

Crow and Crown

by chivalric

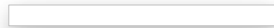
Four years after Ari and Dagur's forced marriage, not many know the man at the future king's side. Dagur, the king's nephew, is convinced secrecy is necessary for Ari's safety. Ari, on the other hand, doesn't mind that not many know of his existence, let alone what he looks like. But one day, everything changes. The king dies and Dagur is called to court—alone. When he's attacked on the way, it's up to Ari to find out who the enemy is. And if that's not enough, he also has to figure out who wants the king dead, deal with a wayward healer, and find a missing fiancé.

Sequel to Crow and Firefly

Chapter 1 of 1

Four years after Ari and Dagur's forced marriage, not many know the man at the future king's side. Dagur, the king's nephew, is convinced secrecy is necessary for Ari's safety. Ari, on the other hand, doesn't mind that not many know of his existence, let alone what he looks like. But one day, everything changes. The king dies and Dagur is called to court—alone. When he's attacked on the way, it's up to Ari to find out who the enemy is. And if that's not enough, he also has to figure out who wants the king dead, deal with a wayward healer, and find a missing fiancé.

A/N: As I always post my (longer) original stories here (well, partly), I thought I'd do the same with this one. Everyone who leaves a review has a chance of winning a complete copy of the novella. Enjoy!



Summer Breeze

IT WAS a mild day in early summer, and the breeze blew gently at the crow's wings, ruffling the long, strong feathers, aiding its flight. The sun shone, barely obscured by clouds, and in the blue sky, the crow was not the only bird around.

It was the only bird, though, who didn't seem interested in its surroundings. This crow flew straight as an arrow toward the distant horizon. It paid no attention to a hawk circling high above it, or to the corpse of a fox near a shallow brook whispering through green meadows.

This crow had a place to go, and it lost no time getting there.

It had left the castle to the south hours ago, shortly after sunset the previous night. It had flown through the darkness, something a common crow would never do. Navigating by the stars, it hadn't lost its way, and it certainly hadn't stopped for a nap. The small sounds of the night hadn't scared it. This bird knew all about the night, not only because it was often out at night but also because it was often out in a form other than that of a bird.

This crow was a shape-shifter. Its name was Ari, and when in human form, it was a man of twenty-seven years, living in the castle he'd left behind. He had a sister, Lilja, and a nephew, whom he'd adopted four years ago.

He also had a husband. Who was also a shape-shifter. And who had decided that leaving the castle without leaving a note, without so much as telling anyone, was a good idea.

Crows didn't think much, not even when they had a human core. Crows cared about flying, and the wind under their wings. It was not easy to concentrate on anything but that—and maybe food—in an animal's body. Ari knew that, and rarely stayed animal for longer than twelve hours. It became harder with every passing beat of his tiny heart to remember why he was here, in this nowhere land, why he was flying as fast as he could, following someone whose name tended to slip through the net of his mind.

Dagur.

Ah, yes. Dagur. Lord Dagur, nephew to the king. His husband.

Find him. Follow him.

Right.

He had been a crow now for over fifteen hours. Longer than he liked to admit. Longer than he should.

What the hell. It was important to follow...

What was his name again?

Dagur, the human core deep inside him whispered.

Damn. Right. Dagur.

A mouse, many feet below him, poked its nose out of a hole in the ground. The crow saw it and got distracted. Suddenly, it noticed the hawk as well and shuddered. A murder of crows could bring down a hawk, but he was alone, and the hawk was a threat. He—

A horse. In the distance, he could spot a horse.

Crows didn't sigh, but Ari's heart did a jump at the sight of it. He'd been looking for Dagur for hours, and the horse meant he'd found him. A few more minutes and he could change back into his human form.

One horse. If Ari could have frowned, he would have. One was not enough. Where were the guards?

Hot anger surged through him. Sometimes, his beloved was so unreasonably stubborn he could strangle him. If Dagur decided something should be done in a certain way, he did it regardless of any objections Ari might have.

Like—marry me, Ari thought and wished he could grin.

The summer breeze brought the smell of the horse, and now Ari could see Dagur's blond hair whipping behind him as he sped over the plains. It was white blond, with beads woven in the long strands, and now Ari heard the sound of the horse's hoofs on the hard ground.

He surged down, not caring anymore about mice and hawks and the fatigue in his wings. He'd found Dagur, and quicker than he'd expected. The king's court was still a few hours away.

Good.

A last beat, and Ari landed on Dagur's saddle horn. Luckily, the horse was well trained, or it might have shied. It did not.

Accusingly, Ari looked up into Dagur's face. It would be unwise to change right now—he preferred solid ground under his feet when doing so—which meant he had to stay in crow form until Dagur halted his horse.

Only Dagur didn't. He slowed down from gallop to a gentle trot, but he didn't stop. His face was pale, his two-colored eyes red from unshed tears.

Ari croaked. Because Dagur wouldn't give him another choice, he fluttered to the ground ahead and changed, stepped forward and took the horse's reins, forcing it to an abrupt halt. Stark naked as he was, he put his hand on Dagur's leg. "What happened?" he said, out of breath from the change as well as from exhaustion.

Dagur looked down at him. "You should have stayed at the castle," he said flatly.

"What *happened*?"

Dagur closed his eyes. He swallowed hard. "My uncle died," he finally said. "The king is dead."

A/N: This is just a little snippet from my new novella, *Crow and Crown*. You can find the complete story here:

http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/store/product_info.php?products_id=4640