

CRAVEN

A thousand moments that did not belong to her flashed through her mind and washed each other out. As it all slipped away, she grabbed on tighter, and still, each memory was ripped from her and shredded. In the blurry smear of recollection people were reduced to shapes, their words reduced to whispers, her past reduced to nothing.

Only then did she stop struggling.

In the final moment before her first breath, there was stillness, her first and final chance to rest. She knew nothing, and nothing knew her— the two were long-since well acquainted— and so she knew without knowing not to take it for granted, not to give up, not to go without a fight; if she just tried a little harder, she could go into the light,

but she was itching, dear Reader,

and the itch was all she was.

Little cracks split across the blank-white space that held her safely outside of life and

little shadows peered out from deep below, watching,

waiting,

patiently,

expectantly,

the dark created definition that could not exist before
and only in its context did her **itching**
take some form:

she needed

it

first

to *know* **it**,

then

to *find* **it**,

finally

to *have* **it**

again

her eyes fell open,

and

her name was **Crow** again



CHAPTER 1

AWOKEN



Crow's first breath was a fragile, fluttering thing, falling apart as it rattled into her and bumbled around inside, flipping on all the lights. Her muscles, starting at the neck and heading down toward her toes, trembled like-in-a-shiver then tensed at once to catch the sudden weight of life. Her fingers were the last to move: cold and purple-speckled bony things, each one lifting up to fall again, shaking all the while. Over and over they lifted up and down, one at a time, in a wave, until the shaking was shaken off and the numbness turned to pain.

Her second breath came in as a surprise, without permission and without warning, a gentle reminder of what it meant to be alive. This breath brought with it flowers, in its own way, borrowed from the wind, and the scent of them sent her reeling back in sharp and shocking pain that rocked her aching, forming brain, and, and, ahnd, ahn, ahh, ahhh—

chhhhk!

Crow curled up at the waist and sneezed,

hard,

gray-clear snot splattering her
paper-white-opaque arm as

it reflexively came up
to guard the world

from her
the displeasure of phlegm.

And it stayed there, tense and shaking, as she sneezed over and over again.

At the end of it, her nose was raw, throat sore and swollen, eyes red, puffy, and leaking.

Though at the very least, her body granted her one mercy— she'd finally put together how to think and feel and see, and all together, not just separately.

She was cold.

The ground was soft and green. It was moss.

The wind was blowing slowly.

Her hair, in love with the wind,
followed it along into her ears
and eyes and mouth.

She was irritated.

Everything hurt.

She pushed the hair away
with her hand.

Eyes free, she looked around:
first to her left side,
then to her right,
but all there really was
were endless trees blocking her sight.

The bark of the trees looked soft.

Their leaves were green, like the moss.

Her hands returned to the ground,
and her fingers got to picking at it,
then digging in it,
like little worms
retreating from the sun.

The moss was warm on top, and cool beneath,
and even softer underneath.

And so she tipped her head to see the moss,
but saw herself instead

Her fingers were too l—o—n—g,
spackled already
with moistened dirt and
stained the lightest green.

They
were attached to hands too-large attached to wrists too-thin
attached to arms she didn't like.

They were

bereft of anything of interest—

lacking fur and hair, freckles and speckles, really,
for grabbing and holding and whatever else arms
were really meant to do.

little more than blank limbs

More curious, though, was that she was not injured.

So why did everything hurt?

She looked around, but found nothing
no
not even any

offensive,
poorly-hidden predators,
remnants of someone else

There was just her and moss and trees and leaves
and green and light of day:
the light came through the canopy— itself
in a most unusual way.

split open

It was not

hacked apart or
grown

that way, but clearly closely pruned,
the newling stubs of branches yawned
and wove a circle leaking through
the light that lit her up
warmed the ground beneath.

and

That was

, she guessed,

why

the moss was warm,
and why she saw the light inside her dream.
But if the light had lit her up...

trembled again as the wind

away

little warmth

Crow

stole

what

she didn't have.

She rocked forward to her feet, then stood and tucked away her hands. They secreted away into the little caves where shoulders joined the chest, and she began to walk across the clearing away from where she'd found herself at rest.

The first matter, of course, was to find a way to abate the chill. Perhaps she'd tuck into a cavern, or find a hollow in a hill; it didn't really matter, but

the cold
was a cruel mistress—

she knew

she could
kill.
And
had

, or would, perhaps even should, but—

No, *wait...* Crow thought, looking down at her paws.

They were hands.

They were not paws.

She closed her puffy-eyes tight and out squeezed a single drip. She

in thought, searching, searching, searching, searching,

lost herself
searching for

...it.

Crow found a stunning lack of knowledge, not just on that, but everything. For whatever reason, her brain had made itself empty. But it wasn't supposed to be— that, at least, she was sure about. She was supposed to know things.

She was supposed to *do* things.

Wasn't she?

Tree bark slinked away in her periphery, forest fading into shadows that cascaded without end as she pressed toward a scent that faded and continued to descend along a single slope that seemed to stop somewhere and look back at her.

A head was spinning now, her head was spinning now, confused, as she chased a mental-tail she couldn't catch for answers she didn't own.

But the way she went was so familiar,

she'd done this all before,

was she walking down a game trail,
or was it *really* something more..?

She'd probably just hit her
head on something very
hard.

Nevermind waking on the moss, perhaps she'd... fallen?

She wanted to believe that she'd simply fallen.

So, she did.

She'd been the one weaving together
the little circle of branches in the canopy, and
she'd fallen and hit her head, and
brushing aside the fact that she was naked,
down shrubs and going down the trail

find a path to lead to answers that would

if she just kept bashing

she'd
fix up every little thing:

~~like the fact her heart was broken,~~
~~body stolen,~~
~~mind a shadow of what was.~~

~~Those were just little things,~~

quickly mended in the comfort of the home she surely had awaiting her with worry, waiting, sleeping late and waking early to be up for her return.

And for that home she surely had, her heart began to yearn.
The forest turned into a thicket briefly as Crow approached its edge.

along

squeezed through gaps between the logs as thick as
her with tiny vines that reached for
her as if to drag her back.

She

She braced and pushed herself

and

kept at this for thirty breaths—

look back.

Though as she left, the stubborn branches scored her skin;
her flesh raised up in
pinkish inflammation keeping her blood within.

along the lines where
she was marred,
but her attention

ajar.

From her perch up on the cliff-side, she saw

It lay between the mountains which encroached it in a ring—
perhaps to keep it hidden— or just as like to choke it out.

She wished the mountains would just do it,
a simple excision of necrosis set by gout,
but they did not.

not even once did she

protest,

It should have burned,

her flesh,

had been stolen,
every part of her

a very crooked thing.

And she did not see a way to go around.

So she forced herself to think about the thing in simple terms; she stripped away disgust and focused just on what she could observe:

It was a scar upon the land, black and twisted, purple pink and red, surrounded by a catastrophic heap of refuse leaking through its walls as if it bled.

It seemed to be a city, and within the walls there was a clearing, some seven-houses-thick, leaving a great and spacious alley-channel shining with something slick.

On the other side of this, adobe houses piled high— though **precious few of them could even see the sky**. They spread across the city in clusters, red and slick, bulging out like boils, their walls a single-person thick.

So tight were they packed that she could not spot their walkways or even imagine where they might be— did the people get around with tunnels, crawling on their hands and knees?

But there was more than that, **and still she forced herself to**

look. She brought herself in closer, right up to the edge of the cliff on which she stood, and she sat down and dangled her legs over the edge, eyes and mouth wide and gawking and still sore and dripping blood from when she'd

Crow looked down at her ~~paws. They were stained a sickly red.~~

They were hands, not paws, and there was no blood on them, because she was not bleeding.

Crow reached up and wiped at her nose with the back of her thumb, then pulled it away, and looked down at it. There was no blood, nor the hint of it: her hands were as before. Spackled with soft dirt, stained slightly green, and just a little sore.

Crow nodded. She knew this was the case, of course, but at some point she'd gotten into the habit of checking and double-checking and triple-checking and whatever came after that. She was a very silly thing, of course, and after hitting her head

when she fell, she wanted to be certain.

Since everything was in order, she allowed herself to smile. But her gaze could never linger on her body very long, and so it wandered, bobbing, head like lead, until she saw the city once again. It was seeming very off, very strange, very feeling-she-could-not-name. Her vision warped and twisted, and she felt a growing shame.

Because when she looked up to the city,

she knew that it was not the same.