

Winn

“Mama, Winn’s crying again.” That’s what I mumbled faintly from behind the doorway in the dark January night. The rain was beating against the window and you could see green vines of ivy crawling up the frostbitten glass. When I was little like that, I didn’t understand that the rain wasn’t trying to swallow me whole, or that the iron walls of the apartment only echoed the amount of fear trapped inside of them. “Mama,” I called out with more rising hope in my voice. Hope that she might wake up and talk to me. Hope she would come downstairs holding my hand; tell my little sister it was alright until she stopped crying. I’m not like that now. I know better than that. I’m not sure if that’s really good or bad.

Mama didn’t say anything, of course. She was awake, but had no intention of helping her scared child, or her crying infant. She put a pillow over her head, blocking out the world like I do now. I could feel that anticipation of affection go cold. I left that doorway, left it wide open to the chilly air and the shadows of the dark. Winn was two when I learned to stop caring about that coldness inside of me. I was eight, which wasn’t fair, cause eight-year-olds are supposed to have somebody. I never did, so I just let my thoughts be what I held onto. Questions no one could answer. *Why is a raven like a writing desk?*

Not much really changed after seven years.

“Maze, you’re spilling it, again,” A soft, careful voice said in the back of my head. It was gentle. It was also right behind me, most likely looking quite concerned. My mouth twitched to the side when I realized I was spilling the milk out of the bowl and onto my hand. Winn was only nine then, but she picked up on everything. Sometimes I’d zone out, but she reeled me back in, or tried to anyway.

“Sorry,” I murmured, shaking it off my hand. I turned around briefly to slide the cereal across the table. She grabbed at it eagerly like a child reaching for diamonds. The small cement window cast faded streaks of light through her brown hair and onto the shining hazel eyes that sparkled in the sunshine. Her brown skin blended with the soft light of the mourning, but her face suddenly grew cold and upset.

“You’re not gonna eat?” Her voice was faint, like it’d always been. Not because she was afraid to speak, but because loud noises set me off real easily. Her tone would get quieter when she asked me questions like that, about why I didn’t eat much and why I’m wasn’t sleeping anymore.

“I don’t need to,” I muttered absently.

“But-”

“C’mon Winn, you’re gonna be late for school,” I urged, quietly escaping from both the room and the conversation. She scowled, shoveling a spoonful of cereal into her mouth.

I walked Winn to school every day, even though she insisted that she was walking me. I’d get panic attacks sometimes, so she was always with me when she could be. She liked to skip next to the sidewalk, her bright shoes and ecstatic energy flaring against the dark, wet concrete. We passed the black metal apartments, the occasional sprout of damp green lurching up the buildings and crawling through the cement cracks. They were trying to survive, I guess. Life is weird like that. It gets no sun, no peaceful tranquility. All it gets is the cold rusty feeling of aluminum structures with titanium walls, and the chill of the nights that no one can escape.

But it was still there. Surviving. Weird.

“I’m gonna make a new friend, today.” My eyes came out of the misty fog of my thoughts as I looked down at Winn, jumping along the storm drains and holding onto my hand to keep steady.

“Hm?”

“I’m gonna make a new friend, and so are you, and it’ll be great.” She seemed so sure of herself sometimes, and I honestly don’t know where she got it. It was good though, better than her picking up something from me.

“How do you know?” I asked, keeping my eyes on the sidewalk, but my thoughts stayed with Winn. She always said the same answer, and whether it was true or not, I’m still never sure.

“I donno. I just do. We are going to make friends today.”

“And what’re we going to do with said friends?”

“You should tell them a story,” she answered after a moment of thought, “You’re real good at that. Like the one with the bird and the table.”

“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” Her face lit up when I said it

“Yeah! That one!”

“That’s a riddle, Winn, not a story.” She shrugged, her short hair bouncing along the frame of her face. Winn always wanted me to have friends, and when I said that I’d try, her eyes always glowed. She told me that when she wasn’t around, someone had to look out for me. When she said things like that it scared me, made my insides run cold again, my thoughts no longer able to retreat into an empty safe space. We rounded the corner, and I tried to let go of her hand so she could go run off to school, but she kept a grip on me tightly.

“...Please make a friend today,” she pleaded softly. I just stood there for a moment before kneeling down next to her. Her eyes were desperate and her face more dejected than it should’ve been. “Please, Mazey? Just try.”

“Why would I make a friend when I have you?”

“What about when you don’t have me?” She tilted her head, which is what she always did when she brought these things up. I looked down, but I could already tell her eyes were knowing and

expectant. “Someone’s gotta be there, Maze.” I took in a sharp breath, not letting it go for a while.

“That’s my job. I’m supposed to be there for you,” I managed to breathe out, “And you know what your job is?” She smiled so sweetly I had to grit my teeth to keep my eyes from getting watery.

“To be the first one to figure it out?”

“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” I whispered in her ear playfully, earning a giggle. “Can you do that? Can you do that for me, Winn?” She nodded, and I remember the look in her eyes, trading a mutual understanding with mine, that it was okay to forget what was coming, just for a little while.

Winn never got to answer that question. She never got to see me make friends, either. But I think she knew I’d still try, something in her eyes told me that.

Winn was nine and a half, then. But like I said, she picked up on everything. I still don’t know where she got it from, but it was good. And I wanted to make Winn right, about me making friends. Winn was right about everything, and not even a brain tumor could keep her from doing that.

One day, I want to be able to look up at the stars, at the sky and the clouds. At the rain that danced when it hit the concrete, and the rolling fog that never leaves until the Sun comes out.

The frostbitten windows, the light that comes through them, and the life that refuses to die, even in the cold and dark. One day I want to look up at Winn, and tell her.

“I made a friend, today.”

