

She hardly noticed the pull of sleep until she was already under.

This, of course, was always the case.

Chapter 11. Seeing Red

Crow was standing on the surface of an endless milky-white pool amidst sparse, silvery wisps of fog that tangled around her and followed her every move. Her footfalls made no noise, and no matter how she moved, the water beneath was never disturbed.

It was endless, this place.

She knew it well.

It was, after all, the mind in which she dwelt.

Though, it was not so much a place, it was something far greater. The surface on which she walked was not somewhere that could be visited, touched, or felt. It was somewhere that existed only for her: the great ocean of her subconscious, and its tides, which pushed and pulled at her in every waking moment.

To wake, she would have to dive within, and brave its depths for another full night.

But until then, she could walk, and clear her mind, taking all the time she needed to build up
the courage to push forward through one more day.

And so she walked, though she knew not for how long. She did often wonder how long she
had spent here, just walking. Perhaps a mere few lifetimes, though she would never know, as
her **dreamself** never needed to breathe, and there was no moon that had ever passed. Based
on her footfalls, though... she had spent *quite* some time here, through her many slumbers.

And still, thoughts were such a tricky thing. Even with lives spent wandering, she still hadn't
thought enough to think through all her life's many problems. A tragedy, really. But there was
nothing to do about it, except for think, then think again, then lose herself in thinking, until
she was finally ready to wake again.

But that could all wait.

For now, tired as she was, all she wanted to do was walk, and walk, and walk some more.
Perhaps then, she'd be able to leave her problems behind her.

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And, with one final footfall...

That made one million paces.

And still, she was not ready.

Okay. Just one million more, and then she would force herself into her dreams at last.

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And so one million more passed, and again, and again... *and again*, and still,

she was not ready.

In truth, she knew she would never be. She went through this *every time*, and every time she stalled for as long as she had patience for, and out of all of her few things, patience was the most plentiful of them.

[*inhale*]

Here was like a perfect death.

In truth, she had often wished to die.

Though, no matter what, it was the one thing she could never bring herself to do.

She wondered if that made her weak.

Or spineless.

Did it matter?

Because here, she found a perfect death.

Calm, and peace, and quiet, as much of all of them as she could ever want. She did not dream to ask of more, and she did not feel she even needed to.

Here, she could exist without existing. She could think for as long as she desired, could move however she willed, could gaze into the void for as long as she pleased,

and when she was tired of being tired,

she could return to being tired of life once again.

And all the while, she was conscious and feeling through it. So if there *was* death, this is the one she would want— the perfect death.

[*exhale*]

But something, after all her wanderings, had begun to prick up her sides and warm her neck and back. It was *longing*, reaching out again, after long last. No matter how far she walked away from it, always, it would return to her as strong as it had ever been, with not a moment between them lost.

Tonight, the yearning was stronger than it had been in countless moons.

Because, she supposed,
there was finally something for her to lose.

She shook her head aplenty. The mind was such a curious place. Her feelings made themselves known, with no hesitation, no attempt to hide their face. In the waking world, such revelations would never make themselves known to her.

But here, the thoughts floated down with the fog and wreathed her, wrapping her up in their sensations, their prickly and soft embraces, cold or hot to the touch, but always so distant, so separate from her, that she may see their true forms clearly even as they were obscured in fog.

Sometimes, as had just happened, they would answer the questions of the mind on which she stood by reaching up and blocking her path with a wall of fog formed from themselves.

This one, though, she simply pushed through, only for it to form again ahead of her.

There is finally something for you to lose.

Again, she pushed through it.

Are you going to lose it all again?

And then, she stopped.

Again?

She was Crow. She had never truly lost.

She pushed through the fog, which parted freely for her, before reappearing even thicker
before her.

Just more bodies for the pile, then?

She turned around and began to walk the other way. She was having quite enough of this.

Do you really intend to leave them in the past?

She did, yes.

Wait. No— of course not. She...

One of the fogs, silky smooth with a smell of blood and passion, wrapped itself around her wrists and coiled up her arms like a snake, slithering up to her throat, where it spun around,
and around, and hung from her like a scarf.

Yes. That was how she felt. So, no, she would not be leaving them in the past.

But then, all the fog rolled away, and her heart began to tear in two with the pain of loss and longing so unfathomably deep that it took her immediately to her knees, clutching at her chest with the need to scream but no mouth to.

This had not happened before.

But then, her body twisted again, and her hands flicked, back and forth, back and forth, as they often did, and they kept doing so, over, and over, again.

No. No, wait. She could not stop her hands from shaking and moving, but she was not the one controlling them.

This had not happened before.

Immediately, her head began to shake.

Stunned, her body froze for what would have been many breaths, and then she was released. Tentatively, she thought:

This has all happened before.

Suddenly, she was forced to nod.

What the fuck?

The flesh of her face unwound and spread apart, and suddenly, her mouth reformed.

"What— what do you want?"

And after she spoke, her mouth began to open, then shut, and open again, and she felt her
vocalthings rumbling. Then, stillness.

"Keep talking?"

Her head nodded.

"Are you me?"

Her head nodded, then shook. Then nodded.

"Some part of me."

Vigorous nodding ensued.

"Subconscious?"

Shake.

"Another... conscious?"

Shake.

Good. That... that could have been really bad.

"The body itself?"

Shake.

"Just using the body."

Nod.

"Because you cannot speak."

Nod.

She wondered how insane she looked, standing on the surface of her own subconscious, speaking out into the fog, then suddenly snapping and spasming with motion in response to her own questions to her own sort-of-self. Crow shuddered.

"My..." Crow thought deeply, searching for parts of herself, not mental, nor physical, but instead— ah, of course! "Soul. You are my soul."

The nod was so slight that it was polite, and she could not tell if the smile was her own satisfaction or her soul's for being finally recognized.

"Why are we separate?"

There was no response. Right. How would it respond? Charades weren't particularly productive.

But there was a brief tugging at something deep within her. It was the feeling of.. grief. Loss. Bereavement.

"We were once together."

Nod.

Crow rolled her neck in response, as if she could shake out the feeling of being controlled so intimately by another. Well, it was by herself, but— *still*—

"I want to know what happened."

Nod.

Well, of course it nodded. She had said it mostly for herself, she realized. Rather than, er, her...selves? This was all a bit confusing. She was used to connecting with her soul, feeling its smooth exterior, of connecting to it, connecting others to it, but she had always seen it as a core part of herself, something that could not be separate, that could not control her of its own accord. But they were not one, but two?

"Why haven't you—?" She stopped herself. How would it even know how to answer?

"Have you always been able to do... this?" Crow mimed clutching her chest, then flicked her hands back and forth, mimicking how her soul had taken her body from her initially.

Her head shook.

So something had changed to let her soul speak to her freely. Of course, it had to be something within her that had changed. Nothing else would really make sense, now would it?

"Did you get stronger?"

Her head shook.

"Did... I?"

Her left hand made the sign for yes, while her right made the sign for no. So, yes and no. A bit of both. It was not growing stronger, but it was, perhaps, some form of growth.

"Will we ever be able to speak freely?"

Her head shook.

That... made her very sad, actually. She quite wanted, now, to speak with the soul that was trying to hard to catch her attention. And what for?

"Show me. You must have some purpose. This can't be easy, can it?"

Her eyes snapped and whirred shut, and immediately, her head was full of bright and hazy images that sorted themselves and moved around with purpose and intent.

It was the image of her **landing**, where she had **awoken**. Her first memory— lying in the grass, surrounded by trees, bathed in moonlight, alone, and unaware of the world and its trials. But, there was a city in the distance, and so she left to make the trek—

but then her memory snapped back to the clearing. And, slowly, the memory spun about, as if the world itself was shifting under her feet, twisting itself and bringing the edges closer in. To the side of the clearing, some kind of stone.

Then, another memory— not hers, for she did not have it— so hazy that nothing could be made out. Some sort of hand, reaching out, grasping stone, clacking against the stone, brushing stone. Colors bloomed from nothing, and she recognized it as the act of painting, of creation, of a story being told.

And then, her eyes opened, and she was again alone.

"Are you there?" Crow whispered, voice trembling.

But her body did not spasm, her mind and heart did not quiver, and so, she was left there,
alone, with no response.

For now, even her own soul forsook her.

"tired, then?" she mused, sitting down, gently caressing the smooth surface of her own subconscious. She yawned. After all this walking, discovering, remembering, and seeing, she
had gotten pretty tired herself.

Fine. Then for tonight, she was finally done with her wanderings. She now had important
matters to attend to, as the **dreamself**, before waking.

She would have to see what was there, then, outside of the city,
waiting for the waking Crow.

What was it, then, that her very soul wished to lead her to?

Crow curled up into a ball and tucked her chin between her knees while pulling her ankles in
tight towards her ass.

She sat there for less than a hundred would-be breaths, reflecting on nothing.

Simply being.

And then, she laid {lay??} back, spreading out all of her limbs, as was the way of things.

Now, there was nothing left to do but descend.

And so she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, then fell, fell, and fell again, backwards,
tumbling

into

the endless

abyss

as her subconscious

opened up

and swallowed her whole.

And then, all was still again, on the ocean of her mind, now empty,

for she was gone again,

once more unto dreams.

The entrance to her dream was not nearly so dramatic as the exit from her mind.

She was not suddenly placed among the living, her consciousness was not restored all at once, and she did not gasp dramatically as her frame magically reformed.

Chapter 11. Seeing Red

She simply returned like a slow whisper. At first, small flutterings, like a new butterfly's wings. Her ectoplasm twitched and contracted in short bursts, testing the limits of how it could be moved and stretched. Then, a far grander movement: the relaxing of long-clenched hands. She then unfurled her wings, stretching them out fully, before pushing herself forward and up onto her feet, knees unfolding as she rose.

She looked around blearily, not quite sure of what she was seeing. Had she awoken by mistake? She'd been lost adrift in a sea of dreams, 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 den of Wolf's kin, and there was no one here. There was only her own body, laying still beneath her, eyes fully opened, staring up at the ceiling.

Crow closed her eye, focusing on the feeling of her frame. It was not corporeal, and she had not awoken. That was good. Life was so.. exhausting. She did not wish to return to flesh— at least, not yet.

But what was she doing alone?

This could not have been the morning, as their stirring would have sent her waking. So, it must have been far after that. She must have returned here, but why alone, and why would she remain here, alone?

Perhaps she had come to visit and no one was home, and so she was waiting.

Crow knelt down and caressed her own face with the warmth and love of another. Suddenly, her physical form jolted, eyes wide in panic, before looking up to her dreamself— of course, not seeing her— then settling back down in understanding.

It was strange, these moments, that she shared with her future self. Always, she would recognize them in the moment, but rarely, would she remember they were coming.

But that was alright. She had more important matters to attend to. She would deal with this in the future present {todo: make this sentence future present LMFAO}, as her physical form clearly was. So, nothing to fret over.

Crow leaned forward and planted a kiss on her own forehead, then stood up and walked away, paying no mind to the den around her or her body behind her. Instead, she was fixated on a single-minded focus: that strange place in the woods where she had awoken, that place she had left behind so long ago.

Clearly, she had left some secrets behind, too, if her soul was to be believed.

She didn't see why it couldn't be. If anything, it was probably wiser than she, having seen every life she had ever lived. Which...

had she lived other lives?

Or was this her first?

If the soul's memory was not *hers*, then—

Ah.

Ah, dear.

That was no good, no good at all.

She hadn't even come to terms with being Crow yet, let alone—

Crow phased through the front door of the home, then began to slowly make her way up the stone stairs outside. This part of town was quiet, today, despite the fact that it was well-lit and only half the day had passed. Perhaps some festivity had gathered most of the town?

It didn't really matter.

She had places to be.

And so, just as before— and as she would after— she walked, and walked, and walked. She walked to the edge of Escrow, then further, up and beyond the wall, into the mound of trash that lined the city, then further, up the cliffs and hills, into the woods and wildernesses that lined the cliffs and looked down upon the many beings living behind their tall walls.

And by the time the night had come for her, she had made it, to the very clearing where she was—

awoken.

She didn't really remember it, but that spot in the middle of the grass, from all those years ago, still held her imprint, as if by virtue of existing, she had left a lasting mark upon the

world. And, too, moonlight fell down as it had, all those moons ago, leaving a spotlight on the grass, shining brightly, a beacon of what had happened before.

Of where she had come from, enigmatic as it was.

The shape of her past was different than she had recalled. Gently, she stroked the wildgrass that outlined where once she had lay, marveling at the difference between who she was now and had been then. Her imprint was nearly three times her present size,

though she hardly recalled the journey that led her to who she was now.

That, too, was lost long ago, to the pain of simply surviving.

But perhaps...

Crow looked up, and to the side, seeing a break in the forest where a small trail led through the forest, deeper in, towards some wall of stone that rose up tall and proud.

And so she followed it, deeper in, even as her ectoplasmic form began to fade. It hardly mattered. When she faded, she would awake, but before that happened, she would make sure to see what it was that had to be seen. Her own destruction did not matter.

All that mattered was the little Crow that would awake, and what, indeed, she would learn from this journey undertaken in her stead.

And so she pressed on, even as her hands disappeared into ash and smoke, even as her shoulders fell away, going deeper, and deeper, into the dark woods.

Until eventually, just as her legs began to shred apart and sail into the wind like baby spider's threads, she had found it.

Indeed, there was some painting here. Many of them. Uncountably many of them, for as far as she could see, lining the dark and hallowed walls of a pristine whitestone cave that went deep into the side of the mountain's peak.

And just as her eyes began to fade away, she spotted it, in the selfsame writing as her own, the statement she knew better than any other, fingerpainted in the unmistakable red of mixed and long-dried blood:

WELCOME HOME

And then, all was dark, again,

and she awoke gasping for air, struggling out of the pile of sleeping bodies, clawing her way across the wall of furs, to where she collapsed in the hallway, eyes wide, as she stared down at the floor and began to weep.

This was not the first time that she had lived.

And having known it, all throughout her spread an overwhelming sense of dread,
and there, as a gentle, and known touch began to rub her head,
a stream of tears trailed down and made wet the floor between her paws.

Because for the first time, she had finally realized it:

she really knew nothing about herself at all.