

Chapter 19.
A Blissful Expanse

Crow was standing on the surface of an endless crystal-clear ocean amidst sparse wisps of fog that tangled around her and dampened her fur. She did not breathe, nor even feel she needed to, and the water beneath her never, ever stirred.

There was no light here save for a single silver beam cast down like a spotlight from the moon directly above her. She stood at its center, numb and unfeeling, able to see only that which the light illuminated.

Right now, the light extended out twenty bodylengths in all directions from her, but before, it had been a hundred.

The light was shrinking, dimming, closing in around her,

and she simply stood and watched.

Crow had no thoughts nor feelings about this, no, she was simply numb. Her mind had shut off, her body followed suit, and no part of her stirred at all.

She simply stood there, empty, like a husk, entranced by the light that came closer, and closer, and closer,

unable to see that it was not the light that closed in around her,
but the darkness beyond it.

Slowly, Crow lowered herself down and sat, pulling her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her shins. This *felt*, this thing she did, it was *feeling*, and it *felt*...

that, too, was quickly washed away as her eyes went glassy and focused back on the slowly creeping border of the light that came towards her.

This Crow was nothing but a husk.

Emotionless, thoughtless, senseless, acting not even on instinct, but rather, even less than that. This husk was nothing more than a bundle of muscles that acted on their own.

Everything, so quickly, had slipped away from it, had been stolen from it, and now, all that remained here,

was

it.

The husk's chest began to burn away from the inside-out, ashes and embers falling freely from the growing hole within its heart. An impulse from which curiosity might bloom caused

it to look down at the tear within itself, and there, it saw a glowing, pulsing thing. It was red, and purple, and black, and smooth-surfaced like glass.

It reached inside its chest and held the little orb. Within it, there was thrumming, and humming— a rhythm.

A rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm...

Unmistakably, it was **power**, one of three things the husk might understand.

Curiously, the husk held up the thin-walled orb to its eye and peered within. There, little shapes of every kind and color flitted around so fast they left behind only blurs. But there was a rhythm, there,

A rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm...

and slowly, slowly, the shapes and colors, they slowed and dragged and spiralled down, down, and down again,

and all of a sudden, the orb was **heavy**, so heavy the husk's arm snapped forward and dropped it immediately, and instantly, the orb broke the surface of the crystal-clear water and began to sink away.

And the husk, trembling and shaking and suddenly **empty**, threw itself forward into the water, bashing itself against the surface that resisted it as if it was made of metal. Again, and again,

and again, it bashed its head and hands against the surface of the water, and still, it did not budge.

Burning, it felt, resounding **burning** through every piece and part that made up the husk it seemed to be. Where once it felt nothing, now, the totality of its existence extended only as far as the **burning** that it was.

It was **burning** because **it** had lost the **orb**.

It was not supposed to lose the orb.

From nothing, a heavy metal beak with wicked, sharp edges formed on the husk's face, and with reckless abandon, it slammed its head down into the water,

CRACK!

again,

CRACK!

again!

CRACK!

AGAIN!

from nothing, its breath heaved out, hot and heavy,

SMASH!

and the thin surface of the water yielded to the husk, cracking away and falling down into the ocean below. The cracks spread quickly, extending all the way to the edge of the light, perhaps beyond, and the entire world around it began to surge and shift as everything fell away and collapsed down into the clear depths below.

By now, the husk's body was nearly fully consumed by the **burning**, more ash than anything else, and as it plunged into the water, its innards dissolved away, now truly nothing more than an empty shell.

And, still, the husk forced itself down into the water, sinking as fast as it possibly could.

There was so much left to do, it understood.

All it ever understood was just how much there was left for it to do.

And it was so, so tired,

And still,

the husk forced itself down, down, down, down, deeper and deeper into the dark, going as far as it could, as far as its corpse would take it,

even as it continued to dissolve away into ash, even as it could see no longer,

still,

the husk forced itself onwards.

...

{prefix

The exit from the \[???\] was several times more dramatic than the entrance. She was suddenly ripped out of it, her consciousness restored all at once, and she gasped dramatically as life returned to her frame.

She returned thrashing, writhing, and struggling. At first, she attempted to move her arms, then her legs, and unable to move at all, she tried to turn her head. It, too, was held still, and she felt a great pressure bearing down on her skull. Her muscles twitched and contracted in short bursts, and she tried to unfurl her wings, but she could not even feel whether or not they were still there.

Crow let herself fall still for a moment, forcing herself to take in deep breaths. A moment later, the swirling and blurry world around her came into focus and, finally able to see, she looked as far down as she could, trying to take in the sight of her own body.

Thick, goopy strands of metal had risen up from the surface of the desk and crossed over her like a ribcage. The metal looped over her over, and over, and over again. It crossed over her legs, her arms, her midsection, her arms, and her forehead, and even still the metal was moving, turning, always wrapping closer and closer around her. Right now, the metal held her firmly, tightly, in its embrace, but if this kept up—

Adrenaline still pumping through every part of her, Crow slammed and bashed herself against her restraints over, and over, and over again, and when that did nothing for her, she tried slipping individual body parts out from the metal, that maybe she'd find some way to slip free of it.

And, still, she was trapped. While she was struggling, the metal had pulled in tighter, and now, it was pinching her painfully all up and down her body. Five breaths later, she was being crushed.

"ss—" she hissed, struggling to take in another breath against the crushing force that was about to snap her soft belly in half, "ss, ss,

ss,

SSSSSSSS,

{crazy mind-lost formatting}

ssssSSEERRRRRRRRRRRPENTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT"

{slightly more normal}

she screamed with all her heart and threw herself forward one last time with the little strength she had left in her tiny frame.

and still, it was not enough,

and she was left alone in the silence.

How much do I have left?! She thought, whipping her eyes around frantically. There had to be something, anything—

The goopy, living metal gripped tighter around her.

Crow winced and groaned and wheezed as the rest of the air was squished from her lungs. She tried to take in another breath,

but she couldn't.

ccccrrraaaaaaCK

The roar of the furnace behind her smothered her choking, shrieking scream. Her eyes started to spasm as her neck locked up and got stuck in a loop of repeatedly gulping, flexing, and gasping. Her arms tightened, trying so desperately to slip out so she could claw at her neck and free it, but no matter how she struggled—

Crack.

Crow fell limp, eyes wide in shock.

—it didn't matter. All over, all of her feelings were all falling away again. They slipped, one after another, slipping up from her skin and into the metal that consumed her. This time, there was no numbing: parts of her simply **were**, then **weren't**, all at once. The parts of her disappeared like candles put out in the wind. Like a sweeping wave, she felt her mind grow lonelier, and lonelier, and lonelier, until all that was left—

"**CROW!**" Serpent screamed, ripping away at the metal with reckless abandon. Its body rushed forward, bubbling up and over itself, spilling down and around the metal that **consumed** its **ward**. "Little Crow!" It shouted, desperate, as it tried piercing through the metal to get between it and Crow. "**LITTLE CROW!**"

A tiny sliver of Crow's face, including just her nose and lips, still poked above the surface of the desk— but even they were sinking down quickly.

Without hesitation, Serpent sent half of itself streaming into Crow's mouth and nose, flooding her lungs full of itself to provide a counter-pressure to the crushing weight of the flowing metal. At the same time, it spotted a tiny pin-prick gap between Crow's cheekbone and her metal prison. As soon as it noticed it, Serpent forced its other half to stream into it and expand with as much force as it possibly could.

crrreeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaakkk, the metal groaned,

and Serpent, trembling and shaking, kept pushing against it.

c-c-cc-cc-cc-c--rrrrrrrrrrrrr—eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaak, the metal groaned, and popped, as Serpent forced the metal to double back on itself. The metal bent, and bunched up, and tangled with itself, and slowly, **slowly**, Serpent worked its way around Crow's body, slipping between her and the metal, doing its best to force her free of its hold.

As soon as Serpent had coated her top half, it ran out of room to stretch. It spasmed, briefly, from the force of spreading itself so thin, and still, **it had to keep going.**

Gray, thick streams of amorphous sludge streamed out of Crow's mouth and nose. As the material streamed down her body, it joined back with Serpent's main body and slipped into the gaps between her and the metal. Slowly, stressfully, it worked its way fully around her.

With every motion, Serpent felt as though it would be torn clean in half, ripped like a page of paper by the merciless living metal that had swallowed them both. The metal had shifted, now, from a crushing motion to a wringing one, and if this kept up for any longer—

Serpent's body fully separated Crow from the metal just as it was torn around its midsection. Instantly, the living metal began flooding in through the gaps, pooling under Crow's back. Hastily, Serpent compressed itself as much as it could, trying to re-form the gaps while recovering some of itself to use for piercing free.

But as it tried, Serpent noticed that parts of it were simply disappearing. Parts of it were being snapped off like flower buds, then swallowed. If they were going to get out of this—

Serpent felt a distinct and tiny tickling sensation as Crow's soul, stretched out as far as it possibly could, gently grazed against the surface of its own. Instinctively, Serpent pulled on the tiny embrace, bringing their souls together, and all at once,

they were bound.

There was a single calm moment as Serpent pulled from the well of their combined **life** and reinforced their position against the metal. They had sunk quite a ways beneath the surface, but together, there was still *hope*.

There had to be.

This Crow could not be allowed to die.

Serpent inspected the well of their combined **life** as it traced the inside of their metal cocoon, probing it, sensing for any weak spots. There were none.

Serpent poured its influence over their shared soul, calming down Crow, sending waves of composure and clarity flooding down over the two of them. Crow was silent, for many moments, but eventually, she regained enough of her senses:

*What will it **cost**?*

Does it matter?

Crow paused. Three ticks passed.

No.

We will emerge from this, little Crow.

Their shared body shivered and trembled.

Aren't you supposed to be good at lying?

Silence.

I'm going to burn it all down, Crow.

I know.

Silence.

Serpie, I, um, I'm not...

I understand.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

The metal cocoon creaked and rumbled around them.

They were almost out of their borrowed time.

Silence.

Rejection, disbelief.

Acceptance, resignation.

Overwhelming sorrow.

Bittersweet longing.

Rage, grief, **all-consuming pain**.

No!

Crow thought, forcing Serpent's body back to its shape.

We can— we— we— I—

Crow.

Serpent closed around her in a gentle embrace.

It was dark, claustrophobic, and warm—
everything she needed to feel **comfort**,
everything she needed to feel **safe**.

Serpie, it can't— I—

We're running out of time, Crow.

I'm not ready for it to be over!

Happiness. Comfort. Acceptance.

You never will be, Crow.

That doesn't matter! It can't— we can't—

Crow.

How am I going to survive without you?!

Crow.

Do you have any idea how badly I need you?!

Crow.

I wouldn't even be alive if—

CROW!

,

Serpent squeezed her tight, the way it always had.

It's over,

Crow.

Its tone took no argument.

Crow froze. She couldn't let it go—
it couldn't be over—
they—

Instinctively, Serpent reached out with all of its being, holding Crow's soul deeply within the cold void of its own. All at once, it flashed by its memories of them together, each one flicking by, one after the other, a hundred thousand fleeting moments across a hundred lifetimes all flying by in the space of a single instant.

Let me do this, Crow. Please.

,

Please,

let me be free.

Disbelief. Hesitation. Grief. But then—

Crow reached out all at once with all of her being, and her soul peeled open within Serpent's, each part of its wall falling down, one at a time, layer after layer, until finally, the whole of her soul was bared for Serpent to see.

There, at the center of it, laid the single truth of her heart, the essence of all she was:

The everburning fire.

Its flames roared out and rushed up along the cold inside of Serpent's soul and billowed around within it, searching not for fuel to consume, but for a vessel to fill with its warmth.

Physically, Crow pressed her face into Serpent and reached up with her arms, wrapping herself around it as much as she possibly could.

Serpent formed two eyes in front of Crow's and met her gaze.

They had so often **bound** themselves together, but for the first time—

Crow met Serpent's gaze with her own. It was determined, fierce, and resolute.

She no longer hid from how she felt,
nor did she hide from what was about to happen.

Serpent smiled.

It was a shame it wouldn't be around to meet her, but...

Finally,
all about them was a sudden storm of *heat, connection,* and **understanding**.

Hot mist rose up as silky wisps and the membrane of Serpent's body lit up in a soft red glow.

The metal of their tomb crackled softly with a noise like flickering flames as they came together, and from them, pressure built.

Crow's breath became sparse and ragged, but also 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.

...at the very least—

In an instant, Crow yielded to Serpent, and Crow's existence became Serpent's existence, 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 fully into their final embrace.

Serpent pulled her as close as it possibly could, and in the union of their forms, there was no longer any distinction between where Crow ended and Serpent began.

—after centuries of nurturing, and cherishing, and protecting—

Crow sank her teeth deep into Serpent's form, and all at once, the leftover tension fell from her frame. She forced herself to relax, fall still, and breathe deeply, all the while focusing all she was, all she ever would be, into their shared soul.

—she'd finally found **it**.

{piercing through the metal, burning through all serpent is, as soon as crow is free, it forces the tiny shreds of its life force into her, to heal her wounds, so she can continue her journey. it has the option to become part of her soul, and it is tempted, but instead— after a single breath of hesitation where the world hangs still—,}

{crow and serpent narration join together in the instant serpent dies and fades away into nothing but a memory. "but instead ... —" {cont} ->

There was so much— too much— she had left to say. Their connection flickered.

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

"Goodbye, Lit-tle Crow,"

Body destroyed, its voice existed only in her mind.

There was none of it left to hold.
There was none of it left to comfort her.
There was none of it left at all.

And then, just like that,
"—it dropped the **binding**,"}

Finally,
It was finally over. **She was finally whole.**

'What will it cost', Crow muttered as she looked down at her talons, eyes hollow.

All that remained of it— No— of *them*,
all that remained—
all—
machine, head still spinning.
Serpent was gone.

Crow clenched her fists as she stumbled away from the

memories remained.

Serpent was gone.

There was none of it left.

Only her

It was free.

She was not.

Serpent was gone.

It died.

She was alive.

empty-

she
was
divided,
split
right
down
the
middle,
and
all
that
she
still
could
feel
began
to
warp
and
twist
together

In all of her lives,
Serpent had been there for her.

But now,
she was well
and truly

alone.