

chapter 1. pieces

She pressed her back into the cold black stone. Her breath heaved out, hot and heavy, and her hands shakily returned to the leather pouch attached to her hip. Her left flipped the pouch open, and her right dove inside, clutching around the singular **precious piece** within.

Her shaky sigh of relief signaled the start of a brief respite. She slid down the wall, now slick with her perspiration, until she was seated fully in the dirt. She brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped up into a tight ball, pulling her cloak fully around her.

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

Inside her ball, it was dark, claustrophobic, and warm; all the pieces she needed to feel comfort. Everything she needed to feel safe. She'd never dream to ask of more and she didn't feel that she even needed to.

Every tick of her stopwatch was met with a single tap of her finger. Even resting, she was restless. She only longed to breathe deep and still her heart, but she knew there could be only twenty more breaths before it was time to run again.

She cherished every one of them.

.

On the twenty-first breath, the crunch of cracking mud under heavy foot signaled the end of her brief respite.

And in an instant, she was gone again.

..

"I'm back," her voice rasped out, barely intelligible from the scratch of the door against the rough floor.

"And in one piece? How impressive. Step here, dear, let's see what you have."

She produced the **precious piece**, placing it into their outstretched claw.

"Ah, sublime. This, now. This is exceptional. Tell me, **crow**, what heap did you drag this shiny out of?"

"Henrich's laboratory."

"Good choice. You want the piece installed, I presume?"

Her voice failed her, and so **Crow** spoke her mind with a simple nod.

There was no response, no follow-up. The creature eyed her expectantly, ravenously. Waiting.

"Mm. Right." Crow held out the **stopwatch** and popped open the backplate, revealing a delicate cloth stored within.

In an instant, hungry claws descended upon the cloth and snatched it up. in the span of two blinks, the cloth was spread across the closest table, and the tall figure peered over it, barely an inch above the wrinkling fabric.

"Dearest, most lovable Crow... This, now. This is your payment?"

"Obviously, **Raven**." She croaked, dropping into the stool across from them. Immediately uncomfortable, she brought her knees up to her chest, perching atop the stool in a tight ball. Yet restless, she pulled her cloak around herself, and only then could she relax somewhat.

"This is more than sufficient, and I won't be in your debt. You may pick any part in the shop—I'll **install** it alongside the piece." As they spoke, Raven did not regard crow in any way, instead fascinated by the meaningless scribbles covering every inch of the fabric.

Crow watched with impatient intrigue as they worked, as if the secrets laid out so plainly in the fabric would pounce out at her and reveal themselves. She yearned to **understand**, the way Raven did.

And soon, she would. She *had* to.

..

The two sat for thousands of breaths in perfect silence.

The room was flat, blank, featureless. nothing had any seams, nor texture, and the only color in the room was a sticky, unsettling gray that stuck in the mind like a mouthful of flour. By comparison, the two sterile metal tables with matching stools were like an island oasis in the sea of visual malaise.

Crow's mind had been wandering for some time, now— that's just what tended to happen when her body could not. The slower she acted, the more her brain acted up, building up thoughts on top of itself until they all fell apart and the cycle began anew.

After so long in such isolating silence, her mind was a tumult of thoughts, her head awash with memories that rolled over her like ocean waves. it was her full effort to keep her body still, her breaths even. she counted the ticks of the *watch* and tapped her fingers in time with it, consoling herself with the idea that every tick was one moment closer to her next *piece*.

Every time, the waiting killed her. and every time, Raven didn't give a fuck.

And so, she waited, patiently impatient.

"Are you ready for your **installation**?" Raven asked, not looking up from their work.

"Yes!" the stool clattered to the floor as she bolted out of it, paused, and then awkwardly set it upright once again. The metallic echo rang painfully in her ears.

"Care, now. Care for your surroundings, *crow*." Raven strode across the sterile room and sank their talons viciously into a peculiar stone on the floor. It burst into shards and crumbled into pebbles, and the wall it was lying next to fell in the exact same fashion.

It was a simple **sympathetic binding**, really.

Raven raised three of their wings ahead of them like a shield and pebbles clattered off of them onto the floor, after which they stepped calmly over the destruction and into the room that was revealed.

Crow scampered after them and hopped over the rubble. With a click of Raven's claws, the thousands of pieces of gravel pieced themselves back into a perfect, seamless wall— a much less simple **entropic reversal**, but still trivial for Raven.

..

Crow found herself again in the room of Making and Unmaking. it was imposing, oppressive, and **alive**.

It was a massive, cavernous space, with no straight lines and no rough edges; it was much like the inside of a giant's mouth in that regard. Tall, grand, and misshapen shelves lined with all manner of trinkets jutted out of the floor like landmasses that had been formed by nature rather than designed by an architect. the floor was perfectly flat, and somewhat reflective, causing the room to seem endless.

Strange, winding paths lead from all of the walls of the room towards the massive red dais at its heart. Set on it was a single, long chair for lounging flanked on all sides by metal tables covered in sharp, expensive things.

With every breath Raven took, the entire room expanded and contracted in smooth, rhythmic motions, as though it was all an extension of the creature's lungs. The floor rose and fell underneath them like rolling waves, and the walls and ceiling closed in towards them slowly before receding away again. the thousands of misshapen shelves twisted slowly with each breath, unwinding again on each exhale.

Based on Raven's *pastwords*, crow knew it was powered by **something**, but what, exactly, she did not know.

.

The two walked together for some time, passing row upon row of strange, weathered shelves. crow brushed her fingertips across each one of them, noting the texture. Some were fleshy, like sponge, others coarse, like sand, some smooth and cold, like metal. She did not regard them visually, though. Instead, she cast her gaze to the floor, transfixed by her reflection.

Often, she did not recognize herself. This was one of those many moments. Something separated her from herself, but she could not place it. *Physically*, her mind was connected to her body, but the two could not feel each other— the same as her, and her reflection, which was trapped within the floor.

..

Crow's reflection suddenly disappeared as she stepped onto the waxy red dais.

She stood there, shocked, as if a piece of her had been cut off.

The sharp clattering of jostled tools suddenly brought her attention up towards Raven. They'd already extended a single clawed digit towards the bloodstained *lounging chair*, as if having anticipated her to forget what came next.

How many times had they done this? She wondered. Did she always feel so empty in the moments before? Why did doubt eat away at her organs? Why did her flesh long to leave her behind?

In the span of three breaths, she was laying back in the *lounging chair*. She did not recall moving her body, but she must have— right?

She stared up at the ceiling, breathing fast and shallow. Raven tapped their claws together and light poured down onto her from above, forcing her to shut her eyes in pain.

Raven's talons clacked on the floor; they were moving closer.

Crow covered her head with her cloak to avoid the light and opened her eyes slowly. The cloak was— no, her *wingarm*— was trembling, and looking down, so too was the rest of her body.

"w, why do-I tr,
tre,
tremble, **Raven**?"

There was
no response.

”

”

”

”

[Dear reader, this is the point in the story that I must warn you of some things.

This is an advisory for **drugs, abuse, and body horror**, as well as **intense and graphic descriptions of violence, mental breakdowns, gore, bodily fluids, and surgery**.

- **before this content occurs**, I will leave this tag:
 - *[inhale]*
- **after this content occurs**, I will leave this tag:
 - *[exhale]*

When the book is closer to being complete, I will link a summary for each scene with triggering content; this is for those interested in the story who are uninterested in being triggered.

I am still playing around with the placement of these tags, and the placement of this warning. Not all triggering content in the book has been tagged (though, it has been in this chapter).

Please, keep yourself sane, dear reader, and do what makes sense for you.]

"What does it do?" Raven's voice was dark, demanding. They were seated on a wide stool directly in front of Crow, and they held out the **precious piece** between two wicked claws.

"I was hoping... you could tell me what it does?" She pressed her fingers tightly into the underside of her beak in a futile effort to keep it from chattering.

"How, crow. How could I tell you what this does?" Raven's feathers and bristles flared out in excitement as they smelled Crow's fear.

"i don't... um.. analyze it?" she stared at the floor beneath Raven's talons, unable to meet their gaze.

"With what tools, *crow*? A hammer, a caliper? With what techniques? Crack it open, measure its pieces?" In actuality, Raven had identified exactly how to analyze the **piece**. They just couldn't help but toy with *crow*, like a predator playing with its food.

"well-"

"What is it that you know about this, hm? Let's start there."

"it was in a box labeled 'spare eyes', so... i think-"

"Ah. Good, that. That is enough information to work off of. I'll find its interfacing components and we'll see if we can make your flesh compatible yet, hm? Occupy yourself." Raven turned away, stooping down to pick up a small piece of scrap metal from the floor.

As they picked it up, a massive metal worktable rose seamlessly from the floor with it, as if the two were connected by invisible chains. The worktable was several times larger than crow, and yet Raven still dwarfed it entirely.

Leaning over the table, Raven dropped the **precious piece**. It fell for but a moment before stopping suddenly in the air, suspended by some contraption held out of view. Raven hunched forward, craning their neck down towards the *piece*. They slid a series of metal stands holding glass lenses in front of their wide-open, hungry eyes. Their breath was heavy, now, and even from far away crow could see the sheen of moisture forming across Raven's maw.

As they worked, Raven scratched their observations into the top of the workstation with a razor-sharp wingtip, never taking their eyes off the piece for even a moment.

.

A stagnant part of crow's brain began to stir as if waking up from some deep slumber, and without thinking, crow slid out of the lounging chair and turned away from Raven.

Without hesitation, she scampered off into the forest of twisting shelves.

Raven had offered her any **part** in the shop for free, and she needed to grab one before they changed their mind. They never allowed Crow around the parts on her own— she *was* an expert thief, and, well, Raven was Raven— so she only had until they finished analyzing the piece to grab what she needed.

Her **Dreamself** had seen the perfect part, some moons ago.

She just had to find it.

[inhale]

Even with her eyes closed, Crow could navigate the hoardish collection of devices, baubles, and squishy organs. She knew it like her own mind after countless nights spent tracing the shelves, trying to understand the shape of a formless domain.

[exhale]

Now, though, she coasted through the living forest of shelves as if she was simply phasing through them. This wasn't the first of such circumstances, after all.

She'd had plenty of time to practice.

There were only two fixed points in the room: the **False Moon** set within the cavernous ceiling and the central dais far beneath it. Whenever the room shifted, it twisted and turned around these points, and the clusters of shelves would roam freely like boats on the open ocean.

Raven's emotional state played a key part in these movements; the entire room followed predictable currents based on the undercurrents of their soul.

The room *was* a physical extension of Raven's soul, after all.

In her *Dream*, Crow had come across a tall, gnarled, shelf all on its own, completely hidden within the shadow of the **towering marble shelves** surrounding it. The shelf was covered in soft fur and smelled of blood and passion.

But to find the part was not so easy as retracing the steps of her *Dreamself*; the room was constantly shifting and churning. Because of this, the task at hand was not a case of plotting and following a fixed path from beginning to end. Instead, it had to be an active pursuit, like chasing a pickpocket through the city's alleys, using your knowledge of its features and shortcuts to cut them off.

Crow had developed a number of techniques to find parts in these conditions over the years.

First, the length of the shadows around Crow indicated her distance from the central dais.

Second, the angle of those shadows relative to the lounging chair on the dais helped her identify her place within the room.

Third, the room was truly *alive*, and she could identify each cluster of shelves based on the unique scent and texture resulting from their biology.

It was simply a practice of following her instincts, keeping track of which clusters she'd already passed, and where they're moving to.

.

After only twenty-three burning breaths spent following the acrid smell of vomit and corpses, her fingertips were already tracing the chalky glass texture of the marble shelves. Each marble shelf was crested by a gaping red and black maw that spewed foul smoke— Raven told her once that these served as units for **recycling** old **parts**.

Crow traced the texture of the shelf down into its shadow, then followed along deeper into the all-consuming dark, continuing long past the point where she could no longer see the world around her, nor even her own body.

In her *Dreams*, never did she encounter danger. and so, in following her *Dreamself*, she would go to the end of the world without question. And so, she carried on, walking for a hundred more breaths before the smell of blood, then passion, reached her beak.

Shortly after, she banged into the fur-covered shelf.

It was a bit dark. She'd have to fix that. Perhaps her last **glow-worm**?

[inhale]

Crow took a small, wriggling creature from a rigid inner pocket and crushed through its shell with the pointed corners of her beak. After, she squirted its innards into her cupped hands and pulverized the offal into a coarse, grainy paste. This was all finished in the span of eleven breaths, after which she spat out the worm's husk and tried hard to endure the feeling of the paste on her feathers.

She *hated* the way it felt, as if the worm were alive and crawling about underneath her skin, and Crow only lasted two more halting breaths before flapping her hands uncontrollably, splattering the paste everywhere.

[*exhale*]

It'd have to do.

The paste began to spark and pop before suddenly igniting into hissing yellow flames. They provided poor lighting, but were cool to the touch, and didn't have a habit of spreading. **Glow-worms** didn't provide the best light, but they were safe.

That was all Crow ever wanted, really.

Once her eyes adjusted, her heart stilled. There it was. The *part* from her *Dream*, before her.

She did it. She made it in time. In one piece. She'd really... managed it. Despite everything. Despite the dark.

Her shaky sigh of relief signaled the start of a brief respite, and she began to count the ticks of her stopwatch. Every tick was met with a corresponding clack from her talons.

Even resting, she was restless, and so she peered at the *part* with eyes full of wonder and cheeks full of rosy heat.

It was a quivering, wobbling little thing, like three worms that got melted together in the sun but never lost their desire to squirm. It smelled rancid, and tasted six times worse, erm—

she *figured* it tasted six times worse. Hypothetically, of course.

Allegedly, these creatures inherently understood how to communicate information directly into each other's minds. It made her feel... hollow.

Was she living the life she was meant to?

...

Crow approached Raven slowly, cautiously, the *part* enclosed within her fingertalons. her feathers stood up in protest as she approached them. She felt a deep, familiar fog begin to settle in with her brain, making cozy the inside of her skull.

"I, erm— it's—"

Raven wordlessly peered down at her before craning their massive neck down, stopping only when their eyes were practically grazing the part.

"Oh, now. Now, this. This is a perfect choice, Crow. Very impressive."

Crow's feathers stood on end from the warm feeling of Raven's praise.

"so, um, where—"

"To the worktable."

"..of course.." crow closed the distance slowly, eyes locked on Raven's shining talons and claws.

As she approached, Raven's maw opened, hungry. Their sharp fangs and tusks pointed down at her, just out of her view.

[inhale]

She plopped the squishy organ onto the cold metal worktable and quickly paced backwards, looking up to Raven, who had already snapped shut their expectant maw.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, like I'm impossible to speak to, dear crow. It breaks my little hearts. Regardless, I am finished analyzing your piece. We'll begin shortly. Now, get. Get into your place."

[exhale]

..

Crow curled up into a tight ball and squirmed like a worm in rain. It was a futile attempt to disappear entirely within the relative comfort of the blood-encrusted *lounging chair*.

She often wished to disappear entirely. Especially now, as the fog within her brain nuzzled in close to protect her by sealing everything behind a dark haze.

Raven approached crow slowly; the **eye** was clutched within one of their many hands. Their movements were stiff and robotic. Their muscles were tensed.

Crow spun and buried her face into one of the cushions, breathing deep to still her heart. Instead, the scent of blood filled up her lungs and flared through her like blazing fire. Her feathers rippled down her body which twitched in fear and spite.

It was wrong. It was *all* wrong. She had to—

"Breathe deep and descend, *crow*. This is not the first of such circumstances, as you well know. I truly cannot comprehend your theatrics."

"ss ,, *serpie?* i **need**—" she gasped, her voice broken. she spun around again as if tossing off a wretched nightmare. Her eyes were wide with pupils like the new moon, and through them, she could see naught but hazy memories that danced before her like bait on a barbed hook. Her eyes darted between them wildly until her eyelids snapped shut.

Then frozen, her talons, feral, tore at the cushions, adding yet more scars to the chair that deserved none. Her eyelids did little to protect her from the past which had already grabbed her by the throat and taken over.

"Oh, that old thing? *Fine.*" Raven rose to their full height and took in an immense, deep breath. A cold gale howled through the room and ripped over crow as all the air in the room rushed up into their monstrous lungs. As their feathered chest expanded, Raven unfurled each of their wings and opened their massive maw towards the false moon above.

SERPENT.

Raven's voice cut through the open room and shook everything within it. Their shout was both an abyssal roar and the call of a thousand ravens, and the room filled with its endless cacophony.

Raven stood proud and took in deep, shaking breaths that caused their whole frame to rise and fall. With each breath, the room rolled up and down like ocean waves. Eventually, the cacophony's echoes collapsed into a single, discordant screech, and all was again silent. Raven stood yet proud, towering over crow.

..

An amorphous liquid **thing** suddenly dropped from the ceiling and rose up out of the floor at the same time. The coarse grey liquid splashed over and into itself, over and over again, sucking and scraping and trimming itself. Grey sludge sloshed off in heaps onto the floor before streaming intelligently into the nearby blood drain.

Over the next few moments, the **thing** quickly became more definite, and its different parts: scales, muscle, and flesh began to take shape and stand out from one another.

"Heeee oooh presh-i-ous Crowww, how is my fav-or-ite little thing doing?" Serpent talked as though its voice was a bouncing ball that had to be carefully directed out of its throat in order to be heard. As it spoke, Serpent moved closer to Crow and knelt next to her on freshly-formed legs.

Her eyes were hazy and heavy with tears that flowed freely into the soft fur around her neck. She was paralyzed, frozen in time, but she still managed a single choking sob in Serpie's direction.

The sight hurt Serpent deeply.

"Quiet, **thing**. No idle chatter. We shall proceed with the **installation**." Raven bared their fangs and made no further attempt to hide their all-consuming hunger. Their voice was the scratchy growl of a starved beast ready to do anything for its next meal.

"I will do nothing of the sort. It calms Crow down to talk beforehand. She wishes to be calm, and I will make it so." Serpent met Raven's gaze and held it without fear or hesitation.

"She need not be calm, only still. Do it already." The room began to rumble with the same timbre as Raven's voice.

"No, Raven. I'd sooner sink my fangs into you than turn them on the unreadied Crow."

Raven folded forward in frustration. They longed to make an example of the two, to lash out and release all which they had been holding back. But, they were too valuable. No suitable replacements for them came to mind.

Raven allowed their arms to droop forward so that their claws may rest against the floor. They could wait a bit longer. It would be worth it. Nothing, not even their own impatience, would ruin this for them.

And so they waited, patiently impatient.

..

"Little Crow. Little Crow." Serpent cooed, tucking Crow's hair away behind her ears. There was no response. It sighed, knowing the two of them were almost out of their borrowed time.

Serpent placed the tip of its scaled tail to Crow's forehead and focused deep on the familiar scent and feeling of her nest in the morning sun. Then, it **called** upon their **sympathy**, and at once their minds were **bound**.

Like a fish hauled from water, crow's eyes flashed open, shut, and open again, and her body trembled as the nightmare melted away to reveal her lovely and familiar home. Serpent held her close, now.

"Is this alright, little Crow?"

"Always, Serpie."

"You should know that we aren't ac—"

"You aren't lying to me, Serpie. I know where I am... and what happens next."

"Right."

"Can we, um—?" She trailed off, gesturing vaguely with a paw.

"Of course, little Crow."

Serpent picked her up with little issue and laid down beneath her in the lounging chair.

Crow settled naturally into Serpie's lap and pulled its comforting arms around her like a blanket. She stared straight towards Raven, but saw only the familiar wicker wall of her nest.

It was a strange and beautiful thing, the binding of minds. All at once they had become one, each a copy of the other, neither one holding on to their former self. In perfect still silence, they exchanged all of themselves, each uncovering the truth of the other simply by stretching their minds.

Everything crow wished to tell Serpie, everything she wished to share, passed over without conscious effort. Nothing was lost, and nothing was misunderstood. It couldn't be.

It was safety. It was comfort. It was acceptance. It was peace. It was understanding, compassion, empathy, fulfillment, certainty, **it**—

Crow's heart pounded in time with the world itself. Every fiber of her being soaked in the ecstasy of life. For one single breath, the fog in her mind lifted, and everything was clear.

It was true bliss.

"You can drop the binding, Serpie. I can't let this feeling be tainted by what happens next. And, um... I'm finally ready now. Thank you."

The perfect feeling of warmth and safety was lost like a paper burning away to ash. Reality flooded her mind, and she was once again confronted with the vision of Raven before her. The fog once again made cozy her mind and every feeling faded away into a tangible nothingness.

"Are you really ready, little Crow?"

"I have to be. what if this one is **it**?"

"I hope it is, dear Crow. You've been searching for so, so long— hold on—" Serpent leaned forward until its fangs were scraping the bare white scars behind Crow's ear. "You seem to have a feather out of place. Allow me to fix it for you."

Crow took in one final, trembling breath, and wiped away the last of her tears with the edge of her cloak.

[inhale]

Serpent crushed through flesh and bone with its fangs, piercing deep into Crow's head in an instant. It teethed away at the back of her skull, pumping its jaw to express its venom gland. Its fangs scraped at her insides like an ice cream scoop as the venom coursed directly into her blood, binding up her body in its sickly-sweet embrace.

She opened her mouth to scream, but her voice caught on nothing, already held tight by the venom that forced her body still. She went down with no further fuss, sound, or fight. She simply slipped away into vitiated bliss as the last remnants of her feelings left her behind.

Of course, Serpent made sure to adjust one of her feathers slightly— it would never lie to poor Crow. After which, Serpent retracted its fangs and massaged its jaw with a free hand. Her blood was always so, so sweet. It did not have time to savor the flavor, though; there was yet more to do.

Serpent held Crow's head in its hands, and once again **called** on their **sympathy**, this time **binding** her heart, blood, and lungs to its own. Without this simple step, the paralytic would kill her in mere minutes— let alone the blood loss.

.

"There. Hardly a wait at all, Raven."

"Hmph."

..

Crow lay perfectly still, just as any good cadaver would. Her blood, pungent and pure, flowed freely from the gaping holes left in her flesh.

"You will collect that for me." Raven instructed, sitting down next to the 'lounging chair'. Even seated, Raven towered over the two.

"Which eye is her dominant one?" Raven tapped one of their claws to crow's beak, idly chipping away at it.

"The right." Serpent lied as easily as breathing.

Slowly, Raven began to caress the right side of crow's face by dragging the blunt side of their claw up her cheek.

Despite everything, they'd really managed it. Crow was in one piece. Alive. And, finally. Finally laid down in front of them once again.

Raven's sigh of relief marked the start of their brief respite.

Finally, they could *unwind* once again.

They pressed their cold black claws into crow's soft white flesh. Their breath fell out onto her, hot and heavy.

Raven's claws flipped her right eye open, and their talons dove inside, clutching around the singular **precious piece** within.

They marveled at its precious fragility. Nothing, not even their own impatience, would ruin this for them.

Raven ripped out her eye and held it up to the false moon to appraise it. As expected, it was a pristine pearl among countless shitty, common stones. How long had they waited for one so perfect? As they admired it, a single drop of blood dripped into their expectant maw.

Their eyes dilated as all-consuming desire once again burned through them like a cleansing wildfire.

Nothing had ever come close to the taste of Crow.

Raven placed the eye gingerly onto their tongue and crushed it against the roof of their mouth. The eye burst open like a ripe tomato and coated their tongue with its beautiful humor. They growled in satisfaction, suckling away at it while reaching for Crow once again.

They scraped out flesh indiscriminately from the eye cavity, making sure to soak the fine meat in the sacred blood that spurted out from where their delicacy once lay. Raven took the flesh up to its maw and ground it between its backteeth while reaching forward again to tear off

her eyelid. It ripped off of her in uneven strands, and so Raven descended upon it with their talons, picking away ravenously at her flesh. They made sure to take every single piece within themselves. Nothing was wasted. It couldn't be.

The harvest did not last long, and once they were out of meat, Raven sat back and gave in fully to the of sensations of the Crow paste within their maw. They reveled within the feeling of it. It was as if every fiber of her being was soaked in ecstasy— it was delicious, delectable, it was perfect, it was succor, rapture, deliverance, it was—

true bliss.

...

Serpent knew better than to talk. At the slightest provocation, they would both die. It was rather simple. Serpent kept its breathing shallow and form flat while managing Crow's health and the collection of her blood. It was what she wanted. It was all for her.

She could run far, far away, never to return. She could leave Serpent and Raven forever behind her. And then, Serpent could finally take itself from Raven.

She never did, though.

And so Serpent's obligation to her trapped it. It could never see her harmed.

Why, Crow?

[inhale]

Raven's form shifted slightly as two pale white imitations of arms emerged out from countless layers of fur, feathers, and scales. The arm's movements were divorced from their own, and as soon as they received a scalpel from one of Raven's many other arms, they began at once.

The arms cut into the remains of Crow's eye cavity, scoring the top corners to lift up the skin and reveal the muscles underneath. It was a circular web of flesh anchored to the bones around it, and with no eye to support, it was little more than a tunnel of blood, pus, and muscle.

The arms began to dissect and peel away muscle fibers one at a time to expose the motor and sensory nerves. With impossible speed and precision, the hands **bound** each exposed nerve ending to a corresponding **sympathetic interface connector**.

The left hand opened up each connector like a sleeve, while the right dove inside with the next nerve to bind. The first would then crimp the connector shut over the exposed nerve, thus preparing it for the transplant. Once all the nerves were prepared, each and every one was socketed into the new eye's sympathetic interface, and so the process went.

And then, after two thousand breaths passed, it was all complete, and Raven left, wordlessly.

[exhale]

"Little Crow. Little Crow." Serpent cooed. Its voice was so, so distant.

...

The lilies are in bloom! I brought some for you. I know how much you love their scent, so ...

...

... your body is healing well! It should only be a few more days, little Crow. You know, I've been thinking ...

... ...

It's time to wake up, little Crow. Please? It's just ...

... ...

The seasons are changing, Crow. I—

Nevermind.

... ..

... ..

Another equinox has passed.

... ...

Crow?