Crowslayer

"Kaya! Wake up! We have to go!"

Sasha frantically shook her daughter awake. She was cold and limp, and Sasha feared her eyes wouldn't open.

She glanced behind them again, her breath catching in her chest. The clock pendant felt heavy around her neck. She could feel it ticking down with every second they wasted.

They're coming.

But after a long, terrifying second, Kaya weakly pushed herself up and smiled her frail smile, which quickly turned into a wheezing cough. Her glasses were askew on her nose, a testament to her terrible vision.

Thank God. Sasha breathed a short-lived sigh of relief.

Sasha wiped away the blood and sweat on her own face and took her daughter's fragile hand. It wasn't hard to haul Kaya to her feet; Sasha doubted she weighed more than the sword strapped to her back. Kaya pressed a hand to her side with a wince as she stood.

That was where all their problems had started four months ago.

Three deep scratches, shaped like talons. Kaya's shirt was soaked with blood, even though Sasha had bandaged her wound an hour earlier.

"It's gotten worse, hasn't it?" Sasha's voice was fraught with concern. "Your illness?"

"It's nothing I can't handle," Kaya said with another wince, trying to sound optimistic. "Let's go, Mom."

Sasha had to squint for a moment to see the star, their destination, through the smog. High on top of a mountain, rising like a shadow in the north, as it always was. But Kaya could

always see it. Its light was ever reflected in her glasses, no matter the amount of darkness in the sky.

They set off running again in the gray light.

Mere seconds later, a cloud of dark wings poured out of the sky and devoured the grass on which they had stood. They left nothing behind.

They ran for hours. Sasha could bear it, but Kaya was far too weak. The past four months had stolen all her strength. Sasha just barely caught her as she collapsed, falling to her knees in the ashen grass.

"Kaya. Maybe you should rest."

Kaya just knelt facedown in the grass, panting. Her voice was muffled slightly when she spoke. "No. I'm fine."

Her glasses had slipped off her nose. Sasha hastened to straighten them on her face, but Kaya stopped her.

"You put them on, Mom."

Sasha frowned. "But you're nearly blind without them. You know that. I can see perfectly fine."

Kaya gave her a look. "I want you to see what I see."

Sasha sighed. As of late, Kaya's words had become more and more poetic. Things Sasha couldn't understand. She wondered, not for the first time, if the illness had affected her brain.

"Just rest, all right?" Sasha murmured.

"You're not listening. You think I'm crazy, don't you?" her daughter's words weren't sharp, but they hurt Sasha all the same.

Sasha put the glasses aside. “We should be far out of the crows’ reach right now. I’m going to try again in the morning, all right?”

Kaya flinched at those words. *Try again.* She knew perfectly well what it entailed.

“I’m going to succeed this time, okay? I’ll destroy all of them.”

The sword felt heavy on Sasha’s back.

Kaya didn’t respond. For a while, the only sound in the still wasteland was the heartbeat of the clock pendant around Sasha’s neck.

The man that wore the white coat sat them down in front of him. Sasha was rigid, tense as a cornered animal. But Kaya was half-asleep, leaning on her shoulder. Warm and gentle as sunlight.

“The test results came back,” the man said simply.

“And?” Sasha whispered. She wrenched her hands in her lap.

For a second she made a fatal mistake.

She hoped.

She’d never forget the expression on the man’s face. Forlorn. The face of a man that had had to say the same fatal words for years and watch them pummel into their recipients like knives.

That was when he gave Sasha the clock pendant, and the crows burst through the window, and the world shattered into a thousand shards.

Sasha awoke with tears on her face, mingling with the blood and sweat from their journey. The memories were still harsh as ever.

Kaya was still asleep. It was just like the day the crows had attacked, and Kaya had gotten sick.

The four months of suffering had taken a toll on her. Her build was thin and frail, her pale skin in stark contrast with the darkness of the sky. Her hair was the gray of bleached bones. When she coughed, darkness seemed to nestle in her lungs, smoke the shade of crow feathers.

The four months had made Sasha's hands calloused from wielding a sword. She was covered in crow blood, her clothing filthy from the months on the run. She was lean and wild, a huntress of crows, the guardian of her daughter on their pilgrimage to the star.

A Crowslayer.

But a part of her had never felt so tired, numb with exhaustion.

So void of hope.

Sasha stood, reaching for her sword. It was time for her to go. She looked down at her clock pendant. The hands were so close to midnight.

Kaya turned one despairing gray eye upwards. "Are you going, then?"

"Yes." Sasha hugged her daughter one last time. "Don't worry, okay? I'll get rid of them all this time."

"That's what you said last time. And the time before." Kaya took a shuddering breath that tore at Sasha's heart. "Mom…"

"Hey, don't give up." Sasha whispered. "Everyone else has, but I never will, all right?"

Kaya didn't respond. Again.

Sasha forced herself away and began to run south. Her pendant banged against her collarbone, reminding her of what was at stake. In her hands was a blade of hatred.

The wasteland was dark and heavy, thick with smoke. All traces of life had fled. Earlier in their journey, Sasha had seen trees with beautiful full crowns of leaves. They'd seen animals, at least the ones that had survived the corruption that trailed behind the crows like a dog. But here, so far north, the trees were petrified skeletons, and all the animals were dead. Here the crows ruled.

It never took Sasha long to find the crows when she went out hunting for them. They were always searching, always drawing closer to pluck out Kaya's life with their greedy talons.

She always heard them first, the very shadows in the tar-like sky stirring as the crows rustled their wings. They poured out of the sky like dark water, hundreds of them, a black flood of despair. Their black beady eyes were malicious, their wings like smoke. A stench of dead things, of blood and fire, always trailed behind them. Silently they landed in a wide circle around her. The sight of them, rising like the spirits of the dead in ominous silence, had intimidated Sasha the first time she'd gone out crow hunting.

Not anymore.

Sasha felt her hatred well up in her veins like fire.

She always waited for them to strike first. But they never did.

"Again you come, Crowslayer," they croaked. Their voices were pitiless. "Why do you continue this futile act? Each time you come to kill us, to finish your job. Yet each time, you fail."

Sasha flinched at the truth, but readied her sword. "Fight me and we'll see." she hissed.

“You know what you are doing is pointless.” they whispered. “Do you kill us to extend what little time your daughter has left? In exchange for her suffering? Tell us, Crowslayer, is it all worth it? Losing parts of her every day for more time?”

“It is, if I can find a cure.” Sasha turned her head north, to where the star was.

“The star?” they whispered. They sounded almost…confused. Pitying, almost. “Do you think a savior awaits you there?”

It was Sasha’s turn to be silent, but after a second she shook the feeling off. “Enough!” she cried. She prepared to lunge. “I’m going to kill all of you so that none of you ever hurt her again.”

They ignored her. “Do you love your daughter, Sasha?” they whispered. She flinched at hearing her name on their dirty tongues. “The clock is running, Sasha.” It sounded more like a warning than a threat. “If you love Kaya, you’ll stop this futile race and lay down your sword, put aside your hatred. Stop trying to prolong the inevitable. Fill up what little time you have left.”

In response, Sasha attacked.

Vicious satisfaction pulsed in her heart as her sword carved a swath of blood and feathers through them. Half of the crows were dead in seconds, torn apart by her rage. The rest took to the sky, cawing with alarm, but Sasha wouldn’t let them escape this time. She leaped into the air with them, delicious adrenaline searing through her veins, her sword guiding her movements. Crow feathers and blood blinded her, but she continued to kill, their bodies dropping out of the sky.

She had to kill all of them this time.

If even one escaped, they would come back, stronger than ever.

Kaya's broken, defeated face haunted Sasha's mind.

"Do you realize that the more of us you kill, the sicker Kaya becomes?" the crows called to her, even as she cut them down one by one. "We are a part of her. Is this all worth it, Sasha? Prolonging her suffering so that you might have more time?"

"Yes," Sasha cried, even though the lie buried guilt in her stomach. "But there is a cure. I know it. It has to exist! Kaya just has to last a little longer…"

The last crow fluttered inches out of reach, practically balancing on the tip of her sword. The bodies of its comrades lay mangled and broken on the ground, but it betrayed no sadness.

"Your desperation blinds you," it whispered.

With a frustrated scream, Sasha slashed wildly at the crow, but it was already winging away into the smoky sky.

Kaya's strength, flying away as she watched.

So close, yet so far.

Sasha sank to the ground. Crow feathers and severed talons surrounded her.

But she was not victorious.

I failed her again.

Far in the dark distance, the star shone like a beacon.

The two haggard travelers stumbled on, insignificant even in an empty land.

Kaya was paler now, if that was possible. Her breath was ragged, even when they rested. Her eyes were distant with pain, and she hadn't said a word since Sasha had returned from crow hunting that morning. One hand was always pressed to her wound, and Sasha clutched the other, more out of desperation than to comfort her daughter.

She was drifting away. Down the river of dark feathers.

And if Sasha didn't hold on—if she didn't keep Kaya *right here* where she needed to be—

"Say anything," Sasha begged. "Kaya. Kaya. *Kaya.*"

Her voice was a sob.

"I'm sorry for doing this to you."

Her nails dug into Kaya's palm.

"I had to try again. They would have caught up and killed you if I hadn't."

Her daughter turned her face up, slowly, her eyes like a doll's. She couldn't see, couldn't hear. The pain had brought her elsewhere.

Kaya weakly took her glasses off and pressed them into Sasha's hands. "Look through my eyes," she whispered.

Sasha was about to protest, but Kaya whispered, "Please. Just once. Maybe…maybe you'll see."

See what? But Sasha reluctantly perched them atop her nose.

She blinked. Her mouth fell open.

The wasteland had transformed into a place Sasha had only ever seen in paintings and dreamed of during feverish nights. The grass was pure white, almost glowing, rippling like a field of feathers all around them in a nonexistent breeze. The air was clear and soft; Sasha threw a hand out to make sure it wasn't liquid silk. And the sky…Sasha blinked and blinked, but it didn't go away. A field of a thousand golden stars, shining in a dark blue sky, illuminating Sasha's skin, blinding her with their glory.

The smokiness of the air brought Sasha back to reality. It hurt to breathe. She ripped herself away from the white field and the stars and put the glasses back on her daughter's face.

"Do you see now?" Kaya whispered.

Sasha shook her head. "I…don't understand. None of it is real."

"Not for you. But it is for me. What you see is different because you're blind."

Sasha was about to argue, but couldn't find the strength. Kaya could believe what she wanted to believe. Reality was that this was a hopeless wasteland, and the crows were killers, and she was the Crowslayer. The only star in the sky was the one atop the mountain in the north.

Sasha wrapped her shirt around her mouth and nose, but Kaya took a deep inhale of the stagnant, smoky air.

"Hey," Sasha murmured. "Quit that. You'll hurt your lungs."

Kaya gave her a sad smile. So faint, so weak.

"It reminds me of home," she whispered, and took another breath.

The city was dark and murky as Sasha and Kaya drove home. Sasha's hands were still shaking. None of this felt real.

The light of the streetlamps was veiled by an opaque cloud of smoke. Sasha's headlights could barely penetrate the darkness, but she knew the way back. She'd driven the road too many times. To and from the hospital, bringing back a more broken daughter each time.

There were still smokers out on the streets. The bright flame of their cigarettes, the harsh smoke that came out.

"Mom…" Kaya's voice was hoarse. Sasha knew what was coming. Kaya had brought it up every time.

"Don't you think you should stop treatment?"

Sasha let out a long, slow breath. "We've been over this before." she said quietly, fighting to keep her voice steady. "I am never going to give up on you, all right? You're not going to die. I won't let you. I can't *let you."*

"But is all of this…" Kaya hesitated. "I don't know, worth it? This suffering? I lose more of myself each time I go in. Even the doctors said—"

"They've lost hope." Sasha said vehemently. "They gave you four months, and look how far we've made it. We're beating the clock, Kaya. You have to believe you're going to make it too."

"You don't have to keep slaying the crows inside me, Mom," Kaya said quietly. Her voice wavered. "... Maybe for however long I have left, can you be my mom instead of the Crowslayer? Let's spend the rest of my time at home. Please?"

Sasha closed her eyes and kept driving.

Later that night, Kaya whispered suddenly from her bed, "Mom. I see a star."

Sasha gazed out the window. The smoke obscured the sky. The city hadn't seen stars in years.

"That's where we need to go," Kaya said, a distant light reflected in her glasses. "That's where this will all end. No more treatment, no more suffering."

"Oh…All right." Sasha was bewildered, but was too tired to question her daughter. She looked out the window again. No stars in sight.

"Will you take me there?" Kaya asked.

"... Of course, hon." Sasha said slowly, and watched her daughter fall asleep.

Sasha knew they were coming even before she opened her eyes. She was on her feet in a second, watching them rise like a shadow from the south. Vast and innumerable, flying on demonlike wings as they shrieked for Kaya's blood. Sasha felt her heart drop into her stomach.

She looked down at the clock. The hands were at the exact same place. Right before midnight.

Because she failed to destroy them all.

Sasha frantically yanked Kaya to her feet. "They're coming," Sasha whispered. "We have to go!"

She glanced north. They were so close. The mountain was right there, waiting for them across the fields.

Her daughter's gray eyes blinked behind her glasses as she gazed south to where the darkness approached. But it wasn't darkness reflected in her glasses; Sasha could see the golden light of a thousand stars shining on her daughter's face.

Slowly, Kaya began to walk towards them.

"Kaya!" Sasha cried, grabbing her daughter's hand. "What are you doing? Let's go! We have to run!"

But Kaya broke away and continued walking towards the crows that gathered like a storm on the horizon.

Sasha tamped down a wave of fear and sprinted after her daughter.

"I want you to see what I see," Kaya said, her voice like a sleepwalker's. She took off her glasses and handed them to Sasha.

The Crowslayer would have slapped them out of her hand. She would have grabbed Kaya and dragged her, kicking and screaming, where they needed to go.

But Kaya's mother accepted them and placed them over her own eyes.

The white field reappeared, along with the glorious field of stars bathing the land in its light. But there was no darkness on the southern horizon. In the crows' place was a gentle wind, carrying stars and cherry blossom petals in its embrace. As it swept over the land, it collected the tufts of white grass, resembling a great white bird dancing gracefully in the starlight. Its eyes were gentleness. Its wings promised peace.

But the Crowslayer slammed back into Sasha, and she tore the glasses off. "It's not real!" Sasha snarled, wrenching Kaya around. "We have to get to the star before they kill us. I don't care if you've given up too. I'll drag you if I have to."

Kaya stepped back, her eyes full of hurt. But the Crowslayer forced iron over her heart and took her hand. Hesitantly, Kaya began to run with her.

Together they dashed through the broken grass, the smoke in the air clouding Sasha's vision. She coughed as she gasped in great lungfuls of the debris, stumbling on in exhaustion, wiping sweat from her eyes. The light from the star was so dim, a dying ember in the darkness. The first crows dove down, hitting Sasha in the back, clawing at her hair with raucous caws that echoed in her eardrums. She drew her sword and cut them down, but more pierced out of the darkness like black arrows, their wings battering her face, their talons sharp as knives. Sasha let out a defiant scream as she slashed them out of the air, their blood pattering like rain on the ashen grass.

"Kaya! Go!" Sasha cried, slicing a crow in half before it could lay its talons on Kaya. "Go to the mountain! I'll meet you there! You have to run!"

Kaya hesitantly let go of her hand, her gray eyes scared. "What if…"

"They're not going to do anything to me." Sasha growled. "Now go. Go!"

Sasha turned and faced the darkness. The months had hardened her. Her sword was her guide.

They swarmed around her in a torrent of feathers and talons, shrieking and pulling at her hair. Sasha spun and slashed them out of the air, a red film coming over her vision as her blade met blood. They clawed at her clothes, trying to force her to the ground, but she threw them off and tore them to pieces, feeling vicious satisfaction with each crow she killed.

Yet it was not enough. There were too many. They slammed into her and knocked her to the ground, her breath whooshing out of her as they piled on top of her, pinning her down. She felt their talons pierce her clothing, their beaks poking at her face. She wanted to shield her face, to fight, to run, but they were too heavy, too many. She gasped in a breath and it turned into a helpless sob.

“Crowslayer.” a crow sat atop her chest, its ugly face suspended over hers. She recognized it as the one that had escaped her blade the last time she’d gone crow hunting. “You continue to blind yourself. Even when your daughter speaks the same truth we do.”

“All of it is lies.” Sasha hissed, struggling against their wings. “She’s begun to believe them.”

“Or perhaps it is you drowning in your own denial.” the crow croaked. “You have someplace to go, little Crowslayer. If neither I nor your daughter can open your eyes, perhaps the star will.”

“What—” Sasha began, but suddenly the crows began to take off, lifting off her body and taking to the sky. Before she knew it, they were gone as soon as they had come, disappearing into the darkness. Left in their wake were crow feathers drifting through the air, and crow blood soaking into the earth.

What did it mean?

But the thought of Kaya forced her to her feet. She glanced north, to where the star still burned.

Wincing at her body's soreness, Sasha slid her sword into its sheath on her back and began to run.

She called her daughter's name as she stumbled in a blind haze towards the mountain. There was no response but the howl of the wind over the desolate fields. Her feet dragged in the ash. The exhaustion from the past months, wandering in this wasteland of death, was finally catching up with her.

She wanted it all to be over.

She didn't want to be the Crowslayer anymore.

As she walked alone, the foot of the mountain drawing closer, memories of Kaya sprang up unbidden around her. She could see them so clearly.

Kaya's first birthday. Her laugh, the most wonderful thing Sasha had ever heard.

The day Kaya got her glasses, saying she looked like an owl as she put them on.

Kaya's numb, shocked face as Sasha explained cancer to her—

Sasha yelped as she stumbled over something half-submerged in ash. She would have dismissed it as a log if she hadn't seen the pair of glasses, half broken on the ground.

"Kaya!" Sasha pulled her daughter out of the ash, brushing it off her face. Her eyes were closed, and she wasn't breathing.

"No. No." Sasha gasped, but just as her heart was about to stop, Kaya coughed weakly and opened her eyes a slit.

"I can't go any further," she whispered. She was so frail. "The star…"

Sasha wiped away the tears on her face and pocketed her daughter's glasses. They were so close…There was a stone staircase cut into the side of the mountain. Their path.

She did what she had to do. She scooped her daughter into her arms and began the ascent.

Her legs burned with exhaustion with each step, her shoulders sagging as she struggled upwards. She could feel the clock's heartbeat against hers, weakening with each second. Fierce winds threatened to throw them off the cliff, and Sasha bent her head against it, burying her face in her daughter's shoulder.

As she climbed, crows descended from the sky. They said nothing. They didn't try to attack, or mock her, or yank Kaya out of her arms. Sasha couldn't have pulled out her sword if they'd tried. Instead, they seemed…almost encouraging. They formed a barrier on her right side, gliding noiselessly beside them on their journey, preventing them from falling. Sasha met the eyes of the one beside her, and it nodded almost respectfully.

"Crowslayer," it croaked. "Still you persevere. Do you know where this journey ends? To where the clock's hands always pointed?"

Sasha gave it no response.

"Let me remind you of a truth you've known all along."

As she continued up the mountain, her memories of their journey returned to her.

The day Kaya started coughing as the smoke of the city invaded her body..

The day Kaya was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer, when the doctor gave her four months to live. That was the day Sasha became blind and deaf to a truth she could never accept.

The endless days of aggressive chemotherapy, as Sasha desperately tried to stretch her daughter's life. The suffering. Her hair, gone, like willow leaves in the winter. She lost more of herself with every treatment.

Every surgery was burned in Sasha's mind. Each time they took more and more from her, the metastasis like an uncontrollable beast.

Every needle was her sword. Every treatment a chance for Sasha to kill the crows, once and for all, to eradicate all of them.

But she never succeeded. And with each hunt, Kaya grew weaker. Sasha was so tired, but she persisted.

Finally, the crow showed her the present.

The hospital room overlooking the dark, smoky city. Sasha, holding her daughter's frail hand as life drained from her body. The suffering left her face with every step Sasha took up the stairs. Her heart grew weaker.

Sasha stopped, dead in her tracks. The summit was just a few steps away. The star glowed gently before her. It was a pinnacle of welcoming light, so close she could have touched it. Months ago their destination had seemed so far away, unreachable. They'd struggled for so long, gone through so much suffering and pain, all for this.

Because Sasha thought a savior, a cure, awaited them.

But the starlight promised something else. Everything came rushing together, everything Sasha couldn't understand.

"No," Sasha whispered, her throat raw. She fell to her knees before the star, her world going blurry at the edges.

Kaya's glasses, her poetic words, the field of stars, the words of the crow, weighing heavy on her chest.

Kaya had known this whole time.

Everyone had known but her.

"No!" she cried, holding on to Kaya. "This doesn't make any sense! Why would she tell me to take her here? After all I've done, trying to protect her, buying her time, all the fighting, the pain? I thought there was a cure here! Kaya!" she shook her daughter frantically, but Kaya was limp. Sasha was the one trying to wake up from this nightmare.

"She has accepted what you cannot," the crow said gently. "Now it is time. This is truly the end, Sasha. Only in acceptance will any of us find peace."

It poked its head into her pocket and pulled out Kaya's glasses, placing them in Sasha's hands.

The Crowslayer wanted to chuck them off the cliff.

But Sasha put them on.

She was in the hospital room, holding Kaya's hand. Sasha felt her pulse, in sync with the ticking clock on her neck, grow weaker and weaker. Barely a flutter at her wrist. Her hand grew colder with each passing second.

"Kaya, no," Sasha whispered softly, disbelief creeping into her heart. She tried to reach out, but something stopped her. A light touch on her hand.

She turned around.

The window was open. A light, clear breeze filled the room, carrying starlight and cherry blossom petals in its embrace. It ruffled her hair and came to a standstill beside her. Waiting.

Sasha took off the glasses with shaky hands. She was back on the summit. Kaya was in her arms.

"Don't be afraid, Sasha," the crow whispered. "I was always here, right beside you on this journey."

As it spoke the crows shed their black plumage, joining together to become a great pure white bird with starlight in its eyes. The smoke in the sky fell away to reveal an endless field of golden stars. She saw the true nature of this world.

Peace.

Sasha wanted to shut out the truth again, but she didn't have the strength anymore.

She let one tear fall down her face.

Then she hugged her daughter fiercely, savoring every moment.

One last time.

"Goodbye," she whispered. Wordlessly, she put her daughter's glasses back on her face.

Then she laid her in the light of the star.

There was a blinding flash of light and a fierce surge of wind as the star embraced her. Kaya became one with the light, the pain leaving her face as she vanished before Sasha's eyes. Her frail body disappeared first. Her face became younger as she left the world, the months of suffering lifting off her heart.

Sasha saw one last smile on her face.

The clock's hands reached midnight.

Then there was peace.

The great white bird touched its head to hers. A sign of deepest respect.

"Now we shall follow." it said. "One day the light will accept you too, Sasha. But not today." it pulled away and spread its wings.

"May you find your way back, Crowslayer," it whispered.

Then it leaped into the air. It shed its white feathers and became a fierce wind, carrying cherry blossoms and starlight. It rushed past her, diving into the light of the star.

Then it, too, was no more.

Sasha unsheathed her sword and plunged it into the rock of the mountain. As her hands left the hilt, peace was all she felt. No triumph or sadness. No anger or exhaustion.

Only peace.

Sasha sat down and closed her eyes.