

chapter 10. Wolf

Crow twirled the locket in her fingers beneath her new cloak, Finch's words still hanging heavy on her mind. Her other arm, idly, rubbed up against the soft, fluffy inside of it, relishing in its warmth and texture. During these frigid months, its embrace was as essential as it was welcome.

Their splitting had been as abrupt as their union. Honestly, Crow felt she deserved a bit *more* of an explanation than she was given, though,

she was still going to help, of course. Who was she to deny a request like that?

Of course a life debt would be repaid with a life. *Duh!* It was as simple as sympathy— a truth that connected the world and laid as a foundation for it. A life was worth another life. Nothing more, and nothing less. And, well, she was no stranger to killing, unlike Finch. She would happily take such a thing off her plate.

It was only what she had said after that had troubled the little Crow.

"Okay. I'll do it. Why?"

"Because so long as he breathes, I can never be free."

And then, as if simply saying "Father" had summoned him, Finch began to shift, suddenly
anxious.

"I really must be going." Finch had said, kneeling down to embrace Crow one last time.

"So suddenly? And when will we be killing your father?" Crow said simply, returning the hug lightly, while speaking over Finch's shoulder.

"Meet me at the East Escrow Cemetery, in one Moon, just as the Moon crests the horizon."

Crow thought for a moment, eyes shut, trying to imagine the place. "The Statues?"

"Yes," Finch chirped, shaking her head, "The Statues, on the tall hill pockmarked with graves. I'm sorry about the urgency. It's just, if I don't return home soon..." Finch looked away, an unknowable expression etched into the backside of her metal faceplate. "It is not possible for me to hide the truth from him."

And just like that, she had left her life as quickly as she had joined it.

Alas.

Alone again.

It was no fault of her own,

even though it still felt like it.

Maybe she had weirded her out. Or... something. There was no straw to grasp, and yet her ruminations turned like the brutal machinations of Escrow, churning her mind into messy pulp that sprouted new anxieties like weeds.

Her chest hurt.

Bad.

And when she thought of Finch, and her passing, the vise-like grip on her heart clamped down harder, crushing it like her pulp-brain, sending the blood shooting out throughout her, making tight her veins and arteries, which pressed up into her skin and pulled it taut.

She felt the whole of her insides thrumming and beating to the rhythm of her worry, and so she shook, and trembled, and swished her hands, her claws, and twitched her feathers, and nose, and rolled her lip, and tapped her fingers to each other, counting nothing— not even her breaths—

thump!

Crow stumbled back and looked up, briefly, to the face of the passerby she'd hit. Likely not a threat. And so, she bobbed her head down, then up— an apology, obviously— and tried to push on past—

"Hold it, there, *Crow*." The gruff voice reached her ears just as a tight grip grabbed hold of her cloak, pulling her to a tight stop.

Surely they knew better?

tick!

And in a moment, she was gone again.

"Ah, she really can, huh? Thhh," The voice behind her hissed in disappointment, and clinking coins swapped hands as two paws dropped down on Crow's shoulder, gripping tight.

"Where do you think you're goin', little lady?"

No. It was worse. They knew better, but were told not to. Crow sniffed the air as she counted her breaths, flesh eye snapping into singular focus as her hand gripped tight around the **stopwatch.**

They reeked of cologne and smoked meats. Cane's men.

two...

[inhale]

Crow whipped her head around and snapped her beak down, hard, on the man's paw where it wrapped around her shoulder. The razor-sharp edge of her beak slipped through the flesh and between the joints of his digits, severing them cleanly off.

[exhale]

Screaming, he pulled hard on her other shoulder with his remaining hand, twisting her around,

three,

[inhale]

Crow plucked out her **bashing stone** from underneath her cloak as she spun and used the momentum to fling it into the first face she saw while ducking down low and bending at the waist. As she did, a heavy metal pipe whirled through the air above her raised arm, and a sharp spray of blood hissed out as her flung stone smashed into a snout and shattered it.

Her stone and their body cracked against the street at the same time,

and the man that had spun her around punched her in the face with his bleeding paw, sending her sprawling across the ground, hand scrabbling around, searching for her bashing stone.

[exhale]

She found it in a trice and her fingers wrapped around it like a greedy spider,

Four!

[inhale]

tick!

and she reappeared, instantly, in front of the gravel-voiced one that she had bumped into. She hopped back to get distance, but by the time her feet left the ground—

their hand had already shot out and gripped around her throat, closing tight with a metal grip while lifting her up off the ground, leaving her feet kicking in the air—

tick!

and she reappeared, instantly, in the path of a mid-swing metal-pipe

crack!

that crushed some part of her side, sending her doubling over and crumpling down onto the ground,

tick!

and she reappeared, instantly, only to be kicked in the stomach,

tick!

and she reappeared, instantly, only to be grabbed by the ankle and swung into the air, clothes draping down and billowing out around her head, trapping her in a cocoon of cloth,

tick!

Crow dove out of the way as soon as she reappeared and skittered into the nearby alleyway, facing her assailants, shaky hands held up in front of her, both clasped around her **bashing stone**.

And still, they approached like hungry dogs, three of them— one short, one tall, and one with a massive metal pipe— crowding into the alley, slowly approaching her as she backed away one step at a time, trembling claws clattering against the smooth side of her bashing stone.

One of them, with the freshly-missing digits, took the lead and leaped forward. He opened his maw wide to shout, but as he did, an amorphous grey metallic sludge that had been seeping out of the tiny pin-prick cracks in the porous walls on either side of the alley shot out all at once and streamed into his open maw. From their, the sludge pooled and spun around and forced itself down his throat.

Recognition flashing in her eyes, Crow dove behind a pile of refuse and reached up to cover her ears as the man choked and gagged on the sludge. He stumbled, and spasmed, and retched, and his throat made a stifled, horrible gargling sound as his flesh began to bloat and swell.

His companions, confused, rushed forward. One gripped him around the waist, attempting to dislodge the sludge, while the other reached inside his maw, trying to rip it out.

Crow flinched at the commotion, tucking herself into a tiny ball behind the garbage. She knew what came next, but could not ever bring herself to acknowledge it.

And then, with one final, terrible shriek as his throat finally drained,

[inhale]

the man popped like a balloon.

Splat!

His bones burst out in a cloud of shrapnel that pierced through everything in the alley, making pincushions out of the two others that had tried to save him. The pile of wood and metal waste that Crow had ducked behind shuddered, splintered, and creaked as the storm of bone shards smashed against her cover like a full hailstorm let out all at once.

thud,

thud.

One of them choked on his own blood for six breaths, his throat a pincushion of his friend's bone shards, his body covered in random scraps of his friend's organs and viscera. There was a single sharp cleaving sound, and then,

all was silent again in the quaint little alley.

[exhale]

Crow did not stir, unwilling to look up, to confront the reality that she had heard, to see the sights she knew would lay before her once she came back to the waking world. With her eyes closed, her ears held shut, she could ignore all of that, instead dwelling only in her mind, which, for once, was blank.

The only thing in her mind was an endless black expanse in which she found herself drifting,

drifting,

drifting,

far,

far away,

where none of this could reach her,

where none of this was real.

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"Little Crow. Little Crow." Serpent cooed, tucking Crow's hair away behind her ears. There was no response. It sighed, knowing the two of them were almost out of their borrowed time.

More of Cane's men would be here soon.

Serpent placed the tip of its scaled tail to Crow's forehead and focused deep on the familiar scent and feeling of her nest in the morning sun. Then, it **called** upon their **sympathy**, and at once their minds were **bound**.

like a fish hauled from water, crow's eyes flashed open, shut, and open again, and her body trembled as her vision melted away to reveal her lovely and familiar **HOME**.

Serpent held her close, now.

"Is this alright, little Crow?"

"always, Serpie."

"You should know that we aren't ac—"

"You aren't lying to me, Serpie. I know where I am... and what happens next."

"Right."

"Can we, um—?" She trailed off, gesturing vaguely with a paw.

"Of course, little Crow."

Serpent picked her up with little issue and laid down beneath her in the pile of bloody trash. Its body morphed easily to the surfaces of it, filling in gaps and providing support for itself where there was none to be had, making a perfectly level and natural and clean place for the little Crow to lie down for a while.

crow settled naturally into Serpie's lap and pulled its comforting arms around her like a blanket. she stared straight towards the end of the alley, but saw only the familiar wicker wall of her nest.

It was a strange and beautiful thing, the binding of minds. All at once they had become one, each a copy of the other, neither one holding on to their former self. In perfect still silence, they exchanged all of themselves, each uncovering the truth of the other simply by stretching their minds.

Everything crow wished to tell Serpie, everything she wished to share, passed over without conscious effort. Nothing was lost, and nothing was misunderstood. it couldn't be.

She finally had her first friend, it learned.
Pride. Admiration. Glee. Congratulations!

It had been following her for a while, she learned.
Shame. Embarrassment. Paranoia. Why?

Safety. Protection.

What would have happened? They thought together.

Hesitant acceptance.

Mutual understanding.

But the binding wasn't perfect. There were holes in Serpie's **self**.

It had none, of course. It was an it, nothing more, nevermore.

And so Crow's **self, bound**, tried to reach out and hold it, embrace it, be one with it, and through union become greater.

But Serpent was **a fabrication, hollow**, a mind with no depth nor surface, only a reflection of a being, never whole. A perfectly precise approximation.

And so Crow's self slipped and slid around in the spiritual dark, held together by the **binding**, by the ghosts of feelings Serpent could only appear to possess, but the appearance was so real, the approximation so precise, perhaps if she just reached in a little *deeper*, if she gave just a little bit *more*, then maybe Serpent would—

And all at once, for the first time, the **binding** fell apart, and Crow fell forwards, off of Serpent, mind stuck elsewhere— in the past, one day prior, feeling not the warmth of the present embrace but the chill of metal that held within it more life than she had ever known.

She hated, hated, hated more than anything, this feeling of recognition, of **understanding**, of the true nature of **SERPENT**.

"**LITTLE CROW? LITTLE CROW?**" A voice cooed behind her, so perfectly smooth and soothing that it almost tricked her back into the comfort she so desperately craved.

But having remembered it, she could feel it no longer— the connection, the belonging, the understanding, the *peace* that she had come to *expect* from **SERPENT**.

And that is why she hated it.

Ignorance *was* blissful, in actuality. If the appearance could sustain her, then why did substance even matter?

Her mind was always playing such tricks on her. Why could she not simply be content with what she had? Was it wrong to long for more? Did she feel she even needed to? There were so few things she needed to feel comfort, to feel safe, and she had so few of them that it drove her mad whenever she stopped to grasp for them.

And even having them, in Serpent, her own knowledge of Serpent stopped her from enjoying it. The bliss was vitiated, wholly spoiled, and there was nothing she could do but bury the feelings until she was able to forget again—

Idly, she rubbed the crest that Weasel had embroidered into the inside of her cloak.

—or stumbled into something real.

"Can I treat your injuries, little Crow?"

"Just make it quick, *SERPIE*."

And so

IT SLOUGHED OFF A PIECE OF ITSELF

AND SACRIFICED IT TO HER FLESH

—which readily and easily absorbed its energy as it had a thousand times before.

It was not the first of such circumstances, after all.

"ARE YOU FEELING ALRIGHT, NOW?"

"Yeah." Crow whispered, staring into the shadows of the alley, past the present, looking to something she could not really see at all with just her flesh eye. "Yeah. I'm feeling alright." She said with more conviction, pushing herself off of **SERPENT** brusquely, staggering onto her feet, where she then found her footing and stood tall. Pointing her beak over her shoulder, she then spoke, "And stop following me. I have it covered from here."

SERPENT said nothing in response, instead,

IT SIMPLY SLITHERED AWAY INTO THE TRASH,

DISAPPEARING ONE BLOB AT A TIME

INTO

CRA

ACKS

PIN

AND

TINY

PRICK

HOLES

UNTIL NONE OF ITSELF REMAINED.

And, finally, she was alone again.

It was about time.

..

The rest of her travels passed without incident, but now she stood, trembling and alone, scared all anew. Well, there was only one thing left to do, and the only way to do was by doing. And so, Crow stepped down the stairs carefully, one tiny quiet footfall at a time, going far, far beneath the street, where below, she expected to find an old heartwood door set in a rustic brownstone frame.

She had never been here personally, instead relying on directions older than her that somehow stuck in her mind like glue. There were many thoughts that stuck and lingered like this, but she tried not to dwell on it. Perhaps, of course, it was just another gift from her dreamself that she had forgotten.

Now, though. Now, she was at the bottom of the stairs, facing the door, hand raised in trepidating hesitating trembleations. She had no invite. Her only link to these kin was tenuous, at best, and it was a negative link, at that.

And, of course, wolf **bases** were so focused on their relationships and links.

Then, too, she was a prey **base**. She'd probably be fine, it's just... she wasn't in the mood to get snapped at any more today. She'd been thrashed quite enough.

Still, though, this was something she had to do.

Knock knock knock!

There was no response, even after six breaths.

Did— were they the knocking type? Given the nature of the visit, she probably didn't *need* to worry about that sort of thing, though, perhaps it was *because* of the nature of the visit she ought worry, though still, *perhaps* the directions were wrong after all this time, and if *that* was true—

Suddenly, the door was opened, and a tall, fur-covered woman with **very** few clothes on was towering over her, and—

"Can I help you?"

"um, no, but I— uh— I can—"

"Why are you here?"

"I carry important things that belong to Wolf's kin..." Crow whispered, voice warbling and trailing off as she spoke, head turning to the side, away, then down, then after a full breath, "...are you wolf's kin..?"

The woman in the doorway stared at her, stone-faced. There was no response, not for many breaths, until at some point she began to stir again. It was as if more than just her face had

been petrified, as if all of her had become a living statue, only roused by something indiscernible to the little Crow.

"Yes. He's..." she cleared her throat, the sound of it caught between a snarl and a growl, "*was*. My father."

"I have his things. I was there when he was killed. May I come inside?" Crow spoke quickly, rocking back on her pawpads, leaning away from the door, arching her whole body like a bow, drawing herself in, closer, all muscles tensed and ready for flight.

"I—" The woman massaged her snout with her paws, stunned, then stared Crow down. "Yes." She paused, then as if having convinced herself, continued, "Yes. You're coming inside and telling us all about this."

The woman reached out as if to grab Crow, but Crow just slipped past her like water and entered the soft and quiet den beneath the soil. Behind and above her, approaching, the woman spoke again,

"I am Red. What is your name?"

In response, Crow dropped the hood and her facemask, revealing her features. Immediately, she heard the footsteps behind her stop.

"Today is all surprises, isn't it?" Red muttered, stepping around Crow to walk down a long, packed-dirt hall.

As she passed, Crow could smell Red's fear slipping off of her. It was a strange and minty pheromone that stung her nose and made her flinch.

Was her presence really so unwanted? She did not desire to herald doom, destruction, or misfortune. And yet...

Crow followed along behind Red without invitation into the hall. As she walked through it, she traced her fingertips along the thin wooden sheets that were tacked into the dirt. They gave the den the tiniest semblance of a modern dwelling, and they were smooth and soft to the touch. It was both common and not to live in dirt, and recently, many had found it more tiresome and troublesome than adapting their hovels and dens to be more like the houses of the surface.

At least, that's what Crow had started to notice in her travels. Perhaps it wasn't true at all. She didn't really talk to anyone much. It was usually far too much trouble, and they usually held so many troublesome thoughts about her and her kin.

Suddenly, the narrow hall broke out into a wide and warm circular den lined with furs of all sizes from all manner of bases. There was a table— a thick oaken slab set atop four wooden crates that had been cleaved in half, the whole of it set into a slight recess in the floor. It was the perfect size for Crow— she'd be able to sit comfortably, legs folded neatly beneath it, arms clearing the top of it easily and comfortably. Though— how did the denizens use it? Red was more than double her size, and uncomfortably close to triple it.

"We'll recline here," Red said, gesturing with one arm to the table. She then walked over to the narrow end of it and laid down on one arm, her body now level with the surface of it. Her other arm draped along the curves of her body, wrist turned to the side, allowing her paw to dangle down in front of her exposed tummy.

Oh! Crow thought, sitting at the opposite head of the table, sticking her legs out fully under the table. Slowly, she reached into the many pouches within her clothes, bringing out each and every one of the belongings she had saved from Wolf's corpse at Cane's estate.

Red stared at each one as Crow placed them with the gaze of a hunter, nose twitching as the scent of her late father reached her snout. She forced herself to remain reasonable, to remain still, and gripped the furs under her with sharp claws, scoring the leather beneath the fur.

"WE HAVE COMPANY," Red barked. There were no new noises, even after five breaths. "NOW."

Then, Crow felt motion from deeper within the house. There were tiny tremblings that carried through the floor and up into the furs. Soon, too, she heard it, the sound of many bodies pushing and prodding and laughing and moving all at once, each getting up and ready in their own distinct way.

How had she not heard them all before? How had they been so *silent* in their living? And..

She began to doubt herself anew (as if she had ever stopped). Was this the right choice? Was she going to ruin many days at once? Was she dragging them back through grief they had ended? Though... this choice *had* to be right, didn't it? Cane could not have the things. She

should not have the things. So the things had to go here, on the table, where she had put them. This was the only place for the things. And the things couldn't be tossed away, because...

because...?

Admittedly, there were not many things. Perhaps the reminder of what they had lost was far too troublesome to justify all this commotion. All this life, this movement, this breathing. And who would want to be seen with her, when even the sigh of her makes others smell of fear?

In one hundred more breaths, the other members of the household had filtered in from various hallways, into the main one, frozen at the sight of Crow, then reclined alongside Red at the lounging table. They regarded Red, turning their heads in deference, and from her steely gaze, decided then to remain silent until all had gathered.

So, then... she must have stepped up when Wolf was lost? A daughter, now a mother to so many...

Crow looked down at the table as she twiddled with her dress beneath her cloak. She wondered what the table was actually called. Um, what tables like this one were called. Something about the way these people lived spoke to her. Here, it was dark, claustrophobic, and warm— everything she needed to feel comfort. Everything she needed to feel safe.

And amazingly, she did. Her nerves had calmed. She felt somewhat at ease.

"We have all gathered," Red spoke, lifting her chin towards Crow. She kept her chin raised, and the scent of fear wafted over from her no longer.

Crow did not stir, instead busy with her twiddling, but after turning the words around in her mind for several breaths, she eventually took the hint, and began to speak.

"Um, well. Hello," Crow chirped, voice pouring out like water that splashed weakly off the table and through the room. "I am the one called Crow. I... was there when Wolf was slain. At Cane's estate. Cane murdered Wolf. He... well, he did it like a coward. Wolf was just talking sense. He was trying to be reasonable. But Cane does not care for life or reason. He only cares about... well, I don't know what he cares about. And it doesn't matter."

The gathered Canids stayed silent, eyes locked to her, and so she continued.

"Cane... after... *that*, left to gather the lot of you. He intended to bring you along by force to gawk at Wolf's corpse. I was there for a different reason, but when he left, I locked Cane out of his study, and, well, Wolf was there, and his things were there, and, well, I knew Cane shouldn't have them. He couldn't have them. It wouldn't have been right. So I took them, so they would be safe. And I kept them, because I was sick, and I was injured, but I wanted to be here, I really wanted to be here, but um, I wasn't, I got... caught in a web, you could say, and then another... and the things were waiting, burning holes in my pockets, and um, well, they brought me here, and now here the things are, on your table, and I'm sorry, I don't know why I— I'm—" The tears had started to well up so suddenly. She did not even know why they were falling. "Wolf was such a kindly man, I— he—" her words were choked out by her tears, now, which took over for her verbally, wrapping up the explanation in a neat little bow.

She couldn't stop her tears from falling, and for once, she did not spite them for it. She clenched her cloak in her fists and balled it up tight in her hands, her knuckles turning quickly white.

Two shuddering, shaking breaths later, a fluffy paw dropped firmly down onto her shoulder, then another on her other shoulder, and all around her, Wolf's kin began to move. Some reclined silently in shock, others had gotten up from reclining to sit back on their haunches, lift their chin, and howl, and still others crowded around Crow, petting and comforting her, pulling her close, squishing her between them.

Crow continued to sniffle, tears streaming from her eyes, hands shaking as she tangled herself up in fuzzy limbs and warm embraces, burying her face into the chest of whoever was holding her. They cried too, she knew, from the drops of wet that plapped down onto her ears and bounced off.

"He didn't deserve it," Crow whispered, her voice as empty as her eyes. She turned her head outward, now, and looked all around the room.

Some of Wolf's kin were gathered around his trinkets, examining them with cold warmth {detached intimacy}. Red was there, too, holding the locket, staring at her own face held within.

"You're right Crow, he didn't deserve it." Whispered the one holding Crow the closest. "But you at least made Cane pay for it."

"That's just because I was trapped there—" Crow protested, but she was cut off immediately.

"And you fought your way out like a feral canine, Crow, with fang and claw. You were trapped in his Mansion between him and his guards and you *still* had the courage to make sure we were taken care of, to fight back and disfigure him, instead of just flying away."

Crow paused, and the tears did too, for a moment. Had she really accomplished something of note? She wasn't intruding? Could she really be welcome somewhere, after what she did, not in spite of it, but because of it? She had hardly even started to piece together the shattered glass memories of that day, and yet—

"And without you, we would have been brought there to witness it, Crow. Who knows what he would've done to us, just to send a message? And who knows what *we* would have done—probably get ourselves killed. But now, after what you did to him, you're the only thing on his mind anymore. It frees us up to do a few things. We're not just going to take this kind of thing lying down, you know?"

Crow's vision filled, for a moment, with the hazy mist of blood that hung heavy in the air and clung to her and every surface she had touched. She remembered the splashes of red from each pawprint as she tore her way up through the estate, fingerpainting its white walls crimson.

And even that could be redeemed? Or—

"Crow." The one holding her said, ruffling her hair. The others had started to drift apart, talking amongst themselves, reclining again, or slinking around. One had even started to prepare a meal. "Crow."

"yeah?" Crow whispered, eyes locked to Wolf's still belongings.

"You did good. Understand?"

Crow nodded. She was beginning to think that she really did.

"What's your name?" Crow asked, turning her chin up, tilting her flesh eye back to look to the one that held her close.

"Hound." Her snout was long, narrow, and dark red-brown. Silver streaks like scars wrapped around it from her left eye all the way down to her two razor-sharp snaggle-fangs that poked out proudly from the right side of her maw. Her ears were slit where they would otherwise meet, giving each one two separate points, and, too, two thick graysteel bands hung from the base of each of her ears.

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They were all sprawled out, now, reclining in the den, gathered around a freshly-made meal of flesh and bone.

Crow had just finished, after much gentle prodding, recounting the full story of her heist on Cane's estate and now sat there silently, comfortably, in peace, legs spread out under her like butterfly wings, ankles stacked on top of each other. She was seated fully in the lap of Red's daughter, Hound, whose legs were spread out just like her own. Hound's arms came around Crow from behind, crossed around her waist, and held her by the hips. Hound held Crow close to her chest, as if Crow was her comfort and not the other way around.

Following Crow's story was a long and great silence. They reflected, eyes closed, on the many words she'd spoken, and all of the ones she hadn't.

Then, slowly, life returned to the room. Everyone began to move and shift— except for Hound and Crow— and before long, sound returned to the den as each of them began to flutter again. At first, it was the smallest sounds— maws slightly parted to part with hushed whispers, then small chitter-chatter, before, finally, they were all talking, to themselves and to each other and to Crow, as the life in the place returned, with its warmth, not all at once, but as with any fire made from scratch.

"We're usually a lot louder," Hound confessed, leaning forward, bringing her snout down in front of Crow and to the side.

"How important was Wolf, here?"

"He was everything. Shame you'll never know him."

Crow, not knowing what to say, leaned back into Hound's embrace and tilted her head down, nestling the top of her head into the crook of Hound's chin. There, she could feel her breathing, her very life.

There was a two-breath pause.

"I'm proud, I think," Hound said, "to be avenged by one like you."

"I haven't done much avenging."

"It's a start. Not like I'd do better," Hound smiled, "though I'd love to try."

"Mm. Well, don't fight him head-on. You'll die. And I like you."

Hound snorted, and shook her head. "I won't. His body is freakish, and I'm just Hound."

There was a three-breath pause.

"What do you mean, 'one like me'?"

"Crow. You're tiny. Stick small. And if I fetched you, you would snap like one, too. And you thrashed Cane like he was a pup, in his own house, killed half his staff, *and* trashed the place. You are strength. It's exactly how I'd live my life, and I'm proud to see kin in the one that avenged mine. I'm proud to be your kin, Crow."

*Kin. She thought. Wait, Kin? Like- **Kin**, Kin? We're Kin? We are kin? The two of us are **kin**? Are all of us kin? I have kin? Now? They are my kin now? I have kin and I am with them now?*

Her eyes shifted and drifted and twitched and craned and gazed off at nothing and fell back to the present all at once as she shifted and pulled and stretched and moved within Hound's arms, squirming as the truth wormed its way in through her ears and snuck down to her heart.

"kin?" crow asked for permission.

Hound nodded, then craned her head back and howled for a moment.

All at once, everyone stopped their chattering and returned the howl, but only for a moment.

Instinctively, Crow craned her own head back, letting out all her sorrows and triumphs at once with one single, warbling note: the sound of her heart and soul.

And together, each and every one gathered joined in the howl, and the sound pounded through the room and bounded up between them, brushing across their fur, swishing past their ears, soaking in deep to their fur and bones.

And so the howl continued, and continued, and in the joining of voices a new voice, the voice of the pack, pulled together by their bonds, held tight by their respect, was created. And even

as voices left it, perhaps to breathe, perhaps just to simply *be*, the pack was not weakened, but simply *changed*. And as voices rejoined, the pack shifted again, no longer the same as before, but that mattered little.

For they were *kin*,

and to be *kin* was to **understand**,

to hold with respect, and adoration.

More than anything else,

Crow realized,

to be kin was to love.

She had felt this before,

love, or perhaps **kinship**,

if ever there was a difference,

but she knew not where.

Her thoughts no longer belonged only to her, but to the pack,
in which her voice was joined with so many others,
her identity left not behind,
but in the caring arms of those that held her dear.
It was not her burden alone to bear, she realized,
because no one could bear everything
alone.

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"Does that answer your question, little Crow?" Hound whispered as the last whimpers of the howl faded away like smoldering embers. She cocked her head to one side and tousled Crow's hair, paws working through it swiftly and effortlessly, claws sending tangles running, her soft working to polish and smooth out her hair rather than strip out its moisture.

But Crow knew not any words for the indescribable feeling that possessed her, and so instead, she bobbed her body and head together, wiggling happily, as her own form of response. It was a warm, and joyous feeling, that welled up within her like a hidden aquifer and seeped out not only through her tripping tongue's fast-babbled words, but too, her eyes, and nose, and even

her porous flesh which wept its own beads of calm and cooling sweat. And she carried on like this, suspended in this feeling of **true bliss**, making all of her many feelings known with every method she had ever learned to.

Hound chattered back with her in kind, with matched enthusiasm, and a coy and sly smirky smile of crooked snaggle-fangs that hung on each word of Crow's patiently before responding with a carefully considered few.

Then, Crow would respond again, letting freely spill the whimsy and joy once bound tightly to her heart.

She quite liked having kin.

Perhaps this, then, was **it**.

But as soon as she had the thought, she looked down, crestfallen.

"Crow?" Hound asked, concerned. The shift in Crow was tangible not only through their joined flesh but also in the connection that they now shared.

But Crow had no words for the sorrow that gripped her heart anew. But she could not leave it undescribed, lest she leave the poor Hound dissatisfied, or scared, or anxious in unknowing—

"Oh." Hound said, knowingly, as she pulled on Crow's hips to motion for her to spin around and turn face to face.

And so Crow did, face pointed down to stare at the fur of the floor between the gap in their crossed and tangled legs, chin weighed down not by her heavy metal beak, but by the weight of what she carried inside.

"Missing something?" Hound asked, pulling her hands down and away to support Crow, respectfully, so that she would not slump too far and fall all the way down again.

"...yeah..." Crow whispered.

"What is it?"

"I... don't know," she whispered, her voice as hollow as her sunken and sullen flesh eye.

"Well, you'll find it."

"How can you know that to be true?"

"Because you're Crow."

"What?"

"You're just..." Hound sighed in frustration. How could she not see it? "You're Crow. Whatever it is, you'll find it, and once you do, you'll get it."

"It still doesn't seem so certain. I've been looking for so long—"

"Listen, Crow. I'm not going to pretend like I know everything about you." Hound said, lifting up Crow's chin by her beak to look her in the eyes. "But I know enough to say that there's nothing in this tiny world of ours that you can't steal. Whatever it is, it's already yours. It doesn't matter how long you've been looking for it. It only matters that you keep going. Because you *will* find it."

"But—"

"Crow. What's stopping you from finding it?"

She paused, for a moment, and reflected. Nothing really came to mind, aside from her normal daily struggles. Though... "I just don't know what it is I'm looking for."

"Neither does anyone else, you know? We're all just trying to..." Hound waved one of her paws in the air. "Figure it all out."

"Figure it out?" Crow asked.

"Yeah. You know, like, life, and stuff. Living. What do we want? Who are we meant to be? The deep stuff most people bury because they're too busy staying alive. But you're on the right track, you know?"

"Because I'm looking?"

"Exactly. A lot of people don't even get that far."

"What is it like when someone figures it out? Is that like finding it?"

"Mmm," Hound growled, putting her paw to her chin. "Sorta. Figuring it out is like when you actually learn yourself, and *then*, you can start actually living. Until then, you're just going through the motions of life, without really feeling it. Because everything you do, well, you know, *you are you*, so if you don't know *you*, then, even from the starting line, you're kinda just fucked."

Crow's feathers began to stand up on end, and her fur prickled in anticipation. That's *exactly* what it felt like. That's what it had all been feeling like, forever, for as long as she had ever known, and she had never known anything different, or that it even could be. No *one had ever told her!*

"So to find **it**... I have to figure out what I want? Because **it** is something I want. Um. Well, I guess **it** is something I *need*, so should I figure out what I need instead? Or should I start with something simpler? Like..."

Hound started to cackle, a light, poppy cackle, that crackled like a fire with too-wet logs.

"You're overthinking it, Crow. If you want **it**," she paused, then smiled, "*or need it*," then paused again, shaking her head, "so strongly, then **it** is a part of you, whether or not you like **it** in the end. So..?"

"The more I know about the parts of me, the closer I'll get to figuring **it** out."

"Yep." Hound said, nodding as she leaned back, setting her paws out behind herself to keep upright. Crow stayed upright in her lap, back perfectly straight, head tilted down slightly, one paw on her chin, the other holding up her cheek.

"And everyone has to do this?" Crow asked after a four-breath pause.

"Yep."

"How does anyone do anything?!"

"Well. Things don't get easier, but after a while, you end up dead or stronger for it."

"How come I never knew this stuff?"

Hound looked Crow up and down, scanning her, then shrugged. "You got unlucky. Happens."

Crow looked down at her paws. *Unlucky? Mmm.. but—*

"If no one teaches you, it takes a lot longer than you've lived to learn it for yourself."

"Oh!" Crow chirped, then looked up, cheeks brought up high in a wide smile that was covered by her beak. "I almost forgot. Thank you!" Then, she dove forward, wrapping her arms around Hound's neck, pushing her body in close for the tightest hug she could possibly manage.

"Yeah, uh," Hound, now, looked away to the fur-lined wall, then up to the ceiling. "Of course, hun." And, slowly, she leaned forward, picked up her paws from the ground, and wrapped them gently around the little Crow.

She hugged Hound because she had wanted to. Just as she had wanted {todo: other things she has wanted} in the past. It was a good a start as any.

She would learn to **understand**, as Hound did.

She *had* to.