

full page trigger warning

[rape, sexual assault, drugging, abuse, gaslighting. these are also the main themes of chapter 5. the remainder of the book will additionally address the side-effects and consequences of this, as they are important to the development of crow.]

chapter 4. vitiated bliss

Crow shot awake with a ragged, heaving gasp. She'd... done it. She didn't die. She was still alive. Probably in one piece. She'd really... managed it. Despite everything.

She was in a bed, of some kind, in a fragrant room with a carpet of moss—

it was the home of **the seamstress**. Her tailor. She must have—

the door swung open and with it poured a gentle, comforting breeze that held the aroma of fresh redberries and pulverized herbs. **The seamstress** thusly entered, carrying a wicker basket filled with linens, cloths, and scraps of all shapes and sizes.

Crow simply let her eyes fall closed.

But it did not work.

"Are you awake, crow?"

"unfortunately." she was not pleased to once again make acquaintance with life. never, could she ever, rest enough to satiate her desire for it.

"You were banged up pretty bad, mm, but I tended your wounds like usual. Of course, no fee, for my best and favorite customer~"

"why is it always free, for me? I know what you charge." she was more honest, now. it was as if the beast within her had come closer.

Crow rolled over in the bed, onto her side, now facing the seamstress. At the same time, she flipped the heavy blankets off, and pulled herself into a half-sitting, half-reclining position. The effort made her side split and crack with pain, and she whimpered softly.

"Well, hmm.." She trailed off, balancing the basket on her hip. What could she say, really? "You remind me of myself, before I could take care of myself. I was a frail thing, like you."

"pity, then?" Crow's gaze was steely and suspicious. Some part of her had **awoken**, and without even thinking, her hackles raised up and flared out.

"Partly. But also hope. I could make someone's life better— *your* life better. I feel kinship with you. In many ways, I see you as my kin."

"Us?" She paused for many breaths, and when she spoke, her voice was thin and weak, "...kin?"

"Of course, dear. I certainly take care of you like we are. Honestly, I'd be happy to be your—"

"um. let me dwell on that, please." her hackles and shoulders slumped, and she scooted backwards on the bed, pressing her back into the flat *pastemade* wall. she crossed her arms around her chest, and pulled the thick blanket back up to cover her thighs and lower body.

"It's a big thing, I know. It's why I never brought it up. I didn't want to scare you off."

many, many feelings mixed inside of Crow. she had no idea what to feel. all of the thoughts just built up inside of her until they began to boil over, and then once again, she pushed off the thick quilts and velveteen blankets. she was cold, again, and her mind cooled only slightly.

immediately, she greedily grabbed up the blankets and pulled them back over herself. but then her mind prickled and ached, overstimulated, overindulging, and so she flipped them off again.

The seamstress simply stared at her the whole while, unmoving and bemused.

"oh, shit. where's my eyepatch??" Crow looked over to **the seamstress**, clapping her free hand over the eye. She could just close it, but holding the eye closed was already wearing on her. she hated focusing on it.

"You didn't bring one, dear. Here." The seamstress set down the basket. "I'll fashion one for you." She pulled out a small circle of leather and unrolled it. All up and down it, silver lines had been inscribed into it, marking specific distances and measures.

The seamstress leaned forward over the edge of the bed and stretched her arms all the way across it to reach Crow. Then, she tutted, and readjusted Crow, pulling her head this way and that. Then, the seamstress looped her hands around the back of Crow's waist and pulled, scooting Crow forward until Crow's head was barely an antslength from her breasts.

"um-"

"It'll just be a moment, dear." The seamstress looped the leather all up, down, and around Crow's head, taking many measurements in many different places.

The seamstress was leaning fully over Crow's entire form, and Crow lingered in the long shadow that covered her and traced a path all the way to where she had been sitting against the wall.

"it's been at least *six* moments.." crow's body burned with the need of release. she was barely keeping herself sane. she could feel her limbs trembling, and her teeth chattered ever so slightly as she spoke. the blankets, too, had ended up piled and tangled up all around and on top of her, and she struggled for air, neck tensed and muscles taut, but even the air was just *wrong*.

The seamstress giggled. It was a well-practiced exclamation of joy, the kind that might be reserved for children or pets that were being particularly silly. Then, three additional moments later— where Crow felt nothing much at all going on around her head— the Seamstress stepped back.

"I'll return shortly with a new eyepatch. I already know your material and color preferences, so, I'll be right back." And so, she left, leaving the door open behind her.

Crow had never actually *told* her any preferences.. the seamstress had just assumed them, and Crow was just too kind to turn down the things offered to her. It had never been a problem, though. The work had no equal, *and* it came freely.

As soon as the seamstress left, Crow flipped the blankets back off and hopped out of bed. Instantly, her hands started to flick back and forth, and she started pacing from the door to the opposite wall, where the windows were set. Pain arced all throughout her flesh. Her wounds were connected by little cringing sparks of pain that blossomed out like flowers then withered as the next spark, somewhere else, bloomed.

Resoundingly, all through her, was a gradual, dull ache, which was punctuated by all the sharp pains that popped out any time she broke the hidden rules her plentiful meadow of wounds followed.

It was too bright. Her head hurt. The street below was noisy. The house was full of smells, smelly aromatic smells, and they were nice **but there were so damn many of them!**, she wasn't home, she hadn't been home, her injuries hurt, she was bruised all over, her bones were broken, her mouth was sticky and dry, and absolutely everything was rubbing her the wrong damn way.

Until this moment, she'd never once in her life been grateful that her clothes were missing. She was pretty sure, though, that if she had been wearing clothes for all this, the extra stimulation would've sent her into some kind of maddening, soul-crushing fit. As it was, she was barely holding it together.

"Oh dear. What are you doing out of bed, little crow?"

Crow turned her head around. Her back was hunched, and pain had carved out the shape of her form, and her face was twitching and cringing and chattering and twisting and scrunching. Tears brimmed in her eyes, and her hands flicked, back and forth, back and forth, never ceasing for even a half-moment. Her knees shook, and wobbled, and she was bouncing slightly, up and down, up and down.

Can't I just be alone?

The presence of the seamstress was too much, and immediately, she broke. She didn't want to be seen, let alone like this, let alone like this and naked, let alone by *her*, let alone now—

The tears kept coming and started running down her face silently before beading up on her fur, bursting, and then disappearing. Before long, she began to squawk, and screech, her voice catching and choking on sobs that she couldn't bear to let go of in front of **the seamstress**. It was too much. It was all too much. Why Did she Feel So Much?

The seamstress kneeled down behind Crow and held out a single cloth, one side white velvet that matched Crow's flesh, the other plush, black silk. After a couple of moments with no response, the seamstress leaned forward and began to gently wrap it around Crow's head, but immediately, Crow's hand flew up, snatched it, and threw it to the floor.

At the same time, Crow's body began to heave and shake with the full weight of her frustration. She rocked, back and forth, lips clamped shut, as she continued to choke and sputter.

The seamstress simply rose from her kneel, looking down at Crow, some unknowable emotion written across her features.

crow, meanwhile, turned away and sank to the ground and wrapped her arms around her legs, pulling herself into a tight ball. The whole of her shook and shivered like a forest in storm, and her teeth and beak alike chattered as her composure continued to crumble further and further away. she need only weather the storm for a little longer, push back the inevitable for only a scarce few more breaths, before she could **let go**. she could hold out. she was good at holding out. she held out all the time. it had been a while since she'd had to, but that was okay, she could still do it. she was really good at it. she could hold out. she was holding out. she could keep holding out.

"Do you want to be alone?" The seamstress asked, her tone unknowable.

crow did not, could not, respond. she was too busy holding everything together. she was too busy feeling the pieces of herself crack and crumble away into the unceasing waves that flooded her senses.

"You're making this very difficult for me."

crow's body forced out another squawk, and crow reached up and clamped down hard on her chattering beak, knuckles turning white from the pressure, hands staining red as the edge of her beak cut into her palms.

after five breaths, the seamstress turned around, and left, closing the door behind her.

crow fell apart instantly.

finally, she could **let go**.

her shoulders dropped and breath heaved out as she broke apart and tipped over onto the floor, where she curled up even further, until her knees were pressed up into her eye sockets and her back could stretch no further.

and then, five heaving, wracking sobs later, just as she had begun to whimper and whine,

the seamstress returned.

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"Are you finally feeling better, now?"

"i guess." crow whispered, voice hollow, eyes blank.

The two were cuddling in the bed, now. Crow was lying with her back on the seamstress' chest— the seamstress had her arms wrapped possessively around Crow, hands joined between Crow's waist and hips.

It had just sort of happened. She knew the seamstress appreciated it, and after blowing up over nothing, she felt bad, and...

and now she was being held. and she simply let it be. it was what she was supposed to do. it was, erm, the right thing to do? maybe? or maybe not, it was all so-

"So what happened earlier?"

"i broke." crow whispered instinctually, eyes scanning up and down the walls around her.

"I know that, silly." The seamstress let out a tiny little laugh. "What happened?"

"when i feel too much, i can't handle it, and i just want to die. it's agony."

"Because you... feel too much?"

"yeah."

The seamstress giggled again. "That's so cute!"

crow did not stir, nor speak. she was too tired to get worked up. everything hurt too bad. there were at least two things she could fix, though.

"water please."

"Ah, but I'm so comfortable."

"..please.." her voice cracked, briefly revealing the fragility that was so thinly hidden away. it was already so hard to speak, let alone ask for something, let alone from someone that had already given her so much-

"Right. Okay." The seamstress got up with a quiet sigh, gently lifting up Crow by the shoulders, so that she could slide out from underneath Crow and leave once again through the dark red door.

"ow!" crow whimpered, wincing as the seamstress twisted her body in a way that caused her wounds to scrape along one another.

"Sorry dear, I didn't know that would hurt you." The seamstress said callously, moving to the door, where she paused with her hand on the handle.

"..it's okay..." crow whispered after a three breath pause.

Only then did the seamstress leave.

Crow remained sitting up and scooted over to the nightstand. It had a big wooden drawer with a pasted-on wooden handle, which she pulled open with the tip of her talons as she sat. The feeling of her leg *pulling* that way sent a sharp crack of pain up her leg, and she winced, but did not stop.

Within the drawer, below her, were her belongings, neatly sorted. All things were in order. Nothing was missing.

Though.. most of her clothes were clearly filthy and in disrepair. Hopping down off the bed, she pulled the drawer— it was half the height of her— out onto the floor and dug through it. She took out her cloak slowly, wincing from the resistance as the things piled atop it fell off.

Wrapping the tattered, bloodstained thing around herself, she noticed that

It was cut. Sheared off, cleaved neatly down this way.. she traced the trail of the seamstress' shears with her longfinger, down to the clasp, which was missing. It was ruined and could not be worn. As she attempted to stand up with the cloak around her, it simply fell off and hung limp around her wings and wingarms like a scarf.

As she looked at it, eyes glazed over with hollow, unfeeling grief, the seamstress returned, walking right past her to place a wooden tray on the bed. On its top was an amphora of water and a small, but filled, crystalline chalice.

"Here you go, little Crow. Drink up." The seamstress called from behind her.

Crow did not stir, but picked at her cloak idly, failing to process the idea that it had truly fallen apart. They had been through so much together. It had spent countless moons protecting her.

"It's alright little Crow, I'll fashion a new one for you. You don't need to worry about it one bit."

Crow turned around, eyes wide and pleading, and wordlessly took the chalice and gazed off into the floor as she held it for two moments. Then, she downed it in one, and reached up to set the chalice back on the wooden tray. The seamstress had no problems refilling it, and so Crow reached for it, brushing hands with the seamstress as she moved to hand it back. Crow quickly readjusted her hand to be beneath the seamstress' grip on the chalice, gripping it around the base, and pulled the chalice up to her lips to down it once again.

This cycle continued for quite a few loops.

"i think i want to get back to resting off my injuries.. would it be alright if i went back to sleeping alone?" crow whispered, gaze still fixed to the floor. her right hand clutched the inside of her left elbow, and her left arm hung down, limp, dangling above the floor.

"Oh." She paused. "If you don't want my company, of course, no problem. I have a bit of work to get back to anyhow."

And so, she drifted out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Crow waited until she could no longer hear the seamstress' footsteps, and after, she let out a long sigh of relief. She was lucky to be alive, and luckier still for the seamstress' help, but more importantly, how could she get home, and as soon as possible, without insulting her?

It would not be right to hurt her.

It seemed the seamstress expected Crow to lay low and recover fully here. Laying low would really be ideal— even trying to hide or run from Cane's men in this state would be idiocy. But that could take moons..

and Crow could not stand much more of this. Just being here was killing her. It felt like someone was grating her bones like cheese, or stabbing into the space where her talons joined to her flesh with a sharp, hot needle, or even like someone was sewing the folds of her brain together.

This was excruciating in the most ephemeral way.

It was a fleeting, but lasting pain, one that fell between her fingers like sand but buried and suffocated her all the same. Dwelling on it, she felt her chest get tighter, and she began to struggle to truly breathe. Every breath felt half of what it should be, and her lungs never quite felt full.

Crow crossed over to the window and opened it, leaning her upper half out, breathing in deep. It was the smallest of reliefs. A crutch she could rely on to keep her sane through this.

i'll be home soon. i'll be home soon. i'll be home soon. i'll be with Serpie, in my nest, in the perfect quiet, and no one will bother me, and i'll be alone, and i'll be home, and the air will be cool and nice..

it was too hot here. that, too, wrapped her up and suffocated her. It was like she had the bedsheets tied around her head.

She could breathe, fine, but could not really breathe at all.

Beneath her, she heard whistling, and she looked down, confused. She caught the gaze of a man that was looking up at her, but his eyes did not meet her own— they were slightly lowered.

Confused, she stepped back, snapped the window shut, and wrapped her wings around herself like a shield. Why was he looking at her?? What business did he have?! And to signal to her— *was he with Cane's men? Shit!*

It made her want to crawl into the open maw of the abyss and just let go of everything. Life was too painful. Too confusing. There was too much going on, especially too many feelings, and she was sick and tired of all of it, and so.....

she stood with her back to the bed, then hopped up and caught the edge of it with her ass. She sat up straight to inspect her body. She was perfectly clean. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence, waking up clean, here. The seamstress often helped her bathe, though Crow had never asked her for the help. Usually she was too tired, or, *something*.

But the seamstress said it was really no problem, and bathing was so exhausting, especially while injured.. so she never specifically forbade it.

Exhausted, Crow flopped back and burrowed into the many blankets and quilts. She pulled them tighter, and tighter, as if she could wrap herself up into a magical cocoon that would take her out of this world and into a kinder one. She bunched up and up and up like a worm, and then flopped forward to lie straight in the bed.

Still, everything ached. She simply couldn't heal fast enough.

Though, it would be faster if she were home. Serpie would make sure of it. Serpie was simply the best at these things. It had always taken care of her, even from the time she first *awoke* in this strange world.

What had happened, in the past? Why was it all like this?

Could she make a better future for herself? Did she have to keep winding up, always and so often, in situations she didn't want and didn't need?

She was just so tired. Of everything. Tired of being tired. Exhausted from exhaustion.

Something had to change. Crow would make sure that it did.

But for now..

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The morning, merciless, came too soon and too loudly. The clamor of the street woke her even before the light, and the light sent her head spinning again, aching profoundly with the typical stabbing she had come to expect from it.

At the very least, the new eyepatch *was* perfect. The seamstress had really-

boof!

The door thumped open and scraped gently over the mossy floor, peeling away tiny layers of plant matter from the top of it. The bottom of the red door was stained green from this.

"Good morning, sleepy. Did you rest well?"

"not really."

"That's okay, you can catch up on sleep during the day, or tonight."

"i doubt it."

"Oh, oh, little Crow, what's wrong dear?" The seamstress knelt down next to the bed, reached up, and rested one of her hands on Crow's hip.

Crow's feathers immediately began to stand up on end and she rolled over to turn away completely.

"i need to go."

"Not until you're fully well." The seamstress replied in a crisp, firm voice that felt like a slap on the wrist.

"ugh!" Crow buried herself deeper into the blankets, pushing her face farther and farther into the comforting dark. she loved the way they pressed at her face, taking the world farther and farther away, until all was warm, dark, and claustrophobic.

"Now, now. How about I make you some of that drink from my hometown?"

Crow's ears perked up and poked out of the pile of blankets.

"I see... four ears, so that's a yes?"

The ears folded up and down, as if nodding.

"Right then, I'll be right back, Miss Grumpypants," the seamstress said, splaying out one of her hands on the back of Crow's thigh, jiggling it, before leaving.

As the seamstress finally left the room, Crow relaxed, immediately curling up into a tight ball under the covers of the bed. That red drink always helped her relax and have fun, and it always gave her the best sleep. It was *exactly* the thing she needed while healing.

Sometimes, the seamstress really did know just what she needed.

Maybe the seamstress was right. Maybe she was just grumpy. Cautiously, Crow parted the blankets, poking her head up and out from the nest. Then, she sat up, pressing her back against the thick stone wall behind her. She'd need to be sitting up to drink, regardless, and to tell the truth.. she was a little excited.

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"Precious little Crow~!" The seamstress cooed, entering with an especially tall, wide goblet, full to the brim with warm, bubbling fluid that threatened to spill over entirely.

"Oh, um, here." Crow leaned forward and fixed her claws into the sides of her beak. She focused for a moment, and then dropped her shoulders, as if letting go of something. With a deft twisting motion, the beak

click, snap!

simply came off her face, revealing her lips underneath. Going across her face in a straight line, starting just under her lowest ear and ending at the matching ear on the other side, was

a thick, dashed line of scars that the beak always covered. These same lines also traced her jawline, meeting at her chin.

"What are those lines?" The seamstress asked, surprised. "I did not know your beak was fake."

"Excuse me?" Crow looked up, a murder in her eyes. "*Fake?*"

"I meant, um, I just figured it grew out of you-"

Sarcastically, Crow held up the beak and flicked it with one of her claws. The metallic pang was the only noise ringing out in the awkward silence. Then, frustrated, she set down the beak on the side table

slam!

which then fell over into a resting position.

ka-thunk.

"Anyway, here, dear." The seamstress leaned forward, hastily offering up the goblet.

Immediately, Crow leaned forward, sipping carefully at first, so that it didn't spill. Then, overcome with desire, she greedily grabbed the goblet and glugged down the grimy guck in a trice. As she did, her hands trembled, struggling with the weight of it all.

As always, it was **sublime**. Even just the scent of the vapors moved her forward, leaving her wanting for more of that dreadful red ichor that sent her head spinning and the world spiralling far, far away.

Already, within thirty breaths, it started, a slight tingle in her thinnest appendages, all along the edges of where her talons and claws met flesh.

"There's more, for later, when this cup wears off. I know how much you like the stuff, sorry I couldn't get you any sooner- I sent for some the day I took you in, but it only got here now."

"oh, that's all alright, miss." Crow said, smiling, clutching the goblet between just two fingers. Her other hand reached out and rested on top of one of the seamstress' outstretched arms.

"Great." The seamstress said, smiling while showing no teeth. She placed her hand under Crow's, then wormed her other hand around Crow's, slipping the goblet out of Crow's grasp and into her own. She then took it to the other room, filled it, and returned.

"It's been a while since you've had a cup, so I figured, why not two, right? To celebrate your successful job!"

"*that's a great idea!!!*" crow giggled, scooting forward towards the edge of the bed. she let her legs dangle over the edge, and held her hands up. her hands waved loosely in the open air and grasped around nothing.

It was unholy, really, how quickly the drug took hold of her mind in the way it was uniquely suited to do.

"Here, let me help, dear." The seamstress stepped forward, placing one leg between Crow's and wrapping one hand around Crow's back. She then pressed into the small of Crow's back with her palm, pushing Crow fully into her, pushing Crow to straddle the thigh she had placed between Crow's legs.

"okay!!" crow leaned forward, tilted her head back, and opened her mouth expectantly. Her tongue stuck out ever so slightly, and her breath fell out, hot and heavy.

The Seamstress cherished the warmth of crow's breath on her fingers, and stood above her, goblet in hand, staring down. Now, there were teeth in her smile.

"Open up, dear."

"ohhkaahhy" crow's jaw lowered, and her tongue lolled out freely, now, as her mouth parted fully open.

The seamstress tipped the goblet forward, carefully and slowly pouring it into Crow's open mouth.

With each pour, Crow would sit back slightly, close her mouth, and thoughtfully treasure the thick liquid within, rolling it around with her tongue, eyes wide in contented contemplation, before gulping it all down, leaning forward again, and opening her mouth fully, expectantly.

If she ever opened her mouth incorrectly, the seamstress would stop her, correct her mouth's position, and then they would continue.

This lasted for a hundred breaths, but at the end of it, all of the red ichor was gone.

Crow's feathers smoothed, her down lowered, and even her fur settled down as her eyes half-shut and her belly filled with a warm buzz. Her mind was drifting on a lazy tide, in a strong, sturdy boat that rocked effortlessly over the tiny waves. Her whole body felt warm as she basked in the sunlight streaming through the window

The seamstress said something, though Crow knew not what, and all at once her world spun around her from side to side. Crow felt a gentle pressure on her chin, and a soft rubbing motion on the side of her cheek. All the while, the seamstress cooed softly, the sound of which made Crow's head spin with the same warm buzz that she felt deep within her belly.

Suddenly, the world was falling, down, down, and down again,

foof!

and then the world was fluffy, soft, and wonderful. crow reached out, rubbing soft fabrics between her hands, before pulling them up to her face, nuzzling them. "ah...!"

From above, there were vibrations, rumblings, as the air trembled, and her ears trembled with them, moving in tiny, carefree circles in time with the tiny, carefree waves that simply

splashed against the side of her boat, where she drifted, free of worries, outside of the confines of time and space.

crow sighed sweetly, and so, so softly, letting out puffs of perfect air that hung still before condensing against the seamstress' outstretched hand.

crow's eyes followed the paint strokes of the ceiling, back and forth, back and forth, tracing a secret pattern into it over, and over, and over, as her mind spiralled endlessly down and down again, falling all on its own into some forbidden pattern that locked her consciousness deep and deeper away.

crow's body pressed deeper into the bed, then rose, and fell again, as with breath, so too did her body move. She loved the feeling of falling, and rising, only to fall again. With each press backwards, her head lolled, and with each raise, trickling sensations flooded into her, as if being brought up from water.

over and over again, her thoughts splashed up, only to be pushed out from her mind again. her whole body trembled and shook, overwhelmed with delight, filled with feelings that wrapped fully around her and threatened to never let go.

she did not dream to ask for more and she certainly didn't feel the need to.

in her vision, she could just barely see the seamstress, with her, watching her from above. that was just so kind of her, so sweet, to always watch over her whenever she '**drank deep to feel**', as the seamstress liked to phrase it. or.. was it '**drink deep and descend?**'

something like that, wasn't it? or was it..

crow began to mumble, trying to push her query from her pursed lips, but was only able to manage a few blubbering sputters before the thoughts slipped off her mind and deep down into the murky depths of her subconscious.

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Crow woke up sore all over, and the acrid smell of her own blood hung heavy in the air.

"You had a panic attack in your sleep, dear. you're lucky I was here to take care of you— you started thrashing all over, hitting yourself into the wall, tearing at your own flesh with your claws. I was up to pee at the time, and you were already a bit injured by the time I got back. I'm so, so sorry I didn't notice sooner— **You forgive me, right?** Did you dream of anything in particular? Were you attacked in a nightmare?"

nothing, particularly, came to mind. even now, her head was fuzzy, off, wrong. she could hardly put thoughts together. "i um, forgive you. thanks for doing what you could, you've been so sweet to me... i don't remember any dreams, though I'm sure i had some."

"I see, I see, little Crow. Well, here, if it's any consolation, I'd be happy to top you off on your favorite drink?" The seamstress was already holding a brimming goblet of it.

Once again, Crow's ears perked up.

"It'll make you feel better, dear. Right as rain, and easily, too. Honestly, I might prescribe it as your medicine until you're all healed up." She giggled, then smiled at Crow, eyes slightly narrowed.

this was fuzzy, *off*, wrong, and her thoughts stayed apart, as if scared of joining together for anything. In her mind, she stood alone, on still water. Her thoughts were like butterflies, scattering as soon as she drew near. just what was going on? and why did the idea of drinking sound so terrible? didn't the drink always make her feel better?

"You look like you're getting all grumpy again, dear. Don't you remember how you felt last time you drank? You were just giggling and having a ball for hours until you passed out. Other than that one nightmare you slept as soundly as a ghost."

Crow leaned forward, looking down into the red ichor. Her whole body ached, from head to toe, from sore muscles to broken bones and aching wounds. The drink would take away the pain, wouldn't it?

Hand trembling, Crow took the goblet and began to drink. The texture of it was strange and goopy, like drinking pudding, but its taste was **otherworldly, transcendent**. As soon as it touched her tongue, she tilted her head back and greedily drank down the rest in a hurry.

Even after drinking all of it, she kept the goblet up, trying to fish out every last drop with her tongue.

"What makesh et tashte sho *good!*?" Crow asked, tongue deep in the goblet.

"Oh, I'm not quite sure about that, dear. Probably just a very good, well-balanced recipe." The seamstress lied, not wanting to scare her off of the drink.

"I know it's drugs, i'm not dumb, just, which one is it?" Crow asked, pushing the goblet back to the seamstress' chest. Already, she was pushing with too much force, losing some control over herself.

"One?" The seamstress giggled, taking the goblet from Crow.

"wait- it's a mix?"

"You could say that, yes." The seamstress clicked her tongue and walked back to the kitchen, washing the goblet. In ten breaths, she returned.

"Of what?"

"You really don't need to trouble yourself over such things, dear."

"I want to know what's in the drink!"

"Oh, oh, now, precious Crow." She cooed, cupping Crow's face in her hand. "It's a secret family recipe, and if I teach you how to make it, it can't be our special thing anymore. I love our special thing. I'm not ready to let go of it just yet, you know?"

Crow, confused, shook her head.

"I'm happy to teach you someday, it's just, not yet, okay? I love being the one to make this for you. Besides, this way I can make sure you stay safe whenever you drink it. Imagine if you were alone last night, and I hadn't stopped you from tearing into yourself."

Crow dropped her gaze sheepishly to the cuts along her ass and thighs. "that.. would suck, I guess." she whispered. already, scarcely thirty breaths later, her head was fuzzy and starting to spin. The energy to fight was being pulled from her, dragged down, and down again, far beneath the still waters of her mind. It simply didn't matter, and she could feel her cares slipping away with or without her.

So, she let go, and fell back onto the fluffy bed.

Why bother worrying when everything felt so *good*?

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...

crow was pressing through fog, wading through deep water with no end. she was alone, isolated, under a pure white sky full of light. even her shadow had left her.

she pressed forward through the water, fighting the mud that suckled around her ankles and stubbornly held on until she yanked her feet out of it. no matter how fast she waded, the water never changed for a moment. eternally, it was still.

and with no movement, crow could not feel where the water ended and she began. she could not even tell if she was moving, or if the endless horizon was drawing any closer, or—

all at once, it was like she was falling forward into it, dissolving into it, before rising up from the water again, gasping as her form took shape once again.

she was lost. where was out? where was up?

she tilted her head far back, looking up into the pure white above. only, the world turned around with her, and all of a sudden the white sky was once again replaced with water, and she was below the waves again, floating.

and before she knew it, she was upright again, water falling off of her in streams, as she stepped forward, one foot after the other.

there was no pain here, nor sound.

was she sleeping?

she could not feel her body.

was she alive?

she could not feel the world around her.

where... was she?

she was underwater again, but she had no urge to breathe. the water did not sting her eyes.
there was nothing.

she looked down, watching as her feathers broke off and floated up in the water. so, too, did
her down, and her fur, all surfacing around her, leaving her truly naked for the first time in
countless moons.

her hands went to cover her body, instinctively, but already her hands, too, had begun to form
bubbles and dissolve into the water surrounding—

what... was she?

emptiness.

calm.

there was no noise, no motion, no signs of life in the perfectly still lake.

the water was blue, and the sky was clear, just as it should be.

and so, there was nothing.

peace.

...

warmth.

heat.

sensation.

crow's eyes parted slightly. there was a dark shape before her, taking up the majority of her vision. white fluff fell down and around it, and crow reached out, holding the fluffy puffs in her hands.

soft.

she laid peacefully, focused only on the fluff within her grip. she ran it between her fingers, over and over again, reflecting deeply on its texture. her whole brain smoothed over with the feeling of the fluff, and so too did her fingers, then her skin itself. in three breaths, the soft

fluff had overcome her, and she sat still, eyes wide, running her hands through it over and over again.

in her periphery, the dark shape froze, before rising up. there were noises, but they did not reach her.

the fluff was leaving!!

crow leaned forward, keeping her hands in the perfect white cloudy fluff. there were more noises, like laughter, but they fell far before reaching crow's ears. in her world, there was only **fluff**.

soft. soft. soft. softy soft soft. soffsoffsoff. fluffyfluffluff!

maybe this was **it**!

crow smiled wide and giggled, kneading the fluffy fluff between her claws, braiding it together, then pulling it apart.

it was **perfect**!

everything she had ever dreamed of!

...

...

crow's head was turned to the side, and her arm was stretched fully out, half hanging off the bed. she stared down at her hand, slowly bringing it into focus. her body was numb, and aching, and her belly twisted itself in knots.

she tried hard to move her arm, to will it to simply close, but instead, her fingers only twitched slightly.

how strange.

she tried again, and again, not frustrated, nor confused, just moving towards a simple goal with the simple conviction of a simple, simple girl.

how strange indeed!

every so often, her arm would move up slightly, or shift back down the bed, moving along with her shoulder, which moved with her torso. all of her, moving together as one, though, she knew not why.

it was like she was part of some machine, cyclically moving back and forth, over and over again, simply a gear in some larger machination.

...

...

...

the room was empty, now. she stared up at the ceiling, eyes still half-closed. the true moon's light set the room with a dim, milky pink. she tried to sniff, but her nose was stuffed and stuck, so instead she sucked in a shaky breath through her mouth. that was hard, too, and she could barely get half of a full breath. some weird *lump* was caught in her throat, thick and gooey— many of them— and no matter how she strained and gurgled and swallowed she could not clear them.

Wait— the *true moon's* light?

had she slept the whole day and forgotten to ever get up? she was still in bed.

no, something was... *off*.

Crow dragged herself over to the side of the bed. There were no blankets, nor sheets, covering her, and her flesh was bare, bruised, and bloody. Everything was sore and aching far worse than before.

another.. nightmare?

no.. then she would be here.

she would take care of me.

The sheets beneath her were sticky, stained with something she did not quite grasp, and she recoiled as her hand pressed into it, trying hard to flick it off. In the commotion, she slid off the side of the bed, barely catching herself on her legs before she crumpled into a little ball on the ground.

Had her injuries really taken so much out of her? Was that stuff on the bed wound discharge? If so, how had her wounds gotten infected? Why wasn't she healing?

Her head was fuzzy, cloudy, heavy. She could hardly move, and always, she felt a pulling, a tugging in her very soul, that led beyond the blood-red door. But for the life of her, she couldn't figure out what she was missing.

Where was she?

Desperate, she clutched her head, thinking back, trying to **remember**. But, there was nothing.

Her head was spinning, and all at once, nausea started to bubble up and build up in her throat. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

Crow scrambled to her feet and stumbled to the door, clawing at the handle, but it did not budge.

Until it shifted slightly, then stopped, as if caught on a deadbolt.

what the fuck..?

But there was no lock on the door.

she tried again, and again,

why would it be locked?!

and suddenly, after one desperate push, the door fell open freely, bringing her with it.

As she fell forward with the door, bile filled her throat and mouth, and she hastily got her feet under her. She pressed one arm tight to her belly, wrapping her wrist and hand around to grab the small of her own back, and she brought her other hand up to rest where her neck met her shoulder. Her hand was cold and clammy, but her skin was burning, hot, and feverish.

it was just.. stuck? she wondered, prowling around the floor in the dark. her head was feverish, delirious. had her wounds gotten infected?

right. the wound discharge. she had just been thinking about that.

crow padded through the house, knocking on every red door she came across. she didn't remember which room was the seamstress', and she needed help, *now*.

.

at some point, crow had fallen to her knees, retching, clutching her stomach as her body heaved back and forth,

a hand gently landed on her shoulder.

"Oh, oh, precious little Crow. Here. Let me help you, darling."

crow whimpered, pressing the side of her head against the seamstress' leg.

"...sick..." crow croaked, retching again.

"I see.. Let's get you some meds to help with that, dear. Just try and go back to sleep, and I'll take care of everything, little Crow."

...

crow woke up to the feeling of the seamstress' hand slowly rubbing against her cheek. the soft fluff around her wrist felt so good..

"Good morning Crow. You got quite sick last night.. I think one of your wounds got infected, but the medicine seemed to help with that."

crow groaned in response. everything hurt so bad. she noticed that the bed was completely clean, again, and so too was her body.

"did- did-" crow coughed, hacking up a web of sticky, coagulated phlegm. "did you wash me?" she croaked.

"Yes, of course, little Crow. Hygiene is very important, and you weren't really in a position to do it for yourself. Since we're both ladies, I figured.."

"okay" crow said, turning her head away, then her body.

"Okay?"

"it's okay." Crow pressed her face into the blankets, peeking out over them slightly so she could stare holes into the wall. she could feel the thin film of wax on her feathers and fur; she'd used soap for skin on them. *ugh*. the whole of her prickled silently in displeasure, and her feathers twitched, trying to cast off the waxy film that stuck to them like glue.

The seamstress sat down on the bed next to Crow and placed her hand on Crow's lower back.

crow's lips trembled, and her feathers pricked up at the slight touch. immediately, she stretched out, as if she could disperse the touch throughout her body to make it more bearable.

"what, um, happened last night?" again, she couldn't remember. yet again, the thoughts had been robbed from her.

"Well, dearie, I just told you, you got quite sick, and—"

"yeah, but, anything else? i feel like i'm missing something still—" Crow pulled away fully, now, from the seamstress. "could you um, not touch me today? every sensation is so—" Crow's full body ruffled up, puffing out, and she shook side to side, as if flinging off dirt or water. "—so,, !! **ugh !!**" she put her hands to her face, clutching it by the sharp tips of her claws. the sharp sensation kept her grounded in reality, a single anchor to tether her here.

she had to stay grounded. turn down the drinks. and get home. one thing was certain: she needed to take her meds, her meds at home. she took them every day, and they were very important, and the fact she went without them... maybe that's why she was so sick? and maybe that's why the meds here weren't working.

she'd never gone without them before, and she'd always known that she would fall apart without them.

she just thought that it would look different.

"...Riiight." The seamstress said, pulling her hands away slowly. "I've finished your new outfits, little Crow, and they're tucked in the drawer with your things. I threw the old, bloody, tattered garments out. They weren't salvageable."

crow just cast her gaze down, downtrodden. it made sense, but... it *hurt*. "But—"

"No buts, little Crow. You told me it was okay—"

"I did? When?"

"Just a couple days ago, when you had arrived here, dear."

"It's only been a couple days?"

"Yes, exactly. That's why it's so surprising your wounds have taken such a bad turn. All in one day, it went so drastically, and when you found me— well, I'd been busy with some very demanding clients all day, and I had to turn away Cane's men, so I hadn't had time to come up and tend to you yet."

"you did that for me? you.. lied to Cane's men?"

"Of course!" The seamstress lied as easily as breathing, but the lie slipped around crow, who sat, head fuzzy, unthinking, and unknowing.

"that's... thank you. But that's so dangerous!"

"So is what you do, little crow." The seamstress said, grinning as she reached out and cupped crow's face with her hand. "But you are so brave, it fills me with strength."

Crow's fur and feathers stood up on end from the touch, and her whole brain contracted, recoiling, but she stayed still, so as not to spurn her hospitality.

"Well, if it's only been a couple of days.. I'm not really in a shape to travel... and.. would it be okay if..?"

"Yes, Crow, of course you can stay. It's such a delight to care for you. Stay as long as you need to recover. I'll keep you safe."

Crow smoothed over at her words and began to softly nuzzle into the seamstress' hand.

"thank you," she whispered. There was a tight, dangerous feeling in her chest. Like freedom, and contentment, but bundled up and caught in a net. Perhaps this was **it**. To be protected, to be looked out for, to be truly safe.

And perhaps the reason it felt so wrong... was just because she needed to give it more time. She always needed time to adjust. And like the seamstress said, her wounds had her so grumpy, and she felt so anxious about having not turned in the results of her mission yet...

The seamstress sat silently, perfectly maintaining a well-practiced polite smile. She simply watched as the gears turned in Crow's head for her, letting her come to the conclusion that—

"I'll stay. Until I'm healed. Thank you, for everything."

"Of course, dear."

Suddenly, Crow felt a pang deep in her heart. A needing, a longing. A void that needed to be filled.

"Um, could you help me with something..?" Crow asked, turning around, chin pointed down, eyes raised up obediently.

"Of course, dear." The seamstress said, closing her eyes and softening her smile precisely.

"I feel like I'm missing something... do you know what **it** might be?"

The seamstress grinned.

"I have a feeling that I know exactly what you need. I'll be right back, little Crow. Don't worry your pretty little head about anything." The seamstress stood up and pulled away from Crow, then walked to the door and stood in the doorway.

"I'll take care of everything. Just sit there and just rest, Crow. I'll take care of everything else."

"thank you so much.." crow whispered and whimpered, relaxing fully into the fluffy bed.

The seamstress had always taken care of her wounds.

And she was still alive, wasn't she?

The seamstress left, padding away to the kitchen, where Crow could hear her preparing something.

A familiar, alluring scent wafted all the way to her, and immediately,
all of her ears perked up.