

Craven
Chapter 25

The world shook again, then, a third time.

Henrich held his ground unflinchingly, though it was clear he had not accounted for this in the day's plans. His steadfast demeanor, though, could have fooled plenty of those in Escrow.

In the far distance at the guardhouse, the guards shouted and screamed, and Crow— eye now open— could see dark shapes soaring through the air above even the walls. One of them came towards her, then smashed against the stone of the pavement, leaving naught but a bloody smear as its limbs tangled and folded inwards from the force of impact.

A corpse. It was flung thousands of bodylengths, but by what?

The blood splatter came just shy of Henrich's boots, and he simply sighed as he knelt down and turned the body over, examining it. As he did, the sounds of battle grew yet louder, with ballistae firing constantly and yet more explosions sounding off.

All around them, guards poured from the buildings all across the plaza and into the fortifications. They were the blood of the fortress, and as they pushed through it, it came to life, and at once, it became clear how Henrich could remain so calm.

The mortar in the walls began to glow red as blood seeped into them, and then— imperceptibly at first, movements growing grander by the moment— the fortress *literally* came to life, moving and shifting in response to the battle. Bricks shifted down the walls like ants carrying food back to the colony, automatically repairing and reinforcing the front-facing sections that were taking the brunt of whatever attack was being launched on the fortress.

"Is it Raven, you think?" Henrich asked casually as he stuck his gloved hand into one of the corpse's wounds, spreading it apart with his fingertips. As he did so, his glove began to glow red, and all at once, the blood was sucked directly from the corpse into it, leaving nothing but a gray, dessicated husk. His glove persisted in its glowing, now thrumming and shifting with some primordial form of life.

Some tiny part of Crow wished it *was* Raven, because then surely, Henrich would die, and her life would be saved. But the rest of her revolted against the idea, determined to make her own way, to separate herself from them as much as possible.

And none of her bothered to answer Henrich's pointless question. They were enemies. She would give him no quarter, let alone information.

"Ah," Henrich said, pulling out a long, barbed spine from deep within the hollow husk. He held it up to the dimming daylight of the clouding sky. The spine gleamed in it, point glistening. Crow recognized the spine at once.

It was Cane's.

CRASH!

The sounds of battle drew closer now, and finally, drew a frown out from the depths of Henrich.

Perhaps a seed of doubt? Crow wondered, now comfortable in Finch's grasp. She quite liked how things were developing.

Henrich turned to face her— no, to look just past her, and then, he smiled. "Excellent!" He called out, dropping the spine into a pocket, before clapping his hands together and standing up.

Crow tried to crane her head around, but could not, and could not see what approached. She could only hear the sound of heavy footfalls on the plaza's stone, and the clattering of chains. Her heart fluttered in panic,

"Seal her away." Henrich called out to the three that approached, then closed the distance to Finch, placing his hand on her shoulder. "And don't let her escape, daughter dearest." He sighed, eyes narrowing as he looked at her.

And then, Finch turned them around, and her heart sank fully.

The three guards approached with a clearmetal coffin filled with chains, covered in esoteric markings, with holes for a head, two arms, and legs— *and it was clearly made to hold her and her alone*. Her head spun at the implications of it, body freezing in terror as she looked down at it. She could not make out even half of the mechanisms held within, nor their purpose, but the idea behind the so-called **lockbox** was clear.

If she allowed herself in it to be sealed, so too would her fate be.

She began to thrash around violently in Finch's arms again, lashing out and flailing relentlessly, but it amounted to precisely nothing. The guards drew closer, and she came no closer to becoming free.

Henrich simply observed callously, though as the **lockbox** was set down at Finch's feet, he allowed himself the faintest smile.

"Would a cell not suffice?!" Crow screamed, kicking and scratching away at Finch.

Henrich looked at her confused. "What? Of course not." And then, he turned his back to them, taking a moment to appraise the situation with the fortress.

Finch knelt down.

The guards pressed the top of the coffin down until it snapped down into the center with a sickening *crunch!*, and then they slid it out through the tiny slit that scored the middle of the side with the head-hole.

For the lid to be removed while she was in it, *it would have to go straight through her body.*

Crow's heart doubled, then tripled, in pace.

There would be no way to remove her from the coffin without killing her.

CRASH!!

Rubble flew overhead and clattered to the ground around them.

"FINCH!" Henrich shouted.

The guards took one look up, then turned and ran away at full speed.

Finch stood up, still holding Crow to her chest, then whirled around and began to run towards her father.

"Ah, hello everyone." Cane smiled warmly, nodding to each of them in turn as he spoke their names. "Crow. Finch. Henrich. Always a pleasure."

"How's business?" Henrich asked coldly, body stiff, posture rigid.

"Booming." Cane said with a toothy grin. "Especially with the new property acquisition."

Henrich shook his head furiously. "You'll die trying."

"Way I see it," Cane snorted, "Little miss here is busy keeping the other little miss from ripping your head off. Your guards are busy with my boys. Well, the ones that aren't pissing their pants running at the sight of me," he laughed. "Which leaves you and me. Not much of a fight, old boy."

Crow turned her head to look at Henrich, then back at Cane, then back at Henrich once again.

And then, she began to laugh. It was a haughty, defiant chirp of disbelief. She tried to keep it quiet, but that was the only thing she could no longer be. It was all too much, much too much, and as she giggled, and giggled— flesh eye flexing down an eyelid that was no longer there— inside her grew the **flame**, and with it, the **heat** within her flared.

Henrich and Cane stopped their stalemate to look at her: Henrich disapproving, Cane confusedly.

"Let me go," she spat, white flame hissing freely out. Then she turned to Cane, "Knock me loose and I'll help you."

Cane smiled as he considered the offer. A fight with Henrich and the hobbled Finch, or a fight alongside Crow against them both. The fight would be harder, but it would tire Crow out— she had little stamina, he remembered— and that would make her much easier to take care of than fighting her while she was still fresh. And if he ended up too injured from the fight to take care of her tonight, the gratitude that he earned might save him from an extra fight.

Infected by Crow's glee, he began to whirl his colossal arms through the air, building up momentum. He was a businessman first and foremost: and he was well accustomed to risk.

Henrich was following a similar line of thought, weighing the costs and benefits. In any case, it would be better to have Finch helping defend him, and if he could somehow hand her the **piece** she'd made... the fight could end quite quickly, and in their favor.

He hated risk, and so he move to minimize it. "DROP HER!" Henrich shouted, jumping back as he did.

In the next moment, everyone moved as one:

Finch dropped Crow instantly, then kicked off the ground to cover Henrich with her body.

Henrich loaded the **piece** with something from a pocket.

Crow grinned at Cane, and in an instant, she was gone again, leaving nothing behind but tendrils of white flame that lingered for a moment before dying out.

Cane leaped forward and swung his arms overhead, bringing them crashing down into the ground.

And finally, the first drops of rain began to fall.

The ground exploded from the impact, sending stone fragments and spines flying out in all directions. The air filled with the sound of clanging metal as Finch shielded her father, stones and spines pinging off of her back and careening off into the distance.

Crow was nowhere to be seen, somehow having vanished in the completely flat plaza.

While still in the air, Cane lifted up his arms once again, and as he landed, he broke into a sprint, heading straight for Finch. Fresh spines pierced through the writhing, winding purple muscles of his arms that squirmed like a bundle of snakes.

Henrich pushed Finch towards Cane, and she spun around: top half first as she backpedaled, bottom half twisting around and snapping into place shortly after.

Cane surged forward, crashing into her with his full momentum. Just before they collided, Finch skid to a halt and dropped into a squat as spikes shot out from the soles of her feet and speared into the ground.

Cane was twice her size, so as the two collided, Finch's hands met Cane's shoulder, which he'd led his charge with. The force of the impact sent her grinding backwards across the plaza, feet cutting straight through the masonry like a plow as stone fragments were sent flying up all around them.

But while she was busy stopping his charge, she had no hands free to keep him from raising up his other arm, palm extended out towards Cane. Her head whipped up to look at his hand, then snapped back to meet his gaze as Henrich sent some command through her mind.

Cane shot out a volley of fresh-formed razor-sharp spines from his palm, and they whistled through the air, closing the distance to Henrich in an instant. But just before they hit him, Henrich dropped down and planted his

glowing-red fist into the ground. The energy from it surged into the masonry and brought it to life, and the bricks rushed up from the ground, forming a wall in front of him. The spines pierced through it, stopping mere antslengths from his face.

Henrich's eyes were wide, but sharp with determination, and he picked himself up from the ground and began to run again, now covered by the wall.

Until suddenly, just as he passed the husk he'd drained for blood, he found himself tripping and crumpling down onto the ground, tumbling head-over-ass from his momentum as pain shot through his body as blood sprayed from his ankle's severed tendon.

"Fuck!" He gasped, slamming his fist into the ground, forming a shell of bricks around himself just as Crow leaped towards him, landing on top of the stone. He sent a new command to Finch, but before she could arrive, he found himself baking alive in a sweltering rush of heat as white flames scorched the outside of his tomb. Above, he could hear the hissing sound of raindrops evaporating on impact.

Finch slammed into Crow from behind, sending her flying away before crashing down, *hard*, and sliding across the pavement. Finch then broke open the brick shell and hauled Henrich out of it, running away with him towards the dome at the center of the plaza.

Cane and Crow exchanged a look. He seemed pleased, but there was still anger in his eyes. It was clear he wanted to kill her. In that, she thought, he was justified. The feeling wasn't mutual, but it didn't have to be.

Their fight could wait.

Crow scrambled to her feet and ran to Cane, who cautiously stopped heading towards Henrich to meet up with her instead.

"Throw me!"

"What?"

"Throw. Me."

Cane sighed, then picked her up, reared his arm back, and then, she was soaring through the air, wings spread, fire streaking out behind her.

Cane followed behind, and behind him, the battle for the fortress still raged on: though, really, it would be decided by whoever survived from the four of them.

As Crow dove down from above, talons extended towards Henrich, he whirled around, raised up the **piece**,

CRACK!

and missed completely, metal round not even grazing her.

But just before her talons pierced his flesh, Finch's arm snapped up and blocked them, catching Crow on her arm like a falconer and her falcon. Crow, though, was not easily shaken off, and threw herself forward, talons still wrapped around Finch's arm, spinning down, beak pointed at Henrich's heart like a knife.

In response, Finch bent backwards at the waist on a hinge, pulling Henrich cleanly out of the way. Then, she lifted up one of her legs from the ground mid-stride and snapped it straight up into the air, kicking Crow in the face.

Reeling with pain, and head spinning, Crow's talons went limp for a moment and she fell to the ground. Before she had even hit it, Finch had already recovered her stride and made great distance from her.

Head aching, Crow lifted up her trembling arm, palm outstretched towards Finch, before her arm fell limp and her head drooped down, hitting the ground. She could hardly move at all, and her head pounded as if she was being kicked over, and over, and over again.

But then, just before Finch reached the door,

BOOM!

a boulder of cobbled stones flew over her head and crushed the door, blocking the entrance completely. Finch spun around to see Cane smiling as he bent over forwards, crushing stones between his hands, packing them into another boulder as easily as forming a snowball.

This time, though, he didn't bother making it very large, and launched it straight at her.

CRASH!

Finch barely dodged to the side before the tight-packed ball of stone ripped through the air next to her, piercing straight through the metal wall of the dome before coming apart inside, stones clattering around as shrapnel.

Henrich, now slung over Finch's left shoulder, grit his teeth and gripped the **piece** tight in his hand. Crow would get up soon. Working with Cane, one of them would inevitably land a lucky hit on him. Finch couldn't defend him properly while holding him, and he was in too much pain to aim the damn thing properly.

"*Kill them*," he hissed, slamming the **piece** into Finch's open hand.

But the moment he did, he felt something *sever* in his soul, and his eyes went wide in panic.

Of course— he thought, but it was too late.

Finch had already slammed the back of the **piece** into his neck, siphoned enough blood for a single shot, then dropped him like a sack of potatoes.

As his back hit the ground, he looked up at her, eyes still wide in panic.

Her eyes, which he had made for her, looked back emotionlessly. In their design, he had seen emotionality as weakness, as information her opponents might use against her. Now, he would give anything to know what she was feeling as she loomed over him.

Cane lowered the ball of packed stone and began to walk towards them.

The rain was now falling normally: a simple shower. It would only get heavier.

"Why are you panicking, *father*?" She asked, voice calm and clear as a mountain spring. With her free hand, she plucked a pebble from the boulder next to her and loaded it down the barrel. "You should be proud."

Henrich was now staring up into the barrel of the piece. When she pulled the trigger, he would die. Desperately, he reached out with his soul, trying to **bind** to her, but each and every attempt found nothing before him.

"I learned from you, after all, how to ruminate so endlessly that there is no space left uncovered by my contingencies." The volume of her voice raised, and she clenched her free hand into a fist, finally **free**.

Henrich did not respond. If only he'd had time to search her memories more thoroughly before Crow arrived, perhaps he would've been able to see the trap she'd—

"Are you serious, *father*?" Finch knelt down on one knee by his side, glaring at him from a little bit closer. "Nothing to say?"

"Drop it, Finch. We can still be a family. I forgive you."

Finch turned her head away in disappointment, lowering the **piece** as she did. There was no rush. It's not like he could take it from her. He had bound to the **piece**, and that had been his final mistake. Now that it held a portion of his sympathy, it searched it out and nullified it completely— its true purpose, hidden by its identity as a weapon.

Even if Crow had failed, he would have turned the **piece** against her, then inevitably forced Finch, instead, to pull the trigger. She could count on his cruelty.

Sympathy was built on **understanding**, and she understood him better than even herself. He had made sure of that. And so, his fate had been sealed from the start.

As she looked away in disappointment, she saw Cane standing there, awkwardly watching. And, too, she saw Crow, hobbling over, clutching her head in both hands. A strange, unusual surge of energy coursed through Finch's wires

and tubing as she watched the burning, bleeding Crow, trying so hard to reach her, even knowing what she had done to her, and *still* moving forward on her behalf. What a girl.

Soon, they'd be happy together. They were finally free.

Finch waited for Crow to reach her, then pulled her close to her side, holding her up with one arm as the other held the **piece** tightly. Crow slumped into her, whimpering in a mixture of pain and contentment, eye closed gently. Her flames licked up the side of Finch's body, but they did not harm her. Instead, the endless cold inside her metal frame, for once, began to feel some semblance of **warmth**. If she could have smiled, she would have. But her father had taken that from her, too.

Eventually, Finch pulled her gaze away from the peaceful, resting Crow to look back up at her father.

Henrich pulled himself up into a sit, leaning his back up against the boulder. His mind was racing, wondering how, exactly, he'd pull himself out of this. He'd have to start over, with Finch, perform another full wipe, then raise her again. Perhaps this time, he'd do it right, and she wouldn't grow up hating him. She'd just been so *off* ever since her mother died, but he could—

"Are you going to kill him or not?" Cane called out.

The rain was falling heavily, now.

"I'm figuring that part out." Finch said, watching Henrich's reaction carefully. His eyes swapped from panic, to hope, then scheming, then self-recognition, then partial worry, before masking scheming as hope. Unfortunately for him, he'd made her too perceptive.

"Finch, I—"

"I pity you." Finch interrupted. "Have you felt a thing, since mother died?"

Henrich's eyes turned back to worry. "No."

He was just saying whatever he had to to stay alive, while pretending his feelings were genuine. If she could boil over with rage, she would, but **he had stolen that from her, too**. Her entire body was wracked with the grief of the fact there would be no happy ending. He would never come to his senses, he would never understand that he was in the wrong, and he would never let his mask crack for long enough to justify what she felt.

This, then, had to be *his* final contingency. A trap of the heart.

A test of her will.

"I am going to pull this trigger, and you will die."

Henrich's gaze fell to look at the ground. Defeat, resignation, but notably,

not a hint of shame. There was no regret.

"Do you regret what you did?"

Henrich looked up to her, sharing one final look between them. And for the first time, perhaps ever, it was genuine.

"I regret only that I failed." He sighed. Acceptance. "Just kill me, daughter. Before I say something in desperation that sticks in your mind for the rest of your years."

He was so... *infuriating*, even now, he was—

"Did you ever care, father?"

Henrich's gaze turned hostile, then he pressed his forehead to the barrel of the **piece**. He pulled his lips so taut they turned white, and he grimaced, forcing himself to speak. He could still get out of this, but...

Henrich's gaze dropped to Finch's hand, which gently and delicately brushed through Crow's patchwork hair. He huffed through his noise, then smiled, looking up at Finch. He met her gaze.

Love.

"I always did." He whispered, and before she could react,

he pressed his head tighter against the barrel and grabbed the back of the **piece**, yanking it towards himself, forcing the trigger against Finch's finger.

CRACK!

His body fell limp against the stone, eyes closed, lips forever frozen in a contented smile.

"In for a penny..." Cane whispered to himself, then loudly and awkwardly cleared his throat. "Sorry to disturb you, but eh, are you taking over for 'im?"

"Does it matter?" Finch asked, turning to look up at him, glaring. There were so many feelings so close to her that she just couldn't quite grasp.

"Well, as a matter of fact, it does." Cane shrugged, then pointed over his shoulder at the war going on at the other end of the fortress. "Sorry lass. Just business."

"Just business..." Finch muttered, standing up. Crow was already standing, but was still wobbling, nearly— but not totally— recovered from the kick to her forehead.

"So..." Cane gestured around with his hand. "Are we fighting, or are you giving this place over to me?"

"I don't give a damn about this place," Finch said, crushing the **piece** in her hand. When she uncurled her fist, the shattered fragments rained down and clattered onto the stone, mixing with the dust.

"Excellent, then—"

"But I'd die before giving it to man like you."

Cane tilted his head forward, and his face darkened, turning grim. "You sure you wanna do this, little lady?" He paused. There was no response, so he continued. "You could walk out of here right now with your little Crow and have yourself a happily ever after."

Finch looked down to Crow, as if asking for permission.

Crow looked up to her blankly, still dazed. She was in no shape to fight, and without her stopwatch, if she got hit by one of his spines...

Then Finch shook her head, and pushed Crow behind herself, standing firm. She couldn't let herself be blinded by the present moment. Cane wanted Crow dead, had been hunting her down in the streets, and had almost succeeded with what remained of his resources. With everything in the fortress at his disposal, it would only be a matter of time before he succeeded, especially with how much of it was made specifically for Crow.

Fuck's sake, Finch thought, lowering herself slightly to cover more of Crow with her body. *Why can't anything ever just be simple?*

But then, feeling the warmth of Crow's flames licking against the back of her legs, running up and around the side of her body, she realized the truth.

This was simple.

Cane was just one more obstacle between them and their happy ending.