipped through the brush and out over the field. Kyp watched a moment, then returned to the poplar grove.

Kalum remained resting on the branch where Kyp had left him, fastidiously rearranging the feathers of his left wing and watching Kym as she doubled back to ensure she wasn't being followed.

He cocked an eye at Kyp. "Smart girl. She will make a very good Chooser." He tugged a feather up and gently folded it back into place. "As will you."

They sat and listened to the sounds rise from the valley. Ducks and geese squawked among the reeds. Below the grove of trees, the river chuckled quietly. Above it, the wind sighed and muttered, whispering softly of its long, restless journey.

"Uncle?" Kyp said at last.

"Yes, Nephew?"

"I would rather the Choice passed to someone else."

Kalum nodded. "You've made that abundantly clear. Now, may I suggest that you get over it?"

"You don't understand," Kyp said, shaking his head. "Kym has exactly the right temperament to be Chooser. She's smart. She thinks before she speaks, she knows how to listen. I'm not good at *any* of those things. I anger too quickly. I hold grudges. I speak without thinking. Last year I managed to organize our Family in the tunnel to fight the cats because ... Because someone *had* to. And I was the only one who knew where the tunnels were. So it came down to me to lead the

Family there to find shelter during the storm. And it was fine fighting the Red, because it was at least partially my responsibility that we were there at all. Besides, fighting isn't a problem for me. But the decisions that go with leading a flock — the planning, the consulting, the knowing what to do. I don't have any of that. I don't know if I ever will. I'm just — not ready."

"You are," Kalum insisted.

"I don't even know the stories," Kyp protested.

"You know them."

Kyp shook his head again. "Not the way *you* do."

"And I'm not leaving, Nephew. And you'll keep learning them. And Kym knows the ones you don't. That is why you've both been selected to Choose. You'll be a different kind of Chooser. Don't you see, you and Kym are held in very high regard because of the roles you played in saving the Family last year from the storm and the cats. The Kinaar will at least accept the *possibility* of change if it comes from *you*. And you're absolutely right — we need to change.

"I couldn't lead the Family that way," Kalum continued. "I'm too much of a curmudgeon and set in my habits. But you and Kym, you just might be able to." Kalum rubbed his neck against a branch, stretched and settled in the crook between branch and trunk. "You're young, and you think that

Choosers have always been like me. They haven't. Different individuals are chosen for different times. Believe me, my time has passed."

Kyp selected a broad branch to the right of Kalum and folded his legs beneath him. "With all due respect, the Family will find that both Kym and I fall short of your abilities."

"Don't make me out to be more than I am," the older bird warned. "I was a very imperfect Chooser."

"You won't find anyone in the Family who says that."

Kalum shook a mosquito off his forehead. "Oh, maybe not today. But it *has* been said, believe me — and worse. And the Crows who said it haven't always been wrong." He chuckled ruefully. "To be a Chooser you have to love the Family — but you have to love carefully. Me, I've always loved the talk of Crows a little too much. The sound of Crows in a tree late at night, the sound of one Crow calling to another as we fly through the twilight during migration. And the sound of my own voice — my biggest weakness. I've always loved talk a little too much. When everyone else has shut up, I still have a beakful of things to say. The Family could use Choosers who don't enjoy words as much as I do. Frankly, I feel quite certain that the Family will be relieved to have Choosers who talk less than I do."

"You're wrong," Kyp objected. "They'll miss you and want you back the moment you fold your wings."

"Nonsense! In the two of you, the Family will be provided with choice as it never has before. If nothing else, you two will confuse everyone so badly they won't know how to deal with you. Now, shh," Kalum said, and grimaced. "I need rest."

Kyp glanced at the older bird with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It's just been a long Gathering. A long Gathering, a long day and a long life. It's chilly and my bones ache."

They sat silently in the tree. The mist gathered and settled on the river. The fading sun's delicate rays pierced the narrow gaps in the trees and lit the haze like a fine golden spider's web settling over the valley.

"Look at us perched here — and all of *that* sits out there," Kalum said, nodding at the valley below. "We talk and talk about ourselves, but that's just vanity. We are only ever perched on the edge of something much larger than ourselves."

At last the sun eased behind the mountains and, after a brief display of glory, slipped away into a thick, rich darkness. The silence grew, and the two Crows fell asleep.