

chapter 12. Chase It

"A nightmare?" Hound asked, dropping to one knee.

Crow looked up with feral, angry eyes, and tilted her chin up as she took a shuddering breath.

"No," she bit out through the tears, standing up, pushing aside Hound's hands. There was support there, but no comfort. Far more life had passed in the night for Crow than any other, and already, Hound was a stranger to her once again.

Crow looked away to where her clothes and things were piled, then gently ran her hand over Hound's extended paw while pulling away. It was not Hound's fault. She should not be mean to her. But she had places to be.

"Heading out?"

"Yes." Crow whispered, as she patted dry her tears and face with the fur on her forearms. Then, she leaned down, picked up her garments, and began to fix them on one at a time.

"Did we— did I do something wrong?"

"No—" Crow whimpered, swinging her head back towards Hound. Tears had already formed again. It was so wrong. She just wanted to be right. To treat others right. But this, right now, was something that had to be done, and be done *now*. "I just—?"

Hound closed the distance and pulled Crow into a tight hug, then released her just as quickly.

"I understand. I'll help you so you can set out faster."

"okay." crow muttered. the tension in her shoulders fell off, and the muscles in her face relaxed. "thank you," she whispered.

The next twenty breaths passed by in efficient silence.

She cherished every one of them.

On the twenty-first breath, a light pat to the small of her back signaled the end of her brief respite.

And in an instant, she was gone again.

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She did not often sprint. There was rarely any need to.

But today, life felt different. It felt as though everything would fall apart, no— that everything had *already* fallen apart— and the only way to put it back together again would be to tear through the object of her desire and emerge free on the other side of it.

She had to know what was there, in the forest, and she had to know *right now*.

The plan was simple:

blow through Escrow so quickly that no one could stop her, reach **The Spire**, get a new pouch of glow-worms to light up the cave she had seen, then glide down from it, straight over the city walls, and straight to where she had **awoken**.

She was making good progress.

In only six breaths, she had crossed ten times as many bodylengths.

She had been to **The Spire** so many times she could reach it blind.

In six more breaths, she crossed an even greater distance, as she reached the peak of her speed. With every bound, the steel cords that wrapped around her bones coiled up and compressed until they clicked into place, and then, landing on a paw, she would flex her ankle-bone forward, releasing the tension all at once, sending her flying forward through the air. Kept up, step after step, she could bound as far, and nearly as fast, as she pleased, in any direction she liked. Even still, her arms had similar *pieces* installed within, and any surface she latched into with her claws could be easily launched off of to propel her ever higher.

And so the ground burned and broke beneath her as she ripped her way through Escrow, spiraling through the air only to latch down onto the ground, turn, and snap off at once in another direction.

Street after street passed by in a blur, and ever always, the great and looming shadow of **The Spire** drew closer.

Her breath was falling out, hot and heavy, but it didn't matter. She would shred every piece of herself, burn everything she had left—

her chest tightened and spasmed, then blossomed out in warmth and blistering heat. Cringing, she dropped one of her shoulders and clutched her chest, spiraled down and to the side, then fell in a fluttering crash of breaking, splintering boards and crates.

Crow arms shaking, looked down and pawed at her front, but found no blood there. No, there was no injury at all, but instead, she felt a lingering *heat*, a *warmth* long-since forgotten. Allowing herself to curl up for only a moment, she fixated on the sensation of her **soul**, of the deepest recesses of her mind, and closed her eyes.

And there, anchored in the very center of her being, finally roaring for the first time,

was **the everburning fire**—

smoldering embers no longer.

Hastily, Crow scrambled to her feet, awkwardly shuffling her shoulders and arms around. She was not used to this feeling— to this warmth, this *heat*— at the center of her. It was so *hot*, blisteringly so, and—

Crow awkwardly waved at a couple of passer-by, who had come up to the wreckage that she lay in the midst of.

And really, she did not know how to feel. She had often longed for warmth,

Crow stood and dusted herself off,

she had chased it, even,

Crow shook her head and crouched down low, eyes fixed on the sky above,

but now that she *had* it, well,

Crow launched off of her legs, soaring high into the air, easily clearing the top of the alleyway,

what came next?

She did not know how to feel. She had barely even begun feeling, begun knowing what it meant to have feelings, and now she had so many of them, and all at once, and throughout the entire day *and* night, was there ever any break from them? Or was she doomed, invariably, to feel them, over and over, all at once, again and again, forever?

Had she felt before, in the past?

When she had made those paintings?

Was this feeling, this revulsion, of feeling her feelings, of the crushing weight of them, of the burning radiance of holding them within herself, of allowing them to exert their influence on her,

was this what had caused her to leave her feelings behind in the first place?

And why didn't she know, if she did?

It would have been a conscious effort, surely?

Crow landed on another rooftop and kicked off again, this time spreading her wings so that she could glide across one of the many rivers that crossed through Escrow. She sailed right over the bridge and passer-by below, few of which turned to pay her any attention.

There were, of course, often far stranger happenings in Escrow.

And still, Crow's attention fell not on her task, but on the warmth inside her chest. It had bloomed into a raging fire all at once, and for what? Why? Why *now*, and why not in the past? Its heat, its brilliance, drove her forward ever faster, with haste she had never known before, with impetus she could have never summoned in the past, and all she could think of was just

how useful it could have been, to feel,

and perhaps,

a distinct wonder, the slightest twinge of a nag,

the very barest of worries,

she just—

how much had she missed?

Had she been living the life she was meant to?

Was all of it necessary to reach who she was now?

Did she have any choice, in all of it?!

Or—

Crow landed on the cobbled street and folded in her wings, then kept running. She was barely a few streets away, now, from the base of **The Spire**.

And so, close to her goal as she was, she ran not faster, but slower, to catch her breath, to pull some peace from the air that she might cool her mind and burning chest.

What was the purpose of living, really, if by thinking wrong, she could be living wrong? That by, simply through not knowing— and perhaps by no fault of her own— so much of her self, so much of her past, could be absorbed by *nothing*, could be compressed into *nothing*, could be so totally and wholly consumed by a void of self that so selfishly sucked up every moment and spat out nothing in return, or even—

Crow, scarcely jogging, now, bumped into someone, but simply pushed them away, eyes low to the pavement. There were more important things for her to attend to within. She did not even have the focus, nor the wherewithal, to mutter any sort of condolences.

But ten paces away, she froze, all at once, as a heavy, crushing feeling weighed down on her and brought her to a stop. Turning back, she saw only the turned back of the one she had spurned, shaking their head in resignation of any chance of commiseration. And so Crow raised up her hand, and started to step forward, wondering if she should spit out this guilt, to do as she felt she needed— no, simply *wanted* to, but perhaps the moment had already passed? Or—

And they continued to walk, further and further still, away from her, paying no mind to her or her transgression. As far as they were concerned, perhaps, it had not ever happened.

But what if their heart was burdened, in the way hers was? Or what if it wasn't, and still, she needed to release the weight upon her own—

and already, they were gone, having turned a corner, and so she stood,

alone,

dwelling only in her mind,

and not in the world in which she truly lived.

And she stayed like that, for many moments, for more than a hundred breaths, simply dwelling, and mulling, then mulling and dwelling again, paying no mind as others pushed past— or into— her, paying no heed as others tripped on her as she stood still, instead absorbed fully in her transgression, and its repayment, and really,

what it all meant at all. If... anything? And she shook her head, confused, and with bleary eyes, looked around, to scenery all different than when she had stopped. The same bodies all around her had been replaced with different ones, moving to, and also fro, bustling about as they were known to do, each and every other paying attention, mostly to themselves, but also to their business, to which they had-to-must attend.

And she was there, alone, outside of it all, despite fitting so neatly within it all, and still, she stuck and stood out, prickling all over, knowing so deeply that she did not, could not, belong, and—

crack!

a small stone hit the ground right by her, and she turned to look at it— and as she did—

cr-crackackack ackack clatter crack clatter clatter ckckck

dozens of tiny pebbles rained down from her head and shoulders, and an assortment of tiny children, even smaller than her, scattered, giggling, as they watched the stones and pebbles tumble off.

And so, Crow smiled, and grinned, and could not help but chirp, herself, before doubling over, laughing at the ridiculousness of it all.

And still, the warmth was there, as surely it was meant to be.

She had come to understand herself— perhaps only a little bit— in that perfect moment.

And, in that moment of clarity, she came to understand what came next.

The pursuit of the self, in every moment.

For when she failed to do so, she ended up frozen in time, stuck in every moment as if it was her last.

She would not let it happen again.

It was her life to live, and in living it, she would not find herself to be a spectator any longer.

And so Crow turned to face **The Spire**, and once again, began to walk, shoulders straight and high, chin pointed up, purpose held tight within her little frame. She was amazed that anything could have distracted her from this, but she did not let her wonderment at herself allow her to sit and dwell any longer.

She would, of course, not let it happen again— let alone so soon.

For in the waking world, she had only the option to move forward.

As in the dreaming world, she had only the option to rest and reflect.

There was a place for everything, she realized.

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And so, she climbed, hand over hand, talon over talon, up the winding path within **The Spire**.

It was not made for this.

It was made for those who could fly.

And yet, Crow had made a home here, for part of her self. A part of her lived here, and always had, ever since she first beheld this ancient place.

It was quiet, and solemn, and hollow, and dark, and every movement of hers echoed out a thousand times across the great metal walls, ringing the entire inside of the place like a monumental bell. Many countless bodylengths above— perhaps thousands of her own— there was a colony, of sorts, of bats both little and great alike, that lived here and called this place their home.

Of course, they were separate, from Escrow— no one could really hope to reach them, so high above the clouds— and any attempt to topple **The Spire** would certainly spell the destruction of near half the city.

And so, they lived here in peace, far above her head,

and she climbed that she might reach them.

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Crow leaped, again, from one rusting metal cross-beam to another, then another, ascending as quickly as she could. The further up she climbed, the more holes there were in the thinning metal surface of the walls— countless places through which she could leap out and fly away— but she was not high enough, not yet.

After all, she owed **Bishop** a visit. It had been quite a while, indeed, if her empty supply of glow-worms was to be believed.

Soon, though—

skkreeeEEEE

A shrill screech echoed off the walls, and then another, and another, and Crow fell still as they swarmed and echoed all around her in a cloud of different voices. Soon, their eyes became visible. Soon, they formed a full cloud around her, hugging her, gliding onto her head, nestling into the crook of her neck and head.

Bishop's flock.

There were so many voices she could not possibly hope to answer them all, and so she spoke simply,

"I missed you too," and **feeling** her words as they left her, she knew them to be true, as longing was dredged up from deep inside of her chest, sapped away by the countless tiny fuzzy bats that covered her like tiny blankets.

And then, a far, far greater swooshing made itself known, and the air all around her became turbulent, then began to rush all together,'

Swoosh!

swooooOOOsh!

"Hello, Little Crow." Bishop called, latching onto the ceiling just above Crow, from which she hung and dangled down so that she would then peer into Crow's eyes, scarcely two antslengths away, face-to-face. "It has been a while indeed since last I saw you. More than two seasons, by my count."

"I wanted so badly to return," Crow babbled all at once, tripping over her tongue and words, "but..."

"You couldn't." Bishop guessed, {blinking weird, but also anatomically correct}.

Crow nodded, then stepped forward onto the tips of her talons and hugged Bishop.

"Oh my, I— what is all this—?" Bishop called, voice muffled under Crow's fur and clothing.

"Thank you." Crow spoke, loudly and clearly, her face pointed to the side, but the side of her face nuzzling up to Bishop's chest fur {face pointed to the side so her beak doesn't stab Bishop}. "For everything."

"You need more glow-worms, don't you?"

Suddenly embarrassed, Crow let go of Bishop and stepped back, turning her face away, "well, yes, but—"

"Ah, girls, what am I to do..?" Bishop sighed, releasing one of the talons from which she hung, dangling it down her side, all the way around to point at the metal beam that Crow stood on, then released her other talon, quickly dropping her leg down to match with the other, where she landed solidly, standing straight up. As she did, many of the bats chittered and screeched and flocked up to her, nestling within her wings, around her chest, and up around her neck.

"I just wanted to hug you!" Crow admitted, with fervor as if she was defending her life, yelling all at once, then clapping her beak shut with her hands. "Sorry," she whispered, then too quiet, "I'm just— I'm just trying to um. Do what I want. More."

I think. I've been thinking, actually. It's... nice." And she realized, perhaps for the first time, that her own voice was so pleasant and light when she let it flow out freely without constraints. And... embarrassing—

—but even embarrassment was such a light and pleasant warmth within her cheeks. It was... far more manageable than she had thought.

Bishop slow-blinked at Crow, one, two, and three times, before her mouth spread into a wide smile and she began to speak. "What has happened to you, little Crow?"

"To me? Um— I wouldn't speak of it in polite company—"

"Then you may consider me impolite, if only for today. Now, get on, already."

Crow realized, then, that Bishop was standing, facing her, expectantly, arms held out straight and slightly bent.

"ah!" Crow chirped, then stepped forward and hopped up into the air, landing perfectly in Bishop's embrace. The tiny baby bats that clung to the two of them fluttered around and resettled themselves— as did Crow, within Bishop's arms.

"Ready?" Bishop asked, crouching down low on creaking legs. Her back flexed and contorted, stretching out fully, allowing her four wings to roll open and true, unfurled wingspan.

"Yes." Crow whispered, pulling herself hard towards her hands that were wrapped around the back of Bishop's neck.

"Then away we shall sail," Bishop muttered, eyes squinted and narrowed at some point far, far above them.

And so, she kicked off. The entire section of the metal support structure where they had stood begun to creak and tremble, and dust fell off it down, down, down to the floor far, far below— the sound of its landing, of course, never reached them. And as the beams trembled and groaned, the uncountable many of the flock lifted up on their own, flapping with reckless abandon, swooping and diving and wobbling through the air on unpracticed wings, doing their best to follow their perfect and timeless leader.

"You're doing a good thing here, Bishop," Crow admitted. She hadn't mentioned it before, but now seemed like a good time.

"Oh?"

swwoOOOOSSH

swooshswoosh

Crow waited for a gap between wingbeats to speak again. "You have such a wonderful flock, and..."

SWOOSH

"...you've given them such a lovely home."

Swoosh

"It's true." Bishop responded quickly, her expression unreadable.

swooshswoosh

"I wish to change things, Crow."

"But you run them so well?"

"In the *city*, not our commune."

"Oh."

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"But change what, dear Bishop?"

"Everything."

"Why?"

"My flock prospers while the rest of Escrow lives in squalor. Beholden to those... *monsters*."

Crow nodded sagely in understanding. They were rather monstrous, it was true.

"Okay. I'll help."

"What?"

swOo . . oOsH

swooooosh

Bishop's face hardened as she readjusted her flight to keep them upright.

swoosh! swoosh!

swoosh!

"What do you mean, you'll help?"

"I'll help you change everything."

"Why? Don't you—"

"I want it to change too. So let's do it together."

And as Crow finished speaking, the pair finally rose above the platform on which the commune was built, and so Bishop glided them to the ground, far above the clouds, and opened up her arms so that Crow may slide out of them.

But she did not.

"I'm serious." Crow said, wrapping her legs around Bishop's torso, arms still looped around the back of her neck. She would not be shaken off so easily. "Let's change our world together."

Bishop could not help but be taken aback, then crack the slightest of smiles, which then—shortly after—turned into a wide grin, and she wrapped her own arms back around Crow, lifting her up by the thighs, to pull her in for a close hug. "Thank you."

"You're welcome!" Crow chirped, and as soon as she was released, she popped down to the floor and did a little twirl, showing off her new dress. "It's a pleasure to do business with you," Crow said, putting on her very-most-serious-doing-business voice, while reaching forward with both arms.

Bishop, of course, finished the other half of the greeting.

"As with you."

"But that needs to wait. I have more important stuff to do first, before we change the world, okay?"

Bishop turned her head and lifted up an arm to conceal her smile, opting to cover it up with a most-polite cough.

"Yes, of course. What is your mission, today, Little Crow?"

And in that moment, Crow dropped all pretenses, along with the tension in her frame, and cast her gaze, finally, to the woven netted floor.

"I'm going to go to where I **awoke**, and there, I'm going to learn the truth about myself."

"What's out there but the monsters of the wilderness?"

"I don't really know," Crow admitted, "but I'm the one who put it there. I have to go and see it."

"Okay," Bishop agreed, nodding. Then, she leaned forward and whistled through little slits that opened in her mouth as she flexed it a certain way. The loud, shrill cry caused a number of her flock to split off at once and flutter away, and then,

in ten breaths,

one returned with a tiny leather-bound pouch, latched shut and full of something wriggling and writhing.

It flapped hard and fast, bobbing up and down in the air, and as it dropped the package into Crow's hands, it fell at once and landed in her hair, where it curled up into a little ball and fell fast asleep.

"Ah, ah, no stowaways now, hm?" Bishop cooed, stepping forward and scooping up her lost little bat, which she tucked away somewhere within the fur of her chest.

"Thank you." Crow whispered, burying her face once again in the soft fur of Bishop's belly, arms wrapped tight around her waist.

"Of course, Little Crow. Now fly, my pretty, and do what it is you were born to do."

"Born to do? Do you know something about that?" Crow asked, stepping away to look up into Bishop's eyes. They gleamed in the light, but, not deception was reflected within them.

"What? No, of course not. I'm just being dramatic, dear. Now flutter off, away with you. When you return, we shall discuss our warplans."

"A war to change the world, huh?"

"Yes. Of course. Is that a problem?"

"Um, no. I just— I figured with your whole—" Crow waved her arms around in the air and started over. "I was worried you wouldn't want to spill any blood, actually."

"Well, worry not. Now, off with you! Go. Shoo!" Bishop gently, and reassuringly, guided Crow to the edge of **the spire**, where the net that formed the floor for their great commune ended, and a great hole in the metal-sheet wall had been carved out with claws long, long ago, then peeled forward, creating a massive ledge that stuck out from the tower like a thorn.

The two stepped out onto the edge, holding hands, Crow's loose, relaxed, Bishop's tensed, tight, fearful, and anxious.

"Are you scared I'll fall?"

"No," Bishop lied poorly.

Crow giggled. "Okay." She teased, slipping her hand away to playfully tap Bishop on the upper arm with her claws.

"Bye, Crow."

"Goodbye, Bishop. I'll see you when I do."

And then, Crow stepped backwards off the ledge, immediately disappearing into the open sky below, body obscured by thick and fluffy rolling purplish clouds.

"You had better," Bishop muttered. Her heart could not take being left behind by Crow again.

This time, surely,

things would be different.

Finally,

they would accomplish what they had set out to do,

all those years ago.

And so she sat, on that ledge, looking out into the endless sky, wondering not when, but if,

Crow would return to her once again.

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