

chapter 6. chasing shadows

"*You do not have to kneel.*" His voice rang out, crisp and articulate, through the polished blackstone hall. It cracked off of the chiseled pillars, reflected off of the clearglass windows, and flew up into the great domed ceiling where, after countless echoes off of the ornamentation, it finally disappeared.

She simply shook her head, keeping her head downturned, and remained kneeling on the thick and plush redthread rug that spanned the entire hall.

Sighing, the man began to speak again.

"*The job is simple. Find Crow, capture her, and bring her here. If you cannot, kill her.*"

She stood and turned her back to the throne but did not move away. Instead, her eyes swiveled up and locked-on to her reflection. It was trapped, just two meters ahead of her, within the mirror finish of the hall's blackstone walls. It returned her gaze, and just above it, filling the rest of the reflection, was that man— the man that sat behind her in his grand throne, looking down upon it all.

Suddenly, she looked to him in the reflection, and he was already returning her gaze.

They stayed like this for ten seconds.

Then, Finch stepped to the grand windows at the edge of the hall, hands folded neatly at the small of her back, and peered out over the towering stone walls of the estate to look at the rest of the known world. Two moats and a river separated were all that separated her from it.

Even still, it was not often she was sent out across them.

Just too much of a liability, she mused mentally, smiling only in her mind, lest her mirth be observed.

"Planning your advance?" He queried from on high as he observed her with relaxed and tired eyes. He was reclined backwards in the throne, now, and was resting his face on his closed fist.

"No." Finch's voice rang out from all of her, impossibly crisp and clear, and cut directly through the air to reach his ears.

"Then what—"

But already, she was gone again,

marching across the flagstone mosaics of the courtyard,

through the vestibule at its end,

out onto the main bailey,

through the gates to the lower bailey,

then down to the first drawbridge,

across the second,

then, through the final gate,

and then,

free at last.

Well.

For now.

””

It took only seven minutes for Finch to make her way around the shore of the fortress and reach the main outflow for the water runoff system. Currently, it was bone dry— it hadn't rained for two full moons.

Which, of course, is exactly why Crow had used it as her entry point.

Finch stepped up to the massive metal pipe and scraped her hand along the outside of it. The offensive sound of her smooth metal hand skittering across the rough, coarse surface of the pipe did nothing to deter her, and she stared dispassionately at her hand as she kept feeling along the pipe's surface.

She had memories of running her soft, fleshy hands against metal, but she couldn't help but wonder what it must've felt like. After forty-six seconds, she grew tired, and lifted herself up into the pipe. Inside, it was smooth and hollow, and she walked easily through it, one foot after the other, looking for traces of Crow.

Perhaps she would find a feather out of place, or clippings from a chipped claw? Even a strand of hair or tuft of fur would do. She didn't really need it, no, but—

Finch knelt down, face blank, as she gently picked up the fragile feather by its calamus and cupped it within her hands. Looking at it, she yearned to **understand**, to see more than just the body parts of the little Crow.

At least she'd get a chance to ask her.

Finch sent a command down her body, and instantly, her longfinger split in half down the middle with a loud hiss, revealing a hollow, cylindrical chamber within it. The inside of her finger was perfectly smooth, and in the dim shadow, it glowed with a pale and thrumming blue-green hue.

Wordlessly, she tucked the feather inside her finger with her other hand, making sure to curl the feather's soft vanes gently up and around so that it would fit inside the chamber without getting pinched.

Then, her finger snapped shut in a trice and hissed as it repressurized, sealing itself once again.

The job. She thought, turning about and walking to the edge of the pipe where she stopped all at once and stared out at the dry and empty basin below her.

Finch's eyes began to spin around in their sockets, and her irises— black spherical holes in the fabric of the world itself— remained frozen in place as the the early-morning's rays were drawn in towards them, curling around them, forming thick red, orange, and yellow rings about their center, top, and bottom. The rings of light bent up and inwards towards the black voids within her eyes, and then all at once,

Crow was standing before her, running, her tattered grey-mottled cloak flitting about behind her in the dark as she leaped from the basin—

Finch dropped down from the edge of the pipe and walked forward slowly, keeping her eyes on the afterimages of Crow.

—and crashed into the wall. She dug her claws into its side and dragged herself up, throwing herself over the ledge. Beyond her, in the city, the sound of Henrich's militia storming through the streets rang out.

Finch knelt down and sent commands throughout her body. Immediately, it began to whirl and shift, and then her legs snapped open, flinging her up and over the edge of the basin, where she landed beside the image of Crow.

She swore and bent down, curling up into a ball. She rocked front-to-back, rapping her knuckles softly against her head. Then, as if somehow inspired, she burst to her feet and sprinted forward into the alley—

Finch followed along slowly, watching as Crow sprinted ahead of her and rounded the corner. Finch took a side-path, emerging into the street, and as she turned her head to the left,

Crow scrabbled across the cobblestones, picking up three of them, which she then flung into the faces of her nearest pursuers as she stumbled forward into the crowd, slinking between legs and slipping through the crowd with ease.

Finch turned and went across the street, following Crow into the next set of alleyways.

Somehow, they found her. Even as she darted through the cramped and narrow passages, still iron bolts flew by, grazing her, chipping away at her flesh and feathers, and suddenly, she jolted to a stop—

Finch paused as she looked down with curiosity at Crow's pastself, who was pinned to a wall by a crossbow bolt that had gone straight through her wing. How did she plan to..?

tick!

And in an instant, she was gone again.

Finch looked around, confused. The bolt was still in the wall. Not even in the past— here and now— it was before her, coated in Crow's blood from the night before. She wrenched the bolt out of the wall and inspected it. No sign of snapping. No signs of a struggle. She was just gone.

No wonder she had gotten away. How could anyone expect the poor guardsmen to deal with this?

How intriguing.

Curious, Finch backtracked, walking calmly through the afterimages of the guards' pastselves, unflinching, until she reached the street again. There, in the past, she saw:

Crow was shunted back out into the world where she had been seven breaths prior. Immediately, she fixed her hood and set to running. If she covered enough distance, and stopped the bleeding, she could disappear without a trace. And so, she ran.

Finch walked slowly, staring down at the trail of blood on the ground from the night prior. With such an obvious track, even with her neat little trick, it was a wonder she—

The guards were on her again. Some had stayed to search where she disappeared, but others backtracked and stormed down the street, having caught the sight of her bloodstained trail. Shit. She ducked into an alley...

Finch stopped in place.

tick!

And watched as Crow's afterimage appeared right in front of her, behind all of the guards.

The world was spinning, but this was her chance. In a rush, she unfastened her cloak and brought its lowest tips out in front of her, tied them into a slipknot, then pulled it as tight as she could. Immediately, the whole of it cinched down hard on her wings, and it began to rapidly soak up the blood that spurted and oozed from her back with every motion. Then, she stumbled into the crowd, slipped through to the other side once again,

Finch crossed the street and stepped into the first alley, pursuing Crow through it, then along to the right, then to the left, and finally,

She pressed her back into the cold black stone.

her breath heaved out, hot and heavy, and her hands shakily returned to the leather pouch attached to her hip. her left flipped the pouch open, and her right dove inside, clutching around the singular precious piece within.

"Mmm.." Finch's body hummed with a smooth and even resonance as she peered into the pouch. *What use does she have for one of my eyes? Surely she doesn't intend to... have it **installed**? That would be suicide.* Finch sank down into the ground beside Crow's pastself, watching her closely as she untied the cloak and re-fastened it around her shoulders.

her shaky sigh of relief signaled the start of a brief respite. she slid down the wall, now slick with her perspiration, until she was seated fully in the dirt. she brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped up into a tight ball, pulling her cloak fully around her.

Finch mimicked her motions, wrapping her arms around herself, tightening up into a ball as much as she could. Beside her, underneath Crow's afterimage, was an imprint of Crow's back on the wall painted in blood.

she did it. she didn't die. she was still alive. in one piece. she'd really ... managed it. despite everything.

Crow's face, tucked away, could not be seen. But she seemed relaxed, soft, at peace, even in the midst of all this danger and chaos. Her breaths were even, and her body barely moved, shook, or trembled. Was she not in pain? How had she not succumbed to her wounds?

inside her ball, it was dark, claustrophobic, and warm; all the pieces she needed to feel comfort. everything she needed to feel safe. she'd never dream to ask of more and she didn't feel that she even needed to.

Finch watched as Crow's wing and back throbbed and spat out blood into her cloak. The blood soaked into and through it, trickling down, spilling around her. She watched as the blood seeped down the inside of the fabric, dyeing the cloak purple-red, and yet Crow sat still, breathing evenly, calming herself.

every tick of her stopwatch was met with a single tap of her finger. even resting, she was restless. she only longed to breathe deep and still her heart, but she knew there could be only twenty more breaths before it was time to run again.

Somehow, she was at peace, even in the midst of this chaos. It was as though...

she cherished every one of them.

She had never known anything else.

Suddenly, Crow's ears perked up as she seemed to hear something, and she bolted away, disappearing in an instant.

Crow's legs were like hers, Finch realized. They could wind up and snap out, releasing the whole of their long-held tension all at once. And since she was so small,

Crow flew through the alleys and held her wingarms straight out at her sides to keep her balance. As she glided through the air, she'd pull her talons to her ass, then kick out just as she landed, launching away again like a grasshopper. As the buildings got sparser, she aimed higher,

grabbing onto the sides of the buildings with her talons before launching up onto another wall, then an opposite one, until she reached the roofs.

Finch, tracking Crow only by sight, kneeled down for a moment and then launched up. At the apex of her jump, her feet neatly cleared the lip of the building's roof, and she softly touched down onto it right after. Far, far ahead of her was Crow's pastself. She was calmly leaping between rooftops, making her way Northwest, towards Raven's domain.

It seems the little bird is leading me right back to her nest. Finch thought, hopping easily between rooftops. From this height, her overwatch was absolute, and there was little chance that Crow's pastself would be losing her tail anytime soon.

Minutes became an hour, from rooftops to streets, to market stalls, through a brewery, up into an abandoned industrial section, and finally,

to a single, massive, looming hill that any and all denizens of Escrow avoided as though it might consume them. There was much superstition in the city, but at least about that,

they were probably right.

But,

Crow marched across the border between the crowded streets and the lush, grassy hill with no hesitation. It was a house-length band of packed and salted earth that encircled the entire hill.

On it, nothing grew, and by it, countless things withered.

Finch, too, crossed it with no issue. Though, a sense of foreboding did creep up over her the further she went, trying to compel her to turn around and leave. But she did not.

Instead, she went up the hill by Crow's side, calmly walking through the dense forest with her, taking in the sight of her as she struggled forward with singleminded purpose. Somehow, her wound had stopped bleeding, but her breath was rasping and heaving out. It was clear that she was ready to collapse any moment.

And then, Crow stopped.

Finch looked up and around. There was nothing to mark this part of the hill, save for a single rusting metal stake that stood up straight in the dirt. It was old, and crumbling, as though it had been there since the dawn of time. There were a line of markings etched into the side of it— horizontal lines, spaced irregularly, going all the way up until they met the sharp and jagged edge of the stake where it had been snapped in half, likely long ago.

Crow reached out and caressed the side of the stake, as if to say, "I'm home, old friend." Then, all at once—

Finch watched as Crow stepped forward into a wall of stone and dirt overhung by roots and disappeared all at once, phasing through it as though she was a spectre. Well—

Finch did the same, caressing the side of the stake, and though seeing no indication of change, stepped forward confidently towards the wall—

and hit it, falling backwards on her ass in the dirt and moss.

All at once, the sense of foreboding within her doubled, then tripled, then tripled again, and from all sides of her mind she felt a creeping anguish and dread that threatened to rip her apart and leave the remainder for the scavenger birds.

She sat in awe, hands and feet planted flat on the ground, as she stared, nonplussed, at her imprint in the dirt of the wall. Within her, a surging compulsion built as she thought back to something Henrich often said,

"If you find yourself facing Raven...

don't."

And so she ran. As fast as she could, she ran, tearing down the side of the hill, crashing into trees, sliding down the steep slopes along with a cascade of leaf litter and dust and soil. And she kept running, and running, far longer than she needed to,

far further than she had expected to,

and all of a sudden,

she was home again.

Back in that wretched fortress beyond the river, separated from the world and all its wonders.

And still, a chill spread through her, holding tight to her core, even as she curled up into a ball and shut her eyes, held tight by thick blankets and the warmth her own body radiated out into the bed.

Even then, she knew,

there was something deeply and terribly wrong with Crow.

...

...

...

"Thank you for agreeing to meet me on such short notice," Finch said, standing straight, hands held neatly together behind her back.

Wraith bobbed his head from side to side, lips pursed as he contemplated something. Then, he took a red-crystalline old-fashioned tumbler glass from a tray on the sidetable, took a matching decanter in his other hand, and sat down onto the plush black-threaded couch opposite from Finch while pouring himself a drink.

"Of course. It's usually in my best interest," he said, sipping on the drink. It was an aromatic and thick black ichor that looked and flowed like liquid shadows. As it sloshed into the crystal tumbler soundlessly, some of it spilled up and over the edge and disappeared in smoke as though it had never been there at all.

Finch remained standing to the side of the room, by the window, whose thick curtains blocked the daylight and sent scattered shadows all throughout the room. She faced Wraith, out of forced politeness, but was only two meters away from the door.

"So, what will I be getting out of this?" Wraith asked, tipping his glass back, downing it all in one go. Then, he eyed the decanter greedily, and looked up to Finch.

The symbolism was clear to her.

"I will capture Crow, and she will never steal again. As a result, you will no longer have to worry about her interfering in your... industry." Finch said, stepping forward onto the rug that framed the sitting space. She looked side-to-side, then deigned to sit opposite from Wraith on a couch that matched his own identically.

Wraith clasped his hands together, stuck out his straightfingers, and brought them up to his lip.

"Hmmm..." He hummed noncommittally, closing his eyes as if in deep contemplation. After four seconds of this, he separated his hands and waved a member of his staff over. They

whispered back and forth for six seconds, and then Wraith turned back to Finch. "And what would you ask of me?"

"I need to learn anything you have on Crow."

Wraith sat back in his chair, eyes closed, and resumed his thinking posture. After two seconds of this, he turned to his advisor, and they whispered back and forth for twenty seconds, and after much nodding, Wraith then turned back to Finch.

"Very well. Let's discuss." He said, leaning forward, arms resting on his knees. His advisor— or perhaps butler?— cleaned up the decanter and tumbler and tray and set them aside, then resumed standing at the side of the room, waiting for his next task.

"Who does Crow fence her items with?" Finch matched Wraith's posture, leaning forward, setting her wrists on her knees, back arched.

"**Firefly.**" Wraith's body shifted with countless micro-expressions.

"Why does that name trouble you?"

Wraith, taken aback, leaned back slightly, then spoke, "She used to work for me."

"Why doesn't she?"

"Raven."

"Mmm.. Isn't Raven stuck to their lab?"

"They have all sorts of methods of..." Wraith waved his hand around in the air, searching for some word to fit the situation, "enforcement."

"Don't you?"

Wraith looked away as if burned and stared a hole in the floor.

"They didn't work. We cut a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"I get first picks of Firefly's stock, and a nice discount."

"What does Firefly get?"

"She gets to be left alone."

"That's rare. Protected by two Heads? Envable."

"I wouldn't say *protected*,"

"I imagine if something happened to her, Raven would take it out on you."

Once again, Wraith looked away, tutting, pulling his lip into his mouth, then letting it go. "Yes. Yes, they would."

"Where can I find her?"

"Are you going to hurt her?"

"No." Finch lied as easily as breathing. Of course, their voice gave no signs of their deception.

"Are you familiar with **The Statues**?"

Finch scoffed, shaking her head. "Yes.. yes, I am. Sorry. It's a pain point."

"We all have them, dear," Wraith said, catching her eyes with his own. "Southwest of The Statues, there is a little tower— like a lighthouse, if you've heard of those— alone and glowing bright on a pleasant and purple hill."

"She works there?"

"I suppose she does."

"Very well," Finch thought back briefly to the metal stake in the ground outside of Raven's laboratory, then to Crow's skill, which did not match her size. "How long has Crow—"

"Been in the game?" Wraith interrupted, motioning for his advisor to bring him another glass.

"Yes."

Wraith sat back, sipping on his drink. Then, he looked out the window.

"That's the funny thing, Finch." He sighed, resting his forehead against the rim of the glass, eyes closed. "No one really knows. She started before I was born, though."

"What? But she's— just..."

"You're right. Even if her **base** is exceptionally long-lived, she just looks far too young for that to be true." Wraith opened his eyes and downed the shadows, which clung to the side of the glass and spilled out soundlessly like a river's rapids, falling into his open mouth. He did not swallow, but as he put the glass down, the sclera of his eyes turned from a pallid gray to a dark, void-like black.

"I don't really know what it means," Wraith continued, "I wonder if, like Raven, she is immortal."

"Raven's immortal?" Finch asked, surprise tinging her voice for the first time.

Wraith, now, scoffed and shook his head, suppressing a laugh behind the back of his hand.

"Has your father done nothing to prepare you to take over in his stead?"

Finch fell silent, and her gaze fell, too, to the floor. Three seconds passed.

"What sort of things has Crow stolen?"

"Everything. She's done it all. A true master of the craft," Wraith said, untainted adoration spilling into his voice. "Parts, pieces, artifice, schematics, textbooks, ledgers, information, artefacts, even punitive theft on behalf of Raven."

"Why *does* she steal for Raven?"

"I don't know. Raven is rather tight-lipped about it, and there are as many theories on the street as there are expendable bodies in the blackstone mines. Personally, I think they're in it together, and Raven just prefers to stay in their laboratory."

Finch shut her eyes and composed an image of Wraith in her head, then imagined crumpling it up like paper and incinerating it. There were not words to describe how dumb his take on that was.

"I... see." Finch said, trying hard to sound convinced, or perhaps manage sounding aloof. "How would you describe her?"

"I've only seen her three times, and in passing, but..." Wraith bobbed his head side to side thoughtfully. His eyes had already lost some of their hue. "Tiny, efficient, adorable, and childish."

"Any other thoughts?"

"She's a threat to all of us. Crow is the hand of Raven," Wraith whispered, leaning forward. He waited until Finch caught his eyes to continue. "Do not get this twisted, child." He paused, sighing, as if he hated to admit it. "Everything in this world can be traced back to Raven. They are the closest thing to a God that will ever exist."

Again, Finch began to that dreadful chill settle into the space between her metal skeleton and the flesh she once had.

"What do you mean?"

"What is something you deem impossible?"

Finch had experienced a great many things, and considered herself very open minded. There was not much that fit that description.

"The spontaneous creation of matter from nothing." She concluded. It was a safe choice.

Wraith simply leaned back, smiling, and then shrugged.

"Where do you think our food comes from, Finch?"

Finch looked down at the metal that made up every single part of her. It wasn't something she had thought about before.

"There are no farms in Escrow, Finch."

...

She was too troubled to return home. The search for answers had left her only wondering, and her wondering had lead her only wandering, through the market, past The Statues, and finally,

to the lighthouse on the little purple hill.

A small moat, perhaps two meters in length, surrounded the hill, and a peaceful, well-maintained greystone bridge connected it to the city proper. In the dark, the light from the lighthouse caused the bridge to cast creeping shadows into the water, and as she crossed it, Finch found herself wondering where this job would lead her in the end.

She could not help but feel that she was now playing a hand in the end of all things.

Knock, knock. Finch rapped on the old wooden door. Beneath her metal knuckles, shavings and splinters flicked off into the shadows that pooled around her feet.

Ten seconds passed with only the soft rapping of a wooden cane down flagstone stairs.

Then, the door swung open, creaking all the way.

"Hello, Firefly." Finch said, bowing her head slightly. It was only right to respect the elderly. Their time would come soon, so it only made sense to be kind.

"Why hello dearie," Firefly chittered, rubbing her little two-pronged tarsus on her bulging compound eyes so as to remove some sort of dust. "What business brings such a shiny young lady to my home at this hour? And from the front door too, with such good manners?"

"Crow."

"Oh, now.. Oh, dear.." Firefly stepped from side to side on her forked hindlimbs, elytra nervously rubbing together. "Well, you look kindly. Come in and sit by the fire, and let's chat." Firefly proceeded to step out and behind Finch, shoos her inside as she looked around nervously outside and shut the door behind the two of them.

By the time Firefly had waddled back and settled on the plush rug by the roaring fire, Finch had already sat down and made herself at home. The fire was warm, and welcoming, and reminded her of kinder and simpler times.

Some part of her even felt somewhat warm.

"Now why would you be asking me about that old flame?" Firefly asked, idly bending forward and massaging the joints between her exoskeleton's segments.

"I would write a document on her," Finch began, "detailing her life, relationships, and exploits, that all Escrow may finally know the truth. It is not right for there to be so much..." Finch

looked at Firefly, gauging her reaction, "tasteless disinformation about one of our local legends."

"Quite right indeed, dearie, quite riiiiIghht.." Firefly yawned, leaning back against a large, stuffed animal— some fictional creature. Then, Firefly pulled a heavy woolen blanket over herself.

"So I was wondering—"

"Ah!" Firefly interrupted Finch, speaking up quickly, and with great energy. "On one condition will I tell you anything."

"Very well."

"I'll tell you, as long as I get to be the first to read it. And you must finish before I die of old age, here."

Finch paused to consider for a moment. Shit. She was rather charming. Was she really going to write a book just to avoid lying to an old lady?

"How long do you have left?"

"One more summer left in me, dearie, then it's off to the mud with these old bones." She chattered, letting out a clacky, healthy giggle.

"It shall be done." Finch swore, and she meant it.

Clearly, this pleased Firefly, who motioned for her to continue.

"How old is Crow?"

"Honestly, I have no idea! When we first met, we were both freshly adults— for our *bases*, anyway— but I don't know what her *base* is. She could've been anywhere from 6 to 66."

"Depending on her base."

"Exactly. Born as a larvae, for example—"

"I understand."

"Though it's the darndest thing, you know,"

Finch was about to interrupt her, but some part of her held back, **feeling** something important about to occur.

"She never really seemed to age like the rest of us. And she takes so many forms, that shifty changeling..."

"What?"

"Well, when we met, she was quite the colossus, you know! More than thrice my size, and ten times my weight, but now... well, now, she's smaller than little old me!"

"I'm confused."

"She used to be huge!" Firefly said, spreading her arms wide, "Far bigger than this! And I guess she just shrunk down. Maybe she really is old like me... hah, that silly girl."

"Wraith said she still acts like a child."

"Ah, that certainly is true..." Firefly giggled, "She certainly hasn't lost her youth, that's for sure! I like to think, in that way, the two of us are still... still..." Firefly wheezed, then hacked up a ball of slime, which she flung thoughtlessly into the fire.

FWOOSH!

"Still what?"

"What?"

"The two of you are still..?"

"I haven't the slightest what you mean, dearie. Bless your heart!" Firefly reached up and rubbed her eyes again.

Alright. Finch thought, wishing more than ever that she could sigh.

"How did the two of you meet?"

"Well, she needed to pawn some questionable items off, and I thought, 'ah, isn't she just something special?', and then one thing led to another, and before you knew it—"

"Hold on. You two, did you..?"

"Yes! Yes, dearie. Do your oral parts work alright? I told you earlier she was my old flame!"

Ah. Fuck. Finch thought.

"Yes, yes, my mistake..." Finch looked to the fire, nonplussed. As she moved to speak again, Firefly continued.

"But one day, she just up and forgot me. She came back as if we had never met, looking different again, though, much *more* different this time..." Firefly rambled for a few minutes before Finch again was able to speak.

"How did you know it was the same Crow?"

"Well... she was the same as she had always been, just in a new form. We old lovers can just tell, you know? Mainly, though... she was still looking for **it**."

"It?"

"You don't know?" Firefly bent back and cackled for a while...

FWOOSH!

"So... is that why she steals? To locate this... *it*?"

"**It.**" Firefly 'clarified', sounding not-at-all different. "I think that's why she does. But what do I know? I'm closer to the grave than my sharpest self!"

"So—"

"Ah! But **it** doesn't have to be a thing, you know. She's tried evermuch over the years, not just stealing, but nothing ever really clicks for her! It must be so exhausting... Could you imagine trying to find your **it** for so long, never succeeding?"

Finch settled backwards, suddenly feeling less **whole** than before.

And somehow, Firefly knew.

"What is it you want, dearie? And... I'm sorry, I must have forgotten your name."

"It's Finch."

"What is it that drives you, Finch? To write about Crow? To learn history?"

Finch leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees, and stared into the roaring fire. The heat of it felt nice. She had come to like this feeling. And she had come to hate others, too.

But there really was something missing.

Finch was going day-by-day, one task after the other, just going through practiced motions, thinking only of what was relevant and trying to avoid the rest on which she could dwell. But that wasn't her, no, nor her life. Hers would be something else entirely.

"I don't know," Finch whispered, her voice faint and crisp like a tiny leaf crunched underfoot.

"Is there anything that you want?"

There was, actually. A fleeting thing. A little passion of hers, a tiny thought that circled around in her head from time to time.

"I want to be free, I think."

"Freedom... ah? Hm... ah, ah. Mmmm.." Firefly chittered, massaging her metal mandibles where they met with her face. "What does it mean?"

"To..." Finch kept staring into the fire, seeing for once not the past, but a blazing future ahead of her. In an instant, the meaning was clear to her. She would be like fire. "To do what I want. And when others ask of me, to react in my own way. To make my own choices."

"To be free from others, then?" She chattered.

"Ah..." Finch rubbed the back of her head. Would that really be freedom? "All my life, I have been controlled. I just want to have the final say in anything I do."

Then, the two met eyes, for only a moment.

"Don't you, dearie?"

"No." Finch said quickly, looking back into the fire. It crackled and roared and shifted and twisted, fierce. "But I will."

"Ah, now what were we talking about, little Finchy?"

Finch would have smiled if she could. "Crow. Your old flame."

"Ah, yes! Well..."

As Firefly spoke, Finch could only think of one thing:

her freedom, and how she would claim it.

...

...

The next moon passed by quickly. Finch interviewed countless faces and names, all the while collecting her information on Crow. Her habits, her favorite spots, the names of her favorite people, where she had been recently, when she had last been seen.

All the while, from countless single observations, Finch pieced together the picture of Crow and who she really was.

,

"Have you seen her recently?"

"No, not for a few weeks ... said she'd come back with something big, then Henrich's place was hit."

,

"What is her relationship to Raven?"

"She works for them willingly. Why couldn't she just leave? It's not like Raven ever does..."

"Raven holds all the power."

"She's a slave."

"Raven works for her. I mean, she brings home the money."

"They're partners in crime."

"She's their enforcer."

"I think Crow and Raven are the same person. I mean, someone would've seen Raven
by now!"

,

"What does she look like?"

"Just a tiny thing."

"Ah, a cute little bird-thing, wasn't it?"

"Do you wanna see my Crow costume????"

"Last I saw her... three arms, 1.5 meters tall?"

"A cloak in the wind."

"Well, she's barely more than a shadow."

"I don't really believe she exists, you know. I think it's a Wraith cover-up job."

,

"Where does she spend her time?"

"Ah, just about everywhere."

"She comes here often, you know, to like, climb?"

"This construction site..."

"I see her going to The Spire at least once a moon."

"She's always leaving the city!"

"Hell if I know. Buzz off."

,

"What are her capabilities?"

"She can kill you with just a look."

"I hear she's fancy with throwing daggers?"

"She can steal. That's about it."

"Can't she fly?"

"Anything you can think of."

"I saw her travel through time!"

"Damn good dodger, not so good at fighting."

,

"What was she like before she met Raven?"

"Before?"

"I don't seem to remember... sorry, dearie."

"Poor, I think. Stable job."

"They've always been together, haven't they?"

,

"What has she done to you?"

"Got me on bad terms with Cane... was supposed to protect the thing, then she swooped in. Hell was I s'posed to do?"

"Stole some shit. Forgot what it was, but it was damn nice."

"She took everything from me. If you see her..."

"Oh. Well, she gave me this massive gem—"

"When my son was out and about, she stopped him from getting trampled by..."

.
.. ..
... ..
....
.....
.....
.....

The job is simple. Find Crow, capture her, and bring her here. If you cannot, kill her."

At first, she had agreed.

But that was six months ago.

Now, Finch realized— and for the hundredth time— that Henrich was a fool. It had been two hundred days with more than twice as many dead ends.

Of course Crow knew how to disappear without a trace. How else could she reach such heights? To draw any other conclusion knowing Crow's storied history would be absurd.

Finch rolled her eyes, then shut them and folded forward, bending in half while kneeling. As she moved, her whole body sang— soft mechanical whirring served as the background for the ephemeral, near-silent humming of perfectly tuned and lubricated crystalline gears.

But she did not need to hear it, for she felt it,

as surely as you, dear reader, feel the muscles within your own corpse. Do you ever marvel at the motion of them? Do you ever press your ear to your flesh to hear its rhythm?

I have many questions for you, dear reader, if you— ah, now.

Ah, where was I?

And she hated the way her body felt. At all times, she was aware of it, and never did her body shift in a way that escaped her attention. Once, it was maddening. Now, it was settled neatly into the background, shelved away just on the edges of her periphery, radiant and compelling. She'd had more time to reflect on it recently, with all her downtime.

Finch, now kneeling and folded forward, opened her eyes to stare again at the ground. There was nothing more to be learned here, she knew. But she had some time before her next interview, and without feeling her feelings, she simply found herself tracing over the same scars she always did.

Two more minutes of fuming. Not a second more. Then, she would stand up and set off to the next cold lead and yet another dead end. But for now...

Finch, kneeling on the stones of the alleyway, illuminated from behind by the midday sun, let herself fall limp. Her head rested peacefully, forehead on a cobblestone, and her wrists and shoulders followed suit.

It was one of the only ways she could relax. When she fell apart, she felt nothing, and this brief respite was a welcome change.

People had a bad habit of staring, but at some point, she had lost the energy to care. It simply didn't matter anymore. Nothing did, really.

Just one day at a time. Just keep moving. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other.

And just like that, a buzzing in the back of her scalp told her that two minutes had elapsed, and in a moment,

she was gone again.

...

...

Today's investigation brought her to Cane's estate. It was a rare joint effort between Cane and Henrich. They had been bonding over 'running afoul of the same foul fowl'. They laughed, but just like with the pun, it was mainly painful.

Finch stood perfectly still, arms hanging limp at her sides, as she waited for the two poor workhogs to pull apart the thick and heavy metal gate. It was a grand thing, more than fifteen meters in width, a meter thick, set on grand silver hinges that were wider around than herself.

Which foundry did they use to produce this? Metal on this scale.. there are only two places that can produce such a thing. Perhaps a private artisan? Cane could have some sort of workshop on the Estate, but the fumes would be notable, unless they were piped elsewhere..

Finch's head snapped instantly towards the well-dressed man approaching her from the other side of the gate. He wore a perfectly-tailored suit, clearly from the seamstress, and carried no armaments nor indications of any that were hidden. His suit was pristine, but clearly cut servile in nature, and his presence was that of a man who had spent his life considering others

before himself. His smile was masterfully faked, and the slightest turn in his eyes' corners revealed the rotten truth of him.

"Finch, I presume?" He asked, voice flat, even, and with the perfectly appropriate volume. His speech was completely inoffensive, regardless of how any listener might go about hearing it.

Finch nodded, unwilling to speak.

She noticed the way the man's shoulders ever so slightly pulled together. He paused for several seconds as he considered his next response.

Cane must be rather strict.

"I am the Head of Estate Management here. I will be overseeing your investigation, as—"

"No." Finch shook her head sternly, and stared at him flatly in challenge.

"No? Cane has ordered it directly. You are to be supervised."

Finch brought up her hand to cover her eyes and rested her forehead on the scalloped metal plating that connected her bentfinger to her straightfinger. Then, after only a moment of brooding, she returned to her original posture.

"I will meet with Cane. These arrangements are unsuitable."

"He is too busy, there is too much going on, you can't just—"

But Finch had already moved past him. She was staring straight up at Cane's mansion and she marched up the winding path in a straight line. Paths were more of a suggestion, really, and she cut freely across the greenery and between the flower beds, all while the 'Head of Estate Management' followed the path diligently, awkwardly speedwalking at his top speed, attempting to catch up to her.

"Please wait! I am sure we can work something out!" He called out.

But she did not regard him, for he was not in charge here. There were only two people one Cane's estate with any real authority.

Herself, and then Cane.

”

”

The smooth red-brown door swung inwards fluidly on perfect, massive hinges, revealing a haggard housekeeper with red-brown ribbon-braided hair and a fluffed-up pink sundress covered partially by a bright white, and frilled, apron. In Finch's opinion— a traditional and tasteless style.

The housekeeper looked at Finch, eyes wide in alarm. She reached one hand to the small of her back and leaned against the door, peering up and over Finch's shoulder—

And Finch, noticing the effort, bent forward toward her ever so slowly so as to provide her a better view, bringing her own face next to the housekeeper's.

Flustered, the housekeeper stepped back, putting both of her hands up in front of herself as she looked frantically from Finch, to her boss speedwalking up the hill, then back to Finch, then back to her boss. Her boss's eyes were down on the pavement, focused on each and every step as he huffed and puffed with exertion. He had not yet seen her.

The housekeeper's shoulders slumped in relief, and she offered the briskest, shallowest of nods to Finch, and then she simply turned aside, grabbed the nearest broom, and sped off like a scared rabbit to clean the nearest room.

Finch offered a small smile to the back of the housekeeper, then stepped forward to the central staircase, gaze still trailing after the woman, fixed on her lower-back. There was a tiny knife there, hidden in the folds of her dress. So spirited.

Only once she could no longer see the housekeeper did Finch turn her gaze away and begin to look around at her surroundings. It was not much to look at, really. Each and every detail was exactly the same as her projections in the lab, and the maps she had obtained were, apparently, even more recent than she had expected.

Her eyes did linger, but only along the places she expected Crow had been. They were *different, slightly to the left*. Tangibly intangibly, some part of Crow had been left here when she left here thirteen days ago.

How strange. Perhaps this lead will, for once, surprise me.

Anticipation flared up within Finch as she calmly stepped up the stairs, hands folded neatly behind her back, eyes scanning each and every part of the grand hall. To either side of the main staircase, smaller hallways went deeper into the estate. Insignificant.

Up above, the main stairway split off in two directions, each meeting up with the same hallway that wrapped all around the bottom floor with a railing, overlooking it. She took the left, coming up to a bloodstain, then looking up to the shattered door of Cane's private office.

With her eyes, she followed the carnage in the opposite direction, where a clear path was carved into the estate itself as deeply as tracks in loose snow.

The scene was still as it was.

Cane had his private investigators try their hand first, but they had failed, even with the estate exactly as it was that day.

And so, she had arrived, to piece together the past in the way that only she could.

For the privilege of her services, Cane was paying a pretty penny to Henrich.

But in the end, Finch would be the only one to profit off of it. She would make sure of it.

Knock, knock.

"What?" A deep, smooth voice deeper in the office commanded. It was the well-practiced voice of a commander, a leader, a general, and a mastermind. The perfect inflection of a manipulator, of a man that could demand anything and expect it brought to him by morning.

Without saying a word, Finch stepped into Cane's office, hands still folded neatly behind her back, and locked eyes with him.

Cane smiled.

"It's a pleasure,"

they said in unison.

Then, they both paused, before attempting to speak again.

"I was hoping to—"

they said in unison, again.

Cane laughed and stood, then crossed the office to Finch. He towered a full meter over her, even without amalgamating with his tail.

"Welcome." He said, extending a clawed and wrinkly whiteflesh hand that was more than triple the size of her own.

"Thank you." She said, and she meant it. It was rare indeed to find a kindred spirit.

"Are you ready to begin?"

"I am."

"May I join you?"

"Why?"

"That I may see what you do."

"That is not possible."

"Then, that I may learn from you, that we may talk, that I might come to learn the truth of what has happened in my home."

"Mmm.."

"It would drive you mad, wouldn't it? If something happened, right in front of you, in your most sacred of spaces, but never could you know the truth?"

"I agree. So long as your dog stays out of it."

"Ah, yes. I am glad you blew him off."

"To see my mettle?"

"Exactly!" Cane said, stepping into the doorframe behind her, as Finch walked further into the office.

"I would have done the same." She said, tracing her finger through the dust on the desk. He had just been sitting here, and yet it was piled high.

"Why?"

"The same as you, I imagine." Finch said, stepping under the hole in the corner of the room's ceiling. "A proper investigator lets nothing hold them back from the truth. All fat is trimmed, that the truth may be laid bare. Someone issued to watch over me is clearly assigned to prevent me from digging deeply into the curiosities present— the very same ones that may hold the answers we seek."

Cane nodded silently in resolute agreement.

"Well then," Finch said, turning to him as her eyes began to spin around in their sockets. "Shall we begin?"

Cane nodded, and lifted his hand, motioning to the ceiling.

.

They started in the attic space. Finch had to hunch over slightly, and to be there, Cane had to bend fully in half. He was determined, though, to see this through, as so he stuck with Finch.

Her current room was coated in a soft twilight from the dormer's window to her east. It was a plain, wooden thing, not too dissimilar from a beggar's coffin. There were cobwebs and the occasional bug, with a tiny rounded door, scarcely larger than her, to her west. The roof itself was just above her, close enough for her to reach up and touch. The wood, there, was smooth on her fingers. A nice touch for a fancy home.

Finch watched as Crow touched the ceiling gently, caressing it like a lover, then watched as Crow followed along the wall with her fingers, eyes softening as she noted the texture.

Her hands continued to flutter as she paced the room. right. only one way forward.

Finch had learned, from long nights studying, that Crow had many nervous habits like this, where she would fling off mental sensations as physical ones, sharpening her focus. At least, that was the working theory, until she could be questioned.

Finch stepped aside as Crow's pastself pushed through the door into the attic proper, searching around in the dark.

"It seems she did not have much of a plan," Finch began.

"And yet she thwarted us easily."

"Well..." Finch trailed off as she watched Crow take out a *Photinus pyralis*, then pierce it through to produce a rudimentary form of bioluminescent light. "Yes. That's correct."

She flicked the remaining paste from her claw and let the leaf fall open. Immediately, the paste sparked and popped, then sputtered and hissed as the telltale yellow flames rose up to greet her.

A poor light, as always, but it was better than nothing.

Cane was curious as to what Finch was watching, but had the foresight to remain silent. The two of them crept through the attic, Cane following Finch following Crow's shadow, who stepped to the corner of the room.

Inspecting closer, it seemed that some fool had simply painted over a hole they were likely meant to fix. Looking up, she spied freshly-replaced wood. Some issue with rot, more than likely. She dug at the wood with her claw until the joint between old and new became visible. She smiled.

Rot indeed, and a hack of a job to fix it.

"Were there issues with Rot in the roof, here?"

"Yes," Cane confirmed, "and I had them patched."

"The worker did a poor job," Finch mused, running her hands over the exposed, rotting wood. "Crow used the leftover rot to weaken this section, then simply knocked it down and dropped through."

"That would take weeks."

"She... sped it up a little bit."

"How?"

"Sympathy, Cane."

"Ah..." Cane sighed. "How does anyone even come to learn that?"

"Through one of three teachers," Finch mused, dropping through the hole in the ceiling, following Crow down to the office.

Cane, far too large for the hole, took the stairs and met Finch below.

*Her feathers stood on end, and she clapped her free hand over the exposed eye. Maybe it would be helpful, but it wasn't now, and **she had shit to do!!***

Finch paused. She hadn't even thought about the eyepatch, or what it covered, but now she saw it plainly before her as Crow bustled through the room, this way and that, bolting the door, falling into the desk-chair...

was it really true?

"What is it?" Cane asked.

Shit. Finch thought, mentally sidestepping her own stupor.

"She's using what she stole from me to steal from you." Finch said simply.

"All the better we end this today."

"Perhaps we will..." Finch said, kneeling down beside Crow's pastself.

She shut her flesh eye and focused deep on the grainy pattern.

Finch stared into the present, seeing the shattered and gaping hole in the whitestone tiles. She, too, looked into the past of the floor...

"This was wood, before?"

Cane stopped himself just before a stupid question left his lips.

"Yes," he said simply.

"I'll be plain with you. She has one of my eyes, and can see into the past, as I can. She simply saw the past where your safebox had first been set in the floor, and from there, she knew where to strike."

"She didn't know where it was before coming?"

"No. She just assumed you would keep it close at hand."

Cane cursed, then sighed. "That's... fair, I suppose."

SMASH!

and the thin plate of stone yielded to her, falling to pieces held up only by the container beneath.

tick, click, shick scrit click click, tick!

And in a single breath, the box yielded its contents to her, as all boxes did. Crow loosened the large bag strapped to her back and spun it around to her front while flipping it open. There was little time, so she dumped all of the contents of the box straight into it, fastened it shut, and slid it back into its rightful place between her wings. Then, she pulled the bag's straps fully through its metal loops, squeezing the whole of it tight against her feathers.

Crow's hands shook as she worked. That was rather unusual indeed. One of the many commonalities Finch had found across all of her studies was that Crow was even, precise, and

dextrous. When working, her hands did not shake, she did not hesitate, and she did not falter. But here...

"She did all of this injured."

Cane remained silent.

"And she took your... *sentimental* belongings because she was in a rush. It seems it wasn't personal, she just dumped the whole box into a bag."

"You should be seeing us fighting, now, yes?"

Crow flung herself to the far wall just as a massive spined tail pierced through the air she had just been breathing.

"Indeed."

As quickly as it appeared, the tail retracted back to Cane, who fully blocked the door before her.

"And... she did that injured?" Cane's voice shook with something Finch could not quite pick-up. The feeling was an ugly mutt, some vicious mixed-breed of anger, fear, violation, betrayal, and misunderstanding.

Instantly, she forced herself back with her wings

CRRRRASH!

Cane's tail now resided where she had a moment ago, its deadly spines flared out. Had she been thinking, she'd be dead.

"Yes." Finch said simply, staring at Crow.

Her rhythm shifted, now, to a low, volatile rumble as old as life itself. The rhythm of cornered prey that would do anything to see another day.

Every piece of her resonated with the same, perfect tone. All of her was consumed by a single, perfect understanding. Finally, she had let go.

For once, she

was truly

free.

Even in the present, Finch could feel the shift in Crow, though her mind could not consciously understand it. There were no microexpressions that communicated the change, but it was total, and absolute. In a word, Crow was simply...

more ***whole.***

"So how did she do it?" Cane asked.

Finch looked up to answer him, watching as he stood in the same place, rubbing his fingers along his grafted-on lip just as Crow ripped it off of his pastself.

"I don't know," she admitted. "All at once, something in her changed."

"Something changed?"

"Yes... It was..." Finch crossed her arms in front of her, stepping to the side, turning only her head to watch as Cane and Crow's pastselves flung themselves out the window. Then,

tick!

and in an instant, she was gone again.

That's it. Finch thought, snapping her fingers, which rang out like chimes as they struck her metal palm. Finally,

Her beak snapped shut around the stolen lips as her legs snapped open and threw her forward through the door.

Finch understood.

She stepped forward quickly, following Crow's afterimage, motioning for Cane to come along with her.

Crow's claws and talons stabbed deep into the hallway's rug as she broke into full pelt. She leaped up and latched onto the first person she saw, a housekeeper, with her razor-sharp beak, all around the woman's throat. Then, holding on tight, she ripped her head to the side, splitting the woman's neck in half, sending her viscera spraying across the rug, across crow, and up the wall.

She understood what **it** was.

And Crow had found **it**.

The rug shredded beneath her as she landed on her claws and pulled forward off of them, then landed on her talons and kicked off of them. Her entire body moved seamlessly, a perfect machination in motion, and she tore through anyone that dare come within sight of her.

Finch stepped down the hallway, watching the story behind each bloodstain with a grim expression.

As Cane asked about them, Finch told him the truth of what had happened, and his face fell with every new story.

Eventually, he stopped asking.

As the two followed the dried river of blood up the whitestone staircase, Cane spoke up.

"Why did she do this, Finch?"

"Escape?"

"No, Finch. This is no time to talk around the truth on purpose."

"I'm sorry." She said, and she meant it. "The truth is just..."

"I can bear it."

Finch turned to him, looking past him into the past,

A tall and skinny servant, arms full of laundry, stood frozen in fear as Crow clawed her way up the stairs towards her like a possessed spider. In one breath, Crow had ripped up three flights of the stairs, and leaped up into the man, latching onto him with her full body, before ripping through him just as easily as she did the carpet. Blood dripped freely from her form and she stood there, silently, maw turned toward the light at the top of the stairs. She relished in the blood that coated the inside of her mouth as she pawed at the ground with her feet, pushing the blood around in her mouth like a fine wine, before swallowing it along with the lips like stew.

Then, Finch turned her head away, looking up the stairwell, where Crow tore further up through the estate, towards her exit.

"Because she wanted to, Cane."

"She—"

"It's simply her nature."

Cane opened his mouth to dispute the claim, but closed it. In truth,
he was no different.

,

Then, the two of them emerged onto the roof, and Finch watched as Crow struggled with something at the edge of it.

"She had difficulties leaving." Finch said, watching, taciturn.

"From her injuries?"

"No..." Finch said, approaching the edge of the roof, standing just behind Crow's pastself.

Beneath her, she, too, saw the abyss.

"What are you looking at?"

The abyss, it seemed, lived only in the past.

"The ground." She said simply. "Crow was staring at it. She was about to fall, and she did."

"Yes... I watched. But she glided over the edge."

"Injuring herself in the process, and then—"

Finch pointed her whole hand, straightfinger extended, to where Crow collapsed in the street.

"Landed just outside your walls, there, on the street."

"Where did she go?"

"Nowhere. She passed out."

"So by the time we got down there..."

"Someone had carried her away." Finch finished, turning her back to the abyss, before walking back towards the staircase that lead into the estate.

"Can you track them?"

"No." Finch lied as easily as breathing. "I can only track Crow because of this." She said, producing the old feather from where it was held within her finger.

"I see. Well, thank you for your help today," Cane said, "You answered most of my questions. I'll have my men search the area for whoever carried her off."

"Of course," Finch said, starting down the staircase.

Today, her search would come to an end.

.

"You return. What did you learn at Cane's estate?"

"Plenty, but nothing to trouble you with."

"Very well. Then—"

"There is, though, a minor curiosity I'd like to follow up on." Finch spoke out loudly, interrupting him.

"Oh? Related to the investigation?"

"What? Oh. No." Finch shook her head. "I want to visit our tailor, and ask for a custom garment."

"You wish to start wearing clothes?"

"I do."

"It is about time." Henrich sighed, gazing over his throne and out of the grand hall's window, eyes scanning over the rest of the fortress below. "I'm glad to hear you are finally coming to terms with your form."

Finch nodded dutifully, and bowed.

"Please..." Henrich trailed off into a sigh, then shook his head. Only some battles were meant to be fought. He waved his hand, dismissing Finch from whatever he had meant. "Very well. Meet with the butler, and take the linens over for our next order. While you are there, take all the time you need, hm? Have a whole wardrobe made, if you have a mind for it."

"Thank you, Henrich." Finch said, head still bowed.

"Of course. Now," He stood up, adjusting the sleeves of his labcoat before fidgeting with the carved crystalline bracelets on his wrists. "Off with you. I'll be in the laboratory."

Finch stood, turned, and left for the Butler's chambers without a word.

,

,

She was painfully close, now. Her entire body thrummed with the anticipation of the coming moments, of the chase that would soon end, as she pushed through the crowds of the city with her metal bin of assorted linens.

Of course, she had no need for clothes.

Finch shifted her grip, freeing up one hand to check all around and make sure everything was fastened correctly, tied on properly, and re-secured so that it would not fall.

She had already acquired the ones she needed.

Indeed, there was another reason entirely for this errand.

"I need a heavy raincloak, trousers, boots, a facemask, a black woolen sleeve set, and a bodybag."

"No. You do not work with us, your requisition is denied."

In response, Finch offered up a small missive with Cane's seal that she had produced while he was clambering back to the office.

"My apologies, erm—" The provisioner looked for a form of address for Finch, who simply shook her head in response.

"It is no trouble. I will not mention it to Cane if you do not."

And so, she stepped into a side-room, got dressed, and departed through the side-gates. Rather than answering questions, she simply produced the missive once again, and combined with the bodybag and standard-issue clothing, she left with no issue.

It was common, after all, for Cane to send out such 'Fixers'.

After leaving the estate, Finch stepped through the streets outside of it, pressing into the first alley she saw. From there, she moved down the steep slope and turned to the side until she came out onto the street where Crow had fallen.

As her eyes spun in place, she spun Crow's shed feather between her fingers. The final parts of the plan were all falling neatly into place.

Finch pushed up the final steps of the walkway carved into the narrow and jagged hill built into the cliff that overhung the burough of the city she had just come from. Then, she continued down past six houses, turned left, went up past twelve more. The further she walked, though, the louder a commotion in the distance became. An unusual stir in the crowd. Shouting.

Finch picked up her pace, then turned right into the wide plaza that she had visited just two hours prior.

But now, it was different.

Forty meters ahead, a wide crowd was gathered around, gawking and jeering. And just above them...

A naked and injured girl in the window, back turned.

Even from behind, through the bruises, the matted fur, crooked feathers, through the dried blood and gaping wounds, even through her emaciated, weary frame, Finch knew at once who it was.

Crow.

Her mission.

Finch moved without thinking, the linens already discarded in the dirt behind her. She crouched down low, knees ringing out like tuning forks while a low-pitched, slow whirring built up and crescendoed until its pitch became a high, piercing shriek.

The target would be easily captured.

She's falling!

Finch's legplates compressed, buckled inwards at the shin, and split apart viciously, revealing hot red metal within the gap that seared the air and left it quivering. Then, she threw her torso down, leaned her full weight forward, and exploded off of her heel. Her entire left leg snapped open with the instancy and majesty of lightning, and while the pathway behind her

shattered and blasted apart, sending stones flying over the cliff and into the city below, Finch rocketed forward and closed the forty-meter gap in an instant.

As she flew, Finch straightened at the hips, raising her back up and then tilting it back, while whirling her arms up and around to catch her—

—!

—objective.

Crack!

Crow shrieked as she landed hard into Finch's metal grasp, bones cracking from the force of it, then whimpered softly as Finch pulled her close and adjusted her hold methodically to minimize the aggregate strain of the injuries.

Finch looked down at Crow, scanning her entire form, scarcely covered by— presumably— her loose belongings, analyzing every piece and part of her in a moment, identifying every issue, every wound, recognizing every component of her at once for what it was, then her sight caught on Crow's eye,

the same as her own,

looking back at her.

And she knew what was left to be done and what she had to do and how to do it and when and why and who she was holding and what that meant and she saw in her arms, for the first time, the only time, someone that was just like her, someone whose eyes reflected the same pain, whose form, even when broken, told the story of a life not yet started, whose sounds were so honest that they echoed the truth in her own chest, and—

and—

and—

She—

Crow—

Someone like me? But—

She's beautiful.

"Thank goodness!" A panting voice shouted from above. "You caught her! The poor thing is trying to recover her injuries. We can discuss this inside!"

Finch tilted her head back, looking up high, and saw there **the seamstress**, some ten meters above. Then, she looked back down to Crow, and closed her eyes, trying hard to quarantine the parts of her mind that shot up and spiked with dangerous thoughts that immediately tried to punch through her better judgement.

Minimize attention. Play it safe. Her life is in your hands.

Finch simply nodded, then ripped her legs out from where they had punched into the stone walls of the shop, and dropped to the ground. Eyes turned low, Finch began to step towards the door.

Crow squirmed, suddenly, wriggling like a worm. Her face contorted, lips pouting, and her metal eye, bloodstained, glistened as she squinted up at Finch.

Finch stopped at the door and waited, standing in front of it, until the seamstress left the window and began padding back into the home.

Then, Finch turned to the side, pushed through the throng, and left.

By the time the seamstress opened the door, there was no trace of them left behind.

..

Finch pressed her back into the cold black stone. Her hands, steady, clutched around Crow.

The soft rasping of her legplates closing shut once more signaled the start of their brief respite. She slid down the wall, which was slick with rain, until she was seated fully in the dirt, Crow positioned neatly in her lap.

She will die. Finch thought, pulling Crow's hair back gently to tuck behind her ears. *I have never killed before, but...*

For her, I'll figure it out.

Despite everything, and how she'd managed it, Crow was still alive. In one piece. She hadn't died when raiding Cane's estate, from her wounds from that night, and now, despite all her new pains, still, she remained whole.

"I had been wondering, you know." Finch whispered, though her voice spilled out from somewhere under her throat, and not from her mouth. It was a perfect, crisp, and smooth voice like rain in drought. "What it would feel like to finally find you."

Inside Finch's arms, it was bright, spacious, and cold; none of the pieces Crow needed to feel comfort— none of the things she needed to feel safe. Crow's vision was bleary and her throat, irritated, had swollen shut. She said nothing.

Finch leaned her head back until it struck the stone wall behind her. There, she stared up to the sky, letting the rain fall down freely onto her eyes.

"mm.." crow mumbled, wriggling to press further into Finch's embrace. It was.. somewhat peaceful. Comfortable, somehow.

"Crow," Finch commanded, gently, looking down to her face once again. With one of her hands, she cupped the side of Crow's head, holding it up so that she may look at her.

Crow's flesh eye was swollen shut, but her mechanical eye swiveled in its socket, locking on to Finch's. She made no attempt to speak, but her eye's aperture was narrowed, squinting.

"I know what **it** is, Crow."

The aperture of the eye was fully open, revealing the dark, swirling abyss at its center. Crow's face began to throb, her veins stood up under he flesh, and immediately, a fresh trickle of blood began to swell up and trickle out from the bruises on her head.

Finch leaned in close, bringing her metal faceplate just one centimeter from Crow's nose.

"Because I need **it** too."