

The dull, creaky, morning-dark-chilled wood of the deck was always comforting for Heart. She liked to pad barefoot out of crew quarters (careful not to rouse the asthmatic Gem from her hard-won sleep), soft-heel her way down the metal corridors of the ship, past gently wheezing pipes and hissing vents, until she reached the lacquered oak of the upper decks, open to the splattering of stars strewn across the ink-dark sky. It felt real and *alive* under her toes, breathing in-out-in-out in time with her own lungs.

Heart liked to sling herself over the side of the deck, onto a maintenance ladder, and tuck herself into a cranny intended for maintenance work on the aft forewing; the wing, just below her and to her left, crackling and groaned with the agonies of shifting metal plates and gears and hissed with jets of hot steam, but she didn't mind the noise much. Her spot gave her a mostly-uninterrupted view of the sparkling pink-blue-purple-white galaxy spilled overhead, and the unwavering dots of blue light from the city far below her. She liked to stay there til the sun began to peek shyly over the horizon, making the sky blush lightly in turn, and then she'd be off to the galley, first one up as always, shovel some slop in her mouth and be on her way.

Crow was there tonight.

Heart swung herself from the ladder and into their nook with practiced ease; her knees hit the ship's metal shell with barely a clunk and she neatly tucked herself into Crow's side before even saying hello, briefly nuzzling her nose into the harsh black sweep of hair that fell over his cheekbone on her way to settle down. She wove her fingers through his, brought his knuckles to her lips, and gave them a fat, wet kiss by way of greeting.

"You're out here early," she finally said, dropping their joined hands down to her lap.

The corner of his lip twitched. "Needed to think."

"Ah." She leaned her head on his collarbone; sharp as it was, she was probably the only person on the planet who would find that comfortable.

Sometimes, once it hit the berry-blue morning-twilight, just before the sky's first blush, there would be birds cutting a sharp path through the sky just above them, calling out in full-throated bliss at the pleasure of flocking together. She liked to watch them, to think about wind rippling through her feathers and the soaring, agonizing joy of a shared destination—a shared journey—her and Crow, cawing in delight, diving down to earth together.

"I got a recruitment order," Crow said.

There were no birds that morning. It was too early for them.

Heart recognized, with some detachment, that her head was twenty feet behind them, back where the ship was when she heard what Crow said. Somehow, her lips managed to form shapes anyway. "For the army?" Dumb.

He exhaled through his teeth. He could whistle through them. Could mimic birdcalls ever since they were kids; Angeline used to show him off to the other mothers in the Soot, before it all went to hell. Used to show off how he could lure a pigeon over, sweet-talking it in little chirps and coos, before Heart would bash its brains in with a chunk of black-streaked pavement and they'd have dinner that night. Heart had been handy with a knife since she was six.

He was talking. Of course. "Third cohort, fifth class... they need air crew. Bleeding em like hell. I don't know who else got one, think they're going by rank..."

"Don't," she said, all too fast, and there was something hot and large in the back of her throat.

Crow turned to meet her eyes, and oh, the whites of his eyes were shot-through with red veins, radiating out starkly from his pitch-black irises, and she realized he hadn't slept at *all* that night. "Heart," he said, thickly, and then "*my* Heart," and oh, he was on her, clutching her small head to his breastbone, his heart (his heart his heart his Heart) fluttering sharply against her ear, breathing hitched and all too hard. The long, harsh line of his nose pressed against the top of her head; there was something hot and wet trickling down her scalp and she realized, with mounting alarm, that Crow was crying.

“I’ll write you,” he choked out, lamely.

Her heart said, *Why are you fucking abandoning me?* Her heart said, *Run away with me.* Her heart said, *We haven’t been apart one single night in all our lives, not since we came into this world, screaming and naked and choking on coal dust.*

Her mouth, dumbly, said “On an airship?”

There was a wheeze, and a queer jerky motion of his chest against her cheek, and she realized Crow was laughing, which was leagues more alarming than the crying. “I’ll—I’ll send a messenger bird. I’ll train one myself.”

“Don’t be a dick.”

“I’ll--”

“Don’t,” she said again, and she flung her arms fully around him and dug her nails into his back, clawing at the rough burlap of his jacket, pressing her face harder and harder into his ribcage until her cheeks felt bruised. Wildly, she thought of crawling inside of him, of opening up his chest and settling herself into his skin. She’d fit perfectly. They were the exact same whippet-thin build.

Heart had no idea how long they stayed that way. When she finally pulled away, she felt the buttons of his jacket unstick themselves from her cheek with some difficulty; there was a sliver of red on the uppermost button that she chose to ignore. Crow cupped her cheek in one hand, the long thin curve of his mouth angled slightly downwards, red-shot tear-puffy eyes traveling over the expanse of her cheek. His thumb brushed a spot where a button had unstuck itself, came away red, and because it was Crow, she let herself flinch slightly.

“I’ll tell them I got banged up fixing up the crankshaft earlier,” she said quickly. She couldn’t bear how gentle his eyes were.

“They probably won’t ask,” he said, and stuck his thumb in his mouth briefly. It popped out clean and brown, not a hint of blood left.

The sky was lightening, the galaxy giving way to a light blue haze. Heart heard a bird call from somewhere; a high, keening song, long, sharp notes that went unanswered.

“Poor thing,” she said, unsteadily.

Crow looked out into the sky, took a breath, and called back, once, twice, three times. There was a pause. The song started up again, and he smiled, fully, enough to show his cracked incisor, and that was more worrisome than the crying and the laughing combined.

Heart wrapped both of her arms around one of his and leaned into his side, tucking her head back onto his bony shoulder. She sat and listened to him and the bird call back and forth, and she did not think about it. She did not think much at all.