

Chapter 26

They'd been fighting for long enough that the rain threatened to drown Cane. Finch was, well, *Finch*, and Crow was protected by the warmth of her flames: any water that came even close to her became mist as it approached.

Cane, though, was just a man. Against the relentless torrent from the skies, he could hardly see, let alone breathe, and he found himself fighting against shadows, eyes closed, lashing out mostly at the empty air. He had no idea if his spines found his targets, or not, or how close he was to winning, or to losing. If they were plotting something, he had no idea.

This would not last, he knew. If he was to win, he'd have to change things. And so, he ran, back across the plaza, towards the other main buildings, pushing through the howling wind and rain until he reached the main castle at last. There, he smashed through the grand, heavy-wooden doors, storm bars nothing but twigs before him, and as soon as he was halfway into the grand hall, he spun to face them.

But they had not pursued him.

Damn. He pulled the corner of one side of his lips open, and they smacked with his disappointment mixed with contemplation. Home advantage, he knew. He was advantaged before it had started to rain, but Crow was much smaller, much easier to protect than Henrich, and Finch had been able to avoid him easily. They'd made up their mind on killing him— that much was obvious. He'd had his chance to escape, and gambled it all.

RAVEN

So, he supposed, shutting his eyes as he knelt down, focusing. *It's time to go all-in.* He'd already been trying his hardest, but there were certain things he could do that were a little reckless. For one, his flesh was malleable, but it had limits before it started to eat away at him. He was no Serpent, but he *could* be, if he was willing to deal with the consequences.

At least, that's what Raven had told him when he'd been **unmade**.

Now, he looked inward, turning his focus onto his **soul**, turning it around in his mind. He felt around it, looking for the crack, for the path forward, for the one thing that would bring him out on the other side of this.

You must do this only when there is no other way forward, Cane. Do you understand?

What will it do to me?

That is the wrong question. The question you should be wondering, Cane, is what will it cost?

Answer me. You owe me that much.

I owe you nothing, yet do this for you out of the kindness of my heart. Raven cackled.

Raven.

Very well. You will have the power to pull yourself into any shape you can think of. The cost is that you will find it rather hard to put yourself back together.

What, will my limbs fall off?

Limbs? Raven asked, chuckling under their breath. Perhaps it is better if you don't touch this part of the mutation.

I need to know about it, in case I have to use it.

Cane. If you have to fall apart to win, then you have already lost.

That's not up to you.

True... well, the option is yours. Shall we begin?

No. Tell me more.

Raven sighed.

This will be bound up in your soul. Any time you change yourself, you will come to it, pushing and prodding at the surface, bending it as you wish. And when that is not enough, you need only find the thing that holds you together.

And then?

*You must destroy **it**.*

What?

To come apart, Cane, you must undo what holds you together. What could possibly be confusing about that?

How would I even start to do that?

Raven sighed in exasperation. What are you, some fledgling? You would go to your soul, obviously, find where the binding is anchored, and excise it from yourself.

Like ripping out my heart?

Raven smiled wickedly.

*Oh, now. **Now** you're getting it.*

But as Cane turned his soul around in his mind and reached out to where the binding was anchored, he stopped. Raven spoke cryptically, but the meaning was clear:

you won't be able to put yourself back together.

"What will it cost?" He muttered, standing up, as he lifted his chin and looked around the grand hall. He hadn't tried it all, and there did not seem to be any obvious traps in the building, though it was clear those two were trying to ambush him. Still, there was hope, so he didn't need to resort to this.

But as he smoothed his thumb over the locket, he realized the truth was much simpler.

He wasn't ready to let go. Not yet.

He'd seen how everyone from the old times had lost themselves over the years. Now, he was the only one left. He couldn't be like them.

He would not fall like Raven. He would not be killed like Henrich.

He would not suffer a fate like Crow's.

If he was to die, he'd die **whole**.

Cane pulled his focus away from his soul and turned towards the throne at the end of the grand hall. He approached it, then sat down, facing the doorway. He took in the grandeur of the room, the splendor. Henrich had had it all—

and he'd thrown it all away. For what?

Cane ran the palms of his hands across the arms of the throne, taking in the cold feeling of the smooth, silvery metal. It was opulence, pure luxury.

The kind of thing he'd always wanted for himself.

He could still have it, if he...

Cane scoffed, then smiled, bemused with himself. If he what, killed these kids? Became a monster and stole their home from them? His left hand came back up to the locket around his neck, and he rubbed it, thoughtfully. He didn't regret his actions, not really. They were the actions of a younger man in a younger time, just doing his best.

He was old, now. Centuries old.

He scoffed again, then folded his head forward, holding his head in his hands.

Old enough to know better.

He'd been confused, at first, with Henrich. Now, it made at least a little bit of sense. Maybe he meant it, when he said he'd cared for Finch. It hadn't seemed like it, but...

Cane stood up, then took in a deep breath. Things were a little clearer, now. He wasn't their enemy at all, was he? He was just snapping back in irritation at a couple of kids that didn't know any better, sent by his own colleagues, who should have.

He clenched his fists, and they shook with rage. Why had he *really* come here today? So he'd have the fortress? For more power? For the ever-fleeting '*revenge*'?

Crow would just come back, and Finch wouldn't deserve it.

"What do you want, anyway?"

"Me?" Cane asked, turning around in surprise. He set the stack of logs on his shoulder down, then knelt down to speak to Crow.

"Yeah. Duh." She gestured around to the empty forest around them.

"What do you mean, what do I want? I'm looking forward to having meat for dinner at some point. Berries are getting pretty old."

"Cane."

He laughed. "No, seriously. What do you mean? Which want?"

"The one you wake up for."

"Oh." Cane whistled, then lowered his chin towards the ground, face darkening. He stretched his lips so taut they became white, then grimaced.

"Why are you upset? Is it gross?"

"No, no." Cane shook his head, then leaned against the tree next to him with his arm, lost in thought. "Nothing like that."

"Is it a secret?"

Cane looked at her, scanning her up and down. He could tell her. He could just tell her. But then...

"Yep." He nodded, giving her a fake smile.

She looked disappointed, but then shrugged, and turned back down the path, arms still wrapped around the bundle of tiny sticks she'd foraged.

He hauled the logs back up onto his shoulder and followed along behind her.

Things were better this way.

They had to be.

Cane chuckled sourly as he walked back towards the entrance to the castle, memory fading away. He didn't need to worry about becoming a monster.

He already was one.

All the things he'd done—

Cane slammed his fist into the wall, sending drops of beaded water streaming down on him from the door's archway above as it all shook from the force.

—and for what?

It all made sense in the moment, but now?

Now, all he could feel was regret. He could have been different. He could have changed things. It didn't have to turn out like this, but he let it happen. He, and he alone, was to blame, blinded by ambition, confused by the insane situation they'd all found themselves in.

None of them were innocent, but if even just *he* had been different, he could have fixed it. He could have fixed everything.

He'd let himself be blinded by Raven's promises. He'd made himself complicit in their schemes.

They'd said it was all for Crow. That it was what she needed, that they'd have her back, that it was what she wanted. He'd gone along, then gotten lost along the way. It wasn't just what he had done, but what he *hadn't*.

"CROW! FINCH!" He shouted, bearing his chest to the sky.

He'd never make those mistakes again.

"I SURRENDER!" He shouted, raising his arms up above his head.

She'd understand.

"PLEASE, LASS. LET ME CALL OFF MY MEN." He knelt down, bowed his head, then closed his eyes. He could feel his heart thrumming in his chest.

She... had to.

And then,

silence.

...

...

"No." Finch said, holding Crow back with one arm outstretched. Crow did not attempt to push by anyway. She was willing to listen.

"Your guards are dying." Crow said. "We could stop it."

"It could be a trap. Then what?"

"Then you should go ahead. It's not like he can hurt you."

Finch nodded. That was mostly true. It was very, very unlikely he had something hidden up his sleeve. But still... they were so close. They could just kill him. It wasn't like he deserved to live.

"Don't you find it suspicious?" Finch asked, looking down at Crow, who stood next to her in the rain, hand-in-hand. Flame spilled out of her eyes, which gleamed with some dangerous mix of emotions. She wasn't being logical, as usual, but it was worse than before, as if all her senses had left her. Probably hyperthermia, though the flames did seem to have a reduced effect on her. Perhaps it was unrelated.

"Well. Yeah. But what if he's being honest?"

"I think the risk—"

"I don't kill people that are surrendering."

"He does."

Crow nodded. That was true. Why would they bother extending a courtesy to him that he wouldn't give them?

"Why did he wait for you to kill Henrich, then? We were wide open."

Finch nodded. That was true. And once again, what once was simple became instantly complicated.

"It." Her voice cut off as she stopped speaking and paused to think. Her voice did not really trail off, the way flesh voices did. "Okay. I'll get more information from him."

Crow said nothing, but squeezed Finch's hand before she left. Then, Finch left her little lantern behind, and a moment later, emerged from the rain next to Cane. He was still kneeling, hands up, head down, eyes closed.

At the very least, he was very committed to looking harmless. He'd even reverted his mutations, for now, and looked mostly normal. His arms were still swollen and purple from all the fighting.

"What is this?" Finch asked.

Cane did not open his eyes, but did speak. "I've decided we shouldn't be enemies. I'm sorry for attacking you, especially on the day you lost your father."

"Hardly a loss," she replied without thinking. It wasn't like her.

Though, she got the feeling that everyone was acting rather unusually today.

"It's suspicious." Finch continued. "And I don't trust you."

"You shouldn't, I guess." Cane chuckled, dropping his arms down to his lap.

Finch flinched back, but all he did was look up and open his eyes. She couldn't read him, at least not to the same degree she could read her father, and didn't know quite what to make of his face.

Mostly, he just looked tired.

"Finch," Cane sighed, "I don't want to end up like Henrich and Raven."

She nodded. That made plenty of sense. They were terrible.

"You didn't seem to have any problems with it before."

"I've never lived a day like this before. Not really. I've had some close calls, sure, but..." He sighed, then smoothed back his hair, and leaned back, sitting down. He brought his knees close to his chest, and rested one arm on top of them. He supported himself with his other arm, palm flat on the ground. "Do you know how old I am, Finch?"

"Ancient."

"Guess."

"Well—"

"Nevermind. Old enough to know better, Finch. Than to keep this going. I want things to change, and I don't need this fortress for that, and I don't need to kill you kids to get what I actually want."

"What *do* you want?"

Cane laughed weakly, defeated. "I can't say."

"Do you have any idea the position that you're in?"

"Sitting."

"**Cane.**" Her voice was harsh and cold.

"I wish I could tell you. I do. But it's something I need to take to my grave."

"I'll be happy to send you there if you don't start talking sense. How *dare* you try to get out of this, with such a ridiculous gambit, and what, just because you're overwhelmed? I never took you for a coward."

"Finch." Cane looked up into her eyes. His gaze was intense, but not desperate. "I want to stop the assault on your fortress and go home. And then, I want to make things right in this city. I'll do what it takes to earn your trust, and Crow's. I don't want to be your enemy anymore. I have no plans to get revenge on Crow, because at the end of the day, it wasn't her fault, was it?" He took in a breath, but before Finch could respond, he continued. "It was Raven's. And if you want them dead, I'll help you kill them."

"You're just as much to blame for how the city is. You almost killed her— multiple times."

"Yeah." Cane said, sighing. "Yeah, I know, lass. That was a mistake."

"I think it would be a mistake to let you go. There's just no way we can come back from this."

"Is that really what you want, Finch? To kill me?"

"I wish I could tell you." She said, sourly.

Cane took in a hissing, exasperated sigh. Crow would understand. Why'd it have to be Finch?

"I'm gonna cut to the chase little lady, because our men are out there fighting and dying." He was yelling, now. He didn't mean to. His veins poked out from his neck as he pointed his arm towards the walls of the fortress. "They don't deserve that. I knew your father for five centuries, and watching him die in your hands made me realize just how far I'd lost myself. I made this city with my hands and that man. Watching him die ripped me out of whatever

stupid fuckin' stupor I'd gotten stuck in. Is that so hard to believe?! I listened to Raven. I believed them. I did terrible things. If you want to kill me, fine. But let me at least stop this fighting. Let me do something *good*, Finch."

"Fine." She agreed, gesturing for him to stand. The risk of him escaping was worth the potential lives saved, at the very least. Besides, in the rain, he wouldn't get very far.

"Gods above," he whispered, swearing as he stood up and started walking towards the gatehouse. Then, he paused, waiting for her to come after him. "Come on, then. You don't trust me enough to let me wander off, surely?"

"Of course not." Finch responded.

Cane could hear her voice, but could no longer see her through the pouring sheets of rain. It was hard to even breathe with how heavy it was coming down.

Then, a couple of moments later, Finch and Crow joined him by his side, and they walked along together until they reached the gates.

Cane's men had breached them, and were fighting Finch's men in the walls of the fortress. True to his word, he called off the assault, ordering everyone to run off. Finch, too, stopped the bloodshed.

It all seemed so pointless, now.

As Cane's men filed out of the gatehouse and began running out into the rain, covering themselves with whatever they could, struggling to stay upright against the wind and water, Crow approached Cane, then looked up at him from below.

They had fought. He had killed Wolf. Her **kin**. But he was only her **kin** because Cane'd killed him.

What a headache.

"Why, Cane?" She asked simply.

"Because none of this is your fault, Crow." He said, kneeling down to talk to her at eye level. "And it's not Finch's. And it's not these guards'. And it's not this city's. It's mine, and Henrich's, and Raven's, and Wraiths, and that's that."

"You were there?"

He exhaled sharply out of his nose. "Yeah, kiddo. I was."

"I'm not a kid."

"Even if we add up all your lives, I have at least a half-century on you."

"Does that matter?"

Cane pursed his lips, then relented. "Right. No. Maybe? It doesn't right now, anyhow."

"You really don't want revenge on me? I ripped up your eye. And your lip. And um, your house. Several times."

"You get used to it after the thirtieth break-in."

"I think that would make me angrier."

"It did. But, it's more complicated than I thought."

"Raven." She said simply.

"Raven." He nodded sagely. Then, looking at her, he had to stop himself from reaching out his arm to touch her face.

"Lost your eye too, huh?"

"Just the eyelid."

"Ouch."

"Yeah." Crow said softly, voice washed away by the rain. She looked down at her feet. She hated remembering what had happened to her. And since Raven was the one that'd done it, she had no recourse. It wasn't like she could ask them to fix her up again. They were the one that had broken her.

"Well, you still fight well. Didn't notice 'till now."

"You don't need to cheer me up. I'm not a kid."

"Right. Sorry."

"What's the real reason, Cane? That you changed?"

"I can't tell you the real reason, but I can lie if you like."

"I don't like lies. You're acting strangely. Stop it."

"What, did you prefer when I was trying to kill you?"

"Yes. That was simpler."

"Oh, dear..." Cane sighed, looking away. Then, he looked back at her, and tried his damndest to give her a good answer. "When we built this city, it was a nice place, full of hope, full of life. The only thing holding back the darkness. It brought us all together."

Crow listened intently, rapt. She didn't say it, couldn't say it— not to him— but there was nothing she wanted to know about more than the past. Her past. The *truth*.

"And now look at us." Cane laughed, gesturing around to the corpses, the crumbling stones of the fortress, the scattered crossbow bolts across the ground. "It was never supposed to be this way. Seeing someone I built the city with be killed, by his own daughter— the one I watched him raise— it just... it *broke* me, Crow. It reminded me of what was actually important. It reminded me of what I wanted. Of what I needed. Of what I'd lost."

"What was it?" She asked, leaning in closer, though not by intention. Her heart beat fast, as if his answer would be her own. As if he held some magic wisdom that would solve all of her problems, that would show her the way forward, that would let her become whole again.

"I lost myself, Crow. Chasing something stupid. Or, I guess, chasing *it*," he sighed, "in a stupid way. Hurting people. Hurting myself. I almost... I almost let myself become a monster, Crow. Like Raven. No, *fuck*," He shook his head. He was deflecting, again. He was old enough to know better. "I did. I did become a monster, Crow, and I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Crow said, hugging him unexpectedly. She didn't mean to.

Her flames burned him, but he said nothing, and hugged her back. He deserved it.

It was his fault she was on fire.

And then, as quickly as she'd hugged him, she pulled away, either oblivious to his burning flesh or unwilling to address it. Or, perhaps she knew better. Perhaps she knew that he deserved it.

"What was I like, back then?"

"Huh?!" Cane asked, shocked. "Um." His mind filled with memories of her, so happy, always smiling. Full of joy, body whole, bringing everyone together. Did—

"Well?"

"Crow, you know this city is named after you, right?"

"*What?!*" She paused, shocked. "Escrow? What, because my name is *Crow*? Those words have nothing to do with each other—"

"Escrow. Something held in trust, until a condition is met. We trusted in *you*, Crow."

"The name of this city is *not* a fucking *pun*." She groaned, rubbing her sore forehead with her hands. Then, she cried out and pulled her hands away as parts of her skull, fractured from Finch's kick, cracked from the pressure of her hands. "Ow, *fuck*."

Cane tried hard not to laugh. "It is. Sorry, lass. We liked that kind of thing back then. We were pretty desperate for entertainment, especially after you died."

"Were... were you there? When I died?"

"Yeah." He said, grimly. "I buried you."

"What about Raven?"

"They..." Cane looked away, stretching his lips tight, wrinkling his nose. "Had already gotten started on their promise to you."

He was lying. She didn't know how she could tell, but she knew it as surely as she knew the rising of the sun and the power of the rain. He was a lying bastard. He was hiding something.

"Don't fucking lie to me about this." Crow yelled, gritting her teeth under her beak. "Do you have *any* idea—"

"I'm sorry." Cane sighed, shaking his head. "I did. I did bury you. I buried..."

"What? What did you bury?!"

"Your bones."

"Just— just my— my—"

"Raven ate the rest of you."

"And you— you— **you LET THEM?!**" Crow screamed, lunging forwards, claws extended, but before they found purchase in their target, Finch had already grabbed her arms and pulled her back. "Let me go!" She hissed, struggling, but Finch did not stop her.

"Crow," Finch said calmly, collectedly. "I know you don't want to kill him."

"Yes I *do*!" She cried, thrashing, losing energy with every moment as the fight died out within her. She was so confused. She had died in Raven's arms. But Raven had eaten her. Raven had— just like when they **unmade** her, they— had they been starving? Had they let her die so they could eat her?

"You want answers. He will give them to us. He needs to live."

"Was Raven ever a good person, Cane? Did I really ever trust them?"

Cane remained silent, instead just looking away. She didn't need to know that.

"Answer me!" Crow whimpered, desperate, lips trembling, teeth chattering. Her fire was nearly out. She was so close to all the answers. She almost understood. She would understand. He just had to keep talking, and she would understand. She was so close. She was—

"You loved Raven like you love Finch. Raven felt the same about you." Cane wouldn't meet her eyes. He was ashamed, gaze averted. He wasn't lying, but there was more he wasn't saying.

what?

"No. No, no— no!" Crow fell limp in Finch's arms, staring down at the ground, trembling. She couldn't, she couldn't— she couldn't— she— it— but—

and Crow stared at the ground, mumbling to herself, whimpering, "no, no, no" over, and over, and over again. It couldn't be true. It couldn't—

"Goodbye, little Crow."

"Goodbye, Raven."

She had buried it.

Then where had *that* Raven gone? Why was she stuck with this *monster*? Why— why, why, why, *why*?!

Finch sat down on the ground and pulled Crow into her lap so she could be more comfortable. She held her close, arms wrapped tight around her, as she carried on talking with Cane.

"What was the condition?" She asked, cupping one hand around the back of Crow's head, holding it still. Crow had been pecking away at her side mindlessly.

"It's not like something magical is going to happen, Finch. This isn't some fairy tale."

"You named the city after a girl and a condition. I know the girl. You will tell me the condition."

"It's not that simple—"

"Escrow. Something held in trust until a condition is met. You trusted in Crow. What is the condition being met?"

"Please, Finch. I can't tell you. We're so close."

"The condition is what you want, isn't it?"

But then, before he could respond, a tremendous sound, far greater than any that had ever been heard, split the sky in half and parted the clouds with its might, banishing the rain outright and revealing the full moon shining down brightly on them.

The three of them looked to the sky in awe as seven massive chunks of packed rock and soil each as large as Cane's mansion were launched from the ground and sailed through the air like meteors before disappearing behind the walls of the fortress. They did not see where the rocks landed, but they felt their impact as earthquakes as screams filled the city beyond the gates. Then, the sounds of destruction reached them as a wave of debris was blasted over the walls, raining down all around them as parts of the city were doubtlessly obliterated outright.

The three sat there, in silence, in shock, in awe, in terror, looking for some sign in the sky, some idea of what had happened, of what could possibly have come to pass.

And then, seven breaths later, the full moon's light was eclipsed by a silhouette that flew up into the sky above Escrow. As soon as the silhouette reached the apex of its flight. All over its body, glowing eyes of all different colors and sizes peeled open, each straining in their sockets to look directly at them.

After five hundred years,

Raven had finally left their laboratory.