

Chapter 16.

Sympathy

Finch was sitting, cross-legged, on the smoothed-flat polished whitestone platform that preceded her mother's tombstone. The actual grave marker was a simple, sharp obelisk, one meter on each side, ten meters tall, covered all over in engravings and carvings of all kinds.

Crow sat next to Finch and took great care to match her posture and body positioning as accurately as possible. It was a matter of respect, of course. She didn't know what kind of death practices Finch followed, so she would simply follow along in Finch's lead. That way, she surely could not go wrong.

They sat in silence, staring at the obelisk, for two hundred *ticks*.

"Do you still want to help me kill my father?"

"Yes. I owe you a life debt. I will repay you with a life. It is a simple thing."

"Simple?" Finch stared off at the obelisk thoughtfully, wondering deeply if there was truth to what Crow had said.

"Well, perhaps."

They sat in silence for another hundred *ticks*.

"I'm sorry. I haven't... done this before." Finch said with awkward cadence.

"Plotting?"

"Killing."

"Well... we can start with the 'why', then."

"Why indeed..." Finch rolled her hands around, spinning over and over again in place in their sockets. "We shouldn't have to kill him, really."

"You just want to?"

"No!" Finch shook her head side-to-side in perfect, smooth, and fast arcs. "No, we— I— do, in fact, have to kill him. It's the only way out."

"Out?"

Finch looked to Crow, and Crow turned her head in kind, returning her gaze. Finch's eyes, mechanical and whirring, were sagging, mechanical pupils contracting and dilating, over and over again.

"You must think it odd, that I am metal, hm?"

"No. I am too." Crow chirped, pulling up her eyepatch playfully, before flicking her own metal beak for added emphasis.

They both giggled for three ticks, then Finch fell silent.

"I am not only mechanical, but also sympathetic, in composition. Living artifice, he calls it. The sympathetic part of me lives, while the mechanical part of me simply serves that existence."

Finch fell silent, again, for twenty-three ticks before speaking again.

"Machines are created to be controlled. Just as I control the mechanical part of me, so too can my father, since he designed them."

"Does he?"

"Yes."

"How bad is it?"

"It's... gotten worse."

"Finch. You're safe here, you can—"

"I'm not."

Crow flinched and leaned back, tears suddenly forming as her head began to spin. Sure, she wasn't so strong all on her own, but certainly, she at least helped provide, comfort..? perhaps..? or was she not good enough even for that purpose— or—

"Crow." Finch leaned forward, cupping the side of Crow's head in one hand. "I am simply stating a fact. I am not safe from his control here."

Crow froze. {she's making it about herself and super embarrassed about it and now she wants to die from embarrassment}

"He can— he— you're not—" Crow's flesh eye blinked rapidly, scanning around, as if she would see Finch's father poking out from behind one of the many grave markers on the hill.

"As long as he is alive, he can control any of the mechanical parts of me, subverting my own control, for as long as he wishes, whenever he feels the urge to do so."

"But—" Crow's head was still spinning. That was *insane*. Her father— he was so— the thought of it made her so— {sick} {pat pat} "And he will not stop?"

"No. After a few thousand tries for self-autonomy, I gave up on asking him. Instead, he will simply die. I'm... not sure how he doesn't see that as the natural conclusion, really, he's otherwise a very smart man, but..." Finch trailed off, looking to the side, then anywhere except her mother's gravestone.

Soon, both of her parents would lie here, eternally. She would then live not knowing either of them, mere pieces of an immutable past.

"We'll free you." Crow said suddenly, uncurling her legs and closing the short distance between them. She picked up Finch's hands within her own and held them firmly, and she looked up, determined, into Finch's eyes. "And I will shoulder as much of this burden for you as I can. Killing is the easy part, and that much, I can do for you."

"Thank you. For perhaps obvious reasons, I can't do it myself."

"The first of which being that the deed would already be done."

"Yes, naturally."

"So, then, Finch," Crow spoke, firmly, and quickly, voice steady with unbreaking conviction. Her eyes glistened in the day's setting light, and every fold in her face was held by the same steadfast determination. "Tell me all that I must do, and it shall be done."

Finch nodded, and after only a single moment spent in hesitation, began to speak.

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"Okay." Crow nodded seriously, but she furrowed her brows and looked down into the dirt beside the whitestone platform, concerned. "But what do we do if he..?" She trailed off, gesturing to Finch's whole body.

"You'll use this." Finch produced a twine-wrapped leather parcel from the inside of her jacket, then placed it in her own lap. She untied the twine quickly, then unfolded the package, revealing a strange metal **piece**. It had a long, carefully engraved metal barrel, attached to an equally elegant wooden handle at a right angle. A small red gem was set into the top of the back of the handle, lined up with the center of the end of the barrel.

Finch gestured for Crow to hold out her hand, and so Crow did. Then, Finch lowered the **piece** tenderly into her care.

It was heavy, and cold, as if the feeling of having killed came packaged with it. It had a lever attached upside-down to the barrel, settled in neatly within a slender metal hook that connected the handle and barrel.

Crow, confused, looked up at Finch expectantly and cocked her head to one side.

"Ah..." Finch couldn't help but reach out and caress the side of Crow's face. "You're so cute." And Finch lingered in that moment, wishing only to make it last longer.

"Anyway, you load the weapon like this." Finch reached out and pressed a heretofore unseen button in the side of the handle, then pushed down on the front of the barrel, causing it to fold forward, exposing a large open cavity within it. From within, a strange energy emanated out of it, as if beckoning to Crow, asking her for something. "Whatever you put into this compartment is what the weapon will fire out, like a bow. Some things work better than others for ammunition purposes, of course. I've found that bundled metal shards do nicely."

"Finch... what is this thing?"

"Just a little **piece** I came up with, my own design. I tried to figure out the most efficient artifice for killing someone, and I think I succeeded."

"It feels... *wrong*."

"I hope to destroy it when we're done, so that it is not replicated. Unless, of course, you wish to keep it."

"No. No, I— I don't want to keep this. Well. I mean, I will. Keep it. For now. Like, I won't—," Crow, flustered, sighed in frustration, shaking her head, then started again. "I'm going to use it for its intended purpose— to kill your father— and then we can destroy it, together."

"Very well."

They were sitting in silence, again, holding hands, each looking down at the other's lap.

"Crow." Finch said, voice flat, low-pitched, serious.

"Yes?" Crow snapped her head up and focused in on Finch's eyes instantly. She could not stand to share a gaze with someone, usually, but Finch was different. It was comfortable, natural, with her.

"I am going to attempt, one last time, to talk it through with my father, before we kill him. But if he takes control of my body, I can't guarantee either of us will survive, and I don't want to leave you in a position where I might harm you— well, where my body might, so..." Finch's chest raised up and her back flexed together as if she was taking in a deep breath. Then, she gripped Crow's hands more tightly in her own, taking great care not to harm her with an excess of force. "As soon as negotiations seem impossible, fire the weapon."

Crow nodded seriously, and her hands gripped tighter around the artifice that Finch had trusted her with. And, strangely, a warm, fuzzy feeling buzzed around in her chest. She began to notice that it felt really, really good to be trusted by someone.

Crow was always being called on for her talents, but never, really, did they ever place any sort of real trust in her. It was so intensely special, and she *needed* more of **it**.

Perhaps... **it** was trust? Affection? That connection she longed for with others? Already, that burning twin desire in her chest had been satiated, at least somewhat, by this moment, here, with Finch. Perhaps she could seek affection

elsewhere, too? She could afford as much as she wanted in the lower district, well, assuming they'd agree to take her as a client—

Crow shook her head wildly. That was inappropriate right now.

"Crow?" Finch asked.

"sorry. sorry, sorry. i um. totally started spacing out.." Crow shrunk down, pulling her shoulders together. Then, she scooted closer and unwound her legs so that she could bring them up to her chest. "sorry," she whispered.

In response, Finch once again brought up a hand and cupped the side of Crow's face with it. "It's alright, Crow. You haven't done anything wrong. Minds tend to wander, believe it or not."

And then Finch did something new. She leaned forward at the waist while tilting her head down, and at the same time, she pushed down on Crow's chin with her thumb. Gently, ever so gently, their foreheads bumped together then settled still without ever bouncing away from each other— a perfect landing.

For many, many breaths, they shared this moment, heads held together, necks craned towards the ground, hands tenderly tangled in the shape of affection.

"Are you feeling alright, now, tender thief?"

Crow chirped and giggled and rolled forward to hug Finch around the neck, "That altername sucks."

Finch simply held Crow tighter, firmer, as if by doing so, all the threats that loomed over them would simply fly away in fear.

"I know," Finch whispered. "Now, do you know what you must do?"

"If your father does not accept your terms, I will kill him without hesitation."

"Yes, exactly. And I will never hold it against you, not even for a moment, as I wish it could be my hand pulling the trigger mechanism."

"Well. At least you made it the... trigger mechanism?"

"True," Finch said, slowly slipping one of her hands away from Crow's,

Crow whined a short, high-pitch disappointment,

and then Finch brought her hand up over Crow's head and set it down gently in her hair, playing with it, smoothing it out, separating its tangled parts, ever so gently.

"When was the last time you detangled your hair?" Finch asked.

"...right before we met here today..." Crow responded softly.

"Oh dear."

"*hmph*." Crow huffed, burying her face deeper into Finch's cold metal embrace.

No one had been patient like this with her before. Well, other than Serpie. But Serpie simply mimicked behaviors that it learned would put her at ease, each a tool to use in response to something specific. Serpie could never do *this*, to truly *listen*, *understand*, and *respond* not only verbally, but also physically, to the tiny, near-indecipherable language of her body.

It was... nice, to be close to another real being. Really, really nice.

"Um, Finch."

"Yes dear?" Finch responded immediately, gaze fixed on the many tangles that remained in Crow's hair.

"Whose grave are we sitting on, anyway?"

"My mother's."

"Oh. Sorry."

"It's okay, Crow. I didn't know her."

"She died before you were born?"

"Not... quite. Yes? It's complicated."

"It can't be that complicated."

"You're right, I just. Well, I don't wish to frighten you, is all."

"I am not easily frightened."

"You lie well, though not to me."

"I will be frightened for you. I want to know, if you would let me."

"I never knew her."

"Oh. Okay," Crow nodded sagely, as if that made perfect sense, as if it was not surprising in the least. "Then why do you visit her?"

"I... still miss her." Finch's hand no longer worked through Crow's hair, and she froze in place, deep in thought. "You don't seem particularly shocked?"

"I sort of just assumed it was childbirth complications?"

"I... think so," Finch said, hanging her head low, "But there's problems with that theory."

"What do you mean? Do— do you think someone killed her? Do you need help—"

"No, no. Nothing like that." Finch began to move more slowly, more deliberately. Did Crow know? Could... was it even appropriate to tell her? The truth had to come out one way or another, didn't it? "It's just... *ugh!*" Finch wanted to sigh so, so, badly, but her form did not allow her to do so, and so she simply took one of her hands and cracked it into the whistone platform, which splintered under her curled fist.

"*Finch!*" Crow yelped, shrinking away from her. "What's gotten into you?"

"This platform, my mother's grave. It has been here for centuries. I have not."

Crow straightened immediately, and her entire body tensed up. She.. wasn't.. *alone*?

So many parts of Crow all fell into place and began to resonate deeply with the metal girl sitting just next to her. In that moment, she wanted nothing more than to smother her, to cover her in affection, to let her know that both of them did have a place in life, and it was here, with each other, in the company of another that could truly and fully understand.

Crow had not responded, and so Finch continued, "And, my father— he will not tell me the truth, and I can't see the past of it, because he's **chained** my eyes to be unable to see her, and I do not want to be seen by you as crazed, or as a liar, but I have never seen evidence of my mother and I wonder what that means about me, about my life, and whether I was ever even really alive or if it is all just some elaborate fantasy spun by a madman that lost his mind after centuries spent alone in his fortress."

And to that, Crow simply leaped forward off of her heels and wrapped her arms around Finch's neck. Still in the air, she brought her legs up and hooked her heels around Finch's back, fully clinging to her as if climbing a tree.

Finch, stunned, awkwardly lifted her arms, which then froze in the air, unsure of what to do for three full *ticks*. Then, she closed her arms around Crow as a miserable melancholy began to sink in throughout her mind, dragging her thoughts deeper, darker, and farther away from the surface of the self she barely knew.

"You yet live, Finch, just as I do."

"Your life is so much more real than mine, Crow. I do not even have flesh to call my own."

"You did, once."

"What is the difference, if I was not alive to see it? If I have no memories of it but what I can find by looking into the past?"

"I'm... trying to figure that out, too. I'm, um. You aren't— we—"

"Crow, when I was hunting you, I had a question, an idea, but... I did not know how to bring it up."

"Was it about my past?"

"Yes. Candidly, there are so many who claim to have known you, to have seen you take different forms, and I could not help but wonder so many different things, or even if— I could trust you, seeing as so many claimed to be abandoned by you, but..." Finch trailed off, "I often wonder, sometimes, if you are just some cruel trick played by Raven to get an upper hand on my father," Finch said casually, just voicing the concern so that it would no longer plague her. But as soon as she put voice to it, a seed began to form and root within her, taking over her senses, warping everything within her mind around to suit itself.

Crow flinched and writhed in discomfort at the sentiment. A cruel trick? Just... some machination of Raven? Was— was *that* why she came back, time and time again? To fool another? To cajole more to fall under Raven's thumb? Was she really no more than a tool?

As soon as Finch had said the words, already, Crow's heart, anxious for tragedy, latched onto them and siphoned off as much vitriol for the self as they could. Really, it had been lying dormant, looking for some excuse to regress, to return, to hold again the simple truth of the past she used to be:

thoughtless.

And it made sense, too— to only part of her identity that had persisted was her place as a thief, first and foremost, and it was always how she had seen, before anything else. She was untrustworthy by her very nature, regardless of how she lived or died, and those drawings from the past—

was it foolish for her to believe that she had made them? Had... Raven simply forced her to?

"Is... that really what I am?" Crow asked, voice breaking. She had, for a moment, believed herself to be so much more, but now that foundation— as solid as it had seemed— was crumbling all around her.

Finch loosened her grip and closed her eyes, focusing only on the sound of Crow's voice. It was so genuine, so fragile, so scared— but if Henrich could have such control over her own self, then certainly Raven could..?

Finch did not respond, and so Crow pushed herself away and curled up in a ball, back turned to Finch, sobbing. Her entire body shook and trembled with wracking sobs that dredged up her deepest sorrows, recycling them, over, and over, and over again, dunking her into pool after pool of sorrow and past-sorrow.

"Crow, I—" Finch reached towards her, then let her hand freeze in the air before she touched her. This was wrong. This was all wrong, she knew it was wrong, but she still couldn't shake it, this pestering, aching feeling that there was so much more to the truth than either of them could know, and...

At the end of everything, Finch simply could not stand to be a pawn in some fool's game any longer. She had to be careful. Precise. She had to take only the appropriate risks, and Crow—

she was just a bit too perfect, wasn't she? So similar in so many ways, struggling with all the same problems? Resonating with her deeply, as though they had met and known each other for far longer than either had ever even lived?

What if this was just what Crow had done to all the others? Even if it wasn't her fault, there was just no way that someone so small could ever hope to measure up against the influence of Raven.

Crow, now, rocked back and forth, split on the edge of reality and fantasy. No longer could she determine where her flesh ended and the world around it began, nor even could she determine her name, or thoughts, or self. The further she slipped from reality, the more it all made sense, and clicked into place.

Of course. she was simply a machination. She *was* just like Finch, perfectly so, it was no secret that her father and Raven had known each other for so long— Raven simply preferred machinations of the flesh, if the laboratory was any inclination, and that was why she was brought back— just as Serpent was—

no more than just another tool to enact their will within the world.

That was why, no matter what happened,

no matter how many time she died,

she had always returned.

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After a long, long silence, finally, Finch spoke up again. "Just tell me, Crow, please I— I just have to know," but these words did not reach Crow, far as she was from the waking world. No, there was indeed only one thing Crow heard in that moment:

"What are you, Crow?"

Crow stopped crying instantly as the question brought all of her processes to a halt. Her breath caught, her muscles seized, and her eyelids snapped open, staring wide-eyed, feral, into the horizon.

It wasn't something she had considered, before— the matter and nature of what she was. She had only seen a past— what looked like one, anyway— and how that connected some self she had never known to the body she now inhabited, and its mind, floating within it, theoretically containing all she was and had ever been.

Was she a mind, then? Or the body, or their union? Was she her past, or, was she simply what lied ahead? Was she her actions, or her reactions? Was she her instincts, or her thoughts? Was there some way to sum it all up, tie it in a neat little bow, and present it to another as if to say, "Here, this is all I am!"

Pah! She thought, now giggling. *What a joke.*

There was no way to conceptualize what she was with merely words, or thoughts, or actions, or anything else that could be seen or known. To summarize a whole self was more than just an audacious ask, but, too, an impossible task. And what was the point of it, really?

Would her answer help with anything? Would being distilled down to just a sentence or two really make any difference, in the grand scheme of things? Could being presented simply provide some benefit that outweighed the loss of the complexities of everything that she was and could ever be?

And she was angry, too, at the question— her feathers raised up on end, and her muscles tensed, as if to tear into something, to shred another down, to rip through whatever it was that troubled her.

She even knew why she was angry, for once, and so instantly, without having to reflect on the feelings at all. Marvelously, she simply *felt* them, the way she was growing so accustomed to.

She was angry, of course, because

she did not even know what she was.

But not knowing had rarely ever stopped her from speaking, and so her mouth opened to speak, and all at once fell out all of her, every single part, in a senseless babble that she had no hopes of ever being able to put a stop to, but perhaps if she just kept speaking, maybe, just maybe,

she would stumble upon the answer at last,

the answer to the anxieties, the guilt, the endless doubt and cryptic dreams,

the answer to her cave paintings, her oddities and idiosyncrasies,

the answer to her relationship with raven,

the answer to her pasts.

What she searched for, as deeply as she searched for herself,
was **it**.

It was the only constant throughout all of her many lives,

it was the only thing she thought of when she thought of herself: that aching, gaping hole within her side, begging for wholeness, begging to be found.

And she knew, she knew as deeply as she had ever known anything, she knew instinctually, down to her marrow and deeper still into her soul— whatever it was she was, was **it**.

She was—

"**It**," Crow whispered, and she uncurled from the ball, stunned by her own declaration, still caught in the torrent of thoughts that suddenly stopped spinning all at once within her mind which fell silent as her heart finally stumbled upon the simplest truth she had never found. Perhaps, she thought, it was the simplest things that were the hardest to grasp.

"What?" Finch asked, standing up.

Crow sighed, relieved, and took in a deep, unburdened breath that filled her chest at last. It was so lovely, she realized, just to breath. Then, hearing Finch rise, she, too, stood and turned around while wiping tears away from her face.

"You asked me what I am, but there is nothing I can say to kill the paranoia you've made your home," Crow said simply, huffing in frustration. "But I finally found **it**— what I was looking for— and since **it** happens to be the answer to your question, ridiculous and offensive and stupid as it was, I'll tell you."

Crow closed the distance immediately and looked up at Finch, who flinched from the hostile, angry gaze of the Crow uncaged at last.

"What I am is **it**, the very thing I was searching for all this time. So, to answer your question, 'what are you?'" Crow spat in disdain, "I am Crow, I am only Crow, and all I have ever wanted was to find what I was missing, which I now have. I deserve to be **Crow**, not only in name, but embodied in every possible way. I was missing myself, having lost her time, and time again, having killed her over nothing, having pushed her into every box except the one she was the shape to fit. The very idea that I could be what I was missing was so alien that I exhausted every other option in the world before coming to the simple conclusion that what I am, so obviously, is what I have always seen in my reflection. Do you see **it**, Finch?"

Finch regarded Crow closely, staring deep into her eye. Inexplicably, impossibly, there was a glow within it— like a burning fire— blazing so brightly that the world itself might be consumed if ever it was freed from within her.

"Yes," Finch said simply, turning her head away, "I owe you an apology, I think—"

"I came to help you free yourself from the chains you were buried under. I came to know you, to be held and protected by you, to feel safe with you, to—" Crow did not know if she could use the word she was thinking, but then, she remembered the simple truth again: **she** was **it**. And so, to find **it**, she simply had to embrace herself. "To fucking love you, Finch. And to think, even in knowing me— brief as our chance encounters may have been— we came to learn so much about ourselves and each other, and still, you have the fucking audacity to come and ask me

what I am, as if you could not see it yourself, because you had deluded yourself into thinking that I was just some fucking pawn for the very one that torments me!" Crow had ripped off her beak so that Finch could see her lips and fangs gnashing as she spoke, so that perhaps, if Finch could feel anything at all, perhaps it would be the rage she'd inspired within Crow.

"Was it so impossible to believe, Crow? That Raven, a god, had—"

"Had what, Finch? Bound me in the way you've been by your father? Was a puppet all you saw in me? Just a thoughtless beast, a ticket to escape your pain? Deceiving you just to pull you closer?"

"I just thought we were the **same!**" Finch shouted down at Crow, towering over her as her arms whirred and separated, revealing the searing-hot, sizzling metal underneath.

"No, Finch, you didn't," Crow stepped back, away from her, still facing forward. "You thought you were good enough to be an individual, while you saw me as just a fucking tool— whether used by Raven, or you— you fucking— believed in your own agency while doubting mine and **yet!**" Crow yelled, hands curling up into fists, claws extending, then retracting, over and over again. "You have the fucking *nerve* to lie and say you saw us as equals."

"What do you expect me to say?"

"Just tell me the truth, Finch."

Finch shook her head, confused, "Ask."

Crow smiled, sadistically, and heat surged up her neck and face as all of her anger and vitriol built up upon her tongue. It was a demented pleasure, she knew, but...

she fucking deserved **it**.

"What are you, *Finch*?"

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They stood, silently, motionless, each facing the other sternly. Neither made a single motion, and perhaps, neither had a single thought.

Everything, it seemed, had gone perfectly still. The wind, the city, the world itself had crawled to a halt and in that moment there existed only the tension between them.

"I was merely worried," Finch said, finally breaking the silence after countless *ticks* had passed.

And again, the world began to turn.

"About *what*?"

"I already told you."

"What you told me was that you wondered if I was some simple beast born just to fuck with you, *what*, Finch, did you expect me to say? And then you— you—" Crow spat in disgust, again, her thoughts so vile that this was the closest she could get to speaking them.

"I just needed to hear you tell me not to worry," Finch yelled, stomping her left foot. Without her usual careful restraint, the whitestone underneath cracked and flew out in a cloud of sharp shards.

Many of them made their way to Crow, who hid within her cloak. The shards of stone bounced off and clattered to the ground, and Finch, unconcerned, continued on,

"Because as long as it was *you* saying it, I could just— I— **ugh!**" Finch turned to the side and crossed over to the obelisk that marked her mother's grave and punched it.

"*Finch!*" Crow screeched, scampering over to her, "Quit it! That's—"

"Why, Crow? What's the point? It's meaningless."

In response, Crow reached up and grabbed Finch's arm between her claws, pulling as hard as she could, but Finch's arm did not budge from where it had embedded itself into the obelisk.

"It had meaning to you mere moments ago!" Crow yelled up at her, still pulling as hard as she could against Finch's arm. And, still, she did not budge.

"Just quit it, Crow. It's not like I knew her."

"That's not the *point!*" Crow persisted, hopping up into the air and using her full bodyweight to pull down on Finch's arm which, even despite this, still did not even twitch.

"I don't think there is a point, Crow."

Crow, seeing how futile it was, dropped down and, flustered, landed in a heap on the ground before scrabbling back onto her paws.

"To what? Living?"

"No. Remembering."

"What? Remembering is the point."

"That's rather circuitous."

"What it is is fucking *simple*, Finch, you're not thinking straight."

"Do you think I don't know that?!" Finch yelled, ripping her arm out of the obelisk as she whirled around to tower over Crow again. "I've been thinking straight every single moment since I was created, thousands of times faster than anyone else has ever had to, oftentimes in multiple parallel streams of thought, Crow, and it's fucking **exhausting**, don't you get it?! To think so often, so deeply, to be trapped entirely within my mind, because it's all I really have left? And whenever I open up— anytime at all— like when I tell you that I'm worried and I just need to hear it from you, hear what it is you really are to me, it fucking backfires because no one has ever been more of an overthinker than *me*, that all of my issues are just mine, and mine alone, and, and— I just—" Finch's voice fell quiet, and her shoulders slumped forward as she pressed her back into the cold, white stone of her mother's grave. "It's always been like this, Crow. Me, alone, existing only within my own little world up here," Finch pointed, pointedly, at her head, "Against my father and the city he controls."

"Then I'll tell you plainly, and I'll say it as many times as it takes for your minds to go still in their worries over me," Crow took in a deep, heaving breath, "I am **Crow**. I **hate** Raven, and I **hate** your father for what he has done to you and taken from you, and I **hate** this city and everything it stands for, and I **hate** how everything that happens here is out of our control, and the only thing I want is someone to help me fix this shit. So—"

Crow flapped her arms around, thoughtlessly, gesturing to nothing, "Do you?!"

Finch let her head fall back against the obelisk, and she slid down the cold white stone until she was seated fully on the platform once again, head now eye-level with Crow.

"Yeah," Finch whispered, "I want that, too. But—"

"But what?" Crow challenged, stepping forward, taking up the space between Finch's legs.

"Can we really do it? And..."

Crow glared at Finch, challenging her to say it.

"Please, Crow, I— everyone— they—"

"How can you still not take me seriously?" Crow scoffed, turning her back to Finch.

"Everyone I've ever known or come close to was hired by my father to help him control me," Finch blurted out, all at once, "and— I just— no matter how much I doubted them I always wanted it to be true, so deeply, and I always let them in, and they always— they always—"

Finch wished, more than anything, that she could cry, that she could let out the anguish in her heart that clouded her vision and tore apart her senses and filled her body with shameful, guilty heat.

Crow twitched, back still turned. What Finch said, it was just like—

—it was just like her, and Serpent, who had never really held any love for her. She was just another task to it.

Of course, Crow thought, whirling around, *she...*

then, Crow rushed forward into Finch's lap and hugged her, just one last time, around the neck.

"I'm sorry," Crow whispered, "you're, we're, um,"

"The **same**?" Finch offered, wrapping her hands loosely around Crow.

"Yeah.." Crow whined, relaxing into Finch's embrace.

"I'm sorry, too,"

"It's really okay!"

"It's not. I should be able to handle my own paranoia, and not shove it off on you."

"Well, it's not like either of this has done this before."

"Done what?" Finch asked, suddenly curious.

Crow pulled her head back from the crook where Finch's shoulder attached to her neck and looked her in the eye. "**Loved**, of course." Crow chirped, ever so sweetly, lips pulling apart into a loose, cheery grin as her eye fluttered shut in peace and pleasure both.

Finch pulled Crow tighter as a hot, horrible feeling spread throughout her entire frame. It was like suffocating, drowning. But, it was also like being pinned under the weight of safety and kindness— light enough that she could throw it off, but... even choking on it, she did not know if she even wanted to. Her chest felt tighter, and her limbs felt numb and tingly, and all throughout her body was the harsh feedback of a thousand different sensations that all sparkled like static as she let her eyes fall shut.

But still, one thing cut through it all:

clarity.

"Crow?" Finch asked, voice hollow and ever smooth.

"Yes, dear Finch?" Crow sighed back, relieved at last.

"I had always thought that the future did not exist, that the present was infinitely small, and that all life was was making sure that, at the end of it, a nice past laid there behind you while you looked back in your final moments."

Crow snuggled in closer to Finch, ears perking up as she listened intently.

"But now... I think I long to live, not so that my past is pleasant," Finch shuddered, "but simply so I can see what lies ahead."

"We will," Crow promised.

"Thank you, Crow."

"Of course."

They sat in silence for twenty-one more ticks.

"What do you suppose the future holds?" Finch asked.

Crow paused for thirty-seven ticks, giving great thought to her answer.

Eventually, she said simply:

"A life worth living."