



their courts
of crows

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imprint

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blurb

Prince Paide ein Iteme has lost his father, his family, his people and his home to a conquering necromancer queen and her armies of the risen dead. A last horrific battle sees him forced to discuss surrender, but that conversation is no small amount complicated when said conquering necromancer is his *mother*. Who might not have been entirely wrong in her overthrow of Paide's father...

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content advisory

This short story contains general depictions of a battlefield and fantasy-type combat violence and property destruction, a few casual references to horrific choices made in war by both combatants, some depiction of blood and injury, non-detailed references to murder and assault, and non-detailed references to the cissexism experienced by two trans characters.

It also includes zombies, flawed characters who have made lethal mistakes and annoyingly ambiguous endings.

their courts of crows

Paide wriggles up to the ridgeline, draws his best attempt at a steadying breath, waits until the stabbing eases some, and peers over the edge. Up here, there's still grass and ferns to shroud his head and shoulders; below, the battlefield stretches across the valley, a mess of trampled earth, burnt trees, broken bodies and rent banners nothing like the gentle farmland of his memory. He should look on paddocks of green wheat and golden canola bordered by post-and-rail fences and sourgrass flourishing on the verge of the road; he should look on brown-and-white cows chewing cud, girls carrying baskets and farmers driving wagons. Now, the river runs red and brown around the abandoned bodies of horses and humans. Arrows and spears, broken and whole, stick up into the sky, forming grave markers and perches for wedge-tail eagles and their courts of crows. Fences sag beside the blackened ruins of farmhouses and sheds, and although Paide is too far away to hear, the screams and groans of wounded horses and combatants trying to rise from their muddy graves will haunt his nightmares—*do* haunt his nightmares.

He rubs his face on his blood-stiffened sleeve and wonders why he watches. There's no reason for him to lie here, half-hidden—not only will the scouts do a better job of reporting, what more can he learn? Every battle has ended the same way: the innocent dead littering

the ruined countryside. What point is there, then, in indulging the helplessness of watching Ihrne's dread commander dismount her horse, hand the reins to her shambling aide and walk the battlefield? Yet he watches, his teeth pressed into his lip, while his breath hitches and the eagles and crows abandon their corpses and take to the blue sky—only to land a few feet away and tear into another meal, another soldier. Not even her footsteps disturb them for long enough to matter, not when the dead outnumber the living, and there the lesson lies. What can the dead now teach him that changes the words he must speak?

What is he doing here but delaying the inevitable?

Still, he lies there, hearing the gasping rise and fall of his ribcage, the breath of the wind stirring the grass, the patter of hooves and human voices behind him, the silence of the woman below.

Early in the war, the swarms of feasting carrion birds took full advantage of human folly, shrouding corpses in veils of black and brown wings, but now the starving Arsha soldiers shoot and cook anything that flies; only a scattering of birds, the survivors of Arsh's famine, dine here. It seems right, *fair*, that they feast now on the dead; it might be the only just thing to happen since the first corpse fell and rose again.

Paide doesn't even know this valley's name, but he has contributed to its ruin just the same.

Zaishne, Queen-Regent of Ihrne, clad in a black velvet gown with the hems of her skirts and sleeves trailing in the bloody muck, pauses in her march, here and there, to brush her feet over the best—most unmolested, least broken—of the corpses. Paide lies too far away to see clearly her expression or her bare toes, just the glint of sunlight on the silver coronet resting entwined in her wiry dark hair, but he knows she looks upon the deaths she wrought with the same blank, soulless gaze she turned upon Paide's father as her hands closed about his neck—the same gaze she turned on Paide when his father's lifeless body slid to the bedchamber floor. He knows, because he's seen her necromancy wrought in the wake of loss and death, and why should today differ?

Death didn't touch her when she killed the man she married; why should it touch her now, even though she orchestrated the deaths of every woman, man and person who died here?

It makes it worse, not better, that Paide is just as culpable.

Salt fills his mouth as a trail of the risen dead, clad in the bloodstained green and yellow of Arsh or the soiled sky-blue of Ihrnein loyalists, all sworn to Paide's service and all marked by the sacrament of a necromancer's toes, follow in her wake. They surge up from the ground in some broken parody of the farms Paide's soldiers destroyed, the land spewing corpses instead of grain and cattle, forming into lines about the woman who makes cold limbs stir and shuffle.

Paide turns his head and spits blood onto the clean grass under his chin.

Better to be eaten by crows and eagles. *Cleaner.*

There are too many unclean things, he thinks as he tries his hardest to still the shaking besetting his hands, that he will give his life to forget. That his kinsfolk and allies are forced to betray everything they hold dear once breath leaves their bodies, thanks to the whims of a murderous necromancer, isn't even the worst of his nightmares. He tried, at Hill Vhrai, to defend the corpses: Ihrnein cavalry retreated with bodies slung over the manes of their mounts, fleeing the remorseless generals and their horses once entombed at Hallow Hin, their bones preserved in the darkness for five hundred years and more until Zaishne's magic summoned them to the light of day. Three bodies burdened his own labouring mount; he left a wounded woman to stumble her way off the battlefield, gambling her life on the fact that, if she makes it to safety, she'll face three fewer thralls during Zaishne's next attack. He tried, only to lose the living for the sake of the dead, only for Zaishne to resurrect those bodies—too many to recover and burn—in her inexorable sweep toward the Arsha border.

Paide severed that abandoned woman's head from her undead neck at Unen, but he sees her desperate gaze as he spurred his mount and left her to struggle through the mud every night before he, finally, with the aid of as much wine as he can procure, slips into sleep.

He wishes to give his life to forget, but what is the worth of suicide when his mother will animate his corpse and turn him into one of her undead thralls?

A soft rustling sound, a human moving through the grass and ferns, makes him startle. Paide sighs, swallows blood and turns his head.

“Your highness.” Sinen’s hoarse voice holds more politeness than most: few Arsha officers have any patience left for a desperate Ihrnein prince trying to avenge his father and halt the dominion of a necromancer, not now they’ve lost the best part of their third regiment to a force that suffers negligible losses in return. Sinen stands, not caring for the fact that Zaishne’s sentries will mark his position; indeed, there’s no reason for Zaishne to attack, for she must read the tides of war as well as Paide and General Thereva. She must know, even as she wades through the mud pretending otherwise, threatening otherwise, what will happen. “Might we leave?”

He looks down at Paide, his thick brows raised, and waits.

It isn’t a suggestion, for all that the phrasing is couched in courtesy.

Thereva outlined all the reasons Arsh should surrender before Zaishne launched her attack on the valley and sent her revenants stumbling across Arsh’s soil, the most important fact being that Arsh doesn’t much care who rules, necromancer or Paide, and if Zaishne swears to abide by her promise to forgive Arsh’s involvement with Ihrnein rebels—*loyalists*, Paide screamed at her—then why should Arsh suffer ongoing losses in a war it can’t win? What does this war, against a necromancer queen who commands an unconquerable army and seems immune to assassination, gain the people of Arsh beyond loss, starvation and death?

He knows the truth that lurks in Thereva’s eyes when she speaks of Zaishne’s rule; he can’t miss the hope in her voice. He can’t begrudge her that, for all that her honour means she must remain this side of the lines.

He had and has no answer, not one that sits easily on his shoulders; the best he can find is ugly compromise.

Politics, he thinks, is viler than necromancy, if it means that a murderer can and should sit the throne.

Yet even Paide knows it isn't quite that simple. It should be. He knew, though, when the Arsha soldiers—and those few Ihrnein loyalists who have survived every failed attack and lost battle—fell back beyond the valley, that only one option, one that ensures Zaishne doesn't govern unchecked, remains to him. That, or Thereva will publicly disavow their alliance and set her forces to hunting Paide and the Ihrnein survivors as traitors rebelling against Ihrne's rightful queen. How long will a handful of loyalists last with the entire nation of Arsh turned against them?

Not long enough, and his kin, his people, deserve better.

Paide doesn't stand; he wriggles back through the long grass, his teeth pressing against his lip to silence his pain, until the ridgeline of the hill conceals his movements from watchers in the vale below. Only then does he rise, biting back another groan as he moves stiff, reluctant limbs in some semblance of walking the strides necessary to reach his horse. A cut on the outside of his right thigh pulls at the movement, sending warm blood seeping down his leg; the act of swinging into his saddle causes further bruises and cuts to flare, and for a moment he grips the pommel in aching fingers, praying to angels and demons alike that he stays this side of unconsciousness. He grits his teeth, knowing that once—back when he had a father, back when he had a family, back when he knew the measure of the world—he'd have complained about such things. Now, pain, dirt and suffering are old companions, too familiar to engender comment.

Once, he had a bed too wide for Paide's hands to stretch across; he had silken hangings and imported oranges and people whose names he never bothered to learn in charge of cleaning and dusting and mending. He had memories now faded and torn under the weight of days lying in mud or eating half-cooked crow, and it seems to him that enduring this now must be easier, if only he can recall what the past felt like. Dancing. Wine drunk for flavour. Going to sleep beset only by tiredness, in the company of any man, woman or person who pleases

him. It happened, he *knows* it happened, but he can't remember the feeling of silk brushing over skin; he just remembers the feverish ache of rising each morning, the scrape of blood-coarsened cloth, the pain of lying awake while sleep abandons him despite the lives of people, his people, relying on his ability to decide wisely.

He can't remember what it felt like to complain about so small a life.

His guard, a scattering of loyalists bolstered by reluctant Arsha soldiers, mount and wait.

"To General Thereva," he says, feeling nauseated by the very words, but he looks his kin in the eyes regardless. Eishne ai Ite. Jaienva and Geruin ein Hrait. Cousins and second-cousins, the remnants of families, a scattering of survivors. They were never many, but how did they become so few? "We will discuss the terms of ... surrender."

The relief in the eyes of the Arsha soldiers is as nothing to the pain carved into the faces of his kin and the loyalists—the people who deserve to be governed by a monarch who doesn't control the living via dominating the dead, the people who deserve to be protected, the people who deserve better than surrender in return for their suffering, sacrifice and loyalty. He should have done them better, should have found a way, should have—should have done what, Paide doesn't know, for he's found no way to counter Zaishne's necromancy, and the angels, for all that he's spent thirty years on his knees worshipping their magnificence, have provided no answer.

All Paide knows is that he cannot become his mother.

Nobody speaks as they ride down the hill into the cut that houses the remains of Thereva's army—a cluster of the bloody and the battered and the moaning, tended by those who walked away by means of luck if not determination. Paide shifts in the saddle and bites his lip against the moan burbling in his own throat. Thereva, as bloody and battered as the remnants of her command, awaits him on her horse, surrounded by an aide, a scribe and the most able of her soldiers to serve as an honour guard—a token, almost a joke, since nothing and no one will protect them if Zaishne ignores the white flag.

The angels, as they have all learnt to their anguish, care nothing for humans.

Thereva looks as tired as Paide feels: her reins held in shaking hands, dried blood plastered along her hairline and down her left cheek, her shoulders slumped. She sits up as Paide approaches, though, and straightens her helmet, her sharp brows underneath angled at him in silent question: will he abide, or must she change the terms of her alliance with him to preserve her people?

“General.” The words taste bitter on Paide’s tongue. His head spins; he threads his fingers through his gelding’s filthy mane and prays the movement is mistaken for restlessness. “I will ride with you and discuss the terms of ... the loyalist surrender.”

Thereva’s gaze lingers long enough that Paide knows she hears what he didn’t say—nothing about a willingness to surrender. “Indeed, your highness.” She squares her shoulders. “Onwards.”

The formation of her honour guard and his is a pretence at such a thing, a scattering of soldiers fore and aft, her bannermen carrying the flags of Arsh’s Third and Thereva’s insignia. Eishne ai Iteime, swaying in her saddle, clasps her hands about the pole flying Paide’s own arrow-on-blue, once the flag of the Ihrnein heir. Her chin is hard and her eyes are set, and Paide knows she’ll fall before she allows his colours to slip from her hands.

They’re drowned out, those battered flags, by the wind cracking against the great white banners of surrender.

Those are, at least, borne by Arsha soldiers.

Crows scatter as they ride out onto the battlefield, black wings beating as they circle and land on corpses further distant. Horses stumble into hoof-sucking mud and over half-visible bodies, but despite the noise of still-dying beasts and crying birds, never mind the sickening iron-mud-rot reek of war, they don’t shy, as tired and aching as their riders. Paide leans back in the saddle, gives his gelding his head, and watches as Zaishne stops and turns to face the oncoming guard.

Her revenants swarm about her, but they make no move to attack.

Only when they are within calling distance does Thereva signal a halt. “Your majesty, Queen-Regent Zaishne ai Iteme, I, General Thereva Asigne of the Third, in representation of His Grace the Archduke of Arsh, offer to discuss Arsh’s conditional surrender.” She pauses only slightly, her voice strong and steady. “To indicate our good faith, we offer unconditional repudiation of the so-called Ihrnein loyalists and acknowledge and affirm your majesty’s claim to Ihrne until Crown Prince Einas ein Iteme comes of age.”

Prince. Paide’s hands tremble about the reins, although he won’t expect anything less from Thereva. Nor should he; she speaks no untruth. The real insult lies in the words “so-called Ihrnein loyalists”.

Zaishne, surrounded by her dead, *his* dead, inclines her head. Her calm, queenly mien feels like a fist to the stomach. “I am willing to entertain discussion, General Thereva Asigne, and I accept your acknowledgement.” She shifts her eyes, and all at once she looks less like a fearsome necromancer and more like a mother, tired beyond measure, as her gaze rests on Paide. “How do you answer, Prince Paide ein Iteme?”

How does he answer? How does a son answer when his mother speaks to him as though he is a stranger? How does a son answer when he sits there and stares his father’s murderer in the face? How does a son answer when he has been stripped of inheritance because he cannot, will not, accept her crime and her powers?

“I see,” Paide says, casting his gaze over the ranks of the walking dead, “that none support you save thralls, slaves to your power. How is it the will of the living Ihrnein people that you serve as regent when none are here to support you?”

Zaishne doesn’t flinch or blink. She just stands, confident, lordly, the sunlight—so incongruous given the death, animate and still, that surrounds them—glinting on the silver embroidery about her collar, contrasting with the muck that coats her feet and smears her dress. The lines about her eyes and lips, though, betray that she is as hard-used as the rest of them, and Paide wonders, for the first time, what it takes from her to give so many breath-void bodies the shambling semblance

of life. “I will not risk,” she says without awkwardness or hesitation, “the living of Ihrne in war, not when I have a choice to do otherwise. Can you say the same?”

Paide lets out a sharp breath. Blood trickles down his side, wetting and warming his undershirt. His gloveless hands and booted feet feel cold despite the sunshine—strange, given how not so long ago he was fighting for breath, sweating, while thrusting at the dead in the weight of a padded gambeson and leather. Then again, how are such contrasts any stranger than everything else here? The world fell askew the day his father’s body hit the floor. “You say that as you leave my father’s blood in your wake?”

There’s no shame in the proud set of her chin and defiant brown eyes. Grief, yes, but no shame or guilt. “I would do the same again to protect my son, should it be sadly necessary.”

My son. Her words hit like a slap to the face, because he remembers those words, said in that same quiet voice, as Zaishne gave her testimony to Parliament and to the Convocation of Deities: a husband who sought to punish his younger son for refusing to know his place as a daughter, a husband who threatened his younger son for not wishing to marry the chosen prince, a husband who wrought violence on his younger son for his insistence on that same title. All true; Paide doesn’t dispute it. But he sits here, too, struggling to draw a pain-free breath, and all he can think is that Zaishne has done nothing to protect *him*.

Parliament wanted to see it as regicide and treason.

The Convocation sees it as a mother defending her child.

Yet even Parliament quails before the grey area of a king harming one of royal blood, at least if the prince’s protector happens to be the most powerful mage in the country. The reasons Paide’s father wed a necromancer still hold true even if Zaishne, murderer, stands as regent. Hasn’t this war proved that Ihrne, with Zaishne as guardian, need fear no armies? If Zaishne is unreachable by assassins, won’t she extend that same protection to Ihrne’s heirs?

They stood there, the nobility of Ihrne, and they looked at the most dangerous woman in the country if not the south entire only to give her, with nothing more than whispered complaints, the regency.

Paide rode, that day, with those retainers, nobles and kin who dared do more than whisper about the crime of appointing the king's murderer, a necromancer with power enough that perhaps only the great mages across the water can face her, queen-regent.

Over the weeks since, one by one, he has watched them die.

"You didn't," Paide says, looking at the ranks of revenants and not his mother's eyes, "protect me when you murdered my father in cold blood. You didn't protect me and my kin, our kin, when you slaughtered us with your thralls." He laughs, but there's no humour in the sound—how long has it been since he last laughed from amusement? "You hold lords and charwomen and generals in thrall; where's my father?"

Zaishne's eyes don't shift in their calm, unrelenting stare.

Her hands—long, elegant and filthy—tremble.

"You expect me," she says, her voice rising, "to look on the remains of a man who couldn't love and nurture and cherish our son? Even knowing that this is flesh and bone, that the soul is gone—you expect me to look on him and be reminded of his hate and to where that hate has brought us?" She sighs, a rise and fall of chest her companions don't imitate, and guilt as sharp as the pain stabs Paide in the ribs. "His hate cost me one of my sons—cost us innocent lives, cost us livelihoods, cost us peace. None of this, Paide, could have happened if only he loved."

His own hands, he realises, are by no means steady on the reins. He draws a breath and tries to ignore the rising pain in his side. "None of this could have happened if you didn't murder him."

It comes back to that, must come back to that. King, queen or regent, nobody has the right to decide outside the court that another must die, and nobody, surely not a necromancer, has the right to act as she alone wishes. Can't she understand that this isn't about the victim, just the act? That Ihrne needs a ruler who isn't a murderer and cannot use the dead as a lever, however much unspoken, against Parliament?

It occurs to him, as she stands flanked by her thralls, undead semblances of human beings that stand with bent limbs and slumped shoulders but lack nothing in promised danger, that Zaishne is by no means a tall woman. She seems somehow smaller, more fragile, as she shakes her head. “What could I have done, Paide, to halt a king whose word is law?”

Those words rattle him as no others have since the day of the Convocation’s pronouncement and the resulting submission from Parliament—or the living remnants of Parliament. What should he have done, if he knew what his father meant to do, if he can return to that day and choose for his brother? Take up his sword, he supposes; threaten civil war, because Paide is loved enough that his people follow him into death and despair—loved enough, even now, that his own people won’t touch those white banners, that his own people have nothing to say against his fight despite their losses. Turn the kingdom into chaos, perhaps, seemingly for the sake of one boy, well knowing that people will die for that boy’s safety. He might have, if he’d known.

It’s not so different from the reality of a man turning two countries into chaos for the sake of one, well knowing that people will die—and worse—for a small matter of choice.

What does that say about everything he’s done since Zaishne let her hands fall away from a lifeless corpse?

He doesn’t know what to say, although he’s aware of the silent living audience, loyalists and Arsha soldiers alike, to this conversation. When the anger raged hot and fresh, he doubted: did his father carry out the violence Zaishne claims? Is a matter of gender worth everything that happened since a king’s murder? How can one person’s freedom justify the ruination of so many lives? How can one prince justify or allow the creation of a world where a country is too afraid to refuse the rule of the woman who murdered their king?

Now, he draws a breath, bites his lip against the pain and wonders.

When the spasm passes, he looks at Thereva, who manages to appear as though she’s listening to a conversation about crop yields, something irrelevant and impersonal. She might be bored, weary and impatient;

she looks nothing like a woman who must have ached throughout this entire campaign and now must endure another cutting wound with every exchange of words.

There's no privacy on a battlefield, and even less in a surgeon's tent, so he knows, even if the Archduke discourages the conversation, why Thereva Asigne commands the force given over to fighting the war the Arsha nobility disdains if not ignores.

It must be a cruel thing to give her the command of a force fighting against a woman who seeks only to protect her son—and Paide still doesn't know if Thereva understands that this war isn't about Einas.

Paide exhales as slowly as he can. It doesn't help the pain any, but it gives him space to think, to poke at the decision blood and loss has rendered necessary. There's a thousand flaws in the weave even he can see, but he can't find a better solution. They've both paid too much to live with surrender, as much as Paide will give anything and everything to see Zaishne concede her claim to the regency.

This war has nothing to do with his brother, nothing to do with his father. It's about a necromancer occupying the throne; *that* is the change he must make, even if he knows he can't forgive, may never forgive, the hands that set his father's lifeless body to falling and the toes that drew his kin's lifeless bodies to rising. It is about someone deciding to end the nightmare.

His father couldn't do it; his mother can't.

"Ihrne," he says, urging his gelding forwards and biting back tears at the pain now flaring at that small movement of heels and seat, "can't be ruled by a person whose power is so vast everyone but a handful, a handful who gave their lives, is too afraid to speak their truth." He waves his right hand at the thralls, who might well have protected a portion of Ihrne's innocent from dying in battle, but the fact those thralls are nothing more than bone and flesh doesn't lessen the horror of seeing one's shambling kin bearing down on one—or the threat that one woman has the power to take life and bestow its broken semblance upon anyone she chooses. The threat that one woman can assault, degrade and use something that doesn't belong to her. "Mamman, I

will fight you for the people I love, the people who fear this, until you take my life—at your hands or a thrall’s, it’s still the same. Mamman, I won’t let you alone rule Ihrne.”

Thereva draws a sharp, too-audible breath.

He knows, from the fierce look in Zaishne’s eyes above her hawk nose, that she will kill him—weep, perhaps, and live with a lifetime of nightmares and regret, but kill him—if he offers any threat to his brother.

Does she, he wonders, fall asleep seeing her husband’s dying face?

“I will change the law,” Paide says. The gelding, at his nudging, takes another limping step over a patch of sucking mud. “I will make it so no parent has the right to work violence upon their children. I will make it so that no parent has the right to choose whom their child might wed. I will make it so that Parliament recognises the validity of a person’s choice in title and gender. I will make it so that my brother can be himself. I will make it so that, one day, you need never choose your son over your husband because there is law to police his actions. I swear on the Hundred Thousand Names of Angels that I will make it so, but I will rule by law, not death.”

His kin, living and the dead, stand on both sides in a quiet marred by wind, cries and too little breath. Crows hop from one corpse to the next as if they glory in the abundance, their only alarm that of an eagle’s looming shadow as it lies claim to the crow’s chosen dead. Claws and beak, swords and necromancy; what, Paide wonders, is the difference?

Zaishne’s dark face holds no expression Paide can read. “And what will your law make of me?”

It isn’t, he thinks, as though he is any more innocent than she.

“Our hands are covered in blood.” He sighs, drops the reins and wipes his hands on his surcoat only for red streaks to mar his brown palms. No escape, it seems. “Mine, too. What would the world be if all queens had the threat of conjuring thralls to defend their children? If all princes had the threat of mustering armies to defend their people? Doesn’t history tell us that?”

Her dark brows knit into a frown. “I know not all with power will be worthy of their titles.”

It’s more concession than he expects to hear. Paide draws a sharp breath, pauses to allow the pain to crest and ebb, grabs mane in his off hand, leans over the gelding’s shoulder and holds his right hand outstretched. Sweat beads on his forehead, but after so many months in the field, he can’t remember what it is to think and plan and speak without discomfort. “I think, perhaps, that the man who fears you so little he rides to war against you will not be assumed, by Parliament or Convocation or farmers, to be your thrall, should we be co-regents until someone whose hands are clean can assume the throne. Einas. I can’t ... I can’t allow anything else. A necromancer who wrought *this* will be too feared to justly rule. Ihrne needs better. Better than you, better than me.”

Compromise, Paide thinks as the pain sends tendrils up to his heart, tastes like salt and iron.

Mamman steps forwards, reaches up and clasps her dirt-soiled fingers around his. Her hands are startlingly warm and soft, and he wonders, then, as his head spins and his breaths cause sharper, stabbing pains in his side and chest, how long it has been since he last felt her touch.

“I am,” she murmurs, in words drowned out by the soft thudding noises of revenants collapsing to the ground, by the rain of rotting flesh returning to its cradle of earth, by the racking cough bringing a froth of blood to his lips, “so sorry.”

“So am I,” Paide whispers as his fingers slip and he falls from his horse into a necromancer’s waiting hands.

about the author

K. A. Cook is a panalterous, aro-ace, genderless, autistic feminist who experiences chronic pain and mental illness. They write creative non-fiction, personal essays and novels about all of the above on the philosophy that if the universe is going to make life interesting, they might as well make interesting art.

When they're not writing, they design flyers, edit and administrate websites. They can also be found collecting fashion dolls and playing Magic the Gathering. They sew, glue, craft and make accessories for both in addition to handbound books and stim toys.

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