

The Depths of Depravity

Chapter 20

Crow slipped her claws through the hollow recess in the top of the **lantern** and

pop!

yanked the well-sealed top off. Then, she flicked her left hand around to her back and untwisted the cord that held shut the tiny pouch attached to the small of her back. She dove inside it with the same hand and clutched several wriggling glow-worms between her fingers.

In a single *tick*, she'd dumped the six of them into the hollow wooden-tube body of the lantern and sealed the top back on. With a deft

twist, snap!

she forced the bottom of the lantern to extend its spikes up and into the glow-worms, piercing them clean through. At once, the paste began to spark and pop before suddenly igniting into hissing yellow flames that licked and stroked away at the slick, shiny walls that trapped them.

With this many glow-worms, the light was pretty good, and she could see several bodylengths away from herself in every direction. It was plenty of light to illuminate the cave around her, but not nearly enough to tell her just how deep she'd have to go to find what she was seeking.

As her eyes adjusted, her heart stilled. There was nothing to fear, though the incline was a bit steeper than she was expecting. And, of course, the signs of Raven's passing were impossible to miss. She could only hope that they were off somewhere else, perhaps attending to Serpent in the **Chrystalis**, and not lurking down below. There was no telling, after all, just how many places there were for them to hide. Perhaps they even had a bedroom?

Do they ever sleep? Crow wondered as she hopped down and spread her wings to glide. She fell for nine bodylengths before coming to the next ledge, and there, she looked down over the precipice and into the darkness below.

Still, there was no sign of the bottom, but at least the heat faded away the further down she fell. There was, of course, also the matter of her exit. She was only getting further from the surface— presumably, anyway, since she *felt* like she was going down.

Feelings, though, were not always so reliable for her.

Maybe there will be a vent? She wondered as she glided down, again, across the vertical shaft and onto another ledge. Each time she did this, she had to leap into the darkness and hope for a place to land. Otherwise, she'd have to scabble against the rough wall for hand or footholds, usually jamming her arm or leg into a groove left by one of Raven's scales. Then, she would hang for many moments, resting as she recovered her strength and calmed down enough to jump into the darkness again. *Or... is hoping for a vent too much?*

scabble-scatter-schrick!

[inhale,]

[exhale.]

hup!

sktsktsktsccchhh tumble-tumble clack... clack.... clack..

[inhale,]

[exhale.]

She stood with her front pressed up against the wall of the cavern, arms spread out wide to hug the wall. The ledge she'd caught herself on was not quite razor-thin, but it *was* steadily crumbling beneath her. As she inched her talons closer and closer to the wall, she searched the wall with her left hand, patting and cupping away at it, trying to find a good grip.

I should jump before I fall, she thought, looking over her shoulder and out into the endless dark. But as she prepared to jump, she found a good hand and foothold, and so she hung there relatively comfortably. Curiously, she stuck her right arm back as she looked over her shoulder again, holding out the lantern to face the dark.

Still, she could see nothing but the shadows that clung to her and wrapped around her over and over again in a weightless embrace.

She looked down.

Nothing.

She looked up.

Nothing.

There was no telling how far she'd fallen already,

no telling how far was left,

no telling how far she was from safety.

I'll live, or I won't, she thought simply, and readied herself for another leap. But that thought wasn't nearly as comforting as it once was, and doubt swam through her, and just before she let go, she faltered.

She found that she actually rather cared to keep her life.

Her hesitation brought her falling ever-so-slightly backwards off the wall, and immediately realizing her mistake, she threw out her hands and feet, trying desperately to grab back onto it. Her hands and feet, though, swiped through empty air, and now she was tumbling, tumbling, spinning and twirling around.

Up was down and down was up, and she reached up and jammed her lantern into her beak for an extra hand. Reflexively, she popped her wings open again to slow her fall— even if only by a little bit. At the same time, she looked all around, hoping to catch the sight of the cavern in the weak lantern light.

There!

She half-folded her wings and dove down, plummeting towards the wall. Expectantly, she held her arms out in front of her, elbows slightly bent, body braced for impact.

Sk!

skt!

Crow jammed her claws into the soft-rock wall, and as she fell down, parallel to the wall of the cavern, she dug her claws deeper and deeper into it. Chunks of rock flaked away and tore off and struck her all over her body. Buffeted from all sides, she became disoriented again, head spinning, vision blurring from the speed of it all. Acting only on instinct, she forced her wings open and twisted them back and forth, up and down, trying to feel for whichever way was down while trying to force her body back into a state of balance.

Eventually, she caught the wall with her talons, too, and just as she did with her claws, she dug them in as deep as they would gouge.

If anything, she felt like she was only going faster, but she clung to the wall, pulling herself as close to it as she could, trusting blindly that her claws and talons would bring her to safety.

Eventually,

skrrrrrr-i-i--i--sk-chhh

she came to a stop.

Slowly, and without breathing, she took one of her hands away from the wall and took her lantern out of her beak.

[iiiiinhaaaaaleee]

"Ah...."

[exhaaaaaale]

"Fuck," she whispered and shook her head, eyes brimming with tears that she had already started wiping away on her shoulder.

That was close, she thought. *Well, actually—* She looked down.

There was nothing but the dark.

Well, perhaps it wasn't close, then. Crow sighed in relief and looked more closely at the wall, trying to appraise—*without* losing her spot this time— if it would be possible for her to simply climb down. The wall was rough, with plenty of spots to hold onto, but they were so far apart that it was far safer for her to ascend than it was for her to descend.

Crow sighed heavily and slumped forward, resting her head on the wall as she shifted her weight down to her talons.

As much as it killed her, the 'leap into the dark and hope for the best' strategy really was her best option. Unless..?

What would Finch do? She thought, scrunching her lips and eyebrows together as she forced herself to think a bit more laterally. In her mind, she saw Finch in the same position as her. And then, Finch simply popped off the wall, fell for a while, and landed safely at the bottom.

She could not do that.

Though, it did give her an idea for something she *might* be able to do.

Crow gripped tightly onto the wall with her left hand, fully unfurled her wings, then let go with her talons. Then, slowly, she brought her dangling legs back towards the wall until the points of her talons lightly scraped its surface. Finally, she brought her left hand slowly out of the little pocket she'd found in the wall, and she gripped onto it only with the tips of her claws.

Slowly, *slowly*, she shimmied side-to-side. This strategy was the kind of thing that needed to be kicked into motion, but if she did it wrong, she'd just be falling all over again.

With any luck, though, she'd be falling in a more controlled way.

sk.... sk...

Two of her claws slipped down the side of the rock. Suddenly scared, she tensed up, but she did not fall.

sk!

Another claw slipped free.

[inhale]

"Here goes nothing," she whispered,

[exhale]

sk, sk!

And all at once, she was falling straight down. She kept her chest close to, and centered behind, her left hand, which she'd dug into the wall. Her claws, embededd in the wall, kept her close, while her talons— scraping down along the surface of the wall— kept her balanced and centered.

Satisfied, she kept on like this, slipping and skating down the surface of the wall, ever and always plunging down deeper and deeper still into the inky void below.

...

...

foof!

At last, her aching talons had ground beneath them once again, and her sore and inflamed claws could finally rest down at her side.

The lantern had gone out some time ago. Just like she did before, she refilled it, twisted it, and watched as it began to spit out weak yellow light once again.

From where she stood in the center of the flickering circle of light, she could see two tunnels branching off from this one. One of them veered off to the left, the other, to the right. She no longer had a sense for north, or south, and she was only mostly sure that her feet were on the floor and that she was standing upright.

Knowing Raven, she could be mostly certain that both tunnels would go *somewhere*, but where, exactly, she did not know. That, of course, left her with one question:

which one would it be?

Left?

or Right?

"Well, there's no point dwelling on it," she muttered, immediately heading down the left path. It wasn't as if she was going to magically identify the correct way to g—

Crow backtracked slowly to where she was standing before. She probably *could* magically identify the correct path, couldn't she?

Her whirred to life as she began to **look into the past**. Mechanically, she looked back through countless moons, paying attention to Raven's comings and goings and the details of them.

Most often, Raven headed down the right path, and when they did, they often carried with them various objects and dark shapes that she could not quite identify.

The left path, however, Raven hardly ever used— and when they did, they moved slowly and languidly. Perhaps they really did sleep?

Crow then focused on the recent past. Which one had Raven gone down most recently?

It was the left.

That's that, then, Crow thought, nodding to herself as she stepped into the right tunnel. *Just one foot after the other,* she sighed, rolling her shoulders and picking around at her many layers of clothes, and fur, and feathers, slowly preening as she continued down the dark passage.

After sixty paces, she turned a corner and entered into an illuminated chamber of the tunnel. Here, she was faced with a terraced wall that stood tall above her and receded backwards into the stone. Each terrace was as high as she was tall, and there were more of them than she could even see. Looking slowly up, her view of the terraces was eventually blocked by a rocky outcropping in the ceiling.

From beyond that top terrace, bright white light spilled out and scattered across the pitted, rocky walls that ate up the light hungrily and greedily. Standing at the base of the terraces, she saw what the bounced light illuminated for her in a sort of eerie twilight, even far away from its source at the peak as she was.

If the old saying was to be believed, bright white light meant the end of the tunnel. With any luck, at the top of the terrace, she'd *finally* emerge into then next section of the laboratory.

Since there was plenty of light here, Crow tucked her lantern back away into the largest of her cloak's pockets. There was no real way to turn it off, so her pocket glowed with flickering yellow light as she walked forward and gripped the top of the first terrace.

Crow hopped up and pressed down on her hands at the same time. Extending her arms fully, she lifted herself up high enough to plant her feet beneath herself and stand up on the first of the terraces.

Hardly a struggle at all, she thought, sighing in relief. She was tired from all the moving, from all the climbing, and falling, and...

As she stood there thinking the nature of her exhaustion, an awful little thought crept around her periphery before diving into focus, splitting her away from the world in front of her.

Eyes closed, breathing heavy, she was in the dark, and she felt trapped, no— she was trapped, and then—

*Goodbye, lit
tle crow*

Crow yanked herself out of the burning memory by whipping her head around wildly. A shooting pain seared her from nape to belly, as if she'd been speared through the middle by the vision, and she staggered forward to the next terrace, determined to keep going, determined to move faster than her thoughts,

determined to out-run her grief.

Serpent is dead, she thought, eyes hollow, as she lifted her hands high above her head and placed them on the top of the wall. *Nothing more than a vision in my head.*

Her fingers trembled and tapped at the top of the wall, and then, she jumped up and pressed down with her arms, pulled her leg over the ledge, and rolled over her side to crest the top of the terrace.

The feelings didn't go away.

She lifted herself over another six terraces, each time slower than the last, forcing herself to just keep moving forward,

but the feelings didn't even fade.

Crow looked up. She still could not see the end of the terraces. Looking back, though, she could see clearly Raven's footsteps— this was nothing more than a staircase for them, it seemed.

Unlike the other caverns, this one was getting smoother. With every step forward, the walls and ceiling and floor were going gradually from rough to smooth. If the pattern kept, the chamber might soon start to resemble a room more than cave.

I must be close to something, then? Crow wondered as she planted her hands flat on the top edge of the next terrace. *It's no wonder Serpent, um—*

hup!

heeeeave

roll

Crow stood up and dusted herself off as quickly as she could. With each swipe of her hand, she shed not only dust, but a tiny portion of the weight that bore down heavy on her mind. On days like this, she was nothing more than a pile of self-soothing behaviors.

That's exactly why she was frozen in place, smoothing her clothes and swiping them for dust long after all of it had been shed. Still, she swiped, and swiped, and swiped,

but the feelings did not go away.

I have to move! She thought, gritting her teeth. *Even if Serpent— **Because** Serpent—*

She crossed the thirty bodylengths to the next terrace.

hup!

Crow froze in the air, holding herself up on her palms, stuck in thought. Slowly, she tipped forward, then—

heeeaaaave

rolllll

—she came to a stop, laying on her back, staring at the ceiling. The feelings were no longer passive, and they were feasting on her. She felt her emotions being torn apart, her already-fragile focus being cut up and discarded, her healthy thoughts being shed as easily as clothing.

It's your fault. A voice in her head, hers, but *wrong*, spoke to her.

You again? But—

What, surprised?

Yes. I thought we'd settled everything.

We did. And now, there is more to settle.

Like what?

This little mission of yours is going to get you killed.

Maybe. Her collarbones felt hot, suddenly, and her face flushed red as a sickly feeling sucked away at the back of her mind and dragged it down into a deeper, darker, more primordial place. Her feathers stuck up, her fur did too, and her ears slicked back against the top of her head.

It already got Serpent killed. You are next.

No! Crow shook her head fiercely and forced herself to her feet. With her left wingarm, she rubbed her face vigorously, drying up any tears or sweat left on her face as her emotions boiled up in her and spilled out of her eyes. No. *I won't be.*

Redoubling her resolve, she stepped forward confidently towards the next terrace.

Crow, her other-voice thought to her, *you are not going to like this.*

What?

All at once, she was forced to double over by an immense pain in her stomach. It was as if her organs had all been grabbed in a large fist and twisted to one side, then the other, then crushed and shook around. She felt sick, dizzy, gut-wrenched, and she collapsed to her knees as wave after wave of fresh shame tinged with fear overwhelmed her and swallowed her up.

This is just a portion of what you leave to rot.

"I don't get it!" Crow squawked as she slumped forward and rested her head on the ground, chest heaving, body thrumming with pain. Her throat spasmed from the intense pain, and she cried out, able only to croak out, "*why?!*"

Because ignoring it makes it worse.

"But I have to—" Crow gasped, the right side of her face smushed against the floor as she writhed in pain, still fully overtaken by the feelings, still fighting against them every step of the way, still obstinately refusing to feel, "I have to—"

You have to be honest with yourself.

"I have to *live*, damn it!" Crow cried, bunching up into a ball on the floor. She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, burying her face into her knees. The feelings did not fade, but instead redoubled, and the veins in her neck and face stood up as choking sobs were forced out from deep within her.

You are living, Crow. That is why you hurt.

"I didn't know Serpent would— would— I didn't want—" Crow sobbed, lips sputtering as her beak scraped against the rocky floor. She trembled and fluttered like a leaf in wind, the whole of her body shaking and contracting and expanding again as the feelings ripped through her body and escaped through every little motion.

It's okay, Crow.

"but it's my fault," crow whispered, eyes wide, her tone asking permission for the feelings that she already felt.

Yeah. So what?

"so I— I killed— I—"

Is that really what you think?

Crow's trembling stopped for a moment as her thoughts ground to a halt and her feelings hit a wall within her. They bounced back and settled, slowly, like the ripples in a pond smoothing out after all of their energy had fallen out of them.

"No," Crow whispered, eyebrows furrowing in confusion. The feeling had been so strong just a moment ago, but having said it out loud, having thought about it after saying it, it suddenly—

Do you get it, now?

Crow closed her eyes slowly, and softly, and allowed her mind to drag her into the burning memory that sat waiting on the edge of her periphery. Instantly, it flashed into focus, and she was there again, waiting, watching, feeling it all anew.

She was held in a fresh-spun cocoon of warmth, and love, and understanding. Her very soul was wrapped in layer after layer of spectral shells woven by Serpent, made of Serpent, to protect her, to hold her, to keep her safe from the magic of the artifice that threatened to subsume her.

It was warm, it was safe, it was home, as much as anything else ever had been. It was the comfort she had always longed for, and it was the comfort that Serpent had always provided for her.

And as she rested there, it slipped away. Slowly, at first— just a few wrappings coming undone— but before long, Serpent was being torn away from her, was being torn from her soul, and their bond was unraveling faster than she even knew was possible as Serpent burned itself down to its quintessence just to give her one last chance at life.

She was losing her comfort.

She was losing her home.

There was nothing she could do to keep it.

'...goodbye, Serpie," she whispered.

"Goodbye,

Lit-...tle..

Crow," Serpent cooed. Body destroyed, its voice existed only in her mind.

It slipped away from her even as she tried to hold on. She tried, she tried so hard, to pull it back to her, to keep it all together. But no matter how hard she tried, no matter how tightly she held on, it just kept slipping through her grasp, and she watched in shock as it all fell away, because she knew, deep down, that—

—it was her fault.

Crow's eyes snapped open as she was forced back into the present by the end of the vision. Stunned, and dazed, she rose up slowly from the floor and sank back onto her haunches, sitting slumped, but upright.

Inside, she was hollow.

The feelings, like fuel, had burned away, and now all that remained was the **everburning fire** licking away at her, hungry, always so hungry.

But the feelings— at least for now— had faded.

And the voice in her head was once again quiet.

She knew not how long it took, but she was glad to finally be separate from the dregs of guilt that had been rampaging through her.

The grief and guilt left her **hungry**, starving in a way she never even realized she could.

As Crow stood, her mind twisted and reached out to another thought, branching out to her memories of **Finch**. It was the hunger within her, the hollow emptiness, that reached out for her.

Crow's hands slapped down onto the top of the next terrace.

hup!

She wished Finch was here to lift her.

heeeeeeave,

She wished Finch was here to hold her hand.

rolllll

She wished Finch was here to help her to her feet.

Crow forced herself to stand and slowly, doggedly, approached the next wall. Like a machine, she went up and over, and on, and on, and this carried on for some time.

All the while, she dwelled on the idea of her.

Finch.

The hollow emptiness twisted upside-down within her and revealed its other side: longing and yearning.

It was not just Serpent she missed, but the comfort it gave her, of the certainty it provided, of the help she could always rely on.

Alone, she did not know if she could stand as strong or as tall as she did before. But she did not have to be alone—because of **Finch**, because of...

Crow's mind twisted again, flipping the yearning upside-down and dumping the feeling down her spine. It washed through her, soaking her muscles with the sickly feeling of **need**, of greedy wanting, but instead of pushing it away—

Crow's hands slapped palm-down onto the top of the terrace. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath before hopping up into the air,

hup!

—she squeezed her eyes shut and imagined her muscles squishing out the feelings like a sponge as they contracted.

heave!

And she lifted herself well up over the edge and simply planted her feet at the top of the wall. The longing oozed out of her muscles and into her skin, leaving it prickling, warm, and sensitive. Her clothes swished against her skin like love's embrace, and she fondly remembered the feeling of **Finch**'s frame against her flesh, and she smiled as the longing again twisted and turned into warmth.

Crow stepped forward, quickly, now, and leaped up and over the next wall in her way.

The feelings were not the problem. The problem was ignoring them, pretending they were not a part of her. The problem was running away from the feelings, when instead, she could run with them.

hup! heave! step!

The warmth in her skin drained away into the **everburning fire** at the core of her being, which doubled in its magnitude and sent its strength searing along her muscles, filling them with its warmth and courage and bravery.

And so she carried on like this. Thought after thought came to her, she allowed herself to feel it, and the feeling slipped away into the **fire**, burned and consumed as fuel to keep her moving.

And before she knew it,

hup! heave! step!

She was over the top of the final terrace. All around her, the walls and ceiling and floor were perfectly flat and smooth.

Crow stood in the center of a tiled whitestone hallway that led some hundred-bodylengths forward to a massive circular door at the end of it. At the top of the door was a single window about three times the size of her.

A vault? She mused, stepping down the hallway. Her muscles were sore, but that was okay, and she let herself feel the soreness. She let herself push on despite it, knowing that her motion was justified, her motion was necessary, that every step she took was just another step that led her towards the person she was meant to be.

Some moments later, she was caressing the smooth white metal of the door. It was seamless, with no visible control mechanisms, and so she walked around the base of it, trying to find some way through.

Eventually, she came upon a single, small boulder, itself perfectly seamless and without flaws.

Ah, she smiled.

Some things never changed.

Crow flicked out a simple binding between the boulder and the door as she took out her **bashing stone**. Then, she kneeled down and smashed the stones together over, and over, and over again. As she did, pebbles and rocks burst off of its surface, and accordingly, massive metal chunks flew out from the door, splintering away as though some giant was ripping them out. The entire hall rang out with the cacophony, but Crow simply continued, until eventually,

c--c--c-c-ckck-crraCK!

The stone split in twain, and so the door did the same, and both fell apart all at once.

As the massive metal vault-door careened forward towards her, Crow ran up to it and hopped clean through the massive split in its center. She ran as fast and as far as she could into the room that was revealed, then dove down behind the first stone pillar she saw and reached up, clutching her hands around her ears,

C-C-C-CRASH!!!!

CLANG!!!

She could not count the number of ticks that passed by because the ringing, echoing metal cacophony swallowed up all of the space available for any noises. Instead, she simply curled up here, face buried between her knees, until the noise subsided, and she was free again to roam.

Timidly, she shooed and peered around the whitestone column, looking towards the entrance.

The metal vault-door was laying in two halves among countless metal shards that had pierced into the smooth whitestone masonry. The hallway was ruined— for now, anyway— by her hand.

There was no sense in keeping it going, and so she droppped the binding while she turned around to properly take in the room she had revealed.

The first thing that caught her eye was the bright red carpet that ran down the center of the hall and extended endlessly into the distance, far beyond even the horizon. The second thing she noticed was the scale of it all: she was indoors, yet she could **see** the horizon. This chamber was nothing more than a grand, straight, and pure-white hallway lined on both sides with dark red doors that were thirty of her bodylengths wide and tall. Each door was separated from the previous by fifty paces, and as she craned her head back, she saw row after row of doors, each set fifty paces above the previous, extending up towards the ceiling for what seemed like forever. No matter how far back she tilted her head, no matter how much she focused her eyes on the distance, she could not see the ceiling. No, instead, she simply saw more and more rows of doors, slowly curving in towards her. Theoretically, the rows met at some point high above her head, but if they did, she would never know. The walls were slick, pristine, and polished— there was just no way for her to climb them.

The scale of it all left her wondering,

had she really fallen so far? Was she truly so deep beneath the world? She'd completely lost track of just how far she'd gone into the depths of the laboratory, but now standing in them,

she felt truly out of her depth.

Immediately, fear began to lick away again at the nape of her neck. She allowed it to continue, even as the fear settled into her bones like a friend. She let the fear settle in, and in allowing herself to feel it fully, she felt her mind's fog drifting apart to reveal a clear set of thoughts:

I need to find an escape from here, was the first thought.

I must do it before Raven arrives, was the second thought.

Raven might have been awoken by the noise, was the final thought.

And it was her **fear** that spurred her onwards down the hallway, running as quickly as she could, for she felt that her moments here were limited. The truth about this room could wait.

Because first, she had to **live**.

Understanding would come after.

It had to.

.

Crow sprinted across the red-carpet with her talons retracted (lest she tear the fabric). As she did, she looked up, and down, and side to side, always searching for a vent. Every room in the laboratory had one— even the great cavern, with that beast of a machine— and she wasn't exactly supposed to be there, was she?

So here, somewhere she **knew** she did not belong, certainly, there would be another.

There had to be another. She wouldn't be trapped here.

Right? She wondered.

But the doubt that weighed on her slowed her down. Her run became a jog, her jog became a walk, and her walk became standing still.

The doubt had stopped her. Why had the doubt stopped her?

She tried to move, but she could not, instead, her feet stayed firmly planted. But knowing that she needed to feel it— as she had *just* learned— she allowed herself to keep feeling it, all the while wondering *why* it was she was stopped when only she wanted to run.

But then, standing there and reflecting, the meaning clicked into place inside her brain. The doubt had stopped her because the doubt had seen that this strategy, of running blindly forward, was doing nothing for her. Nothing had changed but her distance from the entrance. She had learned nothing more, and she had burned through many of the precious few moments she had before Raven would arrive.

The moment she resolved to change her strategy, her feet peeled off the floor smoothly and easily, and so she ran to the first of the great red doors set in the walls that she could see. She knew not what they were for, but if there *was* a vent somewhere, perhaps they'd be found in one of the side rooms?

At the very least, it was better than running blindly ahead like a fool. Perhaps... feelings were not only meant to be felt, but also **interpreted**.

Had her body always spoken to her so clearly?

How had she been so deaf to it for so long?

Crow gripped the dark red grains of the door's wood in her left hand's claws and ripped a piece of it off.

Crow gripped the dark red grains of the door's wood in her left hand's claws and ripped a piece of it off. She casually flicked out her finger and **bound** the shard of wood to the door. She then stepped along the side of the wall, tracing along the smooth whitestone tiles with her fingertips. Once she was a safe distance away, she took the shard in both hands and wrung it like a wet towel. The shard collapsed and splintered into tiny flakes of wood that bit into her fingertips, and the door—

c-CrUNCH—CCCCCKCKCKCRASH

fell apart in the same fashion, destroyed and ripped apart as easily as shredding fabric.

Not knowing how long she had until Raven came back, she leaped up to her feet and ran over to the door, looking at once inside of it. Before her was a dark pit, so dark that she could not even see her hand when she stuck it into the inky void. She wasn't particularly keen on losing herself, so she stepped away from the door, ran up to the next, and repeated the process.

Here, she saw a room full of rusting metal loops stuck into the wall, over and over again, piled up and down and around endlessly just as the doors in the halls were. From these metal o-rings dangled massive, weighty chains that clattered about from the commotion of the door's destruction, and at the tips of the chains were bloodstained

hooks that had clearly seen more victims than she wanted to think about. Some kind of execution chamber, perhaps?

Regardless, there were no vents here. She was shaken by what she saw, but there was no sense in dwelling on it, and so she ran to the next door and repeated the process again.

No vent. More destruction, more death, more baseless violence.

Next door. No vent. More things she simply wished to forget.

And again, and again, and again...

And, still, there was no escape for her— not even the idea of one— and as she continued onwards, she felt not hope, but a growing dread that spread from her head down to the basest, barest parts of her that were the weakest against it.

Against her wishes, her knees, hands, and arms trembled together, each daring to slow down what was already a slow-going and daring process that might leave her looking like the things she saw within this place.

Another door. No vent.

And still, the light in her eyes dimmed further and fell deeper into darkness.

But then, another idea came to her, and all at once her eye started to whirr and whine and spin to life. All the light around the eye was warped and pulled around its inky central vortex that swallowed up any light that dared come close to it. And then, just like that, she once again began to **look into the past.**

Immediately, she noticed the doors once again intact— to be expected— and so she tilted her head to the side, urging her vision further and further back. And yet, no matter how far back she looked, this hall never changed. It was unceasing, and there was not even any view of Raven's comings or goings. She urged her vision even further back, looking untold moons into the past, perhaps even further back than the city itself, and *still*,

the lab remained unchanged.

But that's— she thought, tapping the side of her head with the palm of her left hand.

bap, bap, bap,

Nothing changed.

But that's impossible, she protested, turning to face the opposite wall of doors. Without hesitating, she crossed the hundreds of paces to the far wall, hoping that— for whatever reason— perhaps this half of the hall would be different.

Naturally, it was not.

How could such a grand place stay unchanged for so long? How could it have been built? What kept it from crumbling? Why couldn't she see what Raven had been doing here?

It must have been some artifice beyond her understanding, something that prevented even her **precious piece** from picking apart its secrets. Raven was, after all, endlessly meticulous and diligent in their preparations, precautions, and planning.

A burgeoning anxiety joined with the dread and fear that hung down on Crow like heavy chains. The three mixed in her belly and formed poison. The overwhelming feelings had gotten the better of her body at last, and she lurched forward, retching and gagging.

She opened her beak wide and jammed her arm up into it, clamping down hard on her lips with the palm of her hand. Claws slightly extended, she pressed hard into the side of her cheek. Beads of blood formed at the tips of her claws where she pierced her own face by mistake. Instead of pulling away from the pain, she leaned into it, hoping to flush the feelings of sickness away even as her body buckled from the strain of holding it all in.

I'm going to die, she thought, body buckling again as she retched silently, lips held shut only by the force of her palm against it. The bile was vicious and carved away at the inside of her cheek as if it possessed its very own desire to pierce through and reach the outside world.

I'm going to die, and Serpent's life will be for naught.

And so, she began to run. As she did, new rooms rolled into view over the horizon. Countless doors passed by, but never did the hall change in appearance. The only difference was when she looked over her shoulder to the entrance door, which drifted further and further into the background, eventually becoming nothing more than a pinprick behind her.

But even so far in, there was no telling where this hall ended, or even if it did. Though, from her new place in it, she could finally make out that the hall became dimmer as it went on, and far in the distance, she could even make out large shadows that obscured much of the hall.

As she noticed this, she doubled her pace, now sprinting, no longer bothering to conserve her energy or worry about figuring out what was going on.

As she noticed this, instead of doubling down and sprinting, she slowed gradually to a halt.

It didn't matter if there was a vent at the end of all of this. She would never make it before Raven reached her. Even now, her **soul** was aware of something looming about, lurking ever so close, but just out of reach. No matter where she looked, the hall was always the same, and there was no sign of Raven.

But she knew they were here, eyeing her expectantly, ravenously. Waiting.

But for what?

Crow shook her head fervently. It didn't matter what they were waiting for. She had to come up with a strategy, and fast. She needed a guarantee she'd get out of this— not only for Serpent, for Finch, but for **herself**.

She deserved to live, didn't she?

Crow, stunned by her new idea, rocked back on her talons from the weight of what she realized. It was bold, but, well,

it might actually work, she thought as she preened her feathers and took in deep, slow breaths. Then, she leaned back and smoothed her hair with both hands as she exhaled all her air at once.

Okay, she thought, nodding once, twice, then thrice. Okay! She smiled, though not with her eyes, as to not give away her mirth to Raven.

She would survive this. It was not a maybe, not a possibly, but a fact. There was simply no other option.

Crow took in one deep, shaking breath, held it for three *ticks*, then leaned back and opened her beak wide to call out to the beast in waiting.

"You do not scare me, *raven*," she called, sneering as she spoke. "Now reveal yourself."

Whoosh!

Raven's wings split the air like claws through leather, ripping straight through with jagged, forceful motions that forced the air to life. The sound of it was like the cracks of thunder that heralded a danger far greater mixed with the low, primordial rumble of warping time and space. It was the sound of spacetime being crushed in the impossibly tight grip of the only one strong enough to do it.

THUD.

The ground shook so forcefully from Raven's landing that Crow was thrown three fists high off of the ground. Still, she whirled around in the air to face them, landing precisely as though she had anticipated such antics.

"Hello, now.

Hello, little *crow*."