

chapter 7. a shadow caught

The rain was falling down hard, now. It crashed against the walls of the street, splashing out at all angles, sending deluges through the alleys, and great streams that swept up anyone dumb or unfortunate enough to stay caught outside in it.

Finch had ended up gently securing Crow in the bodybag, swaddled in some of the linens she had been tasked with bringing to the seamstress. Finch only fastened three-quarters of the bag shut, keeping Crow's face open to air, hair neatly tied behind her head with some spare threads Finch had ripped from some butler's uniform. Then, Finch had looped the bodybag's straps around her back, securing it to her chest. With one arm, she supported it— and Crow within it— from the bottom, and all of this was covered under the massive raincloak.

Finch kept her free arm within the cloak, often bringing her hand up to add more support to Crow whenever she might be jostled or jolted.

The odds of her surviving this night were not very good.

And so Finch was running, naught more than a shadowy blob tearing through the sheets of rain that covered and drenched all of Escrow. She fought against gales and fast-moving currents of water alike, doing everything she could to stay upright and keep moving.

She had spent a few minutes, earlier, plotting what to do. But realistically, there was only one option for them.

Finch would have to bring Crow back to Raven. If they were able to set the eye into her, and she yet stayed living, then perhaps there was hope that Raven would be able to mend her present wounds and keep her alive for a day or two longer.

They would have to.

None of this would work out without her.

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Finch vaulted over a thick metal railing and fell ten full meters before splashing down into a meter-deep trench. The vast and heavy current of water and surged out in all directions around her, pushing her forward towards the wide-open dark maw of the stormwater runoff system. Entry was blocked by a treated soft-wood gate, so Finch spun around and crashed into it with her back, shattering its hinges and forcing her way inside.

From there, she heaved up the steps backward, both arms wrapped tightly around Crow, forcing herself to press up the stairs and onto the dry walkway above.

Three steps up, she tripped, and began to tumble backwards, so she jumped off of her still-planted foot and landed on the walkway on her back.

In her arms, she felt Crow whine and whimper, doubtlessly hurting from yet another fall.

Quickly, Finch ran her hands over the bag that held Crow, feeling all around it. Miraculously, it was still dry.

Finch rose to her feet immediately and began to run along the raised wooden walkways that criss-crossed over the raging three-meter deep rapids below her. Idly, she ran one hand along Crow's forehead, gently caressing it as she hopped over crumbling rubble and blasted through jet-like spouts of water that were blasting into the system from holes in its walls.

Here, at least, they were safer than on the surface.

As Finch ran, the entire stormwater system began to rumble and shake as lightning gouged deep into the ground over, and over again. First, once a minute, then, once every ten seconds, then, once every five.

Crow whimpered softly, and Finch held her closer, running ever faster through the tunnels.

On the surface, alone, the run would take either of them just under an hour. But in this situation...

Finch couldn't help but wonder just how long they really had. She couldn't even bind Crow to herself, to slow the progression of her wounds, as she had no flesh to offer, and nothing to sacrifice for an advanced binding.

It doesn't matter. Finch thought, barreling through an ancient and rotting wooden door with her shoulder. *Slowing down isn't an option.*

By now, they had to be at the edges of Cane's territory, and if they kept running underground, they'd soon after reach Wraith's tunnel blockades. In their current situation, they wouldn't be able to pass through, which only left the option of surfacing early.

Finch kicked through a passage blocked off by planks nailed into the wall and stepped through to the other side. She didn't know where the exit would be, but she assumed it would be held somewhere unwelcoming, just like everything else in Escrow.

After all, no one in power wanted anyone slipping through the city unnoticed.

Finch sprinted through the narrow access hall and rounded the corner. Just ahead of her was a spiral stairway carved into the stone, split and cracking and narrow and poorly maintained, but she ran up it anyway, around, and around, hoping to breach the surface.

After two minutes of this, she emerged onto a long stone walkway that wrapped around a massive underground reservoir. The entire cavernous chamber was filled with the sound of rushing water crashing over itself, spilling out, and sloshing around below, and the reservoir was filling readily with the stormwater.

Finch ran down the walkway and opened the door at its end, stepping into a new, drier chamber.

There, on the far side, fifty meters away, was a clear exit onto the surface at the crest of a massive set of stairs.

But between her and the exit were fifty pairs of eyes belonging to thirty-seven different bodies, and each and every one of them had turned to look at her as the sound of rushing water spilled out around her and into the room.

Wordlessly, she shut the door behind her.

The sound left, but the eyes locked to her frame did not.

Tentatively, she began down the narrow metal staircase that led down into the wide-open room. As she did, many of the pairs of eyes drifted away onto other tasks.

It was a barracks, of some sort, for Cane's men. Bunks, cots, hammocks, nests, loose earth, and other sleeping spots of all varieties lined the space, and between each set of them were unlit cooking fires, countless possessions, and filled and leaking bodybags.

A two-meter tall creature with four legs, each a meter in diameter, stood expectantly at the bottom of the stairs.

And yet Finch walked, slowly, so as not to arouse any suspicion.

She would get as close as possible, and then make for the exit. Obviously, they wouldn't survive any kind of confrontation.

At least, hidden within Cane's uniform as they were, Finch and Crow had the advantage of surprise.

Finch reached the bottom step, and the creature, towering over her, spoke down with a mouth set in the underside of its belly.

"Why?" It croaked, four eyes set around the mouth rolling in their sockets to look directly at her.

But she could not speak, lest she reveal her identity.

So she simply stepped between the creature's legs and towards the staircase, walking away.

It did not take that kindly, and immediately, Finch heard loud thumping behind her as she walked away. Turning her head, she saw that it was already about to catch up to her.

"What is your assignment?" It hissed, jumping over Finch and landing in front of her on its side, all four legs stretching impossibly far so that its entire body formed one perfectly horizontal, two-meter high, five-meter long wall. There, belly exposed to her, its eyes rolled around again, looking to her as its mouth gnashed and moved on its own, grinding up some terrible, stringy meat that was caught within its mouth.

Finch simply tossed the soaked missive onto the floor in front of her, then began to step around the creature.

But by now, other Fixers— Cane's 'men'— had noticed the gatekeeper's commotion and had moved in, encircling them, preventing her passage.

The long, fat, wall-like creature flopped forward directly onto the missive. Then, there was a terrible slurping and gurgling sound, like trying to rip one's feet out of thick mud, and it rolled back onto its side, having absorbed the missive.

"This... is not an assignment." It hissed, flesh buckling, veins standing up under its flesh, as the tips of its limbs began to curl forward towards Finch.

Well. She thought, kneeling down and lowering her head, as if in deference.

"Fiiinaaaaa," The creature hissed, relaxing while it squinted its eyes at her.

Then, a whirr gradually built up, before becoming a high whine, before suddenly turning into a shrill shriek, and all at once, Finch launched off the foot she had planted in the ground, jumping directly over the creature and the assembled Fixers.

But as she flew over them, a long and spindly vine-like arm wrapped around her leg, causing her to spin and fall fast towards the ground.

In the air, she spun, then cracked down into the stone with her back. The floor split and fell apart like broken ceramic, and Finch kicked one of the shards into the thin arm that twisted around her leg, severing it cleanly.

In the same moment, she rolled over and kicked herself up onto her feet, scrabbling across the floor with one hand, before pushing herself upright into a run, making a mad dash for the staircase.

All around her, Cane's men drew weapons, and she heard her disguise rip and tear apart as sharp projectiles of all kinds rocketed into her back and ricocheted off. Immediately, the room was full of shrapnel and noise, and Finch held Crow impossibly close as she shoulder-checked one of the hound-like Fixers onto his back and sent him sprawling and flailing down the stairs.

As she raced up the staircase, she dove around the Fixers that came from in front of her, trying to stop her, always back on her feet before they could pile on top of her and end her struggle before it had even truly begun.

We'll make it through this. She chanted mentally as she reared back, before slamming her head at full-force into the face of the Fixer charging her from ahead. On impact with her metal skull, his split, and he fell to the ground limp, tumbling down the stairs, painting them with his foul-smelling blue-green blood.

Finally, she crested the top of the stairs, coming face-to-face with a massive gate: a grid of red wrought-iron, a full meter thick, spanning the full thirty-meter gap between her and the surface on the other side, where the torrential downpour still slammed into the world, soaking it to the bone.

Finch turned her head to review the situation. She had at least twenty seconds before someone made it up to them.

Immediately, she rushed to a tiny, rusting section of the metal and snapped it off with her free hand. Now holding a tiny shard of the gate, she focused deeply on it, and her eyes began to spin in opposite directions. The abyss within her irises began to glow a deep, radiant purple, and flecks of rust began to fly off the shard of the gate she held, and in three seconds, the shard was as clean and pristine as the rest of it.

"**Become one.**" She ordered, and at once, the gate and its shard alike thrummed out with an abyssal chime that filled the room and resonated deeply with the crystals in her own being.

Immediately, she assigned three different subconscious processes to the task of maintaining the **Sympathetic Binding**. With her main consciousness, she mapped out the **binding** in her mental space, twisting and pulling it around, noting the shape of it, its weaknesses, and how it might be controlled.

Then, sensing the crux of it, she clamped down on the **core** of the **binding** with the full force of her mind and twisted her hand holding the shard ninety degrees.

With the exact same speed, the full gate rotated in turn, viciously cleaving through the roof and floor that it was mounted into, carving directly through them as if they were naught but loose rubble. The gate obliterated anything in its path with a noise alike only to the collapse of the world itself and sections of the ceiling began to fall and crumble all around as the gate stood up straight, two massive gaps now open on either side, as the gate's width and height became each other all at once.

Behind her, screams and shouts rang out as all of Cane's Fixers began to desperately claw up the stairs, each hoping to see the light of another day.

But Finch did not bother to regard them. Already, she had sprinted into the downpour and crossed over the low blackstone wall that marked the edge of Wraith's territory.

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In a word, she was lost.

Typically, it wasn't possible for her to get lost—

But the rain now fell in sheets so thick that it was impossible to see more than a meter ahead of herself. Where before she was pressing through a storm, now the rain was so total, so absolute, that it was more like swimming at the bottom of a great ocean.

They could not carry on like this. They'd have to find a way through Wraith's tunnels, which connected the city, without being harried by his men, which were notoriously... callous.

That was, if the tunnels weren't already flooded.

Finch was bent over forward, buckled in half, tracing along a slick wall with one hand as a way to guide herself forward along the edge of the building. No matter what it was, they were

going inside. The storm was too much to bear, and under its weight, the two of them would surely be washed away and buried.

And the howling wind brought with it the sound of the lightning coming back to bear against them once again.

In Escrow, when The Storm came, lightning would fall down to obliterate all that dare bear themselves bare against it. However, only the center of the storm— where its full fury fell freely— was capable of smiting. At its center, wicked, cracking, purple-black, red, yellow, and white lightning all fell constantly. Wherever they struck was obliterated in totality unless it was protected by a grounding stone or channeling device.

On the edge of Wraith's territory, they would find neither, and so they had to scurry underground like vermin, lest they invoke the wrath of the great Storm.

Shaking under the unceasing wailing of the storm, barely keeping herself upright in the onslaught from all sides, Finch's hand rounded the corner of the building, then a half meter later, found a handle. Immediately, she twisted it and threw her full weight into the door, cracking straight through the wooden storm-bar that had kept it shut on the other side. She fell into the room with a stream of water, planting her feet wide so as to barely stay upright. Then, she forced the door closed again, and pressed her back into it to keep it shut.

Gently, Finch lowered Crow onto a smooth wooden ledge by the door. Once she was set down, Finch reached to her other side with one hand, grabbing hold of a table by its leg.

Deftly, she crushed through the joint where the leg met the table, then she slammed it into the place of the previous storm-bar.

The storm crashed against the door, but barely, it did hold.

Finch dropped her shoulders and swiveled her hands side to side to cast off her stress. Then, she looked around, surveying the room they'd found themselves in. It was empty of life, and the owners' possessions were strewn all about, though leaving a somewhat clear trail to the staircase that led deep below.

The entire room was filled in an instant with hot, bright-red light as lightning crashed down into the street just ten meters away. The entire building shook with the energy of it, and then trembled from the roar of the energy's release. Outside, where the red lightning had struck, was a deep, six-meter deep gouge in the world, and the displaced dirt and rocks still fell down, along with the rain, splattering the side of the hovel and all of the nearby ones.

Shit. Okay, okay. Finch thought, swiveling her hands around in their joints more quickly than before.

Finch took Crow from the bodybag and laid her within the owner's nest. Then, Finch ran through the room, searching for new linens, new bags, to hold Crow with. In the span of twenty-six seconds, she had gathered all the requisite materials. In twelve seconds, she had separated Crow from the fully-soaked bag and swaddling linens. She hesitated for three seconds, then ripped up some more threads and stuffed them into Crow's four ears, then bound them shut with an additional layer of fabric. In thirty-six more seconds, she had

re-secured Crow with dry, fresh coverings, and fitted her into a new, though poorly fitting, bag.

Now, though, she would have to dedicate an entire arm to carrying Crow. With the new bag, Finch was no longer able to keep her strapped directly to her body.

But that was no matter, because they would survive.

The room flashed with white as lightning cracked down again, splitting the world outside without restraint. The side of the house rattled and screeched as heavy stones were flung up into it while the rain beat down onto it.

Still blind from the flash, Finch stumbled forward, fumbling around to grab Crow. Then, she took the two of them and descended at once, once again, into the tunnels beneath Escrow.

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The packed-dirt walls of the tunnel were damp, and its clay and stone floors were dripping, mucking, and moist. All around, a thick fog hung, and the tunnels leaned and sagged inwards onto the great support beams that barely held it together. Tiny trickling streams leaked from pinholes in the walls and stuck to them, running down to the floor, where they would pool as tiny puddles.

Globs of clay and earth fell down from the ceiling as lightning once again smited the ground, as if trying to dig them out and force them back up onto the surface.

The storm, ravenous, had no mercy.

Finch reached the end of the current hall and came to a fork in the path. Tracks led down the right path, and dancing lights could be seen at the end of it. To the left was the crushing, total darkness of the unlit tunnels.

Likely, a storm shelter was to one side, and to the other, deeper passage through the slowly-flooding tunnels.

Finch rolled her free-arms shoulder around in its joint, swiveling it a full three-hundred-and-sixty degrees as she contemplated.

Then, she began to run down the right path, sprinting through the tunnels at full speed. As she ran, the noises of life became louder, and she became aware of the number of beings dwelling here. Twelve. But the hovel above housed only five individuals, so that was a good sign.

This wouldn't be a dead-end.

Finch rounded the corner and skidded in the wet clay to a stop, turning as she slid to survey the storm shelter.

"Oh? That you, mate?"

Finch nodded, stepping forward towards the group.

They were gathered by a lantern on a raised hill within this cavernous space. A two-meter wide, two-meter deep ditch had been dug around the hill, protecting it somewhat from the flooding. This area, too, had a roof of nonporous stone. Dice clattered as most of them continued to game.

"How's it lookin' out there?" The man said, smiling. His hand moved to a concealed weapon.

Finch simply assumed he thought that the motion was unnoticeable. More importantly, though, she had no time for this. On the corner of the hill, though, a smaller rat-like fellow was peering over an unrolled parchment, inking new additions to it, crossing out sections of criss-crossing lines...

A map. A crude one, but a map besides.

"Alright. I'll cut to the chase," the man said, pulling out a half-meter blade, curled to a point like a horn, that was serrated along all three of its curling sides. "You," he pointed at Finch with the blade, "are not our mate. And," he pointed to the map on the edge of the hill "you want that."

Finch nodded.

"What'll ya give us for it?"

This would be so much easier if I could just talk... Finch lamented, stepping towards the moat around the hill.

Immediately, all the men that were gaming clattered to their feet and got up and crowded around the moat, pulling out their weapons, crouching, kneeling, or otherwise readying themselves to fight.

"Ayy, woah there, mister... missus? Somethin' in between?" He held his dagger in both hands, now, and crouched down as if he was about to intercept a charge. He didn't like the way the stranger so confidently approached them without worry. Though...

maybe they just got hit in the head by something flung the storm.

"You better back up right now." The man said, voice hardening. He stuck out one foot to the edge of the moat, making it clear he'd cross over. "You can't have it. Get on by."

Finch looked among the members of the group, unmoving. Mainly underground dwellers. Underdeveloped eyes, overdeveloped ears. They'd wasted enough time here.

Finch jumped up into the air, extending her free arm out through the cloak, sticking her hand out into the air, curling her bentfinger under her shortfinger. Then,

ding!

ssskkkrrreeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Finch snapped her two fingers, causing them to ring out like a chime and resonate at an incredibly high frequency. Continually, she sent commands through her body to supplying the fingers with more energy to keep them resonating as loud as possible for as long as possible.

She landed in the dirt behind the men, most of which collapsed, paws, hooves, or hands clasped tight to their ears, writhing on the ground as their eardrums burst and began to bleed. Some of them passed out immediately, eyes rolling back. One of them, dazed and woozy, grabbed onto Finch's leg, trying to pull themselves up.

Efficiently, Finch reeled back her other leg and kicked them in the chin, sending them falling backwards, tumbling over the edge and splashing down into the moat. From there, she closed the last one-meter gap, gently pushed the little, cowering lizard fellow to the side, and took his map.

As she turned, though, a massive metal club whirled through the air and smashed into the side of her head, sending her tumbling to the side, collapsing onto her back, sprawling out over the other fallen bodies.

Finch heard the whistling sound of the club as it moved through the air, and instinctively, curled up forward as fast as she could, catching the blow on the top of her head, which dented and sent her buckling in half around Crow.

Had she not taken the hit, Crow would have been ground to paste.

Finch could only see the cloven hooves of her assailant, stepping back and flexing as they heaved up the club again, doubtlessly going for another blow while she was reeling.

But Finch did not feel pain.

She rolled forward and planted her fist, which was crushing the map, into the dirt and kicked off of the ground behind her with her feet, charging headfirst into the thin legs of their attacker. Unbalanced by his club, he tripped and fell over her, collapsing forward onto the ground behind her.

By now, most of the men had begun to move again, and so when she landed, sliding down the side of the hill, she threw herself forward, onto the other bank, and scrabbled in the mud of the tunnel. As she slipped on it, eventually getting to her feet, the cavernous space filled with yelling and shouting as her pursuers clambered down the hill and jumped over the moat to chase after her.

Having finally caught her balance, Finch grabbed hold of a support beam and threw herself forward down the lit tunnel, breaking into a run, sprinting as fast as she possibly could. With her free hand, she just held Crow tight.

I should check on h—

No. She thought, interrupting herself. She partitioned her mind again, assigning one of her eyes and one of her parallel conscious processes to interpret the map as she ran. She split of a second, subconscious process, assigning it to the task of reading through her sensory inputs

and analyzing them for information about her pursuers. With the remainder of her mind, she focused on navigating safely through the tunnels.

A dunmetal knife crashed into the center of her backplate, denting it, before ricocheting off and sticking into the wall. Six seconds later, it happened again. Then again. As her pursuers ran, throwing whatever they had at her, they would simply pick them up and throw again.

Strong as she was, if her backplate kept getting dented, it would limit her mobility enough to prevent their escape.

Thirty seconds and ten blows endured later, Finch had finished decoding the map and memorizing the sequence of turns to exit the tunnels at, hopefully, the edge of Wraith's territory where it bordered Raven's laboratory.

No longer needing it, Finch crumpled up the map and dropped it. Then, swiveling her head fully around behind her, she swiveled her free-arm in its socket then bent it around to catch the knife just as it struck her.

It was, of course, much better than not having a weapon. Though—

clank!

It didn't solve—

cl-clankank clank

The issue of the other ones.

Finch snapped her fingers again and relished in the sound of a couple of bodies falling behind her. Still, though, she could hear their hoofbeats chasing her, their claws skittering up and along the walls, and their feet stomping through the wet clay.

Right. She slipped in the mud, caught the wall with the knife, and launched herself forward down the next tunnel.

Left, then tight right, she continued, but experienced in the tunnels as her pursuers were, she knew that some had split aside to cut her off.

It was no matter. Each and every problem would fall before her expert assault, as all problems did. The relative silence, at least, was nice.

CRASH!!

The tunnels rumbled again as lightning crashed above.

Crow, of all the days to escape... Finch thought, sliding under a semi-collapsed section of tunnel, turning right, then turning fully around to the left, up a wet a slippery slope. It was a continuous mudslide, and a rush of water was pouring in from above.

It wasn't the surface, yet, but it was close. Based on the map, this ramp exited into a wide-open underground warehouse.

Mud rushed down and around Finch's planted feet, splashing up and over her boots, sticking itself onto the black legsleeves she was wearing.

Presumably, they'd be waiting for her ahead.

Finch looked down into the cloak at Crow, who was nestled tight against her flat metal chest, snuggled warmly and safely in a thick barrier of blankets, eyes closed peacefully, even as the world raged and fell apart all around her.

For her, she would figure it out. After all,

the only forward was with her.

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Finch clawed her way up the slope with the knife, one hand always stuck to Crow, keeping her flat and stable against her chest. At the top, she simply vaulted up over the ramp's edge to emerge into the wide-open cavern. There was no more time to hesitate.

Half of her mind scanning for threats, Finch sprinted through the open space, feet splashing down into the thick pooling water with every stomped footfall.

"Did you really think we'd let you get away after all that?" A voice called out from the dark, echoing throughout the cavern. The inflections of the voice indicated there was a trap ahead, and so rather than get caught in it, she continued to run.

This must have been the right choice, because after a hissed curse, the cavern burst into action. Two bolts, shot from in front of her, whistled just past her as she turned and slipped around their trajectories. Above, rocks were being cleaved from the ceiling, crashing down all around her— but primarily, where she had been before.

Another one of the thugs rushed her with a net, so she threw the knife directly between their knuckles, and it carved easily through their flesh and bone, splitting their hand completely in half before grazing down their arm and planting itself into the bone of their shoulder.

Rushing forward as he recoiled from the pain, Finch brought up her free hand as she twisted her whole body, bringing her metal fist crashing into the man's space, shattering his skull in an instant.

As he fell, Finch followed through with the momentum of her punch and ripped the knife out of his shoulder as she planted her foot into the dirt and leaned forward onto it, sinking into a lower stance, knife held out in front of her in one hand.

The gathered men seemed less interested in approaching after that. Assuredly, they were thinking of cutting their losses, after everything so far had failed.

Any partial success would encourage them.

If she was to end this, it would have to be with a one perfect, clean cut. A single smooth motion.

There.

In the corner of the cavern, loading his crossbow, was the man that had spoken for the group earlier. He was a vulpine base with graying orange-brown fur everywhere except for his scarred and pierced black snout.

Leveling the crossbow while looking to Finch, he paused, as he came to a similar realization.

But it was a matter of pride. He couldn't back down, lest he be eaten alive by his men for the cowardice. Clearly, though, the crossbow wasn't going to work.

"HALT!" He called, stepping confidently towards Finch. She did not react.

The man raised one gauntleted paw up into the air and the commotion all around stopped—save for just one more boulder, which fell to the floor and cracked open, splashing up mud and muddied water all around.

When he was five meters away, he stopped.

"What is all of this for? Why do you need to get back out into the storm? It's suicide, you know."

Wordlessly, Finch stowed the knife in a pocket and opened up the cloak, revealing the swaddled silhouette of Crow.

"Wounded?" He could smell the blood.

Finch nodded.

"And you can't do the treatment." He continued.

Again, she nodded. This peace was welcome, but if he did not hurry this up, she'd have to slit his throat regardless. Patiently impatient, she shuffled her feet, shifting her weight and straightening up her posture.

"...Okay..." The man sighed, relenting. He wanted to let her go. He really did. But...

Finch refastened her cloak and began to step forward. He was running out of time.

"Pay us tribute for a ceasefire. You'll treat your wounded, and I'll treat mine," He said definitively, snout raised up, proud.

Finch would have scoffed at the insolence if she could. Instead, she grabbed her knife by its blade and held it loosely at her side while approaching him.

He made no attempt to move in aggression,

nor did she.

Instead, Finch pressed the knife, flat, to his chest, and he took it from her. Then, she reached into Crow's belongings, and pulled out Cane's '*sentimental belonging*', handed it to the man wordlessly, and left.

And as she walked away, she heard the sound of a crossbow being set—

"Do not." The man ordered. "Their payment was worth the struggle. Come round, boys. And someone get Greff on a stretcher! He needs to see the artificer..."

Finch knew there were only twenty seconds before she had to run again. As soon as she reached the end of the cavern, her time to rest would be up.

On the twenty-first second, the crunch of dry, cracking mud under her heavy foot signaled the end of their brief respite.

And in an instant, she was gone again.

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After seventeen grueling minutes in the tunnels, which Finch never wanted to see again, they had finally resurfaced. The storm had moved away, and they too had moved away from it to its edge.

Here, the rain was rather peaceful, and came down in a nice, light drizzle.

Beings with amphibic and aquatic bases were roaming the streets, just going about their day, as if there was nothing particularly remarkable about it.

Finch turned away from the window and pushed open the door of the tiny nine-square-meter shack, emerging onto the surface. Before her, looming high up into the sky, was the hill in which Raven dwelt.

Finch stepped out into the mud and kept running. Just because they were close did not mean the situation was any less dire. At least, now, the solution was before them.

She might actually survive.

In twenty seconds, Finch reached the dead and salted mud that surrounded Raven's hill. In thirty seconds, she was halfway up it, searching for that damnable metal stake that made the entrance appear.

Crow, too, was antsy, jostling and twisting.

In the privacy of the forest, and mostly protected from the rain by the canopy of leaves, Finch took Crow out of the cloak and held her in the open air. Weakly, Crow opened her eye slowly, then closed it again, and repeated that a few times.

Finch would have smiled if she could, so instead, she returned the gesture with her own eyes.

Crow mumbled incoherently, and the edge of her cheeks tilted up in what had to be a smile. Though, she was still fidgeting, jostling.

"You'll injure yourself, dear. Stay still." Finch whispered, pressing through low branches, pushing around low shrubs.

But Crow continued to move.

After thinking about it for only a moment, Finch lifted Crow up out of the bag and discarded it, then spent some moments unbinding her, so that she may move, and feel, and hear.

"thh..." Crow whimpered, barely lifting her arm up so as to point in a direction.

Finch knew that was the wrong direction to the stake, but followed along anyway.

And yet, after sixteen seconds, they came across the ancient metal stake.

The area surrounding it was identical, but the position of where the area was on the hill had changed entirely. It was closer, now, as if reaching out to them.

Then, as Finch approached the metal stake, Crow reached up and cupped the side of Finch's head.

Finch looked down, iris apertures wide, taking in the broken and bloody sight of her. Suddenly, she felt a tug at her very being, as something attempted to bind to her eye.

Panicking, Finch whipped her head around, until Crow weakly tapped her chest,

rap rap rap!

and looking back, she realized the culprit was Crow.

"**bind.**" Crow whispered, then gestured between the two of them. "**then past,**" she croaked, reaching out to touch the stake with her southpaw.

Of course. Finch thought, eyes beginning to spin. The moisture in the air whipped up and around them, accelerating until it evaporated into a gas and spontaneously ignited into white-hot plasma that swirled around her irises as she began to **look into the past.**

"*My eye is yours, and yours is mine,*" crow squeaked,

Finch lowered them to the ground, curling up into a tight ball around Crow, holding her close, warm, and shielding her from the light of her eyes.

"join with me, entangle souls," Finch continued, swiveling one eye to the metal stake, while keeping the other eye fixed on Crow.

"not two, but one, whom no one owns," crow finished, her arm sliding down the side of Finch's head, then down her chest, before it collapsed limp onto her own.

And all at once, the **two** were **one**, and they were **bound**.

Finch's eyes released a high whine as a deep purple light surged out behind the void within her iris. As she reached out and caressed the stake, she felt Crow cross through her mind, gently resting her own self with the stake, as if comforting it, as if promising,

I will always return.

Beyond the stake, where an overhang covered in roots dwelt within the side of the hill, the world began to shift and change, moving backwards and unwinding slowly as though it was an origami piece that had waited for so long to be unfolded yet again. The parts of the present that did not belong to this past shed off as golden dust and faded away into nothing, and then, as though she had blinked and missed it, the way forward was revealed.

A single unmarked and unremarkable stone door was set into the hill. To its side, painted on the wall, were two black, featureless silhouettes holding hands.

Beneath it, written in the blood of different creatures, was a single phrase:

WELCOME HOME