

High Tide
Chapter 24

Crow's eye snapped open and the world came into sharp focus around her. Rough ropes bound her wrists to the chair she was sitting in, and as she came to, Weasel entered the room. He opened his mouth to speak, but she interrupted him,

"Thank you, Weasel, for everything."

He looked stunned, then moved over quickly and unbound her. The ropes dropped softly to the floor in short order. "You're welcome." He said, nodding, before looking up at her with clear concern. "Are you feeling alright?"

"No. I haven't for quite some time. I'm going to go wash this blood off."

Weasel stared at her, eyes narrowed. His nose twitched, and his whiskers shifted around in the air in little circles. "We've lived this moment before, haven't we?"

"Only once." Crow admitted, reaching up to the pouch in her chest. The stopwatch was gone, and with it, the piece of her it was bound to had shriveled up and died. It was not a physical one, but something far deeper, far more important.

She was no longer **whole**. She knew, instinctively, that that was the price she'd paid for one last chance. She would never be able to reach **it**, would she?

Furious, Crow shook her head. She didn't have any breaths to waste dwelling on that. She would keep moving forward, as she always did, because that was the only choice left to her.

If everything kept repeating, if every moment of hers was just one of countless identical ones, then she would be the Crow to break the cycle and finally be free of it all.

"What did you do, Crow?"

She reached up and felt around the top of her head. There were only three ears there, where once there were four. Her hair was still in patches. Then, she dropped her hand down to her face— the eyepatch was still there. She tried to blink. She could not. Fresh wounds and pockmarks still covered her face both around and under her beak.

"I... failed," she said simply, before standing up and crossing over to the room with the wash basin. Standing in the doorway, she looked back at Weasel.

"How far back did we go? How long will I have to deal with this deja vu?" He asked, cupping his mouth with his hand as he began to retch from a sudden wave of nausea.

"Just one day. Sorry. Again. For everything."

"Don't be sorry, Crow." Weasel coughed, before clearing his throat and straightening his posture. "Be different."

Ouch. She thought, turning her head away as tears began to form, and wordlessly, she stepped around the corner and pulled herself down into the icy water of the washbasin.

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What will it cost, she thought, as she emerged from the water and hastily began drying herself off. She had spent the long moments in the bath piecing her mind back together; she used the clarity of the pain from the ice-water

to orient herself, to fit the countless disparate memories back together, to try and find some truth buried deep within the remnants of whatever she had become.

Serpent was dead. It had died to save her life. But, too, Serpent had killed her **kin** and brought them back to Raven.

Raven had collected their bodies and used them to torment her. Then, they had broken her down, bit by bit, until only a husk remained. She did not know why. She did not know the specifics of what they had done to her— those memories were still too painful to touch, and her mind, vigilant, and feral like a rabid dog, snapped at her any time she tried to so much as glance their way.

So instead, Crow only knew what she now looked like, and knew only that Raven was to blame. That everything that had happened in her life had come from their action or inaction. That every moment of pain, every heaving breath, all of it was sourced from them for some twisted reason that they always brought back to bear down on her as a pitiable excuse for the inexcusable.

There would be no more of this. She would make certain of it.

Finally, she had come to remember something critically important once she had finally sorted through the majority of the shattered fragments of her mind. She had found **it**, whatever **it** was, and Raven had broken her to make her lose **it** once again.

And that was how she had spent the last five centuries: being broken, then pieced back together again, over, and over, and over again, all so Raven could appraise the way she came together and deem her worthy or unworthy of life.

This, too, there would be no more of. She would make certain of it.

But as she left the washbasin behind and stepped out into the room for eating, she saw that things were different now. Weasel had not made her new clothes, nor had he remained reading at the table. He was off somewhere else, presumably, perhaps dealing with the consequences of the déjà vu that she had forced down his throat.

He was just another person wounded in yet another way by her recklessness.

Once, she had despised that, and would do anything to keep to herself, to keep from hurting another, even if it cost her all she was. Now, though...

Crow looked down at her hands, still tinged pink with blood that she couldn't scrub out.

Now, she could no longer find herself caring. The world moved on, unceasingly, regardless of what broke, of what happened. It cared little for the movings of little creatures such as her; even in their grandest, most dire moments— they could sacrifice everything,

Her breath heaved out, and hot and heavy flames spilled forth, hissing between the gaps in her beak.

Crow swallowed hard as heat and rage rushed through her blood and drowned out her senses. It was all too much. Everything was always too much. No matter how many times she had tried, she had always failed, and now, even the ones that helped her, like Weasel, had turned their back and—

Weasel entered the room with a bundle of fresh, warm clothing neatly folded and stacked in his arms. "Sorry it took so long," he called out as he entered the room, eyes turned away from her. "It was a bit hard to work through the nausea." He swallowed hard, again, as if barely keeping the contents of his stomach under wraps. "Are you covered, or..?"

"No, but I'm not a child, Weasel. You can just look," she muttered as her anger turned into confusion and sputtered out and died. He had still decided to help her? But... *why*?

"Oh," Weasel said, brows furrowing as he turned towards her. She was mainly a ball of fur and feathers, and there was nothing inappropriate for his eyes to catch on in the first place. He wasn't quite sure how to feel about this revelation, and his energy, to, turned into confusion.

Everything was so warped, and twisted, and strange.

As their respective gazes met, they both seemed to share the same feeling for a moment, and though neither of them could put it into words, still, they shared it soundlessly on the bond they had, on the fact that they were **kin**.

"You're off to kill Henrich today, aren't you?"

Fuck, Crow sighed, tilting her chin down to the ground. He still had his memories of what had happened before. That was disastrous, because that meant—

"Yes," she said, nodding. Her path was no different. If anything, it only doubled her resolve. She had to make it right to Finch. She had to make up for her mistakes.

"I'm going to help." Weasel stepped forward and set the clothes down in front of Crow.

Immediately, she began dressing. There was not a breath she could afford to waste. For the same reason, she did not argue against Weasel. She could not control another, and she could not do it on her own. That much had been proven, and in the most painful way.

Her attention turned back to the piece of her that she could feel was missing— the gaping hole left in the side of her soul, the mark that she was no longer **whole**.

"How will you help?" Crow asked as she pushed her wings through the slot in the back of her clothing, then fixed the cloth around the base of them with the buttons.

"It is not just clothes that I can make, dear Crow."

She nodded impatiently as she wiggled her way into her cloak. The moment she was dressed, she would collect her belongings and leave. "I'm not sure I have enough daylight to wait for you to—"

"Any other tailor would need a week to make what you wear now. I spun it in the span it took to wring blood from fur, with not a detail missed." Weasel spoke loudly, and confidently, back straight as he continued. "You will tell me what you need, and I will make it before you go. If you are going to do this, I am going to help you."

Crow hesitated. "But why?"

"Because, Crow, you are just like my dead husband and I can't stand to stand by and let him die a third time. Now tell me what you need."

Crow looked up from her clothes, finally fixed on, and up into Weasel's eyes. They were tired, and even his eyebags had eyebags, but they were determined, and there was no sheen of tears. This, she realized, was *his* chance to make up for a mistake from long ago.

Who was she to deny him that?

"Okay," Crow agreed.

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"Something told me I would be seeing you today," Bishop smiled, extending a hand down to Crow. "Is today the day, dear?"

Crow nodded. "I'm sorry I—"

"Now, now, Crow. Forget it. I do not need apologies, only opportunities. Today is a day hundreds of years in the making. A truly momentous occasion!" Bishop flapped her great bat wings, sending a gust washing over Crow as if to blow her doubts and worries cleanly away.

"How many times have we tried and failed, Bishop?"

"Is that really how you see the world, Crow?"

"What?"

"It is not like you to be so dour." Bishop regarded her closely, craning her neck down and sniffing all over Crow's head. "I thought it was just the pain that caused your change in looks that made you antsy, but it's something deeper, isn't it? You've **lost** something, Crow, something you've never lost before."

"Things cannot stay the same, Bishop." Crow said firmly, standing up straight as she spoke. Her voice was so foreign to herself, so far disconnected from the way she was used to being, but still, she pressed on forwards, "So it is better that they change." She did not flinch at the pain of being reminded of what she lost, and she did not balk at the challenge against herself.

"That may be, though I am left wondering something," Bishop brought her head back away from Crow, and still upside-down, cocked her head to the side.

"I'll fix your wondering if I am able."

Bishop took in a hissing, disappointed breath, and remained silent.

Fear began to claw through Crow from the inside, spreading through her like fire— a feeling she was well accustomed to, recently. The silence from Bishop inspired a potent anxiety that held her heart still and kept it from beating for the moment.

"What is it you are wondering?" Crow asked, stepping closer.

Bishop took a step away. "You've already answered my wondering, dear." She said flatly, face wrinkled in disappointment.

The anxiety let go of Crow's heart and exploded through her chest, filling her body with panic. Bishop had never rejected her outright before. Wasn't seeking help the answer, if she couldn't do it on her own? So why wasn't it working? Why was everything still falling apart again—

[inhale][exhale][inhale][exhale][inhale][exhale]

"To ease your worries will cause you pain. Do you want it?"

"Yes," Crow gasped, choking on her worries. Should she have done something different? This was her last chance, she couldn't afford to make any more mistakes, so if it was falling apart, then it would be the end, and if it was the end, then—

"You are no longer Crow."

The panic in Crow's heart exploded into pain that wracked her body and drove her stumbling backwards, flesh eye twitching beneath her eyepatch, as her poorly-contained rage spilled out and consumed her once again.

"Who are you to say that?!" Crow shouted, fists clenching. Her body filled not with warmth but burning heat. Her veins stood out in her neck and face, and her body trembled as she struggled to contain her emotions that overwhelmed her time and time again. Ever since she had become aware of them, they had been nothing but troublesome.

She wished to do away with them. Then she would be strong enough to handle everything before her.

"It's the truth." Bishop sighed, eyes drooping in disappointment, face wrinkling up in true revulsion. "You are angry because you agree." And with that, she turned her back to Crow, and spread her wings as if to fly away.

"But I need your help!" Crow yelled at her back, "This is our last chance!"

"That is only true for you." Bishop said callously. "Now, I must be off. I am waiting for Crow."

And with that, Bishop left her there in the dark, not bothering to turn her head around, not bothering to explain the troubles in Crow's heart, not bothering to explain what she had seen within her. It was not her problem, after all.

Crow flinched as the tears began to fall without permission or reason. Her chest thrummed with the sickly stain of betrayal. Her mind was a flurry of excuses.

Her heart was wondering only who she was to blame.

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There was no one else for her to turn to. Weasel had done his part. Her kin were dead. Serpent was dead, and a traitor. And Finch...

Crow stared from her perch at the fortress across the river. There was no telling if the plan was still on, or if Finch was even still alive.

Is there even a point in trying? She wondered, numb, as she pulled her arms tighter around her legs that were brought up to her chest, as always, in a tight— now tighter— ball.

She had already tried her hardest, given everything, and failed. Now, they likely knew she was coming, if Weasel's experience with reliving the day was universal. On top of that, Bishop was *right*.

Fuck, she was *right*.

She wasn't herself right now. There was something different, broken, wrong, more than just the sacrifice of her **stopwatch**, more than the missing hole inside her soul that kept her from wholeness.

She was desperate in a way she had never been before, hungry in a way she had never felt before. She had felt emptiness, even profound emptiness, and this still went one layer deeper than even that.

Crow rubbed her face with her hands, then ran them over her head, tousling her own patchwork hair, closing her one working eye. Even so shortly after scorning them she was already turning back to her feelings— those fickle things— trying to sort through them, sift for something useful. But as she turned her gaze inward, her thoughts fell through her fingers and ran away from her, scattering like bugs beneath the light.

She was **broken**, wasn't she?

Just like every Crow that came before.

There's no hope for me, is there? She thought, lips trembling as she slightly opened the aperture of her eye and looked up again at the fortress.

It was totally and uncharacteristically silent. Vacant. There were no signs of life, there. They knew. She wouldn't be able to do it. She couldn't. They knew, they knew, they knew...

Did Raven know? Did Raven know what was wrong with her, what had been done to her? Did Raven know what they were putting her through? If she had realized what she was asking for, she never would've—

They had to know, didn't they? What they were putting her through? They had been like her, once, with a normal body with two legs and two arms, with one head and one heart set to beat in pair with her own. They had cared for her, in the real way that one could care for another, they had sworn to her, and still..

Crow ran her hands through her hair again, then dropped her hands down to rub her pockmarked face. There was so much wrong she could not even count it. There was so much wrong that she could hardly feel it. Every off-thing was so much more off than she could handle, and every off-thing was just another on a pile— a mountain— of off-things that set her off. Things she couldn't change, set her off, *she* was off, just another off-thing, just another awful thing,

she was just an awful, wretched thing, every breath stolen from the world in spite of it. It was no wonder she would burn it all down. In a world like this, how could a blazing pyre ever be expected to quench itself, to temper down to a balmy warmth where, within, it was an all-consuming blaze?

Crow felt the heat building up within her again.

Only this time, she could not hold it back.

It spilled out at once through the hole in the side of her soul, manifesting at once within her body, searing away her inhibitions and relaxing every fiber of her being even as it catalyzed them into motion.

The pain slipped away as the warmth took hold.

She had to have the warmth.

She could no longer bear the pain.

She had things to do.

She had so many things to do.

She had so much left to do, so soon, to do right now, there was no waiting, she had to *go*, and so,

she turned to the only thing she knew could keep her warm:

the fire in her heart,

and the promise she had sworn.

As Crow stood up on the edge of the building, looking down on the city and fortress below, once again, **her eyepatch began to glow**. She nodded to herself, then slipped off the edge of the roof, wings spread to glide down to the ground. By the time she landed, the glowing had cut off, and abruptly.

Finch was in danger.

It did not matter if she burned it all away, if she failed, or if today was her final day. If she was no longer Crow, then there was no other way. The least she could do was move forward. The least she could do was *try*.

If she was a dead girl walking,

she would at least choose how she died.

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Crow took the main road toward the fortress. Her steps were slow, self-assured, confident. Each footfall scorched the stone beneath her, and each breath sent out a thin hiss of white flames through the chips in her beak's bladed edges.

A strange calmness had washed over her— one she had never felt before, not while awake, not while in control of her body. It was like the way she felt when she was dreaming, truly safe, truly sequestered from the workings of the waking world. It was also like the way she felt when she was fenzied; her body so attuned to her that she did not feel it, that every moment of herself was somehow preordained— as if she was not only stepping into the future, but forcing her way into a new one of her own making.

Somewhere deep inside her mind, she had accepted her coming death. And in doing so, she had let go of being Crow, she had let go of worries, of strife, of pain. There was no need for that where she was going.

Another step forward. Another moment closer to oblivion.

She would have succeeded, before, if she had truly given everything, but she had not. She knew it to be true, in her mind and in her heart, that still she had held back from sacrificing every part that made her her, that made her breathe, that made her live.

If truly she had cared, she would have died, and yet she lived.

Only part of her soul had been destroyed. Only a fraction of her had been consumed. If she was being honest with herself, then there was yet more that she could do. By crushing only a fraction of her soul, a tiny piece of who she was, she had rewound the entire world a single day— every person and every place— shunted back from whence they came.

She had so much left to give, so much left to burn. She failed because she stopped herself, she failed because she had not earned the success she felt that she deserved. She wavered, and so she faltered, and in her faltering, did she fail.

This time, she would not make such a stupid mistake.

Crow would see this through until its end.

[inhale]

She took in a deep breath and stopped, pausing in the center of the road. It was, perhaps, her last chance to breathe deep and still her heart.

There would only be a few more breaths until she had to run again.

She cherished every one of them.

[exhale]

And as she exhaled, she banished all that remained of her weakness.

She let go of all that remained of **Crow**.

She imagined releasing it all along with her breath, and she imagined it being incinerated by the white-hot flames that sent even stone directly to oblivion. Through the fire, she was purified.

By accepting death,

she was finally **free**.

A ballista bolt slashed through the air just to her side and crashed into the ground behind her. The force of it shook the ground, and the shaking of the ground sent her stumbling forward, grinning beneath her beak. Rather than catch her balance, she instead threw herself forward onto all fours, breaking into a run.

Another bolt, and then another, and another. It didn't matter how many they shot, though— they would never hit her.

Crow leaped out of the way of the next bolt, which crashed down into the space she just left. As she landed, another was already flying to her new location, and so she repeated the process, weaving down the massive stone bridge as she sprinted towards her first challenge: the gatehouse of the forward bastion. Beyond it laid the security checkpoint, then another drawbridge, then the main fortress' gatehouse and walls. Beyond that, of course, were all of the guards and defenses in the main plaza...

Crow pulled out the **piece** Finch had fashioned for her, slipping it out seamlessly from an inner pocket of her cloak. As she did, her left hand pulled open and fished around a new pouch at her hip, pulling out one of the countless metal **rounds** Weasel had made for her. She shoved it into the metal barrel of the piece, then pierced her bentfinger on the spike at the back of it. She exchanged her blood for power without flinching, then— still in the air, spinning around— she reached her arm up towards the sky and **fired**.

CRACK!

The metal round flew out so quickly that her target, despite being hundreds of bodylengths away, fell back instantly with a spray of blood as their head was pierced clean through from the shot.

Crow snapped down on the **piece** with her beak, holding it, then landed on her hands and continued running on all fours.

Another guard replaced the one that fell, and the ballista crews continued manning their stations, firing with reckless abandon.

She wondered what Henrich had told them. Was it really so important to stop her?

Did they really think they had a chance?

What will it cost? She mused, leaping into the air once again as a ballista bolt crashed down into the space she left behind only a moment before. In the air, she repeated the process as before, and another one of the guards fell.

She landed, and continued to sprint on ahead.

They were raising the drawbridge. And as they did, she could see the glint of metal in the slits in the walls as more of Henrich's forces moved to take aim with their crossbows.

In just a moment, they would begin firing, and her approach would get substantially more complicated. It was best not to give them the option.

As she drew into crossbow range, her ears perked up with the noise of weapons being raised, pointed straight towards her, towards her heart, her head, her eyes, her ears— and anywhere she might run.

She kept sprinting forward.

Her ears twitched with the sound of drawstrings being loosed, and her body moved on its own, reacting on instinct. Her left hand tucked the **piece** away, and her right hand dove inside her cloak, wrapping around the metal head of her new grapnel. She jumped over the side of the bridge, and as she fell over the side of it, she threw the grapnel out and ahead of her, hooking the inside of the wall.

The rain of bolts clattered onto the bridge uselessly, missing her completely.

And as they clattered overhead, a portend of the storm to come, she swung under the bridge, rope unspooling rapidly from the cache hidden in the countless folds of her clothes. The rope hissed over her hands, zipping by and burning them, until the knot at the end of it slid into her hand and she grabbed it, tight, rope suddenly coming taut as she pulled against it and soared through the air.

Her swing brought her up and around the bridge, sailing high over the other side of it. But as she did, Crow's ears perked up at the sound of drawstrings being loosed, and she let go of the rope, flying up into the air with her momentum.

A hail of bolts cut through the air around her, and she balled up, willing them to miss— for the wind to carry them away— and miraculously, she came out of it unscathed.

Seizing the moment, Crow unfurled her wings and banked to the side, leaning towards the drawbridge just beyond her. She picked up speed, hurtling towards it, as her hands dove inside her cloak to retrieve the **piece** and its ammunition once again.

Only this time, she drew the metal round from a different pouch, and when she fired—

BANG!

CR-BOOM!

The round sparked against the metal chain of the drawbridge's left side, then exploded in a flash of heat and smoke. A piece of the chain fractured, and as the bridge's weight pulled hard on it, the weak link snapped completely in half. A shard of it swiped by her, grazing the side of her cheek, and from her wound poured a mixture of red blood and hissing white flames.

The bridge strained against the single chain left holding it up, sagging on one side while the other tilted ever-so-slightly, twisting the remaining chain. As it struggled to stay upright, winch winding uselessly to maintain its position, Crow pulled her wings in and dove down towards it.

crrreeeeaaaaakkkk the metal groaned and strained as she sped towards the drawbridge. The crossbowmen readied the next volley.

SNAP!

The bridge fell, accompanied by the loosing of a hundred drawstrings, bolts streaking out towards her as she plunged. She had planned to land on the bridge, but had to dive down low to avoid the storm of metal racing towards her.

chchchchchuckachuckachucka **SLAM!!!**

The drawbridge's chain pulled fully through the guide rings, releasing it, and the massive wooden bridge slammed down to meet the stone road that connected the fortress to Escrow proper. As it fell, its shadow fell over Crow, who plunged beneath it, down towards the river below.

She had another grapnel, but she needed to save it for later. So, she reached up into the pouch by her heart—

but there was nothing there, and her thumb pressed down through empty air where once it would have activated her stopwatch.

Shit! She was still plummeting down towards the river, and now, she was out of range to throw her grappling hook. She twisted around in the air, spinning to face upwards towards the sky to appraise her options.

She could try and go back across the road again, now that the bridge was down, but it was unlikely she'd survive the approach— especially without her stopwatch— now that they were fully ready for her and knew which way she was coming from.

So, obscured by the bridge above, she plunged down into the dark and towards the town below, loading her **piece** with another one of her explosive rounds. She waited, and waited, and waited, coming closer and closer to the sharp, pointed wooden-stake roofs, then,

BANG!

CCCRASH!

She fired, striking the metal gate within the mouth of the stormwater outlet, and extended her wings at the last moment, talons grazing the tops of roofs as she pulled back and up in an attempt to direct herself towards the pipe.

Weighed down by her supplies, though, Crow was dipping down faster than she expected. So, she reloaded, piercing her thumb again to refuel the **piece**,

CRACK!

SNAP!

And shot through one of the ropes that dangled down and connected to one of the houses below. Now dangling free, she flew into it, wrapping her whole body around it, and amazingly, it held firm, and her momentum carried her forward, then up into the air, just like with her grappling hook.

At the peak of it, she let go, jumping, then landed down in the mouth of the pipe, crumpling into a ball, rolling over again and again into the stormwater system. Instead of pain from the impact, she felt only warmth, and saw only

the white glow of her flames as more hissed out of her and flickered, licking at the metal walls, scorching and burning them.

She covered the slits in the top of her beak with her drooping, open sleeve, nose wrinkling at the metallic, acrid smell of the burning metal. Still, she pushed on through, running as fast as she could.

They'd only wonder where she went for a bit. She'd have to get through and surface before they prepared something for her above, before they cut off her next way in.

She would do this. She had to.

She wasn't about to sacrifice her life for merely *nothing*.

If she would die, it would be in her terms, on her own count. No one would take a single breath from her.

No one would waste a single moment of her life.

Only she would hold the power to extinguish it.

That, really, was all she had ever wanted.

Control.

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The exit from the stormwater system was not nearly as dramatic as the entrance. Surprisingly, the metal pipe-cover was unguarded. A trap, more than likely— but also her only way inside. This time, knowing the trick to it, she forced it up and open easily, using her flames to weaken the stone and make a gap for her to force her arms and beak through before wrenching the cover far enough to the side where she could sneak in.

As before, it was a blank, and empty place of straight hallways connected in a maze of criss-crossing patterns, each wall lined with unlabeled dark-brown doors that she had forced open before.

Her mind drifted to Finch, and what must have become of her. Their connection had been shut off so suddenly— had her father taken control, just as she had said? Had he perversely invaded her mind, scraped it for secrets, and left her a husk?

Was the whole plan compromised?

And did it matter?

It wasn't exactly like she could commandeer the ballista again, nor did she have any desire to rip her leg nearly fully off her body once again. That, indeed, had not gone so well.

Even **warm**, the memory of it, flashing through her mind before it burned away, caused her to shudder.

No *matter*, she thought, running through the place until she reached the stairs. *On with the original plan. It's not like I have a better one.*

But as she went down the stairs and into the dark basement where the storage room lay waiting for her, she was struck by the sudden, and overwhelming, silence of the place. Let alone the actions of the ballista crew on the roof, she could not even hear breathing, or moving of any kind— this place was as silent as a tomb.

A *trap*, her heart recognized it for what it was immediately. But did it matter? All of this was a trap. She was pushing, willingly, into the heart of the most fortified place in the world owned by the most paranoid man in the world. If she could not overcome the traps she could tell were there, what hope was there for her to overcome the ones she would not see coming?

Trepidatiously, with lips pulled into a snarl beneath her beak, she kicked open the door to the basement floor and dove to the side, cowering behind the stairs.

She had expected a rush of armed guards, a blast of fire, *anything*,

but instead, there was nothing but quiet and shadows cast by the few rays of light that passed through the metal bars set high in the ceiling of this floor.

What? She thought, cautiously peering around the corner. Her metal eye took a moment to adjust, but then could pierce through the dark. There seemed to be nothing waiting here for her. And yet...

Her heart slowed, then spasmed once, and her chest tightened with fear. There *was* a trap here. She was certain of it.

Wasn't she?

Crow stepped into the basement, paused for two breaths, then carried on along the near wall, towards the storage room. Still, there was nothing, and she appeared to be safe— at least for now. Perhaps the guards had moved deeper into the fortress? Consolidate their forces to be safest against her? Or, perhaps...

Crow held her hand out to the smooth graymetal handle of the storage room, and froze there, hand hovering in the air, just above the handle. The trap was *here*, on *this* door— stood tall on the other side of it, waiting for her to enter, that it might pounce.

"...crow?" Finch's voice rang out from the other side of the door.

Fuck! Crow thought, bursting through it without hesitating. She *knew* it was wrong, but she couldn't help herself— not when she was *right there*, not when—

"Hello, *little Crow*," Henrich cooed from his seat atop a pile of neatly-folded uniforms stacked on top of one of the many crates within the room. His feet were propped up on another crate that had been brought to him and set down, and he reclined, relaxed,

as Finch automatically lunged out from beside the door and caught Crow mid-step by the throat.

Crow's right hand shot up to where Finch's hand was locked around her tiny throat, *squeezing, squeezing*, ready to crush the life out of her at a moments notice.

Crow pretended to panic, legs curling up, talons wrapping around Finch's arm, curling up fully into a ball so that her body would mask the movements of her left arm, which was searching around her pockets, searching, searching,

"It seems your little rebellion has been..." Henrich pretended to cover his fake smirk with his hand as he continued, "*choked out*, hm?"

COME ON! Crow thought, left hand plunging into yet another pocket. She made a show of struggling against Finch's grip, clawing at her with reckless abandon, scratching her arm up and down with her claws and talons, kicking away, flipping around her clothes as much as she could. She snarled, to cover the sound of her digging, and gasped, and sputtered, "you—" she coughed.

"I, *what*?" Henrich chortled, rising to his feet, posture relaxed, as though this was a typical, daily chore for him. Nothing more than taking out the trash.

Perhaps that's how it was, for him.

The thought of it caused fresh flame to flash out around her metal eye, which tightened, focusing closely on Henrich as she pierced her thumb on the edge of the **piece**. It siphoned out another batch of blood from her, and hastily, she skittered her hand across its surface, loading another round into the end of the barrel. She just had to keep him distracted for a moment longer.

"You— you—" she spat, directly in his face, hitting her mark perfectly— as she always did.

"Ah, come now." Henrich sighed, pulling out his already-readied handkerchief which he used to dry up the spittle. "You can do better than that. Aren't you going to shoot me, or something?" He spread out his arms expectantly.

Crow froze.

To that, Henrich laughed, and laughed, and laughed in her face as he drew closer and clapped a hand down on Finch's shoulder.

Her finger curled around the trigger, and she clenched her teeth, flattening her ears down against the top of her head.

She had to at least try.

CRACK!

The metal round ripped through her clothes and pierced directly through his chest. The force of it sent him staggering backwards, and immediately, a pool of red began to form from the fresh hole that had been punched cleanly through him.

Without hesitating, she began to reload as he clutched a crate behind himself, steadying, as his other hand flew to his chest and gripped around the wound.

"You *idiot!*" He screamed at Finch, disregarding Crow. "What part of *restrain her* was unclear?! Is your mind truly so addled?" He raised his hand up towards her, then clenched it, and accordingly, Finch's hand crushed down on Crow's throat so tightly that her vision cut out and was replaced with swimming sparks and stars that danced around and obscured the world.

She heard her **piece** clatter to the ground.

*"If the plan is not going according to, well, **the plan**, remember this, and allow it to guide you, like the moon: his greatest weakness is his arrogance. Exploit it, Crow, and spell his doom."*

"I'm... sorry," Crow whimpered, pathetically, as she allowed her arms to go limp. She was used to being prey, to placating those much stronger than herself.

She was used to showing the world only what it wanted to see.

Henrich, in that way, was no different than Raven. And if she could handle that God, then she could handle this lonely little reject of a man.

Henrich smiled with glee, as though her pleading soothed his pain, his worries. Already, he assumed himself to have won, for a second time.

He stooped down low, picking up the **piece**.

It took all of her willpower not to sink her talons into his eyes, to lash out and strike him, then and there.

But her next attack would have to be her last one— there was no way he'd be foolish enough to overlook her thrice. No. No, indeed, only twice she'd have a chance.

"P—p--plea, please," she sputtered, gasping more than she had to, writhing in the most pathetic way she could as she wracked her mind for answers, poring through her mental list of what she had brought along with her today. There was the other grapnel, her bashing stone, her ammunition...

"Please what, Crow?" He sighed, holding up her hand, from which fire poured, before shoving it up to the wound in his chest. The flesh seized and sizzled immediately, searing shut, blood vessels fried before they could pour out any

more of his blood. He did not flinch, nor wince, instead sighing again as he dropped her hand and stepped away, callously studying the design of the **piece**.

"C-caut--cauteriz...zation.." Crow mumbled. Her vision was spinning, mind slipping to a different place.

Unexpectedly, the grip on her throat loosened, and blood rushed into her head, dizzying her and filling her with nausea. Her ears filled with the sound of rushing blood, blocking the sound of Henrich's voice as he asked her something.

CRACK!

He shattered some bone in the side of her face as he smashed the base of the **piece** into the side of her head.

Head pounding, ears still ringing, he repeated his question, louder.

"And what is it you know about *cauterization*, hm?" He asked, tilting her head up by the tip of her beak with the barrel of the **piece**. He stuck his thumb to the base of it, and it bit into him, siphoning out enough blood for another shot.

She had not seen him load it, yet. That was good.

"Cauteri..zing... a wound... doesn't.." she coughed, making sure to turn her head away so that the fire that spilled from her beak would not singe his face.

His arrogance would only provide her one more opening. She'd have to make it count.

"Doesn't help with healing, yes, I know." He sighed, and did not move, as though having expected her to turn her fire away from him. "There is also the matter that I am bleeding from my back as well, and the internal bleeding besides."

"So... *w..hy..?*" She croaked, the her voice barely intelligible from the creaking of Henrich's black-leather gloves against the wooden handle of the **piece**.

"To see how it affected you, of course." He said flatly, pulling in his face until his eyes were almost touching her own. He stared, challengingly, unblinkingly,

Now! She jolted, lunging up with her claws, slashing his throat clean across. The blood sprayed out at once, splattering all over her face and beak, and her flesh eye— even below the eyepatch— dilated with all-consuming pleasure as she watched the pretty red river *run* and gush out.

She'd done it. She'd really done it!

His body collapsed, falling down, crumpling into a heap at her feet.

But, Finch's grip on her throat did not relax, not even the slightest bit.

Not even one breath later, nor two, nor three. She simply stood there, wordlessly, grip unceasing, gaze unrelenting, staring off into the distance.

A growing sense of dread took over Crow, and she thrashed around, bringing both hands up to pull at Finch's hand, clawing away with her hands and talons, but it was no use.

Clack, clack, clack.

Someone in hardleather boots approached without caution from behind, clacking away at a relaxed pace, almost a stroll, approaching her.

Clack, clack, clack.

And then, just behind her head, they leaned in to her ear, and spoke:

"How interesting." Henrich said, his voice unmistakeable.

"But—" Crow gasped, eyes snapping open as she thrashed around.

"Oh, please, Crow. I thought better of you, especially with your reputation. You really are nothing special, huh?" Henrich tutted. "I held Raven in higher regard, really. But *this* is how their finest creation holds up? How..." Henrich sighed, then stood up, pulling away from Crow's ear. "Disappointing."

Then, he began to walk away. The sound of his footsteps indicated he was heading for the stairs.

"Finch, darling," he called over his shoulder. "Be a good girl and let's get going."

Automatically and emotionlessly, Finch let go of Crow's throat and pulled her close, arms wrapping fully around her, locking her in place, all limbs pinned down against hard metal.

"Finch," Crow whined, banging her head against her chest. "*Finch!*" She repeated, louder, still banging away.

Clang, clang, clang.

"Don't you remember *anything*? What happened to our *promise*?" Crow whispered, rebellion dying away as Finch continued to ignore her. It was if she did not even exist.

Finch began to walk, and quickly, she caught up to her father, and the two walked side-by-side up the stairs. Henrich smiled, humming to himself, as they carried on.

"Isn't this so nice?" He asked, turning his head to her.

"Yes, Father." She said instantly and emotionlessly.

His smile died as his eyes dropped down to Crow, then he faced ahead again. "Things always go so much smoother when you just *listen*." He sighed contentedly, then carried on in silence.

"You're an idiot, Henrich." Crow hissed.

"Is that so." He remarked, carrying on without regarding her.

"A foul miscreant,"

"Oh my." He said flatly.

His eyes narrowed, though. That was good. She was annoying him, even if it was only the sound of her voice, and not what she was saying. He was paranoid, arrogant, and a control freak. There had to be *something* she could do with that. She couldn't just give up, not after coming so *close*.

Even if he had a hundred extra bodies, she would cut him down, however many times she had to. That was the weight of her word. That was the reason for every breath. Seeing how he changed Finch, seeing what he did to her... her life-debt transcended a simple bond.

Now, it was also *personal*. How *dare* he take her life away from her, as simply as breathing. Was she a daughter, a tool, or a toy? How could he be so callous?

He was no different than Raven.

Crow smirked as a wicked idea wormed its way to her.

"It's a shame, really..." Crow sighed, faux-forlorn.

"Whatever dig you are setting up, it will not faze me, Crow. Could you please just be silent?" He closed his eyes momentarily and furrowed his brows, then sighed, as if steeling his resolve, before looking at her, genuinely.

"Please?"

"You are so crude compared to Raven."

Henrich looked away and sighed in irritation. "Do you think I don't know that?"

"What?" She said, shocked. Wasn't he arrogant?

"Why do you think you live, Crow?"

"Because..." she trailed off, then gave the matter some actual thought. "You have some use for me, I imagine."

"Therefore..."

She grit her teeth beneath her beak. She hated the implication, and her feathers bristled at it.

"I am far more than a product of Raven."

"Perhaps that is true in your own life, Crow, but that is all you are to me. A matter of study, and nothing more."

"I will just give you what you want, if you let me go."

"Obviously, you will not be let go. You live with us, now."

"What?!" She exclaimed, thrashing in Finch's grasp. If only she—

"On top of being a useful specimen, you are, I believe, the *only* leverage I have over my darling daughter. She's in her rebellious phase, you see, and—"

"I am going to kill you." She said suddenly. As he spoke, something simply *clicked* in her— as though she did not have reason enough to kill him already— and as it fell into place, it was not her resolve, nor her mind, that was settled: it was her doubts. A subtle shift, but a notable one, and the weight of it carried over to Henrich, who looked down to her in concern.

"Must you be so..." he trailed off as he pushed open the door to the main floor of the guardhouse, and they stepped out onto the bridge that led to the main plaza of the fortress. "Troublesome?"

But Crow did not respond. Instead, she had turned her focus within, eyes closed, ears perked up, picking up any information she could, thoughts racing, and turning. Come morning, she would kill him.

She simply knew it to be true.

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The rest of the walk was carried on in silence that started tense and ended casually as they reached the center of the plaza and Henrich began to speak to the guard assembled there.

"I have captured the one called Crow," Henrich said, gesturing to her.

She paid him no mind. She was focused on more important things.

"You three," Henrich singled out a few of the gathered, "go and prepare the **lockbox**, then bring it here. The typical fashionings should be acceptable." He then carried on like this for quite some time, dividing up his staff evenly, assigning them around to a multitude of tasks ranging from essential to trivial. It seemed, to Crow, as though he could not stand the idea of idle laborers, that each and every person must have a task, however small.

And then, they waited. And waited.

And yet waited.

Henrich, at certain points, attempted to make conversation with Finch, but eventually stopped trying, as he was essentially having a conversation with himself, or a brick wall. Crow could not tell which was the actual case.

He tried, also, to pry into her soul, to bind with her, to attempt to bind with her through Finch— a difficult thing for her to deflect— but eventually, gave up on that too, with some remark about 'the proper tools and restraints for the job.'

Crow thought about letting him bind with her, but she had no doubts that he was more experienced than her with **sympathy**, and so while the idea of a counterattack was tantalizing, she had to accept that it was not the opportunity for which she waited.

CRASH!

BOOM!

Crow smiled as a tremor rocked through the plaza as something in the distance exploded and shocked the very foundations of the fortress.

That, indeed,

might be the very opportunity for which she waited.