

Chapter 22

Low Tide

Crow's metal eye whirred back to life for what felt like the first time in hundreds of years. Her vision slowly returned, from black to grey to white to color, and as she looked up from the long wooden table she was seated at, she saw **Weasel** just entering the room. He caught her gaze in his own.

"Oh. Seems you're back with us."

"Us?" She squeaked.

"That's just a saying, Crow." He let out a short, nervous laugh, then sat down in the rough-hewn wooden chair next to hers. The room around them was made of dark-brown hardwood with black undertones, while the table and chairs were lighter, paler, soft lavender wood.

"Oh," Crow dropped her chin, noting that she was bound to the chair by coarse, rough ropes. She looked up at once, scared, confused, and frozen by the realization.

"Those're to, well, keep you from..." Weasel took his bentfinger up to his throat and made a slashing motion.

Crow nodded along sheepishly. Her metal eye conveyed no emotion, and her flesh eye was covered by the eyepatch. "I think I'm okay, now."

"Seems like it," Weasel sighed, leaning forward. In only a few short moments, the bindings slipped off and landed softly on the floor.

"Thanks," she whispered, rubbing her wrists, then bringing her knees up to her chest in the chair to rub her ankles.

"Yeah," Weasel let out a long sigh while nodding. "Wolf used to go through that, too."

"Huh?" Crow tilted her head to the side, confused. The motion made her neck ache and groan. She was still a bit fuzzy on the details. She... had fought some people... and that was after..?

Weasel didn't respond, and so Crow looked up at him. He was looking down into a greenglass bottle that he held in one hand. His other hand was up inside his shirt, wrist pushed through between the buttons. Three of his fingers rested along the line of his collarbone, while the other two rubbed away at a locket.

He was looking off into the foyer, but Crow felt as though he was looking off somewhere far outside the little physical world the two of them lived in.

"What do you mean, Wolf went through this? Through what?" Crow asked, leaning forward. She placed her chin on the top of the table, body still balled up in her chair, arms wrapped around it. She looked up at Weasel with big, bright eyes.

"The bloodlust," Weasel said simply, shrugging as he looked back to Crow. "He just needed to rip someone apart from time to time."

There was a long pause.

"They weren't supposed to die."

"That's not really what you told **Pig**."

"Who?"

"Bartender."

"Oh."

"'I want to kill someone,' is what you said, Crow."

"That... can't be right. Though I guess, with the way I fight, I can't really—"

"First blood wouldn't have worked, then? Or to surrender?"

"Um—"

"You wanted to kill them, Crow."

"**No!**" She shook her head violently, as if trying to catch the thought and throw it away with her teeth.

"Crow." Weasel leaned forward, gently holding each of her hands in his own. "You did. I was there."

"But— then— why—"

"It's okay."

"*It can't be!*" Her tears were already falling again.

"Crow," Weasel sighed, taking one of his hands back to rub new wrinkles into his forehead, "They volunteered to fight you. They knew the terms of the fight. They knew your reputation."

Her shoulders slumped. Wasn't this supposed to make her feel better?

"Anything you're feeling now is guilt you've given to yourself."

Crow took her chin off the table and rested her face between her knees. Her cloak smelled of lavender and wildberries. Wait—

Crow took her face away from her cloak, then took her hands away from between Weasel's soft hand so she could pull at her cloak and look at it. It had been repaired, and washed, or replaced?

"Thanks," she said again, staring wide-eyed at the cloak.

"You're welcome," he said with a disappointed tone. "I should've known better when I made it for you, that it would end up like—"

"I'm sorry!" She said immediately, looking away and to the floor.

"What? You paid me. It's fine."

"But you—"

"But I what? Sound disappointed?"

Crow nodded meekly as she wiped away one of the few tears that had fallen.

Weasel simply laughed. "You really are like him."

"Wolf?"

Weasel nodded.

"How did you know him?"

"*Know* him?" Weasel smirked as he leaned back in his chair. He took a sip from the greenglass bottle. "I practically o—" Weasel raised his eyebrows in thought, looked up at the ceiling, then looked down at Crow, concerned. "How old are you?"

"I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know how old I am."

"When were you born?"

"I... wasn't."

"What?!" Weasel brought both hands to his face, this time, for the purpose of adding more wrinkles to his forehead which deserved none.

"Okay. Before we get into *that*," Weasel set his hands down softly on the table, then looked down to Crow with soft eyes filled with warmth and care. "Wolf was my husband. We lived together for a long, long time. I knew him very well."

"Does that make us **kin**?"

Weasel's eyebrows furrowed in genuine confusion. He paused for a moment, set his jaw, as if he could understand it through sheer force of will. He couldn't.

*I would've known if she was a member of the clan. Which means... she's young enough that she doesn't know how family works. So she **is** a kid?* Weasel sighed, and he gave Crow an awkward, pained smile, as his eyes grew yet softer. *Damn.*

"Not... *quite*," Weasel said softly, not wanting to rain on her parade. He *really* wasn't good with kids. What was he supposed to say? Should he, like... pick her up? Spin her around? Kids liked that, right?

Wait, so what did Finch mean when— Weasel's thoughts were cut off by Crow speaking up.

"But you said you were Wolf's husband. And Wolf's **kin** said I was **kin**. So if you're Wolf's **kin**, and I'm Wolf's **kin**, doesn't that make us **kin**?"

"Hold on," Weasel said, raising one of his hands off the table, holding his palm towards her. He paused for several moments, then set his hand back down. "When did that happen? I met with **Red**, she didn't mention that."

"It was right after you made me clothes. And made Finch clothes."

Weasel nodded and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, okay." Then, he shrugged. "How are they all doing?" He swallowed hard after asking, and a thin sheen washed over his eyes, glinting.

Crow flinched as a memory forced its way back into her head. All around her, bodies— no, more like *sacks of flesh*, all connected by some kind of sickly, thin white wires. Her vision went black and filled with the sight of Hound's head, face torn off, cables shoved through every orifice, blood seeping out slowly from all over as every trace of flesh on her body had been removed.

There was a sudden shock of pain, resounding pain, throughout her entire body, and in the vision she collapsed forward, embracing herself as she felt the twinges shoot from her heart and bounce around inside her body. Every part of her cringed, twitching, as her breath was ripped from her.

"hheell—" the gaunt red face gagged around the cables, desperately trembling, trying to move something, anything, to get Crow's attention.

Crow felt herself shaking, tipping back, falling away from the vision altogether until suddenly she was snapped out of it like a fish hauled from water.

"CROW. CROW!" Weasel called out to her, one hand in the middle of her back, the other hand lightly resting on her left shoulder, gently pushing and pulling it back and forth. He knew it wasn't the *best* idea to throttle her, but he wasn't thinking clearly from the guilt of 'causing' this in the first place with his words. He should've just assumed she already knew.

"wh— huh?" Crow mumbled as her metal eye slowly spun open again. She could feel the metal plates that made the aperture sliding around and shifting back into the correct locations. It was so weird, being **bound** to metal, that she could feel it just the same as any of her flesh.

"I'm so sorry," Weasel said simply, breathing out a sigh of relief as he brought her close and hugged her. "I really should've assumed—"

"Assumed what?" Crow asked, confused, head still spinning. Her heart was beating fast, and her muscles were tensed in fear. What was it she had just seen? And as she dwelt on it, she felt her mind being pulled back again into the dark, deep, and deeper still, like a coin's journey deep into a well.

"That you knew. You live with Raven, after all, so it— I should've figured you knew what happened."

What happened? Crow repeated as she focused on the blank space inside her mind. Many things had happened. Her body was weary for a reason. Her mind was fatigued. Her memories dashed. These things had happened because they were caused. What, though, had caused them? Crow's brows furrowed— the harder she tried to focus on the memories, the more quickly they were swept away and clouded over by a dense, settling fog that made cozy the space inside her brain.

"It was rough, for you, huh?" Weasel asked in response to her silence.

Wordlessly, she nodded into Weasel's shoulder. Even if she couldn't quite grasp it logically, she knew it to be true.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Weasel whispered.

Crow nodded, again, and still said nothing.

Weasel released Crow from the hug and returned to his own chair, facing her. His expression was even softer, now, like fully melted butter— like he'd found an injured stray puppy outside and brought it in for a new chance at life.

"I... can't..." Crow sighed weakly with strong frustration and shook her head, first slowly, but then quickly, before dropping her head down into her hands. "Remember," she groaned, lifting her head up from her hands too look up to Weasel with wide-open, pleading eyes.

He smiled awkwardly, then his smile faded quickly as he looked back to the bottle on the table, then over to a cabinet in the corner of the room. He weighed his options, then shrugged, and came back a moment later with a pristine and shining greenglass bottle with a pearlescent crimped-metal topper. He flicked the top off of the bottle with his thumb, then handed it over to her.

Crow took the bottle cautiously, then sniffed it once, twice, thrice. It smelled weird, and somewhat rotten, and sharp, and suspicious. Would he have saved her if he meant to poison her? No.

Crow slowly lifted up the bottle, paused, then set it down on the table. With a deft

snap, hiss!

she pulled her beak off and *clank!*-ed it down onto the table. Finally, she drank.

And it was *awful*. Which meant it had to be medicine, and medicine was a high form of hospitality, she knew, so she smiled and tilted her head back, drinking it as quickly as she could with few— if any— breaths between deep, powerful glugs.

The bottle thudded on the table and clinked against her mask as she set it down. Though, she let go too quickly, and set it down too forcefully, and it tilted over and slapped down onto the table, then rolled across to Weasel, who picked it up smoothly with a concerned smile on his face.

"Di—" Weasel was cut off by Crow, who was busy bowing her head slightly, metal eye closed.

"Thank you for the medicine," she said simply, before raising up her head and opening her eye wide.

"Med..?" Weasel shook his head and bit down on his lip and tongue, then continued, "Yes, of course, you're welcome, dear Crow." He rubbed his forehead again as he looked at her, confounded, lost on what to do. Where even to begin with this girl?

Luckily, she started for him, "Something happened to make me this way, and I think I lost something, or a lot of somethings, and I think I need help." She said softly, meekly, as she looked down at her lap rather than trying to meet Weasel's gaze. "I'm sorry."

Weasel nodded and moved his hand from his forehead to his chin, rubbing away at that instead as he worked out what to say. "You were fighting, in **the pits**. Let's start by continuing with that."

"Why were you there?"

"What?" Weasel asked, head tilting back as though the question physically hit him in the center of his forehead. "Oh. I work there."

"You work *here*." Crow said pointedly, as though accusing him of lying. The aperture in her metal eye narrowed.

"I work here *and* there."

"Why?"

"To look over **Wolf**, at first. Now, though..." Weasel sighed, *again*, though this time with his whole chest. "I'm not so sure."

"Okay." Crow said, nodding contentedly. "And I was there to kill people. Which is okay?" She asked, raising her eyebrows for approval. She was like an eager student, quick to ask questions, quicker still to come to her own conclusions with the answers given.

"N— no, not quite," Weasel moved his hand up from his chin to cover his smiling lips, then lowered it onto his knees when the smile was all said and done. "It was okay *because* the people you killed signed up to fight you. They agreed to kill or be killed. They were killed. It was okay because you all agreed."

Crow nodded along silently, internalizing that lesson immediately.

Weasel paused for some breaths as he looked up at the ceiling, then looked back down to her. "There were no victims. So it was okay."

"But they were so scared?"

"You were tearing them to shreds, Crow. That would scare anyone, including you."

"shreds..." she repeated, looking down at her paws. The blood was still there. "Were you... watching?" She looked up at Weasel. Her eye was metal, unfeeling, unable to carry her emotions through it.

Weasel nodded. "That's part of my job, too."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Because I— you— you shouldn't have to— you saw me— and I was— and now I'm here, and you took me in, and—" Crow shook her head. It was feeling fuzzier, dizzier than before. Something was taking hold of her better senses, and quickly, and before she knew it, she was babbling on senselessly about *something*.

"Crow." Weasel said firmly, holding out his hands. She kept going, so Weasel planted one hand on top of her head and his other hand on the outside edge of her shoulder, then tilted her head back to look up at him. "**Crow.**"

"Huh? I'm— I'm really—"

"Anything you're feeling now is guilt you've given to yourself." He repeated. "It's okay. You're safe here. It's *over*."

"I'm so sorry!" She shout-whispered, voice hoarse, as she flung herself forward out of the chair. She buried her face in Weasel's chest— possibly because it was the only one there, possibly because it was one-step removed from an association to her true comfort, Finch.

Her chair clattered to the floor behind her, and the wooden echoes faded away into nothing. The home, warm and soft, absorbed the ever-bouncing sound like it was nothing.

"Me too, kid," Weasel sighed as he rested his chin on the top of her head, looped his arms around her, and pulled her up into his lap and closer. There, he held her, warmly, softly, for as long as she needed to be held.

He could at least do that much.

...

...

"*fuck! it's f r i g i d!*" her voice shook and warbled as she hastily splashed around in the icy water. The chill of it froze the dark and evil thoughts that had been clouding the edges of her mind and vision, and as she scrubbed out the blood from her fur, and hair, and feathers, so too did she chip away at the malaise that hung heavy in her mind.

"Well, it is the cold months!" Weasel called back from the other room. She heard him flip to the next page of his tome. 'Lots of men kissing, you probably wouldn't like it,' he had said.

He was right. She hated kissing.

Crow continued to splash around, working out the crimson piece by piece, part by part. It bled out all around her, staining the water a soft pink, then a light red.

As she worked, she let her tears fall freely. Those, too, were life. She had a feeling— no, she *knew* they were important, but she couldn't place why. The reason had been lost to her, and as she dwelled on it, a fleeting, familiar thought fluttered back to roost with her again.

It was not supposed to lose the orb.

It was all connected, wasn't it? She just had to find the **orb**, and the rest would fall into place.

She yearned to **understand**.

She *had* to.

Crow shivered, her entire body rattling with the effort of staying warm. She only had a little bit longer to get the blood out before she'd have to get out of the washbasin, lest she pass out from the cold.

Knowing that, she kept on fighting. It was bitter, and painful— but it was the kind of pain that brought back clarity rather than stealing it.

Weasel's right, she thought, sighing as she plunged her head under the water again. The cold bit at the roots of her hair, tearing away at her— but it was not the feeling of being devoured, no. Instead, it was the feeling of being cleansed, uplifted. She could feel it all— whatever "it all" was— being quickly, firmly, shunted away, sent away from her. *I can fix this. I can piece everything back together.*

They'd signed up to fight me. That's that. I've killed before, and soon, I'll do it again.

Her entire body rattled continuously, shaking and trembling like leaves in a typhoon. Her teeth chattered constantly, and three moments after she could no longer bear the cold, she finally scrubbed out the last of the blood.

Cleansed, she pulled herself out from the oaken washbasin and onto the soft pad on the floor Weasel had left for her. It was just layered towels, but to her, it was so much more than that.

She reached out her arm to the hook on the side of the washbasin and claimed another towel, a black one, then pulled it over herself. She vigorously rubbed out all of the moisture from her feathers and fur— a long, *long* process of rubbing and wringing and fluffing and more aggressive rubbing, but by the end of it, she was mostly dry.

Crow turned her head to look at herself in the polished metal mirror. Weasel had set it on the floor, leaned against the wall, so she'd be able to see herself in it.

Love.

Her fur was stained lightish pink with bright white tips, and from ear to talon-tip, she was puffed out from the towel drying. She looked fluffy, perhaps even cuddly, and her downy feathers, too, puffed out and pushed her exterior contour feathers further out.

Her flesh, meanwhile, was a clammy, pale blue, purple around the edges, and a warm, soft pink around her scars.

Then, she took in a deep breath,

[inhale]

and dared to look at her face in the mirror again.

[exhale]

Silently, Crow dropped the towel to the floor and slowly padded across the hardwood floor, out of the washroom, and into the common area.

A chair at the edge of the eating table had been turned to face the washroom, and there was a stack of fresh clothes on it. *Her* clothes.

She began to get dressed, and only when she was halfway through getting on her garments did Weasel's ears perk up from the sound of her. He did not look up from his book, although he was seated at the eating table, scarcely a bodylength away from her, back turned.

Crow, likewise, did not bother to see if he was looking at her.

When she was finished dressing, Crow sat down in the chair her clothes had been in and looked down silently at her lap. Her hands were in her lap. There was blood on them again.

"Get all the blood out?" Weasel asked, closing his book.

"*yeah*," she whispered, hand twitching. "I did."

"May I turn around?"

"*yeah*," she whispered, voice cracking.

Weasel stood up, rounded his chair to face her, and frowned.

"You're bleeding."

"*yeah*," she cried. Her tears fell immediately, stinging in the fresh cuts along her face, and the bloody tears dripped down onto—

—a fresh washcloth, which Weasel immediately pulled off of the table and set in her lap before the blood could stain her clothing.

Weasel clicked his tongue. She really was just like Wolf.

Life was cruel like that.

"—i'm sor, ry—" she gasped, sputtering, as she broke down into tears again. She'd lost count of how many times it'd happened here already. She didn't like to think about it. She wanted to be in control. She wanted, so badly, to be in control, but—

"Crow," Weasel said gently as he knelt down beside her.

This time, she looked to him without further coaxing.

"It's okay."

"But—"

He pulled out a clean handkerchief from the breast pocket of his neatly-tailored vest and cupped the bleeding side of her face with it. Then, he looked into her eyes with a fierce resolve.

"Listen."

Crow nodded.

"There are two choices ahead of you," Weasel said, slipping his free hand underneath Crow's right hand— the freshly bloodstained one.

Crow nodded again.

"You can either give in, let go, and die miserable without any of the things you want or need, *or*"

Weasel narrowed his eyes and brought her right hand up, placing it on top of his own hand that cupped her bleeding cheek with the handkerchief.

Then, he took his hands away, allowing her to staunch her own bleeding. He looked at her silently.

"What's the other option?" She asked softly, voice more solid than before.

"You can keep trying."

"I wanna keep trying," she said immediately. Her chin rose a little bit. Outside, she could hear the cold wind howling. She could hear the world still turning.

She wanted to be a part of that.

"I know you do," his smile was soft and small and confident. He sighed, as he was wont to do, this time a sigh of relief. "Why is your face bleeding?" He asked, giving her no time for rest.

"Because I looked in the mirror— and— and— I couldn't— it was so— and I panicked, and I just wanted it to go away, and then my claws were out, and—" Crow collected her breathing, took in a deep breath, then stilled her heart. She could at least do that much. **She had to keep trying.**

"Hey," Weasel grinned, rustling what remained of the hair on her head. She'd lost so much of it since she'd came here with Finch. "You kept yourself calm," he nodded, "good job."

Crow's feathers stood up on end from the warm feeling of Weasel's praise. But then, confused, they fell again.

"But my cheek—"

"Crow," he sighed, *again*, "do you plan on doing it again?"

She shook her head so fast that her neckjoints crackled and popped with the motion. "No!"

"Then it sucks that it happened, but otherwise, it's okay. Okay?"

He made everything so *simple*. Was it because he was old? Was every gray whisker another lesson learned?

"Okay," Crow nodded sagely, swaying easily from side to side. Her clothes, clean and crisp and well-fitted, swished along with her motions.

She grinned. How could she have forgotten them already?

"Thank you so much," she intended to stop speaking there, but could not, and her mouth pulled itself open again to continue, and her throat forced out more sounds she hadn't planned, "for the clothes, and um, the, towel, and um, fixing the clothes, and taking me somewhere safe, and looking out for me, and," the same thing, with her mouth and throat, happened yet again, "and the hugs, and being kind, and nice, and for not looking at me, but also for looking at me correctly— when I need it— and for holding my hands, and me, and dealing with my tears, and just being so kind and nice and um, oh dear, *thank you!*" She squeaked at the end, face scrunched up in embarrassment, and she rushed up from the chair— which again clattered to the floor—

and she hugged him.

Love.

"You're welcome, kiddo," he smiled, awkwardly stooping down to return her hug. He was no good with kids, but, he could at least do this much.

She deserved it.

"Did you end up finding **it**?" He asked, breaking the long silence.

Crow thought for a moment, then realized she didn't really know. Her heartbeat doubled, then tripled, and she felt her mind slipping away towards another memory.

But she did not want to let go of this moment, and so she did not, and so she stayed present with him, prying off the claws of the memory one at a time from the edges of her consciousness.

If she had found **it**, there would be no uncertainty. If she found **it**, she would know.

"No," she said softly, sighing. "But that's okay." She stepped back from Weasel, slipping out of the hug, as she looked up to him proudly, chin raised as high as her monumental accomplishment.

He nodded in turn. "Yes, exactly, dear Crow. Good job!"

Her feathers stood up on end from the warm feeling of his praise, and this time, they were not confused, and they did not fall back down.

Weasel hid his smile behind his palm. She was too damn cute.

"It's okay because I'm going to keep trying." She finished, nodding seriously, eyes closed.

But even with both eyes closed, an amber-orange glow flooded her right eye as her eyepatch began to heat up and push its warmth into the skin around her face. At once, her scars started to itch, and her fingers holding the handkerchief twitched, but she did not tear away at her face again.

"Your **crest** is glowing." Weasel said curiously.

"My **crest**?" She asked, bringing her free hand up to her eyepatch as she opened her metal, uncovered eye. The eyepatch had a raised surface, and it was warm, and shining brightly.

"Um," Weasel cleared his throat awkwardly. "The crest you share with **Finch**. The one you two asked for specifically. You were quite proud of the design, you know? Are you..."

Weasel continued to speak, but Crow could no longer hear him over the sound of her own blood coursing through her ears. She felt the pressure of it building, climbing, up and up and up as adrenaline coursed through her veins.

Tonight, she thought, taking in a deep breath, attempting to calm her nerves.

[inhale]

"I'm sorry, I need to go—" she said suddenly, turning towards the door. She took only a single step before Weasel placed a hand on her shoulder and stopped her.

[exhale]

"Go? Where? What is it you need to do? You need to rest, Crow, you're still—"

"Let. Go." Crow winced, wrenching her arm away from him. How *dare* he touch her without—

[inhale]

[exhale]

—she paused, taking in more deep, shaking breaths as she forced herself to calm down.

Weasel looked at her back with a sad, forlorn gaze, and he immediately let go. With every moment, she resembled Wolf more.

Life was cruel like that.

"I usually wouldn't pry, but given the situation," Weasel took in a deep breath and straightened his already-perfect posture. "I will know where the last of my **kin** is off to."

Crow flinched.

Her hissing sigh of relief as she barely reined in her rampant feelings signaled the end of her brief respite.

"I'm going to go kill Henrich," she said simply, "because I owe a life debt to Finch."

"What? **Henrich**? At his **fortress**?! In your condition? Can't you—" He brought his hands up to his face and massaged the new wrinkles in his forehead— only for a moment—

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

And in an instant,

she was gone again.