

chapter 15.

to meet amongst the dead

Crow touched neatly down on the edge of the ancient and massive graystone wall of the city. It was, of course, a perfect landing.

Immediately, she hopped off of the chiseled-and-chipped block that stuck up from the wall like a thorn. She didn't really understand the purpose of the evenly-spaced sticking-up blocks on the wall. Perhaps some kind of decoration? Ornamentation?

I probably knew, once. In one of my past lives. She thought, stepping across the wall's main path, then down onto the massive packed-earth ramp that led up the wall. It was smooth from years footfalls, and for whatever reason, she found she preferred it to the stairs.

Maybe because stairs were so bumpy? Or perhaps...

Crow nodded to herself as she stepped off of the ramp and into the edge of the city proper. She didn't need to know the reason for her preferences. For now, she only needed to recognize them for what they were. To find her whole self, she simply had to start with the bare basics and build herself up from there, patching in any holes as she found them along the way.

Now, for her plans—

Tonight was the full moon, and therefore, the night she would meet **Finch** at **The Statues**. But before that, she would have to wash herself clean. And, perhaps, eat. And take her medicine. Did she have to wash herself? Did Finch even have a sense of smell?

Well, she *probably* did— but that didn't matter, she realized. Crow felt some deep, primal urge as she walked. The urge to shed filth, to fling it from her skin. She *wanted* to be clean. It wasn't out of politeness that she would wash. No, instead, she would do it for herself. Yes. Yes!

It really was so *simple*, wasn't it? Had it been so simple the whole time? Could she have figured it out sooner? Did it... even matter?

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Crow headed for her 'home', Raven's laboratory. She was coming from the southwest corner of the city, where the great graystone wall met **the ant hills** on the outside and a relatively ungoverned section on the inside. She was rather close, actually, to Weasel's tailor shop.

As she thought about Weasel, about his workshop, about how comfortable she was, how plush the floors were, how soft and warm it all was... her mind drifted, getting lost in a sudden haze of fog that settled down around her proper senses. A tiny, terrible pain started to crawl out from some dark space nestled between the many folds inside of her brain, and then it skittered around inside her skull, rattling her to the core.

Her breath picked up, and her pace did, too, and before she knew it, she was running, heart thumping loud within its cage, muscles tensing past the point she thought was possible as every part of her began to scream out all at once.

The pain in her skull had wrapped itself around her brain and begun to squeeze, and squeeze, and *squeeze*, until brain began to drip,

drip,

drip,

one awful notion:

The seamstress.

And the dripping simply continued as she ran, and it became faster as she did— the harder she tried to run away, the more quickly her brain was covered, until all at once, she was drowning, head fully-full to its tippy-top, and, panicking, she forced herself into the nearest narrow space between buildings and ducked behind the first pile of random objects she could find. There,

she pressed her back into the cold black stone.

her breath heaved out, hot and heavy, and her hands shakily returned to the inside of her cloak. her left gripped the inner seam, and her right pulled the other side to her left, and she clutched around the fabric, holding it tight around herself.

her shaky, warbling gasps signaled that it was time for her to stop and pause. she had to pull herself together, just as she did with the cloak. thoughtlessly, she slid down the wall, now slick with her perspiration, until she fell hard

into the dirt. she brought her knees up under her cloak and wrapped her arms around them, crushing herself into a tight ball.

she wasn't there anymore. she was still alive. in one piece. she'd survived, despite everything. she'd really, really survived. she'd made it.

she was safe, in the dark alley.

the seamstress wasn't here. right?

Crow looked around, frantically, whipping her head side to side. She wasn't here. She wasn't anywhere nearby. She was on the opposite side of the city. Everything was okay.

Crow looked down at the ground beneath her. It was dirt. The walls around her were blackstone. She wasn't there anymore.

She was okay.

and still, she bent forward, burying her beak and face into her cloak.

inside her ball, it was dark, claustrophobic, and warm— her comfort, her safety.

every tick of her stopwatch was met with a single tap of her finger. and as she tapped with her finger, she forced herself to breathe, in and out, in and out, evenly. then, once every two ticks, then, once every three.

she only longed to breathe deep and still her heart, so that is exactly what she would do.

She would, after all, no longer ignore herself.

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"i'm back." her voice rasped out, barely intelligible from the scratch of the door against the rough floor.

"And in one piece? How impressive."

She did not feel Raven deserved a response, and so she stepped inside and began to walk towards the suspicious stone by the left wall of the sterile anteroom.

"You were gone for quite a while."

"Mm." She hummed noncommittally, then cast a quick **binding** between the stone and wall, but before she could shatter it, Raven continued.

"You look defeated, little Crow."

She paused, then turned only her head around, meeting Raven's many eyes with just one of her own. Tired as her gaze was, it was also determined, and steady.

"I am not." She said simply, then crushed the suspicious stone under her talons, and so the wall fell in the same fashion, pebbles and little shards of gravel tumbling every which-way, popping and cracking off the floor, before skittering and rattling to a halt.

But instead of crossing into **the room of making and unmaking**, she remained on the threshold, and turned fully around to face Raven.

"I am going to kill you." She said simply.

"Oh, now. Oh, is that so?" Raven chuckled and chortled, bringing up a hand in front of its maw, mocking her and the way she always laughed.

"It is." She said, voice firm and unwavering, and nodded her head.

"Do you know something, little Crow?" Raven started, rising fully from their chair. As they did, the ceiling of the room— far too low for them to extend to their full height— rose along with them. The walls scraped and screeched as they stretched, and stretched, until eventually, Raven stood tall, and proud, on sets of thick legs that emerged from a dozen different places within their amalgamated corpse. At their full height, they were dozens of times taller than Crow, and in fact, they were larger than many houses that Crow had been in before.

Crow, though, had no interest in their theatrics. She simply left the room and began to cross the room of making and unmaking instead.

Of course, Raven followed her. The walls of the laboratory simply stretched and then parted open for them, making vast and wide tunnels in an instant. The entire hill the lab was built into shook and shuddered with the force of it, and Crow was bumped and knocked up into the air from the tremors of Raven's footfalls.

After six ticks, the wall to Crow's right split open all at once, and Raven stepped through it, then stepped again. As they did, the whole room shrank towards their foot, closing the distance in a single instant.

Now, Crow stood in Raven's shadow, and Raven stood in her way. Their whole titanic form was wreathed in an glowing aura of sickly milky-white pale light cast by the false Moon that shone down onto them from behind.

"I was speaking," Raven continued, "and yet you felt that it was appropriate to leave."

"Let us simply drop our pretenses, Raven. We both know what is true." There was no point in attempting to hide it from them; they had already dealt with the same problem, at minimum, 80 times in the past. There were far fewer than 80 ways to conceal what she had learned, to conceal how she had changed.

More importantly, she did not even wish to. Now that she had changed, she had no intention of ever going back.

Besides, what were they going to do, *kill her*?

She'd like to see them try.

"Ah, now. Ah, is that truly what you wish for, little Crow?" Raven asked, great throat rumbling as they spoke. The rumbling in their throat was so great that their scales chattered together, and the many, many twisting shelves in the room began to shake as the room churned and warped.

All around Raven, the room pulled in towards them. The floor rose up and twisted as the walls and ceiling closed in on the two of them.

Suddenly, the many shelves twisted from storage into sharp, needle-like points that all were aligned with Crow's chest.

And still, she walked, towards Raven.

"Just another empty threat," she sighed, "Now let me pass, I must bathe." She did not even turn her head to regard Raven as she spoke.

"I do not think you understand your situation, *crow*."

"No, Raven." Crow responded simply. She stopped at the base of one of Raven's countless talons where it met the ground, and casually, she lifted up her hand and stroked the smooth metal-like talon.

"No?"

"What? Can't stand being denied? Are you so entitled, in your old age?" Crow hopped up, now, and sat on one of Raven's massive scaled paws. Altogether, it was many times larger than her— the size of a great pack animal, and surprisingly comfy to lay on.

Raven paused to think. Indeed, there had never been a Crow to act so... *brazenly*. It was so intriguing, so interesting, a matter of study upon study. They wondered if they could recreate this Crow. And, as a matter of indulgent interest, they wondered just how this may impact her flavor—

Ah. Ah, now. Raven thought, Am I playing into the paw of the little Crow? How far the mighty might fall.

Twenty *ticks* passed.

Then, a mouth opened up in the side of Raven's ankle. It split apart the gray, stone-like flesh and sprouted out at once like a flower's bloom. The lips formed first, peeling flesh curling up and down to form them, then, the teeth, as though chiseled from the ankle bone, pushed out and joined them.

"There has never been a Crow like you," Raven whispered.

"I know, Raven."

"What is it that makes you so different?"

"I am simply the most tired."

"*Tired?*" Raven asked, and after they did, the corners of their lips curled up. Certainly, they could make her tired, over and over again. That, certainly, was replicable.

"Why am I alive, Raven?"

"Well, if we are speaking with such candor— and as you are being ever so helpful with my experiments— I suppose I could tell you a thing or two. Though..." Raven trailed off, and their body sank down as they sighed, and the room deflated along with them.

Thirty *ticks* passed.

"Though *what*, Raven?"

"Well, it's just— I had assumed you always knew the reason why, even before you knew that you were not alone in being 'Crow'. It is simply the contract that has bound us since our very first meeting."

"You cannot seriously expect me to believe that."

"I am nothing if not indulgent. What else am I supposed to spend my many years on, if not hedonism and my research?"

"Raven." Crow sighed, rolling her eyes. She relaxed backwards into a wide groove between two ligaments. "Are you even taking me seriously?"

"Yes, dear Crow, and more seriously than I ever have. You are officially my second-favorite Crow."

Crow's lips twitched and she felt her fangs grind against each other underneath her beak. They were *ranking* her? Out of all the things they could've spent their time on, all the things they could have done for her—

There was a burning desire in Crow's heart, but she did not have the courage to let it out. She did not have the capacity to speak it; the idea of the answer itself was scary enough to deter her. And, still, she needed closure, she just had to know, and so her beak parted, and all at once her question spilled out,

"Which one, Raven?"

"Which one was my favorite?" Raven asked, craning their great and massive neck far, far down to peer into her eyes with their own. They were curious about how her face might change when her heart broke, and so they wished to observe it.

Crow could not find her words, and so she spoke her mind with a simple nod.

"The First, of course." Raven whispered, smiling.

Crow's heart began to beat faster.

"Every one of you since then has simply been a shadow of that great girl dwelling within a husk you stole. But you, dear Crow..."

Tears began to form along Crow's flesh eye, and already, they were running and dripping down. *Husk I stole? But—*

"You are almost 1% of the girl you once were. It's impressive, really. I'm sure the years haven't been as easy on you as they have been on me, after all." Raven was grinning, now.

The way she broke was just so...

delicious.{formatting: big and elsewhere}

And already, Raven could feel the desire to eat their fill, to satiate themselves at last, to slake their eternal hunger. Their favorite treat was right there beneath them, sitting on their very paw. They could snap her up in just one moment, and then— **bliss!**

Succor at last.

They would eat their fill, and they would be satiated, and they would raise another Crow— as tired as they possibly could make her— and, twisted by her exhaustion, she would surely come to resemble the original again, would she not? Ah, now. Ah, but perhaps the exhaustion was just one piece of the puzzle? They could hardly trust the word of the little Crow to lead them to ecstasy, now, could they?

Well. No matter how long it took, they would get it right. They had all of the years of eternity, all of the resources they could ever need, and the patience to run as many experiments as they had to.

There was some skittering and scampering below, but Raven, lost in thought, paid it no mind. No, instead, they were fixated wholly on the past, the present, and what came after.

Five hundred years of this had already passed by in the blink of an eye. What was five thousand more in the face of such a trial?

Raven began to nod along to their thoughts. They could not allow this to be ruined, not by anyone, and certainly not by themselves. No matter how many Crows they must raise, no matter how many ended up consumed, they would persist with unwavering determination. Each and every failure was a sacrifice that merely served as kindling for **the everburning fire**.

Raven flexed and stretched their body as the sensation of something crawling around began to distract them. But this, these thoughts, were far more important than that, and so they grit their teeth and followed their thoughts down deeper and darker tunnels in their mind, chasing focus, and focus alone.

And as they shut their many eyes and dropped down into a deep, dark tunnel that carved its way down to the very origin of themselves they envisioned a great and blazing pyre. It lit up the black and lumpy tunnel walls of their mind with red and orange lights that flickered and jolted. The erratic lights sent the shadows jumping and screaming around the walls, forming sharp and strange shapes that vanished before existing for even a single moment.

Yes. Yes, there they were. ***The everburning fire.***

At its center was a mountain of charred and melting corpses that had lost their shape, but certainly, not their scent. Even now, as Raven stared within their own mind at the pyre, each and every one of their olfactory orifices began to twitch, then relax, as they recalled the delightful scent of their mind's current fixation.

Crow.

They would bring her back from the **flux** and put her into husks, over, and over, and over again,

and they would watch them, one and all, each pretending to be her, each stumbling and breaking themselves over nothing, agonizing, then apologizing, even though they faced only a small sliver of the agony that Raven herself bore in their shared journey.

No, Crow had no idea where her struggles even began. She did not even know what it was that she was missing. So, they would show her, no matter how long it took.

When they finally brought Crow back as she once was,

she would thank them.

Because at the end of the journey, she would be whole,
and she would not even remember the pain that lined the path to who she was.

Finally,
they would both be free.

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Raven did not notice her as she slipped between their many limbs and up into a vent. It was unusual, though preceded, for them to become so lost in thought. Though— that, now, mattered not. There was yet much for her to do, and quickly, too, that she be free to flee unto her meeting spot with Finch.

And so, the whistling metal tunnel rumbled and groaned as she ran through it, opposite the current of air that wished to blow her back from whence she came. The vents were a wonderful thing, really, bringing fresh air wherever it was needed— and it was *always* needed in such a dank and depressing place as this— but in terms of passages, fare through them was rather poor.

Today, the vent smelled of honey and fresh-fallen fruit. And, famished as she was, her tummy was immediately sent roiling, growling like a feral beast, and as the fresh air continued to rush right up to her, her head spun, all light all of a sudden, and she banged into the side of the vents, metallic clang echoing for countless paces in every direction, bouncing off the walls and back into her ears, the sound of it sharp like daggers.

Crow clutched her head for a moment, then remembered her new cloak and pulled its hood up and over. The soft silky interior wrapped around her in a warm, cuddly embrace, and her ears sunk into the little pockets sewn *just* for them— each one a slightly different size, just like *her*!

The weight of it, heavy on her head, was so calming, so too was the feeling of it, like her ears had been cupped between gentle fur-clad paws for safe-keeping. The noises, of course, struggled to worm their way between her head and the hood, and then the hood and her ears, and so she was safe— for now— from the reprehensible cacophony of the metal walls that enclosed her.

Crow smiled. It was so nice, having clothes that— a tailor that—

—**f**_{it} her..?

Her head was heavy, all of a sudden, and not from the weight of the hood, but some inner weight, some heavy heavy weight within her, in her head. And still, wobbling woozy, legs awankle, she felt her way along the wall with—

—one **h****and**..?

And her eye did flutter, lid heavy as her head, and she did force it open, again, and again,

and again, and again

—if only to stay—

in this moment
if only she could stay

—lucid in this moment for just another

tick!

*{and she was back, again, in that room that smelled of filthy love. even as she felt her body moving, moving along,
plodding through her life without her, her mind was elsewhere plotting, adrift and drifting further still through
shattered stills that, stitched together, kept her heart— and mind, lingering— still in a moment that she had not felt
when it had happened.*

she reached out, sidling along the _mETAL ^wA_{LL}

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_{bed} ^{Frame} ?? pulling herself along further and

further

towards freedom,

up and along the sill, tee^{tering} and _{tot}tering,

until she

fell!

"Little Crow, little Crow." *the seamstress?* cooed, pulling her hood back to stroke her hair.

Crow, facedown in the moss, limbs sprawled around in a heap as if she had been split like firewood, simply mumbled and murmured as her bleary eye fluttered and her chest, which had been fastly heaving, began to sag with heavy, rattling sighs.

"Little Crow. Welcome home." **Serpent** cooed, making sure to take great care to rub her favorite spot between her ears.

The exit from the memory was not nearly so dramatic as the entrance. She was not suddenly ripped out of it, her consciousness did not restore all at once, and she did not gasp dramatically as peace returned to her frame.

She simply returned like a slow whisper. At first, small flutterings, like a new butterfly's wings. Her muscles twitched and contracted in short bursts. Then, a far grander movement: the straightening of a twisted leg. She then unfurled her wings, stretching them out fully, before pushing herself backwards and up onto her haunches, untangling her limbs as she moved.

She looked up blearily, not quite sure of what she was seeing. She'd been lost adrift, and she knew not for how long. Had all of this been a dream?

The world around her shifted and swirled, colors blurring together, pulsing, then fading away as all the disparate pieces sorted themselves back to where they belonged. Then, it happened again, and again, always shifting in new ways.

Was any of this even real?

Serpent moved another appendage under and around Crow's chin, lifting her head up from below.

Some part of Crow's subconscious roused from this, and idly, she pulled her eyepatch back down and into place, and immediately, the shifting colors ceased and everything became again clear.

She was in the **Living Room**, full of moss, lichens, tiny wildflowers, buzzing bees, and fallen fruit. And before her, holding her head ever, ever so gently, looking down onto her with the concern of a caretaker for their favorite bloom, was Serpent.

Though, Crow would have recognized it by feel alone, even if she could not see it. There was nothing, really, that felt the way that Serpent did.

"Thanks, Serpie," Crow sighed and turned her head aside, jostling lightly side-to-side to shake off Serpent's touch where it lingered by her side. Then, Crow moved forward and passed beside, then past, it, hoping all the way that Serpent would find itself minding only its own business.

Of course, life would never allow itself to be simple, and so she felt Serpent sticking and slinking along behind her like her shadow.

"I intend to bathe and wish to be alone." She said simply, coldly, matter-of-factly, over her shoulder, before returning her head to face front, eyes searching around for the berries and honey for which, in at least this moment, she was living.

"Should I grab anything for you?"

"No. Just, go. Please."

And in an instant, it was gone, with no sign it had ever been present.

Crow let out a full, weary sigh of exhaustion, and this marked the start of her brief respite.

Finally, she could unwind, if just for a little while.

Crow turned one head to look through the one-way wall to the world outside the lab. From the outer surface of the hill, only dirt and moss and little rocks would be seen by an observer. But the view from inside was much different— Crow could see straight through all the hill that lay on top of the **Living Room**, sheltering it, sheltering *her*, and the light poured in freely even as the soil did not. It was some application of **sympathy**, she knew, but the specifics had always eluded her. Perhaps some kind of binding of rocks.. and glass? But then what of the dirt, and the living things? Ah,

if only she could **understand**, perhaps then...

Crow squatted down by the grand and ancient tree that took up a third of the room all on its own and picked up one of its delicious, bright-red berries. They were tacky little things, covered in edible fuzz and little white seeds secreted away into countless indentations that covered the whole fruit, and she was so, so glad that they had finally fallen. Squatting there, she popped the little red thing into her beak, then rolled her head back, allowing the fruit to tumble down,

dong-da-dong

the inside of her metal beak, and she opened her mouth, catching the berry on her tongue before it could fall all the way down her throat and choke her. Then, she tilted her head forward and crushed the berry against the roof of her mouth with her tongue. It was perfectly ripe, and it burst open, coating her whole mouth in its beautiful

syrup. She growled in satisfaction, suckling away at it, while scampering around the tree, picking up and stashing away as many berries as she could, each and all finding a home within the many countless pockets of her cloak and sweater and dress.

Every so often, as she searched around, she of course held one up to the light to admire it in the day's glow, before popping it viciously into her beak in the same manner as the first,

dong-da-dong,

squish!

growwwl.

And her eyes lit up each time, dilating with all-consuming desire that burned through her like a cleansing wildfire. Nothing had ever come close to the taste of her perfect redberries, and she had not even realized how deeply she had been longing for them until they were here, waiting for her, at last.

How long had she waited for berries so perfect? They were even unspoiled by her own impatience, which often caused her to pluck them ere before they were ripe, resulting in *many* unsatisfactory harvests.

She often ruined such things for herself, but she just couldn't help it.

Was it so wrong for a girl to want?

The harvest did not last for long, and once she was out of fruitflesh, Crow sat down on a little mossy patch beneath the tree and gave in fully to the sensation of the flavor still left with her. She reveled within the feeling of it on her tongue, her lips, and where it stuck to the inside of her cheeks in gooey, thick, syrupy patches.

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Serpent knew better than to talk, of course. At the slightest provocation, whatever remained of Crow's trust in it would die. And, so, it simply watched from above, tangled in the top-most branches of the tree, a single, sinewy spiderweb with eyes that watched her like a hawk. It was not allowed to let her alone, not anymore, and while it took no pleasure in the task, it was all for her. She needed protection, clearly, perhaps even in her **Living Room**, and so Serpent would watch her, that it may never see her harmed.

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Crow groaned and stretched, belly full and buzzing with a fresh tingling, radiating warmth that soaked into the many layers of down and fur of her cloak that covered her like a boulder of blankets. Even as she stretched, she remained fully inside her cocoon, fully comfortable, fully comforted, fully held in the bliss of simply **being**.

It was so very nice to be alone, truly alone, she realized. It need not be a treacherous, awful thing. In fact, the company of herself, it seemed, was what she made of it. In the past, she often made something awful of it, but perhaps... it did not need to be that way?

And still, even blissful, there was a deep, deep longing— a twin longing, she realized— both separate expressions of the same base desire. The desire felt like the hole that was filled when she was in the arms of another... *companionship*, perhaps?

But if it was companionship, and if the desire was twinned, then what would each half be? A desire for two separate companions?

Crow's head spun from the mere idea of it. No, no, no, no... that could not be it. It would simply remain as a matter for some reflection, then, because for now, it was time for her to attend to the only greater desire she had:

to be free of filth.

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The blobby, fluffy form of Crow shifted slightly as two pale white arms emerged out from countless layers of fur, feathers, and down. The arm's movements were divorced from the blob from which they emerged, and reached around wildly, searching for buttons and clasps.

Eventually, the arms succeeded in opening up the warm and fluffy cavity that imprisoned Crow in layers of comfort, and she wiggled out of it, headfirst, then arms, all the while scooting down the tiny, mossy hill that the tree she was resting under grew out of.

Free of the cloak, Crow raised up her arms and bent them behind her head, leaning forward as she did, carefully unbuttoning each of the four buttons that held her sweater on around her wings. Unbuttoned, the panels fell loose, and she lifted them up, peeling them away to expose her skin and muscle underneath.

Then, all that remained was her dress and its under-wear. With surprising speed and precision, her hands began to work through each and every fastening that held on the straps that kept her harness snug and tight to her body. Clothes loosened up, her left hand opened up each sleeve of the bodysuit, while the right dove inside, keeping the sleeve away from her flesh and fur while she plucked the bodypart out from the smooth fabrics that imprisoned it.

Then, she would move to the next part, and the next part, bending and stretching all around, only occasionally getting caught in the mess of fabrics and straps, and so the process went, until eventually—

it was all complete, and she was naked, save for her eyepatch.

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It felt wrong to look at her in such a vulnerable, lonely moment, but it had no choice but to observe. And so, Serpent traced her body with its many different eyes scattered all about the tree, appraising her from every angle.

She seemed to be uninjured. A little malnourished, perhaps, but otherwise intact. That was good.

It wished it could have helped undress her, as it often did. The process was always much smoother that way, and she always claimed to like the help. It wondered why, today, she longed to be alone.

Had she not been alone enough?

It also twitched, ever so slightly, as she washed herself with unpracticed hands. She struggled and whined and yelped as she untangled her hair and unmatted her fur, and Serpent longed so deeply to do it all for her, to just take care of her, to take the pain away.

But it could not, would not. Should not? Mm.

It simply longed for the past, it supposed. Things were simpler then.

Perhaps this Crow had already learned the truth, and it would have to wait, again, for a great many seasons before they were reunited in earnest yet another time.

And it realized, that as much as it longed for her to break free, so that it may follow suit... that it did not actually want any of this to end.

It had simply become accustomed to every ending bringing in a new beginning.

But what if their last time together had already passed by without either ever noticing?

It could shoulder many burdens, but that....

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was it so wrong to want, really?

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Everything was wrong in the world and in her life, and yet,

Crow was smiling.

One, she felt very clean, very clean indeed, and she had not only come to love the feeling of it, but also recognize the depth of her existing feelings for it. Being clean was being submerged in warm memories while safesured from discomfort and miscellaneous grungus.

Two and too, she was rather excited to see Finch. It had really been a full moon, already, and now, finally, the moments they were to spend apart were finally drawing to a close. That, on its own, was a full cause for celebration.

So, she did not bemoan her smile, nor did she let the world wear down upon it. Her life could be sad, and she could be happy. She was more than her life, and her life was more than her, of that, she was finally sure.

In so believing, she would make something of it. She wanted to. Really, really, she *wanted* to do something with it, and so she would.

Crow popped her wings through the flaps in the back of her cloak with a simple

twist-swoosh!

and she leapt from the final rooftop on her route, spread her wings wide, and glided straight over the edge of the tall, wrought-iron spiked fence that enclosed the hill of raised mounds, wilting flowers, and towering monuments to those who came before.

Finally, she had arrived at **The Statues**, where countless bodies were buried in a tangle like roots just beneath the soil. She often liked to come here to visit the various kinds of worms and slugs— there were just so many pretty and precious types all in one place.

Finch had such great taste in meeting places. This was such a delightful place to meet, closed in by a nice fence, with such great visibility of the surrounding area, high up in the air, with nice wildlife and an even nicer lack of the living. Yes. Yes, this was a good place indeed for them to speak.

Crow touched down with her talons on a soft and squishy patch, but paid it no mind. No, her eye was scanning all about, flicking to, and also fro, searching for the shiny glint of her erewhile companion.

Though, despite a good, good effort, Finch was yet nowhere. Well, not now *here*, at the very least.

But just as Crow lifted her talons to go wandering about freely, she felt her eyepatch grow warm, then cold, then warm again, energy radiating out from the sigil embroidered into it. A signal, to be sure, but what meaning *what?*

Sighing, Crow simply hopped on top of a nearby tall, carved, round-top stone and plopped down, legs crossed, relegating herself to stillness rather than folly. If she was being signaled, then that certainly meant something, so if she did not know what it was, she would simply sit and think until she puzzled it out for herself.

Most likely, it meant "I see you!," surely?

No. *That* would be folly. She was searching for Finch, and that was why her first thought was that the signal would be related to seeing.

More than most likely, it must have meant, "I am here, ready to meet."

That was rather sensible indeed, and so, nodding her head sagely, Crow turned her gaze to the single gate that was kept, most commonly, closed.

Indeed, it was swinging shut, surely freshly opened. Which could only mean—

Crow leaped off of the stone (which crumbled ever so slightly as she left it) and began bounding down the hill, legs swinging wide, running as fast as she possibly could. In a blur, she rounded a particularly steep portion, and skidding to a halt, sending dirt and dust pouring down below onto the plodder on the path, she came to see—

"Acgh," Weasel spat, casting aside dirt with his paws as he waved his arms around in a frantic, though somehow dignified, manner. Then, with a grim expression and clear intent to kill, he swung his head up at the cause of the disruption.

tick. tick. tick.

"Crow."

"Um. Weasel," she chirped, voice squeaking.

There was no response, and so she continued,

"What brings... you... here?"

Weasel let out yet another great and ragged sigh that could outperform any other and simply turned his head down to the path and continued plodding along.

"I am here to visit my husband, Crow. And you?"

"Visiting. Um...." Crow paused, nonplussed, eyes blinking rapidly as she ran through a list of things to say. "Bodies."

"Splendid." Weasel said sourly, rounding the bend in the path, now turning towards her, as he continued up the hill, eyes to the dirt. "How are your clothes treating you? Are you often playing in the mud with them?"

"They're, um. They're just perfect. They're masterpieces. And yes. I am often in the mud."

"Ah...." Weasel sighed, walking straight past Crow. "Well. That's lovely." Weasel spoke through grit teeth, though his back was to Crow, and his voice faded away as he began to draw further, and further away, mumbling and grumbling to himself.

Welp. Crow kicked rocks down the hill as she began to think. *Perhaps the signal did really mean..?*

"Crow, I—"

Immediately, Crow whipped around and flung herself forward onto the familiar metal body she was here to meet. Like a little spider, she wrapped all around Finch, clinging so tightly that they may never part again.

"It's good to see you too, little Crow." Finch's voice rang out, whisper-quiet yet perfectly crisp and clear.

Everything was wrong in the world and in her life, and yet,

Finch was happy.

She just hoped these moments could one day soon be more than a brief respite.