

The Smell of Burning Feathers

Chapter 18

Crow picked apart the soft, pillowy moss of the hill with her talons as she stared at the ancient metal stake. Just ahead of the stake was a normal, gentle slope where the hill curved up and roots reached over it, clumps of dirt held in their winding grasp. If she so chose, the door to **Raven's Laboratory** would be revealed. All she had to do was **bind** to the stake.

She had been wondering, though, on her walk here. *Why* was this thing the single tether to the laboratory? There were no other entrances, nor ways to reveal one. There was only this wrought-iron thing with little horizontal lines scored into it at irregular intervals. It was rusted, and crumbling from the top-down, **and still,**

it stood strong and steadfast after unknown centuries.

Crow closed the last two bodylengths between her and the stake. Immediately, she felt it pulling towards her, beckoning her closer, asking her to **bind** to it. She did not respond, instead allowing the stake to continue patting at her soul as she lifted up her eyepatch, carefully pulled it off of her head and out through her hair, then tucked it away into an inner pocket.

Then, she callously swatted away the **binding** attempt as she straightened her clothing and assumed a rigid, straight-backed posture. She rolled her neck once, then twice—

—then one last time.

For luck.

Crow's metal eye whined and deep purple light began surging out from behind the void within her iris. As it did, she reached out and caressed the stake, willing herself to look beyond it and into the past where it once dwelt. She thought it would take many *ticks*, perhaps some tuning or practice, but immediately, she saw the world shift and

swirl as the years slinked away. All around her, everything distorted and twisted. In a single moment, the whole world was a blur, the next, a smear—

scared of losing the connection, she forced her flesh eye shut and her mind to relax.

It's just like Finch said...

She let go, mentally.

It felt like a wet fish flying out of her grip.

...right?

And once she'd let go, it was gone, her **control** was gone,

and she was being

pulled,

no,

d

r

a

g

g

e

d

down

into

the past

The moss beneath her feet slipped away, and the trees all
around spread away, and she was left, alone, in a packed-dirt
clearing cramped with various tools, supplies, and rubble of all
kinds. There, beneath her feet, was some kind of long and old
woolen coat, and laying on her back upon it,

was *her*,

She met the unmistakable gaze of her first self—

she was slipping away,
bleeding from too many places
from wounds far too serious,
and—

—it took all of Crow's strength not to pull her gaze away and
cast the vision back into the past where it belonged.

Perhaps she should have.

As she hesitated, a tall figure appeared beside the first Crow.

"*Before I die*," they whispered as they bent down over the dying Crow.

She had only moments left—

"I will bring you back."

they both knew that,

"For more than a moment, I hope,"

felt that,

Crow giggled,

coughing and sputtering.

She could hardly feel her limbs

drifting away

Everything was just...

disappearing at last
into

the ocean

the tide would carry her away soon.

"You will live at least a single day as your true self."

'Ah...!' Crow gasped, and sighed,

"More, if it is possible."

'...promise?'

"I swear it on my life."

Crow looked troubled.

No— *displeased*.

Her hand was raised, a single pinky finger

extended.

"I..." The figure sighed, then grinned.

"Yes, Crow. I... **pinky promise**." They relented,
locking

pinky fingers

with her.

Then, they leaned forward, and **sealed** the

pinky promise with a

ki ss

planted where their

fingers interlocked

'Goodbye,
Raven.'

Crow smiled,
weaker than before.

Her eyes fluttered.

"Goodbye, *little Crow.*"

and all at once, her breath fell out,
hot and heavy,

and her chest shakily returned
to stillness, as

her

sigh

signalled

the
start
of

her

brief

respite

Crow did not fight to hold on as the past slipped and spun away into inky blackness.

It was slowly

and

surely

replaced

by a

gray blur.

She watched as that **gray blur** slowly

and

surely

saturated

and came into focus.

She stood,

frozen,

until all of it was gone,

until her own life,

her own place,

her own sensations,

were all that remained.

.

.

·

tick!

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·

More than ten thousand *ticks* passed as she stood there, neck craned down, staring into the dirt.

In those moments, not a single thought plagued her mind.

There was only a disquiet, curdling stillness that wrapped and swirled within her like smoke.

And eventually, it all dissipated, and she was left feeling
nothing.

The first thought that came to her was simply if she was the first to feel such a thing— but as soon as she began thinking, the thoughts rushed in all at once,

it was one thing that she had seen her paintings on the wall, that she had seen her painting— but to see her, alive and talking, slipping away, to see her, to really see her, to truly hear her, to understand her, to **know** her, and to immediately have it all stolen away from her again because of some cruel twist of fate that—

How many could claim to have
watched themselves die?

How was she to function,
normally, having seen that?

How was she to live when she was
buried, here, beneath her own feet?

—and why was it **Raven**? Why, why, **why**, had it been **Raven** there? They had cared for her? Truly cared for her? In her final moments, it was— **them?! She—**
There was no one else like her? What was she even to make of it— Why *didn't* Raven tell her!?
She was alone, again. —was her body still... *there*? Did it even matter?

Crow turned away, suddenly sick to her stomach with overwhelming waves of nausea that turned and churned her innards and drove her stumbling away from her own grave. She wobbled and buckled over, staggering away on tottering legs, steadied only after she pierced deep into the bark of a nearby tree with her claws, where then she heaved and gasped for air that now felt stolen.

It was little wonder that stake sought to **bind** with her.

Crow could not help but giggle, then croak

and cackle

and

H

u G

c o

and

t

s p u

e

t

r

and—

"i'm back." her voice rasped out, barely intelligible from the scratch of the door against the rough floor. her hair was disheveled and tangled. her limbs drooped forward, hung low in defeat. she stared at the floor, gazing at nothing, her beak pointed down in kind.

There was no response save for her own echo.

The **sterile anteroom** was empty today.

probably for the best... Crow thought, sighing.

She padded slowly across the room and made her way to the far corner. There was an entrance to **the vents** there, she knew. She could feel its pull on her— on her *instincts*— and so she wandered over without even looking.

The vents were always in different places, but she never needed to search them out. Ever since she had **awoken**, she'd simply always known the way, no matter where or when the vent covers moved.

Perhaps, over the centuries..? She thought, tracing her fingers over one of Raven's worktables as she passed it by. *Could an instinct for something so silly even become a part of me? A part of my **soul**?*

Crow shook her head, even as she understood there was no other way to explain it. This part of her simply **was**, like all of the other parts of her. Did... did it even matter?

Did every part of her have to matter? Did any part? Did she—

Even having learned so much, she still knew too little, and so she stretched up and grabbed onto the vent cover. Her claws scraped away at the soft metal and dug into it as she leaned away from the wall, feet planted against it.

After just a few moments of pulling, the whole thing popped off from the wall, and, exhausted as she was, she fell back, still holding it above her head. She collapsed down on the floor, and the vent cover crashed down onto a table behind her,

CLANG!

Clang!

—lang!

—lang!

—ang!

—ang!

The sound filled the whole room and bounced off the walls and into her, as if punishing her for her carelessness, her exhaustion, and she curled up on the ground, hands pressed tight down onto her ears. They were well protected under her hood, and still, she flinched from the noise, even as it did not hurt her any longer.

clang...

As the last of the echoes faded away, she slowwwlllyyy,

thump,

thump

thump

rolled over and pushed herself up onto her paws again, stood, and, body fully shaking, ^r**r**^e**e**^a**a**^c**ch**^{hh}**ed**_{dd} up into the vent,

fump,

planted her arms down,

clang, clang

and pulled herself up into it.

So began her journey through the lab.

It was about time, really,
that she saw the whole of it.

She had often wondered about it,
but she loathed Raven,
and longed to explore the outside world.

She'd never understood the point of looking deep within—
especially when there were countless shinies so close at hand without.

Her perspective had shifted since then, of course.

And so,

she plodded through the vents,
right hand half-heartedly tracing the
smooth
metal
walls
as she walked deeper,
and deeper,
and deeper,
and deeper,
into the **dark**.

one way or another—
she would understand it all.

She was soaked from head to toe in sweat.

As she had gone deeper, and deeper, and deeper still, the vents had heated up. At first, they carried a calming, soothing, warm breeze. Then, a mildly uncomfortable, stuffy heat. But for thousands of ticks after, the air had seared away at her, and now, as she dove ever deeper, howling gales of heat burned away at her.

She felt as though her skin might melt off, feathers burned to ash. Even as she held her wings out in front of herself like a shield, using them to blunt the brunt of the heat, sweat poured out from every pore and place it could. Her feathers bristled under the burden of protection, but regardless, she pressed on, steadfast, waveringly unwavering.

Eventually,

thump!

she made it to the end
of the vent,

somewhere
deep

in the
burning
dark

So,

she backed up,
readied herself,

then sprinted forward and jumped!

at
it,

feet-first,

d
r
o
p kicking **the
vent
cover**

It **popped!** off and sailed

through the air,

twirling

and

whirling

and

spinning

about

as it fell far,

far,

far,

below,

CRASH! ...

... *crash* ! ...

... *crash* ! ...

... *cr a a a a a a a*

sh!

sh!

sh!

and Crow fell, too, onto the floor of the vent, banging her joints up against *everything*. Then, quickly, she scrabbled and skittered her way back onto her talons, leaving gouges in the vent's soft, pliable metal with her claws as she fought to stand back up.

Then, she gripped the
edge of the vent and
leaned
out of it,

She was standing on a metal ledge above a vast and dreadful cavern that was soaked completely in a radiant orange hue. The light all came from the same place: a massive metal beast of a machine in the midst of the space, hundreds of bodylengths below. Metal tubes, like umbilical cords, descended upon it from all sides and connected to circular ports the size of houses. The machine's round, pot-shaped base was not set on an uneven cavern floor, but instead, metal grates with gaps wide enough for Crow to easily slip through. She knew of grates only as drains, but these were more like a cage formed around an ancient beast's lair, and up from them, blazing fires roared up like geysers before splintering off into jets of howling flames that faded into glistening embers.

Sharp metal stakes, each at least six times her bodylength, were grafted onto the surface of the grates with metal strands that wrapped through and around like sinew. The stakes were spaced out at regular intervals from each other, and together, they traced the path of a wide circle all around the bestial machine— each pointed up towards it like a spear to halt its advance. Every so often, a ball of pure light would coalesce at the tip of one of the spears before shooting off as a beam of light through one of the countless slits that scored the main machine's smooth metal surface.

The machine had more than just slits— it too had a great metal grate, as tall and wide as a city plaza, that traced a line through its sturdy metal shell from its base to its top. The grate was a fine black mesh, and from this distance, she could only see the brave pinpricks of flickering firelight that escaped through it.

Some sort of... containment mechanism? She thought, already shaking her head. It couldn't be that— it just couldn't be. That would mean there was a beast even larger than Raven,

looking
down
into
the

deep
pit

below.

A gust of hot air
rose up from it
and brushed
against her face.

It could have been
calming— but
overheated as she
was, it simply
burned.

and that just wasn't possible. It couldn't be possible, she didn't want it to be possible, and she would *not* accept a world in which it was. And yet, she could not shake the feeling that—

A wretched shrill scream split through the air before quickly falling apart into countless little echoes.

As soon as the sound met her ears, Crow's feathers flipped up and stood on their ends, and she whirled her head around, trying to find its source.

But she could not find it in the depths. There was no telling where the scream had come from, or why, there was just the grand, imposing shape of **the machine** and its intense, fever-orange glow.

Just what was going on here, in the depths of this place?

How was she so blind to it before?

Why had she never bothered to question the world around her?

No. She shook her head once, powerfully.
The doubts would not, could not, grab hold of her here.
Instead, she would force herself to act.

Crow sighed, shook and wiggled her arms, rolled her neck, then pinched and preened and brought her clothes around into their best, most comfortable positions. Then, she stepped from the side of the ledge into its middle, raised up her wingarms, and, finally, allowed herself to

fall
into

The Burning Dark

She plunged down for a moment, headfirst, before forcing her wings open to catch the force of the rushing wind. She glided like this for a few moments, until suddenly, a rushing flow of heat hit her from below.

All at once, she was blasted up,

and she whirled around in the air,

in the air,

tumbling upwards,

fighting her own fluttering feathers and hair as the wind blowed them endlessly into her eyes—

—through her effort, she caught a glimpse of her surroundings:

severe, rocky fangs

punched through the roof of the cavern, and soon, **through her.**

Panicked, she folded her wings up and curled into a ball

while leaning her full weight forwards.

She stalled in the air for a single blink, and then, the hot air was rushing around her again as she began to

hurtle down into the

complex

below

All around her, metal structures flew past her in a blur as she plummeted down like a shooting star. She grazed beams, passed clean through trusses and windows, and plunged down through the interiors of fully-toppled stone-and-metal buildings. She was hyperventilating, eyes ripped open by the wind, gaze snapping around frantically, trying to take in the sight of everything, no, *anything*, as she raced towards the ground. The air around her went from hot, to warm, to cool, then cold, and as she neared the bottom of the great cavern, her speed alone caused a freezing gale to tear away at her, howling in her ears.

Finally, she forced her wings open again, and her wings and wingarms cracked open from the force of the wind. She shrieked in pain as she flailed, trying to cut through the wind so she could slow down, or at least glide, but her fall was barely slowed at all before she smacked into the floor's metal grates, **hard**. She was crumpled up instantly on impact— tossed head over talons, again and again, across the slick metal bars.

At some point, after countless rotations, she came to a halt.

Her body had come to rest, at last, by folding over and through one of the grate's cells like a damp, discarded towel.

".....aa....ah—.....ooowww..."
she moaned, crying,
as she forced her limbs, screaming,
to move,
clawing away at the metal,
as she once again
forced herself
to stand.

Slowly, she found her footing, shaky, but balanced, on top of the wide and curved metal bar. Strangely, it was ice cold, and as she took in a deep breath, she noticed that the air at this level— despite the jets of flame— was comfortable, even temperate.

Crow's knees wobbled as she retracted her talons so she could grab the metal bar with her grippier paw pads. Forcing herself to take a quick glance down, she saw that she was teetering precariously on top of a metal bar that was as wide as she was tall, perfectly circular, that ran all the way to the center of the cavern. All along its length, it intersected with countless other identically formed criss-crossing bars.

She took in a deep breath, then forced herself to crane her neck to the side and look down. She saw nothing much beneath it save for a welcoming, quiet pit of endless darkness. Every so often, there would be a flicker, or a spark, and its tiny burst of light would be devoured all at once by the rat's nest of tiny graymetal tubes and black cables that wound around and into each other like organs.

Did Raven really build all this? Could they even build this? Crow thought as she limped forward along the top of the bar, taking great care with every paw forward to keep her balance as well as she could.

Surely not.. surely not! Crow insisted, shaking her head fervently. She stumbled, twisted, caught herself, then kept going forward. *It would have taken countless lifetimes— longer even, surely, than anyone has even known how to shape metal and roll cables.*

How had such a place come to be? Had it always here?

It was all just so— impossibly vast, so grand in scale. The whole cavern stretched out so far from her in every direction that she came to see this as a laboratory's basement no longer. No— now, she saw only an entire world of metal and brass and fire.

As Crow limped on, she lifted up her chin and looked around her. The occasional beam of light or jets of pure fire lit up the shadowy world that had been built up around her. Tall buildings with slots for windows but no furniture of any kind nor bodies in them towered all around her. They leaned against each other, fully metal, each a different shade or kind of rust, and countless bridges and grated walkways— the railings strictly optional— connected them in a spiderweb of pathways and linkages.

It looked just like the city above in its utility, in the way it must have naturally formed over time as people lived their lives,

but no lives had ever been lived here, surely?

Had Raven stumbled on these ancient ruins and simply built their machines there? Had they learned from them, studied them?

No.. Crow thought, eyes still wide, enamored through sheer force by the weight of all that she was taking in. *Raven would have just scrapped them, however useful.*

In all the lives she'd known them, only that which Raven had made, or made their own, would they ever keep within their home, their lab, their awful throne from which they studied science and watched the world in silence.

Though, regrettably, there was this aching thought and feeling that settled down on her from above. The feeling came down like dust, in layers, gradually building up on top of itself, on top of her, weighing down on her as she pressed further, and deeper, towards the great and screaming beast held at the heart of this place.

The feeling, the realization of which came to her like melting ice, was of sacred ground. It was the same feeling she had within her own, in that secret place in the woods, far, far away from here, tucked into a cave. The place that only her, and maybe Finch, could ever share.

Now, she had taken claim to the knowledge of this place. If it was private to Raven before, never again could it be.

She had broken into a sanctuary, she knew, a sanctuary not her own. She did not belong her. This, more than anywhere else she had ever been,

was Raven's domain.

There was another scream, then a thud, then silence. The flames roared yet again within the beast before her, and as she stumbled back, jets of fire cracked up from the floor all around her. As if sapient, the fire flowed up through every single hole in the grate except the ones surrounding her, leaving her standing alone, surrounded by walls of fire. All around, it rose and roared, and she felt its pure, cleansing brilliance burn away at her. Her feathers singed, and she shielded her eyes behind her arms, and the flames at once began to die down.

The sound of it all, though, lived long, long after, as the countless metal tubes that crisscrossed endlessly throughout the cavernous space rumbled and shook with the vibrations.

Knowing Raven, it was just some trick, a further dissuasion from breaching deeper into their sanctuary.

And so, she traveled forward, one paw in front of the other, approaching the metal beast in the distance as quickly as she could on smarting, limping legs, more sore than they had any right to be.

It was rather hard for her, really, to be injured enough to ever halt. She'd had enough **pieces** and **parts** installed to take care of that issue thrice over. Still, though,

she didn't have anything for the pain.

Crow grimaced as she passed yet another one of the countless metal structures. Each of them towered high into the cavern above her. Most were connected to each other, and now that she'd come quite some way, she noticed that many of them were also attached to the central furnace— either by metal pipes or covered walkways wide and long enough to be houses in their own right.

Where could this much material even have been extracted from? Was this whole pit smelted metal in the past, these ruins simply carved?

What was the point of all this?

Was it all just to maintain the blazing heart at its center?

The closer she got to it, the more cluttered the cavern became. Eventually, she was pushing through a dense thicket of trunks and vines of metal in all of its different types and forms. At some point— no telling after how long— she emerged onto a raised metal walkway that fully encircled the monstrous machine from a great distance. As she did, she was blinded by the intense constant orange glow that washed over her and everything else that lay around her in this central place. Tearing up at once from the brightness, she swapped her eyepatch around to cover her flesh eye. Her metal eye, of course, had no such weaknesses as a room that was too bright.

Now, she could see, and so she looked all around. Tracing along the outer edge of the walkway were the countless massive metal stakes she had seen earlier. They reached up and over her head like a beast's claws piercing through the floor, and they pointed directly at the glowing, pulsating metal beast at the center of the cavern.

No bridges crossed over to that grand machine from the walkway. No, instead, a railing as tall as her neck simply lined the whole walkway, unbroken, and peering over it, she could see a deep basin that traced around the machine like a moat, separating her from it.

In the basin, red-hot metal pipes pierced out from below the central mechanism's foundation and spread all around like vines and roots, tangling with each other and themselves, carrying along only heat so intense that the air warbled and folded in respect of it. Tangled with the red-hot metal pipes were soft-looking black tubes that wound around them like snakes. Inside of the tubes, she could hear the rush and flow of liquid, and anywhere they touched the pipes, they were cooler, colder.

Crow's concentration was broken by a jet of flame that shot out from the furnace's massive main grate. It sailed high over her head, but close enough to coat her whole body with its heat. She stared into the flames, unmoving, and as she did, she swore she could just barely make out dark, moving shapes like swimming fish within it. And as the flames died out, its acrid fumes washed over her. It was unlike anything she'd smelled before, and immediately, her nose and lungs began to burn after breathing it in.

Quickly, she scampered away down the walkway, doubling over, coughing and wheezing and hacking, and eventually, the pain faded away. There, doubled over, she slowly rose and regarded the monstrous machination yet again:

What is it you think you are doing, Raven? She hissed as she spat out the rest of the acrid, metallic tinge the fumes had left within her. Her spittle hissed, too, as it landed on hot metal and evaporated all at once.

Then, she straightened her head suddenly as she came to a very obvious idea, and at once, stepped forward and stood up on the edge of the railing. There, Crow stared deep into the metal mesh of the machine, trying her hardest to look forward into it and, then, deeper still, into its past.

Despite that, there was no notable difference in it. For all she could tell, it had been running for as long as she could see back. The whole thing only went dark every once every hundred moons or so. And, sometimes, after falling into darkness and disuse, a massive monster would swoop down and pick through it, crumbling the crumpled shapes and masses within its belly before sending all the ashes away with a single sweep of its many wings.

Unmistakably, it was *Raven*.

She had to know more, learn more, see more,

she had to **understand**, the way Raven did.

There was no other option afforded to her.

Crow squatted down on the railing until the metal **pieces** in her legs *click!*-ed into place. Then, she released the tension and launched up high into the air, and from there, she spread her wings and glided down to stand beside the machine. Standing at its base, now, the heat was overwhelming: already, she wanted to peel away and glide off, but *something* kept her here, searching around frantically, looking all over, even sheens of sweat washed down over her only to be evaporated instantly by the overwhelming heat. Her contour feathers began to burn up as she dehydrated nearly instantly, and her flesh eye, even under the eyepatch, began to swell and burn as her vision filled with smog and smoke.

Another scream split the air, and Crow immediately ducked, covering herself with her wings. Fire blasted out from the machine through each and every one of its orifices, and flames washed out and rolled over and crashed down by her side like a tidal wave. From there, the fire streamed down into the basin, and it roiled around there, boiling and bubbling while slowly, slowly sinking down and fading away into the mess of pipes and cables.

And again, there was that wretched, burning 'smell'— if even it deserved to be called one. Feathers singed, skin burnt and peeling, fur split at its ends, Crow still clawed her way up at once— hacking all the while— to peer through the mesh and deep into the belly of the burning-metal beast.

It did, indeed, have a heart.

There, in its center, suspended in a nest of slowly-swirling fire, was a single pink mote drifting around in the empty air. It was a wisp the size of her, and continually, it formed shapes from strange, ephemeral tendrils of flame that always descended back down into the central mass before starting again. As she watched on, patiently impatient, Crow could make out crude representations of the living: ghastly faces poking out in the fire's shapes, twisted nearly beyond recognition. She could see them only as crude imitations of life.

And, the entire floor was covered with mounds upon mounds upon smoldering piles and still-burning hills of some squishy, leaking material. Based on the smell, it was organic in nature— some kind of coal substitute, perhaps?

No, she thought, stepping back. *Biofuel could not burn so brightly, nor for so long.*

And that smell—

Just what *was* it all?

Unable to stand the heat any longer, Crow leaped away, high into the air, then glided back across to the walkway. She landed easily, and now that she was away from the heat, she was finally coming to the realization of just how badly she'd been burned.

The whole of her body stung as if scrubbed with nettles, and her exposed skin— the few places she had any— stood up in wide, translucent bubble-blisters that dared her to pop them. And, too, her entire body itched as if bitten one thousand-thousand times by ten times as many insects, and she could not help but grip down on the railing, knuckles white, as she bent forward and began to scream and cry.

Even bending forward strained her bruised and battered muscles, and every part of her still ached from how she had crashed into the ground just before walking over here. And, too, there was the whole journey she had taken through the blistering-hot vents—

she panted, too thirsty even to cry, no saliva or sweat or tears to protect her any longer from the blasts of heat that radiated out with the echoing screams of the machine as it strained and burned and groaned over, and over, and over,

and over,

again,

and she collapsed, there, curling into a ball on the cold-grate floor of the walkway, unable to take a single step forward.

It was too much. It was all too much.

It was too much, and she was yet too small, too weak, too fragile,
as surely she must have been every single time she'd come here before.

She'd had to, hadn't she?

But... if she had—

Crow scraped her claws against the metal grate as she forced herself, with shaking, trembling, clacking and popping limbs, back onto her knees. Her flesh eye winced and shriveled shut from the pain of kneeling on her burned skin, and she felt a dozen bubble-boils popping and leaking out into her clothes all at once, and her voice came out in a screeching, shrieking squawk that collapsed, just like her, folding against the metal railing.

And still, she stood.

There was no sense in giving up, even if it was all her body longed for.

She was, after all,
more than just a body.

Crow drank her own blood where it seeped out from her dessicated, cracking lips. Eyes dilating, and suddenly flush with energy, she forced herself up and began to walk along the walkway. She regarded the machine carefully as she circled around it like a predator, looking for its weaknesses, its purposes, its routines.

She would **understand** it.

Eventually, her long walking brought her around to its rear. Here, it was dark, and damp, and cold, and she could make out a long desk on the rear side of it. The desk was carved from the metal of the structure itself, set in an alcove fashioned in its same fashion, standing all on its own, clearly separate from all else within the cavern.

She pressed herself up against the railing and rested her chin down on its cold, smooth surface. It was soothing, and standing there, she began to regard the desk tenderly. Slowly, she looked all around it, taking in each and every part.

But even looking into the end of its past, she saw nothing but what was there within the present. She would have to glide over, again, to see any more of it. Her burning feathers and blistered skin prickled at the thought— but it did seem to be cold, here. Perhaps... it would be safe?

{she feels terribly and horribly drawn to it, as if by fate}

,

,

crow hobbled up to the desk, every little movement more strenuous than the last. her breath was falling out, cold and ragged, and her head, delirious, spun, and spun, and spun.

was she still... moving forward?

her hand touched down on something cold.

her head fell off and rolled around to look at it,

no— wait—

her head was still on!

silly, she thought, neck rolling, and rolling around, eye twitching, unfocused, unable to see what her hand was resting on.

whatever it was... it was cold, and soothing, and so she *hopped!*

on up!

{ :D }, and smiled so, so, wide—

as she laaaaaiddddd back, relaxing, stretching allllll the way out across the smooth metal.

this must be the desk! she thought, all of a sudden giddy from tip-to-tail. she didn't have a tail, but that was okay, right?

crow nodded, sagely. it really was okay that she didn't have a tail.

should she have a tail?

she imagined herself, laying there, swishing her tail side to side. mm.
yeah, she should get one of those.

idly, she slid the backs of her hands back and forth across the smooth metal.

As she did, the chill of the desk reached up from its surface and grabbed hold of her.

Everywhere she touched it,

her skin tingled,

then went numb,

pain slipping away into

blissful

nothingness.

her flesh eye grew heavier, sleepier.

maybe.... crow's mouth opened wide, skin cracking, as she yawned. it should have hurt, but it didn't. *maaaybeee...*

{{serious formatting}}

A deep, dark fog settled down over her mind as all of the pain quickly drained away into the desk, becoming nothing more than a distant memory...

Crow turned to her side, dreamily, so that she could lift up her feet and lay them down on the desk, too, that they may be soothed. And, in only a few moments, they, too, went cold, then numb, as the color faded away into blissful **nothingness**.

Perhaps she would rest a while. She *was* rather tired, after all.

It was only right.

And it felt so, so good—

How could such a good feeling be wrong, little Crow?

It's only for a moment.

It's only...

{back to crow formatting}

'just a little rest....', she mumbled sleepily, whining, and yawning again.

{{serious, once-in-a-lifetime-crisis coded formatting}}

She no longer felt anything but the inescapable pull of a
deep,

deep,

sleep,

as all of her thoughts, her cares, her worries, her very **understanding**,

was swept under the heaviest, tightest embrace she

had ever felt,

and it held her so thoroughly, so completely,

that she could not even conceive of 'escape' from it,

there was no **'it'**,

there was only—

pure bliss!

{crow}

..and then,, um,, she yawned,,, grinning wide, 'wake up,? and...' she trailed off, lips no longer moving, tongue lolling back within her mouth, blissful expression frozen fully forevermore

she'd...

she...

..

um...

huh? she...

{corrupted formatting}

reflexively, crow took in a deep breath,

and all at once, her breath fell out, hot and heavy,
and her whole body twitched

and trembled

and her chest shakily returned to stillness,

and her trembling smile signaled the end of all of the
pain.

finally.

a hundred thousand ticks passed,

finally.

and still, she did not breathe,

finally.

and still, her smile remained.

finally,

{{tombstone formatting}}

it was finally over.

...

...

...

...

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