FIXED: BOOK 1

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in English

By Joel Armando Garcia

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DEDICATION

This work is for every teacher I’ve ever had.
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ABSTRACT

FIXED: BOOK 1

By Joel Armando Garcia
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This creative endeavor represents the culmination of three years of theoretical study on the art of creative writing. Through my years at CSUN, I have been gifted with an understanding of theories on gender, sexuality, marginality, and freedom. This creative work is a response to the teachings of Judith Butler, Saussure, Descartes, and many more. My protagonist, Feora, embodies the efforts of marginalized, queer, and disabled in a world which is unforgiving of the deviant. Born to a society of shapeshifters who believe themselves gods, Feora alone lacks the ability to change. As the story progresses, her disability becomes inverted-- now a talent for remaining grounded, giving her perspective and insight. As she is antagonized by the other inhabitants of Avon, their heavenly paradise, she begins to wonder what life might be like if she lived exclusively with those like her. This journey leads to further discoveries about the self-constructed identity, issues of appearance, and the culture of the disabled.
Prologue

“In the absence of change, progress is impossible. That which cannot change is doomed to fail.” – The Elephant God

These are the precepts of the skyfolk of the mountain. The skyfolk know only paradise. The bounty of rich greenery and wild founts of ice born rivers seethe through their valley, nestled within tall and treacherous mountains beyond any mortal who might be tempted to explore its splendors. If one had an unfullfilled necessity, they were forever ignorant to it. In Avon, hunger and pain are nonexistent.

They, those skinshifters of legend, had not left their isolated bliss in centuries, perceiving themselves as gods to live above earthly mortals. Only they, this star-touched people, could throb and thrust themselves into the shapes of the animals in the sky. The twelve first shapes, the primavalia, were considered the most sacred. And the most powerful. But this was not without work. The skyfolk, whose true origins remain forever a mystery, were born as light, coming to the world as falling stars given solid form from the Earth itself. Their form, though, demanded alteration, mutation, freedom. They were compelled, at seemingly arbitrary moments to phase their being to another body, hopping from one body to the next, never knowing solidarity with one constant. It took training to achieve the wisdom to invoke certain shapes on one’s own free will.

The valleys of Avon are littered with ruins of old worshippers, pillars of stone that reach to the sun and moon, and circular slabs to act as centers for discussion and living. Though once invited to share in the banquets of the gods, mortals with one image were
eventually debased as lesser beings, like the crow or pig, who could never free
themselves from their fixed mortal bodies. They were left to inhabit the mortal plane,
below the paradise of Avon, high in the mountains. The skyfolk live a peaceful cycle,
regifting life to generations of new gods by pulling new light from the sky to give form
on Earth. They return to the light by finding transcendence in the god shapes above.
There have been no mortals in Avon for centuries.
Chapter I

“The child hasn’t changed.”

Silence responded.

“Not once. Not a paw, not a tail. She hasn’t even changed her hair color. It has been too long.”

The two circled a white marble pedestal which contained a small silver bowl. The baby’s whispering breaths could be heard just above the soft licks of a wintry wind. Both were cloaked in emerald silk, the tails of which fluttered behind them as they meandered round the circumference of the open gazebo.

“Do you think we did something wrong?”

“You do not make a child wrong,” one voice said. The air was cool and turned their voices nebulous. Streams of misted speech trailed around them in curves and wisps. The circular stone upon which they stood watched the scene above with muted interest. The pillars, from the outside, almost appeared to creep in beside them.

“But she won’t change! She might never change. She might be stuck in this form, this shape, forever. Always recognized. Always the same.”

“Always loved. Do not forget that. We chose to make life because we wanted someone to love. To have believed that our child would exist solely to be as we desired is unrealistic. We would be placing our expectations on a being that didn’t even exist.”

“Yes, you are right. As usual. I do love her.”
The two continued to shark their way around the marble pedestal. Five solitary fingers reached out of the silver, searching for companionship. One of the cloaked figures reached a gloved hand to touch it.

“The others have already started,” said one figure, stopping. The breeze sang from between the pillars.

“Started what?”

“Reacting.”

There was another long, extended pause.

“... I see.”

“The Elder Gods are calling her the Fixed-Face child. They wish to see her in the morning. Cursed with permanence, they are saying. If she hasn’t changed by then, who knows what they’ll decide.”

“And the younger gods? What say them?”

“They are yet too new to the world to understand. The concept of stagnancy bewilders them. Goes against everything they’ve seen. Quite frankly, it bewilders me some too.”

“I do not wish for them to judge her.”

“Nor I, my ally, but we cannot control opinion.”

“I’m scared for her.”

“So am I.”

“Have we reason to fear?”

“Not that I know of.”

Silence remained as they continued in their motion.
“She will be vulnerable.”

“We can protect her.”

“Not forever. No lightgiver can protect their child forever.”

“Then we teach her to protect herself.”

“How?” the figure questioned. “I can barely get close to her without her fearing me.”

The silhouette figure stopped circling the marble pedestal and stood in front of the child in the bowl. A hood was removed to reveal jet black hair and milky skin in quiet moonlight stained with a cool burning torch nearby. The figure took the child in their arms, rocking it from side to side. The baby began weeping, violently disturbing the tranquility of a silent evening.

“You see? Fear. Come now child, do not have fear. The world is full of synchronistic pain, but you, my beautiful child, are remarkable. You are different. Your pain will seem more pronounced because it will be unique, and you will notice its exclusivity. But you must never submit to fear.”

The same figure began to make faces at the crying cherry face, puffing cheeks and widening eyes. “Look child!” As he scrunched his face, the skin darkened to a honeyed gold and hair erupted in curls. “Look baby, look!” he cried. He stuck out his tongue as his skin softened and paled to a milky white. New, fiery red hair lengthened to his shoulders which shrunk and fell as his body reached closer to the ground. Freckles ran across his face in pairs. The new red-headed woman gaped her mouth open wide at the baby. The baby stopped crying and laughed, reaching up to grab at the new mobile of dangling crimson.
“It’s so odd,” the newly female figure said. “She stops crying immediately when I take this form, it’s utterly peculiar.”

“Perhaps she likes the color?”

“I think she likes the unity of expression. She admires the consistency in this shape.”

“Perhaps. She seems to like grasping at those freckles on your face. She’s has yet to take a particular liking to any of the human shapes I take.”

“You don’t know that. She never cries with you.” Her freckles wandered like stars in a moving sky.

The second figure removed his hood as well, and walked towards the mother and child, his green eyes and fawn colored hair glistened in the golden glow of the torchlight. “I fear I should not try and take your form as well. I should probably choose an individual form as well to take around her.”

“That would probably be best,” one said, agreeably. “My ally, do you think she can sense our distinctions? She’s no access to the array of senses we do, can she even tell us apart when we shift our appearance? Do you think she has access to thealahansari?”

“Surely she must. We would all be indistinguishable to her otherwise. She would live a life of utter confusion. In any case, she seems to recognize my energy no matter what shape I take.” He held his face over the child’s as he began shifting appearances, also making faces. First, his nose grew long and pointed before his face sprouted with coarse, now brown, hair. The child smiled and reached up to pull at the beard. He smiled wide as his beard began growing up through the entirety of his face, now turning a rich blond color, brown spots popping all over his face. The jaw began to protrude out
like a snout and his nose shot back into his face, flattening into a happy pink with two large nostrils. Whiskers shot out as his eyes grew iridescent and yellow.

“She seems quite taken with the animal shapes I make.” His face rippled like a wave was running softly under his skin and crashing to form a new figure—a cheetah. He licked the baby’s forehead gently before returning his face to human form, giving a long sigh of relief. The spotted fur became bronze skin, soft yet strong, while dark brown hair grew from the mount of his now human head. His face grew somber, saddened by some unknown regret and pain. “To think, she may never know the beauty or strength of her own deities.”

The two were quiet. They pondered over the future of their child—a future filled with mystery and a formidable lacking. They two, who could readily become any creature, including those which lit the sky, the immortal source of all things, looked upon their child, who would never become more than what she appeared to be.

“I think I’ll stay with this form.”

“Yes, very attractive. You match her skin and hair.”

“It might help her feel more belonging, if one of us shares in her appearance.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that. It’s better, too, that you stay in this larger, stockier form as well. Similar, but always reminiscent of the fact that our people are not bound by any one type of figure. She will have much to learn, better she begin viewing these differences early.”

“She will think she is different.”

“She is different.”
“I do not want her to approach maturity without an understanding of youth. Why should she suffer so prematurely?”

“She’s mortal.”

“You don’t know that, not really.”

“She hasn’t changed. She is attached to the female energy alone. We can see it.”

“…There are things we can do. There’s the dragon… or the spider. Maybe we can invoke them on our own.”

“We are centuries from that type of enlightenment, ally.”

“She is our child. Ours. Do we not bear some responsibility in trying something?”

“I do not know.”

“She will lose her innocence the moment she discover her inabilities.”

“I know. But that is true of all of us.”

“The stars have chosen a strange path for her, my ally. She is a child of the sky, born to a tribe of revered beings. She will be fierce and strong, we have little to fear.”

One lightgiver looked out to the distance, to the starlit valleys and groves in the night turned a blue-hued wonderment. The other locked eyes with the child.

“We do not know what there is to fear.”
Chapter II

In the deepest part of the forest, in a cave burrowed into the side of Avon’s tallest mountain, lay the spider’s nest. Kala, who some in Avon called the Witch of Many Eyes, had invoked the form of the spider god generations past, and studied the fragmented visions he obtained from the spider’s various senses.

It was colder, where Kala lived. Dry frost covered the black stone cave’s entrance. Dead leaves crunched beneath their feet, until the leaves no longer littered the wet stone floors deeper within. It was dark inside; the two, as humans, saw nothing. Sattva blinked himself into a lioness, while Puja became an owl, perching on his shoulders. Sattva carried the baby in his mouth.

Before them, they could see they were approaching dim light and a great open space. They descended further into the mountain’s insides. Webbing was catching on their fur and feathers which they shook off. Puja’s head pivoted in circles, always watching. Insects, the children of the first spider, buzzed around them in the dark. They crept at their feet. Their movements made a white noise that could only produce shivers in those who heard it. The infant remained quietly sleeping.

“What brings you here, fellow children of the night sky?” a loud voice boomed and echoed through the caverns. The sound made the enclosure seem even smaller, as if each ringing word drew the walls and ceiling in closer.

The cave was a labyrinth. From the open tunnel they could see thousands of others meeting up in this central location, branching out all around them. They knew that one wrong turn might leave them stranded forever, an immortality spent searching for a
way out. A god’s only hope would be to reach enlightenment, as the elephant had with the first gods following. Even with their many abilities, Puja could not see with her owl eyes beyond whatever magic was clouding the underground. She became her human form, letting the bright red tresses cover her head on the off chance the child awoke distressed. She took the girl in her arms, quickly. Sattva’s eyes darted around and he lumbered to stay loose on his thick, heavy paws. The lioness was not the most potent form he could bring forth, but its strength and speed made him feel more comfortable nonetheless.

“How might the spider serve you?” The sounds reverberated through them. The two could feel footsteps, so many footsteps rustling around them. They could not see him, and they could not feel him, but they could hear his movement throughout the caves. There was a static energy in the air, as though he were intentionally clouding himself.

Kala-- he sent shivers through their magic skin.

“We’ve come to ask a favor,” Sattva said. He bowed his head as a sign of respect. His front paws were angled out in courtesy.

“A favor of the spider god? Hm?” His low laugh hummed in the passages.

“What a surprise. And what might this favor be?” His voice trembled with an uncanny form of delight, as though he had been waiting for this moment for centuries and couldn’t bother to hide it.

“We need you to cast a spell, Kala,” Puja said. Her voice could barely hide the desperation in it.

He laughed again. “The noble Sattva and their partner Puja, callers of the swan and the rat,” he said, mockingly. “Come to see the great spider for a wish.” He sounded
giddy. They still could not see him, but the sounds of his dragging fat abdomen could be heard always. Scuffling feet would be here, and there, and there again around them, muffled slightly by the slimy, squirmy noises of all the bugs in the cave. Sattva looked at the little glowing lights which helped illuminate the area- glowing flies and slugs of cherry blue light. “Unhappy with what the light has given you?”

“Not unhappy, Kala. Concerned. We are trying to avoid unnecessary pain,” Sattva said.

“No such thing, my sweet friends,” he said, calmly. “Pain is simply growth. Just a little more concentrated. Reminds me of a story I once heard. A story about a fallen god. Do you know it?” A shadow moved from the tunnel above them and into another, crawling down walls and up ceilings, too fast for any one of the two to see, even with lion eyes. The caverns looked so deep, so maze-like; it made one feel incredibly small, even gods. They strained their eyes in the dim lights.

“Yes, we know the stories of the fallen one,” Sattva called out. Something moved behind him.

“Remind me, won’t you?” the spider voice hissed, the echoes sliding down the walls like slime.

“It is the story of the first betrayal,” Puja started, moving her hands and body with the story, looking around for where to direct her voice. “When the spider betrayed the elephant. The witch god tried to trap the elephant king in his magic web, but the elephant was so heavy with the weight of creation the bindings wouldn’t hold. As punishment, the elephant made him and his children the smallest creatures on Earth, and forced them into the darkness of the ground.”
Kala laughed. “Yes, the fallen Spider. That was painful, being left in the dark to spin lies and charms—laying traps for other gods. A trickster. Is that what you think I am? …Maybe. But what lie have you to spin?” The two were quiet. Feora murmured from Sattva’s mouth.

“…They say you’re trying to keep that shape. That you know charms for holding positions for longer than should be possible. Our child…we recently pulled her from the sky. She won’t change,” Puja said. “We want you…”

“You want me to fix her,” the spider’s voice echoed through the caverns. “Yes, indeed. The other Elder gods decided at the gathering of the five that it was best to keep her separate from the rest of Avon. Though why I can’t say. Real gods can be so cruel…their wisdom is often unkind.”

“I, myself, have no interest in unkind wisdom,” he continued, smiling somewhere in the dark. “The spider’s thoughts are heavier things. But then maybe that’s the problem…if only they were lighter…May I hold her?” He descended down, a fat and heavy spider working its mouth, never swaying on the long piece of silken silvery thread.

“No.” Puja stood firm, turning to the red-haired mortal form. She made it taller though, and more intimidating, with larger shoulders and strong, heavy legs.

Kala laughed. “Do you know why the spider shape is scorned? Do you know why they do not teach you to ascend to this great splendor?” He raised his many arms and moved them in little swivels. The spider’s legs were covered in hair that looked like it would burn to touch. His engorged belly revealed an intricate pattern of waves swirling in unison, which might have been attractive if it weren’t for frightful noises coming from
it—like someone screaming deep inside for freedom. In truth, the two were disgusted by what they saw.

“They called me a traitor, but I was only following my instincts. The spider knows things, you know…All these pretty magics… but then, that is why you’re here.”

He worked his many limbs and returned to climbing the walls above them. Sattva began to walk in a circle protectively around the two, letting himself grow larger and more ferocious. His fangs became long and sharp, dangling from the sides of his mouth like the many stalactites in the spider’s cave.

“Fear,” Kala said, speaking faster now, angrily. “They fear the spider, and the secrets he carries. I can feel them you know, little truths, flashes, when I sit here in the dark, seeing with his eyes.” They blinked in a cascade.

“There are so many interesting things you can see with these eyes. I can see so many secrets. Even yours,” he said.

“I saw her coming,” he whispered before crawling into a deep hole. Suddenly, the cave began to feel darker to them. They could sense a great energy brewing from somewhere within the cave. The smell of some sort of magic. They instinctively tensed.

“Even the great elephant had secrets. And the spider saw them, too,” he said, the voice bouncing off of every wall. The energy continued to grow, building from somewhere else, deep within the many pathways in the cave.

Kala crawled out from another hole behind them. He opened his front legs dramatically sweeping them in front of him. “Did you know the first spider had lids for his eyes, to keep the terrible visions from haunting us. When the elephant banished me…"
he had the dragon burn them off of all my pretty children. Now we see everything.” He paused. “…To think they called us brothers once.”

“You know as we do that the spider is not your shape alone, Kala,” Sattva said. “It is within all of us to call him.”

“True enough. But I am the only god in Avon capable of achieving its splendor,” he said, standing up on his back haunches to display the great intricacy of his abdomen, which seemed to dimly light the room. His hands delicately grazed against his entire body, as though he were taking mirth in presenting himself as beautiful. “It does take a certain… type,” he continued, lowering himself.

“Now show her to me,” he said, hoarsely. “Let me see her face.” The sharp dangly pinchers worked their way on his face, like it was gnawing on itself.

Puja turned the baby’s face to Kala. Kala blinked his many eyes staring at her. One single eye, the third in a series running around his face, remained closed. “Hold her still now,” he said.

His eight legs all delicately moved towards his remaining closed eye. His fat abdomen bulged against the ground as it settled. The tips of each leg delicately pulled it open. There was a slight rumble to their air and a humming violet glow shined through, illuminating the great intricacy of the spider’s shape. For a moment, the spider looked terribly hungry and Puja thought she saw a fang. A bright light erupted from his eye and the room turned pure white, and then pure black. Feora began to cry. Sattva and Puja uncovered their eyes, wondering what had just happened. They felt a panic in their hearts as if they had just been attacked, but felt fine, and Feora was still in Puja’s arms when they regained their bearings. Kala hadn’t moved an inch.
“Does she have a name?” Kala finally said, closing his eye, apparently unimpressed by what had just transpired, though there was still a hint of joy to his voice.

“Feora,” Puja said. “Her name is Feora.”

“Lovely,” he said, with some mysterious tone to his voice. “Just lovely.” The spider began working his legs, moving to a delicate rhythm only he truly understood. He spun a slew of bright white silken threads which wrapped around her, becoming folds and folds of delicate fabric. It glowed in the darkness, changing colors in the different light.

“This is a *kalmansari,*” he said. “Magic fabric. It will change as she needs it to.”

“We did not come here for magic clothes, spider,” Puja said. “We came here for a spell.”

“You do not know what you are here for, powerless creature,” Kala snapped back. The cave rumbled with the sound. “I have given you a gift. And you have given me one.” He spun a circle of thread which grew bright, and became a mirror. He looked himself over.

“What gift? We came here for you to cure her,” Puja cried out.

“She cannot be cured, not by me, at least,” he said, calmly.

“Then by whom?” Puja cried out.

“I will tell you,” he said. “Someday. For another price.”

“What price?” Sattva asked. “What price have you already taken?”

“You will see,” Kala replied, laughing softly to himself, looking deeply into his own eyes. “All I can tell you…” the spider said, so slowly, his voice fading in the echoes of the cave. “…is that she will end the world if you let her.” He laughed again.

The two gods left the cave feeling entirely defeated.
Chapter III

“Tell me again,” said the little girl, Feora, swimming in a mist-like fabric. Her lightgivers watched her move between their feet. These two gods, Sattva and Puja, had pulled her from the night sky to become a god, like them, not many years before. She reached only to their knees when they were humans, which they were not. They were zebras with heavy stripes that seemed to move along their bodies, like a rolling wind on the tips of high reaching grass. It would have made Feora dizzy if she weren’t so accustomed to it. She enjoyed letting herself swing sideways between their two legs and flinging herself from one zebra to the next, gripping legs to produce more force in the rotation.

“Tell you what, my little godling?” one zebra said, lazily, clearly annoyed by her vitality.

“The story!”

“Which, little one? There are as many stories as stars in the sky,” Puja, the other zebra, said.

“Endless, upon endless,” Sattva confirmed, nuzzling Feora with a large black nose. The dark stripes continued to slide themselves slowly down their bright white fur. Feora trailed her hand along them until they disappeared into his nose.

“The story of when the Earth met the Sky. How the twelve original Gods came to earth as the first shapes!” Feora, no taller than one of their legs, stood straight on her hands and began to walk around the creatures in an oval shape. It was the most interesting story to Feora, and she knew it was the most complex.
“Oh, *that* story. The story of our people. You’ve heard that one before. Over and over again you’ve heard it. Do you need another reminder?” Satta said, beating his hoof against the dirt, clearly uninterested in repeating the process again.

“Yes!” she cried, losing her balance and falling onto her side. As she fell, one zebra jumped forward, and as it did its fur folded itself into its skin and turned to scales. A green snake whipped towards Feora’s falling body and coiled it before she hit the floor.

“Careful!” Puja hissed, angrily. “You need to be more careful with that body of yours, Feora, it is the only one you have.” Sattva and Puja, the pair who had partnered to pull her light from the sky to give it earthly form, had always felt overprotective to Feora. The other child gods had tried to play several pranks on her, calling her Fixed-Face from a distance, refusing to participate in her training. They had thrown rocks at her for years, knowing her skin was vulnerable to it. They liked to see her bruise, to know they could control her shape when she could not. She rarely told her lightgivers when this happened. They rarely allowed her any time alone as it was, which was stranger still, as she had been instructed to limit her interactions with the other gods in Avon, besides her lightgivers.

“I’m all right. I’ve fallen before, I’ll fall again,” she said. “It doesn’t hurt.” Feora slithered out of the embrace of Puja.

“You don’t know what hurt is yet, my little one,” said the snake. Diamonds grew like patches along her back in crimson and peach. In her head, Feora disagreed but said nothing.

“Well, maybe if someone would tell me a story… I’d be more careful,” Feora responded, doddling her fingers. She was always moving; it was a funny quirk inherited
from the others surrounding her. It helped her think when she was moving. It was hard for her to concentrate on anything unless some part of her was in motion.

The snake sighed to itself, looked over at its partner, still a zebra, and said, “All right. We’ll tell you. One more time.”

“Yay!” Feora cried out happily. She plopped herself down in front of them and rested her elbows on her knees and put her cheeks against her waiting palms.

“What are you doing just sitting there?” Sattva asked, kicking her with one of his hooves. “Up!”

“What?” she asked, surprised. She was never asked to participate in the retelling of stories, which almost always required a shift of the skin. She had watched, from a distance, the great master Maya perform the story sequence only once, beautifully. It was one of her first memories. It was a story which required the most complex changes of all, surely Sattva knew that. But her lightgiver Sattva had been trying to develop some way for her to tell the stories in her own way, so that she might understand their shared history, so that she, as a mortal, might participate equally. He had been calling it dancing.

“You know as well as I do that we tell stories with our bodies as much as our voices. Our history is told in the shift, in the change. Dancing comes as easily to us as speech. We learn our first sounds when we learn our first sequences,” Sattva said. Learning a sequence of movement was part of the training for manipulating one’s internal energies.

“The body remembers, not the mind, your eyes will see the history and flow into you as instinct,” Puja added.
“But I can’t change,” she said.

“You can move, can’t you? Those are legs you’ve been given. Those are arms. Join us. We’ll learn together how to adapt a dance to your body,” Sattva said.

“But, my ally… is it right to change our… history? Our history is in the shift. Can we not simply show her?” Puja hissed, nervously. Puja was always the one who believed most fiercely in the power of the original twelve god shapes. Through intense meditation and training, she managed to achieve the rat shape for short periods of time, a true privilege among the gods. But she was not used to altering the training-- it seemed, to her, blasphemous.

“No. Why? So she can learn to watch all her life? Did we pull her from the sky so she could simply look upon and shyly observe? No. She will do, as she can. She will do. Up, little godling. Learn.” Sattva dug his hooves into the ground.

Feora stood tall, small though she was. She took in a great breath through her nose, bringing heat into her body, as she had always been told to. Fire breath was critical to the internal change in oneself.

“Take a breath and we’ll begin,” the zebra said, before seeing Feora had already begun. The zebra seemed to almost smile at her eagerness. Sattva’s black stripes followed one another to the tip of his head, leaving the rest of his body white. Feora was often hypnotized by it. The white turned to peach, and then a richer tan skin. Hooves turned to toes and fingers. The zebra had become the manshape Feora recognized as one of her lightgivers. As the transformation finished, Sattva stretched out from his fingers into the sky. A smooth blue stretch of soft cloth was wrapped around his waist. He had grown to feel comfortable in the human form, thinking with human thoughts, and
walking on human legs. His body became covered by a rich brown tunic which was tied around his waist. His shoulders were large and strong.

When Feora was younger, she had difficulties understanding the difference between bodies. It was Sattva who trained her to follow his energy, always becoming this male shape first, asking her to track his change to swan, his most powerful shape- the shape in which his energy was the brightest. The two human figures eventually became known to her, until she grew into the alahansari, the knowing of energies. It was one of the few senses mortals could access.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I’ll learn it with you. Feel my energy, and follow what I do.”

The snake coiled itself into a ball and began.

“Long ago,” Puja started, “when the Earth was still very young, she grew cold with loneliness, and wept the thirty great oceans of the world.” As she said the words her serpent body swelled, and grew brighter, until hundreds of feathers burst forth and she flew into the air as a great, iridescent, beautiful bird with as many colors as imaginable. Feora tried to keep track of the bird’s flow of energy as well as of the man beside her. It was chaotic and lost, the feathers changed from blues to purples to bright lime greens, and they all mixed and swirled in stripes and spots. He lifted his heavy arms and pulled himself higher, reaching, reaching for certainty, internally charged. He opened his arms with a sorrow Feora had never seen before and as he let his weight fall into his knees she felt his energy twist and swirl with great majestic swivels. She tried to follow in her own way.
The bird landed and gracefully tumbled into a great panther leaping from side to side, running. “When the first Gods came, they fell like windswept rain, thousands upon thousands of drops of light flying in the nothingness of Night.” The two human figures followed, feeling the energy of the run open their hearts. “They saw their reflection in the water of the seas,” said the panther, now turning into a magnificent stag with the most intricate and large antlers Feora had ever seen, “and paused at the beauty of the scene.”

Feora looked to Sattva for how to continue, not knowing how to follow without being able to change. He let his arms fall to his side and let his neck dangle and sway in calm introspection. His energy was peaceful as he bowed. “Coming too close, they fell to Avon, the throne of the world.” The stag lowered its head and made a large circle in the dirt with the tips of its antlers. The many extra spikes left concentric swirls in between. Sattva rose as well and moved his arms in graceful reverence. Feora continued to follow.

“Not having solid form, they took matter from the earth and meditated until a shape came upon them. The primavalia. Their first shapes. The first was the elephant,” she said, pausing, slightly in her shape, as if she had mentioned something of unfathomable reverence. “The king and creator of all things, and ruler of the sky.” Her voice grew deeper, almost endless. The antlers, Feora understood, were a symbol of respect to the great elephant.

“The second was the dragon, the destroyer. Her fire will burst the sun and return the world to sleep. She was the first blacksmith, and taught the Earth how to make metal. The third god to fall to Earth was the spider, the witch god, the master of magic. He maintains the world by spinning web in the underworld. They are the three siblings.”
“…Why doesn’t my lightgiver ever become these forms during this part?” Feora whispered quietly to her other lightgiver. Puja’s fur grew golden and her antlers glowed with an iridescent hum, but she remained a stag, as though it were meant to be a sign of respect.

“Because, Feora, very few of us can become these creatures, even fewer of us can become them for very long. You know that Feora,” Sattva responded. “Your lightgiver will become that which her body feels is the most natural in the moment. Her stance, her energy flow will mimic that of the great three but without centuries of training and meditation, neither of us will be able to invoke the more powerful gods. No one in generations has become an elephant, and even those who could all those generations ago invoked him only for a second.” The two continued to follow her lead.

“The next god to fall to the Earth as light was the rat. He is the god of cleverness.” She became a white rat with violet eyes. Feora had seen her become and hold this figure for very long periods of time. “He is the inventor of strategy.” The rat began to pace slowly, while soft ripples began to force themselves upon the white fur. The eyes changed to blue, then bright green, and the ripples continued. The rat leapt and as it did it grew so large so quickly that Feora had to duck beneath the growing sea snake.

“After the rat came the two-headed sea serpent, watchers of the oceans and fathers to all sea creatures,” Puja said in two voices, somehow managing to sound relieved to be out of the rat’s fur. It may have been her most powerful form, but she did not achieve it so easily. As quickly as she had become the seasnake, though, with two heads speaking as one, she fell into her smooth rubbery skin and sprouted orange fur. Black stripes
flapped like moving wings upon her face. She changed immediately then to dark grey fur, and her nose grew long and noble. She was flickering between wolf and tiger.

“The next to fall to Earth were the twins- the wolf and the tiger,” Puja continued. Feora looked to Sattva who fumbled in his attempt to feel a mortal way to translate the energies he knew to be right. “They were Gods of the Hunt and the Keepers of the Day and Night.” But Puja could not maintain these shapes for long, and the ripples became more obviously burdensome to her concentration. “The tiger guards the sun, and the wolf guards the moon.” Puja slowed as she started to become a great white bird.

“After they came the swan,” Puja said, “who pulled her matter from the foams of the crashing waves on a beach, and became Guardian of the Coast, where the ocean meets the land. Her light was the most beautiful and wonderful thing to behold. That is why she is called the god of Beauty and can gift beauty to anything she meets, as we did to you, my descendent.”

Puja became a pure white swan which had a single blue stripe running from its neck down to its tail and black rings circling her dandelion colored eyes. She flew easily through the skies as the two humans made waves in the air with their arms pulling the air around them slowly and pushing out with their arms in unison. Their legs were bent and calm. Sattva’s *primavalia* was the swan. It was a considered a great privilege to be brought into the world as an original shape. Puja continued the sequence.

“Her younger sister star saw the beauty of the seas and pulled a rushing wave around her light and turned into the first horse, the Messenger God. The fastest god on the fields of Avon.” Sattva collapsed into her feathers and the rumble in her skin burst legs and hooves out from beneath her. She became a fearsome grayish beast with silvery
hair that was almost copper in the light. She ran freely across the plains as she had before, and the other two followed. As she ran she grew heavier and thicker and straighter. A horn burst from her nose and she grew grey and thick skinned. The earth rumbled with her weight. The two humans put their arms flat behind them and let their weight pull them forward faster, and faster.

“The third to last god is the rhinoceros, the keeper of all the anger in the world. His horn is one of the most powerful magical weapons on Earth. He is the god of war and vengeance.” She buried her horn into the ground and dug into the ground. The other two pushed their fingers into the ground to feel the power in the soil. As her horn dug, it began to shrivel into a single spine which then multiplied along her back.

“The porcupine followed,” she continued, waddling on her little legs. “She tends to the forest and is the caller of the seasons.” She spread her spines out wide and they flashed in different colors brightly. It was so beautiful to Feora. Sattva pressed his fingers into the ground and stretched them wide. Feora followed as he continued to lift his arms up from the ground. She mirrored his movement.

“The final god to come to earth was the crab, walker of the ocean floor. The god of motherly protection.” She let her quills retract into a now hardening shell and pinchers emerged from her arms. She turned to Feora and scooped her onto her back.

“And then?!” Feora yelled, excited, bopping up and down the large ocean walker. This was her favorite part of the story.

“Then, my dear, the mortals came,” Puja said, reverting to her mortal form, holding Feora close. “After the first generation of gods came to know the entirety of the Earth, they wanted to return to the cosmos. Not wanting to leave her to solitude, they
created mortal beasts in their own image to fill the Earth with life and color. The swan spread her light to create endless types of flying creatures,” Puja said, lowering Feora, and leaping into an endless series of winged creatures. The feathers warped between a dazzling collection of bright greens and blues and deep and dark reds and browns.

“And the dragon gave birth to an egg filled with thousands of lizards,” she said, falling to the ground, flitting between a variety of long and short scaled creatures. She continued to move with her story, becoming again and again a new creature.

“And the spider weaved so many insects that the Earth has still yet to see every type,” she said, without turning into any insect. Instead she became a tall mortal woman with auburn hair. “The Earth made mortal humans from her own life force, from the heat within her breast. They had worshipped the first gods for generations, but when the time for the first ascendance came, the mortals were left to inhabit the world beyond Avon’s borders.” Puja shifted between man and woman, playing with different hairs and twirling on different feet.

“As beings of the Earth, their mortal children could never be able to join them in the cosmos. But they were influenced by the light within the first ones, feeling it call within them the sensations of the cosmos. We are the direct descendents of the first gods, all that remains of their pure light on Earth. We maintain all the shapes in the world. You can still see the first shapes in the stars in the sky, and it is from their light we pull our descendents in an endless cycle of descent and ascention. The star shapes are reminders of their time on Earth. In order to join them in the cosmos, we must reach enlightenment and shed our earthly forms and become pure light once again. Every time we change, it is a call to action to find a moment of true purity. The more mastery and
understanding we have of our form, the closer to nirvana we become. And so ends the story of our people.”

Feora laughed and spun around. She was always happy to be with her lightgivers, who were her only friends. When the other gods, even those in her own generation, weren’t refusing to acknowledge her, they were often cruel. Sattva and Puja were her only source of joy in the world, until she learned she could make some on her own. In private, where the only being around was mortal—herself.

“So every one of us came from one star in the sky?” Feora asked.

“No, my heart. We are the light from every star. And that is where we’ll return,” Sattva said. “You included. I will not leave Earth without you.”

“Then I must change as you do!” she roared, running with arms outstretched. “I will be a tiger! Hssss!” She clawed at the air baring her teeth. “I will be a swan!” She tried to feel her arms become wings and leapt into the air, but the change never came. As she fell back to earth, she tumbled down and smashed her knees into the floor. She rolled down a slender hill and hit her leg against the side of an upended tree.

Puja and Sattva ran towards her frantically. Puja became the human shape her descendent had learned to love and recognize. Feora’s skin had ripped slightly and a small amount of red liquid emerged. Sattva and Puja both gasped, mortified. They blinked white for a moment before fading into color again. Puja reached out to touch the cut but pulled her hand back. Sattva went in to grab her.

“…is that…?” Puja whispered.

“…Yes,” Sattva said, still in shock. “Are you in pain?”
Feora’s eyes were wet and she began to cry. “It hurts!” She wept into her hands and covered her knees. There was a long slit down her leg from which the strange red liquid sprang, like a fount. Near her there was a sharp branch reaching out from the ground. Feora passed out.

“We have to do something, take her somewhere,” Puja said, holding her in her arms but avoided the red.

“No! Do you know what they might do to her if they see her like this? If they know her skin had been split and… that this had happened?” Sattva cried out.

Sattva began to shift erratically into different creatures-- sniffing her as a hound, licking the air as a lizard, gazing deeply into the wounds with hawk eyes. Puja looked at her hand for a long while before pressing her palm against Feora’s leg. They both winced and Feora turned pale and passed out.

“We’ll take her back to Kala,” Puja finally said, looking at her hand. She wiped it on the grass beside her. Sattva pressed his palm firmly against Feora’s cut, trying to seal the cut. Feora turned to her side and groaned.

“No!” Sattva said, loudly. “Never again! We tried that spider sorcerer once. And with no boon to carry home. When he looked upon her with his many god eyes he told us nothing of what he saw. When his third eye opened it let a darkness in.” Sattva sounded fearful. “And now I feel his eyes on Feora always. I do not trust him.”

“Then what? What do we do? The Elder masters already didn’t want her mingling with anyone. If they see this…” she said, looking at the pool collecting beneath them, “…who knows what they’ll decide. We are lucky they let her stay with us on the fringes. Now…with blood…”
Sattva paused to think, still human. He held her close and looked panicked as Feora grew whiter. Puja began to meditate, and she shrank and was covered in simple grey fur. Her eyes turned into black beads as she fully invoked the rat, a talent Sattva had no skill for. Even if he could, Sattva’s energy was so scattered at every point his form touched Feora’s wounded body, it might have been difficult for him to focus into any useful form. Sattva understood the pure nature of worry, and knew that in the future, the crab shape would come more easily to him. Puja, always the more adept of the two, had simply woken up one day in it.

“We’ll take her to Maya,” Puja said, finally.

“The dragon?” Sattva said. “She is one of the great masters of our generation. She’s one of the Elders who decided to keep her segregated. What will a goldsmith know about tending to humans?”

“Maya told me once that she chose to keep Feora separate for her own protection. She had no fear of her. She seems… I do not know… very interested in humans. You know as well as I do how often she frequents the old temples the mortals once lived in when we opened Avon to them. I’ve seen her try to hold the human form for weeks, calling it a meditation exercise. She knows things about mortals. How they think, what they feel.”

Sattva turned into a large falcon, growing larger, and larger, until she was able to grasp Feora’s shoulders with her talons and take flight, carefully avoiding any contact with Feora’s cut.

“Then let’s go,” he said.
“Maya!” Puja called, rushing around the temples that mortals once erected in worship of the stars. She was a horse, running ahead of Sattva. The pillars were worn and the carvings in their side had all been almost completely eroded. Puja knew they would find Maya there. The children of the Earth were once welcome in Avon. These pillars were the last remaining reminders of their brief time with the old gods.

Maya was calmly meditating between a pair of eroded marble statues of the twin gods--the wolf and tiger. She was human, a tall imposing woman with dark chestnut hair, light brown eyes, and pale skin. Her knees were crossed and her hands out. Her eyes were closed.

“Puja,” she said. “I’ve been wondering when you might approach me. I was hoping you would bring her to me before something like this happened.”

“We need your help, Maya,” Puja said, growing into her human shape. Maya remained still with her eyes closed.

“I know,” she said, calmly focused on her breathing.

“We need you to invoke the dragon. Feora has been cut. She’s bleeding,” Puja said.

Maya slowly blinked her eyes open and stood. If Puja was tracking her energy, they would sense her clinging to a powerful sensation of heat within her. Sattva arrived as an eagle now with Feora still in his talons. He melted back into her human form, letting Puja take Feora in her arms. She had tears in her eyes. Maya glared at the site.

“Give her to me,” she said, firmly.
Puja held Feora close. Sattva nudged her leg with his cheetah nose. Puja softened, and relented. Maya took her and put her hand on the cut. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

“Can you help?” Puja asked, worried.

“Be silent, and we’ll see,” Maya responded, putting Feora on the ground. She opened her eyes suddenly and looked angry, very angry. They sparkled a deep gold, and turned sharp.

“She stinks of dark magic,” Maya said, looking at them with those harsh, dragon eyes. Her voice was louder and incredibly harsh, filled with centuries of anger, betrayal, resentment. “You took her to the spider,” it boomed. Fangs grew long from her mouth.

Puja and Sattva looked terrified and surprised.

“You tried to work some magic on her. You so wanted her to be like us you tried to break an unreal curse with a real one,” she stepped towards them, growing ever larger. They had never seen such a display of control in a shift before, to linger on the edge of one natural shape was almost a taboo occurrence. It almost never happened. “This girl is a gift and you don’t deserve her. She deserves a chance to be welcome in her own body. What price has she paid?”

The two stayed silent. Maya’s face was calmer as she leveled into her human shape once again.

“Oh? You didn’t know. You might have struck a bargain with the spider, but the price won’t be paid by you. She will wear its burden,” she said angrily. The two looked at the magic fabric folded around her.
“No, not the cloth. A kalmansari serves only one master, and for this one it is she,” Maya said. “But there’s a mark on her. He’ll come for something, and you won’t know when. Whatever you bought from him wasn’t worth it. I can help her. But I have a price too.”

“…What do you want?” Puja asked.

“She will train under me. Not many know this, but my primavalia was also human. Of course I changed moments later, but I know humans. I know their minds and I know some of their history by studying the temples here. I will train her to access her human senses and how to channel her energy for her own body. She will come to me every evening, and will return to you every dawn, until she decides she doesn’t want to anymore. Are we clear?”

Sattva nodded. Puja looked longingly at her wounded daughter and nodded as well.

“What are you doing?” Puja asked. Maya breathed out of her mouth with a great heat. Her eyes opened, and turned to a brighter gold color. Emerald flakes speckled across her face, and her teeth grew long and jagged. Dark blue hues fringed at the corner of every thin golden scale, like feathers, with flecks of green interspersed across her wings. Maya had fully invoked the dragon.

With a great huff, she breathed a thin string of lavender flame which surrounded Feora. When it hit the blood it sparked white and then disappeared. The leg’s skin began to slowly come together; the blood began to fade away. Feora sat up in the flame and cried out, grabbing the back of her neck. When Maya stopped, she returned to her
statuesque human form, breathing heavily from the strain of holding the shape. Puja and
Sattva saw a small, already faded scar where Feora had once been bleeding.

“A scar…” Puja whispered. She had only heard of them before, as she had tried
to learn more about mortals. Scars were another of those permanent oddities.

“She’ll be fine,” Maya said. “Scars are mortal symbols of experience and
wisdom. Their skin remembers every battle, unlike ours.” Puja took Feora in her arms
again. She felt so small to her.

“Thank you,” Sattva said, shifting into a swan, one of his more powerful
invocations. He bowed to her to show the depth of his gratitude.

“Take her home to rest,” Maya said. “Bring her back tomorrow evening for her
training to begin.”

“Thank you,” Puja said, looking up from Feora. Maya stared at her, became a
dragon once more, and took flight.
Feora ran off in a hurry to her special place, the space near the border. It was a place that mortals had built. Heavy stone lay flat and polished by centuries of graceful fog. There were still pieces of the temple standing, with little etching in the side. Some were of humans holding strange poses. Feora didn’t know what to make of it.

Her favorite place was the circular edge, with protruded in one sharp end point - the border of the Avon. One on side was a fiercely tall wall of thick stone mountainside, which had been engraved by mortals centuries ago. She still had until sunset to enjoy some time to herself before meeting Maya for training. Though they had spent only a few together, Feora’s body was still developing. As her body continued to grow older - a phenomenon which true gods considered blasphemous to the very notion of pure shifting - Maya demanded more of her. These calm moments had become exceptionally rare in the years of her harsh training. In Avon, age was determined by stages of enlightenment, not years.

Her hair whipped violently around her as she stood there, at the edge of her world. She looked out upon the ocean of mist around her. She liked to stand there at the end of her world and look out to the mystery of what might lie beyond the walls of her, what she imagined as small, section of the Earth. She used her human senses to see what she could see and hear what she could hear. There was some other sense, something entirely human, craning out to the open air searching for some sort of future. She leaned out over the embankment, and bent. She could bend so far over without losing balance. Any
breeze might persuade her limbs to topple over the edge, to nothingness, to an empty wet death. She reached out her hand and laughed.

Then she heard something in the fog. A flapping of some sort, a whipping. It was coming towards her, through the mist. She could not see it, but she could hear it, she could feel it on her skin. Whatever it was it was massive. She leapt and twisted her body over the ledge and caught the end with her fingers. The fog swept around her to cup her body and she knew she would be hidden.

She heard the thud of a great beast landing and its wings settling beside it. She felt the weight of her bodies on her fingers and calmed her mind. She lifted herself up with such quiet and grace that the eagle, with eyes sharper than the razors on its talons, did not turn its great head. It was one of the largest she had ever seen. It took her a while to focus her senses upon the eagle, to feel who it was. She closed her eyes and let her skin feel the hum of this other body.

*Maya,* she thought. *What are you doing out here? We aren’t supposed to meet until nightfall.*

The eagle melted so quickly into a human shape which began coughing, madly.

Maya always became the most lovely women. She always looked dignified to Feora, like one of the female queens carved into the temple walls. She was a tall, strong woman with a power emanating from beneath her skin. Her hair was long, the color of chestnuts and rich wood from the deepest forest. It fell in long waves to just above her waist. A violet cloak materialized to hang off her bare shoulders which looked lighter than air. She looked out to the mist where she had come from. Feora held her breath.

“You know it isn’t safe to be dangling off the edge like that,” Maya said.
Feora sighed before gripping the stone embankment, kicking her legs up back and straightening them and her arms and tumbling compactly onto the ledge. She stayed low to the ground like a cat, moving with the rolling fog around Maya, who laughed.

“Hunting me, are we little godling? Haha!” She bent her knees and crept on her toes around, smiling largely.

Feora tried to throw her voice, like a frog, playfully growling around Maya, who twisted the long purple fabric around her, twirling. “Oh where could you be, little tiger? Hm? Are you creeping like a tiger, little one? A wolf? Perhaps slithering like a snake?”

“RAR!” Feora cried, leaping from behind Maya to tackle her. As Feora wrapped her arms around Maya, Maya’s shape dissolved and whipped into a snake coiling around Feora, who imagined her bones were soft and let her joints bend so she could wriggle free. She tumbled forward.

“Good!” Maya called. “Good! Stay limber, find strength in your agility. Stay moving, never stop.” The scales of the snake turned soft to white fur and paws, claws, and arms grew out from her sides. She became a white panther, batting at Feora with large paws. Feora flitted, spiraling sideways, leaping backwards and springing on one foot, one hand, here and there.

“You’re getting faster, little godling! Fast like a tiger, but you must be cunning, like a rat.” Maya’s fur rippled from white to brown as she changed from panther to bear. “Predict what your enemy is thinking. Know their weapons, and know yours. You only have a few. Human teeth are mostly useless, claws nonexistent, so you must find your own.” She began snapping quickly at Feora, growling loudly, and swinging heavy arms around her. Feora began sprinting away now. “Never run, little godling,” she cried out,
Feora darted after her. “Don’t give me a free look at your backside.” She pushed Feora with her snout, who began running in zigzag. “Good! The bear is heavy, but not hard to accelerate. Always keep things moving.” Maya flitted into a large grey-furred wolf. “But I’m a new creature, little one. Don’t let panic blind you. Reconsider your tactics.”

Feora laughed, jumped to spring from her hands, picking up a rock from the ground. As she landed on her feet she let her weight spiral her forward and at the end of the spin she rocketed the rock back towards the wolf just behind her. It hit Maya squarely on the head. The entire sequence took her a fraction of a moment.

“OW!” Maya growled, laughing. “You clever little demon!”

Feora laughed hysterically, letting her tongue freely fall from her mouth, filled with joy. She cart wheeled away from Maya who leapt forward, curling up into a ball and landing as a large bulbous frog. A bright red tongue whipped around Feora’s waist, who continued to laugh as she was yanked back to the returning arms of Maya’s preferred human form. The lady of the stone is how Maya referred to the human female shaped she liked to take.

It was an unusual practice among the gods to select individual shapes to recreate, even among the animals, but it was not without occurrence. There were those in the skyfolk community who despised the very notion of stagnancy- who believed that to project a unique identity upon a God’s form was heinous. Maya had been taking the same shape since before Feora was born. She had even been letting it age- another oddity. Feora felt it also odd that Maya felt the need to comment on her height, claiming that someday Feora would be as tall as her own mortal form, which Feora felt even stranger considering Maya could simply make herself taller at any moment.
The two tumbled together, Feora screeching and laughing with youthful bliss and Maya with a wide smile and joy in her eyes. Maya held her in her arms and Feora breathed deeply into her hair. She loved the way Maya always smelled like the damp wildflowers which grew along the mountain’s rim.

“You,” she started, “…are getting faster. Stronger, too. I’ve been training you for years and I’ve never seen you this fast. That stone did hurt, you know.” She rubbed her forehead. Feora closed her eyes and blew on Maya’s forehead. She gave it a kiss before slumping back down. “And what brings you to the edge of the world, my sweet? I thought I’d told you to wait for me until nightfall.” Maya stroked Feora’s hair, who nuzzled into her in a ball.

“I like it up here,” she said, tersely. Feora rarely liked to admit her feelings. To her, it was simply another way for someone to hurt you. There were already too many of those out there without her help.

“Why, little godling?” Maya asked, sincerely, putting all of her attention on Feora, where it usually resided anyways.

“It’s quiet here. No squawking birds or roaring lions. No hoof beats. It’s just me up here, and the sound of falling water,” Feora said. She was also sincere.

“You come by yourself? Is that wise?” she said, knowing the exclusory attitude of Avon’s younger, less trained gods. A few of the child gods with penchants for invoking the angrier of the original twelve’s children, surrounded her once as laughing hyenas and ravens, mocking her. Then there were the rocks.

From the edge where Maya and Feora sat, the sun shined down on their faces and they ran their fingers through the grass growing through and around the stone floor.
Avon was full of long stretches of grassy plains bathed in sunlight. There was the deep forest at the base of the tallest mount, where the spider made his cave. The apex was full of ice, the coldness of space reached down to form what looked like a great seat in the hillside. At the edge where the two were, the hum of a river which formed from the melted ice ran alongside them before diving off a ledge out into nothing.

“I do what I want,” she said, proudly. She craned her neck and squinted her eyes, hopping up to her feet and crouching low. She said in a hoarse whisper, looking out into the empty grass, “I sneak.”

Maya laughed and responded, “And you’re a good little sneak, aren’t you?”

Maya’s face contorted. She looked slightly pained and nauseated.

“Are you alright, Maya?” she asked.

“Yes, my dear,” she responded, “A shift is upon me.” She put her head to her forehead and her hair turned light. Her eyes changed to blue.

“Do you not like to change, Maya? Does it hurt?” Maya believed Feora’s voice was the most innocent sound she had ever heard.

“No my dear. It doesn’t hurt.” She laughed. “It just feels… uncomfortable to stay in one shape for too long. You know that. We don’t have a shape of our own.” Maya looked away and used her hair to hide the pain on her face.

“Have Sattva or Puja told you how it is supposed to feel, when we change?” she said, finally turning back.

“A little. They say it’s like water running over your skin. Like coming out of the river and feeling it slide down and drip around me. They say it tingles,” she shivered, instinctually.
“Yes, to some it feels a wind is blowing against them. Some feel fire, a warmth burning up their outsides. Others feel their skin cracking, their bones crumble and restack. It all sounds rather ticklish, from my perspective. I can’t imagine not scratching all over if that were true. You should be glad it doesn’t happen to you.”

“But I want to run like a horse and fly like an owl. I want to breathe the great fire,” Feora said, growling and roaring with the voice of a child. “I want to be the great Elephant and cross the silver river and rejoin my ancestors in the cosmos.” She whipped her thin arm in front of her face and trumpeted.

Maya laughed. “You really are extraordinary.”

They cuddled together for a moment and Maya began to play with Feora’s long wavy hair between her fingers.

“There is one from your generation, though,” she said, almost to herself. “Raja. He is prone to the invocation of the male energy, but his movement from creature to creature is unbelievable. Since he was pulled from the great light, he has attained all but four master forms. And with minimal concentration…” She put her hand to her chin. Feora stomped around the grass, bored, flinging her arm before her.

“And he can stay in them… for weeks… with no discomfort. He was born the same day as you, I think…” Maya paused for a long while.

Maya watched Feora stomp for a moment, quietly, before saying, “Listen to me.” Feora looked at her. “You should treasure it. You have a body that is your own. No one else can be you. No one can invoke your shape, at least not for long. You’re whole. I do not know what my future holds, but yours…” Maya’s eyes watered. “There might be children in your future… born from your own light.”
“But I am a child,” Feora corrected.

“Yes,” Maya said, slumping her shoulders down. “That you are. And since little godlings should be with their lightgivers before their training, I’m afraid I must take you home.”

“Booo!” Feora whined out. “No!” She set off running. “I’m tired of sequences, I’m tired of training to be something I am not. No!”

Maya laughed, ran after her, and scooped Feora into her arms. Maya tossed Feora over her shoulder and became a beast of a black horse and rode swiftly away from the river’s end back to outskirts of their ancient city.

“What does it feel like when you do it?” Feora asked, clinging to handfuls of jet black horse hair.

The thudding hooves sounded in her ears and Maya took a few moments to respond.

“It feels like crying,” she said.

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“Breathe, my child,” Maya, now a dark-skinned male demanded. They were training, as they often did, at night, in a stretch of land out of site from the prying eyes of the other gods. She stood, like Feora, palms to his side open wide, reaching from the floors of her feet to the tip of her male human skull, as though a string were pulling the crown of her head towards the moon. “Breathe deeply and warmly, fill your body with the moonlight.”
And Feora did breath. She allowed for quiet to fill her up, she allowed for the light to seep underneath her closed eyelids, she could feel the energy in her body flow more evenly, spreading into every piece of her. If there were space in her mind, the cold air would overwhelm her senses. But Feora felt nothing but focus.

It would have to be Maya that trained her. She was one of the most experienced and powerful beings in Avon, and one of the few unafraid of Feora’s constancy. Only Maya among them could invoke the dragon. It also helped that Maya had a special attachment to the human form, an attachment others recognized and found peculiar.

“Channel the energies,” Maya told her. “Feel the power growing from your feet, and pull its force into your legs, your sacrum, your heart. Feel it pulse, vibrating beneath your skin. Feel how thin your skin is in comparison, this weak illusory container. Push upon it with your breath. Feel the change, and move. Lift your arms and feel the power of the swan god, feel your arms become your wings. Rise with your breath, fill your being with power!”

With her eyes closed she could envision her limbs sprouting feathers, she could feel the soft sinewy growths spurting like hair all over her. As she bent from the waist to lower herself, the pull of gravity felt as though she were diving from the side of a tall cliff, screeching towards the floor, and as she pulled herself from the descent to lengthen her back and breathe in more light, she felt her nose sharpen and harden. She felt a sudden lightness as she lost mass rapidly, and as she shot her legs behind her she felt them shrink and pull into the sockets and as she spread her toes into the floor the webbing sprouted and she became one with the swan. As she fluttered her eyes open, she saw soft
fingertips spread into dirt, and long brown hair dangling at her sides, and she began to cry.

“Emotion is to be redirected,” Maya barked at her. While in training, it was clear Maya was more dragon than human. “You swell with water, like the sea serpent. The swan must feel only uplifted, levity.” She raised her arms and as she did her skin turned bone white and plumes of smokey quills ran rampant across her. Her face stretched to gold and her eyes fell into her skull and she rose with wind. “The swan is one of the first original shapes any of us learns to master. Most of us can hold this shape for longer than any other. Some for an entire day. We desire to return to the stars, we are meant to ride the wind, to be part of the sky.”

As Maya spiraled in the air she couldn’t help but laugh. “It doesn’t hurt that flying is incredibly fun,” she said, landing beside Feora, the webbing plumping between her feet and hardening. Her neck sprouted and night black hair tricked down her backside. The transition was far from fluid, it was a jerking command, pulling pieces of the body into an arrangement violently. A horse suddenly stood before her.

“Many shapes such as this do not come easily for even the most practiced among us. You, who are uncompelled to change as we are, may never experience such violence in your own body. Your energy, which is contained in a single shape, can only be channeled through the limited avenues, and can therefore become more practiced within it. I can feel it, and I can train you to feel it in yourself, and others. To follow my own.” Feora looked blank, hiding a sense of sadness. Maya noticed.

“But even shapes such as this I can only maintain for short bursts of time, the duration of a sunset and no longer. There are only few among us to ever fully invoke the
power of the crab, and even fewer to know the fiery breath of the dragon. Only the true masters of our people can invoke their spirits. I myself have only heard of one master to ever truly bring forth the elephant, and only for a moment. It is said that afterwards he reached enlightenment and returned to the stars.”

She shuffled on her hooves uncomfortably and began to shrink in stature. Soft skin replaced brown fur and soft curves replaced the bulk of mighty hips. Her legs settled into place, intertwined with one ankle nestled into the opposite hip, one knee to the ground, and the other a perfect perpendicular. The arms, too, when they became sucked into the sockets, became intertwined, one elbow nestled into the other, palms together above the shoulders. From beneath the arms came breasts. After placing herself into a standing position, the new woman figure returned her cloak to around her neck. She, as a true god, did not need a kalmansari to cover her. Maya had true power over her appearance.

“And when can I try this form, Maya?” Feora asked, impatiently.

“You are given forms I believe you can achieve, Feora. When you are able to master one, we will move to the others, but you have no control over your own body. You will be given form when you are prepared to fill it properly,” Maya responded.

They had been training for years with no apparent shift in sight.

“Why continue with these exercises if I’m never going to get anywhere with it. What if I am not supposed to change? I am older now. It should have happened already. And I’m growing even older still, every day. If I can’t shift my skin as you do, why not live with people like me? Why waste more time getting older, shunned and dismissed? Hated. Why live with people who don’t even like me?”
Feora felt so tired.

Maya gave the young girl, no taller than a sapling, a soft embrace.

“I like you,” she said.

“I do not wish to stay in this place and know only isolation and rigidness. I am my own shape, which the others have too much fear to take. I’ve never been able to invoke any other human shape like the one you take, with full shoulders and as a male. I am human. I am female. I am fixed. Maybe I do belong with my people, like Puja says,” she said. Puja often sat for long periods invoking the god of cleverness, trying to plan Feora’s future. Often, living among mortals was something she explored without reservation.

“Speak not ill of that which does not change,” Maya said. “So says the elephant god. Our people believe in fluid motion, but the mountain is where we draw our stability, our foundation. Without that we would know only chaos. Whatever trees the mountain lets grow upon her hips change in the cold and heat, dropping leaves, turning red, ever reaching higher. Growing tall, as you do. The river’s water may be ever different, but the flow’s path remains dug into the mountainside.”

Maya stepped back from her and looked her seriously in the face.

“I never want to hear again that I am not among your people,” Maya said. She put her hand on Feora’s shoulder. Feora looked up at her.

“Maya…” she started, “Why do you like to be human? I mean, you are a master of forms. You can be anything. A wolf… a man… even a dragon. I know that… that some gods channel female energies more easily, and some channel masculine energies
more easily. I mean, you’re not female always, but for the most part, you can be whatever you desire. So why do you choose to appear a woman?”

Maya looked out into the distance for a moment. She looked sad, only for a moment, but a soft, secret smile licked her lips before she turned to answer. “Because this is who I am on the inside.”

Suddenly, a large red falcon descended gracefully between them. Its large wings opened and melted into orange and black stripes. Long whiskers perked from the nose which had just been a beak and teeth peaked from a white and furry mouth. The god had invoked the spirit of the tiger, and it was imposing.

“Come, Maya, you have been summoned,” Omar, an Elder god and caller of the twins, told her, his voice echoing over itself. Omar had access to the tiger and the wolf figures that only few true masters could produce. Their bodies always came in pairs. Tiger claws could slice the shine off a blade, but the nose of a wolf could find you anywhere on Earth. If they had sent Omar, even Feora knew the Elder Gods were discussing very important. There hadn’t been an official gathering of the Elder gods since she had come into the world, and it had been lifetimes since the one before that.

“What for?” Maya asked.

“I was not told anything but for you to hurry,” Omar said, looking at Feora for a long while. Maya noticed. As Maya paused to consider the command, Omar flickered into a wolf:

“Child, stay here and continue your breathing,” she said. “Feel the constriction in your throat to warm the area, fill your lungs with heat and light and attempt to invoke the
Swan spirit once more. I shall return for you later.” Maya warped into a large azure panther and ran off. Omar followed.
Feora woke with a start. She was sweaty and unrested, haunted by some forgotten nightmare. All she felt was the need to run away. But run where? Avon was her paradisiacal prison. Either way, she had to be alone somewhere, so she got up and left her simple, open-air space.

It was always rare for Feora to be left to her own devices. Her guardians, the ones who plucked her light from the night’s sky, which settled and stayed in her *primavalia*, the first shape one takes, always feared for her when she was alone. There were no private spaces in Avon, as many gods had no need for possessions, but her guardians did prefer to keep her in an isolated space in the westward area of Avon. Feora wished at times that she knew her parents without worry, in some other way. She believed they encouraged her isolation from the others for her own safety, but she couldn’t help but wonder if they were not just a little embarrassed. They had been told years ago to keep Feora away from too much interaction with the others, so how could she really blame them for hating her?

When Maya and her lightgivers disappeared to speak with the council of five, she felt compelled to her own sacred space, far from her home on Avon. She had always felt called to the edge of Avon, the border in which she could see Avon cease to exist. Where Avon become somewhere else. This was her favorite place- the edge of the world. It was the presumed exit of Avon, a great sea of clouds and mist that seemed to never end.

The ice river emptied itself here, originating from the snow in the great peaks of Avon. No god ventured that far north, the only place in between being the spider’s lair. There was really no part of Avon she had yet to explore, save his lair. Now that she was
older, and stronger, she had adventured out on her own. Against instruction, she had followed legions of monkey gods through the trees, struggling against any hope to keep swinging alongside them. They laughed when she fell, and gave no accolades when she stayed with them longer, and longer, after every attempt. She had chased gods as horses and cheetahs through endless fields of wild grass. She had overcome the ice river, bathing in the cold until her body rejected any sense of submission to the annoyance of temperature. She had climbed the tallest hills and scaled the most treacherous walls, until there was nothing left to conquer. Nothing in Avon, at least. *Except for the dark stone cave... and the mountainside...* she thought. *If only there were some way to descend safely. If only I had something to hold on to. Would I... if I could?*

As she looked out, her *kalmansari* folded itself around her to keep her warm. She had never felt safer than when it held her close. Even knowing it had come from the spider did not keep her from cherishing it. Maya had said it bore no curse or magic beyond its ability to reshape itself, but even she did not know true magic as the spider did. But it was the only thing that helped her feel at home in Avon, probably the opposite of the spider’s intent. It *moved* with her, changing colors depending on her surroundings. As she considered her isolation from the others, she felt a piece of something rubbing against her within it. It was a thread coming undone from her *kalmansari*. Just a single thread. She pulled at it, and as she did it glowed white, and turned into a silver chain. *Strange,* she thought. *Just one thread?*

She swung it around herself to become acclimated with the weight of it. It moves as though it were heavy, but to her it felt as light as the silk it truly was. She stooped below to grab a thick rock and banged against it. The chain looked unharmed. She tied
the stone to its end in a knot she had been taught by Maya, who had once glimpsed the spider’s form to understand the nature of weaving. As she flung the stone around her like a heavy weapon, commanding it to slam into the ground her and there, a thought occurred to her.

“Could I use this to…” she said to herself, before turning behind her. She sensed something moving in the fog. She pulled the chain to her and undid the rock, letting the kalmansari take the chain into its many folds.

Feora was never bothered much either by her solitude. The others mostly left her alone, engaging only when required by some special training program devised just for her. This is why it was strange to Feora to find herself not alone in her special place.

The others always underestimated her ability to sense another. But even in the dense fog whispering around her ankles she could feel the creeping of a god towards her. Feora could feel a feline energy approaching slowly.

“I know you’re there,” she finally called.

The cat stayed quiet in the mist. Feora stood tall.

“I’m not scared of you,” said the wily, little bobcat slowly inching its way forward. It was small, smaller than most of the other skyfolk, in any case, when they invoked the bobcat’s form. Feora looked at him blankly, confused.

“And I’m not scared of you either!” Feora yelled back, expecting a fight. Their voices were high-pitched and youthful. She threw a rock directly at the cat, which became a crab, catching the small rock in one of his pinchers and smashing it to dust.

“Haha! Are you sure?” the crab asked, proudly, not noticing the second rock coming directly for its head. Overconfidence was often Feora’s greatest weapon. The
rock plopped against the shell and fell down, clacking against the stone floor in several quiet bounces. The shell had almost sounded hollow. The crab stood still from embarrassment and grew redder. After years of being thrown at, Feora took the time to become good at throwing. Her aim was impeccable.

Feora laughed, facing away from him, standing on her hands. Her hair showed hints of scarlet as it dangled below her, beams of sunlight slipping through. Her skin glowed in the light-rose-colored cheeks on deep bronze skin.

The crab’s skin stayed red but blurred as fuzz came over him in patches. The beady black eyes popped yellow irises and sharp claws turned to puffy black paws. The fox shook its head and rubbed his head.

“You are fast,” the fox said. “My lightgiver said that I should stay away from you so I came to find you. They told me human mortals were slower.”

“I am human,” she said, splitting her legs back and forth above her. “But I am not a slow one. Are you Raja?” she asked, already knowing.

The fox blinked and became a spotted puppy. “So you can tell us apart,” he said, prancing up to her, sniffing around her, almost excited at the news. “Even with those human senses.”

“What am I, your rear end?” she said, smacking him away from smelling her behind. “Of course I can sense you. I have been trained in the alahansari, after all. Same as you.”

The puppy yipped from surprise and curled into a ball. It flopped its ears to the ground and its little eyes grew wide and wet.

Feora smiled. “You think I’ll fall for this trick?”
The pup’s ears grew longer and floppier. It raised its backside and wagged its tail, letting his tongue roll out onto the ground. The puppy jumped at Feora and licked her face, before she pushed it off laughing. “Stop, stop! You win.” She grabbed its ears and began roughly rubbing the top of its head. The puppy’s eyes rolled back into its head and its tongue dangled.

“You have no idea how good that feels,” the puppy murmured, eyes drooping down the sides of its fuzzy cheeks.

Feora slowed her hand and looked up. “At least this will never happen to me,” she said, scratching at the little dog’s side until its leg frantically beat in the air.

“Hey!” it said, writhing and kicking, turning into a small raven haired boy. “That tickles!” His skin blinked to different colors, rich browns and pale yellows. His hair grew short and long and his arms went from short and stubby to thin and long.

“Would you make up your mind already!” Feora cried out, disturbed. She had never seen changes come upon someone so vividly and quickly.

“Then stop tickling me!” Raja said, finally becoming a lumbering tortoise, waddling away, trying to catch its breath. “Whoo! That was not as fun as it looked.”

The design on his shell moved, slowly, like clouds reshaping themselves in the wind. Raja turned his head and a lizard tongue jutted out. The shell was pulled out and sank into a large individual scales. He was a fat lizard shoveling around in the dirt. His skin rippled for a moment.

Feora sat silently while Raja, now a mole, worked his way through the dirt.

“So it’s true what they say about you, then?” he popped up from the ground, a little pile of dirt on his head.
“Which is?"

“That you don’t change.” He went back to digging. His voice was muffled by the ground. “That you always look like that.”

Feora didn’t say anything.

“It doesn’t bother me,” Raja said, popping up from the ground, this time with the head of a penguin. He wriggled out of the hole he had been digging. Feora stared at him for a while.

“Why were you digging?”

“I do what my instinct tells me to,” he said, waddling towards her. “Don’t you?”

“When it pleases me.”

“It always pleases me.”

“I’m sure it does,” she quipped.

“Do you like being human?” Raja asked.

“Do you like being… whatever you are right now?” she asked, looking out into the distance, not knowing if Raja had changed into something else already.

“I do,” he responded. “I like being everything. But I’m not like this all the time. But you…” he grew larger and red-tinted dark brown hair fell to his sides. Cloth fell to his sides. “You always look like this.”

When Feora looked back she gasped. She was looking at herself wearing a thin scarlet sheet which fluttered in the wind. It was like she was looking into the calmest part of the island’s little lake, the reflection that gave the first light pause. She saw her mouth, her nose, her eyes and cheeks and hair. Raja smiled, with her smile.
“Is this how you see the world?” Raja said. For a moment, Feora could not hear a difference in the voice. She was taken aback and stood up, walking backwards.

Raja, still appearing like her, looked noticeably confused. “What’s wrong?” she asked, with that voice.

“I, uh,” Feora started. Raja stood up with her legs.

“It’s just…” she tried to look away.

“I don’t mind being human,” Raja said. Feora didn’t breathe. “There’s something refreshing about the dulled senses. And there’s… a way to thinking when I’m this way.” Raja proceeded to do a handstand with her arms, mimicking her. “It’s more… organized. Do you find you’re more organized?” Feora was still quiet as Raja flipped back onto her legs. Raja looked at Feora and put her palm on Feora’s shoulder. Feora pulled away. “What’s wrong?”

Feora looked up.

“No one has ever looked like me before.”

Raja’s face was surprised. “You’ve never seen yourself before?”

“No,” Feora said. “I mean… normally the others are too afraid to look like me. They think they’ll get stuck or something.”

Raja looked puzzled again and grew into another human shape, male and thin.

“That’s silly,” he said. “The human consciousness is fun to invoke. Their shapes have these nifty… paws.” He outstretched her long and thin fingers.

“Your shape is interesting though. I noticed a scar on the back of your neck,” Raja said. “Shaped like a small diamond.”
“…A scar?” she said, surprised. The only scar she knew about was on her leg when she had cut herself before she met Maya. She scarcely ever heard the word. It had never occurred to her that this was a special talent only she had. It never occurred to think of it as a talent at all, marking one’s body for all eternity.

“Yes, it’s faded, but I can still see it. I only know about mortal scars from a training session with Maya. It is a complex form of shifting, adding details like that, and maintaining them. It is another way to keep your shape entirely your own,” Raja said. He turned and showed Feora his back, and there it was. A tiny scar, that almost looked like a small star with four points of light. “Strange, no?” Feora stared for a long while in wonderment.

“In any case, what should my human be?” He jumped and let himself grow fatter with every bounce. He was hefty and jiggled when he laughed. “How about this, hm?” He grabbed his belly and rumbled it. Feora laughed.

“What about this?” he became a white haired girl, with pale skin and black eyes and incredibly long arms. He moved gracefully around. “This form is so happy to be moving. There’s such a strange balance.” He began to move with arms outstretched, feeling the weight of his limbs move him around. “It’s lower into the sacrum. I never noticed that before.”

“Or what about this?” Black poured through the white hair which curled only slightly and shortened to the temple. Her soft nose pointed and the jaw became strong and square, but still boyish. He was thin but strong and wore only a loose-fitting tunic. His skin was tinted a light amber as were his eyes, which had a ring of blue-green around their rim.
“Not bad,” Feora said, grinning. She did not know exactly how she knew, but to her Raja had become one of the most beautiful male shapes she had ever seen.

“You’re not like the others,” she said.

“Nor have I any wish to be,” he said. “Why attempt to be an other when I can shape my own path? You’re something different, you are yourself, and you’re here to change things. I want to be a part of that,” he said.

“And this doesn’t scare you?” she asked, cautiously.

“Not even a little.”

“It should,” she said, bluntly.

“Why?”

“Even gods like you need perspective. I’ve heard the other master’s speak of you. Of your talent,” she said, intending to unsettle his calmness, to remove what might be a ploy against her.

The handsome boy looked nervous. “And what did you hear?”

“Maya told me that you are one of the most remarkable shifters in generations. That you move from being to being effortlessly, gracefully, including some that she took ages to achieve. I’ve even heard that you may one day invoke the elephant, and lead us all until the end of time. You may have spent as much time as I on Avon, but you’re closer to enlightenment than anyone here. Does that scare you?”

Feora was unused to friendliness from her peers. She had wariness in her that would reaffirm itself when she felt exposed or vulnerable to kindness. When she spoke to Raja, she felt exposed and vulnerable to his kindness, which, to her, felt as genuine as sunshine. It irked her. Raja seemed unfazed by her outburst, but his voice grew louder.
“Do you feel jealous that you can never join us on the great runs? When we all become horses and feel our hooves crack against the ground, and you’re left alone? I’ve seen you following us you know. But it’s hard to follow when we enter the sky with ease on great wings. We build our own worlds with what we’re given,” Raja said. Feora had clearly rubbed a sore spot.

But she knew he was right and she was impressed by his honesty. She tried never to think about what she couldn’t do, and tried to concentrate on what she could. But it was next to impossible not to let those thoughts creep in, to see and watch others who were lucky enough to come into the world as they were supposed to. In all honesty, Feora was jealous.

“Let’s not pretend our worlds are always perfect, or simple,” Raja continued, now clearly agitated. “I’d give anything to go to the mortal world, to stay as one thing, to think in one way. To see and know something beyond this world. But I came to it with a great light I can’t really control. I can be anything, change anytime, but that doesn’t mean I’m always in control, or that some…” Raja was speaking quickly and wildly, jumping from creature to creature, crazed.

Feora could feel his energy spike wildly. Suddenly he grew grey and heavy. His skin cracked and his size doubled. His hands turned hard and flat and two white tusks sprouted from his cheeks. As he grew taller, and wider, he cried out in fear and fell into a heavy, strong body. He shook his head, eyes-wide as the once handsome nose turned long and wrinkled. It reached out and up and his ears grew long when suddenly he began to shake, and rumble. Feora gasped and reached out, touching the left tusk with her palm and looking deeply into Raja’s eyes, which had stayed the perfect gold with the blue-
green fringe. His changing stopped for a second. For this brief moment, they were entirely connected.

Feora felt his energy so completely, and she knew it to be of such purity it was hard to believe. She felt the back of her neck burn again and her blood began to boil. She felt the scar on her leg burn with a strange heat, and she remembered… voices. Cloudy, like her nightmare. Her lightgivers calling out… the story of the original skyfolk… Had she fallen? The feeling of blood on her leg. She let go of the tusk and fell back, remembering a name. Kala.

Raja winced in pain and cried out. The nose hardened and turned pointed. The two ivory tusks wrapped themselves in a swirl around it in a single sharp point, and Raja fell into a rhinoceros.

“You pulled me back,” he said, gasping for air.

“You almost became-” Feora said, shocked.

“-Don’t tell anyone,” he said, looking at the ground. He opened his arms, which became red wings, and he flew away on the wind.
Chapter VI

The meeting of the five most powerful gods in Avon was a rare occasion. The five only convened under extreme circumstances, a tradition brought forth by the original twelve gods. It was in the first gathering that they chose return to the heavens, leaving Earth with a bounty of their children. It was in another that they chose to segregate Feora from only a select few, lest she prove aberrant to their way of life. This gathering would be different.

“Are we all here?” Omar, now a bright fiery red tiger with bold stripes, said.

“We are waiting for the spider,” Maya responded. There would be five of them, as tradition dictates. Maya was in her human shape while Lena, the most powerful invoker of the rat god, had already called her more insightful form. She was calmly sitting across from the two of them, her beady eyes looking westward.

“I can feel him coming,” she said. The five most powerful gods would meet in their most powerful shapes to discuss matters of import.

“Then we’ll wait,” Omar said. Omar was capable of holding the twin hunter gods, the wolf and the tiger, for days upon days. Lena, the rat, would meditate for weeks in thought as the rat. Puja could only hold the rat for hours, at most. Maya alone could invoke the power of the dragon, and Kala could become the spider. Neither had testified to testing their true limits in these shapes. The fifth most powerful god in Avon was Andor, the two headed serpent. He was waiting nearby as a land snake.

“Shall you invoke the sea serpent, Andor?” Omar asked.
“I will when Kala arrives. I do not need to think in two minds for longer than necessary,” he replied.

“Then I suggest you bring them forth,” a voice called from the direction Lena was staring. He revealed himself from the darkness crawling on his many legs, the size of a small boulder. “And you as well, Maya.”

Maya closed her eyes, and sparkled with a purple glow. Golden scales erupted around her skin as she grew ten times in size. She roared loudly as wings sprouted from her back and lavender fire lit the sky. Andor’s head split in two, and fins sprouted from his side. The two heads weaved their way in and out of each other’s direction.

“I believe we all know why we are here,” Omar said, calmly shifting into a wolf. “The human girl.”

“Yes… indeed,” Lena said, softly. “She certainly is interesting.”

“Apparently,” Maya said, shooting Kala an angry glance. “More interesting to some, than others.”

“The other child gods of her generation all avoid her. They fear infection. This generation fears her presence will keep them from attaining ascension. They fear she will bind them to Earth,” Omar said.

“That is foolish,” one serpent head said. “The old gods lived among humans, too.”

“It is wise,” said the other. “She is not human. She is god-born. Her life energy is cosmic, not mortal. There has never been another. We do not know how her energy will affect ours. She might stagnate us as well.”
“Or she might bring us closer to nirvana. A message from the first ones. Don’t forget it was us who advised to keep her separated. Maybe it’s time she’s integrated more completely,” Maya said.

“I agree,” said one serpent head. “She would not have been sent to us by the sky if she were not important. We should keep her close.”

“She might be important to mortals, not us,” Omar corrected. “Perhaps she would be better off among her own kind.”

“We are her own kind,” Maya said. “Her lightgivers are here. That which cannot change is doomed to fail. The elephant meant us to accept change in more than just our skins.”

“Regardless,” Lena said loudly to quiet the others. “We have no legitimate proof of anything. We don’t know much about her. The rat may be wise, but I can deal only in facts. Empirically speaking, she has done nothing to wrong us but be different.”

“You know once she descends there is almost no way for her to return unless she has access to all twelve original god shapes. No human can come to Avon alone,” Maya said.

“…You’re quiet,” Omar said to Kala. “What does the spider think about her?”

Maya glared at him. Kala worked his many legs. He cast a dark shadow around them.

“Yes, Kala,” Maya spat. “What do you have to say about her?”

“I think she’s very,” he said, slyly, “… unique.”

“How insightful,” Maya snapped.

“She may eventually be a danger to us,” Omar said.
“I agree,” Lena said. “But again, proof.”

“Lies!” Maya roared. “You looked upon her with your many eyes, Kala. I smelled your dirty magic on her. What did you do?”

The other gods looked at him, surprised.

“Speak up!” Andor’s heads said in unison.

“We both know you have other reasons to be interested in her, Maya,” the spider said. “But she can’t be your child. I have seen her future, destroyer.”

“What did you see, traitor!” Maya said, angrily. She puffed flame from the sides of her mouth. She ran at him and began spitting fire at his many legs. The other gods moved to stop her but she paused.

“I saw her in the mortal world,” he said, laughing.

“She belongs in Avon!” Maya cried out.

“With you? She belongs with others like her,” the spider said, almost smiling, if a spider could smile. “She would be happier there, I promise.”

He put his many hands over his heart as a gesture of trust.

“Stop fighting, it is not progressing the issue,” Lena said. “The rat prefers objectivity, not speculation, even from the dragon and the spider. What we know is that the mortal realm is well beyond Avon’s border. No human could hope to reach it from here alone. The mountains beneath us are treacherous. If she did leave she would never return.”

Maya’s face rippled and she grumbled to herself.

“You look tired, Maya,” he said, happily. “Why don’t you return to that human shape you enjoy so?”
Maya’s form rippled and she relented, becoming a peacock with ivory feathers fringed with shimmering green. “I know you are hiding something,” she said, catching her breath.

“The rat votes to send her to the mortal world,” Lena interrupted. “It is obvious this girl causes discord. If she stays, it will only escalate. If she goes, her purpose may eventually reveal itself, either to us or her. You can talk about destiny all you like but it doesn’t matter until after it happens. Not before.”

“I agree,” one serpent head called. “Send her away. If she’s meant to be here, she’ll return.”

“I agree as well,” Omar responded, all too quickly. “She belongs with her people.”

“We are her people!” Maya cried out. “If there were a way to put the others at ease…”

“It is possible,” Kala started, “that she has two peoples. We might be destined to send her to where she most belongs, and that place, for her, is not here.” Omar and Lena both reverted to different forms, becoming a dog and a porcupine, respectively. Kala remained the spider.

“Should we not ask her?” Maya cried out. “Should we not allow her a voice? What if she wants to stay? Or are we in the business of banishing fellow gods? Is isolation and regret always to be our response to problems we don’t have enough information about?”
“You are outvoted, Maya,” Kala chided. “But if it pleases you, ask her. I’m very curious to see if she even wants to stay here among us.” He stood tall straightening out his legs to stretch. “Her answer may surprise you.”

“And if she does?” Maya asked.

“Then we will see, dragon,” the spider said, its long, wire legs taking him away in a long swinging motion. Nearby, a sea of gods were listening to their decision and knew it was not long before Feora would be banished from Avon. Only a few were disappointed.

“I wish the elephant were here,” the two sea serpent heads said in unison, before melting into a single lizard.
Chapter VII

Feora didn’t remember how she came to be in the center of Avon, on the sacred story telling field where fellow gods would come to dance the tales of their shared history. She felt as though she were in a trance. Like there were some heavy cloud around her thoughts. Everything seemed to carry a violet hue.

In the distance, a crowd of diverse animals were watching, hollering shameful things upon her constancy. She thought she could see something big moving among them. Something dark with twisted legs moving in unison, something thin. *Banished*… Someone had told her she’d been banished, and then there was a fire in her neck and she was here.

Feora rolled up the sleeve which was draped over her slender, yet firm, wrist. The deep blue folds made her skin seem richer and more vibrant- the light bronze color under her forearm looked soft to the touch. The cries of the herd before her fell to ambience, and a forceful breeze elevated the long brown hair from her neck to the air. Those standing downwind, some flitting from wolves to snakes, lapped in the air and tasted her scent. She was a mix of cold spring water and ripped flower petals. The wind blew harder.

Feora was lost looking into the stone in her hand. Where had it come from? Had she picked it up, when the others had surrounded her? They were chanting something she thought as they circled her, though what she couldn’t say, anymore. The stone. It was the stone which maintained the silence. The quiet. She needed the quiet.
That which cannot change is doomed to fail. Was that what they had yelled?

Why did this phrase linger in her mind. Was this something she had heard before?

Fixed! Fixed! They had yelled it, with that tone. They were a symphony of that hostile tone. Unchangeable. Constant. Unnatural. She was all that they were not and they hated her for it and she knew it. She felt it.

Feora was transfixed, still, on that stone. When the wind gusted firmly, whipping the delicate loose cloth around her legs and torso, Feora didn’t move an inch. She barely noticed, her legs rooted with such a strength to the spot she stood- as if her position there in that moment was absolute. The surface is so smooth, she thought. She rolled her thumb along the sharpest angle of the flat but heavy stone and pressed, hard. The wind died down and suddenly voices began to return, growing louder.

Hooves and heavy paws and flapping and the angry loudness of fear and feet thundered along the ground around her. Her heart was beating, and kept beating. Beat after beat, reverberating throughout her entire body, one pound, and then another, and then another, in an endless cycle.

Her breath was leaving her and her heart beat faster, she could feel it pulsing along her skin. She could feel it beat in her neck, in her temples, in her fingers. The air rushed in and out of her lungs in deep quick breaths and a deep prickling anguish traveled from her gut to her neck. The silence was leaving her and she felt it being replaced by a heavy pressure on her chest.

Through tear filled eyes and in a voice which trembled with fear, confusion, and power, “You…. are… not the only ones who can control their skin.” She thrust her arm out to her side and ran the jagged serrated edge of that stone against the warm pulsing
softness that was her wrist firmly and slowly. As the rock dug and then ripped into her skin, droplets of rouge collected along the now seemingly long edge of stone and fell to her feet. The hand with the rock fell to her side and she gripped it firmly. She left her bloody arm out to her side. The noise grew terrible.

“Unclean?” she asked. “Fixed?! Different?! Weak… broken. That is how you see me?” She wiped her nose with the sleeve, which left a little streak of red blood around her face. She flipped her arm out to them and splatterings fell at their feet. In a wave the beings around her, beginning with those directly in front of her, opened their arms and the wind filled them with feathers. The gust spiraled around her and a sea of birds followed suit, rising in a column above her, moving like a living funnel filled with golden greens and iridescent saphires. Ivory and raven and red. She whipped her arm out at them again, splattering blood in all directions. They whistled and cawed and squawked at her, shocked. Many had never seen blood before. Gods of light do not bleed.

“I too can control my shape,” she screamed to no one figure in particular. “I too am living! And breathing! I too can change! And my shape is mine! Not yours! You’ll never know what it is to own your own eyes, or hair, or scars! I do! I own mine and I make my own cuts and I’ll heal them, too.”

She was alone and the wind beat against the silence.

“When I do leave this place, and I’ll do so on my own feet,” Feora said. When she looked to her hand the stone was gone. She stormed off towards the place her lightgivers called home.
Raja was sprinting as fast as he could away from the edge of Avon, terrified. He was a rabbit now, with white fluffy fur and bright yellow eyes. He was running from the visions he was gifted. When he had almost become the elephant his mind was filled with thoughts he could not know. He saw things that had yet to pass- of places he had never seen. He felt that there was something wrong in Avon and that he was meant to stop it. He felt drawn to the spider’s cave.

In his vision he saw that it was dark and dank within, with an ugly kind of moisture. And then… there was a circle, a glowing circle with drops of red… a small stone ring with a pointed end… shaped like a diamond. The long ivory tusks gave him a sense of euphoria, and then… nothing.

“Why me?” he yelled out running on his swift and soft legs, staying small and out of sight. “Why…?” Raja had always been told he was special, that he was good. But he never truly understood why. Shifting had always come so easily to him, but what difference could he really make? What destiny could anyone possibly imagine for Avon- the land of gods?

He let himself warp into a horse, a tough jangled organization of his internal energy, forcing awkwardness in favor of speed. As he neared the edge of the mountain where the spider’s cave was- one of the few private places on Avon- he became a winged grey bat, bouncing sound off of every wall to see his way. It was one of the few animal abilities that he had discovered in his many changes. Not many knew of the many
splendid tricks each form could access, always favoring the twelve. Raja had been studying the others all in private. But the elephant… even he did not know to expect that.

Insects crawled underneath him as he switched to a hummingbird, hovering above them. He meandered through the darkness, feeling the shifting energies of the magic cave. There were spells, he knew, which were meant to confuse anyone entering here. He had felt their magic in his elephant bones, when he had had them. Raja became an owl, using their night eyes to help him see through the darkness but he still couldn’t see through the spells. When he found himself lost again, he paused. He was wasting time, time he could be spending understanding whatever pressing vision he needed to address. He tried to return to the bat shape but the deeper he followed his instincts, the more confused and scattered his thoughts became. He needed to become something more powerful. Something that could understand the spider’s magic.

He breathed in slowly. Raja had always been afraid to invoke any of the three siblings. The other gods had always made such a big deal of his changes to the nine, which felt to him more natural. But the dragon never came to him, and he never looked for the spider’s shape within himself. The elephant though… it would creep up on him. As he breathed, he let his mind turn to feelings of darkness—of pain and despair. He breathed heat out from his body, lowing his temperature. He felt long legs come from his side and his body fade away. Many eyes popped into his head, but there was something wrong. Something was keeping him from changing, as though the spider itself refused him. For a brief moment, he managed to open his third eye to light his path in a pathetic violet haze, clinging to the form in a way as it tried to rip itself away from him. The eye was whispering his thoughts through the caverns. He felt as though this light was a spell
itself, causing the many insects beneath him to pause and yield to his commands, but he was too weak to attempt anything further. The spider shape spit him out and as he fell he became a small green snake to slither his way through the labyrinth.

Suddenly, he came to an open space, with a single hole in the roof allowing moonlight in. It fell in a single circle around a small stone, with a diamond-like tip stained with rouge. Around the circle of light were drops of dried blood which had painted the symbols of the original twelve gods. The only one which glowed in the light was the symbol for a spider. \textit{Sangremaj}, he thought. Maya had mentioned it once, in her explanations of the human histories. Blood magic. The spider was practicing human magic. \textit{A binding spell}, Raja thought.

The only one with blood on Avon was Feora.
Chapter VIII

Feora stormed through the forested areas in the region of Avon they had called their own.

“Sattva! Puja! Where are you?!” she yelled in every region of their space.

But her two lightgivers were not there. She continued yelling. Her bloody arm had stopped leaking but was still freshly wet. “Where are you?!”

In the distance two small birds could be seen flying her way. When they neared, Feora could sense their energies. They were home. The two landed and turned into their human shapes.

“Feora!” Puja cried out. “You’re bleeding!”

“Why don’t you take me to Kala? He seems to have all the answers you need!” she yelled back. “You took me to the sorcerer god once, you can do it again!”

“Feora…” Puja started, “my child, please.”

“Or perhaps you should become the great rat, hm? Or the swan? Perhaps these great powerful shapes can help me. You’re all so powerful, but no one seems to have the answer! I remember what you said about the days after my light fell to Earth. Before Maya. You took me to see him. But if I came different it was you who did it. It was you who brought me to Avon. And now I’m forced to leave it. Or haven’t you heard I’ve been banished.”

Puja’s human shape began to cry. Sattva came closer, saying, “You are not different, my dear.” He was his standard human shape, black-bearded and bronze.
“But I am. You know I am.” She backed into the corner and looked with angry tiger eyes. Sattva paced as though he were trying to find the words, needing to move in order to process information. He talked as though he were speaking to himself in his past.

“You are different because one day long ago we decided to treat you as though you were different. We taught it to you,” he said.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“It means we allowed for misunderstanding to guide our actions. We allowed inexperience to dictate thought, and fear to manipulate…” Sattva began again to lecture.

“To manipulate what?” she fired back. “Me?”

“It means we forgot…”

“It means you forgot what? To play pretend?” Feora was angry now. “To pretend that I am like everyone else? To pretend that I belong in your perfect, pure bliss that is Avon, throne to things I have no connection to? To pretend like I’m anything but broken?”

“We plucked your from the aurora same as all the rest, the same as I was tethered to this plane, the same as my lightgiver was tethered to this plane, the same descent that the skygods took when they arrived on this world to free Earth from the cold.”

“But I was different,” Feora barked.

“You were the same,” Sattva pleaded, struggling to stay human. “We loved you just the same.”

“You mean you had to love me. You were forced to love me even though I was born like some freak,” Feora cried out.
“You belong here,” he said.

“I belong no where! Least of all here!” She ran out of their temple. Puja moved to follow her. Sattva stopped her at the door. Feora turned to face them. “And talk no more of fear when it is you who is too frightened to ask what I really am.” She sprinted away. Sattva called after her, but it was Puja who stepped forward.

“You’ve said your piece,” she said, melting into white fur and lumbering paws. His wolf’s tail whipped Sattva in the face as he ran out the calling, “She’s getting faster than you anyway.”

***

Feora sprinted away from the ruins of the temple that her lightgivers had chosen as a home for her. She knew one of them would be following close behind. They never allowed her to seethe in private for too long, and this was not the first conversation of this kind they had had before. But this time everything was different.

She sprinted as fast as she could, kicking off trees and leaping down large boulders and swinging on overhanging branches. Even for a human she was uncannily fast and agile. She felt the branches tear slightly into her palms and the ground revenge itself with firmness upon her feet. She liked the pain. She liked demanding new skin from her hands. With each scrape she grew stronger, absorbing pain and ignoring hurt. With each bruise she felt more powerful. She commanded the island in the sky to make her strong and beat against it to get what she wanted.
She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. It would be Puja who would find her. She could hear with immense clarity the wolf’s inhale and knew it wouldn’t be long before her scent, like a loud scream, was discovered. But there was time. Puja, she knew, could only maintain the wolf’s form for a single breath, and then, she’d return to one of the lower animal forms.

Feora yanked her silver chain from her kalmansari and threw it up into a high tree branch. She scampered up it in a flash like a squirrel and clung silently and still to the branch. A white wolf entered the clearing. It was smelling for her.

“I know you’re here, Feora,” it said. “Why don’t you come out?”

Feora stayed silent. Her breath was shallow. Puja sighed and sat. She melted into her red-haired woman and plopped down into the long grass. Wildflowers seemed to spring up around her.

“Fine,” she said, plucking a few flowers and long blades of grass. “I’ll just talk.”

Puja did not move. She sat, and her eyes watered. She forced out a slow story, without moving.

“Sattva is a dreamer, you know.” Puja began braiding them together just to keep her hands moving. Her hair shined brightly in the dimming light. Her face was wistful. It was an expression Feora knew well. Expressions were something markedly human, and the other gods, who had little experience in taking human form, wore their emotions clearly on their faces. Feora had learned to hide hers.

“He always has been. He was meditating in the spirit of the swan when I first encountered him. He was invoking her female spirit, and learning how to fly.” She smiled widely, lost in a distant memory. “It is easy enough for us to invoke bird shapes,
but it isn’t so easy to invoke the twelve god spirits themselves. To truly fly means to become one with the swan god’s purpose. To ascend. To feel such levity that the ground simply falls away and only an uplifted soul remains.” She grew quiet.

“I don’t know if you’ll ever know what that is like.”

She continued to rip grass and flowers from around her. Her skin rippled as she continued to stay human.

“Have I ever told you how the crab god came to me? She came to me in a dream.” She pulled the ends of the braid together and knotted them. Her fingers were nimble.

“The crab is the most protective parent in the sky, and the last to come to Earth. Others spend years in meditation, just hoping to catch a glimpse of this supreme state of consciousness.” She hissed. “And she found me, sleeping, and when I woke up I was the crab god.”

“You’re no child now, Feora. I can see that. Maybe you never were. Sattva would rather you believe you are one of us, that you can ascend like us into the sky.” Her voice trembled and her body shook. She flickered into a green-shelled crab, dropping the flowered crown she had woven.

“If you are looking for honesty, now is when you’ll find it. In this shape, I can taste destiny in the air. I can smell wisdom, I can breathe hope. When I leave this world I will rejoin the gods in the sky and will know a calm bliss for all eternity.” She walked in wide circles around the trees in the area.
“Do you know how sad it makes me to wonder if you will join me? Sattva believes we can show you how. He always has. But I don’t know. Maybe that’s a lie.” Puja stretched and grew into a serpent.

“You are my child, you always will be. I love you. But maybe you will be happier among your own kind. Maybe we should let you go.” She circled the flower wreath which had fallen upon the floor. “All I know is that I am as tired of pretending as you are.”

Puja became a blue-feathered bird and flew away.

Feora dropped from the tree knowing she would never return to Avon.

***

Raja’s energy was running rampant, and as he looked up to the moon he felt it fill him with calm tranquility, and the wolf came upon him. He breathed in deeply and he could smell her. *Feora.*

She was in danger, yes. But why? What harm could a human girl do to a society composed of the very gods themselves? What power could she possibly have that warranted her expulsion? He had heard, along his way to Kala’s that the human was finally being sent to be with other mortals, but that made no sense. Kala wanted her blood, why would he send her away? What spell was he casting?

He warped into a bird and took flight, reaching up to the circle letting in the light, exiting the spider’s secret cave. He did not know what the intention of the spider was, but he knew the binding spell had something to do with Feora. He knew he wanted her for some reason, but he did not know what. Raja ran faster.
“It was all a trick,” he said to himself. “The spider has tricked us all.”

*It’s the blood*, he thought. *He’s been after it all along. I have to find her.*

*She is in danger.*

***

Feora stormed through what she had once considered the shared space with her and her lightgivers. Now it just seemed like an empty slab of rock.

“You’re a fool if you believe you’ll find clarity among mortals,” Sattva yelled.

“Wild, irrational beings. I will not allow you to leave!”

“And you are the fool if you think I need your permission,” she said, firmly, and then laughing. “Wild, irrational beings. Hah! Like I know nothing about dealing with that. You’ve heard the chants. I’ve been banished anyways, whether you approve or not.”

“We can convince them…”

“I will not stay where I am not wanted! I am allowed to choose!” she cried out.

“I will not sacrifice you for the sake of the comfort of others! You are a gift, I can feel it!” Sattva pleaded.

“I am no gift to those who would see me as an avalanche waiting to rip their lives apart.”

There was a pause.

“Not all gifts are welcome, child,” Sattva said. “But gifts they do remain.”

“Yes, gifts remain. As do choices.”
“No!” Sattva roared, reverting to a lioness, angry with sharp golden eyes, turning to the silent Puja. “And you,” he growled, quietly. “Holding your tongue in the corner. Why so silent? What have you told her?”

“I would tell my child anything to see her happiness achieved.”

“As would I! I would have her remain with us, continue her training, reaching as deeply into her own mortality until not even a human body can contain her spirit.”

“No,” Puja said, defeated, human. “You would have us cure her, as you did when she was born.”

“I would have us make her an equal!”

“She is not our equal, Sattva, she is mortal.”

Feora jumped in. “—What do you mean cure me?!”

“She belongs with us!”

“She belongs…”

“—What do you mean cure me?!”

Sattva roared. “Look what you have done!”

“I’ve done nothing but remain honest, Sattva. You live in a world of half-truths…” Puja said.

Feora jumped between them and yelled again, growing angrier. “Answer me!”

Sattva melted into his bronze and bulky man shape. He was funneling his rage and Feora could see it rippling across his figure.

“You want truth, Feora, fine. We shall tell you of the night we brought you down to this world. The great river of light grew bright one evening. It blanketed the sky with such blues and greens and whites. A thousand twinkling sparkles. A few of our people
reached enlightenment in some form of the twelve letting their light return to the sky.
That’s when your lightgiver Sattva and I decided to bring life to the world, as our
ancestors had done before. So we culled your life from the light and poured you into the
world and you became a human girl,” he said. “…And you never stopped being a human
girl. The other new godlings, those other little sparks of light, became kittens and pups
and chicks. As they grew their closeness to the gods grew. And still you stayed a
human girl--”

“--So you tried to cure me. Because I wasn’t what you wanted.”

“Yes. We tried to cure you. We took you to Kala, the witch god of Avon who
had become the spider, and we asked him to cure you,” Sattva said, hanging his head.
“But he couldn’t.” She shook her head.

“You asked him to curse me,” she responded.

“No! The magic didn’t work. We did what we thought we had to. We didn’t
know any better,” Sattva said.

“And I will do the same,” Feora said.
Feora stomped her way to her sacred space. She knew now that she had been meant to leave Avon all along. She wouldn’t wait for them to push her out, she’d leave on her own terms. She felt as though every moment she stayed would be yet another waste of her more than precious mortal life.

“Godling!” Maya called after her. She thundered in as a large gold colored wolf coming between Feora and the tip of Avon. “I have been looking for you everywhere. Where have you been?”

“What’s it matter to you?” Feora called back. Her kalmansari was whipping around her. She had put several days’ worth of supplies gathered from the ethereal forests of Avon into its many folds.

“Where are you going?” Maya cried out, turning into her preferred human form.

“Home.”

“This is your home.”

“This is where I was born. I don’t have a home,” she said, angrily. Then she softened. “But that can change, Maya. I could go find one.”

“But Feora…” Maya started.

“Why should I stay?” Feora was serious. “What life do I have here? A handful of friends and a sea of enemies. No one wants me here.”

“I want you here. You’re good for us. You make us think, you make us better! You make me better. When I look at you I feel home.” Maya held her close. Then she noticed the dried blood on her wrist, and the cut.
“What happened here?” she asked. “Did someone do this to you?” She took it to her nose and breathed in.

“I did it,” Feora said, bravely.

“Why?” Maya asked.

“To prove that I am in control of my own body,” she said.

“You don’t need to prove that to anyone.” She threw Feora’s arm down. “There is no excuse to harm oneself. To harm yourself is to harm me, understand?”

Feora nodded, but looked out to the sea of fog.

“And how did you expect to leave, hm? Were you going to walk off the edge?” Maya asked.

“I can climb down. I can use this,” she said, pulling a long silver chain from one of the many folds. “Spider’s thread pulled from my kalmansari.”

“Where did you get it?” Maya asked.

“Do you really think this is the first time I have thought of leaving Avon? I have been preparing for this moment since I could walk. My kalmansari can hold everything I need.”

“But why would you want to leave paradise?”

“Paradise? Why?” Feora looked at her, incredulously. “To be free of the loneliness! Of the isolation. I talk to no one, I touch no one. All I want to do is feel part of something. This is not a paradise to me.”

Maya sighed. When she blinked her eyes turned to a white hot amber. The color spread like wildfire along her skin as she grew heavy into a dragon. She breathed her
purple flame upon Feora, who felt the familiar twang on the back of her neck. Her arm healed, but Maya remained the dragon.

“I was fooling myself, in thinking I could bring you in to the skyfolk with such ease. But I will not let you leave without protection.” Maya stood firm and thrust her chest forward. She took a great claw and plucked from her breast a scale the length of Feora’s small arm. It was round with sharpened edges.

“This scale,” she said, “is dragon metal. It will not yield, it will not break. The edges are sharp, sharper than anything you’ve ever seen before, so be careful. It is light, to allow the dragon to fly into the air.” When Feora reached to grab it, her kalmansari swirled around it to hold it in place around her arm, like a shield. “And this,” Maya continued, pulling a sharp dagger from the air, “is your claw. You may be human, but with these weapons even a god would have a hard time endangering someone as fast as you.”

“Maya,” Feora responded, tearing up in the eyes. “My lightgivers… would you tell them…”

“I will tell them you loved them, and that you will return to us when the time is right. The spider may have seen you in the mortal realm, but the dragon sees things to. I feel it in my core that you belong here.”

“You might be surprised,” Feora said. “There might be another here who is the beacon you are looking for. Keep an eye on Raja. He… he is important.”

“Not as important as you are. Not to me. Promise me you will return,” Maya said.

“I will try,” Feora said.
Maya watched Feora make her descent into the great swirling sea of fog at the edge of Avon. Her shifts grew erratic as she felt feelings of both gladness of Feora’s safety, and sadness at her departure. She swooned into a sea serpent, which wept, and grew into a swan, which cried out in beautiful song. After a few moments, she was out of sight.
Feora had always had sure footing. It was necessary when one explored alone, learning how to move amidst a sea of changing shapes. Her training had given her excellent balance and raw physical strength. She tied her spider’s thread around the handle of the dagger Maya had given her.

She looked down the treacherous side of the mountains edge. Avon was so far above the Earth that Feora wondered how many days it might take her to descend the entire way. She could barely see below her, but she knew to stay close to the sound of falling water. She whipped the chain around her and swung it at the wall. She felt the dagger’s end sink into the hard rock next to her, and she used it to swing down to a ledge beneath her. She whipped the chain again to release the dagger and pulled it back to her and continued swinging from ledge to ledge.

She followed the torrent of water from the river of Avon, which was said to purify the souls of passed mortals and return their spirits cleanly to be resurrected once more in the mortal plane. The fog was dense. For a moment, she felt as though someone were close by. A familiar energy coming towards her… someone powerful.

*Raja?* she thought.

“I’d recognize my webbing anywhere, little human,” a booming voice said.

In a flash, Kala was above her, his many long legs working themselves around to close her in. Suddenly, she was surrounded in spider web, which wrapped her in. She slashed with the edge of her shield to cut them away, drawing her dagger towards her by pulling the chain.
“Haha!” he laughed, malevolently. “You’ve been busy. Did Maya give you that? A dragon heartscale is very precious. I’m surprised she would give it away so freely. She must love you very much.” He whipped web upon web at her, jabbing to distract her with every leg available. She dodged with her shield and tried to feel the flow of his energy. It was no use. He was hiding his movements from her—she couldn’t read him.

“What are you doing? I thought you wanted me to leave Avon!” she yelled. “I knew it was you driving me away. I could feel you in my mind when I did this.” She showed him her arm. Kala laughed again.

“Yes…” he said. “I charmed you with my third eye when you was born. I needed the others to accept my choice to banish you. I needed them to fear you. And I needed you to agree.” He continued his assaults. His many eyes blinked at her as she continued to cut away the web. With a flick of one of his legs, he knocked the dagger from her hand and it fell to a ledge beneath her, the silver chain dangling off the side. She reached out for it but had to leap away to dodge another barrage of assaults.

“Why?!” she cried out, spiraling away, kicking off of rocks and bouncing off the palms of her hands in a seemingly endless series of flips and twists, barely escaping blows at every turn.

“Because they had to believe you were gone. They had to believe you left of your own free will, or else they might follow you. This way, I’ve got you all to myself and they’ll never even know it. Do you think it was fate that left a single thread undone in your kalmansari? What were you thinking of when it came loose, hm?”

“But why?!” Feora landed on the ledge with her dagger. She knew she needed something that could help her fight from such a distance. Kala’s legs were so long, how
could she ever hope to land a blow to his body. Only that might give her enough time to flee. But she couldn’t climb up that quickly, not faster than a spider, certainly. There was only down.

“Because,” he said, simply. “I am going to devour you.”

Feora looked shocked. She felt her kalmansari wrap itself thickly around her, defensively.

“You are fast, little one,” he said. “But I’ve more hands than you do.” He pushed her to the ground and she slashed again with the edge of her shield into the spider’s leg.

“ROAAAR!!” he cried out, scampering away. When Feora looked down she saw blood on her shield. Blood? she thought. “You’ve been well-trained little human. But even you can’t overcome the power of my third eye.”

Kala reached a leg to open his third eye and a flood of lavender light shined around them. Feora looked into it and grew still. Kala batted her dagger to the ground. This was the same hypnotic trance that the spider had used on her and Puja when she was a child, to fill their minds with subtle suggestions. To freeze them while he snuck a taste of her flesh. Only this time Kala was trying to break her entirely.

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Feora stood still as Kala began to wrap her in magic web. His third eye was shining bright purple around her. Kala was almost giddy. He wrapped her tightly, and bound her mouth shut.
“It had been such a long time since I had tasted fresh human blood,” Kala said.

“What no one tells you is that the mortals once made sacrifices to me.” Feora could hear him but she could not move. He spoke as though he were the original spider god.

“Human sacrifices.”

“But you are something special. When I heard there was a Fixed God brought from the great light to Avon I knew I had to have a taste. When your lightgivers brought you to me of their own will I thought I was the luckiest star in the sky. So I charmed them, and took a piece of skin and blood from the back of your neck. When I tasted your blood… I saw things. I stopped changing.”

He lifted her onto his back and began crawling up the wall, returning her to Avon.

“But I needed more. It only lasted for a short while before I began feeling the call to change again. Before I felt the spider try to shrug me away like all gods do to us, their children.”

“So I set in motion the spell of dark thoughts I had placed on you years ago, under your skin. There was no way for Maya to feel the curse there, but there it remained until I called it forth.”

“I used the stone covered in your blood to bind myself to this body,” he said, proudly. “I invoked the true power of the spider, and made it mine. And now it belongs to me, alone. When I devour you entirely, I will never change. I will be one with the original spider.” He laughed again, and crawled over the mountain’s edge.

“It’s been ages since I’ve been so hungry. I believe I’ve been craving… innards,” the spider’s voice crept over her skin. Suddenly, the spider stopped. Maya and Raja were standing not 10 strides away.
“Give her up, spider!” Maya called. “Or I will make you.” Her eyes burned a hot gold as she invoked the power of the dragon.

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Maya was growing large, and heavy, and strong. There was a piece of her great golden armor missing, though. Kala saw it, too.

“No one can make me do anything, Maya, least of all you,” Kala called back. “Or your pet.” Raja stood next to Maya, in his handsome human form. Raja looked angry and felt the power of the tiger overcome him. He bore his claws and roared at Kala.

“… Interesting,” he said. “A powerful shape for one so young.”

He lifted Feora high, so they could see her.

“No matter,” he said. “I am powerful enough to destroy you both.”

“It’s no use Kala. We know you’ve been playing with blood magic. I’m going to bury you in that cave of yours,” Maya roared as a dragon. “Now let her go.”

The spider laughed. “Go and get her.” He threw Feora high into the air into the ice river. In a moment she’d be swept out over the edge. Raja sprinted after, leaping into the water as the two headed sea serpent.

Maya came at Kala with a fury, raging at him with heavy swipes of her claws, biting with her terrible teeth. But the spider crawled so quickly. Maya breathed in and let forth a spewing rampage of white fire. The spider fled to the rocks and as he was about to be entirely consumed by fire, he waved his arms and circle of dark light
absorbed the flames. Raja emerged from the water with Feora on his back still squirming in the webbing. He became a crab to snip open the net to set her free. They shared only a second of pause, looking at the other and he was off. Feora looked towards the edge of Avon and considering fleeing.

Maya roared again, lunging in with her teeth. The spider dodged, easily using her rushed attack against him to seal her mouth shut. She tried to breathe fire but none would escape. As the spider began weaving glowing thread around her scratching arms, Raja rushed forward becoming a falcon to gain altitude, spiraling above Kala, and then dropping upon him as tiger, swiping his claws at the spider’s legs, roaring. Raja bit down scratching feverously at the base of one of his legs before it dropped off. Raja began to spit out blood.

“He bleeds!” he cried out before being slammed away by one of Kala’s remaining legs. He skidded across the ground from the blow and grew still.

“Yes,” he said, before the open wound closed itself. “An interesting side effect.”

Maya’s eyes burned brightly again as she called forth more power from the dragon god. But the web was too strong, she had been tied down too much already. She tried to back away but Kala kept gaining ground on her, spinning web upon web, slowing her down. She was losing.

“Your power is in your breath, dragon. But mine is in my eyes,” he said, opening his third eye, releasing a bath of warm light. Raja roused to see Maya growing stiller in each moment. He could see her will draining from her and her eyes grow blank and white. The spider laughed as he prepared to wrap her completely.
Suddenly, the dagger Maya had given Feora landed squarely in the center of the open eye, dicing it in two. She had retrieved it from the crevice she had dropped it at before. Kala cried out in terrible pain. Feora stood at the edge of Avon, covered in shredded web, with the single silver chain in her hand still attached to the dagger in the spider’s eye. She pulled hard and it whipped back to her covered in goo, clanging heavily on the rocks by her side.

“You demon girl!” Kala yelled, covering his eye. It oozed liquid—something that shocked everyone.

Raja freed Maya with the tiger’s claws. She leapt forward letting out another great plume of fire at Kala. He moved back.

“You’re losing this battle, spider!” Raja yelled out, gladly, dropping into the shape of a sleek black wolf. He snarled loudly.

“Am I?” Kala said, insulted. He grew larger, and larger still. “You’ve no idea the power her blood has given me. You’ve no idea of the true power of a true primavalia.”

The two took a few scrambled steps back, away from the giant figure. Feora stayed close to the edge and bent her knees, preparing for anything. “Remember, little godling. I do not change, no matter the power I expend in this form. Is that true of the two of you?” Kala said, swiping at Feora with one of his long barbed wire legs.

She jumped over the first but was almost slammed to the floor by a second. It grazed her slightly, leaving her off balance. Raja looked panicked and leapt to attack, large teeth growing longer and sharper. The spider lunged in with his fangs bared. Raja bent forward as if intentionally exposing his neck to Kala’s fangs before a horn emerged,
ready to bury itself deep in the spider’s face. But Kala was too fast and swatted the heavy rhinoceros away. He was stronger than any of them realized he could be.

Raja hit the ground several times over before he skidded to a stop. Kala flung a piece of glowing red net around him which burned Raja’s flesh. Long lines of glowing red sparked against his body. Raja twisted and turned, losing his rhinoceros form and becoming his human shape, the one Feora had so taken with. He struggled under the weight of the red web which but couldn’t free himself. Feora could see-- no— she could feel Raja’s fear and anxiety. It was all over his face, but she felt something deeper. It shocked her how afraid it made her. She knew his energy was too scattered under the web to become anything that might resist the web’s charm. She had to free him, but she was too far to use the dagger. Just then, she felt a shock in her spine. She barely had the second to twist her body away from the tip of a giant leg coming straight down from the sky. Kala underestimated her, too.

Maya blew another breath of fire at Kala, which allowed Feora to tumble under his legs. The black ring returned to absorb the flame. The spider seemed unfazed while Maya lumbered doggedly, breathing in hot air to maintain the dragon body. Feora had to tumble to avoid the lumbering sharp feet. Kala lurched forward to grab and then throw Maya’s heavy body against the already rumbling mountainside.

“It has been a long while, hasn’t it, Maya?” he mocked. “That shape isn’t very becoming on you. You’re always so much prettier… when you’re human.” There was a ripple around her body as she began to shrink, rousing herself from the blow against the wall. She blew another breath of fire and shrank again.
“Wouldn’t it be easier if you just gave in? I can see your heart’s desires. You left an opening in that armor of yours. I know what you want, Maya. I can make you human, forever. All we need is her. You can have your own children, made from your own human body. Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted?” the spider cooed.

Maya looked over at her, and there was a moment of panic in her eye. Feora made a break from beneath the spider’s legs. He reached back, raising three of his legs high to spike the ground and trap her. As she jumped, she threw her shield which curved through the descending hairy columns just before she was crushed into the rock by a heavy, scratchy weight of a spider leg. She was certain her arm was injured, and the other was wedged between her and the leg, without a shield as a barrier. She was trapped.

The spider waved its arms and began to spin another spell from its webbing. Somehow Feora knew it was a spell to seal the exit, as if he could sense her desire to flee down the mountainside. A great net of light grew at the edge of Avon, blocking the way from Avon. Feora felt a pit in her stomach knowing she might never leave this twisted world behind.

“No, Kala,” Maya said. “You’re wrong.”

“So you say,” Kala said. Maya tried to muster the strength for another assault but she could not hold the dragon shape for much longer. She felt another ripple around her as she fell into the shape of a swan. She tried to fly into the air to flee another attack but she was too slow. The spider wrapped her tightly. He looked almost startled to hear Raja’s voice.
“Hey!” he cried out. “We’re not finished yet.” He stood over the broken webbing, the golden shield implanted into the ground beside his human body.

“Ah! You have something left to offer?” Kala said.

Raja looked at Maya flapping in the unbreakable magic thread. Feora looked scared as she tried to free her arm, frantically punching against the spider’s leg.

“Yes,” Raja said, calling the entirety of his energy forth. “I do.”

Two tusks sprang from his face.

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Raja was growing larger now. His skin turned dense and thick and grey. He grew heavy, and the ivory tusks once again sharply protruded from his face. His nose grew long, and he felt a great white swirling energy within him. Raja’s ears grew long and wide and his legs turned to hooves. Raja had invoked the elephant.

“…It can’t be…” Kala whispered.

Suddenly a voice seemed to be speaking through Raja. “It can, brother,” it boomed. Raja charged the spider, who could not retreat fast enough. Its many legs began beating down on the elephant’s back as he slammed the spider into the nearby wall. The great rocks rumbled as though the hillside might collapse at any moment. Feora stumbled to her feet and wobbled towards her shield. Kala writhed in agony as it tried to cast another spell with red web. The elephant’s tusks glowed as he shirked off the glowing threads, unharmed.

Raja’s skin suddenly rippled. The spider laughed.
“Haha, you’ve no experience holding such a mighty form, I can see that now. For who is there to train you in such a force? I am impressed, little elephant, that you think yourself powerful enough to challenge me. I’ve never been one to look to the other gods for wisdom. The spider has all I’ll ever need. And when you’re gone, I’ll be the most powerful being on Earth, and I will stay its master for all time. I have no wish to join the others in the sky. Not when I can rule the Earth itself for all eternity.”

Raja knew he only had moments left in this shape. He searched the elephant’s mind for wisdom. The elephant gave him nothing but a single instinct: Save Feora, at all costs. He had to get her away from here. He trumpeted his great horn and the spider shook. He knew the other gods would hear his elephant cry and come running, but it wouldn’t be soon enough. Would they rally behind him? Even so, when he was no longer able to maintain the elephant shape, they would stand no chance against this force, bent on ruling over them. Kala could spin another set of lies, or charm them. They had already proven themselves easily swayed. No one would be safe until his power was diminished.

Raja trampled his way to Maya and released her, flicking his long tusks against the net around her.

“By all the stars,” she whispered looking at him. “I never thought I’d see…”

“You must distract him. We have to send her to the mortal plane. I cannot explain it but she doesn’t belong here… at least not yet. He cannot hold the spider shape forever without her. If she goes from here,” Raja said quickly, “He’ll revert and we can defeat him.”
“But she’ll have no way to return. Not after this. She’ll have no protection if he goes after her.”

Raja paused.

“Then I will go with her,” he said.

“No!” Maya called. “We have been waiting for the arrival of the elephant for millennia. You cannot leave us!”

“This is my destiny, Maya,” he said. “I can feel it. I only have seconds left in this form. Let’s make them count.” Raja’s skin rippled with soft white light.

Maya nodded her swan’s head and took flight. She focused on the heat within her and called forth the dragon once more. Her body was convulsing as she tried to hold its shape.

“Go!” she roared to him. She snapped her fangs into one of the legs of the spider and breathed her fire. The edge fell off as he screamed. “So there is a price to your constancy after all, spider!” she yelled. “A taste of mortality.” As he swiped at her she warped into the porcupine, stinging him with her many needles. When he slammed his leg against her again she became a turtle, blocking his assault with her thick shell. She became a dragon again, and blew her great fire at the web which blocked Feora from leaving Avon, but the webbing would not burn. Feora looked at Avon and felt the urge suddenly to fight. She felt that she might make a home for herself here, that the spider had been isolating her all along, that one day she would belong.

*We could defeat him together,* she thought, pulling her shield from the ground, testing her wounded arm which burned inside. She felt the dagger swimming somewhere in the many folds on her back and its chain.
But she shook her head. She knew that it was time for her to join humanity, to find her own path. The spider had seen her bring ruin to the skyfolk, but it was he who would use her blood to do it. She had to go. She found the golden eyes with the blue green fringe and locked into them. The elephant was running towards her.

“Come on!” he called, curving towards the webbing at the exit. She ran alongside him and kicked up and onto his back, riding him forward. As they went forward, other gods began to arrive on the scene. Puja and Sattva stood open-mouthed in shock as they watched Feora, the Fixed-Face, ride the great elephant through the spider’s net off the edge of the world. The two fell together into the mist.

“NOOOO!” the spider yelled as he tried to follow. But Maya was too fast, as she charged him with the great spirit of the rhinoceros into the wall. As the rocks began to fall, she turned into a slithering snake, and rat, and cat, all to avoid the torrent of falling stones. The spider’s shape rippled as his large frame tried to free itself from the stone, but it was too large to move, and the spider could not change. As he was covered by the last of the heavy stone, he cried out, “I will find her again! I will!” Soon they heard nothing.
As Maya, Sattva, and Puja watched the other gods remove the stones, they did not know what to feel. They had taken their human forms, as it seemed somehow appropriate. Some were looking out over the edge of Avon, trying to see through the mist to the mortal plane, but they saw nothing. When the last of the boulders had been pushed off by the collection of heavy beasts- oxen and gorillas- all that remained was a small pool of blood, and nothing more.

“Do you think he survived?” Puja asked.

Maya looked annoyed.

“Don’t you?” she said, walking away.