

chapter 3. to cling to life

Crow spent a half-day crossing the city. It was a treacherous journey, even during the day. While most thieves preferred to stay obscure, she simply didn't have that luxury. Everyone knew Crow, or of Crow, and so she always had to be on her guard. That's because everyone knew Raven, or was under Raven's thumb in one way or another, and so they knew her by association.

She hated that people associated the two of them. She wondered if they thought she liked Raven, if they knew how much working with Raven disgusted her. She sighed. It didn't matter, really, one way or the other— but that thought did little to ease the sickly, prickling feeling this particular truth gave rise to.

Often, her worries about others took some part of her to burn over an open flame in her belly. It was a warm, suffocating feeling, like something was trying to break free from inside of her. She wished she could just be rid of it.

...

The target's estate was well-guarded, and often patrolled, but she did have one thing going for her: the size of the estate. It was a grand thing with four tall and proud stone walls hewn from pure whistone. In places like this, guards were far more likely to stay in predictable locations with regular patrols. The size of it made them lazy.

Their own overwhelming force made them complacent.

Of course, she was still going into the den of lions. *If* she was caught, her life was likely over. Best case scenario, she would be kept in a holding cell deep beneath the estate and prodded for information about Raven.

That, though, was a worry she could banish. If nothing else, she was confident in this one ability. The fear in the faces of others was often enough to clarify her talent. It was her one true gift— her perfect calling.

She just wished it didn't have to involve harming others.

Anyway. That's enough rest. She thought, rising up from her ball while dusting herself off. Before stepping out of the alley, she pulled up the hood of her cloak, double-checked each and every fastening of each and every thing attached to her, then slipped her arms under her cloak and held it loosely shut on the inside around its middle.

Noticing a small gap in the crowd on the street, she slinked out into it, weaving between tightly-pressed bodies, through gaps in long legs of creatures far larger than her, and all the way across the street to hide in the vegetation on its other side.

From there, she slipped between bushes and shrubs like wet soap, following a tiny trail of broken twigs left many, many moons ago. After three hundred breaths, she reached the base of the walls of the estate at one of six places where the vegetation met Cane's border.

Crow let go of her grasp on the cloak and reached out one arm from it, gently pulling tiny, flexile branches to the side, searching all along the wall for something. After another hundred breaths, she finally finds it: her entry point. A hole she'd dug many, many moons ago for a different job.

Well, at least it's going to plan. Could've been filled by now. Lucky.

She pressed herself into the dirt and slowly wormed her way through to the other side. She detested the earth that wormed its way between her feathers and made a mess of her fur, but after only fifteen breaths, she emerged from the other side. Crow gently lifted up the bundles of leaves and twigs that covered the tunnel's exit and pulled herself up into the shrubs that lined Cane's private gardens.

As she walked through them, the branches of the shrubs poked and prodded at her, as if to say, "you strange, unfamiliar thing. what brings you here?"

Crow wished to stoop down and smell them, to look for little bugs within their leafy homes, to gently caress each leaf and reflect on their textures, but she could not.

Her life was not yet her own, and she had no idea when it would be.

The thought of it made her grind her beak and wring together her wingarms underneath her cloak. Mind drifting, she floated along through the gardens passively, paying little attention to the world around her.

The pressure of false bondage was suffocating, each breath half of what it could be, each day wasted living someone else's life.

She was already pushing through the leaves at the edge of the garden before she managed to clear her mind.

Lucky again. She thought. *Though, there's never been any guards out this far before..*

There was still a long walk before reaching the mansion proper. She couldn't even see it, yet. Instead, rolling meadows and pockets of trees dotted the land around her. It was the perfect place to frolick.

Really, she'd love to.

Crow climbed a hill ahead, took eight paces to the right, then followed the hill back down to reach a small, but well-worn path used by the caretakers of this place. Despite never exploring it himself, Cane kept his estate meticulously well cared for. Perhaps a status symbol?

Oh, the wealthy... she thought, idly putting one paw after the other as she stared at the ground beneath her. The trees here twisted their trunks and branches together, making a form of makeshift tunnel, as if guiding her ahead with a singular purpose. It was not yet a thicket, she could still pass between them, so their embrace only served to remind her of her yearning.

she wasn't particularly worried about running into any caretakers. perhaps she should have been, but her mind had already drifted elsewhere.

was this really... right? could she keep stealing for Raven like this? when would it end? could it end? would she be indebted forever? did Serpie really mean that much to her? or...

was it just what Serpie represented?

A twig snapped, and she shot her head up to make contact with her good eye on the source of the sound. It was just a simple beast, and scampered away shortly after.

Even now, she felt nothing. No trepidation, no excitement. Her feelings had simply left her. And her head was so, so heavy—

..

and so her gaze was stuck to the dirt path ahead, just like her white-fluffed paws, which were tinged brown and orange from the sediment that clung to her like an old friend. when was the last time she was free to her own devices?

when did she stop living?

had she ever truly lived?

...

Cane's mansion was in view, now, just ahead at the top of the bald hill. Guards patrolled the outside regularly and even more were stationed inside. He was a meticulous man, Cane, never to leave a stone unturned, or in this case, a safe passage unmonitored.

Which, now that she thought about it...

No. Focus on the job. Second-guess after.

In her position, most thieves might wait for the safe passage of night before their attempt. Crow, though, need not. She had other ideas.

She'd made sure to arrive near midday, and so any moment, there would be a brief break in the regular schedule— most of the current patrol would move in to feed their fragile frames while the fresh patrol would come out to take their place.

She need only position herself and wait.

Though, it would take a bit of finesse. There were still guards on high watching the change in shift, and it's not exactly like she knew who would be changing out, nor where.

The best she could do was position herself at the base of the hill, at an uneven part of it, that formed a small blindspot in the form of a shallow ditch. Above this point was the corner of the mansion, which blocked sight from one of two guardstations. In order to take care of the other, she'd need an accomplice.

Of course, the city was full of willing accomplices.

Crow sunk back into the ditch, facing the woods behind her. Her good eye scanned the trees for nests, fluttering wings, any sign of life at all. After a moment, she giggled to herself after catching sight of a particular bird. Perhaps Cane *had* simply given up on stopping her from entering.

She took a deep breath, filling full her body with the stolen air. The muscles in her neck flexed and contorted, and she relaxed her tongue while leaving her beak to loll open.

Immediately, her cries rang out, and ere long a matching cry resonated with hers. In the span of ten breaths, the bird had hopped out onto its branch, to see its hidden friend.

And so, the heist officially began.

Like her, it was a little crow. Kin.

She snapped her beak shut and relaxed her muscles, then sat up straight in the dirt before locking eyes with the crow. She lifted up a claw to her face, then let out a slow, intentioned whisper along it up towards the crow.

"we. are. each other."

And so, she **called** upon their **sympathy**, and the bond was formed. In two breaths, the crow had fluttered down into her embrace. It was a perfect moment she would make permanent without hesitation.

Alas, the flow of life never ends nor pauses nor listens to the whims of poor girls who long only for-

It was time. She could hear the guards bustling in a way they had not been moving before.

Crow caressed the little bird's head within her hands and muttered a brief incantation.

"take this part of Me. see as I do. understand what must be done."

The crow fluttered and spasmed, falling out of her embrace before struggling and writhing on the ground in pain. Crow sat patiently. It would be over soon.

In the span of three breaths, the bird regained its posture. It sat lower, now, with a self-defeated stance and the light of consciousness burning behind its eyes. It nodded its head towards Crow, chirped a brief farewell, and flew off towards the guard station.

Now, of course, for the hard part.

Crow poked her head up over the ditch. The instant her kin had pulled the overseer's gaze away, she launched herself over the lip of the hole and dashed up the hill to the mansion proper.

Her target was a low side wall, where barrels of rain received their fill from the roof above. The wood was grainy and coarse, but she managed to pull herself up and over without gaining any new splinters. She scampered up, now, across the roof and into a valley between two dormers that stuck up like spines.

In the side of one was a small window with wooden slats for ventilation. She simply removed them. The ease of it was intended to make life easy for servants with little thought as to its security. Thieves, of course, typically came in bigger sizes.

Just before slipping inside, Crow cast a single glance to the overseer in the hightower of the guardstation. He swatted at the little crow, which harried him, pecking relentlessly, fighting for Crow's right to live on in its stead.

Crow averted her gaze in shame and slipped inside with little issue. After, she took the time to replace the slats as she'd found them. She never, ever, squandered respite. Her exit was elsewhere, of course, and it was a relaxing change of pace to fix something for once. She was so tired of breaking and rending and taking and...

she sighed, turned, and flicked her hands idly. forward, back, forward, back, as if flinging some imaginary stain from her fingertips. her body made the motion all on its own, often as her mind started to wander.

Her current room was coated in a soft twilight from the dormer's window to her east. It was a plain, wooden thing, not too dissimilar from a beggar's coffin. There were cobwebs and the

occasional bug, with a tiny rounded door, scarcely larger than her, to her west. The roof itself was just above her, close enough for her to reach up and touch. The wood, there, was smooth on her fingers. A nice touch for a fancy home.

Now, what came next? She ran through the list in her head.

First, identify current surroundings and secure the area. While doing this, listen for signs that an intruder has been spotted. It wouldn't be so hard to believe that the guard she sent the crow after had connected the dots and raised the alarm. Still, even in that case, hidden as she was, she still had the upper hand.

Second, find Cane's study and ensure there is enough time to search it alone.

Third, locate the item of importance- his trade ledgers- and secure them.

Fourth, leave while drawing minimal attention. Of course, this step was more of a luxury. As long as she got to leave at all, she'd be happy.

Her hands continued to flutter as she paced the room. right. only one way forward.

She opened a small half-door to the adjoining room and found naught but cobwebs and decrepit wooden crates. Ordinarily, she'd pick through them for the best shinies, but unfortunately she did not have the luxury of time. There were too many unknowns in this heist.

The entire room spanned perhaps a quarter of the mansion's total size. It was a largely unused, unfurnished attic space, filled primarily with sweltering heat and the suffocating dark. The only source of light came from cracks in the floor below, which in turn only received light through pinprick holes in the ceiling below that.

She felt as though she'd been swallowed whole. This simply wouldn't do. Her right hand snuck into a pouch fastened a little too tight to the small of her back. She pierced into a glowworm with her bentfinger's claw, pulled it out, and then pulled the pouch back shut with the same hand's smallfinger and a flick of its wrist.

With her other hand, she fished out a large, moist leaf that had gotten stuck between her feathers in the woods. She wrapped it tightly around the glow-worm, then wrung the life out of it. Its husk cracked and split, and she could feel the paste shoot out and coat the leaf beneath her fingers.

uchgh!

She flicked the remaining paste from her claw and let the leaf fall open. Immediately, the paste sparked and popped, then sputtered and hissed as the telltale yellow flames rose up to greet her. A poor light, as always, but it was better than nothing.

Crow perused the room, looking for flaws, listening for the sounds of the estate, and searching for a way down- *internally*- as exiting the house was not an option at this point.

Far in the corner of the attic, in a section to its own, both dim and din met her from below. A soft and faint yellow glow rose up from a little hole in the floor, and the sounds of a heated exchange became more obvious as she approached. Inspecting closer, it seemed that some fool had simply painted over a hole they were likely meant to fix. Looking up, she spied freshly-replaced wood. Some issue with rot, more than likely. She dug at the wood with her claw until the joint between old and new became visible. She smiled. Rot indeed, and a hack of a job to fix it.

Of course, not even Cane could prepare for everything, could he?

She nestled between the boxes and curled up in the corner of the attic on the floor, pressing two of her open ears onto it to meet the sounds beneath.

Crash!

"Wolf. Tell me plainly. Is this some ill-mannered joke?"

"No."

Wolf was.. *here*? That was strange. Cane had a falling out with Wolf who-knows-how-many moons ago, ironically because of something Crow'd stolen.

"No matter." Cane's voice belied his intentions. "There are many, many other ways to see to this matter. You were but one of many contingencies."

"I'm leaving, then."

"Let's not get it twisted, now. *wolf*." His name was a slur on Cane's tongue.

Wolf remained silent. Likely sizing up his opponent, raising his hackles, and readying himself to pounce. Surely, he could smell the blood that would be spilled before he even came here.

Perhaps, then,

splat

he was ready,

thud.

for his untimely end.

"Clean this up."

..

Five breaths had passed, yet no sole had lifted even slightly from the floor.

"But first, let's bring the rest of them here to see. With me."

The clack of riding boots on hard stone signalled the end of her brief respite. In moments, the last of the footfalls faded away, leaving open her last opportunity for quite some time.

She bolted up and gathered the remnants of rot from the wood above with her claw. Then, she stooped down and spread the wet and flaking wood pieces generously around the mousehole beneath her.

Air poured into her with a hiss as she rushed to hold her anxiety within.

It's just as I practiced with Serpie. I need not worry.

She reached up into the narrow gap between her arm and chest and pulled the **stopwatch** from its secret nesting place beside her second heart.

The glass was shattered, but its motion was unceasing, just as life was. Truthfully, she knew not how to decipher its readings, and had no interest in learning.

tick.

Crow fixed her gaze to the tiny arms and stuck her free claws deep into the wood surrounding the mousehole.

tick tick.

Her breath poured out— how long had she been holding it?— and she imagined the arms spinning like a windmill caught in a fearsome gale.

tick tick, tick tick.

She visualized the progression of life into unlife, of bloom unto decay, the grand progression of all things,

tick tick tick tick

to be made, and unmade,

ticktick ticktick ticktick

to come from light,

she squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

and become darkness again.

ticktickticktickticktickticktickticktick

She wrenched her claws from the wood as it shifted and crackled beneath her. She opened her eyes and saw the arms of the watch spinning rapidly in opposite directions, tracing some pattern, some secret about the world, into the empty air.

Beneath her, the rot had taken hold, spreading rapidly through the floor beneath her and up into the wall.

In an instant, she'd tucked the **stopwatch** away and filled her hands anew with her **bashing stone**. She reached up over her head with it, then

SMASH!

the wood crumbled apart and she tumbled straight through the thin veneer propping up the hack's paint job. The debris landed around her like woodchips, though she herself hit the ground with a loud *thump*.

Hopefully no prying ears were listening in. She should have some moments to herself yet.

Immediately, she rose up and tried to scan the room, but everything was blurry yet again. Crow hissed and cast her gaze above, where her new eyepatch dangled from a jagged splinter.

Her feathers stood on end, and she clapped her free hand over the exposed eye. Maybe it would be helpful, but it wasn't now, **and she had shit to do!!**

She rushed to the edge of the room, skipped over Wolf's corpse, dropped the metal storm bar to block the door's frame, then snapped, bolted, looped, and connected the various other security fastenings.

"They work both ways, dumbass.." she muttered as she crossed, slower now, over to his desk.

It was a little cliché, but the best move here was, in fact, to sit down at the desk and look for clues. Though, just for fun, she spun in a little circle first and fell onto the chair with all her weight.

foof!

She sighed. There was never time to rest on the comfy things; there was only ever time to rush through the uncomfortable ones. alas.

The desk was as she left it last time she was here. Simple, plain, no hidden drawers, documents strewn about uselessly and carelessly. It was all for show, of course. Cane never left anything important just lying about.

The whitestone floor was new, though, and knowing Cane, it surely hid new secrets to uncover. Crow reached out with her talons to tap it, but was too high up, and so she dropped down and searched the floor with her fingers. It was spotless.

She brought her other hand down to feel around, though, the moment she did, the floor started shifting from whitestone to some murky, dirty mixture of brown and white. Again, the new eye made her vision blurry, but she need not see. There would be no visual clues.

The floor was a haze of brown grains, as in wood, mixed with shiny whitestone, though her fingers knew the truth that her eyes did not. but—

Didn't Cane have stained hardwood before?

She shut her flesh eye and focused deep on the grainy pattern. In seconds, the floor shifted before her. The feeling of the texture was the same to her fingerpads, but the floor now appeared just as it did all those moons ago.

Crow was stunned. There was precedent for this, sure— her **stopwatch** was proof enough of that, but this, still, it was—

she let go of the grainy pattern, mentally, and focused hard on the space that was impossible to see, the space that must have come between the removal of one floor and fitting of the next. For an instant, the section beneath her fingertips vanished from view, long enough for her to see the familiar shape of a fitted wooden frame running beneath the whitestone.

Based on its shape, it held some container, as it was set between the framing of the floor itself.

She grinned, ear-to-ear. Perhaps the pain *was* worth it.

With her bashing stone, she set out with reckless abandon,

CRACK!

again,

CRACK!

again!

CRACK!

AGAIN!

her breath heaved out, hot and heavy,

SMASH!

and the thin plate of stone yielded to her, falling to pieces held up only by the container beneath.

By now, her candle burned short. Surely someone was on the way after that commotion. And there was so much left to do..

The door strained against its hinges as something slammed into it. As expected. The storm bar was not yet even creaking, so she had a minute yet.

Crow stabbed her claws into the wooden box and lifted it up. A simple lock. Such defenses would be pierced in the span of a single breath before her expert assault.

In the corner of the room, the door continued to strain against its hinges and splinters blasted out of its frame and shot into the room like tiny daggers. She could hear the alarm being raised throughout the estate as a cacophony of horns rang out, signalling the end of the time she had left to think. Luckily, she no longer needed to.

From within her neckfur she procured a long and flat metal shim, and with it, a small pronged tine used for eating shellfish.

tick, click, shick scrit click click, tick!

And in a single breath, the box yielded its contents to her, as all boxes did. Crow loosened the large bag strapped to her back and spun it around to her front while flipping it open. There was little time, so she dumped all of the contents of the box straight into it, fastened it shut, and slid it back into its rightful place between her wings. Then, she pulled the bag's straps fully through its metal loops, squeezing the whole of it tight against her feathers.

Already, she couldn't wait to rip it off when she got home. That, though, could wait.

SMASH!

The door's bar was nearly bent in half, now, and the metal groaned with the strain. She had perhaps ten breaths left.

Crow vaulted over the desk and landed in a squat down by Wolf's corpse. His kin deserved his belongings, not Cane. She looted him in moments, the chill and stench of the grave creeping

deep into her feathers as she did. His necklace was cold against her, so too were his bracelets. His mementos, parchments, and trinkets filled the remaining space in her pouches, and

CRASH!

Crow flung herself to the far wall just as a massive spined tail pierced through the air she had just been breathing. It would have been a clean decapitation, just as it was for Wolf. As quickly as it appeared, the tail retracted back to Cane, who fully blocked the door before her.

Cane's feral gaze met her own. In that moment, they were simple beasts, fighting over the scraps that let them cling to life for just one more day.

They held the standoff for three breaths. No words need be exchanged. Each could sense the other's intentions. Each body understood the other perfectly, communicating in a language that minds could never grasp.

Cane held up a sickly pale hand, wrinkled and covered in scars, then stepped fully into the room. His staff dispersed from behind him, leaving to cover the other exits.

"Why don't you work for m-"

Instantly, she forced herself back with her wings

CRRRRASH!

Cane's tail now resided where she had a moment ago, its deadly spines flared out. Had she been thinking, she'd be dead. He only spoke tricks. He would never work with someone he could not control.

Of course, two bodies could never deceive each other. That was a job for minds alone. And so, drowning in the rhythm of her flesh, his words could not reach her.

Cane began to slowly walk forward as his tail retreated fully into him. Simultaneously, his arms writhed and wriggled as if crawling with innumerable maggots. Their flesh morphed and shifted before cracking fully open as heaving muscles and spines pierced out from them, dripping with blood and slime. The arms themselves began to stretch and fall to the floor like chains which he began to twirl in a sickening rhythm.

As with the arms of her **stopwatch**, his arms were offset, spinning in opposite directions, tracing some secret pattern into the air that only Cane could know.

"If you survive, you should pick up fighting," he sighed, scowling.

For anyone else, he would have said nothing.

One of Cane's spines flew towards her. She remained motionless, not daring to even breathe.

The spine sailed straight through the gap between her neck and shoulder, coming within an antslength of her flesh, then crashed through the window behind her, shattering it.

Her body understood the warning. Her rhythm shifted, now, to a low, volatile rumble as old as life itself. The rhythm of cornered prey that would do anything to see another day.

Every piece of her resonated with the same, perfect tone. All of her was consumed by a single, perfect understanding. Finally, she had *let go*.

For once, she

was truly

free.

[inhale]

Cane pounced towards her, his arm slamming the ground beneath her feet. Spines shot out as he did, but they found purchase only within his own walls.

His other arm came from the side, tracing a path through where her chest had been. Her wings propelled her under it, straight into him,

ssschhk!

she burst his eye with her free claw,

hhssssssss!

and ripped off his lips with her beak.

His arms careened towards her, but she had already kicked off his chest and flown through the shattered window.

Cane dropped low and leaped forward, closing the distance in an instant, body thrumming with the rhythm of a predator at the end of a hunt as he fell through the air towards her.

Though, Crow's hand was already to her second heart.

tick!

And in an instant, she was gone again.

[exhale]

Crow was kneeling exactly where she had been only seven breaths ago. The entire room shook and books and paintings alike were thrown to the floor as Cane slammed his arms into the Mansion's wall, stopping his fall.

Her beak snapped shut around the stolen lips as her legs snapped open and threw her forward through the door. Instantly, she was noticed by the guards, and already heavy footfalls slammed down into the floor towards her.

Crow's claws and talons stabbed deep into the hallway's rug as she broke into full pelt. Now, others were simply a red haze in her view, and the world was a nothing spinning tapestry of colors.

The rug shredded beneath her as she landed on her claws and pulled forward off of them, then landed on her talons and kicked off of them. Her entire body rang out in perfect harmony, each movement coming to her as instinctually as breathing.

A tall and narrow red haze blocked the path before her. She leaped up into it, latched onto it with her full body, and ripped through it just as she did the carpet. Blood dripped freely from her form and coated her mouth as she hit the ground at full pelt again, stride unbroken. Her tongue swirled the blood around like a fine wine, and then, she swallowed it whole with the lips like stew.

The world faded into a blur, and ere long, faded along into the background entirely. Her feelings extended naught past the hot breath that fell from her and the texture of the world where it embraced her flesh fully. The sounds of the world were dull, now, and she was suspended fully in the bliss of living.

Another hallway crossed, another draught of blood consumed.

She was headed upwards, now, along flights of whitestone stairs that became stained red as she tore up and across them. Each haze she came across exploded into fine mist that poured down the stairs and coated her in a fine sheen.

At the top of the stairs, light pierced into her vision, and she tore through the opening with haste, bounding directly onto the top of the mansion and into the free air.

Slowly, she rose on shaky hindlegs, bathing in the light. Crow tilted her head up, letting all of the air she held dear spill out around her.

Even bathed in light, she was alone in the dark, fully disconnected from the world around her. The warmth of the light was cold against her skin, which prickled in the fresh air. Her fur stood up on end with her feathers, and twitched with the groans and shifts of the world around her.

She paced forward until her talons hit empty air, and then she stumbled back and gripped the edge with her talons. The world spun around her, or, was she the one spinning? Her body was so, so heavy..

Crow stumbled forward again, face dropping down, eyes catching the open maw of **the abyss**. It welcomed her, inky tendrils spreading freely from a central puddle that consumed the world around it, rapidly, and ravenously, eating away at existence itself. In moments, she, too, would be consumed.

"Is that **it**, then?" A voice broke into her mind.

Crow spun around rapidly, but there was no one around. Her lips curled to form words, but they failed her, and instead she sputtered, tongue slipping on blood.

her mind roused from slumber, slowly grinding back to life as she looked up into the sky ahead of her.

Crow tilted her head, then, back down, staring into **the abyss**, which waited expectantly. Ravenously.

her body spasmed and shuddered and twisted, and her head shook rapidly as she flinched backwards, falling onto her ass.

ow.

her tailbone was surely bruised after that.

Crow's vision pulsed, becoming bright, then dark, then bright again. Heavy footfalls sounded behind her. Sets of them, in unison, joined by another, which came accompanied by the cacophony of whirling spines.

she fell forward and pulled herself to the edge, coughing stolen blood out into **the abyss**.

"It's alright, dear. Just **let go**."

And so she collapsed forward,
careening over the edge.

Her wings spread on their own, one last gift from her body,

and she sailed over the abyss,

clipped her ankles against the outer wall at the front of the estate,

then spun out of control, whirling through the air, gliding over the street,

where she crashed down and crumpled into a writhing heap amidst the feet and legs of the bustling midday crowd.

"...fffuck.." she gasped, coughing and sputtering and heaving, as she dragged herself forward.

Passersby split around her, parting like a river, either paying her no mind or regarding her only with disgust.

To her, she was in crisis.

To them, she was just in the way.

This, too, was life.