

chapter 9. just so!

"I am unsure of what to think or feel, now." Finch said as they walked down the hill, hand in hand. Her free hand held tight to the flask of *Red*. Her thumb traced circles over its smooth metal cap. Then, she stowed it away, pushing it deep into one of the many pockets of the cloak.

"About what?" Crow chirped, cocking her head to one side as she kept on walking and looking straight ahead, one talon after the other, easily leading them down the hill.

"Your home, your life, your... *Raven*."

"Raven is not mine, nor am I theirs." Crow snapped her beak in agitation and looked as far away as she could, eyes glued to the sparse parts of the city she could see between the winding trunks of the laboratory's woods.

"Ah.." Finch paused, and their linked hands pulled tight as Crow continued walking, then jerked back from the sudden stop.

Crow turned to look at Finch with a puzzled expression, her facial features flat and expressionless. She did not seem to wear any offense on her aspect.

So why, then, did Finch's mind churn and whirl in a maelstrom, wondering how deeply her words had hurt the little Crow?

"Hm?" Crow hummed and stepped back to Finch and wrapped her second hand around the same metal wrist her first was curled around. "I know you know how to walk *and* talk," she teased, playfully pecking the side of Finch's ribs with the tip of her sharp beak. The two metals rang off of each other like chimes.

"I've not offended you?" Finch asked, stooping down to eye level with Crow.

"Nope!"

"I see. Um. Raven offered your services in helping me secure clothing. I want to know what you thought about that. Would that be okay?"

"Of course, *silly*." Crow rolled her eyes and sighed, shaking her head with glee. "You saved my life. And, um..." She chirped, looking away, embarrassed. She pulled up one of her hands and rested it on her exposed shoulder, where only a single thin strap held up her coverings. "I need clothes too, you know?"

Then, Crow hopped down the hill, and Finch, hand still linked with hers, was tugged, then dragged, along.

With her free hand, Crow held down the hem of her silky black nightgown, so as to prevent it from billowing up and getting caught in the branches or brambles. Though she could only hold one side down, and Finch, behind her, respectfully averted her gaze while using her free hand to keep the undergrowth away from the little Crow.

Poor *girl*. Finch mused, allowing herself to be pulled down through the forest, across the deadzone, and into the street.

Finch was still disguised, of course, though having nothing to wear, Crow was not. Though, realistically, disguises often did little for Crow. Her shape and size were too uncommon, her features too notable, her way of being so entirely distinct that no other could be ever recognized in her place.

And so, nightgowned or cloaked-up, the only thing that ever changed was how long it took others to recognize Crow for what she truly was.

Before they were seen hand-in-hand, Crow split off and stepped far ahead, allowing Finch to trail her from a safe distance. Naturally, it would not do for some nameless and faceless representative of Cane to walk hand-in-hand with their sworn enemy.

Plus, she wanted her hand back. She had so much *energy* for once, and she had to get rid of it. So, she swung her arms back and forth with gusto as she walked, and she bobbed her head side to side to the beat of an unknown rhythm, and she played little games with how she stepped between the street's cobbled stones. Avoiding every crack, then stepping only on the blackstones, then only on the whitestones, then stepping only on every fourth stone— she often had to jump for it— then cycling between so, so many other whimsical games she played with the way she walked.

It was rare to feel such elation! She couldn't help but cherish it for as long as it lasted.

And, despite herself, she did not worry about how she looked for even a single moment.

There was her, and then there was the world around her. Separate.

There was her, and then there was where her talons would land next. Together.

There was her, and then there was how she looked. Separate.

There was her, and then there was the joy of motion. Together.

Finch, meanwhile, was watching after Crow. So, so many passerby stared at her, and her exuberant nature, looking her up and down, tracing every bit of her with their eyes, as if dissecting her in their minds. In turn, she could not help the burning impulse that built up in her chest, nor could she help but glare at each and every one that feasted on the sight of Crow. She longed to put an end to it, but really, there was nothing she could do. She'd have to go and change the whole world to protect the little Crow from this.

And that, unfortunately, would be an excessive response.

Though... did it have to be?

Often, Finch wondered if the world deserved to change.

And the more she saw of it, the more her wondering became certainty.

This world would not last.

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After a long while walking, which took them until long after the rain had stopped falling, and up until the moment before the moon began to rise, they at last arrived at the base of a low and polished blackstone wall that was topped with Crow-length metal spikes.

This wall marked the boundary of the upscale district on the edge of Escrow, wherewhich, deep within, resided the tailor that served as their target. He lived up high, on a tall hill, in a workshop estate that hugged the grand and ancient outer wall of the city.

Crow approached the opening in the district's border wall silently and sullenly. Whatever energy she had had been lost after hours trudging through rainfall, getting soaked all the way along. So, too, was her hair and fur drenched and sopping, dripping water all the while dragging her down with its weight.

Just ten paces ahead of her, down the road, there was no gate, just a man and his staff, stood tall, and proud, and bored— likely because it was not bustling here.

In Escrow, fully enclosed by walls as it was, nearly everywhere, at every time of day, was as busy as can be. When the diurnal tucked away in their nests and beds, the nocturnal would rise, and of course, the crepuscular would fill in any gaps in activity besides.

Here, though. Here, it was quiet, and peaceful, and dull. The lights were dim and warm and close to the ground, and the streets were polished, shiny stones that received regular scrubblings and sweepings. The entire area, really, was like a great, open-air mansion free from the oversight of the four heads of the city.

That, though, came with its own problems.

"Halt." The tall man hissed. Red scales outlined his eyes and flared out when he spoke.

Crow stopped abruptly, six paces in front of him.

Finch, twenty paces behind her, did not stop, instead opting to close the distance.

"What brings *you* here, **Crow**?" The man asked, leaning forward to lean his head onto the top of his tall wooden staff. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop her, really, especially since he was alone.

"um. clothes." She said simply, idly picking at the side of her nightgown, claws running over the bottom hem. It was all-together too short, and she hated the way it dangled down and tossed around in the breeze, every movement showing off another part of her. It was too spacious. Far too free. The only thing that kept her from ripping it off in this moment was the ever-heavy gazes she felt on her back and sides wherever she roamed.

It made her think back to when that man was watching her through the window.

Which, itself, made her think—

"Do you intend to *purchase* anything, Crow?" He hissed out a self-defeated sigh while giving her a pointed, knowing look. She was looking down at her talons, pivoting one of them around in little circles— she was far too cute to be so dangerous— unless— was that a tactic to disarm him?!

"Duh?" Crow muttered, rolling her eyes and snapping her beak in irritation. Then she snapped it again, and again, and again, sighing all the while. Her arms tensed up, and she brought the claws on her hands together, idly scraping and skittering them across each other while ==looking up at the man expectantly. Ravenously. Waiting.==

The man tensed up and squinted further. He picked up his metal-capped wooden staff in both hands and brought it forward to bear against Crow, holding it between them.

"Well, you can't come in. You know better." The man hissed again, opening his mouth to show his fangs.

There were no others on the smooth and perfect road, no other guards watching the entry point, and not even any curious passerby in the market. Truly, they were alone under the first rays of moonlight that streamed down into the city after cresting over the tall outer walls.

A low, guttural growl started to form in the base of Crow's throat. It built up, crackling and popping within her maw, and just as it was about to spill out with her response,

Finch arrived by Crow's side, and settled one of her hands into her hair, ruffling it slowly and softly while looking down to her. Crow returned the gaze, eyes hollow and pleading. She really, truly, did not want to deal with this right now. She just wanted to get out of this soaked nightgown and go buy some real clothes. And her skin was itching, and all of her ached, and she was so, so tired of walking, and it was all she could do just to stay upright and awake...

Finch knelt down and slid her hand from the top of Crow's head to the top of her shoulders, then hugged her. All of the tension, at once, fell from her frame.

"I'll handle this," she whispered. "You run on ahead."

Crow nodded softly, then Finch separated the two of them gently, making sure Crow was steady enough to stand well on her own. Then, as soon as Finch let go, Crow turned and walked right past the man, paying him no mind. Instead, her eyes were turned to the pavement, and her mind was churning, willing herself to keep going, one step after the other. The guard was too stunned to make any sort of move towards her. Instead, he looked between her and Finch, and ultimately, decided to interpose himself between the two, allowing Crow to pass by unharmed.

"Halt..." He hissed out another sigh, holding out his staff with one arm so as to block the entire path. "That patch affiliates you with Cane. His *ilk* are not permitted here. Leave and begone."

Finch simply stepped forward, unable to speak without identifying herself. The man stiffened as she did, but she simply walked straight ahead, not regarding him or even turning her head to do so.

In response, he closed the distance and blocked her way forward with his body. Then, he lifted up the corner of the patch on Finch's cloak that marked her 'affiliation' with Cane. "Are you deaf, big lug? Your kin's not welcome here. How about you turn around and go?"

In response, she turned towards him, staring blankly and silently at him through her facemask.

In response to her challenge, he brought back his staff and thrust its metal cap into Finch's chest.

Only, she did not budge, nor move, and his attack bounced off with a resounding *clang!*

A moment later, his face was flat against the road, ass up in the air, as Finch's backhand sent him flipping over one side and down into the ground. Then, his feet, high up above his ass, completed their arc and cracked down— along with his backside— onto the polished stone.

"*ah... shit.*" She whispered, poking his side with her boot.

Out cold.

Immediately, she squatted down and awkwardly picked him up by the shoulders. Then, as fast as she could go, she crabwalked with him, dragging him backwards into the nearest alley by the gate. The whole time, his staff

bumped against the smooth stone floor, rattling all the way like an uneven wheel. His uniform, too, kept getting caught on the sharp edges of the fancy, harsh-cut masonry that lined the walls of the area, so every half-meter of dragging he would suddenly stop, only for Finch to readjust her grip, heave him another half meter, only to suddenly stop again as more of his clothing caught.

Once they were well within the alley, Finch suddenly realized she needed something to cover the poor fellow with. She turned side-to-side, expecting the usual alley trash, but there was *nothing*. It was all *spotless*!

Who the hell leaves their alleys spotless?! She wondered, opting to simply step back—

thump!

Realizing immediately what had happened, Finch twisted to the side, losing her balance in the process—

bonk!

—only to immediately land flat on Crow, who had tried to duck to the same side to get out of the way.

"Owww....." Crow whimpered from below, flopping around like a fish, wiggling desperately to get out from under Finch. "you're so *heavy*!" she wheezed.

"I'm so sorry, I—" Finch rolled back onto her own heels, then stood while scooping up Crow from her armpits, dangling her up in front of her like a cat. She was drenched from the earlier rain, and her fur and feathers were hanging down, soggy and dripping. Her one copper-colored iris stood out, seemingly glowing with malicious intent, while her black nightgown fluttered softly in the breeze. She looked like a grimy little ghost.

"put me *down*!" Crow hissed, flailing her arms weakly and kicking her legs around in the air, trying to get purchase on something, *anything*!

Finch simply let go, and Crow's talons scattered around on the perfectly smooth polished stones, scrabbling around for traction. Suddenly slipping, she fell forward, right into Finch's hands.

"Having fun there?" Finch's voice rang out, higher pitched than usual, and she held her shoulders lower, and wider, and she tilted her head forward, metal faceplate just an antslength from Crow's forehead.

"No." Crow murmured, looking anywhere other than Finch's face while Finch set her upright, planting her softly on the ground so that there would be no more troubles with her locomotion.

With a hissing scrape against the stone, Crow retracted her talons, then stepped forward tentatively onto her pawpads, testing her traction. Satisfied, she took a few steps, then nodded to herself, stopped, and turned around to look up to Finch once again. She rarely walked on her paws, but kept them for such occasions as this.

"It's strange that our commotion was unnoticed." Finch said, closing the short distance between the two of them while kneeling down. Her metal fingertips brushed against the flask's cap in her pocket. It was time, but she did not want it to be.

Crow silently scampered forward, padding right up to her as she heard the telltale chime of metal striking metal. Even after only a couple doses, she was already trained like a dog.

Mentally, Finch recoiled at the reaction, though she did not allow her body to show it.

Even having known her for so little time, she hated seeing her like this.

Impatiently impatient, Crow tapped her paws on the smooth paving stones of the alley, and leaned forward toward Finch, craning her neck up and around, looking for the pocket that held the flask. "I can dose it myself..?" She asked tentatively.

"No." Finch said firmly, immediately pulling out the flask. "No, that won't do. The measurements are rather precise, and you don't have the tools to make them."

"Whatever. *Hurry up.*" Crow barked, voice harsh, as she looked up at the flask in Finch's hand. Her entire body curled and pulled towards the flask, eyes glued straight to it, pupils wide, skin prickling, head aching, muscles throbbing for release. Even drenched as they were, her fur and feathers stood up on end, puffed out, and her neck was slick and cold and clammy, and not just from the rain. Some part of her had been taken, pulled out, and put in that flask, and she would have it back. She had to have it back. She would take—

Already, Finch had spun off the top of the flask and turned to the side, facing away from Crow, blocking her from the substance with her own body.

The smell of the liquid appeasement made Crow's mouth water, and her beak hung open as she leaned slightly forward, then rocked back on her heels, waiting, eyes still fixed on the flask. Her metal eye, all on its own, fixated on where the flask had been a moment prior, and tentatively, even knowing it was an illusion, she passed her hand through it, grasping at the ghost of her desire.

Then, all of a sudden, Finch pushed through her vision, a tiny cap full of Red extended out towards her.

With greed grabbing claws, Crow lurched forward and opened her beak wide, downing the cap-full in an instant. She reached fully into her beak with her arm, holding the cap just outside of her mouth, swirling her tongue around inside of it to get out every.

single.

drop.

Then, as quickly as she started, she pulled the cap out of her mouth and stared deep into it longingly. Her longing quickly became frustration, and she looked up to Finch challengingly.

"Are you sure that was the right amount?" Crow demanded. "That wasn't enough. That wasn't nearly enough." Beneath her beak, she ground her teeth together, swishing her tongue around in her mouth, searching all around within herself for any she might have missed.

Of course, there was none.

"It was the correct amount." Finch said firmly, grabbing the cap as she stepped past Crow.

"Come. There is much to be done." Then, taking care to mask her irritation, Finch wiped down the inside of the cap with a spare cloth from inside of her cloak, then refastened the cap onto the flask and tucked it away yet again.

Obediently, Crow scampered along after her.

Wait.. Crow thought. Yes. Yes, that's what I'll do. Duh!

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”

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KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

The door shook and rattled against its hinges under the force of the knocking. And, with her part of the job completed, Finch simply left,

leaving Crow, alone, at the door,

with a perfectly-penned journal page of measurements,

a bag bursting full with precious shinies,

and a heavy silver flask, secreted neatly away within the pouch sewn into her chest behind her fur.

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After thirty-one breaths, the door creaked open slowly, revealing a tall, well-dressed weasel-like man.

"Oh." The man sighed, looked away, and shut the door.

But when he turned to go up the stairs and return to his bedchambers, he found Crow there, offering up a thick and round vellum bag in both hands. She was gripping it so tightly that some of the precious stones and coins held within had begun to spill up and pour out over its edge.

"I need clothes," she said simply. Her voice fell out, loose and free, with a slight sing-song swing to it.

"And I need sleep, Crow." The weasel-man spoke, making his way well around her, then up onto the stairs.

"If you open the door for a customer, you have to serve them. That's the rules."

"*I thought it was an emergency!*" He said, lips curling up in bemused confusion as he turned to Crow with the most furrowed and perplexed face possible.

"It is an emergency!!!" She pleaded, padding up the stairs to catch up to him, then dashing past him, then looking up into his eyes. "I'm out of clothing! Look at the sorry state of what I wear! This is all I have! Aside from, well, a really serious bounty for the first tailor that can fix it!!!" Crow said, accentuating her words by jingling the bag of coins and stones, which she jostled around with great ferocity after she finished speaking. From the ferocity of her shaking, precious stones tumbled out the bag and down onto the floor.

"I...." The weasel-like man sighed dramatically, then reclined against the wall, bringing up two brown-furred fingers to massage the creasing flesh between his eyes. "Yes. Alright. Fine." He then righted himself with the utmost panache and stepped down the stairs into the showroom, then to the side, where he lifted up a curtain for Crow to pass through.

Of course, she scampered right after him and hopped through the gap in the curtains into the workroom in the back.

"Welcome to my shop, Crow," he sighed haggardly and entered through the curtains. Then, he reached up to a hook on the wall and took down a nearby black-leather apron with soft white trimming, which he then put on and spent sixteen breaths adjusting and fastening until it was

"just so!" He smiled softly, patting down the front of the apron while shooing away imaginary dirt.

Crow, meanwhile, strolled around the room, fascinated by each and every thing. It was always so strange to see the inside of an artisan's room of making and unmaking. It was like being within their body, or, perhaps even their mind.

"Now. I expect the whole of that bounty," he stuck out one of his paws, paw-pads up, and waited expectantly.

"Done!" Crow chirped and hopped forward with the bag of precious stones and gleaming coins. As she landed, she plopped the bag onto his outstretched paw, which curled immediately around it.

"I suppose I should introduce myself," he said, setting the bag of coins onto a side-table. "I am Weasel," and with that spoken, he offered the same paw forward.

Crow reached up and took his paw, shaking it. "I am yet Crow."

"Obviously. Now then, little Crow, what are your preferences? And do you have your measurements?" He stepped forward, passing Crow, and began to sort through various types of fabrics along the west-side wall.

"I need two outfits made, one for me, and one for a..." She trailed off, swirling her hands around in the air, trying to catch the right word. Shit. What *was* the right word?

Was Finch... a *friend*? Could she even have friends? Did she... deserve one? She'd never had a friend before. Crow's mind spun and churned, trying to figure out some word to capture the whole of what she had with Finch. Nothing she thought felt quite right. There was no word to capture the fundamental truth of the bond they shared. She had one of Finch's body parts inside of her head. Did that make them..?

"An associate of some kind, then." Weasel said, crossing back over to a low wooden table that was set in the center of the room. As he began to set down different fabric swatches, Crow joined him at the table, sitting across from him.

Wordlessly, she slipped the torn journal sheet that Finch had written their measurements on over to Weasel.

Curiously, he picked it up, and raised an eyebrow as he read through it. "These are... needlessly specific. And did you hire a calligrapher to notate this? I figured you were rich, but that still seems..." He lowered the paper to look at Crow, who was simply looking back at him blankly. "Well, it's no matter." He sighed, tucking the paper away into his top-most left-breast pocket.

Then, he took out a large, dustless tome from a compartment underneath the table. As he set it down, the entire table shook with its weight. Using the red velvet bookmark attached to the spine, he opened immediately to the first empty page. "Please rise, if you would. And is this... 'associate' of yours able to enter my establishment?"

"That depends on how well you can keep a secret," Crow stood.

"For the sum proposed, you can consider my discretion to be absolute."

"I'll see what I can do," Crow chirped and swished out through the curtains, twirling as she did. The curtains reached out and wrapped around her before slipping right off. It was a lovely, silky embrace.

And twenty-six breaths later, she returned hand-in-hand with a tall, black-cloaked figure. Strangely, the two complimented each other rather well.

"I would sketch the two of you, that I might envision the perfect ensemble."

Crow looked up to Finch, who immediately turned her gaze down to Crow.

"My..." Crow trailed off,

"associate," Weasel added,

"does not find that agreeable....?" Crow scrunched her eyebrows as she looked up to Finch, who turned to Weasel and nodded.

"I will not push the matter. It is hardly necessary. Though it is a shame, as the two of you make quite a striking pair. I hardly ever get to coordinate a couple's outfits."

Finch barely stopped herself from speaking.

Crow, meanwhile, was tugging on Finch's wrist, pulling her to kneel down and listen. She did not seem to have caught the end of Weasel's statement.

Finch complied readily.

"I think we can trust him..." Crow whispered quickly, "He said his discretion would be *absolute*!"

Finch shook her head. No one could know she was here. And, there was something off about the way Crow was speaking. Why was she not irritable? Was getting new clothes really so uplifting? Mmm.

"Won't it be suspicious if your clothes aren't masterpieces?" Crow whispered conspiratorially.

Finch nodded, then paused. It was somewhat true. The work would have to be far better than what measurements alone could allow for. And, too, she suspected that special considerations would need to be taken to suit her unique body. And... Crow seemed to want this. She was

clearly very excited to get her own clothes— enough so that it was cutting through whatever fog the withdrawals had pulled over her.

Very well, then.

Finch drooped her shoulders in resignation, then pulled Crow in closer so that she could press their foreheads together. After three breaths, she pulled away, stood up, then faced Weasel.

In one smooth motion, she unclasped her cloak and cast it to the floor, revealing her shining metal upper-arms and neck. Then, she untied and unfastened her chest wrappings, allowing them, too, to fall to the floor, revealing her whole torso.

Crow and Weasel stood still in stunned silence.

Then popped off the boots, fell the trousers, and finally, Finch removed her facemask, revealing her whole self at last.

Crow, somewhat puzzled, followed suit, allowing her nightgown to slip off and down onto the ground. Then, Crow leaned forward and fixed her claws into the sides of her beak. She focused for a moment, and then dropped her shoulders, as if letting go of something. With a deft twisting motion, the beak

click, snap!

simply came off her face, and she stepped forward to place it gently down onto the table.

Weasel cleared his throat as he looked down to the floor and attempted to summon his composure from the aether. After only a single and stifled long-suffering sigh, he looked up with a polite smile and took up his pen to begin sketching the two of them.

He had far more than enough grey whiskers to know when to keep his mouth shut.

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The spinning of fine fabrics was no trivial thing, and so the two found themselves waiting beyond the red curtains of the changing room at the back of the workshop.

Within it, there was a long, deep, and wide bench with soft white velveteen cushions for its seat and backing. The bench curved around two of the three sides of the room, leaving a wide square in the middle for changing.

The last wall, with no seating, was a piece of grey-blue metal polished so diligently that it provided a nearly-accurate reflection. The floor, too, was soft white fur that must have been diligently combed through and regularly cleaned to maintain such a lovely texture.

Finch was seated on the bench, legs fully stretched out, her back resting against the bench's backcushion. Crow was laying on her side, arms and legs wrapped around one of Finch's, her head resting on the top of Finch's thigh where it met their crotch.

Finch had pulled Crow's hair out of her face, and was idly detangling it, while Crow rested with squinted and sleepy eyes that were fixed on her reflection that was trapped in the polished metal wall.

It was so strange, seeing herself peering over the leg of another. She often wondered if her reflection lived the same life, or a different one, which just so happened to line up with hers any time they met. She was not dumb. She knew reflections were no portal to another world.

But was it so wrong for a girl to dream?

She did not have to be right to be correct, a fact that astounded or infuriated so many others, and so she had learned to speak only accurately, and only of the world in which she dwelt.

And yet that, to them, was what was amusing.

Perhaps her reflection did not struggle with such problems. Or, perhaps she struggled with the reflection of the problems? So then, her reflection would struggle with... the reflection of communication... which would be...?

"Crow?"

"Mmm.." Crow hummed, eyes still locked with her reflection, lost within the fluffy fog of her present ruminations.

"Crow." Finch repeated, voice firmer and darker than usual.

Crow's eyes went glassy and hollow, and her throat dried up all at once, as she stayed silent.

"Where's the flask, Crow?"

Crow froze, her entire body petrified. She felt as though a deep-seated piece of her had been ripped out and set aflame. Her face burned in shame and all at once her body itched and pulled tight while not shifting at all. There was an unfathomable, ephemeral, chill in her blood that that made her body feel like that was boiling within. And soon, if she kept still, the pressure would all explode.

"Did you steal the flask, Crow?"

But she could not speak, for her voice had been stolen from her. Perhaps by her reflection, which returned her hollow, glassy gaze with its own, as if pleading with her. But pleading for what?

"Nevermind..." Finch's voice, typically so pleasant and crisp, had taken on a low, dark growl, and dropped far enough in pitch as to be unrecognizable. "Just get off of me."

Crow was still frozen, unable to move, as a tear formed within her flesh eye and a matching, choking sob filled up her throat. She knew it was wrong. She had known it was wrong. But she just couldn't *help* it, it was like— her body—

"**Get. Off.**" Finch was sitting straighter up, now, pulling away.

—*wasn't her own.*

Crow, trembling, slowly pulled herself away. She didn't want to take so long doing it. She didn't want to seem like she didn't intend to obey. She did. She was going to. She was going to move. She was moving, slowly, yes, but it was happening, and—

"Get **OFF!**" Finch pushed the flat of her palm into Crow's shoulder, sending her sliding forward.

Something in Crow's brain finally clicked into place, and she collected herself physically, pulling as far away from Finch as possible, before skittering off the side of the bench and to its other corner, where she then clambered back up onto it and pulled herself into a tight ball, tears falling all the while.

"i'm—" her voice choked out on its own, and her claws scratched and clattered around the flask within the fleshpouch by her heart as she attempted to grab it. "i— i— um— i'm— i—" her lips trembled and quivered around her loose and clumsy tongue, which slipped off of her fangs and teeth all together while her vocalthings spasmed, sending out discordant, scratchy noises that barely approximated speech. It was wrong. It was all wrong. It wasn't supposed to be like this, not at all, she— she *wanted* to get up, but—

Finch simply held out her smooth metal hand towards her, palm up. Expectantly. Coldly. Waiting.

crow gripped around the flask tightly, and pulled her arm back, but her hand remained in the pouch, unwilling to let go of her succor. it was all she had. she needed it. she couldn't just— but she really wanted— but—

crow's arm spasmed and twitched, and her hand barely emerged from her chest, just a tiny amount, and she thrust her arm forward, forcing her hand to relax. instead, her hand lurched open, sending the flask tumbling forward and off to the side, bouncing and rolling across the plush fur floor until it banged against the wooden side of the bench by Finch's leg and went still.

instinctively, crow whined, recoiling back, covering her head with both arms and hands, curling up as tight as she could, sequestering herself away from the world, tucking her head further and further and further in, as far as it could go, eyes squeezed as tightly shut as she could manage, until she was finally held in the safe embrace of the dark.

she did not want to think, or feel, or speak, or act anymore. it was all too hard. it was all too painful. everyone just ended up hurt, over and over again, and it *never* stopped, unceasing, neverending, spiraling down, and down again, always hurt in new ways, again, then hurting, again, with no end until sleep, then even then, in dreams that spiral into nightmares, again, hurt, again,

hurting, again, over and over, without end,

there was no escape from it.

and she just— she— she just could— she couldn't— it— if she *could*— but— her body— it— just—

her body never listened, but she could never stop listening. and so, the two were at odds, always, always in conflict, never listening to each other, but always forcing themselves onto each other, imposing their own visions of the self onto the world, at odds, and so,

she was a living contradiction. everything about her that was true was also false, and there was no understanding of her self that was as full and true as the view of the self she wished that she could be

but she could never live up to herself,

no matter how badly she wanted to,

no matter how hard she tried to.

the urge to sabotage herself was just too compelling. even when she knew she should not, she could not help it, because to know the right answer and choose the wrong one, over and over again— no matter how many times she did it— was just so.....

it was all she could do,

not to scream,

as choking, wracking sobs sent her shuddering and twisting and churning in her seat,

as she fell forward onto the hands that covered her face, fingers spread to let her eyes peer out into the dark seat in front of her,
always seeing,
never ceasing,

no matter how much she saw, it was never enough
no matter how much she knew, it was never enough

she was never going to find **it**

she was doomed!

yes, exactly, she was *doomed!* cursed, perhaps. it couldn't be her fault, it couldn't *all* be her fault, because... because...

because if it was all her fault, then...

well, it wasn't, so, she didn't need to—

Something heavy and metal and cold was in her hair, atop her head, rubbing down her scalp and nape with tightly restrained pressure and precision. immediately, her shoulders went slack, and she crumpled forward, laying flat, face pressed tight into the gap where the cushion met the seat, hot breath spilling out and billowing back into her face, warming it.

her heart was beating much faster than she had known it to. and every sense of hers, at once, opened back up and spilled its information into her mind. immediately, her muscles tensed and prickled with the dense mass of stimulation that forced itself in from her nose, ears, skin, tongue, and eyes and made a home inside her body.

but the hand persisted, rubbing so softly, so gently, the single calming presence in the black and storming sea in which she had been drowning.

so even so, she could not move, frozen in place, even as her body screamed for release, because her mind was so well satiated, so fully placated, by the simple touch, the simple gesture.

how could she always want for two separate things?

would it ever be possible for all her halves to be satisfied?

or would the whole of her always rot and spasm with the horrid tension that wound tight her jaw and gripped her lungs in a deathlike vice?

"Oh, crow..." a voice rang out from above, though no air spilled with it, nor scent, or flavor, nor was any hanging dust shifted by its passing. Such was the voice of *Finch*, who surely sat above her, staring down pensively, heart caught somewhere between pity and annoyance.

"mmmm..." crow whimpered, then grumbled, inching closer to the voice like a worm, sliding herself ever so slightly across the bench, one tiny movement at a time.

And still, Finch accepted her with open arms, as shortly after, another metal hand cut through the air to hover just above the small of Crow's back, before gently pressing down into it, locking her in place with firm and gentle pressure.

then frozen, Crow exhaled, slowly, letting out all of the bad humours and miasma that she had caught in her lungs in her hysteria. and instead, she breathed in peace, and comfort, and light, filling up her self with the cold and caring presence of the one that granted her succor— even if only for tonight.

"t-th-th.." crow, shivering, trembling, chattered out the words that she held closest to her heart. "thank you, um...", she cleared her throat, "thgn-", then cleared it again, and once more. "Thanks, Finchy." crow chirped, voice cracking. she simply laid and bared the touch, embracing the good and the bad, feeling all of the feelings as deeply and totally as she could.

it was so rare to **feel** like this, the way she could only after imbibing Red. it was like some latent part of her was unlocked, opened, and through the floodgates spilled everything she had ever wanted to know about herself.

and then, it would wear off, and each time she would have to sit and watch it ebb away like the tide, taking along with it the countless experiences she always wished she could have.

what, then, was a girl supposed to do?

"Crow." Finch said, voice soft, and full of feeling.

Crow turned over, belly-up, to look up to Finch's blank metal faceplate.

Finch tilted her head back and paused, as if considering whether or not she should say what was on her mind.

"Yes, Finchy?"

Then, Finch spoke.

"Have you found **it**, yet?"

Crow, somber, tilted her chin down and shook her head quickly, then paused, and took in a deep breath, shoulders sagging back with the weight of the truth.

"No. I'm... as far away as ever."

Finch gently brushed Crow's wavy black hair from her face, tucking it between her sets of ears.

In turn, Crow tilted her head up again to look at her.

Finch was holding the empty silver flask in front of her, fully in view.

As if burned, Crow looked away in shame, cheeks blooming with a rosy crimson red.

She was right.

And she was wise to prove it without her words,
to lead Crow to the conclusion on her own.

,

You could, of course, teach a bird to fly,
but only she could ever lift her own wings and do it.

What good were all the stories of the beauty of the world
to a bird that lived to fill itself on the seeds around its tree?

The cycle can be broken, though, and the ritual is thus:
she must accept the life she's living,
and do anything to reach the one she's not.

,

As she looked away to the furry floor, a strange and ancient spark flicked to life inside of Crow.

It was a remembrance of purpose—
a single fragment of her self.

Eyes closed, she leaned forward onto her knees, imagining the spark within. It had been dark inside herself, and now, it was finally dim.

She focused hard on the feeling, of the shifting and churning deep within her chest. She imagined the spark landing on some kindling, taking hold to it. She imagined herself nurturing it, breathing life into it, doing anything to keep the spark alive.

And then, right there, she changed— just a little— deep inside.

It had returned:

The Everburning Flame

It had been so long that she had forgotten it, forgotten what it meant to feel its warmth inside her chest, forgotten all the nights she had spent protecting it, nurturing it, doing anything to keep it alive.

Until, one day, the spark had gone out,

and her fire had simply died.

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A strange impulse began to fill her chest.

It.

She would find **it**.

No matter what it took, this time, she would find **it**, and **it** would be *hers*.

She would not forget again.

She could not forget again.

No matter how she slipped or stumbled... no, it did not matter.

For before **the everburning flame**,

all things crumbled unto ash.

It was decided, then.

Always one foot in front of the other,

one step at a time,

forever and always,

forward!

She had decided, long ago, on this. And now, her mind shifted, welcoming back her extant self.
It had never left her, of course.

Her life had simply forced her to put it on a shelf.

But now, knowing it again, feeling it so strongly within herself,

it was so—

Crow lifted her head up to look at the ceiling and took a deep, deep breath.

”

””

"So? Is it to your likings, then?" Called Weasel, voice muffled, from the other side of the thick modesty curtain.

But for ears as sharp as Crow's, a muffled voice was a comfortable one, and she nodded along to his words, hearing him with no issue.

"Yes," Finch called back, pinching and pulling and twisting like a mother hen, taking care to adjust the fabrics draped across Crow until they were all properly seated.

The two of them did make a striking pair; it was true.

Crow was stood half a bodylength from the mirror, eyes wide, looking herself up, and down, and all around. She had never known such comfort in clothing before. It was a wonder, really, what threads could do for her when they were made for her, rather than in spite of her.

She twirled, mouth dropping open wide in a crooked, sharp smile as the bottom of the gown flared out and spun with her, continuing on long after her spin had stopped, before then swishing back and forth and falling still. It was part dress. She *loved* dresses. But there had never been one for her— and everyone who made them had refused to spin a dress for a body like hers. 'a waste of time', they might say, or perhaps, 'just buy one of the children's dresses and be done with it', and there was always the time-honored, 'what? no— it is too much to

ask, your body is far too different, altogether too wrong. A body like yours is not *meant* for dresses, you must realize. How about trousers? I could—'

Bastards and excuses, each and all.

Finch knelt down behind her, then leaned forward to intone softly into her ear. "So?"

Crow turned back and reached up, hugging Finch around the neck, then dropping off and twirling again, then again, mouth still stuck in a wide smile. The two could not help but giggle and chirp, and back leaned against the wall connected to the curtain, head tilted back, ass on the floor, Weasel smiled in smug satisfaction at the sound of it.

Yes. Yes, indeed. This is what the job was all about— to fashion fashions so splendid his clients could not help but be overtaken by glee. It... helped, somewhat. His thumb ran over the locket he had taken off and placed into his palm, tracing the engraving over and over again. And as he did, the happy and weary corners of his eyes grew sullen, and his gaze fell to the floor.

,

"Are you ready?" Finch asked, stepping to the curtain.

"Um, no. Not quite." Crow chirped, dragging her by the hand back to the reflective wall. "I..." She looked around, searching for the word. It was one she had not spoken for some time, and so it took many moments to find it, but then, as she reflected on what it was that might make her happy, the word came to her as if appearing from smoke.

"I... *want...*" she said, tentatively, chin pointed down, eyes pointed up— a most common expression for her—

—and Finch made no motion to dismiss her, and so she continued—

"...to remember this forever. How I look. How you look. Could you, um.." Crow looked to the floor, blushing, embarrassed. "Would you pose with me? I would like that."

You'll have to do the remembering for the both of us, Finch thought, wordlessly stepping back to join hands with Crow and stand with her at the mirror.

"Are you alright?" Crow chirped. Something was wrong within Finch. She was not sure what exactly had told her— but something was *off*, more than seemingly so, but knowingly so, so much that she could feel the feeling within herself and put to it a name: *discomfort*, an old and steadfast companion of hers.

"Well, naturally," Finch said, kneeling down. "I am more robust than any other."

"Why are you uncomfortable?"

"I— well—" It was, in fact, *rare* for Finch to be stunned out of her ability to speak, and yet with Crow, it was more often than not that her words could not come to her. "There's... a *problem* I ha—."

"Oh. Well, we paid a lot for this. One moment. WEAS—"

"No." Finch said, gently pulling Crow back by their still-joined hands, her other hand reaching up with part of Crow's clothing to cover her mouth. "We're alright!" Finch called through the curtain, which did not stir.

"It is not the clothing." Finch said, releasing Crow, who immediately stepped back closer and linked hands with her once again. "It's... a serious problem of mine. The kind that does not go away."

"Oh." Crow said in understanding, nodding sagely. She had a lot of those too. "I'll help," she said immediately, leaning in towards Finch's face.

"Well, thank you, but... it is not so easy a thing to agree to."

"That's okay," Crow said, voice as sweet as honey and strong as forged metal, "I owe you a life debt. I'll do it."

"It's not that simple—"

"It is." Crow insisted.

"Okay," Finch relented, seeing only one way to be able to continue speaking, "you'll help."

Crow smiled wide and nodded her head, content.

But, then Finch paused, tilting her head back again, that way she did when she was unsure of whether or not to speak—

"I can't help if you don't say it."

"Yes. Yes, alright." There was no way around it, really. She would have to know at some point. "Weasel," Finch called, directing the sound behind her, towards the curtains. "We require privacy."

"Oh." Then he paused for three breaths, as if in thought. "Well, there are towels in—"

"No." Finch shot back, turning her faceplate to the side wall, suddenly gripping Crow's hand more firmly. "For a private conversation."

Crow looked to Finch, confused, though Finch said nothing until Weasel's footsteps were long gone up the stairs and deeper into the house.

"Okay," Crow started, standing to her full height, assuming her most serious and composed of faces, then looked to Finch candidly. "I'll hear it."

"I need to kill my father."