

chapter 2. the living room

The exit from the coma was not nearly so dramatic as the entrance. She was not suddenly ripped out of it, her consciousness did not restore all at once, and she did not gasp dramatically as life returned to her frame.

She simply returned like a slow whisper. At first, small flutterings, like a new butterfly's wings. Her muscles twitched and contracted in short bursts. Then, a far grander movement: the clenching of a long relaxed hand. She then unfurled her wings, stretching them out fully, before pushing herself backwards and up onto her haunches, knees folded under her.

She looked up blearily, not quite sure of what she was seeing. Was this another dream? She'd been lost adrift in a sea of those, and she knew not for how long.

The world around her shifted and swirled, colors blurring together, pulsing, then fading away as all the disparate pieces sorted themselves back to where they belonged. Then, it happened again, and again, always shifting in new ways.

Was any of this real?

The world was an unfocused blur. The harder she focused, the less she could see. Despite not knowing where one color ended and another began, though, she could still recognize where she was.

It was the Living Room, full of moss, lichens, tiny wildflowers, and little bugs. Even blinded, she could recognize it by smell alone. She could also tell she was in her nest; she could feel the characteristic smooth wicker beneath her, and every movement of hers was met with a shifting of the nest.

Crow closed her eye, focusing on the nest beneath her. It held her softly, gently, as if to coax her back to sleep. That didn't sound too bad, actually. Life was so.. exhausting. It had a way of being like that.

After scarcely ten breaths awake, she had already curled into a tight ball, and wrapped her wings tightly around her to make up for the absence of her usual cloak. It was plenty warm, and she was plenty safe here, but... something was wrong.

There was a deep longing in her heart, a hole waiting to be filled.

as her lungs filled full with fresh air, she realized she still had not found **it**. rage and grief began to burn her, making hot her backfeathers and neck.

the calls of creatures outside told her that it was now late into the cold seasons. she had slept for over half a year. had she really been asleep for a half-year?

Only to awake without what she had been chasing this whole time? In spite of all the sacrifices made in pursuit of it?

it was too much.

she didn't deserve this.

her shoulders rolled forward, her spine flexed back, her lungs heaved in a wretched, rattling breath. she hated this part.

she began to scream out the agony held close to her heart. she mourned all the life she had missed, she mourned what she must've put serpie through, she mourned her own weakness, she mourned the fact she was no closer to her goal,

she mourned the fact that despite looking to repair herself she

only ever made

herself more

broken.

she screamed and wept, slamming her body into the nest beneath her. the wicker cracked as she struck it, and splintered as she dug her claws deep into it, shredding the surface of it.

every thought revolted her and sent her deeper. each time she opened her eyes, she melted down further, reminded of the fact she also now 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?

maybe she should let Raven subsume her. she need not be wreathed by this wretched life for a moment longer.

it was just—

"Little Crow. Little Crow." Serpent cooed.

how long had it been there? how long had it been holding her?

she choked on her next sob, before letting it out in a screeching, sputtering cough. crow flinched at the noise of it and squirmed backwards as if to escape it.

Serpent held her tighter. Its warmth seeped into her flesh, and she began to feel it all around her, holding her tight, keeping her safe. How?

"i-" but forming words was too much, and so she spoke her mind with tears.

"Oh, oh, little Crow..."

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A half-day was consumed by grief, but at the end of it, she could speak again.

"serpie?"

"Yes, good Crow?"

"i don't want to get up again. i want to rest here forever."

"I know, dearest, most precious, Crow. But you must rise, you haven't finished **looking**."

it spoke true. she would never be able to rest until she'd found what she was looking for. she wouldn't let herself. even so, *smalltears* began to form and brim along her flesh eye, but they did not drip. she would not let them.

"how am I to look when I can no longer see?"

"You need only open your eyes, Crow."

She opened her eyes. The world was clearer, now. How?

Serpent felt her question, unspoken, build up within her chest. "Some things are only a matter of time."

"I can see, now, but only out of my um. normal eye."

"We'll have to set up this piece, just like the others."

"Ugh."

"I know. May I touch it?"

"Yes. please?"

"Always so polite. Let's see here.." The end of Serpent's right arm morphed like soft goo into long, squishy tendrils with tiny pads on the end. They rolled the new eye around in its socket-

'! s..serpie!!!!'

Serpie stopped instantly. "Crow?"

"It feels so weird!!"

"Did it turn on?"

"Uh, no."

"May I continue?"

"Oh, um. yes. sorry!" She wasn't sorry.

There was a small switch on the back of the metal eye, nestled between two-dozen-some tiny wires. Serpent shaped one of its squishy tendrils into a thin, sharp hook, and flicked it on.

"that..." her whole body twitched all at once. *"it feels like there's bugs in my brain!!!"*

Serpent pressed the eye back into its socket. Eight metal plates, each a tiny curving triangle, were set in the outer rim of the eye. They all met at its center, blocking the light from coming in or out.

"I'm going to try something. Please bear with me, little Crow. Try and focus hard on this next feeling."

Serpent stuck each of the tendrils' tiny sticky pads to one of the eye's metal plates, then ever so slowly pushed the plates back towards the rim of the eye. Effortlessly, they slid back into the eye, leaving an ever-growing circle in the space where they once touched. An artificial pupil.

Crow cringed. It felt like someone was scraping their teeth along the inside of her skull. Her body twitched, and flinched, and spasmed. "it's so—!!!!!"

all of her feathers began to stand up on end.

Serpent slowly brought the plates back to the center.

"I want you to try and move the parts of your new eye. Focus hard on that feeling."

"Do I have to feel that every time I want to open my eye?!"

"I don't know."

"If I do, I'm ripping it out."

"Please let Raven handle such things."

"You know I don't want Raven anywhere near me."

"I'm sorry. I just can't stand the thought of you hurting yourself. Don't."

"...okay..."

"Uncross your fingers."

"how did you—"

"And try to open your eye, please."

"Right. Just open... the eye..." she whispered, her feathers still upright and trembling.

After ten breaths, the plates rattled slightly, then went still.

"Let's try again." Serpent placed its pads on the plates once more, moving them in and out, slowly.

Crow's back straightened in a jolt, and her wings drew close together behind her as her entire back tensed. 'it's so— ***fuck!!***' she shouted the last word.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. It's not painful, just.. unbearable."

"Like bugs crawling up your—"

"EXACTLY!"

Serpent's appendages pulled away, now, and Crow focused hard on dilating and contracting her new pupil.

It was hard going, but the two pressed on late into the night, pausing only for short breaks where Crow would bury herself, frustrated, into Serpie. It would hold her tight, until comfort returned to her tiny frame, then it would slowly coax her back upright and ease her into the process once again.

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"I.. think I've got the hang of it, now."

"Really? Show me, precious Crow."

"Just sit and watch." In but a moment, the new eye opened, shut, then opened again. Then it opened and closed a few times rapidly. Then it closed slowly, and opened slowly again.

"Now try and look to me with it."

She strained for a moment, her eye socket twitching around the new eye. It sunk slowly forward, then went still. Her lip trembled briefly.

after eight breaths, she let out a single whisper, "soon," and her feathers smoothed out as she let go of the long-held tension in her shoulders.

"Indeed, Crow. Soon." Serpent held up Crow's new eye and coaxed it back into the socket. "You've made a lot of progress today, and just after rousing from hibernation. You should be proud."

"...proud?" was she allowed to be? after everything? she'd-

"Yes, dear Crow. Proud." Serpent squeezed tight around her, pulling her back into warmth and comfort. "I'll be proud on your behalf, if you can't be. Proud enough for the both of us."

"thanks, Serpie." Crow buried herself deep into its embrace, both eyes firmly shut.

Yet restless, she rested.

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"if I slept through seasons, why is my body still broken?"

"Most of healing is an active effort, precious Crow. The most important parts are."

"that sucks. i hate that."

"You're right."

"can you make it go faster?"

"I am."

"oh."

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"thank you, Serpie."

"Of course, dear. It's my purpose."

crow let out a long-held breath. discontentment. she didn't like to think about the truth of Serpie. it felt better to pretend.

"right.."

Serpent knew better than to press on it. It always made her more upset. Though, so did the silence. It could not blame her- she simply wanted for something it could not provide, and in wanting, found only further disappointment and pain.

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was it so wrong for a girl to want?

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Several sunrises came by and disappeared, and by the fourth tear-filled day, Crow had gained a small amount of control over the eye.

"Serpie, look!" She dilated and contracted the eye rapidly, then moved it all about, pointing its pupil every which-way.

The eye stood out clearly against her flesh. It was a perfect sphere, set slightly deeper than her other eye, and the eyelids that once dwelt there were now ribbons of scarred flesh that covered only the very top and bottom of the eye. All around the area, it was soft, and pink, and slightly raised, and tender, where old flesh met new-old flesh, moved and folded and stitched and sutured to form a new shape to hold the odd metal eye.

What was there before had been carved away, and at the very edges of the scar tissue, the old gouges could be faintly made out by the thin, rail-like whiteflesh that disappeared behind the eye only to reappear on the other side.

The eye itself was a pale-white smooth metal thing, with tiny etchings scoring round the outside rim, lining the top of the tiny slot where the metal pieces would retract to reveal the pupil within. The artificial pupil, though, was a clear glassy thing. It did not shine, no; it was the opposite. It seemed as though it sucked in all light, trapping it within itself, holding it in an inky black void that only went deeper and darker, a trap from which no pigment could hope to ever escape.

"You're probably ready to see through it, now." Serpie stared straight ahead, its own eyes tracing what once was Crow's. The flesh was twisted, warped, and wrong. It always pondered why she went to these extremes. Surely there were better ways of life?

How could a cheap imitation ever hope to compare to the real thing? It wondered, gently pushing Crow's hair from her face. It hoped that it comforted her. It hoped deeply to be her comfort, and her ground, that she may root and flourish.

"Of course I am. It's already become a piece of me."

"Oh? Then the linking should be easy, dear Crow."

"Right.. um. Well, I'm doing it now."

There was a short mechanical whir as Crow shut her new eye. She focused deeply on the sensation of it. She focused on the feeling where her skin ended and metal began. Crow formed a perfect mental image of it in her mind's eye, then re-visualized it as if it was always just a normal eye. A typical piece of her, one that would be expected to be there. She saw herself in her mind's eye, drifting in whitespace, and watched as the metal eye disintegrated and chipped away, revealing her flesh beneath.

As she visualized, her relationship to the eye changed, and she could feel it as she felt her flesh: cold, and stretched, and weary, and overworked.

After altering her body enough over years so that it became unrecognizable, it was simple, now, to link to new *pieces*. She'd had so, so much practice- so many sleepless nights agonizing over the seams between where she ended and the metal, or foreign flesh, began. Over time, it had become easier, and at some point, her mind and body must have struck some sort of accord. Now, she could come to accept just about any change in herself with little issue.

She'd used eyes before. She was used to seeing.

So she reached out, sympathetically, extending parts of her own soul up into the eye, her soul heavy with expectations of what the eye would do and how it would do it. She imagined thick strands of her soul, like tendrils, extending up, flowing through the wires that connected her nerves to her eye, before coalescing within it, spinning, searching for—

Suddenly, something deep within the eye stirred, grabbing hold of the connection and locking it down. It was as if her eye was being nailed into its socket, and she gasped as the eye began to rattle and shake on its own.

Suddenly, the eye opened, shut, then opened slowly, then shut slowly. The feelings faded. She could no longer tell where her skin ended and the eye began. It simply **was**.

And so, the **sympathetic link** was formed.

"That's... so much easier than it used to be."

"I can tell. You took that very well. I'm very proud of you, little Crow."

"I'm a little scared to see out of it, now."

"Why?"

"What if it doesn't work? What if it's worse than my fleshy eye?"

"I think it'll be alright, dear. Henrich made it."

"True. Well, okay."

Crow slowly opened her new eye, making sure to keep her flesh eye closed.

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"Crow?"

She simply stared ahead, lost in some trance. Her open eye darted around wildly, unable to focus on anything in particular. Her feathers, half-raised, were trembling, frozen in place.

"I... can't see."

"Oh, dear. Here, here little Crow." Serpent wrapped itself around her from behind, pulling her back into its warm embrace.

"..it's all hazy, and everything is dancing, and, i can't make out the shape of anything specific.. the colors are all wrong.."

"Shh, shh. It's okay, little Crow. These things take time. When a wing is broken, you know how long it takes to fly again."

"But the eye is not flesh, it-"

"And your mind is, Crow. It just needs time to learn this eye. You need time to learn this eye. Be patient with yourself."

"it's just so,,, *ugh!*" Crow wrestled with nothing, venting out her frustration in one of the few ways she knew how.

Serpent reached forward and covered Crow's eye with firm and gentle pressure. Immediately, she went still, her wings dropped, and the tension left her frame.

"...thank you..."

"It's no problem."

"can I show you?" her voice was a thin, sickly wisp.

"Of course."

"I'll need to **bind** to your eyes."

Serpent dropped its hold on her eye, and shifted backwards so as to sit up straight.

At the same time, Crow rolled around in Serpie's embrace, then pulled herself upright, now straddling Serpie's lower half between her thighs. She leaned in close, scarcely three antlengths from its face, and grasped the sides of its head in both her hands. Her claws pressed into the back of its head, lightly scraping its psuedoflesh, which parted and formed around her claws like dough.

Crow's breath fell out, hot and heavy, onto Serpent's neck. Each breath was deeper, heavier, as she prepared herself for **the binding**.

Serpent wrapped itself up and around her like a shroud, cloaking the two of them in an ephemeral, squishy veil of pseudoflesh. It was a soft, liquidy flesh, like a full waterskin sewn from spidersilk.

Inside their cocoon, it was dark, claustrophobic, and warm; all the pieces they needed to feel comfort. Everything they needed to feel safe.

"Are you ready?" Even so close, Crow's voice scarcely reached Serpent.

Serpent slow-blinked its agreement.

With advanced bindings, the stage must be set properly, dear reader. To share something as personal as your sight with another, you must, in all regards, become one.

Crow stared deep into its gaze and lost herself. Her talons pressed deep into the sides of its face. All about them was **heat**, **connection**, and **understanding**. Hot mist rose up as silky wisps, and the membrane of the cocoon lit up in a soft red glow.

The twigs and fibers of the nest crackled softly with the motion, akin to a flickering flame. Crow's breath became sparse, more ragged, and also more loose and light. The long-held tension of her form, though, only built, and built again, and-

Crow pursed her lips, and seeing this, Serpent grabbed and held her firmly, and drew the cocoon in towards her skin, applying gentle pressure from all sides, allowing her to fall fully into the claustrophobic embrace.

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In an instant, the **binding** was made, and Crow's vision became Serpent's vision, all at once. Crow could feel the **connection**, but at the same time, she was woozy, her head heavy and spinning, and she sank deeper into Serpie, resting her full weight across it.

Serpent pulled her as close as it possibly could, knowing she appreciated the pressure, the union of their forms, that there need not be any distinction between where Crow ended and Serpent began.

In truth, only in losing herself, did Crow ever find peace.

Crow sank her teeth deep into Serpent's form, and all at once, the leftover tension fell from her frame. There was no rush, now. The binding would be dropped only by choice, not by happenstance. She could simply relax, fall still, and drift off towards peace. She need not feel, nor think, nor worry, in this special place and moment held outside the purview of the world.

Here, finally, nothing was real. And if nothing was real, then so too was her pain unmade.

All the while, feeling so much that she no longer could, brain short-circuited and flatlining, there was so much empty space formed within her that any thoughts that may bring harm tumbled down, down, and down again unto a spiral of feelings that carried her deep and deeper still into peace.

In moments, she had already fallen back into the pits of sleep— though only because she had exhausted all other options.

of course, it was intentional.

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was it so wrong for a girl to long for a moment of peace?

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"ssss'pent, wha- **mm**." her voice stopped abruptly as she began to wipe the bleary tears of sleep from her eyes. "How long has it been?" her voice came out croaking and forced. over the next few breaths, she continued to clear her throat, trying to hack away at the phlegm stuck hard to her *vocalthings*.

"Mmm, not so sure, little thing, but at least a half day. The light will go to sleep soon." Serpent relaxed in anticipation of her bolting up; there was no sense in trying to hold her back. The girl knew what she wanted, was certain of what she needed, and her urgency was often like no other.

But she did not bolt up. Instead, she rolled around slowly, staring up into the cocoon's canopy.

"My feathers smell of you."

"An apt description."

Crow's head tilted to one side, and she let out a long, world-weary sigh. Even *connected*, the two were worlds apart.

"Let's, um. Let's.." She trailed off, knowing what came next, but dreading the end of this vitiated bliss.

"Of course." Serpent's flesh fell down in drops like rain, pooled in the nest around them, then rejoined its greater whole.

The light of the world was dim, now, sending red and purple waves of light skittering across **the living room**. They swirled like a haze before her, making a churning mess of her stomach. The world around her shifted and slumped, curled up, then expanded back out. Everything before her danced like wind on the breeze, like the last shadows cast by dying candleflame.

And yet, all of it clashed against the vision of her flesh eye, two irreconcilable sides fighting for dominance over her gaze. The shapes before her twisted and flattened over and over; the light grew to a bright peak only to fade all at once to the red and purple haze, and it all happened constantly, flickering and—

her head was spinning, heavy, and hurting already. She shut her eyes tight and leaned further back into Serpie, letting out a heavy sigh.

"This... will be difficult to live with. You could always have it **unmade**." Serpie, too, was covering one of its eyes, and it was used to having as many or as few as it wanted. The eye was rather unruly indeed.

"I will tame it." She had no idea if she could.

"You're sure?"

"I sacrificed too much to back down now."

"Very well."

The binding dropped as easily as a cobweb cut and came accompanied by another long sigh from Crow. She shut her eyes, somewhat happier than before, some amount of contentment underscoring her features. Mainly, though, frustration made itself home inside her flesh.

"I need an eyepatch."

"We can make that happen."

"And some medicine, for my head. It's aching again.."

"Of course, dearest Crow."

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She had not meant do, but she fell asleep, again. It was just so easy, when everything was so comfortable, when she was recovering from so many different things in so many different ways, and when the only thing she desired was a chance to truly rest.

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When she awoke, Serpent was gone, and so too was the light of the world. Now, little fireflies flit about, providing the **living room** with its own twinkling stars. In the corner of her eye, she could just barely make out the form of a wooden tray. Crow traced its form with her hand, eventually coming across a small leather object, neatly folded, with small, squishy cubes placed atop it.

Crow popped the cubes in her mouth, devouring them in an instant with vicious, ravenous snaps of her beak. Then, she worked the leather over her head, between her sets of ears, and fastened it tightly to seal shut over her new eye. She reveled in the darkness of it. A perfect fit.

"Raven has a new job for you. Sorry." Serpent spoke out from above, then fell to the floor with a splat, before forming into a simple, snake-like shape.

"I've already made peace with it, Serpie." The few days of respite she'd had were a blessing and a privilege.

"They want you to retrieve Cane's ledger from his mansion."

She scoffed, then giggled. "Do you think my body is in shape for that?"

"No."

"So what do I do, Serpie?!" She shouted into the dark. "I have one eye, I've been hibernating for a half-year, I'm not even sure I could pick a drunk's pocket in this state, and they want me to casually slip in to **Cane's mansion**?!"

"Just do what you can. You know-" Serpent spoke from her other side, now. She'd not heard it moving.

"I know I can't refuse Raven."

"Sorry."

"It's okay, I just..

..want to be free, serpie."

"You can be. You just have to make it through this. You can always call for help."

"And yet, I must go at this alone. What good help does me, mm?"

Serpent relented, allowing her to berate, irate, to her hearts' elation.

At the end of it, she was finally still. "Whatever. Just... set out my supplies for me. Please?"

"Of course, dear Crow."

"I'll leave just before first light."

"And you'll come back safe?"

"Or I'll die trying... no choice in the matter, and all that."

"Thank you, Crow."

"I will break free, Serpie. I have not clawed my way to life to be undone so readily."

"If anyone can, it would be you. And once you do break free, you'll find **it**."

"thanks, Serpie."

They nested together, now, bodies intertwined with each other over and over again. Serpent could take any shape, and so Crow often found herself curled up in a ball, suspended within a blanket and bedding both formed from Serpie's amorphous flesh.

How ragged was she, really? Even now, she was exhausted again, after precious little movement. Would it really be possible to make it through?

"Good night, Crow."

"night. i, um, i..."

"Hm?"

"...nevermind. just, thanks for dealing with me."

There was no response, and eventually, she fell fitfully into the pits of sleep.

Everything was just too complicated.