

Chapter 14.

Crow

So, this was it.

A new beginning.

She didn't really know what that meant, quite yet,

but it didn't matter.

She was happy just to be alive, to feel, to even have the
privilege of knowing the names of her feelings.

She was still meeting them all, but,

they would all greet her eventually.

Some were just more shy than others.

a mossy plateau under
a canopy of trees;
two figures, far, far
away, blurry and gray
lounge together under
the moon and stars
all about them is a
developing city,
and they are safe
behind small walls}

///

a girl floats, face-up, in
a milky-white pond.
she is naked, and alone,
save for the glow of the
moon that illuminates
her pale body.
she is covered in scars,
from head to toe, and
lines score her body

"Dear Crow," she spoke, confidently and firmly, as she sat in the
mouth of the cave and looked fondly at each and all of her
pasts.

"There are many things I might say to you, but..."

tick. tick. tick.

"There is much yet to be done,"

"And, in truth, I wish to keep this simple."

tick. tick. tick. tick.

"I'm sorry, Crow." It still felt so weird, to address herself so
directly, but... well, she was just about *all* weird and *no*
ordinary, so perhaps it suited her. So many things suited her,
she had begun to realize. Like dresses. And moss.

"I'm sorry that I ignored you, and that I lied to you, and that I
spent every moment, well... avoiding, you. I bet that was pretty
painful. It was. Well," Crow sighed, "It was all I knew how to do,
really. I don't know if I could've come to where we are now any
sooner. But, um,"

two figures embrace
in amber light at the
top of **the spire**,
everything about
them is left blank,
hollow, empty,
but the environment
and city are painted
in such vivid detail}

///

a girl, drowning,
shreds at the water,
trying to claw her way
to the surface.
her claws cut straight
through the painting
itself, leaving holes
that expose the cave's
wall.
she is weighed down
by nothing.

as if she was simply
stitched together from
spare parts.
corpses line the sides
of the pond, making
mounds upon mounds
of bodies,
a full wall of limbs that
separates her from the
world at large
her eyes are empty and
milky-white, like the
moon.
there are buildings all
around the pond, and
she floats in their
shadows.

///

a girl is kneeled down
on the ground in a pool
of blood, hunched fully
over, where she
devours a carcass

"I'm here?" She asked, flesh eye open wide and pleading. She
stared for many *ticks* into the wide-open maw of her own
memorial.

"I'm sorry for hurting you, Crow. I'm sorry for hurting myself.
I... I..." But as her breath fluttered, a warmth spread through
her, igniting the latent feeling of belonging in her veins, of
purpose, of satisfaction, and she grit her teeth and forced her
mouth open to continue,

"I forgive you, Crow,"

tick.

She sucked in a deep breath that filled her belly and chest, then
sighed it all out, eyebrows drawn together, eyes shut.

Then, she found her resolve to finish it, and she opened her
eyes anew.

"For everything," she whispered.

She could not tell if the weight that had borne so heavy on her
shoulders, the yoke that she had determined unto herself, had

her skin is pale and
perfect, and she is
young, and her eyes
are free and wild, still
innocent,
she is not scared, but
angry

///

a girl is curled up in a
ball in a dirty,
rectangular pit,
it's a clearly-marked
grave, but the writing
on the stone is
illegible
she seems to be
having some kind of
tea party with the
countless stuffed
creatures surround
her.
some have been
shoved into little

beneath her. her head
is fully inside of the
body, up underneath
the ribcage, and her
sticky, matted hair
flows all around,
tangled in everything.

in front of her, the city
burns, and the others
living there, mere black
shades in the distance,
simply stand and watch
it, heads turned up to
the embers that
become stars in the air.

///

two skeletons sit with
linked hands on a
riverbank. one of them
leans their head on the
other's shoulder, and

simply lifted off in flight, chasing after her words, or if it had
simply been incinerated under the blazing pyre of her
conviction.

She was **different**, now, of that, she was certain.

Crow stuck out her hand and turned it around in the air,
staring at it, watching the muscles under her skin with
amazement.

All throughout her body was **heat, connection**, and
understanding. She marveled at every simple movement of her
body, at how each could feel so **real**, so **tangible**, that she need
not float through life, but rather, she could simply wade
through it as any other, fighting not against the tide, but
coasting along with it, allowing it to pull her deeper, further,
away from the long-distant shore she had just departed.

She traced the lines of her black-purple veins and focused on
the sensation of the borders between her many metal **pieces**
and her flesh.

For so long, she had considered their proper belonging to begin
when the sensation of them ended. A *piece* was only part of her
when it was indistinguishable from the whole, when its identity

burrows— her nails
are caked with dirt—
while others are
strewn around in the
pit with her, clearly
posed into certain

actions
the tea, though, looks
clean, steaming, and
delicious, and while
every cup is full,
there is no teapot to
be seen

everything outside of
the grave, save for its
stone, is blurry and
impossible to make

out,
simply a washed-out
mix of different grays.
the grave, meanwhile,
is full of bright and
vibrant colors,

the other clutches the
first one close.

had been erased, when it had been fully subsumed as part of
her.

and even the brown
dirt is a lively amber
shade

in the flowing river,
their reflection, blurry,
shines through, of two
smiling, laughing, and
crying girls simply
enjoying a moment
together.

She did not know if that was wrong, but now,

she was deciding that it would be *different*.

///

little spiders and
insects have made a
home out of the
bright-white skeletons,
which sit in the dirt of
the forest.

They were a *piece* of her, just as any other— why feel only her
flesh and bone when truly she was more than that?

And so she would feel it all. She would *make* herself feel it all.
Her composition made her no lesser than any others, and that,
she feared,

included herself.

A problem for another day, perhaps.

///

A dark and wide abyssal
cavern with bright
white spikes split open,
a bright red tongue
lolling out, as a girl

For now, she was simply coming to terms with herself. She was
barely at the starting line for a race she never knew she was in,
but now, she realized, it was one that would have to be won
before her life was done.

Before I die, Crow swore to herself, *I will live at least a single
day as my true self*. And she stood there, feeling her own

Crow is plummeting
from the sky, arms
whirling around in
circles. Thousands of
bodylengths below
her is **Crow's
Landing**, the little
clearing just outside
this cave and through
the trees where she
always **awoke**. At this
height, it is naught
but a tiny green dot
surrounded by trees,
and the entire world
is visible below her.
Escrow exists in a
small oasis,
surrounded by trees

dangled above it, her arms held above her head by massive fingertips that crushed down hard on her wrists. The strength of the grip had broken her arms, which were limp, and bruised, and bleeding, and despite dangling above the maw, she did not flinch, nor spasm, nor writhe. She simply hung there, eyes closed, lips parted in a sigh, as if to say, "*again?*"

Her body was covered in scars left by the the fangs she dangled above. And yet, those fangs were not bloodstained, despite

conviction rolling through her, reveling in the blissful freedom from her intrusive thoughts. They did not call her dramatic. Nor did they call her a crybaby, overserious, or a failure.

But she did feel those words, as doubts, worming and tunneling through her muscles, burrowing just beneath her skin. She felt those thoughts like bugs crawling within her, and she allowed them to writhe, and eventually,

they fell still, and only her conviction remained.

The everburning fire.

That was that, then.

And so Crow began to head down the cave towards its end. She hopped, lightly, across the raised flatstones that poked out from the rocky, uneven floor.

There, she picked up the glow-worm stick once again and repeated the process of lighting it. The hissing yellow flames reached out into the dark and pointed all around to all the things she could now see clearly with eyes unclouded.

and hills, and then as soon as the trees end, to all sides,

there is nothing. It is simply a black and dusty blank slate. The weirdest desert you could imagine— as if the whole thing was just pulverized coal. And it was *endless*.

In this painting, Crow had her wings, and they were spread wide, but were broken, and she was falling, fast, tears streaming down her face, beading up at her chin, and disappearing off into the air.

how routine it all
looked. The owner of
the fingertips was
nowhere to be seen—
the black-and-gray
fingertips disappeared
into a thick, veiny wrist,
which disappeared
again into a twisted,
broken arm the size of
an ancient tree-trunk,
which then pointed
down and disappeared
somewhere behind the
wide-open mouth.

The moon shone down
from directly above and
its milky-white beams
drew together to draw
a circle on the tongue,
illuminating the girl's
rightful place.

She reached out immediately, tenderly, and caressed a new-old
painting left behind by her past self.

It does not matter how long it takes.

Crow leaned in close and began to trace along each and every
brush stroke as if she was leaving them again for the first time.

*Until I am done **looking**—*

Her breath spilled out across the paint, cold and light,

*—I will pursue **it**.*

Each painting told a full life's story— especially when paired
with the sight of the Crow that had painted it. Each and every
one was truly different, even as they were each the same being.
She had tried so, so many times to find a body that made her
happy, and every time, she had failed. She had experimented
with clothing, with new body parts, with metal pieces, with
jewelry, with dye and pigments and tattoos, with engravings
and brands and scars, but in each and every Crow was a misery
that could not be divorced from her frame nor her art.

She bore her chest to
the sky above her
while her head, feet,
and arms all pointed
down to the ground
deep below. It was
such an unnatural,
twisted way of falling,
and she grimaced in
pain too great to bear.

///

a bleeding Crow is
hugging herself in a
serene, soft, and fluffy
bedroom decorated in
pastels and soft and
vibrant colors. bugs of
all kinds, living and
thriving, are in
decorated glass jars
all around the room
on countless shelves,
and she herself is

///

WELCOME HOME is
painted, in blood,

above a bleak, aseptic
hallway, with a polished
whitestone floor.

it is painted with
perfect meticulousness.

the cave, here, has even
been ground perfectly
flat and smooth, the
holes in its surface
sealed shut, for further
accuracy in the
painting.

on either side of the
hall are giant red doors,
at least ten bodylengths
tall, and they are set
evenly in the two side
walls, one after the

No matter what they had tried, the pain had never gone away,
and it leaked into their stories, into their paintings, into their
lives, and snuck up onto their faces, dragging down the corners
of their eyes and adding sallow hues to their skins. It was so
obvious, in hindsight.

And still, trying so hard, and so often, she had failed, time and
time again, to recreate the first life she had ever lived. Her first
life, when things were simpler. Her first life, when things made
sense.

Her first life, the last time she had ever truly been herself at all.

Ever since then, she had lived as a shadow of herself, hanging
over her own life like a spectre, watching on as her husk acted
and lived for her.

It was all just so, so obvious, now that she saw it laid out before
her.

She wondered if the other Crows had learned for themselves
what she had, after coming here.

She wondered if any of them searched for **it**, just as she did.

laying, smiling in bliss,
in a fluffy bed,
covered in tangled
blankets.

on closer inspection,
her eyes have been
cut out, and her lips
have been stitched
shut into a permanent
smile.

a door leading out of
her room is open in
the corner of the
painting, and from it,
shadows spill forth
into her room, the
tendrils licking along
the floor, searching,
ravenously,
expectantly. waiting.
they are spilling
quickly, and despite
being wispy and thin,

other, until they
disappear at the
horizon.

one of the doors is
open, and inside,
gray-black-tan-white
fleshy blobs are piled
like lumpy sacks. They
are spilling out into the
hall from within the
room, which is so full of
them that they tumble
out by the hundreds,
and they are
illuminated only by the
regular lights in the
ceiling of the hall.

Covering the fleshy
blobs are eyes, mouths,
ears, legs, as if the
thousands of corpses
had simply been melted

Or was her quest just a new struggle borne of new struggles?

It doesn't really matter, does it?

And so, glow-worm after glow-worm, she pushed through the
hall of her own memories, fingers tracing the lines she had so
carefully laid down for herself, following the tracks of her own
story as it spiraled and continued along, year after year, season
into season.

She had spent so much time and effort recording her own
history.

But... *why?*

Fear gripped tight around her heart and held her still as she
looked upon the next painting. She already knew the answer.

She was just too scared to admit it to herself.

But she could no longer lie to herself, now. She would not allow
it.

Crow stepped forward and caressed the next painting, sliding
her hands along its surface, following the brush strokes along
and along into the center of it, where they met, at the center of

they have already
rolled all the way over
to the foot of her bed
and have begun
reaching up its sides
towards her.

together and reshaped
like clay.

a whirlpool. There, two hands formed from the waves met each
other in the middle of the storm.

Beneath it all, painted
in blood, is just two
more words,

Beneath them was the **abyss**, and all around them was
destruction, unlife, decay.

END IT.

But the hands were not dark and hollow, no, they were bright,
radiant, gleaming. They held each other up, and in unity,
strength had been found. Even in delaying the inevitable fall
into the abyss, purpose had been grasped.

She painted it so she would not forget it.

She painted it so she would not be forgotten.

She painted it so that her useless, futile life could have some
sliver of purpose in the end.

Even if she would pass on, some little speck of herself would
remain on these fragile stone walls. The memory of her would
cling to reality like a drowning sailor to their rock and resting
place,

her countless memories splattered on the walls in inky blood
that came in every color of the rainbow.

In truth, they were not paintings, but skeletons,
because the only way she had learned to live at all
was by leaving herself behind.

And that, she supposed,
is why they each told the full story of a life lived.

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Days passed by, and still, she remained.

She had made the cave a home, now, if only for this moon. Her tireless work continued throughout all her waking hours— she ignored her hunger and quenched her thirst only when she felt she might die with tree sap. When she slept, it was for scarcely two thousand breaths before she rose again to continue staring into her countless secrets and memories.

It was exhausting, she learned, to live only in the past.

But she could not bring herself to stop— *there was just so much to be learned!* And her past selves had tried so damn hard, and recorded so damn much, and she felt compelled, no, *obligated*, to learn from her own history, to learn *everything* about herself.

To do any less would be a grave insult, wouldn't it?

Even days in, though, it was as if she had hardly even started. Each question led to six more, and before she knew it, she was awash beneath a surging tide of them that reached higher above her than any mountain could hope to stand.

It didn't really matter, though.

igh of relief signaled the start of a brief respite. She slid down the wall, now slick with her perspiration.

he didn't die. She was still alive. In one piece. She'd really managed it. Despite everything.

all, it was dark, claustrophobic, and warm: all the pieces she needed to feel comfort. Everything

dreaming of more— and the more she dreamed of it, the more she needed it

f her stopwatch was met with a single tap of her finger

ly, she simply leaned back, breathing deep

[imhale]

And with one long exhale—

[exhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaale]

—she stilled her heart.

There was no need for her to run, anymore. But still, she had not earned the right to rest. That would not come for a while longer, she knew.

And so, she rose, and began to walk yet again,

on feet even more tired than her aching heart.

She had finally found one of the things she wanted. Right now, all she wanted was to find a wildflower field and frolick there. She wanted to weave little crowns of thorny long-stem blooms, and twirl around and around again in a perfect, frilly dress, illuminated only by the moon, kept company only by the stars and bugs and moss,

free from all cares and worries.

But she could not, for that was not her reality.

At least, not yet. She would have to fight for it, even if she would not survive to see it. It didn't matter if she did, or did not,

because she would die, dear Reader.

That was certain.

She not only understood, but accepted, that, and she was ready to charge headlong towards her own end. If she would fall, then she would do it chasing what she wanted, no, *needed*, from her life. If she were to spurn the pursuit of her own life any longer, now that she knew how to live it— then she might as well simply turn in for her final, and longest, sleep.

Any salvation she might find in this life would not simply come to her. No, unless she ripped it out of the world with her own two bloodstained hands, she would not have it.

The cave was far behind her, now, and she crossed once more through the clearing where she had **awoken**, all those years ago. The bed of moss was perfect, but she did not stop to rest.

Instead, she found that all she *could* do,

was simply move forward.

,

After only 37 *ticks* of her stopwatch, she had crossed the clearing. After only 117 more, she exited the woods. Then, only 11 ticks later, she came to stand on the cliff that overlooked all of Escrow.

Crow gripped the edge of the cliff with her talons, and leaned forward, spreading her wings and wingarms wide.

She wasn't quite sure where her instincts would take her. Even still, she tilted over the edge, eyes shut, and tucked in her wings and wingarms to her sides. She drowned out everything, all she was, and then,

she

let

go.

Cocooned in the rushing wind, she felt it all slip away, thoughts replaced by feelings, feelings combining all into one—

the bliss of weightlessness,

the bliss of allowing herself to fall.

That, too, began to smolder, then char to embers, before igniting and burning away all at once as adrenaline forced its way through her body and set her senses alight.

Alarm, panic, but also—

peace.

She opened up her arms and unfurled her wings, and immediately, the wind caught her, and she began to glide. Letting out a single, smooth breath, she finally allowed herself, whole body alight with the sensation of living,

to open her eyes.

Before her was Escrow. The only place that existed, and one that she had never been able to call home. She wanted that to be different. She wanted it all to be so, so different. And she knew her life would not be different unless she began to approach it differently. And so, eyes fixed and focused ahead, she decided on one single change:

she could ignore herself no longer.

She understood and accepted that.