

Chapter 17.

One Last Thing

"Ah, one last thing, Crow." Finch said, hand lingering in Crow's for just a moment too long. It was likely time for them to depart, but Finch was going to push that as far as she could. Her father, after all, would not be alive for too much longer to punish her for it.

Crow, meanwhile, had a distinct feeling that it would be far, far more than just one last thing. So, she turned, and looked up to meet Finch's gaze. "Yes?"

"I wonder what it will be like, that future you were talking about."

"Well, that's up to us to decide, isn't it?"

"I'm excited for it, I think."

"Me too!" Crow chirped.

"I've never been excited for much of anything, really."

"We should live in the woods!"

"The woods that are full of monsters?"

"I haven't ever seen any in them."

"You go out into the woods? Willingly? How often? Are there any signs of life?"

"Once every few moons for a while. I spent most of the last moon in them. Not much there except for trees and moss. It's perfect!"

"You need to be careful, Crow. I've seen what my father has brought back from a few expeditions into the wilderness, and..." Finch, usually unflappable, shuddered. "It's horrific, actually. You really can't be spending too much time there, okay?"

"Are you sure he got them from the woods? They're so peaceful."

"I suppose he could be lying. I'll look into the matter."

"Great. And when you find out he's lying, we'll live in the woods. We can build a little cabin!"

"Quaint."

"Quaint and lovely," Crow said, stepping forward and hugging Finch around the waist.

"Um, one last thing," Finch said, slowly separating herself from the hug.

This time, Crow knew for sure that it *definitely* would *not* be the last thing.

"I must instruct you on the usage of the **piece**."

"Oh. Right." Crow's heart sunk. She hated that thing already, even though she hadn't used it yet. She was looking forward to destroying it, actually. She'd never been one for ranged weapons. They always felt so... *impersonal*. Really, if she was going to go and kill someone, she wanted to be *there* when it happened. It just felt barbaric to do it any other way— downright uncivilized, in certain circumstances, especially if taking the person by surpr—

"Crow? Hello? Crooow?" Finch cooed, petting the top of Crow's head.

"Oh, um. Sorry! I... started spacing out." Crow chirped, pulling out the metal **piece** from where it had been tucked deep away in some random inner pocket.

"It's fine, just pay close attention. There is only one chance for this."

Crow nodded and opened her eye as wide as she could, focusing on Finch's hands. She even pulled down her hood and perked up all of her ears to make sure she caught every word within them.

"To power the **piece**, you'll need to bind to it. Sympathy with it will be hard."

Crow nodded enthusiastically.

"You need to use this gem on the back here," Finch tapped the sharp, blood-red crystal that attached the top of the handle to the base of the barrel, "To store some of your blood."

"My blood?! Why?"

"It works as fuel. Like for a lantern."

"Blood goes in, junk goes out and kills your dad."

"Well, not exactly—"

"Can I try it?"

"I.. *suppose..* field trials are a good idea. I had figured you'd practice on your own, but we're here now, so let's try it. Go ahead."

Crow pressed the small button on the side and popped the **piece** open. As she did, she flopped down onto the marble platform of the grave with her belly, then reached down over its side and plucked some small pebbles from the dirt. Then, she popped back up, inserted the random stones, and snapped shut the metal barrel.

"Now I just..?" Crow asked, holding the pad of her bentfinger just in front of the sharp gem. She could feel the gem pulling on her, urging her forward, as if begging for her blood.

Finch simply nodded.

Reluctantly, Crow pressed her bentfinger hard onto the gem, piercing into it. Immediately, blood drained from her and flowed into it, down the engravings of the barrel, filling the grains of the wooden handle, staining all of the **piece** with a beautiful, and unmistakable, blood-red. "Woah.." Crow whispered, almost reverently. Maybe... maybe they *didn't* have to destroy it..? She could be responsible. This was a work of art! She couldn't just—

"Now you just pull the trigger."

"The trigger- that's this lever part?"

"Yeah. And stop pointing it at me, please."

"Sorry!!"

"It is, you know, the *deadliest weapon I could come up with*."

"Um, woops—"

"It's fine, dear. It can't actually hurt me, physical attacks are ineffective against, well." Finch rapped on her metal chest. "Me. I'm pretty much pebble-proof."

"So.. I can use you as my test target?"

"Oh, absolutely not. Shoot someone else!" Finch chirped, laughing. "Don't, actually—"

"—I'm not du—"

"—Sorry, yeah, I know, I was gonna say 'but you already know that.' You're right. I just over-worry."

"No problem." Crow pulled her into a hug, still holding the loaded **piece**. "So I just point, pull the, erm.." Her mind fumbled for a moment. "The trigger. And the stuff I put in blasts out, and I put in more blood to do it again?"

"Yes. Sorry the fuel source is so... *weird*. It's the most efficient source for that size that we have easy access to. Almost everything in the lab is powered by blood. Very energy dense, though not in the traditional way. And um,

try not to shoot too many times, please." Finch placed a consoling hand on Crow's shoulder. "It takes quite a bit of fuel for each shot. And if you pass out, we can consider that an instant loss."

"Our whole plan really depends on me, huh?"

"Yes, but no pressure. We need you well rested and low-stress so you can perform at your best."

"My... best." She said skeptically, pointing the new **piece** at the ground.

"Is there a problem with that?" Finch asked, looking up from the piece into Crow's eye.

"I'm worried my best isn't good enough. I'm worried I'll do everything I can, and we'll both die anyway, and we'll never be free, and we'll never get to live the life we want, and I'm thinking maybe we can just.. run away? Far far away? And never come back?" She said it hopefully, but it was clear from the tone of her voice that she didn't really believe her words.

They both knew it would never work.

So, it was time for Finch to put this to rest.

"We wouldn't be able to survive in the wilds for very long. And even if we could, at some point, my father would take over my body. We'd never be able to have the peace that we left to seek in the first place." Finch placed a consoling hand on top of Crow's head and pulled her into another close embrace. "I wish we could, though. It would be a lot simpler."

Crow nodded solemnly, lips pulled to one side of her face. It sucked. Everything sucked. What they had to do was just as awful as what they had already been through, and ten times harder. And...

"Crow," Finch said plainly, "You can do it. Do you know why?"

Crow, still nervous, still sad, shook her head and pulled tighter on her embrace with Finch.

"Because you're **the** Crow, and everyone in this city knows you by your deeds," Finch patted Crow's head and smoothed back her hair, taking great care to slip her fingers around Crow's ears without touching them.

"I still have bad days.." Crow mumbled.

"I think killing my father will be relatively trivial compared to some of what you've done. He is smart, yes, and skilled at Sympathy and Artifice, but he has little to nothing in the way of combat capabilities. We have as many advantages as possible on our side. Not the least of which, of course, is surprise."

"It's just.. i don't know.. i'm just so worried that i'll fuck it up. i.." Crow looked off to the side and trailed off.

"What?"

"I fuck everything up, Finch. Nothing ever goes the way it's supposed to with me."

"I don't understand. You're here, aren't you? Breathing? After countless impossible jobs, after all your trials and tribulations? Still yourself, still intact, even though you live with Raven?"

"Well.. yeah, I guess, but—"

"Crow. You're the only one that works for Raven, and it's because you can do anything you set your mind to. There's be no reason to hire anyone else, because you can do it better, faster, with results even better than expected nearly every single time. *You*, Crow," Finch said, pointing into Crow's chest with one of her fingers, "Are a living legend—one of only eight that have ever existed."

"Thanks, Finchy. I just..." Crow smiled, and turned her face away, blushing. "I just over-worry. And, usually it's only my life on the line, but the thought that one mistake could send us both to the **Abyss** is..." Crow trailed off again, then shook her head. "I mean, there's no other choice, right?"

"That seems to be the case." Finch agreed readily.

"Then I will succeed."

"As you always do," Finch whispered. As she spoke, she let a honey-like warmth and smoothness coat every single syllable. "And then, we'll be free."

"Free... huh?"

"At last."

"If you um, had the time, would you be able to fix my wings?"

"Yes." Finch said without hesitation.

"You didn't take long to think about that—"

"They're just wings, Crow, I can fix them. Promise."

"So I'll be able to fly?"

"Of course!" Finch said, lifting up Crow by her underarms so that they could speak face-to-face.

Instinctively, Crow wrapped her legs around Finch's hips, and looped her arms around Finch's neck. This... was really nice. She wanted this, she realized, more than so many other things she had wanted or almost wanted before.

"Okay. Let's do it," Crow chirped.

"We will. The plans are in motion. Now, let's get back to it." Finch said, pointing at a random gravestone in the distance. "Hit it," she said simply.

Without hesitation, Crow leaned back in Finch's arms and pulled her arm holding the **piece** to the side, pointing it at the gravestone. She thought for a moment about how she should hold it, about how the pebbles might fall— perhaps like an arrow? Or a thrown knife? Or... would it be more like a hatchet, since they were rocks? No. If the thing worked at all, was accurate at all—

Crow lowered the barrel of the **piece**, pointing it directly at the gravestone. It was some thirty bodylengths away.

—then it would have to shoot out the random scraps extremely quick, perhaps pulling them together with **sympathy**.

With a swift, practiced ease, Crow shut her eye for a moment and reached up with her soul through her arm. The tendrils of her **self** extended out through her hand, reaching and licking out into the world, pulled towards her blood that was held within the handle and barrel of the **piece**. She focused on the feeling, pinching the tendrils together, willing them to wrap around and around the **piece**, piercing in through the little cracks and gaps in it, filling up the whole of it, extending the idea of her **self** to encompass the strange and vicious thing.

Then, all at once, the **piece** snapped down around the pieces of her soul she had offered it and pulled them deep inside itself, **binding** intangibly, but so significantly, to the very nature of who she was.

Without hesitation, she pulled the trigger,

and the **piece** exploded with light and sound that howled forth from the barrel in an instantaneous burst of energy. Already, the pebbles, whistling through the air, were halfway to the target, and before she could even blink,

sk-CRASH!

crumbleumbleumble crackack thudthud.

thud.

the pebbles had pierced straight through the gravestone, leaving a wide circular hole in it, into which the rest of the stone cracked and split apart and crumbled into, falling into rubble in but a single moment.

She felt a little bad, actually. She had not expected to destroy the gravestone wholly. Still, though, it was energizing, radiant, so beautiful and efficient in its destruction that—

Crow had pressed her bentfinger forward to pierce it again on the gem, but her finger's pad met the side of Finch's, who had interposed her hand before she could.

"You seemed to enjoy that," Finch said curiously.

"Do we have to destroy it?!" Crow chirped back instantly, sitting up straighter in Finch's arms as she waved the **piece** around in the air, expressing just how lovely it was, and how nice it felt to fire. There was so much **power**, here, and she was realizing that she quite liked feeling powerful. Or, at the very least, she was so very tired of the alternative..

"We'll see," Finch said, sighing. "I assume you can be trusted with it, so as long as you can keep anyone from stealing it from you, or copying the design."

"I can!" Crow called back confidently, mouth wide-open, grinning.

To that, Finch simply shrugged.

"Do you feel confident using it?"

"Yes. And I'll practice more."

"Good, good," Finch mumbled, running over their to-do list again in her head. "One last thing..."

Crow grinned.

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"...and we really ought to get you more practice with your eye, as well. Why do you keep an eyepatch over it?"

"It sorta, um, is always looking into the past. Everything gets so blurry, and it makes my head hurt, and I feel so sick... so I just slapped a patch on it, and it's all better!" Crow said happily, planting her hands on her hips.

"Right. Let's fix that. I'll need to **bind** to you, is that—"

"ON YOUR MOTHER'S GRAVE?!"

"What? Uh, Crow—"

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"...it was really harrowing, finding that, hidden away in some forgotten part of the world. My entire history, recorded so plainly for me to find. Each of my lives, a painting, just..." Crow let out a long, stressed breath as she finished speaking. As she did, she deflated like a balloon, all of her muscles falling subtly from where her tension had held them up.

The two of them laid side-by-side, limbs spread out, bellies facing up at the stars, hands held together loosely by only a few interlaced fingers. They were warm, both covered in a sheen of Crow's sweat, and Crow's face was still flush with a hot-pink warmth.

Admittedly, Finch had... well, she hadn't... or rather, she had not really realized— before this evening, anyway— what exactly **binding** to another really... um... really, well, *entailed*. She, too, would be blushing— if such a thing was possible.

"I want to see it, if that's— if that's okay."

"See what?" Crow asked, turning her head around to look again into Finch's eyes with both of her own. Her gaze did not slip into the past, anymore.

Finch had taught her how to stay present.

"I'd like to see your cave," Finch said, "and marvel at its paintings, and see each and every version of you there ever was, if you'd let me."

"Of course!" Crow chirped, propping herself up on her elbow as she leaned slightly forward, head still turned to look deep into Finch's eyes. "I'll show it to you, someday soon, and we can explore my cave together."

"Excellent," Finch responded softly, for once grateful that she had no mouth. She would *not* have been able to hide her impish grin, and she simply could not bear to tear such beautiful innocence away from her. Idly, she slipped her arm further towards Crow's, wrapping up her whole hand within the embrace of her own. "Could you... describe some of them to me?"

"Of course! Well, we have to start at the beginning. So, um, in the first one..."

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"...you keep a journal?" Finch asked curiously, peering over Crow's shoulder to stare at the little thing she was holding in her lap. Crow, too, was the little thing held in Finch's lap.

"Yes!" Crow smirked, nodding proudly. "I have my own code. It's basically uncrackable, so everything in here is completely safe from prying eyes."

"Oh? Can I see?" Finch asked, raising up one of her hands, palm-up. She had already cracked the cipher from the glimpse she got over Crow's shoulder, but..

"Of course!!" Crow chirped, excited, and immediately *plap!*-ed the journal into Finch's outstretched hand.

Wow, Finch thought, mechanical pupils dilating as she looked down at it. *This is fucking cute*. It wasn't that the cipher was rudimentary— it was passable— nor that the notes were somehow rudimentary or juvenile, it was just—the presentation of it, the way it was composed, the way the notes flowed together, the kinds of things she wrote about, how she described them, it was all just so... **cute!**

"That's a very good code indeed," Finch said solemnly, trying as hard as she possibly could to keep the mirth out of her voice. She even nodded sagely, the way Crow did when she was being serious, to sell it all the way. "It would take me quite some time to crack it, indeed."

Crow grinned ear-to-ear, proud, then slipped the journal out from Finch's hand before flipping it back to the page she had just been working on. Then, puzzled, she sort of rolled her lip around, trying to remember what they were doing. Though... Finch probably remembered !

"What were we talking about?"

"We were going over the plan again, and you were taking notes."

"Right!" Crow chirped.

"So, once we're at that juncture, you'll..."

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"...and lastly, the night before, and the morning of, I'll signal you just as I did today with our shared **sigil**. That's how you'll know which day we'll need to strike."

"Got it."

"And, one last thing..."

Crow would have grinned, but she could tell by her tone that Finch really meant it this time. That saddened her, and deeply, too, and she instinctively reached out to hold Finch's hand in her own. Finch, of course, accepted her hand, and wrapped her fingers neatly around Crow's, fully enclosing her little paw.

"I'm very lucky to have met you, little Crow," Finch whispered, leaning down until her head was just above all four of Crow's ears, "and I'm looking forward to our future together."

Crow's body instantly filled from the tips of her talons to the top tufts of her ears with warmth, acceptance, understanding, passion, heat, and— and—

it was **pure bliss**.

Without thinking, Crow lurched forward and threw her arms around Finch, nuzzling the side of her head against Finch's cold metal belly. She pulled herself in as tightly as she could, embracing her as deeply and totally as she could, and yet unsatisfied, shook her head and rolled around her arms, stretching, so that she could embrace her more totally.

"me too!" Crow whispered, voice so small, so shaky and fragile, that it was broken up and swept aside by the wind which brought it to Finch's aural sensors by chance, or perhaps in kinder world, mercy.

"Goodbye, Crow."

"Bye Finchy~"

Finch slipped away carefully from Crow's embrace, taking great care to separate herself in the most empathetic, touch-intensive way possible, lest Crow feel cheated or slighted in their parting.

And then, she nodded to Crow, turned, and left.

And the whole while, Crow sat there on her mother's grave, watching in hopeful disappointment as Finch drew farther, and farther, and farther away.

Soon. Crow thought as she sat alone in the dark, many countless *ticks* after Finch had disappeared from her sight.

Soon, we'll be free together. I'll make sure of it. Crow swore, standing up slowly.

I have to.

And in an instant, she was gone again.

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