INEFFABLE

"Raven." Crow said curtly, turning up her chin to face them proudly.

"What is it you are doing here, *little crow*?" Raven's words were a threat and an accusation folded into each other so neatly that neither could be separated.

Crow, of course, had known those implications even before Raven arrived to confront her.

"Well, this is where I reside and work, raven." She had settled for audacity in the face of danger. She would appeal to them in a way she knew she never had before— by leveraging the value of her own life, by forcing them to see her for who she truly was.

"Me as well." Raven responded simply. After speaking, they circled her, head extended down to greet her.

Their head was held on a neck far long than her own body six times over. It was disgusting, unnatural.

Crow thought briefly back to the past, to her gravestone that marked the entrance to their 'home'.

Raven was not meant to look this way.

"Okay, Crow. Okay, I am cutting to the chase, as you like to say. Perhaps these simple, familiar terms will help get these ideas through your dense little skull." Raven sneered, but they could not hide their delight. They challenged her to see her strength, that they might revel in it. Perhaps, after all, this Crow really *could* be the one.

"You are in my private laboratory," Raven continued. "You will tell me why."

"I saw no mention of exclusivity, nor any indication that a Crow might be forbidden from this place." Even as she spoke boldly and bravely, her fur stood up on end with unsettling thoughts— like how Raven knew **exactly** how dense her skull was.

"Really, now, Crow? Was the size of everything no indication?"

"It's not as if you have ever made an attempt to accomodate me. I figured it was self-same as the rest of the laboratory— suited to your tastes and no one else's." For once, she could speak with the full strength of the venom she held only for herself. Turning it outwards at last felt so *freeing.*

Raven dropped all pretenses of hiding their delight. Now, they grinned with every mouth they had, and all up and down their titanic body rows of fangs and tongues lolled out in glee from gaping holes that appeared from previously-flush flesh.

"Oh, oh. Oh, Crow. I have given you more than you could ever hope for in your pitiable existence. I have showered you with comforts without compare in a City as wretched as this. I have spent my every waking moment for a half-millenia doing nothing but tending to your growth and desires, ever your steadfast gardener. Who do you believe crafted the Living Room? Who was it that installed the Lounging Chair for our little operations?"

"I had assumed Serpie, since nothing of value has ever come from you without some form of theft involved."

"Now listen here, *crow.* I am beyond kind to you. You and I are kindred spirits. We must stick together in a world as cruel as this."

"Kin? You dare call yourself my *kin*? Kin does not eat kin."

"That is a pitiable belief you hold indeed. There are many beasts of all kinds that eat kin, from spiders to bears and everything in between. The only thing you need is a little push, and just like that, anything becomes a cannibal."

"You have plenty to eat. You need not strip meat from my bones."

"Now, now. Now *crow*, would you deny me the comforts I so readily bestow upon you?"

"Your maw is open, but only lunacy falls from it."

"What does **it** feel like, little Crow?"

"What?"

"Oh, please. Oh, Crow, any old fool could see how you've changed. I know you've found **it**. You have my congratulations!" Raven cooed, ever looming over her. They leaned their entire head forward, chin pointing down towards their own body. The result was that their head hovered directly over her, pointing straight down, surrounding her on all sides with their countless eyes.

Crow had no idea how to respond. Her clenched fists quivered with rage, her knees trembled with fear, and her head shook with disappointment in Raven. She swallowed hard, then tilted her head straight back. The muscles in her neck stood out as she steeled her resolve and forced her knees to lock up and go still. She *would* stand strong.

"Stunned? Don't know what to say? Is **it** truly so awe inspiring? Please Crow, regale me. I crave the satisfaction of finally knowing what you were missing all this time."

"I don't exist for your pleasure," Crow *spat* on Raven. "You exist for mine."

Crow flinched as Raven's flesh split open to create mouths barking and shrieking with laughter. Dozens of their eyes twisted and collapsed, sucked back into the main mass of flesh by thick veins that opened up from every exposed part of Raven's flesh. The veins sucked away the eyes like parasites, liquefying and consuming them all at once. As soon as they disappeared, the flesh rippled and bubbled like the murky water of a fetid swamp, and all along its surface, their flesh ripped open to reveal teeth and mouths and tongues laying just beneath the surface. They surrounded her on all sides with their ugly and ceaseless barking laughter.

Crow's eyebrows furrowed as she turned her head towards the ground, away from Raven. Their laughter, their *joy*, made her sick to her stomach. She hated the idea of their happiness. She hated the idea that she might be the source of it.

"Why are you laughing?" She asked, quietly, but their laughter drowned out the sound of her own voice. She looked up, eyes straining and shaking with fury as she yelled at them. "Why are you laughing?!"

"Surely you have learned by now that it is no flaw to be happy?"

"You have no right to be."

"Oh? And why is that, *little Crow*?" The mouths went still, if only for a moment, as they waited on her reply.

"Because you..." Crow's lips twitched, and she bit on her words once before saying them, "You. Don't. Deserve. It."

"I don't deserve to be happy." Raven repeated flatly, mocking her.

Crow nodded fiercely. "You don't. You are too wicked for it."

"Wicked?" Raven asked, voice tinged with curiosity. "Tell me, *little Crow*, what do you really know of my wickedness? Was your little walk down our hall of memories not to your liking?"

"Our?"

"Well, I certainly *could* have done this alone," Raven sighed, head pulling away from Crow as their neck retracted back into their body. They stood up straight, towering over her, now roughly the same size as the massive doors that lined the hall. "But I wouldn't have gone to all of this trouble for myself, really."

"You aren't about to pin all of this on me. You're sick— deranged, a monster, bereft of morals, twisted down to your bones."

"I am."

Crow took a step back. Now that they were no longer surrounding her, she wanted to be as far away from them as she could get.

Raven made no attempt to stop her, and so she kept pacing backwards, one foot at a time, as Raven simply watched.

Are they really going to let me—

Her back suddenly hit cold stone, and her breath, suddenly knocked out of her, fell out all at once, hot and heavy. Her hands shakily felt around behind her, and there, she felt nothing but a cold and wet wall. Recoiling, she ripped her hands away and looked down at them as she stumbled forward.

Her hands were damp, and sticky, and she quickly flicked her head around to glance at the wall. It was a massive monolith of bones of all color, glued together by *something* that oozed out from between their joints and dripped down the wall. Crow shrieked as she flapped her hands and arms around wildly, pacing back again, barely cognizant of the fact she was now heading back towards Raven.

"The laboratory is just an extension of ourselves," Raven said coldly as the wall of bones sunk down into the floor and was eaten by it, whitestone tiles crunching away like rows of teeth until all that remained was a few sharp shards that came to rest in the cracks between the tiles.

"Are you really so repulsed?" Raven whispered to Crow from only a single fist-length away, entirely covering her with their shadow.

Crow did not jump, nor spin around, nor even tense up, nor extend her claws— no. No, instead, she forced herself to be still, to take in a deep breath and calm herself, before she responded. Her life was still on the line. She had not yet escaped. She could not yet relax.

[inhale]

[exhale]

"Yes," she said simply, not turning around to regard Raven. She was unnerved enough, and she did not desire to deal also with the dreadful sight of them. "What was that... *fluid*?" She asked simply, eyes twitching as she looked down at the thick and pinkish dripping goo that yet coated her hands, and more than likely, back.

"Amniotic fluid. Shortened: *Amnia*. Simplified: liquid life."

Crow's shoulders slumped as she allowed herself to relax. It was, at least, a fluid familiar to the body, and not something that would be her undoing or send her into illness.

"Give me something to dry off with," she demanded, not bothering to turn around to regard Raven.

"You really are quite something, little Crow." They chuckled— lightly this time— and after thirteen ticks, a bundle of fabrics fell from somewhere over Crow's head and landed just in front of her feet.

"Why do you comply with my demands?" Crow bent forward and dug through the bag. The fabric was blotched with all manner of washed-out stains from which the discoloration yet lingered— primarily red. Salvaged bloodstained fabric, perhaps?

Crow picked up a rougher piece of fabric— the inside of a hide, cleaned, but not smoothed. She used the gritty parts of it to remove most of the *Amnia* from her hands, then dropped it to the floor before digging through the bundle for other cloths. She'd have to clean off her cloak, and for that, she'd prefer a softer one...

"Because I am in a good mood, Crow. It is my pleasure, really."

Crow's eyebrows furrowed. That was the single most suspicious thing they could have possibly said. As she thought on it, she pulled off her cloak and laid it down flat on a clean part of the ground, the back of it face-up. Then, she knelt down and began to scrub away the fluid.

Amniotic fluid was not supposed to be red, nor pink. And whose embryo was it pulled from? Raven had said the laboratory was an extension of them— were the walls nothing more than an exoskeleton? When she clawed into it, did it..?

Crow shook her head.

"You seem confused, little Crow."

"I am," she hissed, huffing with the effort of cleaning her cloak and the added frustration of trying to make sense of Raven's words and actions (always a dizzying task).

"The **Living Room** has misled you, I suppose," Raven sighed— a noise like the wind stopping for the day— then stepped forward until they were side-by-side with Crow. There, they sat down, then tilted back until they were laying on their massive back, facing the ceiling.

"My sanctuary has no capacity for thought, let alone deceit," Crow huffed again, looking pointedly at Raven. "Can you just speak plainly? What is with the backwards way you express yourself? Surely you know by now it is no flaw to be understood?"

Raven cackled for a moment. With every word spoken, she was ever closer to the woman they had molded her to be. They could sense her drawing closer, nearer, with every moment. At this rate—

it might actually happen.

Which meant there were only a three things left to do to ensure her transformation went according to schedule. They were her **Fundamental Pieces**, the three pillars that, more than anything else, defined what it was to be '***Crow***'.
And so, they would be her steadfast steward unto the end. She would succeed, or she would not. Either way...

their work continued.

It had to.

"You laugh at nothing again."

"Do you really not understand my mirth?"

"I do not understand how one as..." Crow looked over at Raven, glancing up and down from one end of their form to the other. They had never relaxed by her side like this before. They had never been so totally comfortable in her presence, so at peace, so... *lively*. It was as if her own return to life had inspired theirs.

Crow trailed off and went silent as she remembered their vow to her.

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"I will bring you back."
"You will live at least a single day as your true self. More, if it is possible."
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She paused.

Raven paused.

Neither dared to breathe, nor break the silence.

"...am I close, Raven?" She asked, voice cracking as she allowed her vulnerability to push up into it and fall freely into the air. It spilled out of her all at once, clouding her thoughts and vision, as her heart raced. She wanted, more than anything, more than she even desired—

"Yes."

—Crow let out a breath she hadn't even realized she was holding.

"How close?"

"Closer than you have ever come before."

"Will I make it?"

Raven paused, not wanting to tell her what awaited. Would it ruin the experiment if she was expecting it? Would her reaction to it change if she knew it needed to be done? If the violence was not senseless, shocking? If they consoled her, if they made it easier, would she still..?

"Raven?"

"You're so close, little Crow," they confided in her. "You are closer than I could ever ask for. But there's..." Raven trailed off and went silent.

"What is it? What is there?"

"The easiest part of the journey is behind you."

"*what*?" Crow asked, head whipping around to face Raven. "***easy?!***" She yelled, outraged.

Raven closed all of their eyes and sighed again. This was not pleasant, nor was it easy, and yet...

Crow lurched onto her feet and ripped her cloak off of the floor, forcing herself into it as fast as she could. Then clothed, she stormed towards them. "What do you mean, *easy*?! What could possibly remain? What else do I have to prove?! Do you have any idea— no, *of course you don't*! So how could you—"

...they would be the villain of this story. For her.

It was all for her.

There was so little left to do.

Finally, finally, it was almost over...

"Crow." Raven said smoothly, calmly, hoping to ease her tizzy as quickly as they could. She ought to be resting, 'the calm before the storm'. And, too, they wanted to enjoy this last moment with her. She would either grow, or she would snap in two, either way—

Crow stopped one bodylength from Raven's side, glaring at them. "What?"

—this would be the last peaceful moment they shared together. The question was only if that would remain true for centuries, or for eternity.

"There are three things left that separate you from your true self. You will experience them, though it might kill you. Ordinarily, I would doubt your capabilities..." Raven opened up their original pair of eyes in front of Crow. They were lavender, and gleamed in the light.

The mere sight of them filled Crow with peace that overflowed from her very soul.

"...as this will be your first time going through them. We are in uncharted territory, you must understand. You are the single outstanding experiment from a half-millenia of short-lived failures."

"How d—"

"*But*," Raven continued, interrupting her. "You..." they trailed off, searching for the right expresson for something so precious, so ephemeral, so difficult to describe. "You might just be her."

Crow went still, and her anger dimmed. "...*really*?"

The floor thumped and trembled as Raven nodded their colossal head. "It is possible. And if it is true, you will survive, and emerge as her from the other side."

"And if I'm not?"

Raven remained silent for many moments. "Then I will have a very frustrating milennia trying to get you this far along in your growth again while figuring out where we went wrong."

"How long have we been doing this, Raven?"

"You don't want to know."

"I do."

"No, Crow." Raven sighed. "You still don't understand," they tutted. "**I *know* you do not want this**."

"Oh," Crow said, crestfallen. She looked to the floor in... shame? Fear? Pity? The feelings were so many that she could hardly feel them clearly, let alone interpret their meaning.

"Just rest, Crow. When you are ready, I will start this for you, this ***beginning of the end.***"

"Um," Crow was confused, so deeply confused, by her feelings and Raven's cryptic words alike. Her feelings were contradicting, clashing, and still, she found herself sinking down to the ground before leaning her back up against Raven.

With a deep breath in, she began to rest.

"So that's it?" She whispered.

"Seems so."

"Do you think I'll die?"

"I don't know. Try and not do that."

"I'll... *try*," she said solemnly, eyes hollow and staring off into the distance at nothing in particular.

"You will." Raven agreed. "That part of you is constant."

She could not explain it, but some part of her cracked like an eggshell and twisted in a permanent, terrifying way. It was one thing to know what had happened to her. It was another to know that Raven did it to her. It was a further, final thing to have Raven openly address the rotten truth of it. She hated the feeling of them inspecting her like that, of them ***understanding*** her more deeply than she understood herself. It wasn't right, for anyone to come to know her better than she knew herself.

So, the part of her that twisted stuck out in an obvious way. It was a sticky fear, one that reminded her of Finch—perhaps some kind of fear of losing her control, her body, like that. Or perhaps it was the notion—

that she already had?

"You... do not seem, to be.. calming. down." Raven said slowly. "Hardly resting?"

Crow nodded silently and bunched up into a ball, bringing her knees up to her chest,a nd wrapping her cloak tightly around herself. Inside of her ball, it was dark, claustrophobic, and warm. All of the pieces she needed to feel comfort. Everything she needed to feel safe.

"What troubles you, little Crow?"

"Why should I tell you?" She snapped back.

Raven sighed like they were defeated, but continued anyway, "Because I would like to see you succeed in this."

"So now you will support me?"

"I always have. Your goals are simply often misaligned with my own."

"You shouldn't need my perfect agreement."

"I don't. This is simply why you receive no support when going off on your own."

"Were you always so...?"

"Yes. And it comforted you."

"I doubt it."

"It comforts you now."

"It does *not*—" Crow opened her eyes slowly as she moved her left hand up inside her cloak to feel around her heart. It had slowed, and her breathing was more steady. *Bastard*. "Fine."

"Fine what?"

"I will talk to you about my troubles."

"Excellent. Please continue."

"I will," she said stiffly, eyebrows raised. Before she continued, she let out a long, drawn-out, and exasperated sigh. Then, she took in a quick, sharp inhale, "I am unsettled that you know me better than I know myself. That you got to know me, and I did not. That you have seen all of me, and for centuries, and that everything I know about myself is taken from scraps of history and vague feelings in my soul, but you *know* me, the way *I* deserve to know me. And it feels... itchy, and terrible, and I *hate it*, and I hate you, but you're helping me calm down, and I don't get that, but apparently we want the same thing— according to your past self, anyway, no telling what you—"

"I do." Raven nodded.

"You do?"

"I do. All I work towards is returning your true self."

"Then why aren't you kind to me? Why don't you help me? Involve me? Tell me anything? Why is it all so cryptic and stupid? Why can't you just be.. *normal??*"

"We tried involving you. We tried keeping you in the dark. We have tried being kind to you, helping you out, we have planned and executed these ideas and many more both together and separately. We have tried ***everything***, Crow, and we have failed *every* time, so *forgive me* that this life isn't exactly what you were hoping for, but there is one thing I must not compromise on, and that is that we will keep trying until we succeed."

"Why didn't just telling me who I was work? Why couldn't you just... show me everything I was? And let me figure it out for myself?!"

Raven sighed. "Obviously, that was the first thing we tried, but *you* are too good at pretending, and only ever imitated her. Never did you come close to **being** her."

"Whatever! Then we should have—"

"It is natural I know you better. For the last five centuries I have done naught but study you and the steps required to recreate the definite 'you'," Raven continued, talking over her easily. "With such short lifespans, you do not have this advantage."

"How can you just kill me every time?!"

"We cannot start over while your soul is in the body. What would you prefer? Living full fake lives in bodies that do not belong to you? And what of me? Do you expect me to watch you live a full life only to lose you again, over, and over, and over again?! It is ***quite bad enough*** that each of our experiments takes so long in the first place, and—" Raven stopped themselves and sighed deeply. The heat and pressure of frustration rolled out into the air around them and lifted off their skin as wisps of vapor.

Crow fell silent and looked down at the ground, staring off into space. What *did* she think about all of this? She had been so caught up on confronting Raven about it, on getting to the truth, that she had not stopped to actually **feel** these things, nor come to understand them.

What *was* the right answer? Did she really wish to live a full lifetime each time? To be on lifetime 10 or 15 instead of 82? To still be so far away from finding her true self? But perhaps those lifetimes were not so hopeless as they seemed, and she could have—

But surely Raven hadn't wanted her to die? So often, so readily? They must have weighed these feelings, surely, and seen that it was to their benefit, somehow... if really they only wanted her back, surely they wouldn't kill her unless it was the only option?

Even *Henrich*, the *bastard*, was being offered a chance at life. Surely she deserved at least as much? So if she had died anyway...

"What is the truth, Raven?"

"You would ask *me* to ground you?"

"I'm— you're the only other one— I—"

"You cannot come to rely on me like that."

"But I *did!*" She yelled, clutching her head in her hands. "You're the only other one involved, and I just want something to cling to, Raven, I *need* something to curl up around to sleep, I need something to keep me together, I need— I can't just— *this is all just too much to handle on my own!*"

"If it is any consolation, Crow, that has been the crux of these experiments."

"What? Loneliness?"

"Naturally, there are a few common points of failure on your path to becoming **Crow**. This is the most significant one. In loneliness, you collapse. In companionship, you cling on so tightly that you become the one you admire instead of yourself. If you are given anyone— *anyone*— you can rely on, then over time you come closer, and closer, and closer to them. Eventually, you depend on them, and the experiment is failed. If you come close to someone, and lose them before you depend on them, there is a chance you fall apart at the seams. If you are not so close and

lose them, you become jaded with relationships, often believing yourself to be cursed..." And Raven droned on, and on, and on about the experiments, and the failures, and lessons, and trials they faced together...

And Crow, rapt, listened along, enchanted totally by the tiny fragments of herself she could glean from their words.

"...But that's enough about that," Raven concluded after some hundreds of breaths. "Shall I take you around to see some of the laboratory rooms? There are many experiments I have performed that I would show you. It is not often we get to talk about this, if you would indulge me?" They added a tinge of hopefulness to the end of their voice— on purpose, of course— to further push the idea of it being a favor.

She broke more cleanly when given the opportunity to blame herself.

"Of course," Crow nodded along readily. She had come down here to investigate the laboratory— Raven was playing directly into her hand, and they had *no idea*!

"Very well," Raven nodded and pushed their titanic form off of the ground. After a full six breaths, they were kneeling. They extended one of their medium-size hands— with a palm the size of Crow— down towards her, palm-up, that she may 'hop aboard'.

She did, and quickly.

And just like that, they had smoothly guided her into one of her last three trials, while preparing her, while being honest with her, while keeping her in the dark and still managing to surprise her with it. She was in the palm of their hand— literally— and was none the wiser.

Raven began to move down the hall towards the section of the laboratory covered in scattered shadows. As they walked, they slowly closed their hand around Crow. To her, this would seem as though they were simply giving her a railing, perhaps a 'safety net', merely trying to keep her from falling to the ground. In reality, of course, they were merely preparing the stage for the next step of her growth.

They would show her the extents of cruelty. They would guide her along, like a shepherd, to the edge of the **abyss**. They would push her to madness.

They would break her, and then, they would let her go.

Bones always grew back stronger. And when they did not,

well,

they could always be replaced with a bit of effort and sturdier **parts**.

...

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She could not stop screaming. At first, she had simply flinched away, whined, shout at Raven in anger, struck them, bit them, clawed away at their flesh. But as they carried her along, door after door, unceasingly, a strange kind of... stillness... washed over her. She had even stopped fighting against her eyelid, which Raven had, of course, forced open long ago with a hand spontaneously-formed for the task.

But that stillness did not bring peace with it. Ever since she had fallen into the stupor, she had been screaming. Mouth open wide, veins standing tall, *vocalthings* forced well beyond their limits. She hardly stopped to breathe, instead hyperventilating at seemingly random intervals between bursts of activity. It was if she was losing and gaining lucidity, over and over again, as she forced herself through everything she was shown.

Raven ruminated on these pauses and the implications of them. Was it maximally efficient? Was her brain simply going through the right process, and were these pauses a necessary part of it? Or could the pauses be eliminated, and the process streamlined?

Ideally, they'd simply **impose** a **binding** and invade her mind, taking on the feelings for themselves so that they might gain a full understanding of them. That, though, would certainly interfere with the results, and so they could only deal with what they could intuit from their years of Crow handling.

Really, there—

Raven's train of thought was interrupted by another scream from Crow. Agitated, they squeezed her roughly, causing her voice to flake off and break from the force of their massive hand crushing down on all of her airways from all sides. She shouted it all out with a single cracking wheeze, then fell silent, save for the sound of rough hyperventilating.

It was a wonder she had not passed out, yet. And if she did, would it be right to wake her..? Would that add to the shock, or would it take away her time to process it, thereby lessening the effect? There was only so much the mind could be exposed to before it gave in to shock. The goal was not actually to ***break*** her, but to send her to the precipice of it, that she may save herself from the worst and become stronger from it.

As they thought on, Raven suddenly came to notice that the sound of scrabbling and desperate gasping had stopped at some point. Curiously, they looked down at Crow. She had gone totally, completely still, collapsed in their hand.

Ah, they'd almost killed her. That—

Immediately, Raven relaxed their grip on her, which had grown tighter unintentionally from the quick and excited nature of their thoughts.

Crow's chest heaved as her body swelled, instinctively filling with air again, and she gasped like a fish suspended by its tail above water, retching as she lashed out blindly, limbs flailing, as if further struggle would improve her odds.

Raven let out a massive sigh of relief.

—That was close. They had to be more careful— they couldn't be getting lost in their thoughts like that. They could not lose this experiment to such a stupid mistake— this Crow was too rare, too extraordinary, to waste on that.

Raven, of course, did not speak up, nor comfort her. By now, her mind was far away from the waking world, lost somewhere between her dreams and her primal self, everything she felt filtered through the poorly-fitting lens of adrenaline.

And so, they carried on to the next room, even as she went quiet again. It would be obvious when she had seen enough, surely. Thought it was always so hard to tell with this kind of thing— it wasn't exactly like cooking meat. They could not just dissect her and reach their desired answer. It was too time consuming, and putting her back together always had unintended consequences...

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"—and this room is actually quite special, Crow, so do please pay attention to it," Raven cooed, flesh blooming into fresh hands dripping with **Amnia** that descended down on Crow's head and rubbed away at her scalp and shoulders, rolling away, massaging her.

The soothing motion of it caused the nearly-catatonic Crow to whine and shift subtly. Her head, and throat, and body, and muscles, and bones— even her blood— it all ached, her eyes felt as though they were bleeding, her nose certainly was. Her body held nothing but exhaustion, and pain, and defeat, and she hung heavily over Raven's finger, any ability to squirm of leave having been torn out of her long ago.

She blinked once.

The blood-red door swung open. They were deep down the hallway, now, and shadows were more common than the light here. Dazed as she was, she could see hardly more than blobs ahead of her. Blobs that were... linked together? Connected by wire?

Some kind of machine.

Just another experiment on biological machines, probably—

The machine shuddered, spasmed, stretched, and *groaned*. Then, too, it whined, and whined. The sound of sniffing filled the air.

Crow was brought closer, lower, held just in front of and above the contraption. Once she was at a certain distance, the sniffing picked up, and then, all at once,

the room filled with the howling of wolves. Crow felt herself pulled into it, and instinctively, tilted her head back and returned the howl. She flinched as her voice cut up the howl into little scattered pieces, but still, she joined in.

She... *had* to. It would be wrong not to join in. This was her **pack**. This was her—

Crow's eyes suddenly flashed bright with clarity as she was thrown back into the present moment. Her gaze flicked around the walls and floor, searching for her **pack**. They were ***here***, they were here and she could hear them, but where were they? Where were they?

"***Where are they?***" she gasped, clawing forward across Raven's extended finger. She laid along it like a tree branch, arms dangling limp down towards the ground, pointing into the dark wildly. "Where are they?!"

In response, Raven simply set Crow down.

[inhale]

As soon as she was let down, Crow began to run around the room, searching and feeling around. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark, but she saw only random blobs and shapes, and still, her ears could not find the source of the howling.

While she was scrambling around, Raven returned light to the room, and even as her eyes adjusted, she felt her way around, searching. Her voice was too sore to cry out intelligibly, and so she croaked. They had recognized her scent— they would know the sound of the ugly frog was her. They would come to her. Embrace her.

They would be together.

They would survive this together.

Kin.

Crow felt the pain of the bright lights mostly fade from her eyes, and so she stopped feeling around the room and instead bent forward to rub away at her flesh eye with her sleeve. Weirdly, though, her sleeve was wet and damp, and so as she took it away from her eye, she looked at it.

It was dripping with blood and unknown other fluids that she had just smeared all over her face. Eyes twitching, she lowered her arm as she grit her teeth, bit back her breath, and looked up.

She was standing before what appeared to be a stone birdbath— a simple stone column with a basin set atop it. Her chest came up to just above the top lip of it.

Laying in the basin was an oozing sack of warped, re-stitched flesh with all of its the limbs removed and the head scalped so as to expose the brain beneath. The face, too, had been peeled off down the front and allowed to dangle down. The eyes had been scooped out, the fangs and tongue removed, and various clusters of wires and cables dove down into the body through the extra orifices. The skin of the flesh sack had been shaved clean of fur and was pulled so tightly that it became translucent, allowing her to see into the body.

"It's your fault, you know," Raven called down.

The remaining skull of the exposed brain had been drilled through and attached to an adjustable metal ring that had been tightened until the skull beneath changed color from the pressure of it. Worms crawled between the wrinkles of the brain, breeding and burrowing and wriggling all around. Each worm was stabbed clean through with a silvery metal wire that connected to a long spool suspended above the sack of flesh.

"N-,,o," Crow croaked and sputtered, reeling back and twisting herself away from the sight of it all.

But Raven simply picked her back up by the sides of her head and dangled her over it. Their smooth and sticky fresh-formed hands forced her eyes open once again.

"Well, really now, it *is* your fault. You went missing. For two weeks! I thought they'd killed you. I was just getting revenge on my little Crow, is all."

"*Revenge*?" Crow cried as she dangled above the massacre.

"Ah, yes. Ah, it wasn't *all* revenge. I am also testing out the incredible **part** you selected! I needed to make sure I understood how it worked and what it would do to you, of course, before I installed it, and—"

"You what?!" Crow sobbed, thrashing about as she dangled helplessly above the scene below her.

"My dearest, most lovable, Crow," Raven cooed, sprouting new tendrils of flesh from their hand to drape down her back and wrap around her waist, supporting her like a sort of harness. "I research every **piece** and **part** before **installation**. What did you think I was doing while you were waiting?"

Crow's mind did not shy away from the implication, but instead burst into flames from it. There was no telling how many body modifications all of her past selves had asked for. Had they truly, for each and every one..?

Crow lost control of herself and vomited, repeatedly, as Raven dangled her in the air above the scene, eyes forced open. Her flesh eyelid tore from the force of being held against her instinct to shut it, and the stream of blood blinded that side of her. All the while, she remained sick, and dizzy, flailing around from overstimulation while her mind failed to conceptualize everything before and below her.

She could not grasp her current situation. Her mind refused to. Instead, it simply slipped off of the facts of the matter. No matter how firmly she tried to hold herself together, to comprehend it all for a single moment, it all just fell apart from under her. She could not even reconcile the remainder of her vision, which began to swim between the past and present, blurring the flesh sacks below with the past versions of themselves. She watched as they were pinned to the floor by spikes, ritually dismembered, and transformed... only for their body to warp and blur, flicking between the sight of the past and present.

Over and over again, she was sick,

and for countless breaths, this all continued.

Raven, of course, did not fatigue. There mind was elsewhere, thinking of other things, while Crow was simply 'processing' in their grasp. And when the 'processing' was done, the next part of the plan could continue along.

And so, over and over again, she would wake, stir, be tormented again by the sight of it all, fall ill, become numb, succumb again to emotional shock...

and so it repeated,

and repeated,

and repeat..

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[exhale]

...

Raven prodded Crow callously, lifting up her wing, pulling open her beak, licking away the blood from her eye, then peering into it under the light. They inspected her fully, analyzing all there was to note down.

She was compliant during the process, still stunned from her recent exposures.

That was good. She was responding exactly as predicted, which meant that the remainder of the conditioning could progress as originally planned.

You must understand, dear reader,

I am simply recreating her formative experiences.

She needs this.

I vowed I would do this for her.

We are so close to seeing her bloom, dear Reader.

Surely you can see it too? How she has changed? How she has grown?

This is what you want, too.

Isn't it?

Why else would you follow me here, if not to see what becomes of her?

You must be curious too, dear Reader.

Therefore, surely, you understand.

I do only what I must to satisfy her last request.

There are no other options left to me.

That said, dear Reader,

while, truly, I sympathize with you and your curiosity,

there are some things for which I cannot tolerate any witnesses.

"Off with you," Raven sighed as they set down what remained of Crow onto the floor of the **Living Room.**

'Crow' simply sat there in shock, totally still, incapable of moving or thinking or **being**. There was no recognition in its eyes, no movement under its skin.

Raven tutted. That was no good. They had settled on the idea that more exposure was better, and that at the point of breaking, no additional harm could be done.

The mind was more malleable than bones, and so more was possible with it,

but that was not always a good thing.

"Crow? Little Crow?" Raven asked, poking her callously.

'Crow' recoiled from the touch and lashed out at Raven viciously, severing the small hand they'd extended cleanly from their body. In an instant, 'Crow' snapped it up from the floor and buried her face in it, devouring its palm while caressing her own face with its fingers.

There was no recognition in her eyes— no sapience, no emotional turnings.

That... was not ideal.

But, still, she was an odd girl, and she processed things in odd ways. Perhaps she simply needed more time for her processing. And for that to begin, Raven would have to leave her on her own.

The sight, smell, feeling, and memory of them would be connected deeply to the fresh sores that had drilled deeply into her mind. So long as they were together, her subconscious would prevent any healing, from the assumption— and understanding—- that she was yet under threat, and could not begin to rise from this state again.

No. Raven shook their head, and stood up to their full height, and dusted themselves off. This was a good thing. They had to trust their intuition, and their processes, and their methodologies. They'd gotten them this far— this Crow existed, after all, didn't she?

All that remained was to simply observe what happened next.

And so, in the next instant, they were gone again, and the husk of Crow was left all alone.

...

...

The streets were cold and wet and empty save for a single bumbling figure that stopped every so often to tilt its head back and sniff around in the air. Then, it would pause, for a long, long while, before abruptly pointing its head back down and carrying on.

The figure did not move like a creature alive with thoughts, but instead, like a wild animal that searched through Escrow for scraps. Everything was unusual to it, every experience novel, and it plodded on forward, as curious as it was craven, as it traced its paws along the coarse stone walls of houses it passed by.

The beast was small with a blob-like silhouette. When it skittered through shafts of light, bright white fur and black feathers briefly gleamed through the countless holes in its many layers of ripped, tattered, and stained clothing.

It seemed to have direction, though. If not pushed forward by intention, then surely by a string instinctual pull, as the beast winded through dense alleyways and navigated labyrinthian tunnels as thought it was a simple, natural thing. It would pop out of a tunnel-like hole in the foundation of a building to drop into an alleyway, then in the air, catch onto a metal railing to hop across the way into another tunnel-like hole carved into the side of another.

And the longer it did this, the shorter its pauses after sniffing were, the faster it moved, the more confident it seemed.

The beast was going **somewhere**, and surely, it would soon find whatever it was tracking.

.

It was well beyond the night, now, and halfway into the next day. Tirelessly, the beast carried on, quietly stepping down the smooth and crumbly graystone stairs one at a time. It went far, far beneath the street, eventually emerging into a shadowy chamber held in a little pocket carved into the side of the hill.

There was an old door here, and it was open.

The scent inside was familiar.

The scent inside was **home**.

The beast huffed and snarled softly as it pressed its face into the side of the door and swung it open, dropping down smoothly into the soft and quiet den beneath the soil. In only a few paces, the tight hall broke out into a cold, scarred den lined with nothing.

This place was nothing more than a hollow pit, an empty cyst in the body of the world.

This place was not supposed to be like this.

The creature's fur and skin prickled at the slight. Its instincts brought it here to **home**, but this was not **home**, this was not even close to **home**, but it was where **home** was supposed to be, and the **scent** of **home** was here, and so this was **home**, it had to *be* **home**, but it was not.

The beast whimpered and padded down another hall, slowly, going deeper into the den.

The scent was stronger here.

The scent of her kin!

As soon as she recognized it, the beast broke into a sprint and reached the edge of the hall in a single breath. To the right, there was an opening, and as she pressed through it—

,

The exit from her stupor was just as dramatic as the entrance. She was suddenly placed back among the living, consciousness restored all at once, and she gasped dramatically as her feelings and thoughts flooded back to her.

Crow looked around blearily, whipping her head around, not quite sure what she was seeing, of where she was, of what had happened. Had she awoken here by mistake?

She'd been lost adrift in a sea of dreams and nightmares, but she knew not for how long.

She clenched her fists and contracted her wings, then took in a deep breath,

[inhale],

[exhale].

She then unfurled her wings, stretching them out fully, before pushing herself forward and into the center of the room.

The world around her shifted and swirled, colors blurred together, pulsing, before fading away. All the disparate pieces of what she saw sorted themselves back to where they belonged. Then, it happened, again, and again, always shifting in new ways.

Was any of this real?

Had she simply fallen into another dream?

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 by scent and sound and **instinct** alone.

It was the den of **Wolf's kin, *her* kin**, and there was no one here. There was only herself, standing alone in the middle of the empty room where her sleeping pile of family members was supposed to be.

Crow attempted to close her flesh eye, then shrieked and winced and fell back onto her butt in pain. Her eyelid muscles twitched, trying to contract and press the flesh down over her eye, but they could not,

because there was no longer any flesh there to move.

With a trembling paw, Crow reached up and caressed her own face. There was blood there that shouldn't be. There were sticky residues, and holes, and tears, and cuts, and as soon as she became aware of them, her body's senses spontaneously conflagrated and burst into overwhelming bonfires of burning and stinging pain.

Crow cried out, then bit back her tears. She'd had quite *enough* crying, actually. It was exhausting to be consumed by despair all the time, and so she wouldn't be. If she was wounded, she would fix it, and get revenge— not in any particular order, of course.

Crow poked around her pockets— she was missing quite a few of them now, and tried hard not to dwell on whatever may have been lost— until she found her eyepatch. Miraculously, it was unscathed, and so she pulled it over her head and fixed it in place above her flesh eye. It would not help with the dryness, but it would at least keep it safe, and keep her from being irritated further by it.

Then, with her metal eye, she surveyed the room. Immediately, two questions came to her:

1. What was she doing alone?
2. Why was she here?

It could not have been the morning, as the stirring of her **kin** would have sent her waking. Then, too, if she had been hanging around them, they would not have allowed her to stay so dirty and wounded. Certainly, they would have tended to her.

So she must have returned here, but why alone, and why would she then remain here, alone?

And why had she woken standing? — That, too, was a question that hung on her periphery, locally floating into focus before it drifted away forever. She might have forgotten it, and it seemed, clearly, an important part of the puzzle.

She had awoken standing, she was wounded, and her **kin** were missing.

There must have been a battle, perhaps? And she had gone into **frenzy**, then come back to check on them?

Perhaps she had simply come here to visit, for comfort, with no one home, and therefore needed only to wait. But why, then, were the walls barren? All possessions missing? The furs, the knick-knacks and personal particulars, even some favored blankets, all had been taken.

They would not have moved.

Looters, perhaps?

But, then, this place would have been empty for quite some time.

Crow laid down on her back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. All of a sudden, she felt as though her cheek was being caressed, and through that ephemeral touch, she felt the warmth and love of another. She jolted— even while relaxing from the touch— and looked up and around, seeing nothing.

Then, she shuddered, as recognition washed down from her spine and rushed through her body, steeping every piece of her down into a deep understanding that went beyond her fleeting conscious recognition of it.

It was strange, these moments, that she shared with her past self. Always, she recognized them, but rarely, did she ever remember they were coming.

In a moment, her past self would kiss her forehead—

—and a moment later, she felt the warmth and love of a kiss pressed into her forehead.

It was true, then. She was finally living through the other half of the dream she had seen before. But, that was alright. She could dwell on it later; she had more important matters to attend to, just as her dream self did. There was nothing to fret over.

Crow rose to her feet and looked around the room, trying to figure out what happened here. She needed to be certain.

A high whine and low drone filled the air together as the mechanical shell of Crow's eye began to separate off, hovering around the central aperture, before spining around it rapidly. The room was dark, but still, flicking flits of light formed in the air, drawn directly towards the eye. Over time, the spinning piece went faster, and faster, and tiny flits of light, like fireflies, streamed in towards the eye's iris.

At her iris, the light pooled together and formed a glowing ring. As more and more light collected there, it expanded out to the sides, fast becoming a twirling disc of radiant golden light.

Then, the world flipped upside-down, twisted around, reversed, and began to spin—

—And as Crow stopped the spinning at a precise moment, she began to **glimpse the past.**

The memory of the place was blank.

In the bottom-left corner of her vision, she still saw the writhing image of all of the past memories. As she looked on ahead, she moved her left hand up to that image and began to precisely shift further, and further back in time— one day at a time— as she carefully watched on for any changes.

In her vision, what she saw was the room itself— and everything in it. And as she went back in time, any changes simply melted into the picture suddenly, while anything no longer there appeared to flake off into scentless glowing embers and sooty ash that disintegrated moments later.

*It **was** looting*, Crow thought, watching as thing after thing reappeared in the room as she continued to look back further into the past. *But they were gone for some time before that. Why?*

Crow stepped out into the hall as she continued to sift through the memories of the den. As she walked into the main room, she shifted just one more day into the past—

—and there, illuminated in the bright daylight spilling in through the hall,

was **Serpent**,

dragging **Hound** out through the door by her hair. She was slumped forward, motionless, and a trail of blood led from her to well beyond where Crow was standing.

"***you—!***" she bit back her scream, instead opting to remain silent.

Serpent, standing only in the past, suddenly froze as if it sensed her. Then, like nothing happened, it carried on, sloooowly dragging Hound out and away step-by-step.

Crow ran down the hall and outside to follow it. When she turned the corner, it was already up the stairs with Hound's body, still slowly shuffling along. The blood trail was intermittent, now, but still smeared up and across the steps.

Crow kept up her pursuit and ran up the steps, looking up at the street as she crested it. Serpent was some ten paces ahead of her, shuffling along in the same exact way, mechanically dragging Hound's body along behind itself.

As Crow looked at the street, she noticed that this was just one of dozens of trails of blood, each one dragged out of this place and away. But as she looked up the street, in the direction Serpent was going, she did not see an end to them.

Crow staggered back until she hit a wall. she pressed her back into the cold black stone. her breath heaved out, hot and heavy, and as her lungs filled full with fresh air, she realized she still had not found **it**. Rage and grief began to burn her, making hot her backfeathers and neck.

It was too much.

She didn't deserve this.

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

she began to scream out the agony held close to her heart. she mourned all of the lives she had missed, she mourned the **kin** lost so senselessly, she mourned her own weakness, she mourned the bond she thought she had with serpent, she mourned the fact that everything felt so **cyclical**, so **connected**, like she could just **reach out and change it.**

But she couldn't.

She screamed and wept and dropped to the ground, slamming her body into the hard stones beneath her. She struck it with her hands, which cracked and popped from the force and motion, and as the pain got too much to bear she rose up and slashed the door with her claws. Splinters flew out and pierced into the other side of the doorframe as well as the soft dirt just inside the door.

Crow swore, repeatedly, then kicked the doorframe, stubbing her toe in the process. The pain only made everything murkier, and she winced, and grimaced.

She felt herself slipping away again. Whatever had happened to give her these wounds, she knew, must have been the first time. She woke up here after it, having run away, but what had she been doing—?

Crow thought back to the cave— the most recent thing she could remember. She'd seen it in her dream, and her dreamself— no, wait,

that had already happened, and this was herself, in the present, living out the dream she'd had... then—

She could not remember anything from before the cave. She had gone to the cave because she'd seen it in the dream. She stayed at the cave for a long time. She left the cave and came back to the city. Then...

It was blank. A hole in her memory, a slice of life that never happened. The harder she tried to focus on it, the further away it slipped from her grasp. The space in her mind felt like a **literal** hole, like some **piece** of her had been stolen, like she had lost something **important**.

It was not supposed to lose the orb, she remembered, then shook her head. What? W*hat orb*?

And why did it **feel** true? Like she had already learned that before?

What was happening to her?!

Crow backed up until she was up against the nearby wall— something solid, to cover her back. She was by the front door of her **kin's** den, which meant that the street was above her, and the street was on the ground, and the ground was solid.

With a shaky sigh of relief, she slid down the wall, now slick with her perspiration, until she was seated firmly in the dirt. She brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped up into a tight ball, pulling her cloak fully around her.

She was alive. In one piece. **That** was important. **It was important that she was alive.**

But there was dissonance, there, a disconnect. It was a new thought, an unfamiliar thought, that her life was important. It unsettled her. She did not want to be *important*.

She wanted to be *Crow*.

Suddenly, her mind flitted to somewhere else. Her trail of thought was not so much a trail, anymore, as a bunch of breadcrumbs scattered randomly from the sky.

Serpent was not supposed to do that.

She felt that very strongly. And yet, Serpent had. She knew that if she went inside and looked back far enough into the past, she would see it there, slaughtering every single one of her **kin**.

It was her fault. She shouldn't have— she shouldn't have come here. She shouldn't have tried to return Wolf's things, she should've— just left them there. She had brought so much danger straight to them, she had— she'd ***killed*** them, just by—

—just by trying to be kind, she—

—killed—

Crow looked into the doorway of the den through the slits between her bloody and broken fingers. The hallway was caked with blood, where layer after layer had been left, then dried, then left, then dried, then lef—

Crow's hand and head twitched together to the side, and her fingers began to tremble as she stood up and entered the hallway.

If they were all killed at once,

Crow padded down the hallway, flinching and gagging with each crunching step that cracked the dried blood beneath.

then how is each trail fresh?

Crow followed the trail of Hound's blood past where she was standing when she first spotted **Serpent** in the past. The blood went all the way down the hall, then to right...

...where it joined with the start of all the other trails.

Crow looked one more day into the past. Five of her **kin** were here, bodies frozen in awful, contorted shapes. They must have—

Crow choked back a sob. It was **Serpent's venom**, obviously, the very same used as ***her anesthetic***—

—they were paralyzed by it and left here, suffering, twitching, watching as each of them was slain and dragged away—

Crow turned the past back further, and further, watching as the room filled with the scattered and paralyzed bodies of her **kin**.

At that moment, Serpent entered the room and threw another body on the pile. It did not take its normal form, the form it showed *her*, but instead, it expanded out into its typical form— a giant, shimmering silver sphere of liquid

that simply rolled around along the ground. Whenever it needed to interact with something, it simply formed a perfectly-shaped appendage from the material within its body and pushed it up to the surface, then used it for the task. Each part of the tool was still part of itself, of course, and could be controlled freely.

Serpent had only ever shown her the parts that made her feel comfortable.

Crow left the room and looked back half a day further as she entered the den. There, she watched Serpent effortlessly slipping between her **kin**, injecting them with its fangs, and moving onto the next victim. It moved so impossibly quickly that none of them even had a chance to react— it simply slid through the cracks in the door, darted through the room, and within ten breaths, all of them had been incapacitated.

It was like she was watching death itself. It was so impossibly silent, and efficient, and intelligent. And, she knew— she knew *again*, rather— **that it felt nothing under the surface.** No matter what it said it was, or what it pretended to be, or how it tried to change or plead or show her it was different,

It had all been a lie.

Serpent had *always* been this monster under the surface.

And she had been blind to it, fooled by it, swindled and led along and comforted and—

Crow leaned forward and screamed one final time as her anger boiled over and took control of her better judgement. She was no beast, but in her mind, there was hardly any difference, now. She could handle the violence she saw, and now she needed to take it out on something *else*. She could not hold it in— not a moment longer— it was all spilling out, and no matter how hard she tried to cap her feelings and push them down, deeper, and deeper...

...

...

...

It was a dingy, cold place. Despite the movement and heat of its occupants, frost settled deep into its walls.

Crow felt the chill as a tiny prickling in the flesh that held her talons on. It was a rancid, itchy sensation, and it drove her **feral**. It was as if some tiny insect was there, latched on, nibbling away at her. But every time she bent down to check, there was nothing there, and no matter how much she scratched, her skin still itched, and the itching only grew hotter and sharper the more she dug away at it, and—

"Fleas?" The bartender asked, calling down to her.

"I wish," Crow growled as she stood back up and took her seat again. "I'm not here to drink,"

"*I know*," the bartender sighed, clearly with disappointment, as if he *knew* her. Bastard.

"I want to kill someone," She said simply, looking up with hollow, glassy eyes at him.

"Maybe... you *should* be here to drink." The bartender said, grabbing a mug from under the counter. He placed it in front of her—

—and Crow snatched his wrist instantly, claws extended, gripping around his soft brown-grey flesh. "I'm not. Here. To drink."

"*I know*," the bartender sighed, taking the mug away and stowing it. "I was hoping you'd change your mind. I live off the tips, you know?"

Was he real? He didn't actually care if she—

Crow shook her head, blowing it off. It was probably just another dream.

She never came down here to **the pits**, and it was exactly as she remembered. All around her was screaming, yelling, hollering; those noises bounced off the walls and filled the place with a bitter, coarse tune that reeked of bloodlust and despair. The noise soaked into Crow, and as it did, it made her ears get itchy, too, and as she folded them down, she brought her ears up to cup around her ears as she closed her eyes tight and leaned forward on the bar, pressing her face down into it and away from the dim lights.

And as she laid there, the **rhythm** of this place bled into her. It thrummed through her, and at first, her body stayed still, rejecting it, but before long, there was a longing in her heart, a panging, a deep thrum within that was twisting around on itself, searching for the right **resonance.** She felt the deep, primal need to satiate it, to fill the **urge**, to move to its rhythm until all that sickness she felt was shaken off by doing it.

If she did not satisfy the **urge,** it would spill out some other way.

Crow's legs began to shake, knees bouncing up and down as she crossed her arms underneath her chest.

She never came down here to **the pits**.

Someone's fingers, light and stupid, tapped on the top of her head, not-so-politely asking her to raise up for a chat. She did.

It was the bookie. Obviously.

"Booking's closed for the night. No more time for walk-ins."

In response, Crow reached up and lowered the hood of her cloak, revealing her face.

"Oh. Uh. *Crow*." He said, voice quavering slightly, "You never come down here to **the pits**."

This wasn't real, any of this. It was all too strange, too wrong. He recognized her too quickly, he spoke with the words that were on her mind, the words that had now been repeated three times— by her own count—

and so she breathed out a long, stressed, sigh of relief.

Since this was a dream, she could **really** unwind. She didn't have to hold anything back, and she could simply be herself. She did not have to worry about being seen, understood, or anything tricky like that. She didn't have to worry about giving away secrets about how she fights, or looks. She could simply ***fight***, the way she always wanted to, with her life on the line— no consequences.

"...Right," The bookie coughed awkwardly after the long pause. She'd been staring him down, but it hardly mattered. She wouldn't even remember the moment come morning. "I'll, uh, get the boss then. Sorry for the wait, miss." He said quickly, doing a stiff half-bow before turning on his heels to run off into a dark tunnel in the wall.

Crow watched as his shape disappeared into the shadows, then kept staring into the tunnel. She wondered what else was in there. Part of her wanted to hop the counter and find out.

The other part of her didn't want to accidentally send the dream in the wrong direction. She was quite looking forward to fighting.

After only ten breaths, a portly, round, and tall man waddled in from the back. He barely fit behind the bar. Bottles turned as he brushed past them, and the bartender, trailing behind, caught and righted several things that were knocked aside as his boss moved through.

"*Crow*?" The man called down to her, extending out one of his trotters. He was **pig**. "You never come down here to **the pits**."

To that, Crow sighed, then could not help but giggle. The phrase was thought and said just too many times, so now, it was a funny phrase. That's how funny phrases got made.

Pig was clearly taken aback by her response, and he looked over his shoulder at the bartender as he raised his eyebrows. The bartender simply nodded, and so Pig turned his head back around to face Crow.

"Crow, huh." He paused and took in a long breath. His eyes were focused, irritated, and exhausted. "You're eh... smaller than I thought you'd be." His voice come out with a garbled, bubbly quality, as if air was trapped in pockets that were burst as his jaw pushed back and forth, jowls flip-flapping in the air with the motion of it.

Crow opened her beak to speak, but Pig interrupted her.

"I heard you were small, of course." He said, nodding seriously as he patted the top of his chest just under his collarbone. "I was just thinkin, eh.. Well. Doesn't matter. You want a fight?"

In response, she simply nodded. She didn't want to be interrupted again.

"That'll turn some heads. If you're okay with waitin' so I can get the word out," He mumbled, pointedly turning his head towards the bartender, who sighed, exasperated, then immediately rushed off. "I'll let you pick your opponent."

"How long is the wait?"

She didn't really understand his response.

"Just get my attention when it's my turn. I'm going to sit there." She pointed at a spot right next to the pits, which someone was already sitting in. "Find me someone that's going to fight to the death. It's not fair otherwise."

"In it for the blood, huh. Not the first. The crowd likes that kind of show," He leaned back and chortled, hearty mixed with nervous, "I'll make sure you get your fight. And thank you." He extended both of his trotters forward, as if to shake hers.

"I'm sorry, **Pig**, I don't really-"

"No, no, my mistake." **Pig** placed one hand thoughtfully on his chin. "Ah, hm. Well, no, that's no matter." He seemed to have drifted someplace entirely in his mind. Without regard, he turned around, waddling back from whence he came.

Crow hopped up from her stool at the bar and paced back and forth for a moment, thinking. Then, she began to cross the room. For the first few paces, it was peaceful, even comfortable. Not many bodies were gathered around the bar at all, ever since the night's festivities has kicked off. By now, everyone had their drinks or simply couldn't afford them.

But then, four paces from the bar, she hit a wall of legs and flesh and bones. She was quite far from the stands, let alone the seat she'd chosen, but even here, the pits were packed with bodies.

They always were.

There were too many bodies in Escrow, and too few things for them to keep themselves busy, and so anything that provided even a modicum of entertainment was quickly snapped up by the jaws of the populace and locked down by sheer weight of desire.

Crow, though, was no stranger to slipping through crowds. It was an essential skill, one she always had, one that came to her as easily as breathing and thieving and all the other things she had to do just to live on for one more day.

So, she skirted along the outside edge of the crowd until she found an entrance: two too-tall legs set too wide to keep her out.

Without hesitation, she slipped between them like the breeze, then sidled along between the narrow gaps between anyone and everyone that still stood in her way. Most of them did not notice her, the ones that did didn't care, and the ones that did were too slow to reach her.

There wasn't too much to it, and in moments, she'd reached the front of the railing by the actual pits, and she was standing next to the seat she'd chosen.

Sitting in her seat was a tall, immensely muscled woman that looked like she could crack metal bars in half like they were little sticks. Her skin was light-orange skin like dying leaves, and her hair— dark red-brown— was pulled up and woven into braids that circled her head over and over again. Her arms were crossed, and her face was firm and stern. She watched callously, analytically; her eyes flicked from fighter to fighter, from wall to wall, dwelling in each place for only a moment. Was she appraising the place? Perhaps betting?

And, too, Crow had never seen someone like this before. It was weird. She *definitely* would have remembered her.

"Excuse me?" Crow chirped from below. She had her back to the railing, and she was eye-level with the woman's knees.

The woman did not respond, and so Crow rapped on one of her knees.

Curious, the woman spread her legs apart and looked down between them at Crow.

Someone moving around behind Crow bumped into her, sending her falling forward between the woman's legs—

—and she was stopped, just as suddenly, by the woman's hand, which flew out and stopped just in front of Crow's forehead, catching her.

"Need a seat?" The woman smirked.

Crow nodded into the woman's hand. She tried to lean back and go back to standing, but the space she just left was already occupied, and so she just ended up squirming awkwardly in place. She reached up into her cloak and pressed her hand to her **stopwatch**, then decided against it, instead tilting her head to the side so she could look up the side of the woman's arm and see her face.

.

Crow was curled up into a ball, cloak pulled tight around her, watching silently. Waiting. Patiently impatient. Instead of the hardwood seating she was expecting, she'd ended up with softer, fleshier seating— one that had a habit of humming just softly enough that she could feel the rumble through her body, though she could not hear it.

She was not very pleased about this. She was here to **hurt**, to **maim**, to take out her frustrations— but clearly her subconscious mind, her **dreamself**, had other intentions for how to express those feelings. She would, of course, ignore them. She wanted what she wanted.

Was it so wrong for a girl to want?

After a while watching, she'd come to understand the environment. Everything here was meant to agitate, to get under the skin like needles and poke and prod at the insides, to spur people to action. She could feel her muscles tensing in response to the world, and she could feel her mind pulling back into a fierce, primal place.

Crow soaked up the feelings, reveling in them, silently watching blood splatter, bruises form. She won alongside the victors and suffered each crushing defeat personally, deep within her heart, as every part of her being began to beat with the same **rhythm** as this place.

All of it revolved before her, revealing to her a world that she had always known and belonged to deep inside of her. It was familiar.

It was **home**.

And these were her **kin**.

.

As she sat there, the crowd around her doubled, then tripled on top of that. Bodies were packed tightly together, as if for easy consumption or long-term storage. The once frosty walls and ceiling were now dripping, and the moisture hung tight to the air and clung to her feathers. It was a sticky, awful feeling, like cobwebs tangled up in her fur, or cloth shoved in her—

Crow startled and turned around as someone tapped on her shoulder from behind. Beneath her beak, her mouth was raised in a snarl. It was not the woman that had touched her— she had been gentle, of course, and had paid her no mind after setting Crow down in her lap to share the seat.

No, instead, when Crow turned around and looked up, she saw **Weasel**. He had given up on talking through the noise, and so he just pointed with his bentfinger off to the side of the pits, down to where she knew the entrance of the prep area to be.

In response, she simply nodded.

He offered his hand, and before she took it, she turned to the woman that had offered her lap. It was just a dream, but it never hurt to be polite. A service for a service, as it ought to be.

"Bet it all on me," she said simply, "On Crow. And thank you."

The woman's eyes flashed with recognition of her name, but before she could say anything in respones, Crow was, in an instant,

gone again.

,

As they moved on, perspiration dripped down from the tightly-pressed throng of bodies like rain, and on top of that, both of them were continuously dripped on by the melting frost within the ceiling.

Weasel forced through the crowd with his side and his southpaw; his other hand was gripped firmly around Crow's. He guided the two of them along, and even though he forced the crowd aside, it reformed just as quickly, and so Crow had to press close to him, nearly ending up entirely between his legs.

Honestly, she found it all rather comfortable.

Here, it was **dark, claustrophobic, and warm**, everything she needed to feel comfort. Everything she needed to feel safe.

In this dark, brutal place, she felt true comfort that often eluded her.

She just hoped that it would last.

...

Weasel opened up a narrow porthole of a door and motioned for her to walk ahead. "Tunnel to the ring. Not sure who you're fighting, but Pig said it would be exciting.

"Exciting." She repeated, emotionless, before stepping forward into the tunnel. Her mind was somewhere else, retreating slowly into a safer, calmer, quieting place.

Her heart beat fast, now.

This was the space she lived in: the space between, the liminal. Her mind slowed, but her pulse quickened.

She relaxed, but the comforting thoughts she had formed a nest from and settled into were ineffable.

Still, Crow walked down the tunnel to its end, and there, she rested, and waited.

She pressed her back into the cold black stone. Her breath heaved out, hot and heavy, and her hands shakily returned to the pouches set in her flesh below the fur on her chest. Her left gripped around her **stopwatch**, while her right dove down between her legs, held gently by her warm thighs.

Her shaky sigh of relief signaled the start of a brief respite. She slid down the wall, already slick from the mist and perspiration, until she was seated fully in the dirt. She brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped up into a tight ball, pulling her cloak fully around her.

Every tick of her stopwatch was met with a single tap of her finger. Even resting, she was restless. She longed to breathe deep and still her heart, but it had already run ahead of her, gorging itself on the urges on which it was about to feast.

Her heart— no, her *body*— longed to rip, and tear, to pierce and stab and gorge, to imbibe blood and claim victory over, and over, and over again. A strange heat came to her throug hehr claws and talons and flood up into and through her whole body, rushing through her, wrapping around her neck, and caressing her head from all sides.

There, she floated, mind adrift, head suspended in the clouds of a wordless high that soothed her sensibilities and heightened her senses.

Everything was so sharp, now, and she could separate out all the pieces of her mind so easily that it was triviial. Each individual sound idn the world had a clear source, every detail stuck out to her self-evidently. Every motion had purpose, easily tracked back to its source and understood implicitly.

Through the tall bars of the tunnel to the fighitng pit, she could see clearly.

Even caged, she was **free**.

She could hear the crowd chanting, cheering, counting down. She longed to rush to her feet and make real her fantasies, to unwind before she woke so that she could feel refreshed.

There would only be twenty more breaths before it was time to run again.

She cherished every one of them.

.

On the twenty-first breath, the crack of winching rope signaled the end of her brief respite.

The gates lifted.

[inhale]

Her mind went blank, and the noises around her faded into the background.

In the corner of her eye, she saw Pig's jowls flapping from his seat, but the noise of it did not reach her.

As Crow emerged from the tunnel, she was embraced by a feeling just slightly beyond her conscious comprehension. It was a feeling as old as the world itself, the kind that could only be felt and carried and spoken by bodies— not their minds or mouths. She resonated with the discordant thrum of the pits, every piece and part of her standing up and prickling, more sensitive, more focused, more clear-headed than ever she had been before.

Facing death, she was alive.

All that she was, she risked,
upon an altar of dirt and blood,
hewn from sorrow,
carved from pain,
it offered comforts that could not be found
in any home
or in any sane, sanct place.

these vicious delights could only be felt
within the blood of another
or from the seat atop their corpse.

Two stood before her.

That was good.

In the background, the din of noise went still as a new voice called out above them all. It boomed, resounding, echoing all around. The words slipped off of her mind except for two:

"raven ... ... **CRRRROOOOOWWWWWWWW**!"

Crow twisted her neck up and around as she heard her name, locking eyes with the announcer. Her gaze was feral, lost. What right had he to call upon her by name? What right had he to tie her name to that of Raven?

And then it hit her: a wave of sound, a raucous clamor of cheers and jeers pouring down into the pit around her, flooding it completely. She looked around, awestruck.

Some of the crowd fell silent, while others stood up and cheered even louder as she stepped into the circle of light in the center of this place. Their bloodlust poured out openly and freely, and feeling it,

she grinned.

Here, she too was free to let go for once and just ***live***.

She unfastened her cloak and threw it to the side and behind her. As it flew, she leaned her head back and released a horrible screeching scream. Something unkowable embraced the sound and came out with it. The scream was pure, raw, unfettered, and carried with it all that she truly was.

In the pits, for a single breath, there was silence.

Then, resoundingly, the beasts gathered there joined her in this beautiful, ancient rite. A thousand voices came together, tree and free, wrapping together to produce the most sickly-sweet harmony.

An endless, warped spiral of sound encased her, embraced her, and set her free. Howls, screams, and cries rang out endlessly across the infinite, unceasing moment, until eventually, all went still.

One voice— the one that always broke the clamor— came out into focus again. The voice carried with it some meaning that fell past crow and landed beneath her.

Words were nothing but a way to distance herself from her true feelings. The more she used her words, the more confusing everything became.

Tonight, her body would speak for her, as was its right. It lowered her down onto all four limbs, tensed, waiting for the start of it all: the metal sound that had started every fight before;

the metal sound that would set her free at last.

BANG!

The noise came with a fine misting of white powder that had not finished falling to the ground by the time Crow had set upon her first victim. Every piece and part of her was in perfect alignment, true autonomy, and moved without any conscious effort. Every movement was smooth, effortless, and wild: like a rampaging beast that had simply never learned to waste energy.

Her beak bit down hard around a metal shell that the body beneath her threw up just in time to block Crow from piercing through the perfect squishy insides held ever so gently behind the skin of the neck.

she couldn't wait to burst it open and watch the red pour!

Crow took the moment to truly take her opponents in. One was wrapping around behind her, while the other thrust a glinting blade up towards her chest.

Crow bent impossibly far forward, bringing her talons up to her beak, before kicking off and twisting around in the air to face the other. She contorted her entire body in an uncanny, unnatural fashion. It looked broken, stilted, like a spring warped far too far from its true shape. In a single, wicked motion, she brought her claws down across her prey, piercing through the side of its ear and grazing along its shoulder.

In that moment, her prey lunged up towards her with a thin, pallid arm. The breeze from it as it passed just beside her felt nice against her feathers. As the arm fell away, she latched her talons into it and ripped herself towards the arm's host, pulling them off balance and herself away from the blade that sailed through the air she had just been taking up.

The opportunity gave her exactly one breath to waste, and so she reveled in that moment. Crow brought her face up into her opponent's, eyes unblinking, unknowing.

There was a curious look on the face of her prey. Its body resonated in fear, but its visage,

was acceptance.

That was good.

thud.

Crow stood poised over the body, limbs crimson. Her breath heaved out, hot and heavy, and the moisture from it beaded up on the mangled face of the prey's corpse beneath her. It had been only four breaths.

One of her talons was gouged deep into the corpse, the others wrapped around an arm. Her claws dug into the dirt ahead; her head cocked to one side, and her eyes were blank, emotionless, not even regarding the remaining opponent.

It was too slow, too crude, its body too dissonant to ever strike a chord with her own.

The bliss was *gone*. Where was **it**?!

Crow could feel thoughts, sickly and slow, slowly and cyclically sapping her senses, weighing her down.

why?

Her opponent circled her, looking for an opening.

why! why?!

She closed her eyes, feathers standing on end in frustration. Beneath her beak, she gnashed her teeth together

where is it?!

Crow could clearly hear the thud of heavy footfalls approaching cautiously while she was frozen like fawn in peril.

*i **have** to feel **it** again!*

Crow opened her eyes and pounced forward, directly parallel to the strike her opponent had aimed at her. His passed just between her raised wingarm and chest, and hers found purchase deep within his throat.

He locked eyes with her, eyes open in shock, as his free hand went up to his throat. He sputtered and gasped, choking as blood flowed back into his throat and airway, suffocating on his very own life. His blood was freely flowing as a river, streaming down her claws and into her feathers, where it beaded up and dripped off, staining red her perfect snow white fur. Yet still, some blood freely sprayed from the wound, showering down onto her. She spat and spasmed and twisted like a trapped animal as the blood split and wrapped around the pieces and parts that made her whole, covering her in deep red smears that could never be washed away.

The man fell backwards, his bodyweight bringing Crow with him, and he collapsed into the dirt. Crow was straddled atop his chest, motionless.

She killed him. Except, this time, it was real.

Her body had not been moving on its own.

There was no red haze,
and there was no trance.

There was no exhilaration,
only reproach.

Her claws were in his neck and he was dead.

She had asked for this?

she did this?

she—

Crow tried to pull her arm free, but her claws had found purchase between his vertebrae and held tight to them. She thrashed and flailed like a wild beast. The skin of his throat split and tore open from the force of it, and muscles, severed, fell limp around her wrist. Crow shrieked, attempting to jump backwards, but his neck lifted up with her claw, and the weight of him pulled her back down into oblivion.

Silently, the audience watched her as she screamed and sobbed and retched, her free claws flying wildly, shredding apart his flesh. Eventually, she tore her claws free, viscera skewered along them. Her hands seized in rampant, deadful motions, casting his blood and pieces aside recklessly, strewing them across the arena, abandoned.

Crow stood up and stumbled backwards, hysteric, before falling backwards and collapsing on herself, crumpling into a ball of flesh just like the two fresh ones she had created. Her arms twisted around her head and neck, as if to snap it, or perhaps to cradle it from the world around her.

Nothing could reach her.

After all,

her defenses were impenetrable.

These new corpses were just more proof of that.

...

[exhale]

Crow was alone, now, rocking back and forth slowly in the dirt, eyes wide and body stained. In her mind, she begged for release from this nightmare, to be free of it, to wake up and find everything fine, her body and mind intact, only slightly shaken by the memory of what had happened.

She looked down at her paws.

They were bloody.

The blood did not go away. It felt real. It smelled real. It tasted real. In her, too, was a real— and growing— fear and shame.

It had been the last fight of the night, and none had had the courage to step into the ring after what she had shown them she could be.

When faced with her true self, none were willing to measure up to it.

No one, including herself, would willingly brave that darkness.

No one would risk getting close to her.

It would be stupid, wouldn't it?

The frigid chill had returned to this place shortly after the bodies left it. Now, the frost bit her ass, the one thing grounding her in the reality she was related to, once removed.

She was a corpse, now. She had no right to breathe.

And yet, she did.

Death would claim her soon, right? It was only fair, right?

Why was it two of them?! Why couldn't she just kill just one?

She whipped her head, disgusted by her own existence.

No, why wasn't it none?!

Crow couldn't breathe. She was suffocating on air, letting it in but never releasing it, too scared to even breathe on the world after what she had breathed into it.

Then, **touch.**

Crow, sniffling, looked over her shoulder.

Weasel.

"Did this happen... after what happened to Wolf?"

In response, she simply nodded.

Weasel bent down and offered her a hand.

"It's... not safe to stay here. Come on."

After waiting for several breaths, he took her hand in his own and stood up. The motion of it pulled Crow to her feet, but she slumped, defeated, gaze fixed directly on the dirt-crusted bloodstains that speckled all over her lower half.

Weasel simply kept walking, face twisted by grief, agony, and disgust. His steps were slow, but steady, as if forcing himself to keep taking each step forward.

Crow simply plodded along behind him, half-dragged, half-walking. Nothing could reach her anymore.

"Crow." Weasel's voice was cracking. "I don't know what you are, and you scare me. Still..." He kept walking forward, pulling her along. "I have to do this. Please understand"

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