

Euthanasia
Chapter 27

Chapter 27
To Live Again

Raven spread all seven of their massive wings, eclipsing the moon completely. The silver shine of the moonlight crept around their frame, revealing their true form. They were a horrible dilapidated mess of twisting flesh. Countless body parts of all kinds from all different creatures stuck out and wound together, forming the approximation of a single giant creature. Their muscles roiled and twisted like a sea in storm, revealing new features underneath, that would then be swept away by another wave of muscles that would roll over them and push them down below the surface.

Raven hung there, perfectly still, for seven breaths. Each time Raven inhaled, icy wind ripped past Crow, Finch, and Cane, and the very clouds were sucked towards them. And then, with each exhale, the three were blasted by a rush of heat as the clouds were sent racing away from them in all directions.

On the eighth inhale, Raven plummeted from the sky, and as they fell, they forced their way through the sky with their seven wings working in tandem. Each wingbeat doubled their speed, and before Finch could haul herself and Crow away,

DOOM.

Raven flattened the castle at the center of the fortress simply by landing on it. The force of their landing sent a shockwave rushing through the foundations. As it rushed under the stone like a tidal wave, each and every brick of the fortress was flung into the air from the force of it, **unmaking** all that had been built, and after only three breaths,

all that remained of the fortress was dust on a bald hill.

As the dust settled, Crow began to cough, and sputter, clearing her lungs of the dust that had invaded her beak and forced its way into her body. Cane, likewise, dropped to the ground and began to do the same. Both were shielded

by Finch, who stood with her back to Raven, arms wrapped tight around Crow, legs dug deep into the ground, slightly warped from the force she had just withstood. Her back, once silver and gleaming, was now plastered with a cast of brown dust.

Raven breathed in, and the dust rushed across the ground, and the force of it caused Cane, trying to regain his balance, to stumble forward.

Finch spun her head around on its swivel to look at Raven, but kept her back turned. She had to keep Crow safe, no matter the cost.

She had done the same for her.

Black flames poured from every pore in Raven's flesh, every gap between exposed muscles, and every divot of its exposed bones as they inhaled. Anywhere the flames touched, frost formed. And as they exhaled again, the black flames turned to white, melting the frost, sending hot steam rushing out from them in all directions, turning the dust to mud.

"Crow, you must listen carefully." Cane said, rushing forward to Finch. "No matter what happens—"

"It's over," Crow mumbled. "What can we even do?"

"Crow."

She looked down at the ground, dejected, unresponsive.

"**CROW!**" Cane shouted, jostling her. But as he did, Finch kicked him in the chest, sending him flying back, flat on his ass.

"Don't. Touch. Her." Finch snapped, still watching Raven carefully. They remained still, motionless. Watching. Ravenously. Expectantly.

Waiting.

Crow, though, seemed to snap out of it and turned her metal eye to look at Cane on the ground. There was no reason not to listen to him.

They were all about to die, anyway.

Might as well let him get it off his chest.

"No matter what happens to you, do not give up," he heaved himself up to his feet, into a kneeling position, keeping himself and his center of mass low to stay steady against the wind.

"I already have." She said calmly. "If Raven can leave their lab, what else is there to do? There is nowhere in this world that I can run off to where I will be safe from them. Did you not see them? Do you not see what happened to this fortress?"

Cane narrowed his eyes. This was not like her, not in the slightest. She had never been a logical girl, nor one that would ever— *ever* give up.

There was a long, long pause.

"She was the one that brought us all together." Cane said, breaking the silence.

"Who?"

"Your first self. She was beautiful, intelligent, powerful, brave, and kind. She lit up every room. She made every struggle worth it. She had a wonderful voice, and a whimsical way of being, and above all, she was our joy."

"I am not her," Crow spat, hissing. The flames did not return. They were gone, extinguished. They would not return. "Nor could I ever be."

"That's the problem, yes." Cane sighed. "So what are you going to do? Leave it for the next Crow?"

"No," Crow whispered, flesh eye glassy and hollow beneath the eyepatch. "I'm going to make sure Raven never gets what they want."

"What? Crow—"

"I'm going to make them suffer. I'm going to make them feel every ounce of misery they put on me, on you, on this world. I am going to kill them not by action, but inaction. I will curl up into a ball and never wake again. I will make Raven regret everything they have ever done. I. Am. Giving. Up." Crow hissed, then took in a high, shaking, feral breath. "Because it's the only thing left that I can do."

"Crow.." Finch said softly, hugging her closer.

"I'm sorry, Finch." Crow whispered, snuggling in closer to their last embrace. It was dark, claustrophobic, and warm.

Everything she needed to feel comfort.

Everything she needed to feel safe.

She needed nothing more.

"I'm sorry, too." Finch said back, rubbing Crow's head consolingly. "We didn't even get a whole day together."

"Yeah." Crow responded, closing her eyes. "yeah." she whispered softly, focusing only on the feeling of their embrace.

"Would you like me to try to run? Maybe we could—"

"Girls." Cane interrupted. "This is all very sweet, but we all know the way out of this."

"It's not happening." Crow said weakly. "I *can't*. I tried, I failed."

"Raven is only going to stop when they fulfill their promise to you. **You**, Crow, are the only thing in the way of that."

Crow did not respond. Nor did Finch.

Several more of Raven's breaths swept across them as they sat in silence, waiting for their world to end. It was strange, watching the end of things. Being alive for it. Wondering what would happen, despite knowing.

"Are you really going to be so selfish, Crow?"

"What are you on about, Cane?"

"Don't you see what Raven has done to us? To this world? You're just going to let them roam free for countless more centuries, as they toy with you, and torment you? Just to cause them one more moment of agony? Just because you feel like giving up?"

To that, Crow had no response. There was just no more fight left in her.

She'd gotten this far.

Wasn't that enough?

She wished only to breathe deep and still her heart, and yet—

"Are you really going to let Raven kill Finch? You are not even going to try?"

Finch tensed, stiffening. She did not want to admit it, but she was not particularly happy with Crow's decision, either. She would suffer through it, but...

she did wish she would try.

At least *try*.

At least, at least, at least,

"At least try," Finch whispered, turning her head back around, looking down at Crow.

"I *did*," Crow whimpered. She felt like her head was being crushed in a vise, like her soul had been dropped in acid, like her past had been destroyed outright. She'd tried in every life, a thousand times, a thousand different ways, and no matter what she did, it was never enough, and everyone only asked her for *more*, but they had no idea how hard it was, how difficult it was for her, how heavy all the weight was on such tiny shoulders,

if she did not know what it meant to be Crow,

then how could anyone else? How could they ever blame her for it?

How dare they ask something so awful of her.

Didn't they understand how *painful* it was, to be Crow? To try and be her, every day? To open up her heart and keep it warm despite the constant chill? To try was to invite failure. To live was to invite pain.

It was better if she just gave up and died.

Everyone else would only suffer once.

Only she'd have to deal with the consequences.

"Just let me die," Crow whispered, voice breaking. Even as she said it, she regretted it. She didn't mean it. Not really.

If she could choose, it would be Raven that did not survive the night.

If she could just choose, she would have her happily ever after with Finch. She would spare the city her fate.

They were all silent.

"Okay, Crow." Cane said, standing up, and sighing. "I will. But first, you'll humor me. Consider it a dying wish."

"What is it?"

"I'd like to share a memory with you. Just one. And then, I'll let you die in peace."

Crow bristled, and the wind shifted with Raven's breathing, rushing cold air over and through her.

"Fine."

"I'll need to **bind** to you."

"Just get it over with, Cane."

He took in a deep breath, then closed his eyes. He wasn't even sure what he was going to show her, but he had to do *something*, didn't he? She'd brought herself this far. She'd gotten them all this far. They were so, so damn close, even if she didn't know it.

All she needed was a reason to keep living— no,

she didn't need anything as grand as that.

Cane reached out with his soul, brushing up against the edge of Crow's. He could have entered it through the gaping hole in its side, but did not. He would wait for her to allow him to **bind** with her, *obviously*.

He was no Henrich.

He was no Raven.

After a moment of hesitation, Crow accepted the touch of his soul, expanding the boundary of her own slightly to encase the tiny portion of his own that he'd extended out for her.

There was one more moment of silence as Cane wracked his brain for the right memory, and then, he smiled softly:

And all at once, Cane's memory became Crow's memory,

and she was once again plunged into the past.

It was a simple one. It was a memory of Cane watching Crow from behind. She was sitting alone, on the cliff that overlooked what was then a blank canvas, and what was now the city bearing her name. Her fingers picked at the moss by her side, idly twirling it between her fingers, before dropping it down the cliff. She tilted forward, holding the edge of the cliff with her hands, head pointed straight down as she watched it tumble down into the dark below.

Cane whistled, to let her know he was there, and as she turned,

she smiled wide, then hopped up to her feet, running over to him, hugging him. Immediately, she began to chat about her day, what she had been up to. There'd been no food for a few days, but that didn't bother her. She'd been hungry before. It just meant her body was reminding her what to do. She was very forgetful, so that was alright. Sometimes she needed reminding.

And then they sat together, on the cliff, and she leaned her head against his shoulder, and they talked for hours. They were both too hungry to sleep, and so they talked through all the night, and half through the next day, about everything and nothing, about the lives they'd left behind,

and about the lives they wished they had.

Everything wasn't perfect, they knew,

but it was what they had.

"How do you do it, Crow?"

"Do what?" She asked, cocking her head to the side, confused.

"Stay so... happy. Nothing fazes you. You just keep moving forward, one step at a time, and everything falls into place for you."

"Oh." Crow said, chin drooping down low. He nodded, bobbing her head in thought, as she was wont to do. As she thought, she picked at the moss, balled it up in her fingers, and tossed it off the cliff. It helped her think. And it was fun. Kinda.

"I don't really know," she said, after a while. "I don't have a deep answer for that."

"No great wisdom to share?"

Crow laughed. "Now I've got plenty of that," she inhaled quickly, then let out a dramatic sigh. "As a result of my studious and intellectual nature." She said, scrunching up her face and raising up her shoulders, imitating Henrich's voice.

They laughed together.

"It's not that things don't bother me. It's just..." She looked up to the rolling clouds, eyes getting lost among them, imagining which one was what. What stories they might tell. What it might be like to live in the cloud kingdom.

"Nothing really matters."

"Huh?" Cane startled. Was— well, depressed people did usually mask with happiness, didn't they? How had he not seen it before?

"Sorry. That must sound really sad. It's not. It's freeing, I promise."

"Freeing?" Cane asked. "'Nothing matters'?"

"Well," Crow paused, pushing her lips to one side of her face in contemplation. "Some things do. Everything else doesn't. This stuff is really simple to me, so it's hard to explain." Then, she turned to face Cane, and tilted up her chin, looking him in the eyes.

He returned her gaze, and they stared at each other. She was trying to tell him something with her eyes, but what it was, he couldn't quite grasp. Perhaps the Crow of the present would understand. He hoped she would.

She had to.

For everyone.

"Do you get it?" Crow asked, eyes wide and pleading. No one ever did. It wasn't like eyes could speak. Well, not really. And not reliably. Some people said they did. She felt like hers did. She wanted hers to. But they didn't. But that didn't matter. It was just one of those things.

"Ah..." Cane sighed, awkwardly. "I'm sorry lass. I don't."

Crow looked away, disappointed.

"I..." Cane trailed off, looking at her back, one hand hovering in the air. Then, he lowered it. "Crow?"

"Yeah?" She whispered.

"Are you really always happy?"

"No, Cane."

"What is it then, an act?"

"No, Cane."

"Then what is it?"

"It is just who I am. To be Crow is to be sad. And scared. And that's okay. It's not like I'm hiding it, you know. It's just..." Crow trailed off, then turned her head around, looking up at Cane. "It's just one of those things that really matters. So I have to try. I have to try, I, I, I, have to. Because when I don't, everything falls apart, and so quickly that I don't even notice it's happening until it's too late. And then, I have to pick everything up off at the ground and start again. And I'm tired, Cane. I'm just so, so tired."

"You... put in so much energy... because you're tired?"

"That's right." Crow nodded sagely. She was already being funny again, as if being herself was some great burden.

"But when are you going to rest, Crow?"

"What did you think I was doing up here?"

"Oh."

"Anyway, can you go away? I'm brooding."

To that, Cane could not help but laugh.

Of course, as he did,

he left.

Crow snapped back to the present moment, eyes wide from what she'd seen. In so many ways, she was the same, but in so many ways, she was different. She felt connected to every single detail of her past self, even though every single one had changed.

She had never felt so...

"Do you still want to give up, Crow?"

But Crow was choking on her thoughts, mind overwhelmed by the tossing waves of her conscious. Her chest was tight, full of panic. She couldn't handle what she had seen. Her past self, the one there in that memory, was *dead*. In her place was just some impostor.

And in that moment, she became intimately familiar with the truth inside her self.

Crow had one weakness, and one alone. It was a flaw that went down to the core of her very being, lodged so deep within her, that it had become her, and her,

it.

It was that she could not handle change. She was scared of things being different. There was nothing more petrifying, and no thing that hurt her more, than the unexpected. She liked predictions, she liked **knowing**, she liked **understanding**. When things stayed the same, they were good, because she knew them. But when they changed, she had to learn them all over again, and what if they were different? What if she failed this time? What if she couldn't know them anymore? What if she wasn't enough? What if it changed her,

and she wasn't Crow anymore?

What if she killed her past self again, and again, and again,
building herself up on a mountain of corpses that just kept getting higher?

Like everyone else,

she was scared of dying,

and the unknown,

and as she knew nothing at all

she was the most scared girl to ever live—

terrified out of her mind, of everything, but especially,

of **it**.

It was precisely because it was the end that she was scared.

How could anything be more scary than an ending?

Now, her efforts mattered more than anything, because she stood upon the wobbling pile of all that came before.

She had failed every ending before this.

Every.

Single.

One.

And every time, she tried her best, and it all fell apart, slipping through her fingers,

no matter how much she hoped, how much she changed, how much she tried to convince herself that things were different,

they never were, and she would fail,

time, and time again.

Always before the ending.

The ending never came.

And ending meant a change, but more importantly,

it meant goodbye. She could never handle those. She couldn't tolerate to say 'goodbye', not ever. To say goodbye was to move on, to move on was for things to end. For things to end meant for things to change, and she was scared of change, so scared, because when things were the same, she was comfortable, content. When things

stayed the same, her eyes relaxed, the light dimmed, she felt warmer, safer, like she was being squeezed. She liked being squeezed. Because being squeezed meant that whatever was happening was still happening, that the moment hadn't ended, that things hadn't changed, that she was still warm, that nothing had ended, that she didn't have to say goodbye,

because she never wanted to say goodbye,

not ever!

It was never time to say goodbye!!!

Goodbye meant that things were different. When things were different, that meant change. When a change happened, that meant an ending. When an ending happened, that meant goodbye!

If she said goodbye, things would be different

if things were different, things would change

if there was a change, there was an ending

if things ending, that would be goodbye

goodbye meant different

different meant change

change meant ending

ending meant goodbye

goodbye, different

different, change

change, ending

ending, goodbye

goodbye different

different change

change ending

ending goodbye

Goodbye different change ending

Different change ending goodbye

And her mind spun, and spun, and spun,

but one thing was clear, just as it always had been—

though, admittedly, she was rather forgetful,

and she needed to be reminded.

She had to try.

She had to at least try.

She had to.

For Serpent, for Finch,

for herself—

for every Crow that came before her,

and to make sure that none would come after.

"I'm ready." Crow said, breaking the silence. "Let me down."

"What?" Finch asked, "What do you plan to do?"

"The only thing I can do, Finch. I'm going to try."

"Good luck, Crow." Cane said softly, smiling at her. "Don't lose hope."

"I won't." Crow promised. "Not ever again."

...

Raven was waiting for her at the center of the fortress. They were nothing more than a titanic blob of flesh and bone and tissues, pieces and parts of countless kinds, roiling and churning and calculating.

As she approached, the flames did not bother her, nor did the howling wind. It simply did not affect her, instead rushing around her.

She was terrified, but still, she stepped forward. And with every step, Raven's countless scattered eyes of every color of the rainbow followed her, until eventually, she was standing just in front of them, only a single bodylength away.

Then, Raven formed a face in front of her, and waited.

"I'm going to kill you." Crow said.

"Will you, now?" Raven asked, tired.

"I'll try. For them. For me. For... Escrow? I don't know anymore, Raven. I just want all this to be over."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Raven cackled, and twelve giant arms curled over the top of their body and formed a structure over the two of them like a ribcage. Then, from where their palms were planted into the ground, dark

tendrils began to creep across the dust. As they snaked through the ground, the darkness began to spread on its own, eating up the world around it.

"Are you going to devour me again, Raven?"

"Something like that."

"And then what?"

"And then, you will succeed, or I will try again."

Crow grit her teeth. They were too similar.

She hated it.

The darkness had spread all the way back to Raven, and slowly, slowly, it coursed around under them, tracing a perimeter around their whole form. Until, eventually, the two were standing on top of a perfectly still pool of inky black darkness.

It was only then that Crow recognized it:

the abyss.

"Are you going to kill me, Raven?"

"I do only what I must, Crow. Do you find yourself to be ready?"

She found herself to be wondering how many times they'd done this. Did she always feel so empty in the moments before? Why did doubt eat away at her organs? Why did her flesh long to leave her behind?

It was wrong. It was all wrong. She had to—

"Breathe deep and descend, crow. This is not the first of such circumstances, as you well know."

Crow felt the abyss reach up and wrap around her talons. It did not tug at her: it simply rested the smallest bit of weight on her, reminding her that it was there. Waiting. Patiently impatient. Like an old friend waiting for her to come visit again.

Crow took in one final, trembling breath, and wiped away the last of her tears with the edge of her cloak.

"Whatever the Abyss holds, Raven, I will survive it."

"That would be very convenient, Crow. I hope that you are right."

And in an instant, they were gone.

"Crow?!" Finch yelled, rushing forward, but before she could take a single step, Cane grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back. "Why?!" She yelled back at Cane.

The inky pool was still there. She could follow them. There was still time. She didn't have to do this alone. She was an idiot for not going up with her.

"If you follow along, you'll die."

"I don't care! I can't—!"

"You have to trust her, Finch. You have to trust she'll be okay on her own. There's nothing left that either of us can do for her. She'll either get through this on her own, or she won't.

Finch stilled. "...Fine..." She whispered. She could trust Crow. She'd done it before, and watched her burn herself to ashes just for the chance to pay her back. If there was a way through this, Crow would find it. If anyone had the resolve to see it through,

it was her.

.....*right?*

...

...

Crow and Raven sat together on a cliff floating through the endless void. They drifted past galaxies and half-formed worlds, and were nestled in by a tree, legs dangling out above the endless black. Raven had taken the form of their first body, of who they were before Escrow, before all of this had happened.

The one she'd loved. Allegedly.

"Why aren't you in your current form?" She asked, breaking the eternal silence.

Even though she was usually barely aware of it, she could feel that time did not exist here. It was strange. Peaceful. Like her dreams. Like death.

"Because it doesn't help." Raven said simply.

"Help with what?" Crow asked, turning to face them. They looked so wise. So kind. Their face was pretty, and handsome, all at once. They looked much better this way.

"As soon as we are here, outside of the world and all its turnings, just our souls together, you always look on me with kindness, no matter how I try to scare you. Here, you are always calm, and treat me all the same. All you ever see in me is 'Raven'. I might as well be comfortable."

"You didn't answer my question, Raven. Help with what?"

They didn't want to say it. They couldn't bear to fail again. And, still, somehow, they found the strength to try—even if just one last time.

"For you to live again, you have to kill me. That is the cost."

"Then how am I alive? Alive a hundred times?" Crow demanded. "If it must be your life for mine, how is it not the other way around?"

"Every time you have died, Crow, I have been the cause of it."

"That— no, that can't be true. I saw the past. I saw it. With my own eyes."

"You did not die of natural causes, Crow.

I killed and ate you to survive."

"But I saw you—"

"When you look into the past, Crow, you see what you believe. Everyone does."

"But—"

"Do you know why we have done this a hundred times, little Crow?"

She remained silent.

"Because every time we get to this point,

I tell you that you must kill me,

and every time,

you won't.

No matter how badly I treat you, no matter how closely I hold you, no matter how miserable I make your life, no matter how many perfect moments I give you, no matter how I cherish, torture, lead, or deceive you, no matter what I do, no matter what I don't, I can never convince you that your life is worth something, or that at the very

least, that it is worth more than my own. How must I debase myself, what must I say to you, what must I do, to make you let me finally fulfill my promise to you, little Crow?

What do I have to do to make you let me go?"

Crow hesitated, but she did not freeze. Slowly, ever so slowly, as if waking from centuries of slumber, she moved. First, the smallest flutterings: the relaxing of a long-clenched fist. The shallow, soft breath that comes just before the eyes fall open ever so slowly. Then, a far grander movement:

the wiping away of tears long-held back. The first step forward, then the second, then she was rushing them, wrapping her arms around them, hugging them. And before she could talk herself out of it, she pushed her soul up against theirs, flattening her own around **it**, making sure to hold hers fully within her own.

Raven could have slipped away through the hole in the side of her soul. They could have slipped through it, escaped, at any point. But instead, they waited, patiently impatient. Waiting to devoured. To be **subsumed**.

"I don't want to let go."

"I... I know." Raven sighed, hugging her.

"I'm sorry."

"Then change, Crow."

"Why do you keep bringing me back, if all I do is disappoint you? If I can never do it? Why do you keep trying?"

"Because I promised."

"Just break it!"

Raven smiled. "I can't."

"Why can't you just let *me* go?!" She yelled, stepping back, and away, glaring at them. Blaming them. That, too, was always part of this. Would this time really be any different?

Raven looked down at their feet, still smiling. "I can't."

"I'm not even the same girl anymore, Raven!"

"I know." Raven sighed, meeting her gaze with tired, weary eyes. "Why are you fighting me on this? After everything? Why can't you just kill me, Crow? Do you really want me to throw away everything I did for you? Do you really want me to go on, on my own, living with all the things I did? Without even you to keep my hope alive? What do you think I've been living for all this time? I ran out of things to do and became a *god*, Crow, and now even that bores me. I have no more ways to pass the time. There is but one thing left of my life and it is you. And I will not, *ever*, let go of that, because it was the reason for all that came before. I cannot see it wasted, and I cannot see that promise broken." They stopped, as if to breathe.

"It was a pinky promise. Sealed with a kiss. Do you remember it? Because it is seared into the surface of my heart, a memory that replays in every moment.

All I can think of is what I promised you. Of how important it was to you. Of how deeply you wanted it. Of how unfair your life was. Of how I wanted, more than anything, to see you breathe even one more time. It broke my heart to do it, to make that promise, but I did.

I was terrified that it wouldn't be possible. That no matter how hard I tried, I would fail.

And every time, I tried my best, and it all fell apart, slipping through my fingers. No matter how much I hoped, how much I changed, how much I tried to convince myself that this time things would be different,

they never were, and I would fail,

time, and time again.

Always just before the ending.

You wanted to return to your true self, and this is what you have to do to get what you want, Crow.

This is **it**."

And then, Raven calmed down, stepped forward, and knelt down in front of her. They took one last deep, shaking breath, and caressed the side of her face.

"You don't need to be scared of change, Crow. No one has changed more than me, and still, I am true to myself. What does someone like you have to fear? You could never become a monster. The only thing you will become is different, and there is nothing wrong with that.

Different is beautiful."

Crow nodded, tears forming in her eyes, running like a river down her face. There was so much she wanted to say. So much she wanted to do. There was— ***there was so much she wished was different!***

"Let yourself be free.

Kill me,

Crow."

"Okay," she whispered, nodding her head into Raven's hand. "Okay."

She stepped back and wiped the tears from her face.

"Goodbye, Little Crow."

They smiled.

She smiled back, weakly. She could be strong. For them. Just this once. She'd never have to do it again. She might change, but that was okay. Change was okay.

It had to be.

No—

It was okay because it was what she had always wanted.

To change. To be herself. Her true self.

It wasn't wrong for a girl to want, after all.

And, finally, perhaps for the first time,

she was sure of what she wanted.

And in that moment, everything disappeared, and there was nothing— not even blackness—

"Goodbye,

Raven."

And slowly, ever so slowly, Crow tightened her soul around theirs, closing the distance, until none was left— until she could no longer find where her soul ended and theirs began.

And then,

Crow killed them,

taking her life from theirs.

And so Raven was **subsumed**,

giving the entirety of their soul to mend the hole in hers.

At last,

she finally had **it**.

At last,

she was finally **free**.

What will it cost? She mused, alone, in the nothing. She could feel her soul responding to the change inside of it. She could feel her past self, her present self, her future self— there was no difference between them, not anymore—

...

"So that's it?" She whispered as she cracked her eyes open once again. She was laying on her back in the dust, staring up at the full moon. She waited for a response. She felt there was supposed to be one, that she had lived this moment before. But none came.

Things were different, now.

Crow heard rapid heavy thuds, and a couple moments later, Finch was kneeling behind her, lifting up her head, and putting it in her lap.

"Did you think I died?" Crow asked, voice hoarse.

"I don't know. Try and remember something."

"It's all rather... fuzzy... but bits and pieces are there. I at least know why I'm here."

"Oh? You've found the meaning of life, have you?"

"Finch."

Finch made the sound of laughing, then stood, dusting herself off. As soon as the last speck of dust was clear, she bent over, offering a clean hand down to Crow.

Crow took Finch's hand without thinking.

The two stood in the middle of the vast wasteland of loose brown dirt mixed with pebbles and dust. The silty stuff blew around in the light breeze. There were no buildings, no walls, no... *anything*. It was just flat, until the city proper, which lay in ruins.

There was, at least, some light. The full moon glowed brightly, painting the world in its satin lavender hue.

"Is every night so beautiful as this?" Crow asked, truly taking in the sight of the world for the first time. She **felt** it all, in a way she never had before— at least, not in a way she had in a long, long time.

"No..." Finch said, squeezing Crow's hand softly as she looked down at her. "No, I think tonight is uniquely beautiful."

Crow laughed. "I've lived here all my lives, and now, I feel like I'm seeing it for the first time."

That gave Finch some pause.

"I think I am too."

Crow began to walk in the direction of the moon. "Where's Cane?"

"He left when you reappeared. He claimed to have some business to take care of."

"Typical," Crow sighed. "That's all he ever thinks about."

"Maybe," Finch said.

Crow stopped, suddenly looking down at her free hand. It was flesh, with no fur or feathers. As it used to be. But as she flexed her back, she heard her wings shift, and as the breeze blew across her, she felt it in the floof of fur in her chest, but also in her hair, the two ears of cartilage on the side of her head, and the two ears of fur on the top. She tried to extend her claws, and they came out easily, though her talons were gone. She had feet again, the kind with toes. She wasn't sure if she was happy about that or not.

But,

[inhale]

she sighed,

[exhale]

she supposed she could always change.

If she wanted to.

It wasn't so bad.

Nothing to be scared of, really.

Though, it did hurt.

Growing pains. Probably.

"Is something the matter?" Finch asked. She was not concerned, only curious. She trusted Crow. She didn't need to worry about every little thing. She didn't need to prepare for any of the thousands of things that were going on.

She could figure it out in the moment.

That, she had learned from Crow.

It wasn't so scary as she thought.

"No. Nothing's wrong." Crow said, looking up, grinning wide. "Except for how hungry I am. Is it wrong if we go try to find some food before helping rebuild the city?"

Finch shook her head. Out of all the things in the world to be worried about...

"I think that should be fine, Crow. Let's go find you something to eat. Though, before we do..." Finch leaned back, looking down at Crow's wings. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

Then, Finch squatted down, wrapped her arms around Crow's legs, picked her up, and threw her high into the air.

"What are you— aaaah!"

Instinctively, Crow unfurled her wings, flapping them, and—

and instead of gliding, she went ***up!***

And she flapped her wings, over and over again, and she *flew*.

She was flying!

"Finch! Finch, I'm *flying!*"

"I can see that." Finch laughed, giggling to herself. Crow was just so damn *cute*.

It was good that things were different.

Finally, they could be happy.

Crow landed next to Finch, grinning even wider than before, heart full of joy. She hadn't even known that was possible.

Finally...

Crow pressed her chest into Finch's warm silver belly, pulling her close. Crow's breath slipped out, cool and light, and she straightened her back as she held Finch ever closer, arms clutched around her precious Finch.

Her shaky sigh of relief signaled the start of their happy ending. Finch slipped down onto one knee and picked up Crow in her arms, lifting her up and turning her around until Crow was seated on her shoulders. Crow sat up tall on her shoulders, looking around, when suddenly,

Finch began to spin around in a circle, giggling.

And so Crow leaned back, stuck her arms out to the side, and began to laugh, entire body trembling with the force of it.

Finally, they were free to be themselves. Their true selves. For as long as they wanted. And, she knew, that it would be for far longer than just one day.

She'd never dream to ask for more.

She didn't feel that she'd ever need to.

After all,

She did it.

She didn't die.

She was still alive.

In one piece.

She'd really... managed it.

Despite everything.

