

chapter 8. folding

Finch pressed her shoulder into the stone door and slowly heaved it open with small steps that became larger as the door, once mostly open, swung open freely. The door was far, far too heavy for most lifeforms to force it open.

"i'm back." Crow's voice rasped out, barely intelligible from the scratch of the door against the rough floor.

After one second of marching into the pitch-black room, the stone door crashed shut behind them, causing the room to bend and wobble like jelly before righting itself.

"And in one piece?" A massive, imperious voice called out from the darkness. The sound of it was like blades sliding on whetstones, a hundred animal's calls twisted into a greater purpose, and countless death rattles all coalesced into an approximation of speech. And still, it rang clear, its meaning impossible to escape from, its parts unable to be separated.

Finch, stunned, paused in place. A tiny sliver of the dread she felt before began to creep in between her joints once again.

"How impressive," the voice continued, nonchalant. "Step here, dear, let's see what you have."

Finch looked down to Crow, who eyed her expectantly.

Slowly, Finch stepped forward, metal feet clacking against the perfectly smooth stone. When she could feel Raven's breath spilling out ahead of her, she paused, holding Crow close to her chest.

"Ah, sublime. This, now. This is exceptional." Raven surged forward in the darkness until their face suddenly appeared before Finch, two centimeters from her own.

Just Raven's head was larger than her entire body. They must be—

"Tell me, **Finch**. What heap did you drag my Crow out of?" Raven's slick eyes gleamed in the darkness, each a completely different color.

Their voice demanded and answer, and Finch found herself speaking all at once,

"The— the—" She stuttered, unable to control her voice. Internally, she felt a shifting, something attempting to **bind** to her. "*The seamstress!*"

"Oh?" Raven's voice cooed and turned, spilling over itself like water, filling the room with a low and thoughtful hum.

"*You will treat her!*" Finch ordered, holding up Crow slightly higher with trembling, rattling arms.

There was no response, no follow-up. The creature just eyed her expectantly, ravenously. Waiting.

Then, a collection of things clattered to the floor, as Crow discarded her belongings before Raven.

"Ah, sublime. This, now. This is exceptional." Raven said, callous and patient, as they plucked Cane's ledger from the floor and sank back into the darkness.

"She is going to die. TREAT HER!" Finch shouted, forcing herself to take another step forward.

Finch trembled as Raven's sigh washed over her and chilled her body all over in an instant.

Then, as if she had missed it by blinking, the room was bright, and all became visible.

Before her, barely fitting within the room, was the titanic form of Raven. They had laid out the ledger on a sterile, cold, and polished silver metal table. Their neck, four meters long, curled around and around, then craned down, so that they may study it.

"Do you not care for her?" Finch asked, defeated. "Is her life worth nothing to you?" She had pulled Crow back to her chest, arms wrapped tight around her, her hand cupped around the back of Crow's head, caressing it gently.

Raven did not turn to regard her.

"What a strange way of thinking," Raven continued, slowly turning the tiny, crinkling pages of the ledger with a long and slender whiteflesh hand that reached out from deep within their chest.

"It is the clear conclusion from your actions." Finch challenged, approaching the metal table.

"My dear, dear finch..." Raven sighed, again, then turned up their head to regard her with six of their eyes. "I am simply weighing the costs and benefits of saving the little Crow."

"You are forcing her to wait to assert your dominance." finch retorted, turning her chin up to challenge Raven.

Raven, of course, sighed again.

"Out of everyone, little finch... even you do not understand?" Raven turned their head to the side, staring into the blank and sterile grey wall. Then, Raven turned their head, and their attention, back to finch. All of their dozens of eyes fixed on her with a withering gaze, and the dilapidated muscles that criss-crossed all over their head flexed and turned, as if pushing their thoughts around to find the right phrasing, as if forcing themselves to speak in a way a mere mortal might understand.

But even gods had their limits.

"Then perhaps my judgement truly is... *flawed*, on only this matter. Or..." Raven uncoiled their neck and craned their face forward, hovering it over Finch, looking down at her like a

spotlight. Then, they retracted their neck, and their body shook, and twitched, and trembled. Bones and spines clattered together, and out from their throat came a choking, sobbing sound—

were they *laughing*?

"I will treat the little Crow," Raven continued, and a long, fused-together arm of bones wrapped around a coil of muscles reached out and lifted up Crow from underneath.

Finch resisted, at first, but then let go.

Still, Raven continued to chuckle.

"Why do you laugh, Raven?" Finch demanded, stepping forward again.

"There are so many reasons," Raven cackled, rising, now bipedal, to their full height as they crossed to the other side of the room.

"Enumerate them."

"Your insistence, for one," Raven sank their talons viciously into a small binding stone on the floor. It burst into shards and crumbled into pebbles, and the wall it was lying next to fell in the exact same fashion.

It was a simple **sympathetic binding**, really.

Raven raised three of their wings ahead of them like a shield and pebbles clattered off of them onto the floor, after which they stepped calmly over the destruction and into the room that was revealed.

Finch walked after them and stepped calmly over the rubble. After she had crossed, Raven clicked two of their claws together, and the thousands of pieces of gravel pieced themselves back into a perfect, seamless wall.

Entropic reversal? And done trivially?

"For two," Raven continued as they continued, "the lapse in judgement lay not within me, but in a bias you held close to your chest. Having doubted myself, let alone over *your* words..." They began to cackle again, and the whole of **the room of making and unmaking** clattered and rumbled along with them. "That, I suppose. That, was rather lightening."

They were still studying the ledger as they walked and spoke and thought. They were holding it up to two of their eyes with a long and slender blackflesh arm that was anchored into a joint at the base of their neck.

There was a six-second silence.

"And the third?"

"So perceptive, little finch." Raven cooed, "You are just like your father."

Finch flinched and stopped in her tracks, turning her gaze away to the floor as if burned by the words.

"I am nothing like him."

To that, Raven simply huffed in amusement. What a serendipitous day indeed.

You know, dear reader...

We *are* in *my* domain.

It is only right that I, as its owner,

show you around.

Let's put aside little finch and little crow, for now.

They are amusing, yes, but...

If even Finch cannot understand me, then I must make sure that at least you can.

An action understood by no one is a flaw, you see.

I do not tolerate flaws.

Of course, you'll understand, won't you, dear reader?

And as soon as you do, you can have your little friends back.

I had many things to be attending to, but the most pressing of them was always Crow.

My concern for her was not *actually* trivial. But I found, though, and through many, many years of living,

that it was rarely beneficial to show weakness.

Ever and always, the world was consuming, snapping up and around with a ravenous blackened maw anything that would be pleased by its embrace. In my laboratory, I watch it happen, I study it, and still, I do not understand its machinations.

And so I keep to myself. It was the weak, ultimately, that found themselves consumed by it.

Crow, of course, is a matter of constant study. I find her to be the weakest, *and yet*,

never once has **the abyss** wrapped her up in its embrace.

It constantly offers itself to her, an option always on her periphery,

perhaps she is even tempted,

but never does she give in or give up.

She is the weakest, and yet thrives where so many else fail.

How curious.

Another matter of inquiry were her wounds. I had been wondering, for some time now, where the little Crow had found herself.

"Where was she?" I directed the question at Finch, of course. As always, she would be a veritable trove of information.

"At the seamstress," Finch started, chirping up from far, far below.

I hummed, rolling the quandary around in my mind, along with the contents of the ledger, along with my tendrils running along Crow's flesh so as to diagnose her. Many things, of course, and all at once they progressed, somehow related... *ah!*

Of course.

"No matter. I will arrange some new clothier for her," I sighed, rolling the problem just a little bit further down one of the many deep tunnels in my mind. What would be a suitable punishment for marring my prized possession?

Death seemed... No, that would not do. My effort was wasted, along with Crow's body, and if the resulting traumas were too deeply set, that could cause a whole litany of headaches and long nights wasted on repetition and new forming.

"Finch," I spoke as I roamed up and onto the central platform, relaxing my mind so as to open up the Moon above.

"What is it, *Raven*?" She emitted. What a curious device her speech was. It would be so fun to rip it out and pull it apart. In fact, all of her artifice would be a delight to study. It was a wonder she came here at all, really. How serendipitous indeed.

"The seamstress..." I began, trailing off as I sorted my tools with an off-arm. What was the correct way to phrase this, hm? Ah. Ah, yes. Of course. "What punishment would you design for her, knowing what she has done to the little Crow?"

Finch was the same tier of little helper that the little Crow was. And so, this delegation was neat, and natural, the correct order of things. My entrustment of the task brings her closer, and her own mind will assume intentions within me that indicate she may rest her trust more deeply within my being. Yes. This, then, was correct.

And having helped in her creation, then, too, was it neat and natural for my ordering of her functions.

Finch paused, stunned, then looked up to me as though I had somehow changed. I returned her two-eyed gaze with two of my own, as was the proper way of things, and within that exchange of attention, a new understanding and connection was formed.

Yes. Yes, yes. Would that all plans forever and always should coalesce so neatly.

"I would simply kill her," Finch started, and so I interrupted, as she was wrong entirely. Surely she knew that would not do. And if she did not, then to be interrupted would be forgiven, as in my next statement, the connection between us would grow tighter—

"That will not do." I retorted, shaking my head ever so slightly. With me, the room moved, side to side, spinning ever so slowly around where we stood firm on the central platform.

And then, Finch changed. She drew forward, her body pulled itself around differently, and as expected, her gaze with mine grew not more hostile, but softer, more understanding.

As always, the fettered minds of the little helpers were so easy to mold and change. It was clear that her opinion of me had shifted with her body's stance, that in me, she saw intentions I never had had. Excellent.

"Please." I continued, setting down the little Crow onto the bloodstained *lounging chair*. Her whimpers were so pure and precious that immediately I stored the sounds away within myself for later use. "Please, little Finch. You are safe here to be as brutal and unkind as the world would demand. Hold nothing back. What, pray tell, would a suitable punishment be for the one who has undone the little Crow?" I kept my voice soft, and smooth, and elegant. This, too, a coy ploy to soothe her and coax her forward.

Now, she paused seriously, and indicated that she would enjoy a place on which to rest while her mind spun the answer for me.

I simply unfurled one of my long, reaching arms from my back, curled it over to one side to retrieve a chair, then curled it up into the air, over my whole self, then down onto the ground beside the lounging chair, setting it down as a place for Finch to sit.

And immediately, she did. What a good little helper. Henrich had such excellent and refined taste in certain things.

"Do not worry about speaking at the right time," I insisted, bringing my tools forward as I sank to the ground and leaned over the bloodstained lounging chair. "I can perform these operations while speaking. Though, before I do..."

I leaned my head back and let out a light shout so that I may be heard within the whole of my domain,

SERPENT.

And in a mere 8.3 breaths, well within the designated response time window, my oldest and most loyal construct had appeared, and it looked to me expectantly.

"Now, then. Now, go and fetch a sack of A6.b, two prepared bases, three vials of Red, and the proper tubes and wires for these operations."

And in a trice, it set off, oozing down into a grate I formed in the floor for its travel between the walls.

"It will be some time before its return," I spoke to Finch and Crow. "How long, little Finch, will you be staying with us?"

I needed to know how much time I had to form a compulsion within her to drive her back to us in due time. I had long been searching for a hold on Henrich, and truly, she was the perfect 'in'.

"I have quite a bit of time to spare, actually... so long as I return with tailor-fit clothes."

That was a tricky challenge, but one that could be resolved.

"What is your intention, little finch?"

"To stay by her side and see her made whole. When she is walking, I shall go, consequences be damned."

"A lack of foresight is unbecoming," I chided while reordering my tools idly with one of my offhands. It was a pleasant form of stimulation, to run my fingers idly along their sharpened edges and magnificent metal curves.

I could do the operations with my body alone, of course. But I am not barbaric.

I, for one, take pride in my work.

"I do not fear being unmade," Finch responded quietly, staring off into the fitfully shut eyes of Crow, who cringed on the lounging chair in pain, moaning softly and murmuring to herself. She rolled up her hands into little balls, and pressed them into the chair, while squirming ever so slightly with her hips—

I had to avert my gaze to Finch, studying her instead, lest I lose my patience before the operation. There was not enough vitality within Crow for me to feed, and so I had to stay my many, many urges.

How tiresome indeed.

It would, perhaps, be less trouble just to reform her.

"What was the alternative to saving her? Don't you need her?" Finch asked, voice low and quiet, like a mouse demanding from the hawk that held it in its talons.

I did.

"Death holds no meaning in this house."

"What??"

"Finch. I know you know the truth of your own self."

"I never died, my consciousness was preserved and placed into my new body."

I simply sighed in response. She was too smart for me to bother explaining this.

Then, some form of recognition flashed in her eyes, and Finch turned her head to me, gaze full and understanding.

"It is the same for Crow, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"But how?"

"If I tell you, does that hold benefit for me?"

She paused, then shook her head, slowly.

"You should tell me regardless."

I could not help but bark out a laugh. The audacity! Such fire and spirit in this girl.

If only metal had a taste. Though...

"Very well. I will."

"Really?"

"Yes. I will explain the process to you if you submit to having your consciousness transferred from..." I paused, wondering if I needed to care about causing offense. No, of course not. We were being audacious, after all. She had been the one to start it. "that *machination* into a new flesh base."

She considered the offer for far longer than I had thought was possible. Easily one hundred breaths passed. She was far more sentimental than I had calculated. The question was a trivial one, and the answer for any rational being would be resoundingly no. There was no debate, even, to be had.

"I cannot," she said simply. It was not possible for her voice to be tainted by her emotions and yet it thusly was. Perhaps a flaw in its implementation? Or a further display of the sentimentality of the flesh by the artificer that constructed her?

Both, more than likely. Henrich was, after all, a fool before anything else.

"Do you not long to return to flesh? I see the way you look at Crow, as though you would wear her skin as your own."

"I—" her voice stuttered to a halt. "I can—" Her voice stopped, and skipped like a smooth stone on water, repeating itself over and over again, "can'— can— can—" before stopping, suddenly, pausing for three breaths, and concluding, "I cannot."

Finch sat back on the stool, clearly frustrated. If she had a face, it would have been scowling. The misery was etched into every blessed piece of her.

How interesting. Her frame held even more advantages than I had previously considered. Henrich must have revised the designs past his original intentions. *To what end?* I wondered.

"So he controls your speech," I tutted, scathingly, "that is no good at all. How barbaric," knowing that my condemnation of the source of her frustrations would bring her only closer. Then, too, coupled with my generosity towards the one she desired, well.

It was a done deal, Henrich. Sorry.

Such was the price of playing with fire...

really, how had he considered it a good idea to put out a hit on my most precious little one?

What a fool.

After ten breaths further pause, Finch spoke up again.

"I know what should be done to the seamstress," she started, leaning forward, forearms planted on her knees.

"Go, then. Go on."

"She should be subjected to the exact treatment that Crow endured, though sustained indefinitely."

"Oh? How pragmatic. And who would carry it out?"

"A machine, of course."

"So. You?"

Finch imitated a scoff and sat back on the stool, stiffening and straightening herself all at once.

I maintained my gaze.

"No. No, of course not. An unfeeling, uncaring machine. Perpetual and unceasing."

"And what of the drugs she has gotten Crow addicted to, hm?"

Finch paused. "I would make a perverted strain of it, an inverse of its original affects, and have it applied automatically and intravenously."

She was uncomfortable with herself, of that, I was now certain. She was so distanced from her **beast**— perhaps a result of the distance from her old flesh— and she forced herself at every turn to spit out her true desires.

Perhaps her hesitancy was due to her proximity to Crow. Perhaps it was due to her apprehension around me, her fear of my domain?

Perhaps, like Crow, she needed her own space within the laboratory for her vulnerable feelings. I have noted, indeed, that all my space below the Moon leaves guests feeling... *unwound*.

I found myself with a lack of information and a captive guest. And so, I simply spoke my mind.

"Finch." I spoke, breaking the silence. "Why, why, why indeed..." I sighed, shaking my head quickly, as if spinning off an imaginary confusion. "Why, dear Finch, do you hold yourself back? What is it that you are scared of?"

Finch, though, remained silent.

"I see how deeply and terribly you are hurting. I know you can feel its pull within you, stewing, simmering, itching at you, longing for release. Here, I tell you, is the one place where it may be found."

As I spoke, she stood and began to pace by the lounging chair, bringing one hand up to her chin, the other to the back of her neck, rubbing, as though she could soothe her metal frame and the worries that lay within it. Surely some link to her **beast** was yet there, if she so stubbornly held to the mannerisms of her pastflesh?

"You need not be scared of your own mind. You must dwell within it, and exclusively so, after all."

Finch stopped and looked up to me as she crossed her arms. Her eyes blazed with an anger I had rarely ever seen. There was so much life there, so much life trapped within unlife, flesh bound within metal, desires bound within stone.

"Make. Yourself. Known."

"I would break her vertebrae so that she could not move," She paused, looking to me with the wide-eyes of a child asking for acceptance.

"Yes." I commanded.

"And I would drag her to a deep pit beneath the earth, with walls, floor, and ceiling made perfectly reflective,"

"**Yes!**" I growled, craning my head forward towards her. Her momentum built, and her voice spilled out like a babbling brook, no longer able to stop, as she let out her clearest, purest intentions.

{tw: graphic descriptions of torture}

{will probably cut this}

[inhale]

"I would rip off her eyelids with my own hands so that her eyes would be forced open, always fixed on her own reflection, no matter where in the room she might gaze. The room would be illuminated to be blindingly bright, overwhelmingly so, so that her eyes would be burning at all times. I would leave her discarded on the burning hot floor, health sustained only through a sympathetic binding to a simple beast matching her base. Then, I would score with a scalpel all around her neck, leaving deep incisions, from which I would pluck out her nerves, one at a time, until the entire system of them was extracted and laid bare on the floor behind her, trailing across it like discarded threads. Continuously, one would be picked up at a time, then laid within a tray of pure acid, where it would soak for untold hours before being pulled out and set into water to rest and rehydrate for the process to continue again and again. Then, that all told, I would have one part of her body crushed into paste each day, until eventually, she was nothing more than a sentient smear on the floor, writhing for all eternity, every fiber of her becoming one with the very essence of agony."

[exhale]

It was a feeble attempt, really. An amateur's pass at eternal torment, though *technically* passable. She probably did not even know all of the different *kinds* of pain, let alone how to pursue their experience on behalf of another to fullest extent.

And there she stood, shaking, trembling, as though the release of her emotions was just too much to bear.

"Now, there. Now, doesn't that feel *better*?" I cooed, leaning back and away, straightening myself by my tools. Serpent would return in but a few dozen more breaths.

"Yes," Finch imitated gasping, and looking away from me, bashful and ashamed.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of, you know. Such thoughts dwell within us all."

"No," she rebuked me, "No, they do not."

"Oh?"

"But they do dwell within me, and having let them free, I no longer have to bear them. Thank you."

Truly disappointing. Even with such pure and wonderful thoughts, she could not bear to hold herself to them. She would rather reject the self than embrace it. I would push on the matter, but...

I looked Finch up and down. She was satisfied, satiated, and even with her back turned to me, I could tell that she was more comfortable, now, in my presence.

To push the matter would push her from me, and that simply would not do. And so, I remained silent, even as Serpent rolled a metal cart down and along the winding paths between the shelves, and up and onto the central platform, stopping as it arrived next to

Crow. The cart was covered with a thick and heavy black cloth that shifted and moved separately from the motions of the cart.

"Are you squeamish, little Finch?"

She shook her head. She was a rather good liar, really.

But I already knew the answer.

How brave of her.

"This process is... hmmm... how shall I say it?" I mused, playing with the phrasing in my mind, taking the brief respite to take in the sight of the squirming base of Crow beneath me. Sublime. "I believe the usual inhabitants of our fair city would describe this spectacle as 'incapacitating'. Personally, I find it rather efficient."

"What... does the process entail?"

"Unfettered brutality," I whispered, allowing my many, many mouths to split open all along and up my head into wide and sharpened grins as I lifted up the cloth covering the contents of the metal rolling cart. "When you release your attachments, little Finch, an entire new world of possibilities opens up to you."

Finch covered her face where once there was a mouth and stepped back, recoiling in shock, at the sight of the wretched abominations within the cart.

Serpent, meanwhile, had set itself busy, cooing at the overdramatic Crow, setting her nerves at ease while it administered the transfusion to her and set her mind adrift with a quick imbibement of Red. She would have to be weaned off of it, that much was certain, and she would need it to stay stable for any considerable length of time.

"What is it, Finch?" I asked, tutting, as I lifted up one of the thick, bulbous bags of flesh and held it all within one palm. On the surface of the fleshbag, two eyes wiggled, looking all around, feral. Its mouth, smeared across its face like a fingerpainting mistake, was stitched shut, its tongue stitched to the top of its palette, and the smooth, but wrinkly surface just beneath its mouth had a jagged whiteflesh scar from when its vocal folds had been removed.

"You..." She paused, choosing her next words carefully, then fell silent. Likely, she was holding her judgement until the process was complete.

And yet her eyes were locked-on, viciously, to the writhing bag of flesh that I held up between my talons, that struggled and squirmed and squished, as though it could simply roll away. How foolish.

It was not often I had guests to watch my procedures. It was so interesting, watching them squirm, as though they were on my operating chair, under my knife and bindings. It was twofold interesting with Finch, who, even metal, felt so strongly for this foreign flesh that she might sacrifice her life just to make her displeasure known.

How strange indeed. And how wise she was to remain silent.

"I will proceed in two phases, as you must have surmised, based on the presence of the two flesh bases." I paused my explanation as I picked up a stone from the ground, causing two stone tables to rise from the floor beside the lounging chair. Onto the left operating table, I set the base I beheld. Then, onto the right operating table, I set the matching, though distinct, base.

"The first one, on the left, here," I explained softly, pointing to it with my talon, "shall inherit her infections." I then pointed to the one on the right table, "and this one, here, shall inherit her wounds, thus making her whole." I took in a deep breath, sending the room rising, only to fall again as I exhaled just as heavily, sending Crow's feathers and furs and hairs twirling in my breeze.

"The transfusion and Red administered, of course, will help her health return. And so, she shall be walking within a thousand breaths, blissfully unaware of what goes into her maintenance, able to go out as many times as she pleases and return back to me just like this."

"If it is so easy for you, why did you bother considering reforming her?"

"Ah, now. Ah..." I breathed in a lightening, delightening breath, and felt my whole base and frame shudder with sudden joy. "That's personal."

I was, of course, considering the benefits of giving her a new frame with which to roam, so that I may feast on her from the start again. And I would have, were it not for Finch's

attachment to this base for Crow. By healing her today, I bring them both closer under my control, and so, my hand was forced, really.

A shame.

But my hunger could wait. Some things were just more important than my base desires.

"Let us then proceed," I whispered, raising up my first, and most wisened, whiteflesh hand from where it rested beneath the folds of my upper chest. In the air, I clicked my talons together and snapped my fingers.

By now, Serpent had administered the Red, and Crow was floating on clouds that held her far, far away from the world. In her dreaming, Serpent was easily able to pierce her flesh with wires that connected her to the two flesh bases.

And as my own flesh fell into place, so too did Crow's fetid wounds become pallid and dim, smearing together like an oiled painting, as her flesh swirled and disappeared up into the wires, along them, all the while unwinding and unswirling and becoming pristine and white again.

Then, the flesh bases bucked and writhed and fell all at once, crashing down onto the floor, trying their hardest to scream as tears flowed freely from their wincing and buckling eyes. The sacks they were crumpled up before sliding apart, inching across the floor like worms, leaving trails of blood and pus as the wires snapped freely from them and waved in the air,

spewing the excess and aspirated blood and pus as a fine mist that fell down onto them and painted them like fresh rolls prepared for the oven.

Then, in mercy, I leaned forward over Crow, covering her body entirely with my own, and spattered the flesh bases into paste with my greatest, and heaviest arms that lurched forward from my back in an instant, bringing me down and forward onto my knuckles, beneath which, the fleshy sacks were all at once crushed and fell still.

And so, the excess spattered onto me, but left my Crow pristine, and as I rocked back onto my haunches, thusly she was mended. Serpent, meanwhile, had oozed across the floor and risen by my side, already wiping off the goo in a haste so that I need not bear it for a moment longer.

"And so mote it be," I sighed in relief, beholding finally a pieced together Crow that no longer held any pain or suffering within her flesh.

Instead, she breathed in time with me, fully at peace in this rotten world, drifting along on in her mind on a sea unknown to any other, bobbing up and down on waves that held no troubles.

"Do you understand, now, little Finch?"

"I do," She lied as easily as breathing and surged forward to cup Crow's face in her hands. From there, she ran her hands along the places she deemed appropriate to touch. She was

disgusted and enthralled all at once, and she could not tell herself to be angry, for she was so very pleased with the results.

Indeed, then, her beast was only latent, awaiting the day it might be roused at last.

"That phrase, 'so mote it be,' I have not heard it, where..?"

"I stole it from one much wiser than me, and I appropriate it to my own ends. I need not say it, though, I cannot help myself." I admitted, though, the admittance pained me. I, too, found some relief in releasing thoughts I had long held quiet.

"You hold someone higher than yourself?" She looked to me with a pointed expression.

"I do. Though..."

I trailed off, preventing myself from finishing the thought. I did not wish to say the next part, yet I also did want to complete the thought. It was as if not speaking it was more treacherous to me than keeping such things private. How curious.

"Though what?"

"They live only in the past." And I felt, having said it, real pain— kind that sticks to you like the blood after an operation. I felt it in my throat, and in every tunnel of my mind, as deep as they went, they cringed and folded with it, dredging up those fousweet memories from all those years ago.

Yes, it was true, I supposed. Despite my searching, I always knew it.

There was no way to return to the past, even though I could view it, as plain as day, in front of me, as often as I desired.

No matter what I did, no matter what machinations I put into motion, no matter how far my studies took me,

I was never, and would never be, able to return.

There was only one of every moment.

And that one had passed long, long ago.

,

"...raven?" Crow chirped from below.

I turned my head and gaze, slowly, not wanting to drag myself away from the memories that had bubbled up at last from so, so far below. And yet, I did, to lay eyes upon the little Crow again.

Already, too, had Finch, who sat by her side, petting her head softly.

"what is wrong, Raven?" Crow whispered, scooting herself to the edge of the lounging chair, where she took up one of my horrid appendages in both her hands and held it tight.

Her hands, as always, were ever so soft and warm.

"Ah, dear Crow..." I murmured, lowering my whole body to the floor, where I then began to rest. From there, I leaned my head forward, pressing it ever so gently against her forehead. "There is nothing wrong, I fear."

"You do not fear," she giggled, shaking her head, nuzzling up against my own. The Red was hot on her breath, and where it touched my skin, my skin began to tingle and buzz. "So what is the matter?" She whispered with a grin.

I had missed this, I think.

"Just a thought about something I had missed," I admitted, wrapping some parts of myself gently around her, so as to bring her closer, that I might feel her warmth a moment longer.

"Hmmm..." She hummed, doing her best to solve the problem at hand. "Can you not find it within our world, dear Raven?"

"No, little Crow..." I croaked, folding forward, holding her closer.

"Nevermore."

...

...

...

Earlier, Reader, when I was considering the healing of the little Crow,
it was not that I did not wish to restore her.

In many regards, restoration was all I ever sought.

Rather,
I was dwelling on the method that I might use.

The choice must seem simple.
As it was for Finch, and assuredly, Crow, if she had any part in it.

But they do not carry this heavy burden.

Nor do you.

Crow, after all,
lives beyond death so long as I move my hand.

Through me,
Crow will always return.

So how, then, *reader*,
am I meant to let her go?

