

The Price of Arrogance
Chapter 23

It was going to storm soon. The clouds were gray, bleak, and sharp like black knives that hung down from the sky and threatened to pierce Crow clean through.

She was standing on top of a particularly tall building for the southeast section of Escrow, and she was staring across the river at Henrich's fortress.

It was an overwhelming place: a star-shaped fortress with embankments twenty times taller than all the normal-size buildings on the other side of the river and hundreds of times taller than the tiny houses and shacks that clung to the tiny shoreline around its base. Behind each embankment were even taller walls, each separated from the other by moats.

In the center of it all was a massive plaza of meticulously maintained shining whitestone. In the plaza were a dozen main structures that each served different and important purposes. Finch had described each of them to her, but only one was important.

In the very center of the plaza, there was a massive geodesic dome that she knew— from Finch's description— was at least ten floors tall. Beneath it lied a sprawling underground complex with an endless labyrinth of halls, floors, and vaults.

That is where they would find Henrich.

But to get there, she'd have to sneak into the fortress, past three sets of walls, through the guardhouse, up across the drawbridge and up onto the wallwalk, then down across the plaza and into the dome to meet with Finch.

From there, they'd head down together.

Crow sat down on the roof, reflecting on the night ahead. Her body was broken, mind shaky, and she didn't even know how far she'd make it. Still, though, she felt the urge to keep moving forward.

There was, after all, no other option for her. No matter what, **she had to keep trying.**

It wasn't exactly like they could reschedule. They had exactly one chance at this. If they failed, she'd probably die, and Finch would be reset again.

"Be strong Crow. For me. For us."

"I will." Crow whispered, turning her head to one side. "No matter what, I'll make it. For you."

"For us." They said together.

Crow watched for a little while longer. The rain began to fall— softly, at first, but it was picking up quickly.

"Finch," Crow groaned, "Come on," she whined, rocking forward onto the tips of her pawpads. She was balled up, with her arms wrapped around her legs.

When the rain was coming down like rocks, the guards within the fortress finally began to move, streaming down into the plaza, forming up together. All over the fortress, they left their posts, moving deeper inside for shelter.

There was nothing much to worry about. She was the only one in recent memory that had broken in, and everyone knew that birds couldn't fly in heavy rain. If she broke in, they knew that the only things small and valuable enough for her to steal would still be well protected within the buildings of the central plaza. And, there, they likely expected to catch her.

[inhale]

[exhale]

Crow slipped off the edge of the building and spread her wings, gliding easily down to the ground where she touched down with a gentle pitter-pat of her grippy pawpads. Her talons were injured, so she had to keep them retracted for as long as she could in the interest in protecting them and preserving their health.

From there, she walked quickly through the streets and alleys. She slid down hills and slipped between buildings, and within forty breaths, she was on the swelling riverbank. It was muddy, and this part of the river was petulant and stinky. The stench burned her nose and made her tear up, but she pressed on down the side of the river and towards the point where she planned to cross.

This was the most difficult part of the plan— getting into the stormwater outlet. She walked up the river until she was under the stone and metal bridge that linked Escrow to Henrich's laboratory. The bridge was wide enough to host festivals, and long enough that there was enough space for a shanty-town to pop up. It was a place of winding wooden docks that stretched all the way to the island the fortress was built on. Tiny wooden shacks covered the twisting docks, which rose and fell with the rushing water of the river, always cracking and groaning in new ways.

Pretty much only those with gills bothered living here. It was just too dangerous, when it rained, for anyone capable of drowning to bother trying. That, of course, didn't stop them— there were always a few bodies that washed up every rainfall, no matter the time of year.

The docks and houses were all tied together, and many of them were even lashed to the bridge. Countless ropes dropped down from the bridge above, attached to giant winches set on the platforms and rafts that held the many

structures on top. When it rained, most of the houses would be lifted up by their denizens using the winches, up until they disappeared into the metal trusses and leftover scaffolding in the hollow space under the bridge's main walkway.

Crow pulled her hood up and stuck her head down. Her target was a metal pipe sealed shut by a metal grate installed to keep her out specifically— and it was on the other side of the bridge, eight bodylengths above the water, and relatively far from any nearby buildings.

The docks were a flurry of activity. Everyone could feel the rain coming, and they had to prepare for it. All over, houses were lifting up into the air, being winched up as high above the water as they could. If they didn't, their homes and places of work would be lost to the tides. This would her way in— she just needed to ride one of the homes up into the air, glide down to the pipe, and break her way inside.

After that, all she'd have to do is sit in the stormwater collection system and wait at the exit hatch for the rain to fall. Finch would take care of the rest.

"I'll take care of most of the guards."

"How?"

"My father is insane about his preparations. I will convince him that we need to do extreme weather training in realistic conditions. So when it rains, I will gather all of the guards together and have them perform training exercises, opening up the opportunity for you to enter."

"Won't I drown if I try to get in when it's raining?"

"Well, ordinarily, yes, however..."

Crow cut across the docks, weaving between groups of bustling busybodies as she made steady progress towards the other side of the river.

She made it across with little issue.

Just as she did, she spotted the house closest to the pipe set in the wall already raising up out of the water. At each of the four corners of the platform, the members of the family were operating the winches— working together, tirelessly, and they were already ten bodylengths above the surface of the rippling river.

Crow hesitated, looking side-to-side for a way up to them. Then, realizing her time was running out to act, she simply started to *run*. It was in letting go that she felt the most alive, and as she simply let her body take over, she felt a rush of energy and heat rushing through her.

She vaulted over one of the dock's piles, briefly flit through the air, then bounded off the top of a pile of crates. From there, she spread her wings, gliding over to a nearby building. She narrowly caught the edge of the roof, then hauled herself up and over it, then ran to the peak of it. From there, she hopped onto the chimney, then, without any further hesitation, leaped into the air, arms outstretched in front of her.

The wind rushed around her. She was falling, *fast*, and the platform was still rising up into the air in front of her. She flapped her wings once, as hard as she could, and extended her claws out as far as they could go.

ccccRACK

Wood splinters flew out and dropped down into the water below her as she caught the side of the platform by the very tips of her claws. Immediately, she swung her legs forward, barely catching the bottom of the platform with her talons just as her claws broke sheared through the wood and fell completely out of it.

Her arms swung down through the air, and then, she was hanging upside-down from the bottom of the platform, holding herself only by her talons. They were wrapped around the sides of the smooth wet logs the platform was made of, and their tips pierced into the soft wood, but already, it was crumbling away just as it did underneath her claws. Unfortunately, she was facing away from her target after flipping upside-down.

Crow tilted her head back, looking down towards the stone wall of the bridge. Still, she didn't have a clear view. Swallowing hard, she decided to trust the grip of her talons and bent backwards, and eventually, Crow was able to see the stone wall that marked the end of the bridge. She had to scan around for several moments, but eventually, she saw her target— the stormwater system's outflow pipe. Of course, as it was literally a hole in the wall with no access pathways, it was unguarded save for the heavy metal grate set a couple of bodylengths into it.

Suddenly, her whole body jolted as one of her talon tips popped out of the crumbling wet log. She flexed her talon, planting it back into the log, but as she did, another one of her talons fell out. Taking in a deep breath,

[inhale]

Crow bent fully backwards in a back-bend, grabbed the platform with her claws and let go with her talons. There was a deep sinking, dropping feeling as her legs swung freely through the air, and before she lost her momentum—or her grip— she pulled as hard as she could with her arms, then let go and spread her wings, gliding through the air.

Two moments later, she was there, pulling herself up and over the lip of the rusting metal pipe that stuck out of the wall. She was far, far above the river, and the wind ripped at her, threatening to pull her right out and back down below. She didn't let it, though.

This was their only chance. She couldn't afford to fail now.

She dug into the metal pipe with both sets of claws and one of her sets of talons, but the metal was hard, and it didn't give her much purchase. The wind, blowing across the side of her body, was causing her to slowly slip out of the pipe. Crow brought the leg that wasn't digging into the metal up towards her waist, waiting for the metal **piece** inside her leg to click into place.

Once it did, she threw herself forward and let go of the tension in her leg. The metal piece snapped open instantly— her leg snapping open along with it— and the force from her heel striking the pipe was enough to bring her fully inside and up against the metal grate with a **clang!**

Just another obstacle in her path. As if her life hadn't been hard enough recently.

Crow sighed, picked herself up, and began feeling the metal bars of the grate. They were thicker around than her wrists, and interlaced together tightly enough that she couldn't simply squeeze through them. Testingly, she flicked the metal. It hurt. It was clearly very strong.

Ouch. She thought, unsure what she had been expecting.

She tried scraping away at the metal, but it was new. It was unlikely she'd be able to break enough off for **sympathy**, nor would she be able to break or cut her way through it normally— individually, each of these metal

bars likely outweighed her two-to-one. And there were a lot of them: sixteen going across horizontally, and twelve going across vertically.

Last time she broke in, the grate hadn't been here. Though, Finch hadn't prepped it for her, nor had she briefed her on how to get through it, which meant she trusted her to get through it on her own. That meant there was a way for her to get through it on her own.

She just had to find it.

Instinctively, she began to look into the past, hoping for some clue left here by the spectres of yesteryear. Perhaps there was some flaw in the construction, or the installation. Perhaps her past self had left her a clue. Looking back, she saw the grate suddenly disappear, and so she fine-tuned her view and looked more closely at the grate's installation. It was done in a single day by a team of three: one that hauled the bars in a heavy sled through the stormwater system, and two that worked to melt each bar into place with some kind of hot, sparking tool that they cowered as far away as they could from.

There did not seem to be any weaknesses there.

Sighing, she looked further back, and some part of her brain began to turn with a strange, interesting idea that she couldn't quite fully grasp yet.

Looking at her past self, the way forward became instantly clear. Instinctively, she reached up and beneath all of her layers of clothes, snaking her left hand into the flesh-pouch stitched in front of her heart and below the fur on her chest. Her left hand clutched around her stopwatch as she locked eyes with her past self,

Tick!

And in an instant, space folded and warped around her as she was shunted from one side of the metal grate to the other. The vision of her past self faded away as she took her place, and at the same time, stopped looking into the past. The present was busy enough— she could not bother with chasing shadows.

After only a few hundred breaths, she had arrived at her starting place for the plan. She was sitting on the penultimate rung from the top of the ladder, her legs tucked behind the rung under her, her hands grasping the rung above her.

She was waiting for the inevitable storm. When it came, water would begin rushing through the stormwater collection pipes below, and the majority of guards would leave their station above her. When that happened, she'd lift up the manhole and scurry through the fortress to the next part of their plan.

They'd hardly started, and already, it had been so difficult.

Crow wondered if they really had any chance at all. They had to, right? Finch was a genius, and she'd spent so long planning this, preparing for this. She'd probably spent her entire life practicing to one day escape, and finally, it was her chance.

Even if Crow didn't do her part *perfectly*, Finch probably had contingencies for that. They'd succeed.

They had to.

There was no other option left for them.

...

Crow was startled awake by the sound of water rushing past. The walls around her rumbled with the force of the roaring tide that ripped through the stormwater collection, and if she had woken up a moment later, her legs would have been shaken free of the rungs, sending her tumbling down into the dark, howling current below.

Crow shuddered, wondering how long she had been asleep as she stood up on the rungs and began to push against the metal cover to the pipe. It was *heavy*, far heavier than her, and she groaned with the effort of lifting it.

She wished she could've spent more time with Finch before all of this. In such a short time together, Finch had taught her so much, shown her so much, let her *feel* in ways she had always needed to. If only they'd had a little more time together, this would be so much easier. *Everything* would've been so much easier—

sscchhhkkkrrRRrRR, the metal groaned as it scraped against the stone, lifted slightly up and over. Through the tiny crack in the opening, flickering lanternlight cast down into the dark pit, illuminating her claws and a portion of the rungs. She kept straining, struggling, as hard as she could.

She had to see her again. She *needed* to see her again.

When you emerge into the gatehouse, the hard part starts.

Crow wedged both hands up into the tiny crack between the pipe's lid and the metal wall of the pipe and **shoved** with all her might. She gripped the rungs tight with her talons, flexing her entire body as she twisted at the hip and used the full weight of her body for extra force.

She was so close. She was so, so close.

There, you'll need to find your way to the storage room beneath the drawbridge, as quickly as you can.

The metal cover scraped the rest of the way to the side, and finally, the hole was large enough for her to get through it. She scrambled over the top of it and out onto the simple, speckled graystone floor of the guardhouse.

As promised, it was empty. She was going to do it. She'd see her, and soon.

Everything would be simpler then. Easier. She wouldn't have to bear it all on her own anymore.

A distant, withering part of her flickered and shuddered in her chest. It felt like a slight burning twinge, like tiny still-hot embers fluttering onto skin for a self-terminating final kiss, that they might embrace another, even if only for a moment.

During the storm, we'll lift the drawbridge as part of the training exercises. That will be your only chance to reach the main fortress. Do not miss it.

Crow tore through the fortress with reckless abandon. She dropped to all fours, throwing herself forward as far as she could with each sweep of her claws. Behind her, she left deep grooves in the stone, which chipped and flaked away as she searched for a way down. She flicked her head side-to-side, looking for a sign, directory, *anything* that might guide her forward.

But there was nothing but a littany of blank doors and undecorated, maze-like passages that intersected with each other over, and over, and over again. Likely, it was just another security mechanism.

Crow's eyebrows twitched as she burst through another door, only to see another simple accomodation for one of the guards here. She tossed the room in moments, sheets, parchments, and hygiene items flying through the air, fluttering to the ground, and crashing into the walls.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glint of light. Turning her head, she saw it— the *window*. It was internally-facing, and she could see the main fortress across the moat through it. Of course!

Without hesitating, she launched herself through it. As she fell, shards of stained glass fell all around her, twinkling and glinting in the brief flashes of light left by the lightning. The wind rushed all around her as she fell, howling, pelting her with water, as though she was trespassing on the territory of the sky and had to be dealt with accordingly.

Barely, one of her three ears caught the sound of chains clattering, rolling, winching, and she wrenched her head around in its direction.

The drawbridge was already half raised, and it was too far away from her for her to glide to it, especially with the strength of the wind.

Once the drawbridge is raised, you'll—

Crow winced as she watched the wall come together, and her plan fall apart.

She'd failed Finch.

But what if I fail? Crow whispered, looking away.

No matter what, you'll make it. You always do.

How can you be so sure?

*Finch looked at her with a mixture of confusion and bemusement. 'Because you're **Crow**.'*

Tick!

The air split around Crow in a bubble, then compressed at once into nothingness. When she opened her eye, she was back in the guard's room, standing in the windowsill.

No. Crow thought, shaking her head furiously. No! She pounded her fist against the stone wall that wrapped around the windowframe, spun around, and dropped off of it and back into the room.

She'd find another way. She *had* to.

There was no other option left for her.

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Crow burst into the door set into the corner of the hall, finally entering into the staircase. Rather than heading up towards the roof, she first headed down, all the way down, to the bottom, where she knew the storage room from the initial plan lay. She wasn't sure what she'd find there, but whatever it was, it would hopefully be more useful than all of her miscellany she had neatly tucked away in her pockets.

The door to the storage room cracked open and slammed against some out-of-sight crate, and in the same moment, Crow had set onto the first box she saw and pried it open. It was rope— hundreds of bodylengths of it— coiled neatly.

And so she went, checking box after box, breathing more heavily with every moment, heart beating faster with every passing breath. Her eyepatch began to glow again, and she cursed, tears pooling in her eyes as she wondered just how many moments would pass before their plan could no longer continue.

She wanted more than anything to respond, to let Finch know she was okay, to send her own signal back, but she didn't know how and didn't have the breath to spare on it.

Finch would just have to wait.

Gathering all the useful things she'd found in a bundle of scrap-cloth she'd torn from a spare uniform's cloak, she burst back out of the room and up the stairs. Flight after flight disappeared behind her until she reached the wooden hatch of the roof, and the moment she removed the bar from it, the storm blasted it open, stormwater crashing against her in a deluge greater than any normal wave.

Even as the icy water soaked her to the bone, she simply grinned and bore it. Beneath her eyepatch, her flesh eye flickered with hope— or perhaps madness— as she tightened her grip on the bundle and pressed through onto the roof proper.

She would not be stopped by problems as trivial as a fucking moat.

Nothing in this world would hold her back from fulfilling her promise to Finch because nothing in this world could. At the end of it all,

She was Crow.

The fire in her flesh eye redoubled as the burning embers in her chest settled and smoldered once again. Dormant coals within her soul grew in heat, shifting from black to dark gray, deep orange hidden just beneath the layer of soot that covered them.

Crow rushed forward to one of the ballistae stationed on top of the roof. They were lashed down and covered with thick cloth to protect the wood of them from the storm, but that would not stop her.

It couldn't.

Forcing her way through the storm, body lowered, chest and head pointed straight ahead, she trudged against the wind and grabbed tight to the wooden frame that locked the ballista to the surface of the fortification. With the claws on her right hand and a crisp snap of her wrist, she cleanly severed the ropes on her side, and at once, the howling wind ripped off the thick fabric that covered the weapon.

Cane had installed these to keep her— and everyone else— out, but today,

Crow threw the bundle down and hastily attached the pieces together. With trembling hands, she attached the length of rope around her ankle, then secured the other side as tightly as she could around the ballista bolt. That, however, would never hold— especially not during the storm— and so she had replaced the head of the bolt with a thick metal cross-bar from the storage room's window. It wouldn't fly true, not even close, but she had no other option.

Crow's mouth fell open beneath her beak, which rattled like a metal roof underneath the relentless rain, and cackled wildly as she lashed her leg to the cross-bar in the bolt's head. Over and over again, knot after knot, until she was certain that it would hold.

Once that was done, she unfolded a much larger cloth from the bundle. She'd left a heavy chunk of stone within it, to keep it from blowing away on the roof, and she'd prepared the corners of it with yet more rope that she'd pierced through and melded with the cloth using basic sympathy between the natural fibers. Amazingly, the rope and these massive sheets of reinforced cloth were made of the same fiber.

Crow then rose to her feet and attached each of the four ropes to the four spokes of the winch that prepared the ballista for launching by drawing back and twisting its great bowstring. With her foot, she kicked away the rock from the unfolded cloth and leaped back.

Her wild cackling became a wild howl as the wind caught the underside of the cloth and snatched it up greedily, sending it flying into the air like a kite. As it fluttered in the air, pulled along by the storm, the winch turned around, and around, and around again, and in moments, the ballista was ready to be loaded.

Not wasting her last opportunity, she half-hobbled, half-climbed up the side of the ballista, claws scarring the wood with countless pockmarks as she tore up its side before the bowstring had a chance to snap. She stood on top of the ballista, in the groove created for the bolt, bent over forward on all fours, holding onto the damn thing for dear life as she placed the bolt into the leather strap that marked the center of the bowstring.

Crow's howl died down into a self-satisfied, insane giggle. This was it. It would work, or...

She shook her head ferociously, casting the doubt aside before it could root itself in her, and kicked the firing lever.

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Crow screamed as the bolt ripped out of the machine and took her leg along with it, tearing the muscles and cleanly popping her knee and hips out of their joints. The rest of her body- held to her leg only by the metal cleanly implanted beneath her bones- followed along behind it, and she dangled under the bolt, flailing and spinning around in the air as the bolt dipped down and curved under her weight and the force of the howling gales. Every half-breath, her spinning brought her facing the fortress, though too quickly for her to make out any details.

Acting purely on instinct, she waited two breaths, then curled up towards her leg and slashed the rope connecting her to the bolt.

She forced her wings open against the wind and tried to use her wingarms to point her toward the main complex before she smashed against the wall. In the same moment, the bolt *did*, sending boulder-sized chunks of stone from the walls careening down into the moment.

In the instant before impact, she was finally facing the wall, and then, she grinned madly.

She'd done it.

Tick!

She reappeared higher in the air— exactly where she had been two breaths before when she was attached to the ballista bolt. Now, though, she was gliding down towards the wall under her own power.

The wind ripped at her wings, and a howling gale tilted her to the side and spent her spinning. Reflexively, she closed the wing that was being pushed against and compensated with her wingarms and her other wing,

correcting immediately. But the wind kept tearing at her, pushing her off course, no matter how many times she corrected herself.

Crow grinned again as another wicked idea sprouted in her mind and spread its roots down into each and every one of her muscles. Her whole body was wrapped up in a cocoon of mind-splitting pain that numbed her to the world around her. In this state, she could hardly feel a thing, even as the storm picked up and twisted her dangling and disjointed leg around, and around, and around again. Facing such pain, she was still awake, still living, still moving,

so there'd be nothing wrong with a little more!

Crow folded her wings in and dipped her head down towards the drawbridge. She streaked through the sky like a shooting star, gathering so much speed so quickly that the wind could no longer push her off of her path.

No matter what, she would do this.

She had to.

The instant before impact, she twisted around in the air, facing the wood of the drawbridge with her partially-extended talons and claws. It was hardly a buffer at all for the amount of momentum she had, and even as her sharpest parts bit into the wood, the rest of her body— soft and bony— crashed into the drawbridge and was crushed by the impact of it.

Head spinning, her mind was disconnected fully from her body as she drowned in the bottomless depths of pain too great for her to feel. Her lips parted to scream, but nothing came out. Instead, she bit down hard on her lips,

drawing blood, as she sacrificed nearly every single claw to the drawbridge. As she bore down into it, her claws cracked and splintered from the force— or were simply ripped out from the knuckles completely by her speed.

But even as she tumbled down the side of the drawbridge, falling all the way to its bottom, she slowed down, and eventually,

came to a stop.

[inhale]

[exhale]

[inhale]

[exhale]

Crow, stunned, vision blurry and partially obscured by smears and splotches of blood, craned her neck back and looked up.

Her legs, broken, were dangling in the open air.

She was hanging on to the very bottom of the drawbridge by her two remaining claws— both in the same hand.

None of her talons remained.

Crow smiled weakly, then flinched from the relatively minor pain of stretching her cracking, bleeding lips.

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

Within her, the coals had grown white-hot and burst into flames. Crow felt, deeply and totally, as though she was on fire.

She felt as though she was truly alive.

Crow laughed, even as blood came up from some hole in her throat and she choked on it. And then, once more, she began to move.

Nothing in this world would stop her.

She was Crow.

Crack!

Crow pierced her beak into the wood of the drawbridge, wrenched her claws free, then reared her arm back and forced her claws into the wood above her head.

Crack!

Crow wrenched her beak free, reared her head back, then pulled as hard as she could with her right arm, lifting herself up far enough to pierce her beak into the wood of the drawbridge. Then, she wrenched her claws free...

Crack!

Another bone broken, another bodylength up the wall.

Crack!

It did not matter what she lost. She would give it all up. To reach into the future, to see even a moment of what her life held ahead, **she would let it all burn.**

Crack!

Crow screamed as the force on her beak finally caused the fracture in her jaw to grow and snap in half. She hastily slammed her claws back into the wall, crying out as her beak dipped and dangled down.

But the fire in her eyes did not dim for even a moment.

Finch pulled her closer, holding Crow fully in her embrace, then pulled away, looking down at her, studying her closely. Then, she spoke:

"One last thing," Crow whispered, smiling softly.

Deep within her, beneath her flesh, beyond her bones, past her heart— even deeper still— lying countless layers beneath the surface, at the very center of her being, laid the single truth of her heart, the essence of all she was:

A cold, gray orb, cast from slag glass, dull, and dim.

But as soon as she became aware of it, it disappeared again, lost instantly to the depths of her soul.

It was not supposed to lose the orb.

Something cracked. And as **it** did, warmth spread through her, and a glowing, orange light began to shine deep within the dark. Crow turned her soul over, searching for its source, until finally, she saw it:

a single wisp of flame, flickering out from a hairline fracture in the side of the **orb**.

And at once, she recognized **it** again.

Its flames roared out and rushed up along the cold inside of her soul, billowing around within her, searching not for fuel to consume, but for a vessel to fill with warmth. Physically, Crow dipped her head down and screamed as the burning in her body changed from a mental pressure to an all-consuming embrace. Its hot tendrils reached up and lashed around her body, wrapping around every piece and part of her over, and over, and over again. The sheer weight and presence of it pressed the tears from her eyes and crushed the doubt out of her heart. Expecting the flames to stop, she steadied herself, gasping and panting for breath as her final two claws planted in the wall began to slip—

But the flames did not stop with her doubt and grief, no— instead, all about her was a sudden storm of heat, connection, and **understanding**. Hot mist rose up from her body as silky wisps, and her body shone with a hot red glow as every part of her began to **burn**.

Crow buckled against the fresh wave of pain as the cleansing fire burned through her and set the very basis of her being alight. All throughout her body, she felt light, warmth, heat, and single-minded focus. Everything became sharp, clear, *obvious*,

and as she looked up towards the top of the drawbridge once again, her eyepatch began to glow.

There was still a chance.

No matter the cost, she would see it through. She would do anything for a single extra moment of life. She would do **anything** to reach out ahead, even if only to brush against the tail of her future for a single moment.

As the fire continued to burn through her, she smiled. There was peace in the overwhelming weight of it, in the certainty of the destruction, in the single-minded pursuit of the one goal her heart had always held closer than anything else.

In order to live as herself, even if only for a single day,

SHE WOULD LET IT ALL BURN.

Crow's eyepatch disintegrated as pure-white fire erupted from her flesh eye's socket and scorched the air around it. The patch of drawbridge closest to her face, even soaked with rain, was instantly blackened and scorched from the heat.

Mind blank, Crow pulled on her claws as hard as she could and ripped them out of the wall. The force of it sent her full bodylength above where she was before, and at the apex of her jump, she gouged the wall once again with her claws. Over and over again, she repeated this, scorching and tearing away at the drawbridge one bodylength at a time, until, finally,

sccrrraaaatch! her two remaining claws carved away at the ramparts to make their own purchase. Finally at the top, she flung herself over them, landing on her back on the wallwalk.

"One last thing," she whispered, slamming her hand palm-down into the soaked stone. The heat from her palms evaporated the sheen of water on the wall's surface, and she pushed herself up to sit, then tipped forward, falling onto her knees. She kept falling forward, but caught herself with the same hand just as her head came an antslength from the floor.

Then, on shaking, trembling, sickeningly-twisted and bent legs, she forced herself to stand against the rain, chest bared against it, breaths heaving in defiance against the pressure of the world that bore down so heavily against her.

Even standing in the midst of such a great storm, the water did not touch her, and her skin and clothes were dry. All over her body, tiny wisps of white flame poured out of her from every break, abrasion, and cut in her skin.

She was nothing but a vessel for the everburning fire.

And it had consumed her.

Her breath heaved out, and hot and heavy plumes of bright-white fire spilled from her mouth and hissed out between the gaps in her beak. She twisted her head around to the side with a *cRACK!*, surveying the plaza below. The rain fell so heavily, and in such thick sheets, that she could not even make out the glinting of lights below.

Then, a bright-red streaking comet of light and sparks hissd out from the ground in the middle of the plaza and streaked up into the sky. A flare. And in a moment, its flame was extinguished by the relentless rain.

Even over the sound of the rain, she could hear orders being shouted, and flare after flare was fired up into the air. Her shoulders raised in anticipation, and her feathers stood up on end, bristling and puffing out. Every part of her **burned** with the need of release, with the need to fill the world with the fire burning in her chest.

She needed the world to burn as she did.

Her fingers twitched, and her hands curled up into fists, clenching so tightly that the freshly-sealed wounds where she had been declawed split back open. Instead of blood, sparking streams of white fire poured out and flowed between the gaps in her fingers before floating up and wrapping around her hands and wrists.

When she unclenched her hands, the fire reformed and twisted. From each of her declawed digits, twisting, spiralling, hissing flames shot out into the air for a full half-bodylength before unraveling at the tips, fading into little wisps that evaporated the rain until they were inevitably overtaken.

'During the training, we will fire flares. I will excuse myself from the main body and head to our target, opening up an entrance in the side for you. Once I do—'

Crow snapped her head to the side as a brilliant white flame burst out from far away and higher up than the rest of the flares and rocketed into the sky. Instead of being extinguished by the rain, it exploded, bursting into blue-and-white fragments that sizzled in the air and fell back down to the ground.

Without thinking, Crow fell to the side and twisted her body down onto all fours, gripping the edge of the wall, facing where the flare had launched from. She ripped away at the wall, throwing herself forward with her hands, headfirst, over the edge of the wall and down towards the plaza. As she fell, she partially unfurled her wings and threw her wingarms back and to the side. On its own, her eye whirred and shifted, looking into the past. Over and over again, it repeated the moment of the flare was launched, and she pointed herself towards it.

Even as the wind ripped at her and twisted her body around, throwing her like a ragdoll— even as flames rushed out of her body from all over— even as her body was broken and bruised beyond repair—

she felt nothing but the warmth of the flames; all else was burned away.

Crow crashed down into the wall of the great dome, but the moment before she touched it, the heat from **the everburning fire** caused its canvas surface to conflagrate instantly. She reared her head back and flicked her gaze around wildly, looking for the opening Finch had made for her.

"CROW?!" Finch shouted out from above, clear voice cutting clean through the rain, wind, and fire.

Even before Crow snapped her head around to catch Finch's gaze, her body was moving on its own, clawing its way up the canvas as it disintegrated beneath her every touch. Her muscles, torn apart and ruined, flexed and gripped and climbed without complaint, but as they did, new wounds formed across her body, and from them, new fonts of flame hissed to life and burned away all that came before them.

Crow opened her mouth to call back, and from it spilled her voice tangled and scattered among the streaming fire that pushed through the gaps in her beak.

'f.....I .. , N C ..,, H?'

In the single moment of hesitation, the fire burned away all that she clung to, and in the next moment, Crow was plummeting down the side of the dome,

Crow's vision split like fractured glass as her body met the stones of the plaza. From what her single eye could see, a hundred images formed, wrapped around each other, mirrored and reflected endlessly, color, size, shape, and direction distorted and folded into bisected smears of light cut by sharp lines that flickered with the movements of the world around her.

But she did not feel it— her sensations extended no further than the warmth of the **fire** that **unmade** the world.

Callously, and curiously, she stood as if it was the simple, rote matter of rising from a long slumber in her nest. She did not know how her body moved, contorted, or twisted. She did not need to.

There was only one thing she needed. It was the reason for her fire; it was the fuel that spawned her flames. It was...

Crow stumbled forward, vision swimming with a thousand new flickering blobs that cut across her vision and bobbed around her, dancing like lures on a line. Tired, she raised her arm up and swept her hand aside to shoo them away. As she did, she was blinded by bright-white light a thousand times brighter than the morning, but as she lowered her arm, it faded, and the blobs perturbed her no longer.

And so, she carried on, callously, curiously, head bobbing side to side as she continued to wonder and wander. *The reason for the warmth*, she pondered, nodding. Everything was so, so warm, so comfortable, so... *lovely!*

It came from somewhere, she knew, the warmth. It had a reason, a drive, some sort of... *something*. It was...

More blobs, like squished hourglasses stuffed full with drenched and dripping cloth, packed themselves around her, flooding the whole of her vision.

Ugh, she sighed, dismissing them once again with a single swipe of her hand. This time, the light was dimmer, cleaner, *sharper*, and it sliced through each one of the hundreds of panels of her vision, cleaving across the blobs, **unmaking** them.

Once again, her vision was clear, and she was freed to think again.

Much better, she thought, humming softly to herself as her head returned to bobbing. *Now*, she scratched the top of her head, lips scrunching as she pushed them to one side of her face in contemplation.

But just as she returned to thinking, a new blob, a different blob, a whiter, taller, sharper blob, like metal stacked and folded and pinched together over and over and over again, came and filled each and every part of her vision.

Her body came to a halt, and on her shoulders, her warmth dimmed.

The blob was touching her.

The blobs were not supposed to be touching her.

Crow lifted her arm to push the blob away, but found that she could not. Curious, she cocked her head to the side, regarding her frozen arm with all of her attention. Its warmth, too, was dimmed. All around her wrist, she was **cold**.

The longer she looked at it, the further up her arm the chill spread, and with it, a rush of sensations that wrapped her mind in prickling thorns. She flinched away from it, thrashing around, trying to rip out of the blob's grasp, but it held firm, and all through her body, the *ice* spread. She hissed along with her body as the fire was quenched and overwhelmed, crying and screaming and thrashing all the way as the **warmth** fell away.

With the chill came pain, and with the pain came *clarity*.

All at once, her vision snapped back into sharp focus and the body of Finch, body wrapped around her own, became instantly clear. Without thinking, she raised her arms up and hugged her, empty eye socket spasming as it tried to milk out tears from a duct that no longer existed.

"I'm so sorry," Finch was saying, over, and over, and over again, as she squeezed her ever tighter against herself.

Crow coughed and sputtered, thudding against Finch's back weakly with her hands, "let—"

At once, Finch pulled away and knelt down, looking into Crow's eye.

The flames lurked just under the surface of her skin, expectantly. Ravenously. *Waiting*.

The two were illuminated by intense, bright-white light that flickered over them from behind. The heat of the burning dome was so overwhelming that the rain did not even reach them. Instead, it evaporated long before it ever had a chance to hit them.

They remained there in silence, each staring at the other, stunned.

Finch's clothes were smoldering ashes on the hot and cracking ground, and her body was covered in soot and burn marks from the chin down, silver metal blackened everywhere it had come into contact with the warmth of Crow's fire. Her eyes, metal and unfeeling, stared blankly back, but Crow could feel the overwhelming sorrow leeching into her where their hands were joined at her waist.

"What happened to you, Crow?" Finch asked, softly, steady voice quiet, dim, and dark with emotion she had never shown before.

"I—" she croaked, voice failing her. No matter how she strained and stretched and tried to force out sound, nothing but scratchy squawks and curdling gargles spilled out. The more she tried to speak, the more desperate she became, ripping her hands away from Finch's to grasp at her throat. The muscles around her eyes stretched wide in panic, skin cracking as micro-cauterizations all across her face split open to dribble out blood and spurts of cold, dim flames.

"Raven?" Finch asked simply.

Crow's mind swam with memories, with possibilities, with visions of the past and recent-past, of everything that had happened, of the life that brought her up to this point. The latent heat within her mind melted it all together, and all that remained in the crucible of her body was a scar of Raven branded upon her very being. Whatever had happened, **it was all their fault**. That much was clear.

Then, Crow responded. Her voice failed her, and so she spoke her mind with a simple nod.

Finch paused. She wished that she had lips, that she might purse them. She wished that she had lungs, that she might sigh. She wished that she had power untold, that she might fix this, that she might fix her, that she might save Crow from all of this. One half of her mind was breaking itself apart, tearing down the protocols and thoughts and plans that had caused all this, that had forced this fate on Crow. Even if she claimed it to be Raven, deep down, **Finch knew that she alone was to blame**. She always failed, she always fell apart when it mattered. No matter how much she had planned, no matter how many contingencies she prepared, nothing in the world could have tempered her for *this*—

What will it cost? Crow thought, lips trembling as her eye continued to spasm. She'd done it. She hadn't died. She'd made it to Finch. Despite everything. But...

Crow's legs folded as the last embers melting her together faded away, and she collapsed into Finch, body ruined, life fully spent. She had burned it all away, and now, there was nothing left to give. But still, her mind turned, her thoughts lingered, and her body screamed out with a thousand sensations that ran her focus through like knives twisted into wounds over, and over, and over again.

She had reached Finch, but reaching Finch wasn't **it**.

The everburning fire wasn't **it**.

She had given everything, but giving everything wasn't **it**.

Finch pulled Crow close to her chest, lifted her off the ground, and began to run.

Crow's vision began to dim as her focus waned, her grip on consciousness fading. Everything hurt too much. Everything was too much.

Why was it that no matter how hard she tried, she always fell apart in the end?

The spasming of her empty eye socket reminded her of all she'd lost, the scratching of her useless vocalthings against the inside of her throat reminded her that it was all her fault. She mourned her own weakness, she mourned how Serpent sacrificed itself for someone so *useless*, she mourned what she was putting Finch through, she mourned the fact that despite chasing **it** she only ever found herself slipping further and further through the cracks.

Every thought revolted her and sent her deeper. Each time she opened her eyes, she melted down further, reminded of the fact she now also had to mourn the loss of her vision.

Was she truly cursed, now, to be half-blind?

Was she cursed, then, to always fuck up?

Did everything she do to help herself have to make everything worse?

Did she have to be such a fuckup?

Did she have to be such a waste of flesh?

it was just—

"Little Crow. Little Crow," Finch cooed, pushing what remained of Crow's hair behind what remained of her ear.

"Little Crow. Little Crow," Serpent cooed, ...

"Little Crow. Little Crow," The Seamstress cooed, ...

"Little Crow. Little Crow," Raven cooed, ...

"Little Crow. Little Crow," Hound cooed, ...

"Little Crow. Little Crow," Weasel cooed, ...

"Little Crow. Little Crow," ...

"Little Crow ... "

"...Crow..."

"Crow?"

All of this had happened before.

All of this was happening now.

All of this would happen again.

tick, tick, tick

How many times had she lived this moment?

tick, tick, tick

How many times had she clawed her way to the surface, ready to pierce through it and claim her life, only to be dragged back down into the **abyss**?

ticktick, ticktick,

Something within Crow cracked and chipped away.

ticktick ticktick ticktick,

It couldn't end like this.

tickticktick tickticktick tickticktick—

It wouldn't end like this.

—ticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktick—

With the last of her strength, Crow reached up into her chest, pulled out the **stopwatch**, and held it up to the sky. Her beak fell open, head lolling to the side. Her raised arm shook, spasming from the effort of staying upright, trembling with the effort of merely holding the stopwatch.

[inhale]

She flexed her fingers, gripping the stopwatch tight. The cracked glass of its watchface shattered as her fingers strained against it. She focused all of her life, all she was, into one final movement:

"Crow? What are you—"

She crushed **it**.

Tick!