A girl on a typical quest to awaken her town's patron god accidentally awakens something worse.

When a teenage girl named Aster is instructed by the sky god to join her best friend on a deadly quest, it's a far stretch from normal. As she and her friend, now accompanied by a mysterious thief, journey to reawaken the god of the ocean, Aster learns that the god is already awake- and that he, along with the others, have been watching her since childhood.

Swept under the wing of the strange gods of her world, Aster is delivered her apparent destiny: to become a god and rule her own planet. However, before her powers can properly develop, her two friends accidentally awaken an ancient monster bent on destroying the world.

Caught between friends, her planet, and her fate, Aster must decide what she wants- godhood or death. Neither is alluring, but whatever her choice, the galaxy is waiting.
The story of her birth and the story of her planet’s birth were achingly similar.

But, like any good myth, the latter tale was archetypical enough to theoretically apply to most births. So there were parallels, yes, but they in no way meant that she was destined for greatness.

For her, there was a mother and a father. For the planet, there was the earth and the sea. The two fought and fought until they created new life, and then the earth left to create peaks where the sea could not reach her. And the sea was left to lap at her shores, creating worn grains of sand- repeated phrases he could not move past.

In the legends, this is when the sky came in to watch the earth and the sea, and force them to live in harmony, protecting the fragile earth below them.

In her tale, there wasn’t a sky until she was four years old.

And unfortunately, this is where the legend and her story begin to cross- ever so worryingly- into one.

Her name was supposed to be Ixai, but her father thought it was too formal. Then it was going to be Xalai, but her father thought it was too religious. Then it was Kixlei. Then Axiis. Then Xigh. Her parents knew two things- they wanted her to have an X in her name, and for her name to end with a strong ‘I’ sound. In a way, they were sort of hyping the poor child, or really fetus at this time, into something more than she was. An X for the crossroads she represented. An I for the sky god, the overseer of the land and sea.

Her father was named Linson. Her mother was named Kala. And back then they did not get along, in so many different ways. If their daughter had grown up properly, she would have almost been jealous of their classic love story- enemies, falling in love despite the odds and having a child as they ushered in a new era. Except, well, they never really stopped being enemies. They just had a kid, and that was one more thing to fight over.

The girl’s name, it might as well be said, ended up being Aster. But before that, it was Tai.

Tai was named Tai until she was four years old, but she barely knew it. Her mother liked to call her Tala, and her father never met her. She was raised in the Kout mountains with little real influence of her mother’s Stemalian heritage- in fact, she had only been to the nearby city of Haveninkout twice. Her life was simple, really. She played in the cold hills around her. Her mother would paint more than she would talk, so Tai grew to be mostly silent as well- perhaps because she never learned what words to speak.

Her mother tried to kill her when she was four, and it happened really quite unannounced and gathered the attention of absolutely no one. If Tai had been properly self aware at this age, she would have learned this: her mother was very unhappy to have a child, and very reluctant to give that child up to the father. So she was at a sort of standstill that lasted four years.

There was no tipping point, presumably because there never had been- Kala had been long, long
gone. She took her daughter to the sea one day— the first time the girl had ever seen it— and threw her off a cliff.

And then. Well. Then there’s a sort of pause. A gap. Tai didn’t end up dying, of course. But there is a sort of question about how she survived— and what she became after she did. And that question can be solved in two different ways— an examination of the planet-wide mythology, or by skipping ahead five years to a Tai that has learned to speak and has finally reached that wonderful time in her life when she can’t shut up.

And, speaking of—

“Where does thunder come from, Uncu-sil?” The girl asked, watching a thunderstorm take shape off in the plains.

The man who answered her was not named Uncu-sil. His name was, in fact, just Silan. Long ago he had told this girl he was not her father. And at some point, she had learned the word uncle instead.

“The sky.” He answered.

“What about the snow then?” When she had lived in the north, there had always been ice on the peaks and the grass had always been dead. Now, in the south-west region that she had yet to learn was named Sved, it was too hot for any to form.

“The sky.” Silan said again.

“What about plants then? And birds? And fire? And rainbows?”

“Everything comes the sky.”

“You could at least try to teach her some science while she’s still is curious.” Said a woman behind the two of them. She hadn’t been expected. Silan frowned, taking as much effort as possible to look as unhappy as he could.

“Auna-lai!” The girl exclaimed, running up to hug the woman. Of course, like Silan, she was not the girl’s aunt. And her name was Laila. But unlike Silan, she was very fond of the child, and took her into her arms.

“When it rains, and the sun shines while it does so, light can reflect through water and create a rainbow.” Laila said, taking the girl on her lap and pointing off at the sky like she could a summon a rainbow herself.

“You don’t know science.” Silan said edging away from Laila’s stretched out legs.

“Then you explain it.”

“I don’t know science.” Silan said, irritated. “Obviously. But you don’t either.”

“Well, I vaguely remember what she taught us. And she said that—”

“He now. Today.” Silan said nervously, looking over at the girl.

The both of them had their qualms about each other. There were few times the girl even got to see both of them at once. “Who is she-he?” The girl asked.
“They.” Liala quickly corrected.

“He today.” Said Silan.

They were both looking behind them. Waiting. So when the man did appear, the girl wasn’t very surprised. But her uncle and aunt were terrified.

He was an odd looking man. That’s what got the girl in the end. She wasn’t scared or surprised. But she thought him weird.

And here’s where it’s necessary to take a couple steps back. Zoom out a little, so to speak. Laila was long limbed, light footed and largely lovable. Her hair was an august auburn to match her red-brown skin. Her eyes were white though. Not blind. Just white. She usually wore her hair up in a plain bandana, and her clothes had a sort of northern suggestion to them, thin sleeved, tight, and warm. The patterns on them belonged to no real culture, however, similar to the dark markings that coated her skin.

Silan was less elongated. Larger than Laila in every real way, but all together less elegant about it. His hair was the color of slate, though perhaps less blue, and his white skin had a sort of dull grey hue to it, as did his freckles and markings. His eyes, also white, were rarely wide open. He always had a sort of look on his face like he was trying determine if someone was making a joke or not. His clothes were from Sved, the region the three of them were currently living in, and they were loose and light and could be separated into many layers.

The man who had appeared on the plain behind them was tall, slim and wore clothes with more angles than the girl had ever seen in his life. His eyes were sharp and large, rare to narrow, leaving his brow the only indicator of his mood. His hair was blond. Today.

Silan and Laila stood up as tall as they could, and the girl clung to her adopted aunt’s leg.

“Happy birthday.” The new man said. “Ten years old?”

The girl was not afraid, remember, but the fear of her guardians echoed into her speech. “Maybe.” She said at half volume.

The man laughed, and it was a surprising thing to hear, his laugh. He hadn’t looked capable before. “It is, it is.” He said, and it wasn’t so much a repetition of a phrase than an echo. “What is your name?”

His laughter had woken to the girl to her normal mind. “Tala.” She said, only semi unsure.

“Wrong.” He laughed again, touching her once on the forehead. “Your name is not always what you are called.”

“We never named her.” Laila said, seemingly ashamed. She gathered the girl into her arms with ease, holding her like a toddler.

“Didn’t really seem necessary.” Silan said.

“We just call her ‘you’ or girl’, most of the time.” Silan seemed less ashamed, but still tense, like he was expecting the odd man to lash out at this decision.

“She’s not a pet.” The man offered, twisting his jaw until the joints cracked. “She’s leaving today. She can’t be nameless among her own kind. They will be confused.”
“I’m not very good with names.” Silan offered.

“Agreed.” Laila. “I can try… though. Will you be taking her to Sved? She could be called… Kefla.”

Something in their voices indicated neither had known the girl would be leaving today. But they also carried a hint of acceptance. The strange man was known for this behavior, dreaming and almost expecting others to know his thoughts.

“That is a name for a man about a century ago.” The stranger said calmly, like reading from a book. “I was thinking Aster. What do you think?”

“What kind of name is that?” Silan sounded alarmed.

“The you in my last question was not you, Silan.” The man leaned down to stare at the girl, never bending his legs but still meeting her eyes.

“My name is Tala.”

The man sighed. “Your name is Tai. But I’m calling you Aster.”

It was a definitive order. One that made Silan and Laila quiver and sweat, but only served to frustrate the girl. She did not like this odd man and his angles. But he had no interest in leaving her alone.

Laila knew to place the girl on the ground in the same inborn way she knew to walk away from her. And that instinct of obedience was lost on the girl, but the assumption of authority still hung in her mind. The man did not take her hand, but she walked after him like he had, head to the ground.

“Your name is Aster.” The man said, reaffirming what would soon be ingrained in her mind. “I suppose I have a few things in mind for you. Later.”

And the girl, Aster, watched her bare feet next to the black shine of the man’s shoes in response.

“You’ll know.”

And she did know when that time came, but it took a lot of convincing before she believed it.

By the time Aster was seventeen, she had rearranged her memories into a more sequential pattern: A government man had taken her from her parents when she was younger. Maybe they had beaten her, and that’s why she had blocked out all memories of them. The man had taken her away from the house- a place she never remembered beyond the grass plain that had to have been her backyard- and walked her to the city. To an orphanage. To her new father.

There were many problems with this analysis, and it irritated her. Her old father had worn clothes she could have sworn were Svedian, loose and layered brown cloth. Except she had a long and clear memory of walking for an hour and arriving in Baased, a city on the other side of the continent.

Other things didn’t match up either. She remembered mountains from above and eyes without pupils. And once or twice, strange monsters haunted her mind, chasing her footfalls like ducklings, but with jaws like demons.

Aster was logical, and these muddled memories were the bane of her schoolwork’s margins. Instead of classes on history and war, all she could think of was how wrong her mind was. She found the only way she could really disappear into nothing but the lines of facts she defined herself as was if
she drew pictures in class and relived memories in her dreams.

“We live in a time of peace…” A teacher was saying, though the thought was left unfinished in Aster’s mind. She wrote ‘peace’ down on her notes, then erased it a moment later. She didn’t need notes on things everyone knew.

She was sitting by the window, and it was raining out. The dull sound at least carried the blessed scent of pavement through the screen. Rain was her favorite thing- a presence she still unused to, missing from her memories. Sved was a country of desert and plain. But she couldn’t have been Svedian. Most ethnicities were separated by borders of war and she- with her black hair and scrawny body- didn’t match the dusty and steady features most typical in Sved.

She didn’t really look Renen either. The fishers of Renen were strong and callused, often with skin ranging from from old wood to literal blackness. Aster had dark olive skin, close enough that she did not stand out, but there was something off about her- her jawline, maybe, or her thin shoulders- that brought on second glances. Baased was a large city, but there were few children.

Today had been a relatively typical day, though Aster did have the opportunity to call it ‘slightly noteworthy’. One of her good friends was being exalted today, a boy named Wren, and the class had taken a somewhat somber view of the event. Most of Aster’s classmates had been together as a single group since they were twelve, and it was rare for anyone to leave.

The school didn’t take time to acknowledge it though, meaning Aster had to sit through all her usual courses- mostly on frivolous things like music and dancing- before having a chance to speak to Wren at the end of the school day.

“You don’t seem the type to quest anywhere. I wouldn’t trust you to make it to your front door on your own.” Aster was joking around, but she was a quiet sort of girl, and had yet to master the light-hearted tone needed to convey this well.

Wren understood, of course, as they were good friends and both rather withdrawn. He was a tremendous artist, but that was rarely a favorite trait for boys “It’s my parents. They already have my older brother.”

“You should write me.” Aster suggested. She had intended to say goodbye to him, but found herself unable to pronounce the needed words.

“I’ll be dead.” Wren said, shaking his head slightly. His hair, once a pale violet, had long dark roots down to his ears. Likely he had given up on dyeing once he realized he was going to die.

“I mean. Not right away, you’ll be dead. You have to journey first.”

“You said I wouldn’t make it to the front door of my house. Trust me, I will fail to scale a mountain any day.”

It was somber to walk with her moribund friend to the gates of the school with his hand sweaty and tight in hers, but typical. Most parents sent their kids on this sort of quest when they were twelve. Most of the kids left, the only children and the dearly loved, had had to say goodbye many times before.

Aster had as well. But she had never been close to the kids who were leaving, and often her involvement had been a card, with something like ‘I didn’t know you very well, but I am sure you were nice’ written inside.

At the gate, Wren had two bodyguards waiting for him. They would walk him the rest of the way.
Before he left, Wren signed out with his hands ‘Pray for me.’

Aster did not pray, but she did not explain that to him. ‘I will’, she signed back.

Her father was waiting at the gates for her as well. She did not actually know his name, or much about him besides his appearance. She did know he was the sort of man that would never exalt his daughter, primarily because he was the sort of man who never would have to. He was the head of the committee of exaltation, or at least, Aster vaguely believed he was. She did not know much about his job besides the fact that he often traveled and left her home alone.

“How was school today?” He asked. Despite the existence of automobiles, and his apparent wealth, he walked everywhere. Aster’s feet hurt.

“Wren’s leaving.”

“He is?” Her father looked over to judge her expression. “He’ll be-”

He wasn’t going to be fine, and Aster’s father knew it. Aster knew it. Anyone who was over the age of five knew it. But Aster’s father, though a seemingly distant man, could read his daughter’s untelling facial expressions better than anyone.

“He will be hurt. But if we’re lucky, he’ll only be hurt. And then someone might find him, and he might come home, and if we’re very lucky he’ll only have gone deaf and lost a limb or two. You two learned sign language for this exact reason, didn’t you?”

The school had required the course, actually. There were a number of times exalted children had come back alive, but often they were so damaged it was like they hadn’t come home at all- and indeed, their parents would many times lock them away from society in shame of their failure. But the luckiest ones were the children who simply went deaf, and were allowed to returned home with familial shame but unharmed.

“I have to pray for him.”

“He’ll... maybe be fine, Aster. But prayer won’t change that.”

They arrived at their house, a large three story building entirely empty besides them. It was in the center of the city, away from the docks where the poorer families lived.

“I said I would.” While her father walked through the door, Aster stood still. Then she turned and continued down the street in the direction of the nearest altar.

There was no need to doubt the legends and the gods, but Aster was a logical sort of girl, and generally settled on a sort of apathy towards them. Her father was not tremendously religious either, sans for a home altar to the sky god Ikina. They celebrated all the holy days at school, but at home these days consisted of little more than an extra desert.

Baased, and the whole country of Renen, worshipped only Silanah, the god of the sea. His altars were designed after the caves he was said to call home in the ocean’s trenches, so they were dark and wet. Baased, as the richest city in Renen, housed the largest temple to him, consisting of many rooms, including a fishpond.

Electricity and technology were banned at holy sights, and the only light in the altar came from candles and moonstone.

Aster had never actually prayed before, besides repeating the same group prayers at school once a
week. When she kneeled at a statue of Silanah whose details were missing in the dark, she was utterly speechless.

When Aster was younger, it was hard to keep her quiet, but at some point over the past seven years, someone had told her to shut up. And she had. So words were not her strength. Her only strength, actually, came from her mind, and even that had faltered as she kept silent. She was always curious, but without words, no one knew to answer her.

Someone with a candle walked past her, and for a moment Silanah’s statue was illuminated, revealing a shape like a fish and a six-legged goat mashed into one, with the cold and empty eyes of a man.

Aster got up immediately, more or less jumping to her feet. The image of the gods was not allowed outside the doors of an altar, and the shock of seeing his apparent true form had startled Aster. But a second later she calmly reminded herself that, obviously as a god, Silanah was not going to look like a human. She kneeled again at the statue’s feet and closed her eyes, breathing in the damp air around her.

She tried to word a prayer in her mind, wishing Wren safety and to return home minimally injured or else, somehow, a hero of the country, but the words would not form.

Aster knew logic, and logically Wren was going to die. No one lived. Few got away intact. Exaltation was an honor and an inevitable outcome, and it really wasn’t her business to protest it.

A man sat next to her while she was failing to pray, a stout and stiff sort of man who didn’t seem lost in prayer himself. He looked over at Aster, once, and she immediately got up and left the altar. As much as she’d like to stay, the moment someone payed a little extra attention to her she knew she had to leave. It wasn’t unheard of for people to kidnap children and exalt them to the city, reaping the rewards before the police determined the kid hadn’t been theirs.

She walked home quickly. Baased was not an unsafe city, and indeed a rich one, but there were few children and many things to keep it that way.

While it is all good to focus on Aster for the rest of the day- when she returns home to speak curtly to her concerned father, for example, or later after dinner when she finally allows herself to cry- Aster left an important sort of person behind when she left the altar of Silanah: Silan. Ah.

The ‘Ah’ was not actually part of his name, but an old sort of suffix that had latched on at some point in the last few centuries. It probably came from the ‘a’ sound at the end of Ikina- and while he was honored to have his superior’s suffix on his name, he would have preferred it if people got his name correct.

Laila like being called Lailanah though. Figures.

Silan had roughly left Aster behind years ago, back before she really had a name, but gods have many powers and one of them is pretty close to omnipotence. He was fairly aware of everything that occurred in his domain. Not fully aware, of course, but nearly. So it wasn’t impossible for him to check in on the girl every so often.

Of course, he wasn’t watching over her purely out of his own interest. If he had that much freedom over his powers, he would have been spying on Laila (as an enemy, that is. To learn her secrets). Ikina was his source of energy, and it was their will that he had to check in on Aster. They liked Aster for reasons Silan could understand less than the poor girl’s name.
Aster was *such* a bizarre name.

Ikina was actually and honestly omnipotent as far as Silan knew. They appeared without the slightest tremble of energy behind him, and without words seemed to know what had transpired that day.

“If I stop one child from being sacrificed, I’ll have to stop them all.”

“No.” They said. They were wearing a feminine form today—daringly—buxom? Was that the term? Er. It was a very feminine form, but as always, their eyes were the same soft and pure gold. They never really seemed to wear their body more as possess it, and features of the face and hair were left untouched, giving the impression they might as well have been painted on for all Ikina cared for them.

“If I stop one child sacrifice, other parents will think I don’t want them anymore. And I do want them. I want them so much.”

“Your hatred of children is not a flattering trait.”

“The only person I have to flatter is you. And if you dislike anything about me, you can always remake me.”

“I want Aster to be happy. She was crying.”

“Didn’t see that part.” Silan said. An instant passed and the two of them were standing in Aster’s room while she curled up near the television and cried. “Oh.”

They shifted back to the altar. The scene before had been nothing more than a temporary illusion of a past event. After all, nothing can travel through time.

“You won’t spare the child.” Ikina said. “I will.”

Silan knew not to say a word until Ikina had explained themself. They rarely enjoyed interruptions, but only those gods such as Laila and Silan could tell when they were thinking and when they were finished.

“It’s about time for me to play this game. Find a chosen one. This planet’s been going on for a little too long.” They sighed at this idea like they were repeating it, not speaking it. “I’ll miss them though, when they’re all dead.”
Chapter End Notes

Notes on tagging: This is M/M because Wren will have a dude in his life, soon. Aster is autistic and aromantic. The spaceships show up later on.
Bombshells of information aside, it’s important to remember when the focus is back on Aster that she isn’t aware of any of this. Wren is going to die! Or is already dead. There was no dramatic ceremony for exaltation, just a signed deed at the city hall. He could be long gone by now. And dead.

It was not a day for school, meaning Aster had free range of... well, the house. Unless a friend came to walk with her, it was not a good idea to venture alone too far. And now, with Wren gone, she did not have any hope of leaving. Her father was at his work, exalting or ambassadoring or whatever he did.

She decided to read, and then read for a few hours in tedium and general uninterest. She was quite absorbed in it, of course, but overall it wasn’t the most exciting way to spend a day.

Around three, there came an excited knocking on her door, and she looked through the eye hole to see Wren and what appeared to be his entire family.

He leapt into her arms the moment she opened the doors, and the act of joy was so unknown to him that Aster almost felt the need to check he really was Wren.

“I’m going to live!” He exclaimed. “Ikina, the blessed mother, has chosen me to live.”

Aster was not sure how to match his enthusiasm, though truly very excited on the inside. With his entire extended family here, however, she felt the pressing need to try. “That’s... amazing.” She tried. The grin was not hard to conjure. “How do you know?”

He pulled a feather from his coat pocket. It had been sticking obviously out before, but Aster had taken it as nothing special. Wren carefully handed it to her by the tip, and she spun the soft golden feather about in her fingers. It still did not look sacred, but was definitely beautiful.

“This could have fallen off of any bird.” She whispered, handing carefully back to him. “But your family interprets it to mean you shouldn’t be exalted?”

“Of course I’m going through with the exaltation, Aster! Ikina has blessed me. I’m meant to finish this quest.”

Aster grimaced on reflex. “You’ll die. A cocky attitude will only ensure it.”

“Thanks for your vote of confidence. I’m sure the mother of the sky is going to look fondly on you for doubting her so ruthlessly.” Wren was more energetic than Aster had ever seen him, and she did not enjoy how easily his sarcasm was heard. “I came here for your regards. Will you give them to me?”

She didn’t want to disappoint her friend, no matter how wrong he was, so she bowed her head at him, two fingers on each hand pressing down- the traditional custom of blessings.

Wren smiled, lightly touched her head once to signal her to look up, and returned to his family.

As he continued down the street, his overjoyed parents in tow, he glanced back once long enough that Aster could sign out: ‘I will not pray for you.’ Then he was gone.

“Cold.” A man’s voice said behind her, and she yelped and punched him as hard as she could without stopping to look at her face.
If she had, of course, she would have been met with the appearance of a man she had never met before, but the gaze of someone who knew her very well.

He didn’t fall to the floor, and even though her punch had made contact, there was a sort of soft feeling to his body that made Aster queasy.

The man stopped to close the front door, then stood in front of it while Aster’s mind raced. There were many ways this man could hurt her- and she was too weak to overpower him. What weapons did this house hold? Surely her father had a gun of some sort, or perhaps a shovel?

The man seemed malevolent in that he was in her house, and a stranger. But otherwise his face was bank- though perhaps a small pout of a frown had gathered on his lips.

“Aster.” He said. “Come speak with me.”

“Are you an associate of my father?” Aster was halfway up the staircase when he had spoke, and she stood tense waiting for a reply.

“No. But he knows me. And you know me.” The man took a few steps up the stairs, but the moment Aster began sneaking silently down the hall with the intention of hiding, he stopped. He met her gaze. “You are chosen.”

“No. That’s just something you tell to people you’re going to kill.” Exalted, after all, just meant ‘in high regard’ or ‘extremely happy’. No one went around choosing people randomly- it was always predetermined who would be going places and who wouldn’t be.

“I am Ikina.” The man said. He did not offer any more proof than the pure will to say those words of blasphemy, and had Aster been a more aware girl, she would have realized this and bowed.

“You’re a man, in my house, and you plan to exalt me so you can take the coin and meal it provides.”

“I am Ikina.” He said again, and this time he proved it with nothing more than a single line of feathers and scales bursting grotesquely through the skin of his left arm. He let them boil back into his flesh a second later. Aster was about to throw up, but she forced the mucus down. “Okay.” She said weakly. There was nothing else to say, for if this man wasn’t a god he was a monster, and either ways nothing good could be in store for her if she didn’t cooperate.

“I had hoped you would offer to join your friend on his journey. Instead, I am reduced to ordering you to. Please, you are chosen Aster, and you must complete this task.”

“Why? If you also chose Wren, why also pick me?”

“Hurry along.”

“What about my father?”

“I will talk with him.”

“So I have to go now?”

“Yes.”

And she did without further protest, though she walked warily and aimlessly once she was past the
front door. The man- or the creature, really- was not following her to ensure she did as he had ordered. But there was a sense in the air that he’d know anyways.

It could be debated if Ikina was psychic or not, but at the very least it was agreed that he was highly intelligent. Whatever he thought was unknown to all- the ‘all’ only being his two gods- but it seemed he had thought of everything. And while he truthfully was not making sure Aster was heading in the right direction, he had little worry that she would go too far astray.

Ikina sat down on the couch, content to sit very, very still until the man who was Aster’s father returned. It would be a while. But rarely was Ikina impatient.

Aster met Wren at the steps of the town center, moments after his parents had finished exalting him. His family stood a distance away, watching as he departed in the direction of the wilderness.

When Aster ran up to him in a half-hearted and truthfully awkward jog, he seemed again to be the timid boy she was comfortable with.

“What is it?” He said, almost alarmed.

“I’m-” She clenched her jaw. She didn’t want to admit what had just happened, and if she told Wren she was expected to travel with him, well, it’d be a done deal wouldn’t it? She’d have to, and if she somehow got out of it, he’d always know she was supposed to.

“Though while you’re here...” Wren glanced about cautiously, then whispered with a sharp glance to his extended family. “M-my parents said you might want to... ask for my hand in marriage. Since I’m chosen, and all that. Once I came back.” He did not seem any more fond of the idea than Aster was.

But it was normal for girls to marry young in Renen, and arranged marriages were just as common. It was this exact reason that Aster had to sit through weekly classes on sewing and homemaking as well as history and math. Even though it was acknowledged many young girls excelled in the sciences, society needed children to exalt. And if a girl could marry into a wealthier family, well, all the better.

Aster did not live in a traditional family, and had a feeling her father would allow her to get away with not marrying. Wren was not as lucky. Before he might have been able to live in a peaceful quiet, overshadowed by his older siblings and their children, but now as Ikina’s chosen he was fully expected to marry and reproduce.

He had once admitted to Aster that he did not like girls so much as boys, and Aster now realized marrying him would probably save him from a hassle of a life. If Aster married him, they both would avoid the hard-gaze of society, and at least they’d get along.

But of course, Aster was seventeen and not really into the whole concept of marriage. She grimaced, and Wren flinched, and then she realized one of them was going to die on this journey anyways and that she might as well make a few empty promises. If either returned home without the other, at least now they had the excuse of ‘lost love’ to use to escape matrimony.

“That’s not why I’m here.” She whispered, taking his hand into hers. “But I know.” She leaned her head against his chest for a few seconds, hearing his heart beat and utterly indifferent to what was happening. He took the feather- Ikina’s?- and searched around before finally jamming it into her hairband.

It started to drop as Aster lifted her head, so she took it out and started to twirl it in her fingers as she looked over at Wren’s family. She nodded once, and, thinking they looked somewhat happy about
what had happened, took Wren’s hand in hers and continued walking.

“Where are you going?” Wren asked as they turned onto a street and left his family behind.

“With you. Into the wilderness. Into exaltation.”

“Why? It’s too dangerous for you, I mean. It’s too dangerous for me, but Ikina is watching over me.”

Ikina was not watching over him right now, actually, and instead was watching the old mantelpiece clock in Aster’s house tick the minutes off. Winged humanoids topped the frame. Angels, but here they called them Ikieen- his supposed messengers. There were no such things, of course. Just because their gods were real, that didn’t mean there had to be monsters as well.

Aster thought over her choices, running her thoughts into charts of sequences. If she had a chance to write this out, the answer would come easier- but it was not a hard choice to begin with. There was nothing to be gained from lying. “Ikina came to me as well. He told me to travel with you.”

“Maybe our marriage is meant to be.” Wren said grimly.

“I mean, if you want to look at it that way, maybe our friendship is meant to be- which is a sort of useless thought since we were already friends to begin with.” Aster said. “No need to drag our spontaneous and never-actually-happening marriage into this.”

“I won’t mention it again.” Wren promised.

The two of them made their way to the edge of the city, which took a few hours. Baased was spread over a great deal of land, and was more or less in the shape of the shore it bordered.

The quest of exaltation was that of the ocean, and Silanah, but it wouldn’t be enough if the city simply threw their children off the docks and called it a day. The route began on the western gate, through the mountains that covered most of Renen, and to the sacred mountain of Ae-en in the neighboring country of Aela. From there, it was assumed the child would be visited by Ikina and told the way to the deepest cave where Silanah was held. Silanah would then be awakened, granting the child’s country safety and flooding the planet with a newly wondrous tide.

No one had made it to Ae-en. That was a simple fact. They all had died along the way, bodies usually missing and deaths never witnessed.

Because it was unknown what caused the deaths half the time, it was impossible for Aster and Wren to feel truly prepared for the journey ahead. Aster had a feather, now, and Wren had the supposed protection of a god currently fascinated by a clock.

In Wren’s bag was the standard, a number of filling compact meals that were lacking in nutrition, a filtered water bottle, a sleeping bag, a flashlight, a pocketknife, and a book of prayers. One thing about Aster being ushered to leave so quick was that she was now very unprepared. Her pants were somewhat warm, she guessed, and her coat had a fur lined hood. But it got very cold in the mountains of Renen, and Wren was packed with enough food for one.

Aster decided not to mention this problem. The dunes beyond the gates of Baased were friendly enough, still holding paved roads, and Wren was altogether too optimistic about the situation right now.

Not much happened for a number of hours between the two of them. Then a monster tried to kill them. But that didn’t happen for a few more hours, and before that could really happen, Ikina finally met with an old acquaintance.
Using the word ‘acquaintance’ implies a certain sort of connection though. And Aster’s father, a man named Linson, was not particularly aware of a bond between him and the woman on his couch. He had never seen her before, in fact, until she opened her mouth to speak and confirmed the sort of fear he only worried about in nightmares:

“I am Ikina.” She said to him. “I’ve removed your daughter.”

“Is she okay, at least?”

“She’ll be fine. But how much trust do you place in blood?” Ikina phrased her question like it was on a survey and scored on a ten point scale. Like the data would be collected and analyzed, but ultimately there was no correct answer.

“I don’t care.”

“Notable. She was your daughter. By genetics. If I had said that before asking, would you have had a different answer?”

“Sometimes I had figured that was the case.” Linson said, but in truth he had never considered it. Ikina had come to him in the shape of a blonde man, and guided him to adopt Aster. It had been on a day when he was already at an orphanage and seeking to adopt, so he had not thought anything odd until the orphanage called the next day to check if he was still interested in adoption.

And then, of course, the odd man had come to his house and told him he was Ikina. And Linson had had little choice but wonder what his daughter was destined for, and erect a small shine in his house, just in case.

When the world only has three gods, you can’t risk having more than one of them on your bad side.

“She’ll be safe. And I’ve come to thank you for raising her for these past few years.”

“What gifts can a god give?” Linson said, interrupting without thought.

“Oh, nothing but my thanks, and word that she will be alive and well.”

“That’s good.”

Ikina seemed more pleased than Linson, and suddenly she made a quiet sort of exhale, the sort that might precede laughter.

“What is it?”

“Oh, Laila doesn’t recognize her anymore.”

It took a while for Linson to realize the Laila in question was likely Lailana, and by then Ikina had disappeared.

If anyone took a few moments and thought hard, they would have been able to put a few details together and realize this: On a quest to grant the sea god supreme power, the land god was probably not too happy.

She wasn’t purely unhappy, of course, just protective of her interests. And yes, of course, she lacked the omnipotence that would have allowed her to recognize Aster.

She had created a fairly monstrous wolf from the shadows to attack any exalted children, and it was this creature that threw itself on top of Aster. Its jaws were open, but luckily failed to grasp the curve
of her shoulder- instead, its jaws snapped shut below her collarbone, taking with them minimal blood
and a whole lot of cloth.

Aster screamed right away, and flailed her arms about like she was trying to punch it in the jaw. She
was unable to find a way to calm down and think rationally, but her instinct took over and did just as
well: she turned her head away from the beast, put an arm up to shield her face, and tried to roll on
her back so her legs might kick its stomach.

The wolf was stronger than her, however, being a manifestation of Laila’s power. Its teeth found
their way to the flesh of Aster’s arm first, causing deliberately light bleeding. Then the wolf let go
and stood calm.

Aster could smell only blood and rain and her ears were foggy from the wolf’s presence. When it
seemed to stop its assault, she could not feel calm, but she slowly inched herself away from under the
creature.

Then, the moment she took her arm away from blocking her neck and shoulder, the wolf leapt again
and gripped her so tight in its jaws that it picked her body up like a ragdoll and dragged her along the
ground as the wolf retreated into the forest.

She was not dead yet, but there was a certain assumption that she would be soon. Then she felt
something very precise in her neck, like a needle, but it was really hard to gauge exactly what it felt
like- she was in so much pain it was generally pointless to think of anything beyond it.

Then there was something warm after the point had receded. And then she fell to the ground. And
then, standing above her and bathed in blood, was Wren and his pocket knife.

Aster had a feeling she looked dead, or else actually was dead. But it was very hard for her to make
up her mind.

Wren leaned over her body and checked her pulse on the side of her neck that wasn’t cut open, and
he found that there wasn’t one. The fight had really happened too fast for him to intervene, he
thought. He cleaned his knife on his jacket best he could and folded it back into its sheath. He looked
back in the direction he and Aster had come from, and considered how long of a walk it was going
to be to return her body.

If Ikina had really been protecting her, she wouldn’t have died. So had she been lying? Or had Ikina?

Wren fixed his cap. His clothes had been a mix of pale blue and white before, stylish but called
unsuited for adventuring. Now he understood why.

He took Ikina’s feather back from Aster’s bloodstained pocket, and found it completely clean. He
turned it over in his hand a few, captured by its soft and bloodless glow, and set off down the path.
He had a feeling if he tried to return Aster’s body, another wolf would come for him too. And if he
was going to die, it might as well be far from home.
With the drama of Aster’s death behind him, Wren only knew one thing for sure: at least he wasn’t at risk of running out of food. The worry of sharing food had concerned him almost as much as the worry of having to share a sleeping bag. This was a venture meant for one. And... that was all. That was all he could think of.

Aster, meanwhile, could not stop thinking. Mostly because she had just woken up in a pile of blood next to the carcass of a wolf with a literally red pelt and her neck seemed to be cut wide open. She didn’t want to touch it to find out, but the cold air of the plains chilled something very wet on her neck, and she definitely did remember a bite that went through her skin.

And standing up, she was very frustrated to find she was not the slightest bit disoriented. She should have died! There was no true method to live with injuries like hers, and yet she was alive, and even if Ikina was real, she still couldn’t be alive. The science wasn’t there. Her body couldn’t just support a giant gaping wound without infection, vein failure, and blood loss. No god should be able to circumvent that sort of inevitability.

But she seemed fine, so she dusted her pants off- a useless effort at cleanliness considering her blood soaked status- and continued down the road.

Ikina had had no part in Aster’s resurrection, actually, it was rather that they had ensured a prevention of her death. There was no point where she had been dead, to tell the truth. Wren had simply failed to find her pulse due to the unconnected nature of most of her veins at the time. But in this case, that did not mean she had died.

Maintaining someone who ought to be dead takes a great deal of energy, but on a planet like this, Ikina never had to worry. They had a surplus of power, and was able to feed Aster the needed energy without any hassle. Still, it would be a shame for the wounds to indefinite- they were deep and grisly, bone exposed on the shoulder, spine snapped around the neck and plenty of open veins. So they got to work healing Aster, a task accomplished without her notice for the first few hours.

Aster probably would never have noticed her body’s miraculous repairing of itself if she hadn’t found her way to a slow river- and there she could look down at her cuts, gashes and holes slowly fill themselves in.

There was a moment where Aster had to stand still and question herself, and a few seconds into that moment she even raised her hands into the air and stared at them. Was she invincible? Was she immortal? Was Wren as well?

She did not like the idea. Immortality, and longevity, frightened her immensely. It was like love- a goal unreachable, and deservedly so. She wanted to die, one day. How long would Ikina keep her like this?

She knew she needed to follow Wren, let him know she was alive, but she was seriously coated in blood. It had begun to dry in her hair, making it matted with soft and sticky balls. She took off her clothes to quickly bathe, stopping the moment she had scrubbed the blood off her skin with her hands. She kept away from her still slightly open wounds though, even if they didn’t hurt when submerged in water.

Then she had to wait a half hour to dry off, and by then it was mid afternoon. The wolf had attacked last night. Wren had likely made some good distance by now.
Wren wasn’t actually too far from Aster, though neither was aware of it. He found himself staying the night in an inn in a small mountain town named Noihan. He had planned to depart immediately the next morning- but found himself drawn to stay. Mostly because he really needed some money. Exaltation was supposed to be a spiritual quest, so money wasn’t traditionally included- but if there were going to be monstrous wolves involved, he needed some funds to buy a real weapon. And pay the inn back.

The only real job he could find involved capturing a thief, a task he was in no way equipped to deal with, but luckily had solved itself with relative ease that morning.

To skip over the exact sequence of events, the thief in question had tried to rob one of the two shops in town the morning Wren was debating how to capture him, and with a few strong words and the influence of his bloody clothes, Wren had caught a thief.

Then, a few hours later, he was having a hard time letting the thief go. He had collected the reward, and then wasted a few hours looking through every item in the only merchant’s shop before settling on a settling on a very plain and cheap sword. Then he ate lunch. Then he went to look at the thief again, because really, he could not stop looking at the thief.

He was really gorgeous. And no, that wasn’t the only reason Wren was so caught up about him. He also was decisively foreign, covered in strange tattoos, and seemingly eccentric. And very good looking. Being good looking isn’t a personality trait, but it can make your actual traits seem a little more appealing.

His name was Senya and he had actually red hair. Aster’s was dyed from black. But Senya’s appeared to be the fully natural copper orange most typically called red. He was fit, but not tall, and his eyes were a clear green.

Senya was a name that, at the very least, was from one of the countries where Laila was worshipped. Wren was not too sure which one specifically, though the closest one was Stemale. But between his pale skin and foreign language tattoos, it seemed likely he had come from further than that, maybe even the southern continent.

“Come to gaze upon my grandeur yet again?” Senya teased when Wren returned to the corner of the inn’s dining room where he was tied up. It was his fifth visit today.

“Your hair is coated in mud.”

“So I represent the charming peasant aesthetic. Who cares? Sure not you, considering you keep coming here to stare.”

“I’m just sitting here to relax. And make sure you don’t escape.” Wren said. “I’ll be leaving shortly.”

“Pray, do tell me your destination. Perhaps we shall meet again on the lonely paths of life, if the sky destines it.” With the theatrics Senya was taking with his voice, it could only be assumed he would have been making grand gestures if his hands weren’t tied up.

Did exaltation exist in other countries? Surely the other towns of Renen participated in the rite- but then again, Wren’s life in Baased had been fairly isolated. Travel wasn’t very common between cities, and about null between countries.

“I’m exalted.” He tried.
“Oh, exalted? I didn’t know you felt that strongly about me. My heart simply flutters at the joy you receive from watching me in chains!” Then he dropped his voice of sarcastic whimsy for the first time in hours. “Me too. But we call it immolation. Bit more truthful to the end result, I believe, then your sea custom of ‘pure joy’”

“Where are you from?”

“I may have misled you by saying ‘sea custom’. If you’re from Renen, you have no right to the ocean. I’m from Iixo.” A hazy world map came to Wren’s mind. That was far to the south, wasn’t it? “It’s the large island chain on the right.” Senya said as if he could read his thoughts.

“How did you wind up here?”

“I know. How to drive. A boat.” Senya’s accent of mockery had returned, and he turned away from Wren’s gaze to make a face. “If you’re not going to kiss me, lean back a little. You smell like blood.”

Wren leaned back a lot, startled at the other boy’s ability to even jokingly mention the thought of kissing. He hadn’t realized he had leaned in so much, either, and now moved his chair back.

“I’m an artist.” He said weakly, like it was at all an appropriate response to the embarrassing amount of red that had flushed his cheeks. How weak was he if he honestly felt embarrassed by the joke of a rude stranger?

“Do you work in nudes? I’ll gladly pose for you.” Senya laughed when Wren squirmed. “Draw something for me right now. A dragon. I want a picture of a dragon that I can look at when I’m planning my escape from prison. And I want to be riding the dragon, naked. And while we’re at it, you also should be naked and riding the dragon.”

“I only work in oil pastel.”

“Is that painting to you?” He said. “Do you have any with you then?”

“Why would I pack pastels with me on a dangerous journey?”

“So... you can make this poor boy’s dreams come true? I mean, I’m not sure how I’ll cope without a charming rendition of a dragon and your naked body to keep me company in jail.” He sighed exuberantly. “It’s a real shame.”

“Can you switch to your normal voice for a few seconds? I... really need to go. But how did someone from the other side of the planet end up here?”

“You’ll learn eventually.” He said in a voice that was a compromise between joking and serious. “Or you’ll die.”

“How have you survived this long?”

“Seriously? Right from the heart here? Completely and utterly truthfully? I’ll tell you how I survived if you untie me. And I won’t even kill you at the end of it.”

“You’re a wild criminal. I can’t trust you.”

“I’m a thief, not a murderer. And I’ve been stalking this town for too long now. Let me go and I guarantee I’ll take you up to the mountain of Ae-en unscratched.”

Though it hasn’t really been mentioned in between all the charming dialogue, Wren was still grieving
Aster and feeling very alone. And that was the reason why he untied Senya and snuck him outside. That- and not Senya’s gleaming eyes or apparent willingness to joke about things not acceptable to society. He was lonely. Senya seemed to know a few useful things.

He wasn’t even that attractive, just at this level of unattainable beauty where he still looked kind of good when covered in bruises, cuts and mud. And Wren, a boy who really had never had an excuse to even make friends with other boys, was drawn easily in.

Though Aster was nearby, and closing in, and soon enough would be reuniting with her friend and his new companion, now is a good time to look at Laila, and then someone else, briefly, and for just a few seconds.

Laila couldn’t trespass on countries that didn’t worship her, and sending just one wolf into Silan’s territory had taken such a strain on her that she lay utterly exhausted on the grass, breathing for half a day before she could stand again. Things move slowly for the gods. Petty conversations between boys don’t matter to them.

Only Ikina has free range of the world, but the most they felt comfortable doing was watching and waiting for their humans to figure their own problems out. And even then, they could not always be there to watch.

For example, now, Ikina is not watching nor listening. They are standing and speaking to a man who looks like he could have walked off the streets of Baased’s wealthiest district- but that would be very, very wrong.

The man has purple hair, naturally, and this fact is not at all strange to him. His name is Artemis, and he does not see a single thing odd about that name either.

He likes watching as much as Ikina does, and he has a few questions. Mostly about Aster.

It was about sunset when Aster came to the town of Roihan, and not long after she came to the center of the place- a brief walk, considering the town only had twenty buildings- she heard Wren’s voice.

She ran towards it for a few seconds, then fell into a steady walk. No need to look so alarmed. Her wounds had mostly healed, though the cuts in her coat still suggested their presence. If she could find a shawl, she might be able to cover them up and look fully normal.

She found Wren unconscious in another man’s arms, and was too taken aback by the stranger’s looks to feel fully angry about it. He was seriously good looking. Different looking, but really good about it. It may feel repetitive to reiterate Senya’s appearance, but it was honestly very important to Aster at the time. Very key to the next few events. He was just that gorgeous.

The mysterious boy dropped Wren, and Aster ran after him, tackling him to the ground a few seconds into the chase. He was likely a lot stronger than she was, but he seemed to give in when she kneeled on his chest.

“What did you do to Wren?”

The boy didn’t meet her eyes. “He seriously just hit his head on a pole. Nothing else happened.”
“Why did you run then?”

“Do you know how much blood you’re covered in?” He stopped for a moment and thought about it. “I guess that makes sense, you and him being together. A couple of traveling murderers or something.”

“We’re not maniacs, and this is just wolf’s blood. I’m going to go wake Wren up and check your story.”

“He might-” The man started, but failed to finish his thought. He got up and meekly followed Aster to Wren, who was starting to regain consciousness.

“What happened?” Aster asked.

At the sight of her, Wren fainted again.

Aster sighed. “I’m taking him to the inn. You’re coming with me.”

She bought a room using money she found in Wren’s pockets, and put Wren on the bed. The innkeeper smiled nervously at the man with her- if she had been present an hour ago, she would have known Wren’s excuse for freeing Senya was that he was escorting him to Baased city prison. The innkeeper was not pleased to see him staying another night.

Aster unrolled Wren’s sleeping bag and took her coat off to use as a pillow. She was exhausted, but had no way to ensure that the mysterious boy wouldn’t run away if she let herself sleep.

Luckily, before she had a chance to worry too much about her suspiciously alluring prisoner, Wren woke up.

“Senya.” He groaned, and Senya almost on cue gave an exaggerated glance towards Aster, a face that seemed to be prompting her to laugh. But Aster rarely laughed, and certainly did not find now to be an appropriate time.

“Wren, are you alright?” Aster leaned over him, checking his forehead for fever automatically even if it didn’t make much sense to do so.

“Eug, I’m fine.” He sat up slowly and clutched his head. “Just ran into a pole.”

At that Aster could have laughed. So Senya wasn’t a killer then? He legitimately was a random guy off the streets who had been concerned with Wren’s wellbeing? That was a nice occurrence. Aster wouldn’t have liked to be dealing with any sort of madman in this mad quest.

Wren continued to groan as he further woke up and his head stopped spinning. “Though-” He said simply, and then frowned like he was remembering a bad dream. “I thought-” He took a moment to confirm his thoughts until he realized he hadn’t been imagining Aster’s death. “You’re dead!” He scurried back on the bed until he bumped into the headboard.

“I came back!” Aster exclaimed it with as much fear as he did. Of course, again, she hadn’t actually died- just been kept alive against the odds. But the distinction didn’t really matter.

Senya felt like he was intruding on something he probably didn’t want to be intruding on. But it wasn’t like he could stop himself from hearing the next few lines of conversation:

“Ikina saved you.” Wren said formally, giving a small bow of prayer to the sky god.
“He would do the same to you- Look.” Aster pulled at her coat, revealing the pale scars where she had once been cut open. “I think his blessing has made us immortal.”

“Should I harm myself to test it?”

“That’s not a good idea. If you end up killing yourself and you don’t come back… well. You don’t come back.”

“But it would ease my mind about future encounters. Here, I know.” He removed his sword from its sheathe and made a very light cut across the back of his right hand.

Aster and Wren both watched blood bead out of the wound with a look of cultish fascination for whatever would happen next. Except nothing happened. Wren licked the cut clean and put away the sword.

“So at least we know that.” Aster said dully.

“Oh, have you met Senya?” Wren looked up at him with a smile. “He’s going to travel with us now.”

“Is that why he was hanging around? How much did he cost you?” The subject of bodyguards was common talk for the two children from Baased, but it sounded very troubling for Senya. In fact, he was starting to regret his previous light hearted interactions with Wren. Dealing with immortals- or really, kids who thought they were immortal- was going to cause him trouble.

He had lost focus for a minute while debating the consequences of leaping out of the window, when he heard a few notable words:

“He’s Iixoan, and there they call it ‘immolation’...” Wren was explaining.

“That’s a sacrifice, especially one by burning.”

The two turned to look at Senya carefully, but it was Aster’s keen eyes that found something to spot.

“His chest tattoo is covering a burn scar.” It was true- the tattoo was of nothing more than a series of thick black lines, but carefully visible around the edges was distressed skin tissue.

Senya quickly buttoned his shirt fully closed. “It’s traditional. You guys get a bit of coin, I get a few burns before I go through with it. It’s nothing important.”

“How did you come here?” Aster asked, but Wren shushed her.

“I’ve already gone through with that line of questions. He’s not about to budge, so let’s not annoy him.” Wren was especially concerned about looking good right now. “I’m exhausted. We ought to sleep.”

“I agree.” Aster said, and with a yawn she climbed onto the bed with Wren, getting in a position to sleep where she lay opposite from him. The two had never shared a bed before, and honestly Aster was apprehensive to the whole idea of sharing a room with two boys- so much so that she slept with her clothes on.

Senya was forced to take the sleeping bag, which he was quite content with. He had a feeling Wren was betting he’d try and sleep- sleep sleep that is- with him, and he didn’t need that sort of pressure. The only other sleeping arrangement would have been to share the bed with Aster, and she creeped him out more than Wren did. At least with Wren he had had a few earlier interactions, enough to
decide the kid was harmless.

There was no denying something had cut up Aster’s coat. And her unharmed status- that had to be noted as well.

Senya was not of the religious sort beyond his general acceptance that many other people were. He had his moments of spirituality, he just didn’t consider anything to do with people being brought back from the dead ‘holy’. That was terrifying.

He had come to this town to slack off fate, and now he was saddled to travel to his final destination again- and that was okay, if not inevitable, but every time something changed in his life he found himself he could’ve taken the other path. It was like that- branch after branch, fork after fork- all the way back to one day in the midst of fall when he was eight.

There was nothing special about that day. He just didn’t regret it.

Before these three can sleep- and yes, it will be a while before they can, for Aster is thinking and Wren is fearing and Senya, as always, is regretting- it’s pleasant to go back and check up on Artemis again.

He is alone now.

His eyes are purple too, but something about the way they match his hair makes them feel fake- and truthfully, they are nothing more than prosthetics. But they work.

He can watch Aster without seeing her because Ikina has allowed it, and truthfully, like Ikina, he has no reason to feel drawn to the girl. The only thing special about her is what others have given her, otherwise she is perfectly alike to millions of others.

But because Ikina has point her out to him, he pays attention. He sees something in her that he has missed for a very long time: normalcy. Potential in its rawest form. She will have strengths and she will have weaknesses, but until they are revealed, they are truly unknown.

A machine goes off, and one of his attendants rushes to examine it. His only reason, really, boils down to one thought-

“Might as well.”
squad
As more and more people- well, the word here isn’t exist, as that makes little sense. These people have existed for years. But as more and more people come to light with a degree of importance in Aster’s life, it can be tedious to remember them all. Conversations overlap, thoughts muddle about, and overall there’s the question of who-knows-what.

Luckily, perhaps, two things happened the next day: Aster killed a man and the group was split up. Not necessarily in that order, of course.

They had woken up sore in the inn, as the bed was as uncomfortable as the floor, and Aster’s stiff pants had left red creases on her skin from sleeping in them. Her and Wren’s clothes had really begun to stink from the blood on them as well, making everyone quite happy to leave the room.

Wren and Aster were naturally quiet, so beyond a shy “Good morning” from Wren to Senya, they ate in silence.

It was only after the dish of eggs and bread was done that they focused on the tasks of the day. “How far away is Ae-en anyway?” Aster asked the table.

“Not more than two days.” Senya said immediately.

“Have you been before?”

“No. I know this region fairly well, so don’t go looking to buy a map from any merchants- most are inaccurate.”

“Do you have one of your own?” Wren asked with a yawn. He was not used to waking early in the morning.

“I could probably draw one, but it’s not my real strength. More up your alley, right?” He gave a nervous laugh. Most of his bravado from when he was tied up yesterday was from the assume knowledge that he was doomed to death or incarceration.

“I never could wrap my head around geography class. Too many names.”

“It’s best to learn from experience, I guess. But I envy the fact you had schools.”

“Hm?” Aster asked, intrigued by a comment left hanging. “What’s education like in Iixo?”

“Every islands different, but only on the big ones like Yls and Rii are there any real educational standards. A lot of the smaller ones host more traditional societies.”

“What was it for you?”

“I was from Sonla. It was a mix, really, of cultures. I went to school, but it wasn’t the sort of rich kid history classes I’m sure you get in Baased. I was only really good at fishing.”

“So that’s what you bring to the table then.” Aster said, in an attempt to be light hearted. “Wren has a sword, I can’t be injured, and you are good at fishing. An unequal comparison, I believe.”

Her try at humor completely missed Senya, as was the unfortunate condition of her voice. “I know this area very well. We will be at Ae-en within two days.” He said, concerned to defend his worth.
Wren yawned again before speaking. “Let’s go then. If I move, I’ll wake.”

It still took them a few minutes to gather everything together, but eventually they were ready to leave. The town of Roihan had been nothing more than a couple buildings on a small foothill of the mountains, and it was a three minute walk to leave town and head into the wilds.

Of course, from here everything seemed very wild—there were steep mountains all along the road, and few plants had taken to growing as they ascended along a winding path that might as well have been unmarked—no one had walked it in years. It was so desolate, in fact, that Aster worried Senya was leading them to a dead end, perhaps to end their lives—but of course, he was unarmed.

Wren had a sword now, but he lacked any training in it, and as they walked he swung it around wildly, trying to practice slicing. He seemed high in energy, certainly more energetic than Aster was used to, and keen to impress.

The dry mountain path continued to wind up through the cold heights, but at one point Senya veered off to the side. Here was an overlook to a pine woodland, and without more than a warning of “Here” he started to descend, often relying on blackened trees for support as he scaled down the crag.

Wren’s shoes skipped down the dust with wary determination, and Aster carefully watched the both of them before climbing down, steadily, herself.

“You have a very precise knowledge of this place.”

“Uh, yeah.” Senya said, seemingly embarrassed to have it pointed out to him. “I fell down here a year ago and discovered it was a bit of a short cut.”

“How long have you been doing this?” Wren asked.

“Traveling? Three years.”

“I think the more pressing question is of his age.” Aster emphasized it like it was something very key to her.

“I’m nineteen.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Wren said without meaning to, and Senya felt a bit put out about it. But he kept his new... allies in good graces by not addressing it.

“Is it just woods from here on out?” Aster wasn’t used to the scent of old pine like this, the deep sap and frozen air stinging at her eyes. Baased didn’t have room for the forest.

“For the rest of the day, I’d expect so. We’ll cross through Aela’s borders at some point, but here in the wild it’s not very clear where those sit, so it’s unguarded. We won’t even know when we pass into it.”

They would know, though, as it’s the part where a few previously established things occur: the killing and the separation. But right now, of course, the group is innocently unaware of the mechanics of godhood.

They walked for a few hours, though, stopping for breaks whenever Aster or Wren became tired. They ate from Wren’s supply, but were too worried about running out to really fill themselves up. Senya found a stream to try and fish in, but wasted half an hour catching nothing.
“We could try hunting our food.”

“None of us are really that skilled.”

“I know a thing or two.” Senya offered, but he ended up wasting another half hour in his search. There seemed to be no signs of life in these woods beyond the trees, not even bird song or insect life.

Finally, they gave up and went hungry. Even with the promise of reaching Ae-en by the end of the day tomorrow, none of them wanted to risk something going wrong and being stuck with absolutely nothing.

They settled down for the night in the roots of a very old pine which branches hung low enough that they sometimes touched the forest floor. A branch hung close to the roots like a strange cloud, and under this there was some solstice from the growing cold. Aster sucked up her concerns and squeezed into the sleeping bag with Wren, while Senya was left to huddle close to her and with his hands inside his coat.

Aster was awoken from her thoughts, not sleep, by a gentle creaking sound, like trees bending in the wind. But she was in a forest. It was normal. She let herself sleep.

Senya was used to these woods, and he heard the creaking and didn’t have to listen long to confirm there was no wind tonight. He got up and shivered as he did so, casting a jealous glare in the direction of the rich kids he was traveling with and their heat-reflecting sleeping bag- except, wait, only the girl was there. Wren was gone. Senya swore he would have heard him getting up.

He left the small enclave of needles and roots and peered into the moonlit forest. The trees were well spread out, allowing for many patches of light in the otherwise shady area. In one of them, just in the corner of his eye, Senya saw a movement.

He turned to find the source- Wren was probably up to get some more water or to pee- but was instead met with a shape he couldn’t quite make out. It moved slightly, and there seemed to be a shimmer in its darkness.

This wasn’t good.

Suddenly, the shape lunged, and Senya had no choice but to run away- not even try and seek shelter back at camp. He just had to escape from whatever mad animal had come to attack him-

But it was far faster than him, the shape, and a few seconds into his run he was struck by something blunt and fell to the ground. He rolled, more out of instinct than anything, as he had no desire to see what was about to kill him, and exhaled sharply.

He knew what was happening. And he was the antithesis of thrilled.

The creature above him was not a shape nor befitting the title of ‘creature’. It was Lailana, the divine god of the land, a whose true shape was alike to both an elk and a boar. Her legs were like saplings, thin and seemingly weak, but high above the group and somehow supporting a stout body covered in tusks and horns like thorns. Her face was human though, frighteningly so, like someone had glued a theater mask to a bronze statue.

Lailana was a known shapeshifter, and on Senya’s island she often was said to be an island herself, carrying refugees to the mainland where they would be safe from the dangers of the sea. She was shelter and protection, calm and serene, and absolutely horrifying to look at.

But at least Senya knew she wouldn’t harm him.
As hoped, she slowly lifter her face away from his, turning her gaze towards the camp. She made a noise like a sniffle- like an honest sniff, like she had a cold, then began a slow and spidery walk.

Senya’s voice caught in his throat, unwilling to interrupt any sort of divine will- and yet, it probably wouldn’t be morally sound of him to leave Aster to die. No one could hold it against him, honestly, and no one would know- she was on a quest of exaltation. She was marked for death.

But probably, just letting her die would be unwise for his overall mental state. Senya was not unexperienced in feeling haunted by the ghosts of his past, and it was an experience simply best to avoid whenever possible.

The ground was lush with needles and dry tree branches, nothing that would be able to harm a god. Lailana was slow, though, and as Senya hesitated to watch he at least felt comforted that he had made some attempt to save Aster. He had been concerned, but a death by a god was roughly equivalent to death from many terminal illnesses in its preventability.

He walked after the light steps of his deity, eventually catching up to her and walking by her side. She towered in the air, but slowly let her maned face lean towards the ground, peering through the branches. Senya too leaned forward to examine the darkness of the scene, even cautiously resting a hand on the Lailana’s silky fur, which seemed to have no skin beyond it.

Aster was gone. Lailana moved forward to examine the hollow space, again releasing a sort of growing hiss as she did so, shrinking in size in a single fluid movement. Without Senya noticing, she was soon to the size of a deer, and she seemed to be watching the sleeping bag with interest.

Then she turned away, again extending her limbs so she could bound across the forest floor, and within seconds was out of sight.

The sleeping bag was empty and the woods were silent. But there was still heat, and Senya at least didn’t have to worry about being haunted as he fell asleep. He was simply scared.

Night reigned in the northern forest longer than anyone but perhaps the locals were used to- but there were no locals here. The forest was nameless, right on the border of Renen and Aela, and often the only sound heard for days would be the cracks and shutters from Laila and Silan- Here, in a country that stood with no national deity, they were both allowed. Here they could fight.

The exact science of borders is simple: there are none. They are man made and rarely have physical markers. But Laila and Silan obeyed them regardless, as they always had- As much as the humans held them in respect, they were due to do the same in return. It was an ancient law, likely set by Ikina.

It was created to allow respite.

Laila fell to a form more like a human when she left Senya behind, already exhausted from her simple venture of being seen. Invisibility was her natural state, but there was still a sound that radiated off her, a sort of dull ringing in the ears and a soft pulse of energy.

It was this static that caused Aster to turn her head. She had awoken to find herself alone, and wandering from camp had yet to prove that theory false. The wind was howling, but Aster felt warm- it was almost like she was overheating, and she took off her coat and folded it on the crook of her arm.

She walked without intention, at first seeking Wren and Senya but then perhaps lost. She wasn’t scared though. It was irrational to fear the dark.
And she couldn’t be lost, let alone harmed, with Ikina watching her like this. Literally, at that, as she slowly came to sense she was being watched. Then, almost as she thought it, a light came to her.

Ikina. In Baased culture, Ikina was referred to as the sky mother to match the sea father. But in countries where Laila was the mother of all, Ikina was her husband- so, steadily, Aster adopted the pronoun ‘they’.

They watched her with odd eyes, chemical yellow and wide open. Something was bird-like about them, beyond the obvious trait of being able to summon feathers- and when they swooped down to walk on her level, there was a halo of light trailing them. The Ikieen, their followers, were said to fly the world on wings of stardust. They must have carried the same majesty.

“Can you tell me where Wren and Senya went?” Aster asked, the nerves in her voice not breaking her tone but keeping it quiet.

“There’s no need.” They cracked their neck, never blinking. “You’ll learn everything petty before the end of this.”

“Are you psychic then?”

They did not need to frown for the feeling of resentment to be clear. “Even I have no domain in time. It’s a line that’s existed before I could have, and it’s not my place to know of those older than me.”

“...How old are you?”

“It’d be meaningless to tell you, wouldn’t it? Human minds aren’t meant for large numbers. The only way to present it would be to break it up into sections, a ten times a ten times another... but that string would soon lose meaning.”

“An estimate?”

“It’d be useless.”

“I don’t have anything else to talk about then, if it’s not about you, or Wren, or Senya.”

Slyly, Ikina gave their equivalent of a grin: a slight parting of the lips and a concentrated move of the eyebrows. “You never asked about the boys. Just where they are. I could tell you many things they wouldn’t discuss with you. I could tell you many things you wouldn’t talk about either.”

“Like what?” Aster said, intrigued and without a clear mind.

“You failed to specify the bounds of your inquiry. I will assume all.” Ikina was blank in the expression of their voice, but more and more their face seemed excited. “More than Senya’s chest has been burned. Wren’s family is always fighting with each other- him included. And you’ve been lying to yourself for a very long time about your memories.”

“Are those true, conjecture, or purposeful lies...?” Aster mused over more often then accepted things she learned from others, and each so called ‘revelation’ of Ikina seemed suspiciously common place. Was it true that before Ikina had decreed so, she’d never have learned Senya had suffered more burns? Wren’s family had always seemed full of expectations, so was screaming that much of a surprise? And as for her- well. Hm. She would feel concerned later.

“They’re true.”

“But they’re so... unremarkable. These aren’t high caliber sort of secrets.”
Ikina shook their head once. “They aren’t. They’re useless.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“You’re the one who asked for them, so don’t question me. Perhaps you spend too much time with unremarkable people. The man I spent the last day with, for example- a hidden story of his might be that he practices cruel genetic experiments on human children, or that he lost half his face to an assassin’s bomb and later had it remade in metal- he is the sort of extraordinary person I believe you should affiliate with.”

“I’ve never heard of any genetic experiments. What country was this?” The concept seemed, at the very least, intriguing. Not cruel ones, of course, but the idea of what could be learned by pushing the human form.

“You shouldn’t. Dismiss that statement. Focus on the robot face anecdote instead.”

“So all this has been a lead in for you to try and convince me to meet this man?”

“His name is Artemis- no last name, but I hardly can say that’s a foreign concept to you right now.”

“Is he a god, like you?” A god unworshipped, then. But the world was a lot larger than land, sea and sky, so the concept was not hard to accept.

“He’s human. Dangerously so. But anytime you’re-” Ikina stopped and stood still in their step, suddenly twisting their head and staring at something in the woods. Then, with another ambient sound, they were instantly gone.

There was a shape moving towards her, and the shadows glowed- with sunrise, Aster realized, though she felt in no way tired enough for the night to have fully passed- and the darkness formed into a man. A soldier, it seemed, dressed in a dark brown suit meant to fade into the bark of the ancient trees he was stationed by.

He had a kind of long gun- a rifle, Aster guessed, though she was barely educated in military affairs- and stopped about twenty feet away from her.

“You’re trespassing.” He shouted, far louder than he needed to. “I will need you to come with me.”

Aster half-heartedly put her hands above her head and walked over to him. She had plenty of viable excuses to make about why she was out here- she was lost, she was exalted, she was unarmed- nothing really seemed malicious.

The soldier didn’t seem particularly upset either. “Sorry for my asking, but are you okay? You’re pretty far in. Would never have found you if I hadn’t been following a bear.”

“Why would you follow a bear?” The first time she asked, the soldier cupped his hand to his ear, and she repeated herself in a louder voice.

“Haven’t seen one in years. Wanted to figure why. I saw a huge one, once, wandering these woods about the time I lost my hearing. This isn’t a safe place for a youth to be wandering.”

“I’m not alone, but I was separated from my group. Hopefully they’ll look for me in... whichever town we’re heading to.”

“Good luck on that.” The soldier smiled. “Here, I do need to put you in cuffs though. Standards of the sovereign state, you know.”
Aster turned around and let herself be handcuffed when-

Well. One thing about the world is that it is always happening. Everything is always happening. And it never stops. So many events are constantly overlapping simultaneously that there’s no way to get the full story besides looking at a chart- and even with that, you must read it section by section.

When Senya woke up, Wren was already gone and having his own dramatic encounter with a deity: Silan. And when Aster woke up, Senya was moment away from encountering Laila. And by the time Aster was with Ikina, Wren had finished his encounter, met up with Senya, and begun to track Aster.

It’s a mess, which is again why the world is such a mess- everything has factors of influence and environments to promote various moods and actions.

Listening to Wren talk with Silan would be interesting, but ultimately unnecessary. What happened next is more important anyways.

For those very keen, here is the summery: Wren hears a sound, investigates sound, Silan shows himself, they have a moment together, and time passes faster than it should have. It’s unexciting. Once you’ve seen one godly being show itself to an unsuspecting mortal, you’ve seen them all.

Anyways, as Aster was being handcuffed, Wren had a moment that made enough sense to someone with little understanding of the scene presented to him: he threw his sword at the soldier.

He wasn’t a good throw, as he was fairly weak and swords were generally not intended to be thrown in the first place. But the small sword hit the ground and bounced a little on the pine needles, and the soldier immediately readied his gun.

He didn’t say a word, but walked over to examine the blade, which had fallen a good twenty feet from where he was standing. He moved it with his feet, checking for any sort of insignia.

When the circling soldier’s back was to him, Wren ran with wild abandon towards him, gesturing to Aster for her to join him in whatever sort of assault this was to be. They were both unarmed, but if Aster did nothing to join Wren, he would easily be killed.

The soldier took a moment to hear Wren approach, eventually turning when he heard a branch snap. By then, Wren had enough time to duck to the side when the soldier attempted to shoot him, and essentially dove towards the man the moment he had enough room to make the leap.

He didn’t jump far enough to topple the soldier down, but he did fall near his feet, and at that moment pulled out his pocket knife and slashed the man across his hamstrings. For good measure, he then repeatedly stabbed the knife wildly into whatever regions of the legs he could pierce, until finally the soldier fell to the ground.

Violence was not supposed to be easy for Wren. It wasn’t easy for Aster.

But the soldier dropped his gun and fell to the ground, screaming a tone higher with pain, just so he could hear it. Some fresh drops of blood had fallen on Wren’s face. He turned towards Aster, who was motionless behind the soldier, loosely holding her friend’s sword.

“Where did you wander off to?”

“Where did you...?” She tried, but any sort of casual conversation made her uncomfortable near a man in agony.
Wren looked down at him too. “We need to kill him. We can’t have him telling anyone who we are.”

“He wasn’t hurting me. Or taking me away. Just concerned.”

“He’ll have to tell his squad ab-” Wren was cut short by a sudden movement and a scream from the man of a slightly different quality. Aster had suddenly gone for the heart, putting all her force into a single blow. She pulled the sword out a moment later, and handed it to Wren.

“Where’s Senya?” She asked, slightly louder than usual.

“Here.” His voice answered, and a moment later he appeared from around one of the trees.

She looked at his hands, and the slender black gloves he kept on them. She noticed how carefully he tucked his trousers into his boots, and how last night he had worn high socks.

“We’ll reach Ae-en by today.”
No one had slept well the previous night, but with dawn coming, they felt compelled to move forward. There was no true reason beyond Aster’s insistence, but suddenly that insistence seemed to be a very legitimate reason to do anything.

They passed through a small town at the mouth of the forest, and Senya quietly remarked, “Aio. We have time to eat.”

“We’re that close?” Aster asked.

“Closer than we should be.” He nodded. “It’ll still take most of the day to walk, but we can lose an hour.”

“A whole hour to eat seems like too much.” Wren said, and the other two looked at him with empty stomachs and desperation. His bag had all the food, and a few coins. “Okay, I’m starving too. But after the stress of last night... we could lay off on eating everything we have.”

“The only reason I remember to eat is because of stress, so I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

They found a small crook of the town to eat in where they wouldn’t be in anyone’s way, a small strip of field covered in mounds of grey rock. They sat on one such pile to eat, perhaps up ten feet around the surrounding plain. Aster let her feet dangle off a sharp spire.

“What is this place?” Most of the food Wren had in his bag was specially made in labs to be filling, though it was rather bland to eat. They were like soft and chewy squares, and the texture reminded Aster of fabric.

“It’s the graveyard.” Senya was a messy eater, even with such basic foods, and he spoke with his mouth open. He was less alluring when he did so, much to the thankful appeal of both Aster and Wren.

They kept a bit quiet after that, though it honestly had nothing to do with any childish fear of the dead. They had all come out of the woods perhaps a bit traumatized, between all the gods and grisly death.

It might as well be stated, if it was not already gleaned, that the act of killing a man was not something Aster was fond to accept as part of her life’s experience.

It was only petty things that could preoccupied a worried mind, and Aster found herself thinking, cautiously, about the boys she was with. She was not really the sort to understand the appeal of romantic relationships, but she couldn’t deny the aesthetics at play. Senya was good looking. Wren wasn’t bad looking either, but of course, he wasn’t into girls anyways.

If Wren liked boys in the same way Aster did, did that mean he was as keen on Senya as she was debating to be? With the three of them together like this, of course, nothing could happen with alienating the other. So she probably needed to just keep her thoughts quiet.

Besides, with gods always watching her, wouldn’t it be a little weird to... pursue any sort of relationship? And this wasn’t even about the petty short term, like some quick happening one fateful night. If she kissed someone, thirty years down the road, would some god be watching her?

These were the tedious thoughts that concerned Aster, as truthfully, they concern many teenagers.
Boys and girls. Not everyone, but many, have someone cross their mind where they think ‘Well...’. And then that thought is rarely addressed again, especially in shy and sheltered kids like Wren and Aster.

Senya was really the opposite of that, and for anyone particularly touched by the plight of his two blood-stained companions romantic feelings towards him, the question of his sexuality may arise. The answer to that would be simple: Senya didn’t know. Rather unfortunately, a free upbringing, bold personality and three years of life on the road did not necessarily make for a young man at all versed in sexual behavior.

But he gave off that allure, according to people who were not him, and others would flirt with him. And he’d flirt back. But he’d never actually done anything- and was, in fact, too afraid if he did he’d want to commit and to settle down- and give up on his nomadic life.

“What is Ae-en like?” Wren interrupted the silence to ask. His mind was on other matters.

“A mountain. Looks like any other.” Senya answered, but Wren wasn’t focusing on his words. In Baased, where exaltation was a common part of life, any couple where a child couldn’t be produced was considered a waste. Not fully ostracized, but discouraged and weakly scorned. This did mean infertiles, though often they were counted as simply unlucky, and the elderly, who were considered to be wasting their time.

But mostly it concerned same sex couples. Not... illegal. Not irregular. But useless. Encouraged to not bother with marriage and ‘keep their options open’. Wren had never had a chance to learn much about being gay- like there was anything to learn in the first place. Maybe there was? He had no idea, but it seemed like he should have been attending classes on the subject for all he knew about it.

His original plan had been to graduate school and and study painting. Oil pastels were not technically painting- this also felt like something school should have taught him, what pastel work was technically called- but he was good enough to get into art school. Maybe then he’d make enough money to move out of his parent’s estate like his aunt Dlel did. And maybe, once he was financially secure and well educated, he might meet someone.

Truthfully, he could not imagine himself happy with Senya- he was a total stranger. But the thrill of being away from home, and meeting a good looking guy who seemed kind of interested in him was too much for Wren. If Ikina had sent him to his fate with Ae-en, was she also sending him to his fate with Senya?

Maybe, when he got to know him better, he’d figure it out for sure...

But for someone concerned with getting to know another person, he was keeping very quiet. They all were.

In the end, they ate all the food and bloated themselves with as much water as they could before they departed again. Aster groaned at how heavy each step was, but the conversation was sparse besides a few ‘This way’s and ‘Come on’s.

Instead of reflecting further, despite how searingly interesting the developing love triangle is, it might be nice to pay attention to someone else.

Silan was as weak and exhausted as Laila after showing himself to the boy named Wren. Wren struck him as an odd name, and the kid had been a bit odd himself- that was Silan’s impression, at least, and the only thing he had payed attention to. He didn’t care much about this grand plot of Ikina’s, and his occasional ordered interactions were nothing more than string-pulls on the part of the
When Silan needed to rest, he often fell on the ground and spread his legs, almost like a nearly dead human might. And he, indeed, did breathe oxygen like a human. And he would look human, too, as his most natural state. He did not eat or sleep, but he could feel emotions, even certain physical feelings like itching or attraction.

But he wasn’t human. And he had that boon going for him- he could lie down and breath, but he could also teleport. Though that term makes it sound high technological, when really it was best phrased as ‘location shifting’. No machines involved, just some honest, hard, magical nonsense.

Silan was a god, but he didn’t need to understand what rules of the universe he was forced to obey.

There were a few things that Silan counted as free will, but internally knew he could do only because Ikina allowed it. He wasn’t free, he was a creation.

One of these things was have children, which he hated, but he was quite fond of everything before that. And anyways, it’s not like he was expected to be a dutiful father. He disguised himself first and left the next morning, and in many cases where the lady in question was from a higher tech city, that was it.

But when there was a child, and it was his- and he knew, he always instantly knew, and could blame Ikina for that- he felt an obligation to watch. Not closely, not personally, but just to watch.

His duties, now, were starting to overlap. With a slight twitch in his mind, he was aware Laila was here too- watching the other boy, Senya, without the level of intimacy Silan portrayed.

When they were both tired like this, they did not fight. They did not speak, though truthfully they rarely had to begin with- while they were not psychic, they were linked. The words and language of humans was not necessarily needed.

Laila did not have children that Silan was aware of, though it couldn’t be doubted she had had her lovers. Perhaps there was a difference to how each of them conducted themselves, a difference that had decided Ikina’s punishments for them.

Ikina had many children, according to them, but Silan had never asked about that. Sometimes they would call him and Laila their children, but that seemed to be linked in fondness. Silan was sure Ikina had never had a partner of a sort, and indeed had trouble even picturing them finding a lover- even if the forms they took on could be attractive, there was always something too powerful behind those yellow eyes to fall victim to.

When Laila was sitting with him, as quiet and defeated as he was, she was actually lovely. They were sitting while the children were walking, but they never had to worry about falling out of sight. They floated between dimensions and sight, though some animals would catch the glimmer of energy they gave off even in rest.

The kids were quiet, petty, and doomed. And Silan understood that. But he watched his son anyways- Wren was such an awful name, and if he had been there he would have chosen something better. Of course he had been there, watching, content to not even consider talking to his mother... Her husband was there too, though, so perhaps his invisibility had been wise.

And watching Wren seemed to be rooted in the anyways part of that thought. Anyways. Might as well. Not much else to watch elsewhere.

Everything happens so much in the world, but a god has the power to play favorites.
The foothills of Ae-en were like mountains in their size, but were relatively short and gradual in their curves. Many towns lay nestled in their rock, carved out, in a cave, or resting in the valley between two rocks.

Ae-en, it turned out, was a lot like this. A great stone mound, reminiscent of the rock piles in the graveyard of Aio. From a distance, it looked just like one, a large and flat-topped hill made entirely from stone. A few straggles of forest poked through crack on the surface, but the top was bare.

But they were still very far from Ae-en when it first came into sight.

“We climb to the top?”


“I was expecting more of a snow-capped peak. This shouldn’t be impossible.” Wren said. “Ikina will appear to us then, and then it’s… off to the ocean? She’ll tell us when the time comes.”

But as they continued to walk, the matter of Ae-en seemed more and more—ridiculous. It was a very large mound of rocks. But it went beyond very large— a few hours after they first caught sight of it, it was dominating the skyline. The cracks on the surface were fissures, and the trees had to be hundreds of feet tall.

“This is going to be impossible.” Wren concluded, another hour in as Ae-en seemed ever further away. They had found the city of Aen-sa, carved into a vertical cliff, and used the last of Wren’s money to buy more food. They sat in a small bakery for a late lunch.

“Ikina spoke to me, in the woods. And back in Baased. They may appear again.”

“Personally? Sh—They never did that for me.” Wren sounded upset, and protectively touched the feather from them in his coat pocket. “Silan…ah did come for me though.”

“I saw Laila.”

“So we were all visited by a different deity.” Aster took a steady drink of her tea. “We should establish anything of note that occurred, then, in case they tried to turn us against each other.”

“Why would they do that?” Wren asked quite earnestly.

“You and Senya. The sea and the earth. They might have tried to pit you guys in some way?”

“Lailana didn’t talk to me. She just was wandering around. Nearly scared me to death though.” Senya looked with anticipation towards Wren.

“Silan… talked with me. I don’t know. It wasn’t anything special or suspicious, just typical god talk. Told me to finish my quest and all at mount Ae-en.” With his turn over, he looked now to Aster.

She was quiet. “Ikina is odd. They told me things which I am unsure were based in reality. And they seemingly tried to convince me to— meet a friend of theirs, I suppose.”

“A friend? Can gods have those?”

“I couldn’t understand what they were talking about. But nothing scary in the regard that you two have anything to fear.” Aster shrugged.
“So you’re really the truly chosen one, huh?” Wren sighed. “Here-” He announced suddenly, and gripped her hand. Then he took out his pocketknife and drew a sharp line across her palm.

Aster let out a yelp of pain and withdrew her hand to examine the bloody cut. “Why would you do that?”

He was deadly silent for a few seconds, watching her palm. But it continued to bleed. “I... don’t know. Ikina chose you as their charge, that’s all. I was first. Ikina heals you, but I...” He trailed off. Her hand was still bleeding.

“You still have Silan, Wren. No need to freak out. You still have an entire god supporting you.”

“I don’t like Silan. I want to be with Ikina.” He was still watching her palm. “Sorry. Though. That was terrible of me.”

“I’m not forgiving you, but I’m moving past it.” Aster licked the wound clean. It wasn’t very deep, and would heal with time. Or even sooner, most likely. She didn’t need an extra sense to know Ikina was watching this. Letting her be hurt to provide an example.

But that was over now. They set out for Ae-en again under the ever growing dusk. At least here the sky was wide and the stars were glowing- the only thing getting in their way was the imposing form of the sacred mountain, made of nothing but shadow before night had fallen anywhere else.

It was nice here, temperate and warm. Scaling Ae-en was considered a proper holy pilgrimage, but it wasn’t overly common, and they walked a silent and deserted path to its base.

Here, where a single house and a signpost stood, the mountain was more like an impenetrable wall. On either side it stretched on, and it rose through the sky and coated the area below it in only blackness.

It was not cold, even in the shadows, but everyone was too tired to continue very far up. A little bit up the very first trail, they decided to stop and make camp in a small cave. It was pitch black and deep, but they put their sleeping bags near the entrance and huddled together regardless.
Place of the sky

Everyone seemed to wake up collectively at dawn, but ‘everyone’ was not a careful selection of a word, truthfully. Wren and Aster woke up at dawn, when the blinding rays of sun illuminated their patch of cave.

Senya was missing, as was Wren’s backpack of supplies.

“Is Senya... making breakfast?” Wren asked, though of course what little food they had needed no preparation. But it seemed highly unlikely, somehow, that he was simply gone. Why would he do that? He wouldn’t do that. It didn’t make sense.

It took less effort for Aster to think logically than it did Wren, especially since she was less keen on Senya than he was. The two of them... honestly didn’t know him. Wren hadn’t explained to Aster anything about why he was traveling with him, and from a logical point of view, he was just a stranger who had been tagging along for the last two days. And he was homeless. The fact that he might, given the opportunity, have run off with a few supplies, wasn’t all that odd.

“I think he’s gone.” Was what Aster offered to Wren. “And it wouldn’t be good to dwell beyond that.”

“Our water was in the bag. And our food.” It was notable how Wren seemed to avoid mentioning why the bag was gone, instead focusing on what was missing. The phrase ‘He took’ was purposefully absent.

“We won’t die from a few hours without food or water. It’ll be more exhausting, but maybe we’ll find a stream at some point to refresh at. Once we meet Ikina, I’m sure they’ll help us...” Aster squinted, thinking. Ikina was a god, not a water dispensary. Still, she couldn’t imagine them letting their chosen heroes die of natural causes. “In some way.”

“I guess.” Wren rolled up the sleeping bag, but without the harness of the backpack to carry it with, it was relatively cumbersome to transport. He tucked it under his arm, frowning at the inconvenience that he refused to associate with Senya. “We don’t have to walk very fast. We have all day.”

Ae-en was a very large mountain, but not overly tall, and the group (if it could be called that) felt certain it wouldn’t take more than twelve hours. The path was dust and rock, seemingly a steady spiral to the top. It wasn’t very steep, though cold, and Aster and Wren were not too worried about time.

“When we return to Aen-sa, do you think he’ll still be in town?” Aster asked, thinking out loud more than she was thinking of Wren.

“Maybe he got lost. Or injured. He might have fallen off the side of the mountain by accident. I mean, there’s no solid proof he ran away.”

“Why did he take the backpack then?”

Wren remained silent.

“Senya left us. I think you should acknowledge that. He was just a nomad who was kind enough to guide us here, but in the end he decided to make away with what he could in the middle of the night.”
“He was a thief, when I first met him. He told me he’d teach me how to survive if I freed him.”

Aster smiled, almost unnoticeably. “I suppose he has taught you how he survived, at least, what with him stealing all our possessions. So you can’t say he didn’t fulfill the deal.”

“I liked him though.”

“Me too. I mean, it’s dangerous to find yourself liking strangers. But I enjoyed his company.”

“I like liked him though, I mean.”

“Like liked”? That’s pathetic of you, Wren. Are we again children? I realize we stand on the mountain of Ikina, under whom we are all children, but seriously? Like like?” Aster said playfully. “...I ‘like liked’ him too, I guess.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you did. I wasn’t sure you even capable of those sorts of feelings.”

“Capable? Like I’m a sort of nonreactive molecule?”

“I don’t know. I’ve just never seen you date before, so I guess I figured you weren’t interested.”

In truth, Aster really wasn’t interested in dating. “I’m only seventeen. Besides, you’ve never dated anyone either and I’ve never considered you unable to hold a crush.”

“It’s different for me though.”

“Okay. Let’s stop before I dissolve from pettiness. Honest and frank, did you two ever do anything? I couldn’t really decipher his sexuality.”

“No. I have no clue. But it’s not like either of us really made... an effort to try and flirt with him. I mean, he sort of hit on me once, but he was just joking around.”

“Well, at least he’s gone now.” Aster shrugged. “With all our supplies, of course, but at least he’s gone. So we don’t have to fret about useless feelings anymore.”

“I liked the feeling of being dumb though. Really reminded me how old I was between the violence and horror. Now I guess all we have to think about is... Silan. And Ikina.”

“I’m kind of excited. I mean, this exaltation quest thing is supposed to be about journeying, not proving one’s worth, so it’s not like Ikina will try and get us killed.”

“I’d bet Lailana will try something though. Since she attacked the first day as a wolf-creature, and appeared to Senya the second, it seems safe to bet there’s some sort of once-a-day limit on her power.”

“She didn’t appear at all yesterday while we were walking.” Aster pointed out.

“She did appear to Senya at night though. Maybe it’s more hour based than day. Still, I’d expect her to show eventually.”

“Between your- Oh, right. I forgot Senya took your sword with the rest of the pack. So we’re defenseless. Still, we’ve come to Ikina’s mountain. They can’t let us die here.”

“Yeah.” Wren shrugged. “Probably.”
When it becomes apparent a shift of perspective is occurring, one might wish to view Senya, perhaps, since his fate is still quite unknown. However, unfortunately, this would be very pointless— for the only thing to be seen is darkness, and observing that darkness would get very boring very fast.

Instead, something colorful: Ikina.

The feathered god in question was pacing the length of a sleek sort of room made of metal. Today’s dark skin was wrinkled in their brow, though not from age- never from age, as Ikina seemed adverse to that sort of measurement of time. Concentration. Thought.

The girl in the room was smaller than most girls, and calling her a girl would not have gone over well with her. She was a woman, well-aged but as wrinkle-less as her associate, and her feet dangled off the edge of the meeting table. She was not quite human, either, but human-assumed. One might look at her and politely decide she had some sort of birth defect resulting in thin, wispy hair and an off-worn face. This would be incorrect.

“I’m telling you, harpies.” The woman said. “Harpies.” She repeated with urgency.

“What would they eat, though?” Ikina wondered, full of worry.

“Well, flesh, I suppose. Gosh though-” She laughed at her use of gosh, perhaps seeing it as ironic to use a censored version of the term ‘god’ in front of one- “You’ve got to relax and let nature do its thing. The harpies will find their place in the ecosystem, I promise.”

“I can’t risk another instability though. The introduction of something more typical, such as moose or perhaps voles would likely be a lot more balancing than harpies.”

“Harpies are cool though. They’re just like your beloved humans, but also mostly birds. You don’t have to stick to a such lame animals all the time, you know? Branch out a little.”

“I don’t want failure.” Ikina actually frowned for a second.

“Animals is my department, not yours. You have your humans. Let me fret about ecosystems.”

“The fact of my worry is that you don’t fret. You’re too gleeful about these matters. Efficiency and effectiveness demands that we-” Ikina went quiet.

“Hm?” The woman asked, nonplussed by a conversation interrupted.

“I have somewhere to be.” There was ringing in their ears. Somewhere important to be, it seemed, for immediately after speaking they left in not a flash of light but a waste of it, the energy lost to the universe.

“Hm!” The woman frowned, but stayed put. Time was meaningless to her kind. They didn’t even have a term for the concept of ‘waiting’.

Ae-en’s name was essentially meaningless. Aster, after the light chitchat at the beginning of the walk faded, was stuck thinking about this. Ae was a sound associated with Ikina. En... was meaningless. It probably meant place in some ancient dialect.

Ae-en, then. The place of the sky. That seemed right. As the path continued on the bare fissures of the mountain, there was plenty of sky to be seen. Plenty of everything, actually, as the foothills they
had passed through to get here were easily squashed by the mountain they surrounded. The city of Aen-sa was a small square from here, and there was something terrifying about knowing she could block the entire city’s inhabitance by lifting a thumb to her face. People were tiny. She was tiny.

It does not need to be said that neither of the kids from Baased had climbed a mountain before.

Wren was freezing. ‘To death’ he often mumbled to Aster. The top of the mountain was not actually visible from the far edge they were slowing scaling up- he had learned this the hard way, as about two hours in he had caught sight of an incoming rounded ledge that he swore was the peak. When he reached it, and saw nothing more than further ledges above him, he almost threw himself to the ground with exhaustion. The road was not a tiring one, but the cold wind made both their mouths dry, and endurance had never been something either had practiced.

Another two hours passed, and their environment changed. The walking path, never very visible to begin with, had begun to truly fade away. Then, it simply stopped. A bit of searching around finally found the way to proceed was to climb a few rock ledges, wander in the right direction, and then quite suddenly stumble upon a forest.

It was the one once mistaken for scraggly and small among the cracks in the mountain top. Only now, under the branches of the pines, was it very clear how very large they were- And that size, to be very exact, was *absolutely huge*.

They were hundreds of feet tall, surely, and thicker than houses. The actual species was neither of the kids had never seen before, dark black in color, and trunks growing close together. Sometimes, between the thicket that smelled so sweet it burned their eyes, there’d only be a few feet to navigate.

It was deadly silent besides the soft sound of a river flowing somewhere unseen. The mountain still stretched ahead of Wren and Aster, a dark and imposing wall that never left their vision, but it seemed in this tree-filled fissure like they were in a valley, or a crater of some kind. There had been no sudden incline down, but now everywhere they looked they saw rock walls.

They followed the sounds of the river until they came upon it, a deep gorge of rushing white water. A waterfall fed it from a higher ledge of the mountain.

There was no way down, otherwise Wren felt like he would have risked his life for a drink. Still, the wet fog from the rapids was refreshing enough for them to pause by the edge.

“The bridge.” Aster said without pretext, and Wren followed her line of sight.

There was a bridge. It was made of metal, green and somewhat rusty. It had a simple design, but was still far more complex compared to the expected ‘hanging rope bridge of doom’ idea that plagued the mind of Wren the moment he saw the gorge.

“Who...?” He started to question, but let it drop.

They crossed, and the other side was no different from the one they had come from. Thick and dark trees with little navigable room. Eventually, like fish in a bowl, they came to an edge. And then another twenty minutes had to be spent searching for a way up again, out of the fissure-

Then Aster pointed, solemnly, ahead. There was a staircase up the wall. One made of metal and with enough black spots to suggest it used to be painted.

“So, uh...” Wren said as they walked up the gradual steps.

“I don’t know. Maybe next there will just be an elevator.”
“I guess this place... is a tourist sort of area. I mean, it’s not like we’re the only people to ever scale it.”

“Yeah. Obviously. It’s not like Ikina is summoning these conveniences.” Aster’s private theory had been that they had been, but she kept that to herself. It... was not a very good theory. Wren’s made more sense.

At the top, there was another clear and steady path to travel, similar to the one they had started from. It was afternoon now, but the sun did little to warm the high altitude chills. The wind was raging here, with nothing to stop it on the bald mountain side, and Wren shivered under his coat.

He looked up at the next layer of mountain above him with misery. “I don’t suppose that’s the top, is it?” His teeth were chattering. The coat he wearing, the same off-white with its bloodstains, was not meant for low temperatures. It was a coat meant for late spring, and for looking rich and stylish.

Aster was not fairing much better, but she couldn’t stick her hands in her coat without feeling like the wind was going to knock her over. She didn’t have any gloves though, and soon her hands were numb and irritated.

“I think I’m going to get frostbite.” Aster said. “Let’s find somewhere to stop and heat up.”

“What, can you produce fire from your fingertips? I feel like death too, but if we stop we’ll simply want to never move again. If we can produce any heat in the first place.”

“We’ll find another cave.” Aster said, and the suggestion was not all that ridiculous. Caves seemed to dot the mountain like pores, and they had passed many of them already. It wasn’t too absurd they’d find another within ten minutes.

And they did. By paying attention to the rocks on their left, they soon found a small crevice that widened into a comfortable passage. They settled down, huddling together for warmth. The narrow cave brought on feelings of claustrophobia, but it helped retain heat. The escape from the wind helped the most in heating them up.

“It’s not like it’ll end.” Aster said, listening to the howls outside their sanctuary. “But it’ll be nice to get our health up.”

Wren sighed. Speaking of health, he was starving. And absolutely parched. But nothing could be done about that. “This cave is warm.” He mumbled. Then he sat up. “Really warm. As in, heated.”

Aster had been sitting upright, trying not to touch the rock walls. Now she extended a hand out and felt the floor, and found it indeed seemed the littlest bit warm.

“These tunnels probably continue into the heart of the caves. Maybe... the hot air rises from the lower levels and ends up expelling out of the caves closer to the peak?” She was not experienced in this field of science, and tried to phrase it as a question. Wren, who was not at all aware of most forms of science, shrugged with acceptance.

“It’s nice, but the sooner we get moving again the sooner we can eat.”

With this thought, they spent only a few more blissful minutes in the relatively musky heat of the cave before facing the icy wind again. The cold seemed worse now that they had experienced heat so recently, and pretty soon the gust turned into a headwind, forcing them to keep their eyes narrow and inducing immediate shivering.

But the top seemed eminent. Neither wanted to look up and see for themselves, but as they struggled
through another hour in the freezing air of the rapidly approaching night, they were creeping ever closer to the peak.

And then they hit it, but it took a moment for that fact to register. It was getting dark. The wind was worse then ever up here on what was essentially a slightly rounded plateau. Still, when they turned their heads to the back of the wind, it was fairly clear this was the top.

There was a dark shape on the other side, and a rather dead-eyed Wren pointed it out without a word. They began their trek over.

The shape ended up being a sign, in metal and plastic, that read ‘Mount Ae-en’. And that was all.

The sign was, at the very least, fairly wide. So they stood behind it, mostly sheltered by the wind, and looked down on the hazy world below. Sometime on her way up, less than halfway surely, Aster had thought of humans like ants. Now they were atoms, and though she had no ability to discern the landscape, she felt almost certain she would be able to raise a thumb and block out a country with it.

“Do we summon Ikina, or...?” Wren asked with a dry voice. A white fog escaped his mouth as he did so, as the air up here was easily alike to that of winter. But there was no snow.

“I’m not...” Aster said, but she let her thoughts purposefully trail as she felt something. A rumble in the ground. And the heat of the ground- like in the cave, it seemed far warmer than the air. There was a noise then.

And then there was a crack, both a sound and a tangible object, that threw itself across the peak of Ae-en. Like an egg about to hatch.
The Gang has a brush with death

The good thing about the mountain beginning to shake was that, while the wind did not cease, everything else became searingly hot. Shivers were soon replaced with sweat, but Aster and Wren were too practical to toss aside their coats.

They didn’t have time to take off their coats anyways, as the shaking of the mountain left little time for worries such as overheating. The mountain was shaking. Their top priority was getting off the breaking peak and to somewhere they wouldn’t feel like they were about to fall off the side.

There was another loud crack as a jagged line instantly drew itself along the length of the peak. Aster grabbed Wren’s hand for security and began to walk slowly towards the route down.

There was another crack, and she fell to the ground, dragging Wren along with her. She began to crawl until she reached the narrow path down the mountain path, and it wasn’t until they were a good way down that she stood up again.

The sides of the mountain were more secure than the peak, but still seemed flush with heat and the occasional rumble.

“Is this connected to us?” Wren asked. The question was on both their minds.

“I don’t think so. We stood there for a while before this happened, and if Ikina truly was testing us here, they wouldn’t have waited.”

“What is it then?” Wren asked, even though he knew she didn’t know.

They gazed up at the steep hill that led to the peak. The sound of breaking rocks was getting more frequent, as was the rumbling. There was something else, like metal on metal, that seemed to be echoing from somewhere too. A hot gust of wind came down the mountain top, and a light came with it.

But Aster and Wren did not care to investigate this phenomenon- instead they found themselves a small crook of a cave and huddled, carefully, together.

A light on a breaking mountaintop is the sort of thing one might hope to see investigated, but, mind, Ae-en was currently a dangerous place to walk on. Aster and Wren were wise to seek shelter.

Anyways, it didn’t matter that they weren’t around to witness any further events. Someone else was-

Well, many people were, to tell the truth. Ae-en was a very large mountain, and earthquakes were rarely ignored. People in the nearby towns and cities all played observer to the following events- and then, after them, there would be many others who would carry the tale to further reaches, until perhaps a three days later, Aster’s own father would hear the news.

The best witness to the scene, and thus the best person to focus on at the moment, was Senya. Surprisingly, or not, he had not fled to Aen-sa with Wren’s supplies. He had fled to Ae-en, not taking the same route Wren and Aster had but instead one through the core of the mountain- the caves, the thin narrow tunnels that they were, led to the heart of the mountain.

And they him to where he was now, the heart of Ae-en: an altar of fire. The mountain itself didn’t
seem, on first appearance, to be a volcano. This is because it was not. The lava was not there from the mantle of the earth. It was there for one purpose: to keep the vessel of the land alive.

It may be good now to take a step back, explain a few things and all that. But Senya didn’t have that luxury of time, to explain a thing. He was starting to burn.

There was a good reason this quest was called immolation.

He had some water still, and he swallowed half of it and poured a little on his face. He was drenched in sweat, but knew if he took off his clothes he’d only risk more severe burns. The lava had almost been cool when he had entered this grand chamber, but as the creature within awoke, everything began to feel like it was on fire. The rumbling of the cave did not help either, as rocks of all sizes were dislodging from the chamber’s ceiling and falling down.

The entrance he had used to get in here, a steep and skinny tunnel, seemed at risk of collapsing at any second. It was maybe seven feet off the ground, and he had to jump to get a grip on the bottom of the tunnel. Just touching the rock seemed hot enough to burn his hand if he hadn’t been wearing gloves- but despite his protection, it still hurt.

He threw his weight wildly, jumping and forcing himself far beyond his ability to climb up. Only when he was fully in the nook did he rest to let his adrenaline rush die down.

Seeing as he was in a cave, it was too dark to see much. The lava, unconvincingly real, added an off-red touch of color and gave off a small amount of light. But most of what could be seen were silhouettes of dark shapes.

There was something that might have been a creature in there. But it might have been a rock. Something about it was moving though, as steadily he saw beams of light cut themselves on the ceiling- apertures to the outside. He had to get moving before the roof fully collapsed and his tunnel became overrun with dust.

He crawled for his life. The tunnels here were thin, and often too tight to navigate comfortably. He had left Wren’s backpack in a chamber some ways back, taking with him only the sword and water bottle, and now he struggled to find his way back.

The vibrations on the floor caused Senya to often bump his head on he ceiling. He couldn’t focus on the route he had taken in, and the narrow passages branched off like capillaries. He eventually found himself in rooms he definitely did not recognize, and soon changed his goal to simple escape.

He followed the sound of wind the best he could, but truthfully he was utterly lost in the darkness. He had put aside his feelings of claustrophobia best he could many years ago, but between the deafening shaking and the repetitive and dark rooms, his heart was picking up an irregular heartbeat.

Finally, he found the heat subsiding and the wind, buried under everything else, slowing becoming louder. He about threw himself onto the dusty rock outside and took a minute to just breathe.

But there was still shaking, and he still had a job to do, so after a moment he began to fast walk- and then run- up the mountain. He passed Wren and Aster in doing so, actually, but they were lucky not to notice.

Considering he had entered the cave system near the base of the mountain, it was some good chance that he emerged near the top. Otherwise there was no possible way he would have made it to the peak in time to see a few things.

And experience a few others.
Senya climbed closer to the plateau of the peak, waiting. The light continued to hover, and despite the clamor of the breaking mountain, everything was quite boring.

Then there was another crack- yes, another- but it was slightly different from the rest. It echoed into the expanse of the sky, and the rumbling stopped. Then, hundreds of fissures splinted across the shell of rock Senya was standing on. He ran to solid ground, leaping off of breaking shards that crumbled under his feet, and fell onto dirt. Then he spun around, and watched the suddenly very silent night.

It was quiet. The stars were bright, clear, and-

A dark shape rose out of the mountain, but rose is not quite the term for it. It emerged. It was.

The shape suggested a canine of some kind, with its long fangs and sharp teeth, but the shape seemed to be shifting and changing. It was fluid, not set to be any one creature but rather exploring a plethora of shapes. Even when it began to settle, something suggested motion in the shape that must have been its head.

It was hard to tell if it was its heat, though, seeing as it was obviously just one part of the beast. And soon, into the night air came the greatest sounds Senya had ever heard, and soon their crashes made them the last sounds he ever heard- Permanent or not, he seemed to have gone deaf.

The mountain was ripping itself apart as the creature climbed out of its bed, but even to compare the mountain to a nest would be incorrect. The mountain was the creature. The trees dotted its backside, still rooted into the earth, and the lava that had nurtured its dormant state had found a new home in the translucent underbelly of the creature, forming organs of ember held by a ribcage of obsidian.

This beast was nameless, but if she had ever needed one, it might have been Aera. For obvious reasons, hopefully, she was often confused for Laila- but this did not matter to her. ‘Her’ did not matter. For once, even the term ‘they’ would not matter. Aera was an it: A creature, a monster, and a true neuter noun.

Aera moved, and its movement wreaked the earth below it, but luckily its body was an ark of preservation. It did not have a destination in mind, as it did not have a mind. It was moving. That was all to be said.

As the monster unfurled, hot air and dust pelted Senya’s face and buried into his eyes. He curled into a ball and covered his face with his hands to try and keep protected, but nothing seemed to work. Even just laying there, feebly, his exposed head was assaulted with rocks that cut open his skin.

He was not crying, but his eyes were trying to summon what little moisture he had left in his body to flush out his eyes. His hearing was slowly coming back, and all it offered was the terrible sounds of shaking, jarring movements felt and heard.

Even as Aera left, extending and shifting more than walking, Senya was left very still on the ground. Shaking no longer guided by tremors. He reached for the water bottle and tried to forced himself to drink from it, but his hand was shaking with such erratic behavior that he spilled it on the ground.

Not far from him, closer than realized, Wren and Aster had crawled out of their seemingly doomed shelter and caught only a dark glimpse of the monster set free from the mountain- the mountain that, truth be told, seemed to finally be bearing the weight of its empty core. Without Aera, it was a husk unable to support itself. Trees with miles of roots were lifted cleanly out of the earth, and rocks older than civilizations had emerged to face the sky after years in the dark.

Ae-en would soon, it seemed, be a valley. Splinters creeped down the walking path, threatening a
death to an unknown cause. Would it be the fall, or the landslide, that eventually would do them in?

There was absolutely no hope of running down the mountain and praying for the best. They stood outside, dully, for a few moments.

“There’s... Hm.” Was all Wren had to offer.

“There’s a light coming from above. If we speak to Ikina directly, they might...” Aster didn’t know how to finish her thought. What exactly was Ikina planning to do with her and Wren? Clearly, they wanted her to meet with some odd friend of theirs. Alright. She had to be alive for that.

But they had chosen Wren for some reason. Specifically, him, to complete the quest of exaltation- but this had never been in the plan. Whatever creature was now free from Ae-en, it was unknown to legend. Wren was supposed to have met Ikina here, and they would have pointed him to some sea cave to restore glory to the ocean.

Not hatch an infernal monster from the depths of the Earth. Something had gone wrong, and Wren couldn’t be blamed. Ikina, maybe, could have been. But they were also the last chance at a savior.

“We’ll likely die, somehow, if we don’t try something.” Wren said factually, and Aster nodded. They walked carefully up towards the peak of the mountain, soon finding themselves confronting harsh and hazard filled winds that forced their eyes shut.

If their eyes had been open- like if, say, they had for some reason packed goggles- a number of things would have gone differently.

They approached what took to be Ikina. The air was as silent as a collapsing mountain can be.

“Ikina!” Aster shouted, voice dry from dehydration and soft from not risking opening her mouth too much. “Without your assistance, we’ll die out here.”

There was nothing. Then, a soft sort of whimper that definitely did not befit a god. The whimper grew into a struggle of a voice.

“Aster...? Wren?” It begged, and the two Renen kids spun their heads so fast they almost fell over. They allowed their eyes to open, just to confirm Senya’s existence.

“Why are you here?” Aster asked, quick to throw on a sharp voice before Wren let any insecurity show.

“I freed Lailana. Finished my immolation.” He coughed, and then quite unexpectedly threw up a little watery mucus. Wren stepped over to him slowly, grabbed his water bottle with its nearly diminished contents, and helped pour some water in his mouth.

The fact Senya was crying had its effects on both Aster and Wren, but quite luckily no one in the group could really look at each other beyond a squint.

“Why was Lailana in mount Ae-en?” Aster asked.

“Now’s not the time to be gathering facts.” Wren reminded, nervously watching the crumbling ground around them.

Senya seemingly ignored him. “In the chains of Iixo, there was another mountain like this, rising out of the sea like a bubble. And we called it Mount Ae-ah, believing it was the beacon that would lead us to awakening Lailana again. I set out for it as part of immolation. But when I came there, I
realized we had the name wrong. There, in the sea he created, rested Silanah.”

“Was immolation common in Iixo? You’d suppose someone would have succeeded by now in accidental reviving Silanah then, if the mountain is so close by.”

Senya shook his head. “It’s very sacred. Only the children of the royal line, the spares siblings, attempt it.”

Though still afraid of the others’ determination to talk in crises, Wren burst out quite alarmed, “So you’re a prince?”

“No.” Senya licked his lips once before continuing. “I didn’t know there was another mountain until a good year into my travels. And... I figured with you two on your way over, I might as well end this journey.”

“Or... you could have not done that. Did you even see the hellbeast you awoke?” Wren said. “You escaped the duties of your culture’s sacrifice easily. Why bother fulfilling them at all?”

“I wanted to. It’s... my duty to.” Senya shook his head, wringing his gloved hands together nervously. “I’m not happy about this either, particularly, but at least it’s done. Lailana will bring new earth, and unite the islands together into one. It’s far better than if you have succeeded in finding Silanah, and flooded them off the map.”

A sudden, jarring snap of stone brought Aster and Senya back to the reality Wren was more attuned to: the mountain was ready to cave in.

Aster turned again towards the light in the sky. “Ikina! If you actually want me to do... whatever it is you seem so keen on, you’re going to need to save me from death. And my friends, too!” Senya was not currently her friend- their conversation hadn’t even touched on his abandonment of them- but she did not have time to articulate ‘friend and this other guy’.

The light hovered. The wind began to get cold again. The floor started to give in, all at once losing weight- and now, it seems, might be a good time to note the light in the sky was not Ikina.

The floor gave in, and almost comically the three seemed to be floating- but then, uncomically, they were falling. Screaming. And then, hitting rocks on their fall down before finally settling in a thicket of lava.

Unconscious, luckily, though perhaps that distinction did not matter at this point.
The Gang actually Dies

Chapter Summary

The gang actually does in fact die.

Wren died on the way down, smashing his head against a falling boulder. Aster watched it happen, at least the skull smashing part, but due to her own descent she was unable to ration whether or not he was dead. She was too preoccupied with screaming.

And then she hit the lava, and screaming was no longer an issue because she was dead. Same went for Senya- quite luckily, both had hit the molten lava head-first, resulting in a lesser amount of suffering.

It still burned, and hurt, of course. But then they were dead, and pain was no longer a concern.

The heroes of a story were not allowed to die. Unfortunately, while they were busy elsewhere, Ikina had left his divine protection on a sort of auto-pilot. A direct link of pure essence, a stock that wouldn’t be activated in case truly needed- and now, as they were all dead, was the time.

So truthfully, Aster, Wren and Senya never actually died. They almost did. Over and over again, their flesh burned and their eyes melted, teeth were blackened and hair sizzled. They screamed with mouths that were in the process of unhinging and healing in cycles of agony, and fire ran into their throats and their organs as they tried to move with limbs that were only occasionally attached.

In short, it was awful, and really, really terrible. Just the worst, even.

Ikina felt the metaphorical string of energy they had left to keep the kids alive tug at them, but now was a not a time they could attend to the matter. Even if the matter in question was burning through a suspicious amount of their energy.

In the end, the thing that stopped all those frankly disgusting things from harming Aster any further was not a god. It was the light in the sky- and the man that it belonged to.

Artemis had not done much more than make a game of the scene that had played out before him, watching between his dinners with relative interest. But when people started dying and regenerating without a senseless end, he sent a few orders to some of his inferiors and had Aster pulled out.

Traction beams did not make all that much scientific sense, at least to Aster, but that is essentially what pulled her out of a bout of torture so stressful to her still-reforming mind that she had almost already succeeded in forgetting it.

The beam was like sun, and it rose her slowly into an air like thick fog. Lava came with it too, thin blobs that burned her skin. Fatal wounds would heal, but non fatal scarring had begun to collect all over her body. Pink and black wounds that bled a thin pus coated her body by the time she stopped ascending.
And found herself on something metal.

The shock of her many deaths had one effect on her: she was tired. In pain, too, but mostly tired. Shaking, she curled up on the unfamiliar floor and stared at the open wounds on her fingers slowly heal until someone picked her up and carried her away over their shoulder.

Senya and Wren were left in the volcano.

Whatever had picked Aster up was not human. It had claws that dug, with the clear aim of being gentle, into her skin. And something that felt like fur brushed against her cheek. Her eyes were closed, or maybe they weren’t, but she surely was retaining nothing she saw.

This place seemed alien, which was dumb, since aliens probably existed but had no reason to be hanging around her boring planet- but then again, she had just been lifted by an anti-gravity beam.

She was placed in a chair in front of someone, and in her blurry vision she thought she had an identity to place on him. He didn’t seem alien. But she was still unconfident that her eyes were even open.

“Ug.” A voice said, and it echoed in her still reforming ears. “Make her presentable first.”

She was carried away again, and her vision slowly reformed in one of her eyes, revealing nothing. The floor was metal, and the hall was dark and narrow. Her neck was in too much pain to move, so this was all she saw. Lights embedded on a grey floor.

Then she was placed on her back in a room that was mostly white and caught the smallest glimpse of who had been carrying her- and yes, they did seem to have fur- before she was knocked out.

Back on the ground, or now, essentially under it, Ikina finally felt irritated enough with the dying boys’ energy usage that they came to fish them out.

They did this in their human state, and the boys were left with a few moments- while Ikina traced their hands across wounds to seal them in a hurry- where they got a chance to feel utterly at odds with the god before them. It did not help they were both naked.

Both were also struck with the strange sensation of being healed, which seemed to feel like every cell in their bodies was alive and buzzing. And shock, naturally. But after all that emotional confusion, there was Ikina. A man in foreign clothes.

“Hm.” Ikina said, or hummed, when they felt the boys were patched up to satisfaction. “Don’t do that again or I’m revoking your immortality privileges.”

“Excuse me, honored.. sky mother.” Wren started saying, but immediately regretted when Ikina spun around with an air of impatience. “Uh. Why are you keeping us alive in the first place? Senya already freed Lailana, and...”

Senya shot Wren a strong look to remind him not to question things that save your life. Wren was too busy being intimidated by Ikina to notice.

Ikina’s face was stern. “You want to die?”

“No!” Wren exclaimed immediately.
“Then don’t be concerned. If you were interested in dying, I may have sat you down to explain why it matters to keep you two alive. If there’s nothing to convince you of, I may as well... keep myself quiet.”

“Okay.” Wren said, shrugging. The previous statement had been the most acceptable thing Ikina had said yet, playing right into the annoying dichotomy of right and wrong he expected a god to play in.

“Are you going to heal these scars?” Senya asked, running a hand across his charred skin. Ikina had stopped the bleeding and closed the wounds shut, but the damage was done. Grooves, burns and discoloring covered the majority of his and Wren’s bodies, the only clear spots being the ones Ikina had healed due to open wounds.

Truthfully, this was a lot of the body- areas like the nose and fingers had to be mostly reconstructed- but it left a lot of painless but odd markings. They were not natural burn wounds, and people would have had a hard time recognizing them as such.

“You’re fine.” Ikina said, then made a noise suspiciously like the beginning of a laugh. “They’ll have to stay.”

Senya furrowed his brow and Ikina disappeared.

“Where’d Aster go?” Wren wondered a minute later.

“I dunno.” Senya glanced back the lava pit, perhaps expecting to hear some sort of submerged screaming from his forgotten ally. “Ikina may have taken her.”

“Huh. Weird.”

“What do we do now? I was sort of betting on dying after freeing Lailana.”

“I guess head home? By the time I make it to the other mountain, Aea-ah, to wake Silanah, Lailana would have probably made a ton of new land. Flooding it again would probably just get settlers killed.” Wren said. “I don’t want to go home though.”

“...I don’t either.”

“I guess we can just... travel around? If you’re into that. Travel.”

Senya almost laughed. “I’m literally always traveling. Same thing for three years. I’m about tired of it, but until someone forces a stop, I guess I’m always up for another bout of it.”

“Do we have to pick a direction to head in, then? Or is it just a kind of going wherever?” Wren looked about at the cooling cave he and Senya were now semi-stranded in. They’d likely have to climb out through one of many tunnels and hope it wasn’t caved in.

“I like to have a general destination. And then when I reach it, I find another one.” Senya helped Wren climb up a boulder to reach one of the small tunnels. He had half a mind to see if could track down Wren’s backpack, but that seemed slightly unlikely.

“So, where do we start?”

Senya climbed after Wren, and took a moment to look the other boy in the eyes. He had never traveled with anyone else before. He wasn’t sure he would like it, but he was tied to Wren now, marked as ‘semi-important’ by the ruler of the gods.
“Stemale?” He offered, suddenly having a thought.

It was nearby. A good test run.

Aster awoke awakened- if that made sense. She was clear-headed again, no longer running a fever, and not in the slightest bit tired.

And very fine, it seemed. She stood up on her own, and had a moment to examine her body- it was naked, and her skin had never looked so clear. She had the faintest impression that, in her previous memory, she had been covered in burns and sealed wounds. Now her skin was clear and paler than usual, soft as if it had been soaked in water for a few hours.

Even old cuts seemed to be gone- an old bug bite that had left a soft purple mark on her arm was gone, as was the indent she had made on her head once from walking into a door.

The other people in the room were the same furry attendants as before, and even as she had the mind to look at them, she couldn’t quite figure them out. They looked like dogs in suits. Like someone had just taken a dog and put it in human clothes. But they were somewhat bipedal, though standing with a slouch, and one was even wearing goggles. They were kind of cute, but something about their stretched-out faces creeped Aster out.

One stumbled about a bit on legs not meant for this sort of activity and put its paw on her back, guiding her to the door. Another brought her clothes, the same sort of meshed grey uniform the creatures wore.

The one with its paw to her back guided her down the hall. Though it took a few moments to steady itself walking, a few paces in it was as capable of walking as well as anyone.

A fairly short distance away, they came to the section of the hall that Aster vaguely recognized as the one she had arrived in. Two great glass doors, fogged so details behind them were lost, opened automatically to reveal a room suitably high tech. It was like Aster had expected, actually; two long bay windows on either side gazed out to what seemed to be outer space, and to either side of the doorway, more strange animals sat at odd machines.

Straight ahead was a man, sitting fairly arrogantly with pale purple hair. Half his face was covered in a chrome electronic in similar shade of violet. He had half a beard going on, in the same ridiculous color, and Aster was left to assume it was his natural shade. She supposed he was an alien of some kind, but he honestly looked entirely human.

The words of Ikina, also, were brought to mind. She had heard of this fellow before. Not a god, but very human.

And with naturally purple hair, evidently? Weird, but alright. He knew Ikina on a personal level. He had an allowance of oddities before he crossed any lines.

“Aster.” The man said. “Artemis.”

Aster pointed, confused, at herself. Was that some sort of title?

“That’s my name. Artemis. I’ve been watching you carefully.”

“Why?” Aster knew why. Ikina had probably told him to. But she was curious if he had any better explanation.
“Io- Ikina told me to.”

Oh. “Did you almost say something else there?”

“I almost called him Ioro. But then I remembered he likely doesn’t refer to himself by his birth name in your presence.”

“He?”

“I’m not trying to be incorrect. To save on my tongue- and the ease of language- I try to just keep to whatever sex he was wearing last I saw him. I know he’s bisexual- or, bigender, I suppose is the slightly less accurate but still truthful way to say that. He’s probably bigender too, I guess, but I’ve never heard him talk about what his actual gender is. Regardless. The essence of the point is this: His real name is Ioro. But don’t tell him I told you that.”

“Okay. So what did Ikina tell you that drove you to... abducting me like this?”

“You’re not abducted. You’re saved. Do you recall when you were dying? I ceased that cycle. This is your way of repaying me.”

“What about my previous question?” Aster asked. It was hard to focus when everything Artemis said seemed to bring up more questions.

“Ikina told me you were unremarkable. And I agree.” As Aster raised her hands to gesture confusion at the statement, Artemis continued. “You are somewhat smart for your kind, and somewhat curious, and those are an acceptable state. There are thousands far better than you, but I confess to being too lazy to seek them out. Ikina offered you, and I accepted his gift.”

“I’m a gift now?” Aster said. “...What exactly are you planning to do with me, anyways?”

“Train you, probably. A bit of apprentice work to break the tedium immortality brings.”

“Train? In what?” Anything, really, would have satisfied Aster when it came to learning aboard this- well, it must have been a spaceship. She knew her science the best she had been taught, but Baased was one of the most technological cities on the planet and it was nowhere on the level of this spaceship. This was ridiculous.

If the idea of apprenticeship was on the table, she couldn’t argue even if all she learned was maintenance.

Artemis gestured with one hand to the ship’s bridge. “Everything.” Then he went quiet, almost as if he was afraid someone was listening. “Genetics.”

“What?”

“Ioro does not enjoy my work, but I specialize in the manipulation of the genome. It’s not a hard field to dabble in, but dabblers rarely get away with it. I believe it’s noble and Ioro swears on the devil it’s disgusting- your choice is yours, I suppose, but I could definitely use someone to teach.”

“What exactly do you do?”

“Tear something apart. Put something else together.”

“And why does Ikina hate it?”

Artemis pursed his lips, but did not answer. A moment later, an unknown but still familiar voice
answered. “If you follow in Artemis’ footsteps, Aster, he’ll have you killing your own young just to see if you could give them wings.”

“You gave me the girl.” Artemis said, testily, and Aster was shocked the god accepted the human’s clear irritation.

“With the intention you might teach her what you know. What you know that I approve of. She will have to return to her home, eventually, and should not do so as a monster.” Ikina stood behind Aster with a hand on her shoulder.

“She will be fine. If you’re so keen on her apparent education, teach her yourself.”

“Can’t be bothered. This is all a petty exercise, and if we can’t come to an agreement, I’d be better off simply terminating it, wouldn’t I?” Ikina said, gripping tighter on Aster’s shoulder. Their implications were not good.

“I really don’t think Laila would like you killing her niece.” Artemis said, almost bored.

“Laila must obey me.” Still, their grip loosened.

“She ought to choose.” Artemis suggested. “Illegal experimentation or... everything that isn’t that.”

Aster did not feel like choosing. As intriguing as pushing the limits of the human genome seemed, she could not miss not learning about a subject. “What is the ‘everything else’?”

Ikina answered. “Godhood.”

“Why would you offer that to me?” Aster exclaimed, quite alarmed at the apparent opportunity she was in possession of.

“I didn’t choose you, necessarily. But you were pointed out to me, and the arrangement came to mind. You were there, that is all.”

“It was easier than guessing at random and having that child fail you.” Artemis offered her with a grin.

“Think of it like this.” Ikina said, and it was odd how the they and Artemis were now working together to speak to her slowly. Like a small child. “No one is special when you’re immortal and all-powerful. But spending time with those alike to you- and with your creations- leaves little space for comparison. I’ve learned, over eons, that I need an occasional refresher of my morals. A reminder of what a human is. So choosing one, and turning them into a god, helps me keep track of what separates me from them. The journey is what I watch.”

“If you need any further proof, look at me.” Artemis said, posing egotistically towards himself with an over-the-top flair. “I was the last millennium’s child.”

“So what will you do, Aster?” Ikina asked, leaning down to get on her level and stare into her eyes. The seriousness of their gaze made her suspect Artemis had been a failure of a project. They needed her to be properly obedient.

“Okay.” Aster shrugged. “I guess I could be a god.”
Holy Practice

After Aster nonchalantly accepted her eventual godhood, Ikina left and Artemis became enthralled in something on a small device in front of him. After a few moments of standing there, Aster asked what was supposed to happen now.

Artemis suggested she go to bed. She was tired enough to agree, though somewhat let down nothing of further excitement was to happen, and allowed one of the creatures to guide her to a bedroom. Then she fell asleep.

The next morning- or, next wake, as her room had no windows and she wasn’t sure how time worked in space anyways- she got up and found new clothes had been placed by her bedside.

They were definitely the sort of future wear Aster had been expecting, but she was not pleased with their overall fit. Instead of pants she had some sort of thick, fleece-lined stockings, and she had a long shirt instead of a dress. Still, she had never been the type to fuss over clothes, and accepted she probably needed to look like she fit in.

Of course, that would be impossible, as there didn’t seem to be a single human aboard the ship. She stepped into the hall with the intention of exploration, and all she found was a great many creatures. She gave a half wave to the first few she met, and said hello, but they did not show any sign of response.

The ship seemed fairly long, and there were no maps to be found. While the idea of aliens had sustained itself in Renen culture, there were few people who had spent time documenting these laughable accusations, so Aster had no basis of knowledge to work off of when confronted with what was definitely a spaceship. In space! With... dog aliens.

She tried to take note of everything she saw, but after twenty minutes of wandering, she seemed to have seen it all. The halls were bright, narrow, and grey. The aliens all looked fairly similar, with only slight changed in coloring. There were few rooms she could enter, and the ones she could were mostly metal boxes with a couple beds in them. Once or twice, she found a small medical room.

Eventually she realized she had turned enough corners to end up where she had begun, gave up on her exploration, and sought out Artemis.

He was sitting in the bridge- she didn’t know why that word came to mind, but it seemed to fit- on the same chair as before, sitting in the same way. It was like he hadn’t moved all night.

“How long does it take to become a god?” Aster asked him.

“Any amount of time. Could be a day if you’re desperate to rush. Ioro is the one this benefits, and I doubt he isn’t capable of seeing every ‘change’ godhood brings you no matter what arrangement of time it takes.”

“I’m not interested in a day.” Aster said. She had just been curious. “Though. Do you know? You called me Laila’s niece last night, which isn’t... really possible, is it?”

“I was being facetious, yes.” Artemis said. Aster breathed a sigh of relief. “But according to Ikina, you used to call her your aunt. So I had imagined that would not be something you’d need to turn to me for, answers-wise. I do not know it.”

Aster narrowed her eyes and thought. Repressed memories- well, they had never been that. Illogical
memories. Daydreams that had mixed together with reality. And she did not remember calling Laila an aunt, but she did remember \textit{having} an aunt. An aunt who was Laila, the great god of the land? That... was worrying.

“I guess.” Aster stuck to saying. She blinked a few times, listening to the humming of the bridge’s machines. “How does one become a god?”

“Well, anyway one likes.” Artemis said with a teasing tone.

“Are there... textbooks... involved?” Aster was really not sure where this conversation was going.

“Anyone can be a god with enough confidence. All it takes is the authority to stride out there and declare a planet yours. Check in every so often, rile the people up a bit, and let them fester. Enough careful tending and you’ll have worshippers by the millions.”

“Isn’t there something beyond that though? I mean, Ikina can transport themself at will instantly, shape-shifts, and I think gets some sort of energy from prayer. Not sure about that last one, but surely they get their energy from somewhere.” The idea of prayers and worship being energy to the gods was actually a common religious belief, but Aster didn’t want to sound foolish in front of Artemis.

“Ioro is... different from gods like me and potentials like you. Powers like shape-shifting and teleportation are all achievable, but Ioro is not a good model of comparison when it comes time for you to practice them. You’ll end up a lot like me, probably. All the practical power with minimal supernatural elements.”

“What’s so different about them?”

“It’s- It’s in his blood, I believe.” Artemis seemed oddly unsure with his answer, squinting down at his hands while thinking.

Aster paused. “But how do I begin?”

Artemis gave a fast smile, but it was not a friendly one. His face did not seem to have the disposition to smile. “Get creative.” He said. “Ioro doesn’t want you practicing genetics, so we’ll take the good road and only practice on animals. Humans later, if you’re skilled.” He threw some sort of plastic object at Aster, who caught it in her hands. “Think of something ridiculous and we’ll try to bring it to life.”

Aster examined the plastic he had thrown her. It seemed to just be an overly high tech drawing board, and she unfolded it and sat down. “I can’t actually draw.” She said, ten minutes later when the board was full of bad doodles of animals that looked mostly like blobs.

Artemis got up and looked over at her work. “I never said you had to draw. List. Write out thoughts. I’m going easy on you with this- honestly, I’ll make sure whatever monstrosity you try and put together doesn’t die from a coding error.”

Even if she didn’t have to draw, Aster was not suited for creative endeavors. Of course, everything was so high tech here that she couldn’t say she excelled in technology anymore either. Excelling in technology back home was being able to make a projector work at school or knowing that for most machines to work, they had to be plugged in.

If she had been asked why the drawing board in front of her was able to follow her touch and save drawings, she would have likely decided on something along the lines of ‘witchcraft’ and left it at that.
After a good twenty minutes of brainstorming, Artemis again stood up to look at her work. He picked up her board and held it close to his face like he was near-sighted, then tilted his head. “I almost forgot you have a ridiculous written language. You’ll have to narrate this to me.”

“Oh. Right.” Aster said. Somehow, she had forgotten that barriers of language could exist. “You’re speaking the same language as me!” She said, almost alarmed it had taken her this long to realize how odd it was for an alien to speak her language.

“There are many planets with the same language. There’s little clusters of language throughout each galaxy, and considering this ship’s not really built for long distance traveling, I’ve been keeping in the same district for centuries. On a good, natural planet you see hundred of languages develop, but those are pretty rare.”

On her planet, there really was just one language- most countries had a few dialects with a couple unique words, but the barrier of language was never a problem. Aster had never realized how odd that was until now.

“Natural?”

“Well, Ioro made your planet. Out of all the things that surprise you, that shouldn’t be one of them. But without the interference of gods, life still can develop. Sure, sometimes it’s as simple as an inhabited planet getting hit by a meteorite and a chunk of ice and bacteria getting tossed about the void for a while. But the end result is a planet utterly unique. And not home to humans.”

“How many planets are there? Are many home to humans?”

“Humans are everywhere.” Artemis said with exhaustion. “I can’t quite express distaste, being one myself and helping spread them myself, but humans are the go-to sentient inhabitant for any god trying to make their name.”

“So there’s thousands of planets, all exactly the same and filled with humans?”

“Roughly. Some get more creative.” He ran a hand through his purple hair to demonstrate this fact. “Don’t freak out so much, kid. Every planet ends up developing different cultures and leading different futures. It’s just that some gods, like Ioro, really love their humans. Now, read me your notes, here. Let’s not get too off topic.”

It didn’t seem very off topic, but she complied. “If you want me to create new animals, I guess I was thinking- Like, a cat. But underwater.”

“Exactly a cat, but exclusively aquatic?”

“Yes.”

“Does it really need fur, then? A cat’s tail is utterly useless as a flipper, so what purpose is it to serve? How do its eyes fair from constant exposure to water and increased pressure? How does it mate, and give birth to its young? This isn’t about a few keywords. It’s about messing around with concepts until you create something that could have evolved on its own.”

Aster crossed out half her board, the one devoted to the words ‘water cat’ and a crude drawing of a cat underwater, in frustration. “The only other thing I have is... like, a bear. But smaller, and it can climb trees. Like a squirrel. But I don’t have any more specific details than that.”

“You don’t need to have a chart of how everything works. My earlier questions were just an example of the level of thought I want you to put to this. Placing a common animal underwater is not
“quite the landmark idea of the century.” He took the board back from Aster, wiped it clean with a tap, and folded it away. “We’ll use your miniature bear idea as a model.”

“What happens next, then?”

“We construct one, see what goes wrong, and construct another.”

“How long will that take?”

Artemis gave a sigh of exasperation. “A few seconds. I know your planet is a mix of technology bordering on anachronism, but I’d hoped you’d adapt quicker than this. I take all my machines from civilizations far ahead of the level of knowledge you’re comfortable with. We’ll likely visit some of these places. You need to accept that the concept of designing and creating artificial life- and any other high tech mechanics we’ll be examining- are all very simple to use.”

“Okay. Fine. I was just curious.”

“Only think, don’t wonder.”

Artemis led Aster down the hall and to a room that had been locked earlier. It seemed to be another medical type room, plain white, with a bay of computers at one wall. A large window, looking into a plain room, took up the adjacent wall.

“We’ll need a bear, to start.” Artemis said, and he pulled a small device out of his pockets, tapped for a minute, and then put it away. “Just asked for a bear.”

Aster narrowed her eyes. “From whom?”

“Well, bears are like humans. Staples of a lazy planet. Not very hard to get one mailed to you. I just ordered some off the omninet- that’s like the internet, but in space. Wait, did your planet ever develop an internet? Never mind then. I just called someone and bought a few bears, and they’re going to teleport it over immediately.”

“If you want me to adapt to higher levels of technology, you probably shouldn’t skip over explaining things.”

“An intranet is what connects a network in, say, a few buildings. An internet can connect the world. The omninet connects planets. What level of computer does your planet have?”

“Well- I’ve heard the kingdom of Aeis’ royal institute is years ahead of my schooling, but I’ve never been to the south. We had a computer that would do math, and there was an ongoing effort to copy a dictionary onto it.”

“Well, I’ve heard the kingdom of Aeis’ royal institute is years ahead of my schooling, but I’ve never been to the south. We had a computer that would do math, and there was an ongoing effort to copy a dictionary onto it.”

“Okay. Look. The omninet allows for trillions of people to connect, and there’s trillions of web addresses on it for every kind of anything you can imagine. This constant flow of information has-oh, look, the bears are here.”

The bears were here. In the other room, four attendants were walking four bears by the muzzle. The attendants left, and the bears stood around peacefully.

“They’re a domestic subspecies.” Artemis said, seemingly proud.

“What species are the other aliens on the ship?”

“They’re just dogs.” Artemis said. “I keep them around mostly to piss Ioro off. He can’t stand them.
Now, anyway, I will show you what I mean when I say anyone can be a god within a day."

Artemis turned to the computers on the wall, and brought up a screen of letters and numbers. “This is the genetic code of a bear. We didn’t need actual bears to bring it up, of course, as it’s been in the databases for years. It only takes a couple of mods, in truth, to turn a bear into a fern- well, metaphorically. If we tried that now, the bear would simply die. But the codes are similar enough.”

“So what do I do?”

“I’m going to walk you through this first one, but honestly, a child could do this.” Artemis clicked around a few times on the screen, typed a few things in a foreign language, and code shortened itself. “Here’s a few example of genes a bear might carry.” He selected something else, and a machine in the other room hummed to life. “And here are the exact genes the bear on the far left possesses. Adjusting one will do nothing immediately, unless it’s one of the genes concerned with carrying a disease, in which case the bear may become ill. Are you following this?” Artemis turned over to look at Aster with a somewhat bored expression on his face.

Aster was following it, but she did not know what a gene was. Or what DNA was. She was just making assumptions in her head, guesses based on context that let her feel less lost than she was. She nodded.

“We’ll be using gene shock therapy to adjust the DNA in two creatures, then artificially age the young to examine if desired results were met. If we actually were seeking to create a new species, further generations would have to be born in order to create genetic variability, and add in codes for disorders and variations to help equalize population levels. For now, we will focus on creating a small bear.”

“What’s gene shock?” Aster had to hold herself back from simply asking ‘what’s a gene’, but figured she could perhaps glean that by asking a question related to it.

“Using an infectious disease as a base, a virus containing desired new genes is introduced to a specimen. The virus is designed to spread at extreme speeds, killing old cells and replacing them immediately with new ones. Shortly, the host has been recoded.”

“If all this technology exists all over the universe, why isn’t everyone a god?”

“On planets where this sort of work is commonplace, they still call themselves human. They lack the gall to claim themselves gods.” Artemis said. “Though, keep in mind, the work gods like Ioro do extends past the foundations of a creature shop. It’s the maintenance- and the longevity that maintenance requires- that makes for a legitimate god.”

“And magic, too?”

Artemis put a hand to head and thought for a moment. “Magic is... probably a science. If you’re referring to Ioro’s instant inter-planet transportation, I have no idea how that works. Same with shape-shifting.”

Aster could see the anger in Artemis’ face, and she switched the subject. “Back to the bear thing.”

“Oh. Right. So, you want a small bearish creature that can climb trees. A predator, then, that might leap from the trees to kill, and hibernates each winter by bloating itself. Simple enough. I don’t want to buy any squirrels for this, so we’ll simply take the ideas of a squirrel, and work towards them in our mods- adjusting instead of splicing, you see.”

The bears were calm, almost asleep in the other room. A machine dislodged itself from the ceiling
Artemis knew exactly what he was doing, almost with so much clarity that Aster had to doubt this was the first time he was teaching this to someone. He moved through the computer’s program too fast for Aster to follow, adjusting letters and switching out sequences of code that made no sense to her. He stopped when he noticed Aster leaning over his shoulder.

“Here. Once more.” He gave a small, flat computer to Aster with the computer screen on it. “Look here. This is the gene that determines body size and growth. What we want is to adjust it to a smaller size. The real problem would be recognizing which other strings also effect size, and switching them out correctly. But the computer does it all for you. All you have to do is select your size.”

Aster touched the area Artemis pointed at, and a box popped up in another language. Artemis continued to read over her shoulder. “This says this bear could grow to be about five foot one in an optimal environment.”

Figuring she knew what to do, Aster tapped on the number box and typed in a height of one and a half feet. When she tried to enter it, a red box popped up. “What’s this?” She asked, alarmed.

“Bears naturally aren’t that size fully grown, and the program is warning you if you try and create one with that condition, it will die before birth. You have to manually adjust the genes to look for some way around the problem.” Artemis was saying this like he thought it amusing, but Aster was simply frustrated. This looked cool, but she was never going to understand it.

Artemis watched her expression. “Look. We can try this again later. I’ll find something else for you to do in the meantime that isn’t so computer orientated. Would you prefer that?”

“No.” Aster said. The truth of the matter was that she didn’t like not knowing things. And with the universe evidently out there and full of everything, there had never been so much she hadn’t known. At school, she had been smart because she did enjoy geometry and absolutely volunteered on the weekends as a tutor to those struggling with essays. The feeling of not getting something, of becoming lost and confused, was disorienting to Aster.

“I’m doing it anyway.” Artemis said, looking at Aster with what seemed to be distaste and leading her out of the room.

The next day, Artemis brought Aster a handwritten notebook on how to read his language, something called Seltia, and left her in her room. Breakfast came later from one of the dogs. Then came lunch, though it hadn’t seemed like much time has passed. She read a few pages, wondering when Artemis had had the time to write this up, but soon grew bored. She wandered another full circle around the ship, disappointed to see there was nothing new. The dogs were uninteresting. Artemis sat, as always, on his chair on the bridge. He didn’t look up when Aster entered the room, nor did he make note when she left.

Besides the bridge, there were almost no windows on the ship. But in one of the small medical areas, Aster found a small line of a window. She sat in front of it, gazing out at the stars and blackness and very much wishing she was facing her planet so she had more of a reason to feel moody. Watching space calmed her. She didn’t want to be calm.

The darkness did not move, and with the steady hum of machinery around her, Aster fell into a light sleep- an aimless morning nap, the sort she never would have allowed herself to take back home. But the stars looked as soft and steady as fabric, and it wasn’t until she heard a sudden voice that she realized she had fallen asleep.
The image beyond her window had changed. There was a planet, not her planet, and it shone like silver.

“Seltiabah.” Artemis voice came from a worn speaker on the ceiling. “Thought we’d begin with my home.”
Tempting Wrath

Aliens aside-

Well, that’s sort of unfair, isn’t it? To promise aliens and then have to retreat solemnly back to a boring, human planet where two boring human boys are traveling.

To be fair, Seltiabah didn’t have any aliens on it, and was fairly similar to Aster’s world, in the end. And it’d feel pretty mean to leave Wren and Senya alone for too long anyway.

It had been two days since Aster had vanished, and their travels were off to a pretty good, though unremarkable, start. Wren had put aside his more crush-based feelings for Senya after he had stolen his stuff and awoken a volcano god, so he no longer got as worked up at Senya’s every move. They even would share a bed together with the occasional touching of the skin, and it was done with the pure understanding that it was fine.

Of course, the whole ‘crush’ and ‘platonic’ thing had never been a question for Senya, who was simply glad to see Wren not dote over him as much. Senya was used to traveling alone, and even with company, he kept his old habits. He was quiet. He didn’t look up off the trail very often.

Wren constantly was stopping to take in the scenery around him. As the country of Aela gave way to their neighbor Roria, the foothills of Ae-en became less steep, turning into grasslands that were dotted with wildflowers and streams. Aela and Roria used to be one country, until the small province of Aela declared itself a new country, claiming Ae-en as their sacred territory. The two had gone to war, but Renen had backed Aela as an ally, ensuring a victory. Now, there was peace, though resentment towards Renen were not uncommon in Roria. Whenever they stopped in town, Wren tried not to speak in case his accent gave him away.

Below Roria was Sved, a grassland that led into desert on the west. The country was constantly at war with itself, and often others, and unfortunately stood as the only land-bridge between the north and south continents. Crossing it was highly dangerous, and even trying to take a boat across could lead to danger. But Senya’s first destination had been Stemale, a nearby country very similar to Renen in its environment, though home to a more traditional culture.

Roria’s grasslands were exciting to Wren, though Senya generally seemed uninterested. In fact, Senya generally seemed uninterested in everything.

A few more days into their travels, as they came to the border of Stemale, Wren was nothing less than worried about his traveling companion. Finally, during mid afternoon when Senya refused to eat the sugary lunch Wren had bartered for, he asked “Are you okay?”

The effect was immediate. There was a drop in his face, and a twitch of his jaw. He looked ready to snap, but simply ground his teeth. “Not really.”

“You know, your terrible fishing skills payed for these cakes. You ought to enjoy them before we leave civilization again.”

“Is that supposed to be helpful?” Wren flinched at his comment, and he tried to ease his tone. “Look. I never planned to live this long.”

“Yeah, but... we’re here now? You lived? Try to relax.” Wren, who had no experience with this sort of emotion, was fairly useless with his good intentions.
“I unleashed a demon onto the earth. I don’t want to see the results. If it wasn’t such a pain, I’d like to die. But I was hoping someone else might do it for me, you know? Then I wouldn’t have to worry about chickening out. It’d be pre-determined.”

“We haven’t heard one word about that thing doing any damage. For all we know, it wandered off and created new land in the ocean, like you intended! I mean, come on, there must be something... you enjoy in life...” Wren strained to think of something Senya liked. Not traveling, he’d been on the road too long. Not fishing, he probably did that too often. Not other people, that seemed certain...

“Do you have any hobbies?”

“Like you and your painting? No.”

“Like you, I just feel like there’s going to be one thing, out there, that will make you feel better again. Like some cure all that will remind you how to have fun again.”

Senya sighed. “Ug, Wren. Calm down. I’m not starving myself to death here. I refuse to kill myself. I just want someone else to do it, that’s all.”

“Is that why we’re heading to Haveninkout?”

“Yes.”

Haveninkout was the largest city in Stemale. Buried in the Kout mountains, it was mostly inaccessible and very hostile to outsiders. There were no skyscrapers and few things of any tech. The biggest altar to Lailana in the north was there, and Wren was worried Senya had a reason to be seeking it out.

The two of them stayed near the border for a few days, Senya catching fish and Wren doing his best to forage for editable plants. He knew nothing of the forest, but Senya corrected any errors he made. Then the two of them would try to sell their collections at the market, take the coin, and sleep in the woods.

Wren and Senya had emerged without clothes from the volcano ordeal, and Senya had promptly found- well, stolen- them some new ones from a farm at the base of Ae-en. But Stemale was a cold country, and they would need actual winter coats to make it to Haveninkout without freezing.

The days went by quiet. The routine wore them out. Their conversations were kept simple, and with a tried honesty, neither of them bothered to listen for any news of a monster destroying the world. That would have been too negative for their lives right now.

They found the money slowly. Traders were aversive to dealing with two boys covered in strange markings. Also, good coats were expensive, as all clothes were made by hand here, and the cold weather ones were often woven with fur collars and down linings. By the time they were free to leave, it had been two and a half weeks.

The actual journey to Haveninkout did not take more than three days, and besides the freezing winds, was not very perilous. As they walked, there was a feeling of growing anticipation from both Wren and Senya, both nervous for whatever was planned.

One night, the second night, the anxiety became too much. They had set up camp at a site meant for travelers, bundled near a fire with about eight other people. Despite the crowd, no one was paying mind to anyone else, and the only thing Wren noticed from around him was the soft sound of someone strumming a guitar.

“What are you planning to do when we arrive in Haven?” Wren asked in a harsh but quiet voice.
“Something involving Lailana?”

“Yes.” Senya said almost wryly. “I’m going to see if I can’t make it her divine duty to kill me.”

“Ikina’s keeping us alive, Senya.”

“So Ikina will have to pick favorites. Explain to Lailana why she can’t kill me. Maybe it’ll anger Ikienough that they’ll end up killing me.”

“Playing games with the gods will...” Well. It’d get one killed. Which is what Senya was shooting foranyway. “If you die, then I’ll be alone. And I don’t think I could make it very far on my own.”

“So you’ll die.” Senya said nonchalantly.

“Yes! Maybe. I’ve never wanted to die before, but with Aster gone- and you gone- what if I do? I don’t want to die.”

“Then don’t.” Senya was facing Wren, holding his head up with an elbow while lying in the sleeping bag next to him. But Wren was on his back, talking to the sky.

“It’s not that easy for you, so why would it be so simple for me?”

“You have Baased. And Aster’s not dead.”

“But they’re far. And without you-”

“Ug. How codependent can you get?” Senya grumbled, but then worsened the problem by, quite unprofessionally and awkwardly, leaning over to kiss him.

It didn’t work out so well, but after the both of them shifted around a little, they almost figured it out. The positioning, that is, so it wasn’t at such a weird angle. The kissing was still hard, neither having any experience in the field or even any honest exposure of seeing other people kiss.

They were just guessing. Just for a few moments. Then, without a sudden sound, their environment was brought back to mind with the eight other people around the fire with them, and they separated and attempted to sleep.

The next morning was simply awkward for Wren. Senya didn’t seem to care much about the previous night, going about the routine of eating and bathing without a word, but Wren felt odd about that now. What was going to happen next? Were they a couple now, or had that been some sort of tactic by Senya to get him to shut up?

He didn’t like Senya much, he reminded himself, as he was a pain to deal with. He was a thief. He lied. He revived ancient demons. He was not boyfriend materiel.

But, as previously mentioned a long ways back, Wren was pretty loyal to anyone who showed him the tiniest bit of affection. The trick stood as ‘did Senya kiss him as a joke of some sort, like his flirting had been’. Well. It had been a somewhat emotional moment. Was it possible it had been genuine?

Wren bundled himself in his soft jacket, burying his face in his fur collar. They were walking an ancient and well-worn road through the Kout mountains, and it would likely only be a few more hours before they came to the city of Haveninkout. The plants here were frozen, and not far up the
trail, patches of snow could be seen.

Wren was going to keep Senya alive today. That was his goal. If he had his journal, he would have written it down and underlined it in the same way his mother had taught him too. His goal journal was sudden and odd memory to have brought to mind. A journal exclusively for goals? In towns like these, that was a complete waste of paper.

Distracted, Wren blinked and tried to refocus. Senya was going to live. Okay. Or more specifically, he wasn’t going to die, wasn’t going to get painfully revived, and definitely wasn’t going to bring on the wrath of any gods.

Senya, meanwhile, was thinking a vaguely similar series of thoughts. Because even if he didn’t die today, he was hoping to carve the path for it to happen.

Haveninkout, or as it was sometimes shortened to, Haven, was a large but separate city. While all people were united as one large group under city government, most of the day-to-day life of a citizen was concerned with smaller communities.

Hundreds of ancient religious sects and traditional clans thrived in small, multi-home complexes. Two people from different sides of the city could be easily have nothing in common bar language and city of residence. The country of Stemale was openly hostile towards immigrants, and those that made it in all seemed to gravitate towards Haven- meaning there was a district for each country in the world, and then sub-districts for various cultures within that country.

The city itself matched the messy diversity of its inhabitants. It was lain in a mountain valley originally, and the common entrance was through a carved arch and into a narrow and square valley where red houses rose up like tiers, carved right into the side of the mountains. From there, the city opened up, though many homes were still carved right into stone. Some were even underground, their entrances marked with cheery circles of flowers and a helpful sign to watch one’s step.

“‘The altar of Lailana will be there.” Senya said, pointing to a spire of rock in the distance where stairs could be seen circling to a dark spit.

“Quite a walk then.” Wren said almost cheerily. He regretted the tone of voice immediately. Now was probably a time to try and tackle Senya’s angsty issues before anything got desecrated. “Uh. Nice city though.” He tried.

It was not helpful. Senya had a quiet determination to him as he walked the smooth paths of Haven, occasionally glancing up at the approaching altar with a sort of resolve. He did not care how pretty the city was.

“I’m hungry.” Wren said. “Let’s find somewhere to eat.”

“Sure, fine.” Senya said without much emotion.

“It’s not like the altar’s going anywhere.” Wren said brightly.

He had hoped eating might clear Senya’s mind, and if not, Wren might think of something else to distract him with. But actually finding a commercial eating place took at least an hour, and by then Senya had become visibly bothered, frowning and speaking only to complain.

It reminded Wren why he didn’t have a crush on the other boy anymore, which was good because it allowed him to clear his head. Depression. That seemed to be what Senya had, though it was something Wren had never really heard about. He knew the word, as many do, from some long forgotten time. But Baased, despite its scientific progress, had rarely noted any sort of mental health
Depression was something where you failed to care about anything, Wren thought. Except Senya clearly cared about killing himself, but that probably was some kind of side effect. Something had triggered this—well, obviously releasing the monster from Ae-en had. But there was something else.

Senya ate his portion of soup in ten minutes, and Wren was only halfway done when he decided to act. He grabbed Senya’s gloved hands in a friendly manner.

He looked into Senya’s eyes and leaned forward. “So. You’re depressed. But that doesn’t mean you have to anger any gods! We can work—”

“I’m not depressed Wren. I’m pissed off.”

“You’re mulling around, not eating, and trying to kill yourself! That’s essentially what I infer is a class A case of depression.”

“I’m not depressed. I’m wrathful. I was meant to die.”

“Why did you bet on dying this much? Shouldn’t you be thankful your life was spared? Ikina saved you. You have a second chance millions of others never earned.”

Senya raised his brow, opening his mouth midway through Wren’s last sentence to express an emotion of pure offense. “Never earned?” He said. “Millions never earned this chance Wren, you’re true. But millions were more deserving than me. What kind of god saves a homeless petty thief like me? There’s dead children out there. Dead parents. Dead people who were generally useful.”

“I’d be dead without you.” Wren tried to offer, but it did nothing to calm his fit.

“And hundreds are dead because of me.”

“The monster- Lailana- I mean, we haven’t heard anything yet, and it’s not like there aren’t any radios around here. If there really had been death, we’d know, okay?”

“I’m not talking about Lailana.” Senya said, dully and darkly, and Wren was reminded yet again how little he really knew about his traveling companion.

“What are you talking about?” Wren asked, quiet and steady. He was suddenly aware of his environment- a dark and half underground kitchen, empty besides an old woman currently in one of the backrooms. He was not scared. But was he supposed to be?

Senya stood up, and walked a pace away, and then turned back to Wren. He had a hand to his face, lightly touching his cheek. Then he leaned over Wren and kissed him. Again. And like an idiot, Wren fell for it again.

This time there wasn’t the presence of other people to stop them— but there wasn’t the heat of the sleeping bag either. Both could only go so far before, physically, they were reluctant to continue.

Senya knew what he was doing— shutting Wren up— but he didn’t know how much more kissing he could do before he felt obliged to sit himself down and figure out his sexuality.

Wren did not have a crush on Senya anymore. And he wasn’t dense— Senya was obviously doing this so he didn’t have to answer the far more pressing concern of ‘whom exactly did you kill?’

But Wren let himself fall victim to Senya’s charms anyways— the kissing, the eventual soft touch of a
hand to the neck, even the awkward moment where Senya half fell into his lap. And Wren let himself laugh, figuring there’d always be another time to worry about murder.

After all, he seemed to have found a boyfriend.

Which was a pretty exciting event for a kid—well, young adult really, but calling him that always seemed more like a marketing term. He thought of himself as a kid, still. Seventeen, a virgin, and desperate to feel loved. And he didn’t really like Senya, but Senya maybe liked him, and that confusion was acceptable, overall.

He liked feeling liked. That’s all.

They had to leave eventually. Kissing, while nice and all, can’t fill very many minutes without anything else going on—and that ‘anything else’ was a field neither Wren nor Senya cared to delve into right now.

They got back to walking towards the altar without saying a word about it, and it was only as they came very close to the rock spire in question that Wren remembered he had been trying to stop this from happening. Instead, he had let himself get caught up in kissing, and for some reason assumed that would change Senya’s plans in the slightest. Like the power of true love was somehow going to solve all his problems.

He reached for Senya’s hand without thought, then looked over and saw he had both in his pockets. “What are you going to do up there?” Wren asked.

Senya didn’t respond.

“I meant everything I said, you know.”

“I know.” Senya swallowed. “This has always been about retribution for me. That’s all.”

They began to climb the steps to the spire. A sign promised that there were three hundred and thirty-three steps to the top, as a sign of piety towards the three gods. Even places that hated Silanah wouldn’t dare to discount him.

There was a railing to hold onto, but Wren decided instead to walk in the middle of the path, next to Senya. He had a chance now to hold his hand. It wasn’t exactly a revolutionary feeling, but he liked the idea of it. He liked that other people could see it, and maybe understand that the person with him was his boyfriend (well, that wasn’t official, but maybe).

At the top, Senya stopped and stared at the entrance to the altar, a simple cave. He squeezed Wren’s hand. “It’s not like I want to die.” He looked over to him. “Personally, that is. It’s obligation. It’s responsibility.”

He let go and entered. Wren stood still for a few moments longer. Then he followed.

The altar was as dark as the one to Silanah in Baased, pitch black besides the occasional candle. The place had been carved out of a natural cave, and on either side of the main entrance hall were small corridors lined with candles and crypts. Bones were occasionally fastened to the wall with small signs indicating likely martyrdom or sainthood.

Farther along, the cave opened to a main chamber. At the center was a statue of Lailana in a form akin to both a forest and an elk, but with a distinctly human face with eyes looking down in pity.
The rest of the walls were gems. Some were naturally occurring— that was why this cave was the altar, after all- but many had simply been gathered over the years and stuck on. Diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds of all sizes and colors made for a glistening dome that surely would have been tacky in full lighting- but in the dark, they merely glimmered, contained.

Senya stood in front of the statue to Lailana, looking up at her sad face. When Wren approached him, he walked away.

There wasn’t really much he could do here to wreak havoc.

Then, as if to counter Wren’s thoughts, Senya went ahead and wreaked some havoc. It was true there was little he could work with in a place where most things were cemented to the walls, but he started simple. He ran to walls and the small shelves of offerings and started throwing things on the ground. Glass trinkets shattered, flowers were flattened and small slips of paper— written prayers— were burnt in the candles.

Then, once that was ruined to satisfaction, he turned his attention to the rather upset worshippers. He blew out the candles— Wren simply ducked under the statue’s legs at this point— and began to hit people with Wren’s sheathed sword that he had never got around to giving back. Senya wasn’t really trying to hurt anyone, but he did use enough force that some people were knocked right out.

By the time the caretakers of the altar arrived, the scene was a mess. Everything was on the floor, including a number of people, and Senya was devoting his time to trying to pry a diamond off the wall.

“Stop at once!” A rather average voice rang out in the dark.

“Oh, if I’ve committed a crime, let Lailana make this tomb my grave.” Senya said. Such a declaration was daringly serious, especially at a holy site, that Wren swore he heard a gasp from one of the custodians of the altar.

Senya notably did not die.

Someone lit a candle. Someone else, on the floor, was waking with a groan. The wind outside the altar made for a sweet static silence as Senya was led— by the roped wrists— outside.

Nothing killed him there either. Wren followed the procession, waiting for a sign from a god he knew to be real— but perhaps she did not care about one angry human, in the grand cosmic scheme of things. Why would she? Gods and humans rarely mixed.
Chapter Summary

Whoops! I forgot I had an Ao3 for a bit there. Will work to upload rest of this.

If you're liking this, check out my other works too.

Gods mixed with humans freely on the planet of Seltiabah. Or at least, one was now—leaving the ship out in orbit, Artemis had teleported down to the surface of the planet—most of which seemed, at least to Aster, to be one large city.

“My home.” Artemis said, gesturing to the sky with a smile. “And my planet.”

Aster tried to judge his expression. “You mean something by separating those two, don’t you?”

“Precisely. I grew up here. But I also rule here.”

“Like a king?”

Artemis looked humorlessly at Aster. “Like a god. Obviously.”

Aster wasn’t sure how that worked. Unlike Ikina, Artemis lacked a divine air about him. The idea of him being worshipped was about as silly as the idea of a publicly inebriated buffoon being an emperor.

“I don’t doubt that you have power.” Aster said carefully. “But somehow I can’t imagine you being a proper divine.”

Artemis did not seem tested when he replied a moment later. “I was born here. So I’m not a true god in that way. But I have since taken over the role of god, and the generations that now inhabit the planet recognize me as such.”

“But this is an artificial planet, right? Didn’t another god already rule it?”

“Yes. Until I usurped them.”

“Can you kill a god?”

“Some.” Artemis said, and then he laughed softly. “Not Ioro. I hope you weren’t thinking of trying to harm him.”

Aster was actually mortified at the implication that she might want to hurt Ikina. She didn’t like Ikina greatly, to tell the truth, but they seemed to at least be a force of lawful good in the universe.

“Does this city have a name?” Aster changed the subject. She was uneasy, anyways, with talking so openly about these matters in public.

“Metropolis city.” Artemis said. “Unfortunately, it was called that before I came to power. There was nothing I could do to stop it from acquiring such a bland name.”
It was not a bland city, however. Electricity was everywhere. Signs were everywhere. Artemis’ notes on how to read his language had not had any time to sink in, so walking through streets lined in it was akin to the feeling of drowning in culture. Who were these people? What was their language? These were things Aster would never have the basis of experience to understand- or even a reference to guess off of. Artemis, who ought to have been her guide, only looked at the city with smug power. He was not about to teach her its ways.

“So why did you take me here?” Aster’s voice was not one to falter. Mostly, it just came off as calculated.

“To remind you of what I’m trying to turn you into.”

“Do you want me to usurp Ikina?” Another worrying thought. Artemis did seem quite subversive to his once-teacher...

“No. You can’t. But perhaps you will try to find a way to do the work I give you if I show you the rewards you may receive. This city here. I own it. And I know how meaningless that seems- because is is meaningless. I can’t walk into any shop and have anything handed to me for free. But I can destroy it. And I want you to think of what that’s like, the power of destruction, because you’ll never quite understand it until you have it.”

“You want to give me my own planet then?” The idea of any sort of power was unknowable to Aster.

“That is what Ioro wishes. He tested me the same, and I chose this planet. He hopes you’ll make one for yourself, from scratch, and nurture it carefully. I want the same. But I want you to go a little more in depth about this science of life- genetics are what Ioro fears nonsensically.”

Aster was quiet for a few moments, not meeting Artemis’ gaze. She watched someone with bright green hair buy a bulk box of lipstick. Then she spoke in a quiet voice. “Well. I’m not very good at computers, so I’d like to just do what Ikina wants instead.”

Artemis sighed, leaned his head back and seemed to roll his eye as he did so. “Look. I know you’re frustrated with not understanding high end technology. I recognize your disadvantage. But you can’t mope around because of it. If you force yourself to listen to me drone on enough, you’ll figure it out, I promise.”

“I mean, it’s not like I ever wanted to do this all that much. And you said Ikina would be angry if they knew I was learning this stuff, right? So I want to stop doing it. Let’s just do the planet-nurturing activities instead.”

Artemis was insistent. That was clear simply from his body language. He had to be around seven feet tall, and he leaned over Aster to put a supportive hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. I know someone who will make this easier for you.”

“I don’t care about this.” Aster tried her best to add an edge to her tone.

“You’ll like her. She’s young too.”

The discussion was promptly ended the moment Aster realized Artemis had no intention of ever giving up. He wanted to teach her. He really, really wanted to. There was almost something worrying about his insistence- was something more sinister behind it? Was he preparing her for something?

She tried to keep her thoughts clear as Artemis ran through a very brief tour of Seltibah and
Metropolis City. They were both big. People had ridiculous hair colors here and were intimidatingly tall.

When Artemis had killed the last god, he had burned all images of her. He had yet to explain beyond that.

Artemis was worshipped as an icon of a man here with a half machine face. He showed Aster a few icons of himself, and his holy icon looked almost identical to his actual form. So much so that Aster worried someone might recognize him.

But no one ever did. Many people had machines ingrained into their skin here- Artemis had his face repaired due to injury, he revealed, but it was quite common for people to add machinery for aesthetic or practical uses as well. Some people bought ports for their skin, such as on the wrist, and then were able to interchange various machines whenever they wanted. It was not a rich man’s folly- it was a common reality.

It was really weird. Hair coloring was only just vogue in Baased, and Aster did have stark red hair- but the idea of a baby being born with pink hair was just silly. Here, it was mediocre. She had to wonder if the average Seltian would marvel at her world at all.

Her world. That brought up another question. “Who names planets?”

“Gods. Scientists. Depends.”

“What about my planet?”

“I’m not one hundred percent sure. I think Ioro calls it ‘Daliis’. Mostly he just says ‘my planet’ so I’m not too sure.”

‘Daliis’ was not a name that made any sense to Aster. It’d be a bit of a stretch to try and pull an ‘Ae’ sound from the ‘ai’- after all, when being used to refer to the sky god, the ‘ae’ was supposed to go at the end of the name. It was gibberish- but it was her planet.

Artemis bought Aster lunch at a shop so bustling with oddities that she had no way to discern if it was high or low class. It was unknown, and uncategorizable. The meal she had there was high in salt, soft, and stung her lips. It was also hard to place.

“We can head back to the ship now. I’ll call the girl up right away so you two can begin immediately.” Artemis said when she was almost done eating.

“You don’t have to call her ‘the girl’. Being cryptic benefits no one but yourself.”

“Yes. That is why I do it. But the girl in question is named Eii, and she’s a trans-dimensional omnipotent being who I promise can create life out thin air. I hate her.”

Aster had a lot of questions. She began with one: “What?”

“I don’t really know. It’s never been very clear to me what she is, just what Ioro implies to me. She helped him design a lot of things on your planet. The duality of your gods was all her work. No one is really sure where she came from, but I think she’s from another realm of existence entirely- I may sound mad now, but judge only when you meet her.”

“...So there’s different dimensions as well as different planets?”

“I don’t actually know. I’ve always just assumed... ask her when you meet her. She’s as fond of me
as Ioro is.”

Back on Daliis- as, it would later be learned, that was the planet’s name, Senya was in jail. As dull as it may seem to leap back to a world that doesn’t consist of trans-dimensional girls, the boys’ story can’t quite be ignored. Yet. Later, there will be a time when the boys can do very little of anything- but that, patiently, is not now.

The jail in Haven was a grotto system dug out of limestone, leading to more or less square cells. There weren’t any doors or bars to keep people in, instead the cells were just deep pits. To get out, one had to be lifted by another.

Jailbreaks weren’t really that hard to pull off. To keep them at a minimum, no visitors were allowed, and guards were everywhere.

Wren did not know what Senya was doing, and continued to worry him. Probably he was thinking of killing himself again, since the whole ‘divine judgement’ thing didn’t work out, and that both concerned Wren and annoyed him. As much as he liked Senya- on the level of friendship/boyfriendship that they were at- having to deal with his sudden emotional issues was tiring.

He wasn’t a bad person for faltering in his sudden role of caretaker. It’s a job not many are cut out for. But what ultimately sets a moral compass is a choice, not a thought.

And he chose to wait.

The valley of Haveninkout was warm when the sun hit it- but that only lasted for a few hours. And the wind never gave up in between. As it began to get dark, Wren curled up tighter in his coat. Did waiting politely mean he was going to have to sleep out here?

A couple of guards left the jail at the assumed end of their shift, and Wren saw an opportunity to not come off as a bad person.

“Is there... bail at your prison? My friend’s in here.”

“No bail.” One guard said. “Friend’ll get sentenced. But there’s short sentences. Only a few months.”

“Your friend must be the boy who wrecked the temple, correct?” Another guard said. “Only one in today. His stay will be determined by the holy leader. Likely it’ll be religious service, so you shouldn’t be too scared for him.”

“What time tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Likely she’ll be informed of it tonight, and make her decision then.”

The guards left after that, and shortly a new shift came in. Wren kept waiting outside the entrance of the jail, shivering but determined to be good.

The high holy leader came by late at night, though of course Wren had no idea how long he’d be waiting. It seemed like it must have been midnight. She wore layers of fur and brown cloth typical of the region, but it was highly accessorized to look mystic. There were small jewels and golden embroidery to help differentiate her status. She even had a clear shawl draped around her shoulders.
When Wren saw her, he stood up and blocked the door. “Miss.” He said urgently. “I’d like to accompany you inside. You’re here to see my friend, and I’m not sure he’s fit to make his own case.”

“Miss.” She said softly, scorning the title. “Kala is my name. You are free to come with.”

“Thanks!” Wren said, trying to sound grateful. But he then toned down with energy to match her own somber features. She was quite pretty, but grim, and her face bore wrinkles—marks that seemed to have found their way to her face far ahead of schedule.

The jail was quiet, but the echoes that matched every footstep seemed to suggest an immense size. There were multiple guards at each hall who bowed their heads as Kala passed.

Senya was not very far in, having likely been placed in a wing for newcomers.

“You have ransacked the sacred grand tomb of Lailana, and in doing so, brought a coming wrath to those in Haven.” Kala said immediately. “What do you say?”

“I did it to test her. And she has yet to kill me, so I suspect she was fine with me wrecking her stuff. Maybe she wanted an excuse to redecorate.” Senya’s voice sounded bored, though perhaps dehydrated. The cell was too dark for Wren to see into.

“Sentencing for this crime will harsh.” Kala said warningly.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here...” Wren intruded, as politely as he could, into the conversation. “Senya is not doing much to defend himself. But I know he’s going through a hard time, and honestly doesn’t mean any of what he’s been saying.”

“Wren?” Senya asked. “That you, my beloved? Did you bring me my dragon painting yet? I don’t know how I’m going to break out of jail without a nude image of you, and a dragon, to motivate me forward.” His old tone of mock seriousness was back, and Wren’s skin bristled. Out of all times, now he felt the need to joke? Wren had almost frozen to death trying to get him out of jail— and now he was trying to stay in it, evidently.

Kala’s lip stiffened. Joking wasn’t approved of. And references to homosexuality weren’t acceptable in Haven either. Wren watched her face harden and panicked.

“He’s insane!” Wren almost stuttered from the sheer force of his statement. “I’m his brother. Adopted. And he’s lost his mind. You know. He can’t help anything he says, which is why I, as his younger brother, try my hardest to keep him out of trouble.”

“That doesn’t work.” Kala said. “I will sentence him for death.”

“What? No! You can’t just toss around death like it’s nothing!” Wren’s reaction had been a gut one, but then he remembered Ikina was keeping the two of them alive. It’d be one thing for Senya to be put to death. But it’d be another for other people to see him come back again.

It might be a good thing—perhaps it’d be seen as a sign he was spared by Lailana for his damages. Or perhaps he’d be seen as a monster. And Wren, either ways, would be involved.

“Death.” She said quietly. Senya could hear her anyways, but for formalities sake she spoke again. “For your crimes, Senya of Iixo, you will be sacrificed for the hopes of Lailana’s forgiveness— I, Kala Vel Hirsha of the sacred order, decree it. The date will be tomorrow.”

Wren was struck by something she said. “Vel Hirha? Hirsha?” He spoke quiet, afraid he might have
made a mistake. But it was extremely rare for last names to be shared- and coincidences to be made.
“I know a Hirsha.”

“Hm.” Was Kala’s reply. She had already turned around and began to walk away.

“Aster? Do you know her?” Aster’s last name was Hirsha-Loann, a fact few besides Wren knew.
Hirsha was a clearly Lailanic name, so generally she stuck to Loann- her father’s name.

“No.”

“Aster... Hirsha-Loann. I mean. That’s her full name. She’s my best friend.”

“Then where is she?”

“Not here. But I promise, I know her. Is she... of relation to you?”

“She’s dead.”

“Well, no.” Wren said simply. “We thought so too, but she’s probably fine. But you do know her?”

“I knew her, yes. She was my daughter.”

“Yeah, I had sort of thought so.” They didn’t look very alike, but she seemed old enough.
“Anyways, I know her, so maybe that’s enough to make you reconsider killing Senya?”

“Well, it wouldn’t work then.” Kala was muttering to herself. “Well. She was my daughter, and she
wasn’t named Aster, and she is definitely dead, so perhaps you only know an impostor. Perhaps Linson Loann kept part of my name when he had a second child.”

“No, I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s her. Weird things tend to happen around her, I guess, so if you
thought she died and she didn’t, it’s not the oddest thing.”

“She fell off a cliff when she was four.” Kala was watching the ground, brow creased in
concentration. “She’s dead.”

Wren would have loved to say she recently fell into a volcano and survived, but knew now was not
the time. “The gods may have spared her.” He said. “You know, you’re a priestess and all... they
may have spared her as a reward to your piety.”

“No, I wasn’t religious back then... It was after that that I- She’s supposed to be dead.”

“Well. Yes. But I promise she isn’t, and if you free Senya we will bring her back to you.”

Kala seemed repulsed. “I don’t want her here!” She snapped.

“Let Senya go.” Wren pleaded at the gates of the jail.

“Yes. But leave, forever. If either of you returns, it will be death. And if the girl is with you, it will be
worse.”

“Thank you!” Wren said with a grin. The scary threatening part of her speech was ignored. He didn’t
exactly care if he was barred from the city or not- he might as well be barred from the country for all
he minded.

Kala walked through the wind of the valley with her shawl billowing about. She looked like some
sort of deity with the moon shining on her- and as if she were a goddess, Wren was quite happy
when she left his sight. He ran back into the jail immediately and found Senya, then lifted him out of his cell.

A guard at the entrance confirmed they were allowed to depart—she had heard their conversation—and then they were gone. Exhausted, but gone. Completely fine to be ordered to leave the city before dawn.

Snuggling up in a sleeping bag worked well enough for them.
When Aster asked the name of Artemis’ ship, he told her it didn’t have a name. Many ships didn’t. It would be like naming a car, he said before asking if she knew what a car was.

She grumbled a yes and tried to look pouty. There wasn’t a point to whining, she decided a minute later. But she had decided she didn’t like Artemis very much, and was greatly hoping that if she looked angry enough, he’d pick up on it.

He had, unbeknownst to Aster, and didn’t care.

Artemis called for Eii using a method of communication that resembled a phone, but quite obviously couldn’t be. The calling part was truthfully pointless, as Eii generally came whenever someone was thinking of her. The exact science behind this was generally classified as ‘magic’ by many, but Artemis tended to claim ‘inter-dimensional powers’ as an explanation.

Artemis dialed a long string of numerals. In Artemis’ culture, they had been the numbers of Aoxch’li the death spirit who would devour Seltiabah into the dark pit of her mind’s soul.

Today, these numbers summoned a girl-like creature to the bridge who giggled the moment she saw Artemis. She was laughing at him for his number joke, and he knew it immediately. Psychic powers weren’t real, but something was up with Eii.

“What are we doing here?” Eii asked with an odd gesture. She was obsessed with watching young cultures on various worlds, and was constantly adding poses and words that she found ‘cute’ into her vocabulary. “We’re always busy, you know.”

“I don’t know how you don’t find your job tedious. Or lack of one, I should say.” Artemis glanced once at Aster, knowing he had to focus, but he couldn’t resist throwing a short attack out at Eii.

“And you? We don’t suppose you’ve found the meaning of life yet trapped in this little box. How’s Garth doing?”

Eii had this thing, it may be clear, for referring to herself in the plural sense. She’d catch herself, eventually, and fix it without a word. People never really talked about it with her, but it was one of the reasons Artemis detested her.

Artemis exhaled slowly and changed to a straight tone. “Ioro gave me a girl. Teach her how to create life.”

“Does she have the potential for it?” Eii crept towards Aster with exaggerated movements, like she was sneaking but wanted to ensure a cartoonish silhouette. Aster couldn’t quite make sense of her appearance- unlike Artemis, something did seem alien about her. She had sort of nubby fingers with little black spikes between each joint, and her large eyes resembled dirty pond water.

“No.” Aster offered. “I don’t understand all this upper science, and I don’t really care to.”

“That has nothing to do with your potential.” Eii said. She squinted her eyes, looking carefully at Aster, who noticed her eyes changed color very slowly through a cycle of muted shades. “...No. You definitely don’t have the capacity.”

“The capacity for...?” At this point, Aster didn’t want to sound like a fool by assuming anything.
“Creating life!” Eii said. Aster had expected her to snap, but instead she was quite cheery about the subject. Her muddy eyes seemed to change to brighter hues to reflect this. “It’s a skill few creatures posses, changing matter by hand, and we were hoping that if Ioro had chosen a human like you... perhaps you carried a mutation that granted such power. I’d love that! I’ve never seen it occur naturally before, life-giving, so I was hoping...”

“No. Artemis was trying to teach me through a machine.”

“The poor man’s substitute, I’m afraid. And a cruel man’s as well.” Eii sighed, but combined it miraculously well with a quick glare towards Artemis. “It’s like a sewing machine versus hand stitching.”

“Sewing machines are much faster and more efficient.” Artemis said. “Not an apt- or particularly truthful- metaphor.”

“Yes! But hand sewn clothes are worth so much more.”

“...I don’t particularly want to learn how to create life anyways. We have-” Aster stopped before she could finish that thought. It had been a rather primitive one, she knew, and was scared of the gods’ reaction.

“You have what?” Eii said. “Is there a condition that prevents you from doing this kind of work? A disease?”

“Stop mixing your singulars and plurals.” Artemis said sharply. “She’s likely speaking of... folklore.”

As Aster expected, Artemis shook slightly at the mere thought of mythology, and she blushed slightly. “Well, yes. There’s just a story we have about a man who tried to create life like Ikina did, first from the sand, then from s-” She stopped talking and looked to the floor, ashamed of her planet’s silly rustic beliefs.

Eii, who had been generally keeping her distance with the occasional lean-forward, came over and placed a hand on Aster’s shoulder. “Ioro probably came up with that story herself. I bet it’s absolutely cute. She’s always cute when it comes to you humans.”

Aster did not feel very encouraged to continue, still red in the face, but luckily the story was a short one. “...The man tried to create life from sand. And then he tried seafoam, and then mist. But he is unable to create life. Then, Ikina comes from the heavens and doesn’t say a word to him, just sits there and uses their claws to churn the ocean with the earth. And from the mud, they created a flower.”

“So Ioro has a myth where he just shows up and proves a mortal inferior?” Artemis said coyly. “Is it possible he has a sense of humor?”

“I don’t think it’s a joke, Art. She’s just trying to remind mortals to live like flowers, and not worry about creating life like she does. It’s a noble, folksy sort of tale. Not as cute as I had been hoping.”

“Uh, it doesn’t end there though.” Aster said. “After the flower is created, Ikina disappears. But the foolish man is inspired by the sacred act to try and create life from mud like Ikina had. So for three nights he sculptures a bog into this huge garden of mud, but no matter what he does, he can’t seem to create life.”

“How is this any different?” Eii said.

“Well, finally, in anger, he tries to uproot the crested flower, wading into the middle of the bog to
reach it. The roots prove too deep, and he uses so much force that the flower slips from his hands and he falls into the mud and drowns. The rot from his flesh becomes the yellow of the flower, and it becomes known as the golden crest. And then his body feeds the flowers to grow until the bog has become a garden.”

“So... Ioro is threatening you?” Eii squinted, turning her head back and forth. “That is unlike her.”

“It’s just called ‘the foolish man’. I don’t really think it’s supposed to mean anything other than ‘don’t try and imitate the gods’.”

“Good advice.” Artemis said. “But you’re going to become a god, remember? You’ve already agreed.”

“Good advice.” Another voice said with the exact sort of accent Artemis carried. The person was assumed to be Ikina- in this case, they were a man with curly dark hair and half a beard. Sort of like a toned down and shorter version of Artemis. “Except no.”

“No to what?” Aster said, sort of excited. She wasn’t very fond of any of her odd companions right now- Eii was weird, Artemis was condescending and mean, and Ikina was... mysterious to deal with. But Ikina also represented any chance of change.

“No to any genetics nonsense. If I want things done right, must I manage them myself?” With every body Ikina took on, their personality seemed to shift- but perhaps that was a side effect of the simple changes an appearance could have on a phrase.

“I mean, I’m not too interested in this anyways, so...” Aster was trying her best to make her voice whiny and adolescent, and trying to sound disinterested. There was a worrying thought in her mind that perhaps she would be sent home if she complained, and perhaps her life would be perfectly mundane after that.

But she also did not care the slightest about the apparent turf war of genetic moral codes that divided a bunch of gods like this. If she could find a way to not study complicated genetics, that’d be absolutely fine with her, okay. The other stuff would probably be simpler and more fun.

“Oh no. This will work.” Ikina said, looking at her. Anytime they looked at something, they did so with absolute care. They did not believe in making anything quick.

“I just don’t care about all the... computer machines, and all that. Artemis is trying to teach me to edit bears, and it seems like fun, but I don’t think I’m capable of it. That’s all.” Aster could feel herself blushing again as Ikina made solid eye contact.

“Well. I never wanted you doing that in the first place. I knew Artemis would ignore me, of course, but surely your displeasure is enough for him to calm down? Perhaps now you can finally train.”

“Is it really... training though?” Eii said, yawning. She walked over to Ikina and, quite unsettlingly, casually draped an arm over their shoulder. “She’s not exactly practicing a skill. I mean, you’re pushing her through the same old... ropes again. Choose some plants from this pre-approved list, choose some animals. Here’s a couple humans. We’ll see you in a millennium.”

Ikina seemed genuinely to be listening to Eii. “That’s true. It may seem like ‘the old ways’, but after my last few apprentices, I could use someone... bland.”

Eii examined Aster again. “Well. It’s not like you don’t have hundreds of files on these sorts of cases already. I mean, I’ll go right ahead if you want me to teach her ecological systems. Going at this game again seems rather... unfocused of you. Might I remind you that-” At this, Eii switched to
something that took a few moments to settle in Aster’s mind as another language. The concept had always existed before, but she had honestly never expected to hear one.

Ikina replied back in the same foreign tongue, and soon even Artemis added in a few words. He seemed less adept though, and looked like he had to concentrate carefully to understand what they were saying.

“Do you think she’ll die?” Eii said, suddenly very clearly to Aster. It occurred to her that this had likely been her intention, making sure she knew what subject they were discussing.

Ikina rolled their jaw before speaking. “Yes. But I can keep her alive. However, she’ll probably be otherwise psychologically damaged.”

Artemis shrugged.

Aster was slightly taken aback by the gods’ casual dismissal of her mortality. It wasn’t quite clear what they were talking about in the first place but... a reward that could cost death probably wasn’t worth knowing in the first place.

“Let’s not, then.” Aster looked from face to face, trying to gauge blank expressions. “Just send me home. I’m not really doing it for you, correct? I was worried about the idea of leaving behind grandeur, but I’d rather not get ‘psychologically damaged’ if I can avoid it. So send me home, please.” After a second, she quickly added, “To Wren.”

The three fell back into their conversations in the other language, but now it seemed more of an argument.

“Oh, it’ll work, one hundred percent!” Eii snapped again, back in an understandable language. “This won’t be the first time!” Perhaps it was a mere accident rather than intention. She was answered back in the other tongue.

The bickering continued for far too long, and intermixed were occasional snorts of laughter from Eii and Artemis. It was odd, and truthfully quite alien to watch. Because they were aliens, right? Even Ikina must have come from another planet, no matter how vaguely special their powers were...

Suddenly Eii jumped towards Aster, roughly pulling her by the arm towards the group, who circled her cautiously. A couple words were exchanged. Ikina produced something thin and translucent from nowhere. Then, for her specifically, Eii spoke. “This will hurt you a lot.”

She took the clear item from Ikina and slipped it into Aster’s arm, burrowing cleaning through the skin and fading an inch in. Likely it was connecting to the vein- a shot of some kind. Aster had gotten vaccines when she was younger, and was not very sensitive to them, but perhaps the shock of receiving one so suddenly was getting to her- she seemed to be feeling very dizzy.

Her hearing began to dim as her jaw began to sting, and she could feel blobs move up and down her arm. A loud buzz rang in only her right ear, increasing in pitch without a possible end.

Then she felt her knees go. And then, though she was unaware, she was seeing only darkness.

She fell into Ikina’s arms, and they held her at a distance.

“She wanted to go home.” Eii said.

Ikina was quiet for a few moments, eyes focused on Aster but not thinking of her. “She wanted to go to Wren.”
“You promised her father—”

“I promised she’d be safe. She is safe. I don’t have to worry about that anymore. She will go to her friends.”

Eii looked up, and caught Ikina’s gaze. “Are they still alive?”

“I’ve been keeping them so.” Ikina said with what might have been shame if one knew how to read their emotions.

“They all should return home.” Eii said.

“I’m out on this.” Artemis said simply. “All your long, meaningful stares. But I doubt any of them care to go home at this point. Usually that’s saved for the end of the journey, and besides, we won’t be able to really observe Aster as well if she’s simply sitting around at home.”

“You misunderstand, Artemis.” Ikina said. “Her return home... it really ought to be now. It will be now. I will see to it myself.”

“When we’re all together like this, and she’s unconscious, you really don’t need to leave me out of the knowing.”

“This isn’t your planet, Artemis!” Eii exclaimed.

“Though you’ll still have a part, I guess. But it’s mostly Ioro’s business, and mine as well. If you’re so jealous, you go and trigger the end of your planet and don’t invite us. Don’t worry. I won’t care.”

“Don’t... actually destroy your world.” Ikina added after a moment. “This is a special circumstance.”

Artemis gritted his teeth. “Then talk about it somewhere else.”

They complied, disappearing instantly and letting Aster fall, quite rudely, onto the cold metal floor.

She did not wake.
The gang reunites

Aster wouldn’t wake for days, in fact, but that period of time was utterly meaningless to her anyways. Technically, while she had simply spent two days in space, a few weeks had passed on her planet- sometime while she was who-knows-how-far away, on Seltiabah, some sort of time distortion had occurred. So the fact she was unconscious for a couple extra days didn’t really matter.

She wasn’t even aware of the couple weeks thing for a while anyways. She woke in the middle of a road, and though she saw frost on the ground, her first thought primarily concerned where she was. Obviously back on Daliis. Right? But if she was back home, where exactly had the gods placed her- Ikina knew exactly where she lived, after all.

She got up. Frost was uncommon in Baased, but that was primarily because there was little grass in the city. But if she was somewhere on the outskirts, well, there still shouldn’t have been frost- it was late spring. Almost summer.

Her head was remarkably clear, and she turned about, taking in her surroundings. It was on an incline of brown mountain road, surrounded by clumps of frozen black grasses. On one side was an overhang looking down on a similar sort of valley. Nothing familiar, or manmade, could be seen.

But Ikina probably hadn’t just tossed her somewhere random. She decided to walk down the mountain, figuring anything important would show itself eventually. A frigid wind picked up, and Aster hugged her uncovered shoulders- And then realized something.

She wasn’t cold. She felt the wind, and understood its temperature. But it was like she wasn’t present to feel it. Her whole body seemed to be an unremarkable room temperature of heat, and the wind did nothing to change that.

Few things could be counted on to be coincidence in her life anymore. Especially something as ridiculous as this- she absentmindedly felt the scabbed over mark where the needle had pierced her arm. Likely, resistance to cold was just a side effect of whatever the gods had done to her.

She continued down the mountain- really, the choice of direction was solely on the expectation it’d be more pleasant to walk down an incline than up. What she did not know was that, in all likelihood, she had been expected to go up- after all, just a little bit up the road, Laila was sitting.

There’s an idea of likelihood to this only because it’s near impossible to tell what Ikina was planning. Down the road was Senya and Wren, to tell the truth, and Ikina had promised to reunite Aster with them. But Laila was also there, waiting. Would it be incorrect a meeting had been anticipated?

Surely not by Laila herself, that can be said. She was in her naturally invisible state, and dully using her omnipotence to observe the boys walk. She couldn’t quite see so much as sense, and their general state was just a simple mark on a list of checks she had running constantly through her mind.

She wouldn’t normally have bothered to watch over two humans like this- since she really didn’t mind Senya trashing her altar, truthfully- except Silan had asked her to. And she couldn’t really deny Silan this.

Bloodlines of the gods meant nothing, but Laila knew Wren was Silan’s son. And it meant nothing. But if Silan bothered to talk to her about him, and ask that she watch him while he was out of his realm, well... She didn’t want to let him down.

Laila and Silan were enemy gods, designed to be from creation. They even represented the binary
opposition of the sexes. The land and the sea, the man and the woman—even their personalities, though faint, could be argued to opposites. Bright and cheery versus gruff and pessimistic.

But they did not actually hate each other. Oh sure, they hated each other’s presence, as Ikina had surely wired some sort of biological sourness that both experienced when they saw each other face to face. But Laila actually was quite fond of Silan. After all these eons of knowing him, it was hard not to like him. Or at least, know him really pretty well. Enough to get attached.

Silan was much more into mumbling threats than she was, but he had asked her without emotion to watch Wren. And without emotion meant a lot from him.

So she did. And it was boring. And Aster walking away from her—unseen, as Laila had not been looking—did not help her at all.

Aster was obviously ignorant of whatever heavenly soap drama was taking place behind her, as she was primarily fixed on finding her way back to humanity.

And she found that pretty quick—Ikina had done their job. That person down the mountain, with the dirty white hat and fading violet hair—that had to be Wren. And... Senya, as well, seemed to be right next to him. She had almost forgotten he existed.

Aster ran down the road, focusing the majority of her energy on not tripping over on the semi-steep descent. Because of this, it took her a few moments to remember to smile—but that detail didn’t matter to Wren. He was used to her clouded eyes and furrowed brow—and he could tell she was as excited as he was.

She ran right into his arms for a hug. Neither were really physical, truthfully, so it wasn’t a particularly well-crafted hug. But it served its job fine.

“Did you think I was dead? I wasn’t really sure about you guys, to tell the truth. It wasn’t ever made explicitly clear, and then a lot of other things happened, so...” Aster began to speak very fast, letting her hyper words spill.

“We kinda of decided you lived without any discussion, but looking back, we really had no idea. It was just assumed that Ikina had saved you from the volcano like they had with us, but if that really was the case, why didn’t we see you?”

“But you’re alive.” Senya pointed out after a beat of silence.

“I went to space! And it kind of was bad. And I’m not really sure how else to sum up the experience. Bizarre?”

Wren tilted his head. “I want to ask questions, but it’s probably better you just elaborate on your own.”

“Well, probably I’ll forget a bunch of things like that.” Aster fretted. “I mean, it was just a lot. A lot of weird things. In space?”

But she did her best to tell her story anyway. Artemis, Eii, and ‘Ioro’, three gods and the odd machines and powers that let them create life. She skirted around how much of a disappointment she had been to them. But she tried her best to cram in every detail of Artemis’ ship and the planet Seltiabah that she could, knowing times that were bad to her were wondrous to them.

At the end, she mentioned that she had lost the ability to feel cold. But she phrased it as ‘gained cold resistance’, and said it in an off-tone and unimportant way.
This tactic was not lost on Wren. “Why?”

“I don’t know. They gave me a shot. And that’s all I know about it so far.”

“Well, when has the ability to feel cold ever done you any good?” Senya said with an unintentional yawn. He was almost bored though. Not with Aster- her tale had held his interest enough. But with Wren and Aster. The pair of them, the rich kids from Baased, back together again.

He really didn’t need this.

“I think it’s more than that.” Aster missed his joking tone. “Otherwise I’d get frostbite. It’s more like I’m not even here.”

“Can you feel heat?”

“If we got out of this wind...” Aster said, letting the idea hang. But she clutched her arms to her chest and knew she could not.

“What use is that?” Wren said. “Many. But... why would they...?”

Aster shook her head. “All I know is that... we’ll know eventually.”

“So the gods just threw you down to Earth and expected you to guess your way from there?” Senya said. “Or is there any chance you have a destination in mind?”

“We’re sort of aimless right now.” Wren said cheerfully.

“Where are we?”

“Border of Stemale. We were kicked out of the country. Or perhaps just Haveninkout. But we figured we might as well keep moving from there.”

“Well...” Aster didn’t focus much on the details of his sentences. Just the raw fact that they couldn’t got to Stemale. “I guess there’s always Aela? Going back to Renen- I mean, we’ll have to do it eventually, but we haven’t really been gone for all that long. And we didn’t succeed in out exaltation either, so it won’t be a very happy return.”

“It’s not like we can go through Sved, and I doubt we’ll have much luck finding a ferry across the Dividing Sea.”

“So... Aela, then? We only went to Ae-en before, so I guess there’s still plenty of things to see. It’s a nice enough country.” Aster wasn’t too enthused on the idea. “Hey Senya, you’re from Iixo. How did you end up here anyways?”

“Hm?” Senya had mostly toned out the conversation. “Did you know I’m dating Wren?”

Aster’s confusion was for once evident in her face. “Congratulations?” She looked quickly at Wren and made a nervous face. “But how did you even get up here? Through Sved?”

Senya exhaled loudly, stuck his hands in his coat, and didn’t answer.

“Senya?” Wren pulled for his hand and held it, looking expectantly at him with a blush like they were actually lovers. Senya grumbled.

“The gods did it.”
“Why didn’t you say that from the start?” Aster exclaimed loudly. “We all have been in contact with the gods lately. Why would you be resentful to admit that?”

“It was years ago, that’s all. It was different then.”

“You don’t need to play the sulky teen thing up this much, you know. Hiding things achieves little to nothing.” Aster declared proudly, perhaps expecting him to shrug his shoulders and admit defeat.

“I like doing it though.” Senya said.

Even Wren had to hold back a tired sigh.

As dramatic as their reunion was, and should have been, not much happened that day. More discussion was had of where they were going, or what had happened to Aster, but the same couple of attitudes and options persisted in the group. They went to bed in a shallow ravine on the edge of Aela, Senya and Wren snuggled close in their sleeping bag and Aster unable to fit even if they had wanted her there. She lay resentfully next to them instead.

Sometime in the early morning, Aster felt Wren shift beside her. He got up carefully, and Aster made a soft sort of ‘eh’ noise meant to question where he was going.

“heard something.”

Aster hadn’t heard anything, but since she had yet to feel tired, got up as well. She walked quietly to him, nervous to wake Senya- but also embarrassed to admit to herself she didn’t want Senya here. He was... unnecessary, that’s all.

“What do you mean by heard?” She whispered to Wren as he gazed into the dark woods.

“Do you want a definition?” He seemed sort of confused. “It was like a crash. I heard a lot of snapping. And even now, there’s something creaking.”

Aster strained her hearing. There was creaking. And snapping. And wind. But they were all soothing and natural sorts of sounds.

“I don’t hear a thing.”

“...It’s fading out.” Wren sighed. “It bet it was related to one of the gods. At least thanks to them I always have an excuse if I ever begin to think I’m going crazy.”

“I can’t sleep anyways.” Aster leaned against a tree and looked back at Senya, across the clearing and deeply asleep.

“Do you think you can’t can’t sleep?”

The dreadful thought hadn’t occurred to Aster yet. “Oh. No. I hope not. I... quite like sleeping.”

“The gods sure have quite a plan for you. Wish I could say the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“We were banned from Haven, right? Well, Senya had this crazy idea- has- that he needs to die now that he’s awakened that monster, so he trashed Laila’s temple. I guess he expected she’d come over and kill him for it? Or smite him where he stood, I suppose. But she ignored him. I haven’t seen
either god for weeks now.”

“Weeks? It’s been two days for me.”

“I kind of figured that from your explanation, but I didn’t want to speak up. Oh, on the subject of things I haven’t mentioned... we ran into your mom in Haven. Uh. It was sort of weird.”

“My mom?” Aster had never really heard anything about her mother growing up for one simple reason: She was adopted. So the thought of her birth parents had never really plagued her. “In Haven?”

“Yeah. She was a priestess. Didn’t look like you really, but she had part of your last name, and said she had had a daughter. It’s not like Hirsha’s very common of a name either.”

“But she couldn’t be... my mother. You do realize I was adopted? My last name isn’t actually Hirsha-Loann. That’s just from my dad. If anything, she’s his ex-wife.”

“I don’t know. She lost a daughter some thirteen years ago. The timelines match up.”

“I don’t want to consider anything I don’t have pressing need to understand.” Aster said simply. Then she leaned forward and spoke slyly. “Unless I want to know it. What happened between you and Senya?”

“Us? Well. Uh. Not much. We’ve kissed a lot now. And we cuddle in bed. And sometimes he lets me hold his hand.” Wren was smiling happily.

“So you’re dating now?”

“Yeah!”

“You’re totally dating now. You guys have a romantic connection and a strong base of trust and friendship that has compelled you to call each other ‘boyfriend’.”

“You’re sounding really doubtful.”

“I am. Senya’s a bit...” Aster spoke all at once. “You found him without me, and now you’ve bonded with him without me, and he’s never really proven himself useful. Like earlier, you said he trashed a temple because he wanted to die. Where were you for that? You guys say you’re dating, and he’s just completely happy to try and off himself for vaguely religious purposes?”

“Whoah. Look, he likes me. We’re dating! We’ve kissed more than three times. And, come on, like I have to rely exclusively on you? Like I can’t make my own friends and decisions? I get this whole quest is all about you now, but it started with me. Ikina started by choosing me. They just... changed their mind to you.”

“I don’t care for fighting.” Aster said, level-voiced. “I just think you can’t go about falling in love with the first boy you meet who’s willing to put up with you. I’m happy to admit you have a harder time because of your orientation here, but... don’t just fall into a stranger’s arms because he ended up being gay.”

“He’s just scared, Aster. He doesn’t really want to die.”

“But that doesn’t make his threats less actual.”

“I do like him, you know? He just seems cool. And mysterious. And I don’t really want to admit to
making a mistake while I’m still living in it.” Wren sighed and pulled at his hair. “So I’ll leave it at that.”

“You leave it at that.”

Aster nodded solemnly as Wren went back to bed—dutifully curling against his boyfriend. And content to do so.

The dawn wore into a true morning, and Aster was not asleep. Or tired. And she didn’t really need the daylight to tell her what that meant. She had picked open the scabbed over wound and it had healed again before daybreak. So she tore it open once more.

It gave her something to do.

That morning, at a hour late enough Aster was considering waking the boys up herself, Senya got up without a sound. She hadn’t heard him—something might have been wrong with her hearing, she was in the midst of deciding—and he paused to stand next to her.

She almost jumped when she turned her head and saw him there.

“Don’t tell Wren, but Silanah took me to the north, over the sea and in an instant.”

“Why does that deserve to be a secret?”

“He didn’t tell you while you were whispering away last night? Oh well. He never told me either. Silanah is his father.”

“And why wouldn’t he want to know that? It’s not like he isn’t aware that... Silan is his father. How does that work exactly? Because that’s kind of—”

“He’s sensitive about it. Not happy to have another thing to be an outsider about.”

“So you’re looking out for him?”

“I’d rather not deal with any of the gods. You’ll probably figure out why eventually.”

Aster voice carried her frustration. “There’s nothing cool about secrets!”

Senya smiled slyly, and again there was that irritating hint of ‘he was actually attractive’. But the terrible parts of his personality were beginning to wear that old dazzling smile thin.

“What are you guys doing up already?” Wren’s voice came from on the ground, and he groaned as he stretch into a standing position.

“We’re heading to Renen.” Senya called back. “It’s been decided.”

Aster frowned strongly at Senya, and he smiled slowly back.

“Why?” Wren came over to join them.

“It’s been decided.” Senya said, and he took Wren’s hand in his and kissed him on the lips.

Aster frowned harder.

Out in the woods, the wind was rifling through old leaves and carrying the dead ones down to the earth. The land was technically Aelaen land, and both Laila and Silan had put away their problems in
order to watch the humans below.

It might as well be stated now: there’s nothing voyeuristic about watching humans to the gods. There are elements of it, truthfully, but it ought to be at least understood Laila and Silan were not watching Senya and Wren kiss in utter captivation. They had thousands of other people to watch at the exact same time.

They had this to say, however:

“What’s wrong with Aster?” That was Laila, the more concerned and maternal of the two. Probably she had been programmed that way

“What’s wrong with Aster?” And there was Silan. Not unemotional. But definitely not the more paternal of the two. “Not our business to know.”
Haunted Idols

Aela was a short country to cross if you were determined to cross it. It was mostly a narrow strip of land, connecting Stemale to Renen with Ae-en in between, but it was possible to avoid the mountains and walk right through the valleys and onto the other side.

Doing so was exhausting for Wren and Senya, and included avoiding every town for the sake of speed. They had little food left—just some rolls they had bought back in Haven—and took conservative bites for their empty stomachs.

“We don’t need to run over there, you know.” Wren complained. He had been holding back his complaints best he could for the majority of the day, but he really needed to rest.

Aster’s restless energy was amplified by her new inability to feel tired. She shifted her weight from leg to leg when she stood still to speak. “Yeah. I know.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with hurrying over. But I would like to see if I can’t hunt something down.” Senya said.

“You’re a terrible hunter.”

“He’s a good fisher though. And Aster, seriously, we’re starving. Let’s sit down for an hour.”

Aster did not sit down, but leaned back against a tree. “Fine.”

Senya was quiet when he spoke, and his words were nearly missed. “I’m going to look for food.”

“...I guess you’ve lost the ability to feel hunger too.”

“More like ‘gained the power to no longer need to consume calories for my cells to function’. Eug! How does this even work? I shouldn’t be able to just feel so fine all the time. The science isn’t there.”

“I don’t think you should be concerned about science right now. This was a gift from the gods. They have magic.”

“Except I’ve never really believed in magic. And this was just a shot to my arm! I saw what did it to me and everything, just a clear tube thing that went right into my arm...”

“So maybe it contained magic, or contained something that instigated magic within you. It’s the only explanation I can think of. Either that, or, well, you know. Science neither of us understands. The kind of thing you complained about.”

Aster sighed. “What I really mean, like, what’s really getting to me is- I’ve never believed in the gods, so I’m handling this okay. But. You know what I learned, up in space like that? There are no gods. Artemis was the god of his world, a king feared, but he told me he was just a human given a couple extra powers. Lailana and Silanah are both creations of Ikina. There are billions and trillions of other humans out there, and so many other gods to match that. It’s sort of... pointless.”

“What is?”

“Don’t you get it? The gods are just artificial.”

“So...?” Wren drew the vowel out. “They’re still... gods. They still have undeniable power, and
they’ve still influenced every culture to some unmeasurable degree. Even if they didn’t- what, spawn out of some heavenly vortex? - they’re still best classified as holy.”

“Yeah. The problem is that I get that. I just think I ought to be having more of a crisis from it.” Aster sighed, standing up straight and looking behind her. “How long does it take Senya to find fish, anyways?”

“It’s only been like five minutes.”

“Right. My perception of time seems to be off, and I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s another gi-Wait!”

“Huh?”

Aster had said ‘wait’ on trained reflex, otherwise she might have substituted in a much stronger exclamation. Past Wren, standing- or floating?- just a few yards behind him, were two creatures. Except there were no creatures on Daliis, only gods.

Lailana and Silanah were there, and probably had always been there, but only now could Aster’s eyes perceive their violet hue. They were both human-shape, that was clear, but something about them looked half molded.

Lailana’s hair was blood red and billowed, unmoving, behind her like a shell. Her skin carried that same red hue, but it was interlaced with precise lines and writings in orange and yellow. She did not have nails or fingertips, just transparent claws that gradually faded into skin. And her eyes were large, pure white, and unreadable.

Silanah was similarly constructed. He was dead-eyed and blank, his hair an actual blue and his skin a slate to match it. Odd blocks of flesh jutted from his skin in square formations, like outcroppings of rocks. He too had precise markings in a deep sapphire blue.

Neither was moving in the slightest, and both were a good ten feet tall. They did not breathe, and their hair did not react to the wind. Their eyes were still- like painted statues.

Aster’s heart raced. Were they looking at her? They had to be. “There’s...” Would it be a good idea to even acknowledge them?

“What is it?” Wren turned around and looked at the empty field behind him. “What?”

Aster took a step forward, and grabbed his hand, suddenly sure it would allow him to see what she did. And it worked- he suddenly gasped, and through his palm Aster could feel his blood rush.

“Is...” He did not finish his thought.

Aster let go of his hand and walked forward. “Hey.” She said, standing in front of the two beastly gods.

Something seemed to slightly crack within Lailana. Her eyes twitched. Her face moved slightly- just the neck moved, really, as her muscles stayed firmly still. She tilted her head a tiny bit.

“Child!” A voice came from her that was deep and purring. It was happy and friendly- but staring up at huge and soulless face of Lailana like Aster was made it sound horrifying.

“Child.” Silanah said. Aster glanced back at Wren- maybe fishing for a reaction- but he was watching her. Sightless, of course, without her help.
“What is it?” Aster asked.

Lailana turned her head back and forth, like it was fixed to an axis. Her lips did not move. “Nothing at all.”

“You’re the one looking at us.” Silanah added.

“But child, do not fear!” Lailana’s exclamation was loud, but with her eyes that seemed to creep forward like a piece of slowed down film, it was impossible to understand her tone. “We have long been with you without incidence.”

“Why? You just... follow me around?”

Silanah spoke next in a smooth voice. “On occasion. You were Laila’s favorite child. But she doesn’t remember that now.”

At about the same time, Lailana agreed. “But she doesn’t remember that now.”

“Me...?” Aster tried not to grimace. Looking at the gods before her was rather hard on her eyes. She squinted. They weren’t glowing, and were taking in light if anything- but it stung her eyes to look at them.

“When you were younger, you knew us.”

“Differently.” Silanah added.

Lailana giggled, or at least, released an odd sort of hollow sound that resembled a giggle. Their voices seemed to sting Aster’s ears as well, and though she could hear their voices clearly, it was getting harder to discern the wind and Wren’s voice from the white static around her.

Lailana giggled again. Aster did not doubt she had some sort of psychic prowess about her, and could tell Aster was remembering. It wasn’t like she had ever forgotten her once-aunt and once-uncle- but they had been dismissed as false. Illogical. But of course, everything unexplained was always firstly seen as illogical.

There was a difference between the two. And now, in a world of spaceships and monsters, Aster was able to accept the government hadn’t come for her when she was little, and taken her away from her true parents.

A being in a suit of odd angles had come and taken her from the gods who had raised her like a pet.

The reunion was not one she had been looking forward to. “Are you going to be here from now on?”

“If you can see us now, I’d think so.” Silan said.

“I’ve missed you dearly.” Laila said. “If Ikina has given you this sight, he may further bless you...”

Laila’s voice trailed off only because Aster turned her head- and as she did so, a world of sound came rushing back to her ears. She hadn’t realized it before, but by the end of that conversation all she could hear was the voices of the gods.

Now she looked at Senya and Wren, eating cooked fish by a campfire. And she had to blink a few times, rapidly, before she understood it was nighttime.

“I’m... back.” She said, walking to them. A quick glance behind her confirmed the gods were still
watching.

Wren swallowed a bite. “Oh. Yeah. Sorry for not seeming more freaked out, but we figured you were fine. Are they still there?”

“They are.” It was Senya who answered. “Wouldn’t just leave like that, would they?” Though his answer was neutral, Aster had a nagging feeling he probably meant it. Probably could see them too.

“Ug. Did I ever tell you Silan is my blood dad? Like, biologically.”

Aster looked quickly to Senya. Wren didn’t seem very sensitive to this fact. Senya just flashed a smile back. Figures he had just been messing with her.

“It kind of pisses me off.” Wren added, but in an uncommitted voice.

“Laila and Silan raised me for six years when I was a kid.” Aster said, adding onto the unfocused conversation of things that had probably scarred them.

“I guess that’s why you got to head to space then. You’re just the super special one. The lapdog of the heavens.”

“When I was with the gods, they all kept emphasizing how special I was in that I was totally regular. I think they value normalcy. You don’t want to give amazing powers to a genius, after all. They’ll just outsmart you.”

“It didn’t hurt that they already knew your name.”

“They didn’t name me. Ikina did that. They just pointed me around.”

“Hmm.” Wren sighed. “Do you think it’s coincidence we ended up together?”

“Ikina ordered me to join you on your exaltation quest.”

“But as friends.”

Aster paused. “I don’t believe in coincidences anymore. There’s probably a science to them, somewhere in the universe.”

Senya was very quiet. “Laila saved my life when I was younger. I can see her right now.”

Aster had been toning out the presence of the gods- a sort of low rumble she felt throughout her body- but now she blinked and saw Senya was correct: Laila was there. Wrapped, quite suddenly, around Senya. She was floating a foot above him, but her hands rested on his left shoulder and her body was still in the midst of a movement like swimming.

Her blank white eyes met Aster’s. If she had been capable, she would have shivered. “Yeah.” Aster added. Next to Wren was Silan. She decided not to mention it to him. The god was sitting next to him on the ground quite casually. His unmoving head was locked to the side, looking like he was in the middle of a conversation.

Senya took off his gloves to reveal charred skin, actual scars compared to the healed spots that coated the rest of his body. When Ikina had healed him from the volcano, they had left these wounds to scab again. “I was burning, and Laila stopped me.” He ran dull and nearly unfeeling fingers across old wounds. “She took me to the north, and told me to revive her. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” Wren asked.
“Yeah.” His voice was weak. “That’s all I have to hide. That’s the actual truth.”

“You once told me hundreds died because of you.”

“I’ve revived Laila, but she’s always been here, beside me. I’m not sure what I woke was her at all.”

With a sudden movement- or perhaps the opposite of one, as truthfully nothing moved. Aster blinked, and the action was. Laila’s fingers brushed Senya’s cheek, clear sharp nails running against his skin.

“The hundreds, Senya.” Wren said urgently.

“You two have never been very clever, have you? I’d have thought your schools were more up to date. There was a volcano. Iixo was made by volcanos, the land fighting against the tyrannical sea. Sonla, my tiny island, was burned three years ago and buried in ash. I’ve heard much of Iixo suffered the same fate. But I survived.”

“Why would you say that you killed them then?”

“I survived.” Senya shrugged one shoulder, the one Laila didn’t have her hand so close to. “And Laila refuses to kill me now that my task is done.”

“She chose you, that’s all. I mean, you’re alive now, and trying to resist that is going to get you...”

Aster cut herself off with a shake of the head from Wren. “Don’t be so sappy.”

Senya grimaced. “It seems dumb to you, okay, and I get that. But I was burning. I was dying. And then I wasn’t- immune to the flames, I walked on the lava and watched my village burn with the hands of a god on my shoulder. And I was told there was a mission for me.”

“And I chose you randomly.” Laila purred. Senya shivered at her words, and Aster could only stare.

“What is it?” Wren asked.

“I don’t think it’d be good for you to know.” Aster answered.

They walked disturbed- or at least, Aster and Senya did. The gods were here now. Sometimes they weren’t, but their presence was always humming in their ears.

Today would take them back to Renen. They diverged back onto the main road in anticipation for this, as even though Aster still had a hyper energy she couldn’t seem to burn, she acknowledged her companions need for food, water, and rest.

One time she watched Wren drink from a stream- not a particularly good idea, but they had lost the water bottle ages ago.

“You can try drinking, you know.” He said.

“It’s probably going to be a lot like trying to sleep. And hurt, somehow.”

Aster was starting to feel jealous of the others, though. Not needing anything was rather boring, and she attracted glances from other travelers with her clothes- especially her lack of coat.

There were many travelers, but their glances were essentially meaningless. One group of three young women shivered when they saw her, and one of them offered her a blanket in a svedian accent. War
refugees, most likely.

She waved them off and tried to smile. They shook their heads, and soon split off of the road towards the nearest town.

It seemed hundreds were fleeing the west and Aela- the explosion of Ae-en, after all, had done no damage to the surrounding towns but had spooked people regardless. A sacred mountain decimated by dust was never a good sign, and its cracked hollow shell was constantly in the group’s field of vision.

Eventually they stopped running into travelers. It was mid-afternoon, and beginning to get hot enough that the boys took off their furry coats and hung them over their arms. As they entered the flat lands of deciduous forests, summer began to hit them full blast.

“How much longer is it again?” Wren asked wearily, waving himself with his cap.

“Not much. Just head west long enough and we ought to run into some kind of border patrol. We’ve already passed Ae-en, so I’d hope by night we can enter the country.”

“This heat absolutely abhorrent.” Senya complained. “And I’ve burned to death twice.”

“You used to live on a tropical island.”

“It wasn’t tropical, thanks, but that was an implied part of the joke, yes.” Senya groaned and took off his shirt.

“You’re just going to get burned if you expose your skin.”

“We’re all going to burn.”

“Don’t whine.”

“It is beastly hot for this time of year.” Wren added.

“Just accept what you can’t change and move on.”

“That was pretty cryptic of you, Aster. Lost your humanity already? First you ascend beyond the realm of heat-based suffering that we mere mortals experience, then you start dispersing life advice. I fear what comes next.”

“I wouldn’t whine.”

“Okay, but I am.” Senya then looked to Wren and nodded once, exaggeratedly. “We are.”

“Look, we might as well—” Aster’s hearing suddenly burned out, and for a few seconds she was treated to Senya speaking coyly and Wren soundlessly laughing at it. Then there was a ringing, and her hearing returned. She looked around her rapidly, but the gods were missing.

“What?” Wren asked as Senya joined in her spinning.

“We’re all going to need to tone down. Because I’m not sure what’s happening, but I can feel something unpleasant on the horizon.”

They continued walking, but in near silence. Occasionally, the blank-outs of sound and the ringing would return. The heat persisted even in as they entered a quiet forest. At a certain point, it no longer felt like something acceptable to joke about. It stung their eyes like an invisible mist, and even Aster
was cringing.

“I want to find a vantage point.” Senya said in some kind of anticipatory tone.

“Like a mountain? It’s unlikely we’ll find one.”

“Do you think we’re in Renen yet?” Wren asked.

“I think so. Laila never followed me here. That’s why I stayed here for so long and thieved from that town, Noihan.”

“But then where is Silan?” Aster asked. Even the presence of the god was gone.

Senya was silent.

An hour later, it turned out having a vantage point might have been a good idea. It would have given them some forewarning, at least. Because it seemed quite suddenly, really, the shift between there being nothing ahead of them and there being something.

It was dark, and it was obscured by the tree tops. There were gaps to it, but otherwise it seemed obsidian black. It was not quite still.

“That’s probably...” Wren sniffed the air. “Burning.”

It wasn’t a fire, but Aster understood how it could be burning. It smelled like it. They had to squint their eyes to avoid invisible smoke, and the taste of char now seemed to linger in their throats.

They kept moving west, towards the thing. Renen was a country of natural mountains, and they changed their path lightly to head up one- it was still woodlands, but now they were heading up a slope. There was no path here, just thickets of thin trees to grasp while walking uphill. No one complained though. Everyone was curious what was ahead.

Though some had their guesses- “It’s going to be that monster.” Senya said. It didn’t sound much like a guess when he said it.

“There’s not much else that can appear out of nowhere and be hundreds of feet tall.” Aster admitted. “But maybe it’s... a spaceship. A space rock. Something related to the gods that isn’t a monster.”

“Your head it too focused on space. It’ll be that Lailanic thing.”

“Probably.” Wren said. “I’d rather it wasn’t though...”

Both Wren and Aster were bracing themselves for the worst when they came to the top of the skinny peak they had scaled and peered over- and at- what lay ahead of them.

It was sitting in a bed of forest like it was grass, and it was likely a sacred miracle they hadn’t seen it from Aela. It was like the creature from the volcano- or the glimpses they had seen, at least. There were bald mountain heads on its back surrounded by ancient black trees still carrying needles. It had taken on a more Lailanic shape- possessing her antlers, for example- but it lacked her human like face. Instead, it had the snout of a lion.

Tusks and horns of white bone pierced through a translucent skin of pure black interlaced with veins of red, like its blood might have been fire.

It was still, but it was breathing. Alive.
And around it, past its bed of living woods, was a wasteland of ash and dust. It gazed out on its work of ruination, of fading husks of roads and what may have been- or were- cities.

Somewhere, beyond their sight but within its, was Baased. And there was no need to waste time hoping it had been spared.
More Death, and a Desert Oasis

Aster probably swore, but left her thoughts at that. Wren actually and quite definitely began swearing, but within moments he was crying- and it felt quite dumb to him, crying, because he had been unhappy in Baased. Too many expectations. Too little freedom.

But now he couldn’t expect to come home. And it hadn’t been his home, had it? His distant parents, his antagonistic brothers, and a society that regularly sent children out to their death... But he could never return to it. It was bad to him, not awful, and perhaps if it was still standing he might have been content to travel the world and never return to it. He’d never return, but at least he would always know-

Well. It was ashes now. Thousands were dead. His room only existed within the confines of his memory. His old paintings, the ones he had hoarded since he had learned to paint, were gone now. Once he had won an award in school. He had no physical proof of that award anymore. Did it matter? Would he ever need proof that a teacher thought he had been a good student when he was twelve?

No. But it wasn’t an option anymore. His freedom, as limitless as it was able to be perceived, was slightly smaller with a whole country off the map.

“I-I never asked Ikina... about this.” Aster said. Her voice was shaking. Wren, if he hadn’t been equally distraught, would have been shocked. “I never asked what that creature is. What was going to happen.”

“Why hadn’t we heard? Someone should have come running to us, sometime in the last weeks, shouting about the mountain that burned down a whole country.” Wren said. “There’s no way no one knew.”

“Ikina wouldn’t have allowed you to meet them.” Aster said bitterly.

“They told me to send us here.” Senya said. He didn’t seem very emotional about the events before him, which could have been anticipated, but still angered Wren.

“Why do you let yourself become controlled by the gods like this?” Wren snapped.

“We would have had to come here eventually.” Aster said, looking at the ground.

Senya ignored Aster’s attempt to calm the conversation. “We’re all puppets of the gods. I’ve just accepted it before you two have.”

“...If Ikina ordered you here, does that mean you see them now?” Aster said after a pause.

“Of course.” Senya grumbled. “Look. You wanted to understand why I want to die. Why I shouldn’t have lived. And now you’re living it.”

“Yeah, I know, I guess I...” Aster was suddenly distracted from the fear in her heart- and the ever decreasing amount of it, as truthfully she wasn’t grieving nearly as much as Wren- as she began to spin around in one spot. Ikina was here. Watching. Of course they were. But why wouldn’t they show themself to her?

Wren then started to cry, just falling to the ground and letting out a few weak sounds before full on sobbing. He tried to say something, at some point, but his words were indistinguishable.
Senya was blank faced. Aster was increasingly empty-hearted. And Wren was emotionally incapacitated. How long were they going to be standing here like this?

The deer creature yawned with a rumble that shook the earth, and the inside of its mouth glowed teal beyond its black teeth. Then it stood up- stretching first and causing a few miniature earthquakes- and disappeared.

Wren still had tears on his cheeks, but he joined Wren and Senya in staring.

“I’m not really sure what’s happening.” Senya said after a moment. He looked over to Aster. “Where do you want to head next?”

“There’s nowhere really left. Or, nothing left to do, I suppose.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Senya’s total dismissal of Wren was noted by Aster. His hand suddenly finding hers was even more notable.

“...I feel like we should rest.” But Aster wasn’t feeling sorrow. Her home was burning, and she couldn’t find herself caring. Her dad was dead, and she didn’t care in the slightest. Wren was crying, and she had trouble maintaining empathy.

She sat down, still clutching Senya’s hand- and then it sunk in. He wasn’t holding her hand because he liked her. He was doing it because Ikina was here.

And as soon as she had that thought, she felt cold again. An actual, true cold that stung her bones. She whipped her head back and saw something behind her, and around her, in crystal colors and in gold. It flickered in and out of her sight too fast for an image to truly settle. But the energy it- they, as it was truly Ikina- gave off was frightening. Her heart had never beat so fast.

There were feathers, and there were scales, and there was a being. Unlike their gods, they were barely six feet tall. They had hair mixed with feathers that circled their head like a mane, and from there they had two pairs of wings in changing, but always opposite, colors.

So much about them seemed to be pure flux. Their sex, their colors, their expression. It was hard to really say if there was a true form to be had- rather, just a collection of potentials.

They shook and flickered until they settled into a human shape. A man like Aster remembered from her childhood, in a black suit and tie and gold hair. But now, gripping Senya’s hand, she could see their veins that extended every which way on the planet.

A noise from Wren indicated he could see them too.

“Welcome, all.” Ikina said, blinking. “If you were wondering, there is no grand design to this world.” They made a soft sort of noise like the end of a laugh. “That was Aera. But if I was to clear your confusion any more, I would probably say too much.”

“Why did you let Baased burn?” Wren lashed out against the sky god.

“Oh. I do not control Aera. It seeks to do its ancient role of destroying the sea. And it found its way to the nearest ocean-worshipping country, I suppose. Odd how these things can interpret old commands. Either way, it’s not like you can count on me to interfere in these matters.”

“You chose me. You chose Aster. And you know we’re from Renen! Why wouldn’t you think about that before letting this thing destroy a whole country?”
Ikina tilted their head. “There’s still a good nine others. It may sound silly to you, but I can’t go about ‘playing god’ to please one human out of billions.”

“Well- We’re not going to listen to you anymore, okay? Like we’ll trash your altars, and burn your idols, and defy your every order...” Wren started to get ramped up on his anger, but then looked around and realized he was the only one upset.

“I don’t live off the worship. If you wanted to kill me, you’d be best killing the entire planet.”

“Doesn’t it harm you then, letting Aera destroy a whole nation? If you live off their lives, then...”

“Yes.” They paused for a while. “Aera will likely continue to rampage, killing millions and weakening me. I designed it- and its aquatic equivalent, Aelen- as a finality device.”

“So it’s not just about Renen for you. You want everyone to die.” Wren had calmed his anger down, but he still sounded very bitter.

Aster was calm. “Why are you letting yourself die?”

“Senya’s the one who woke Aera.” And then Ikina smiled, and Aster was hit with a sense of ‘seen before’. She had heard them laugh before, and heard those words ‘It is, it is’. A meaningless phrase to recall now. A confirmation of nothing.

And then Ikina did laugh, just once, and they disappeared. They left a trail of energy, and Aster suspected they were still watching- but now hidden, truly.

To say there was no plan of this planet was a falsehood for sure. And if Ikina was trying to die, they wouldn’t have chosen her for an apprentice so recently. So they were being cryptic. Messing with her head.

For what purpose? If Aster had to guess, the answer would be ‘for no reason at all’.

They stayed the rest of the day on the hill, camping somewhat lower so they did not run the risk of seeing the wastes ahead of them. It was a long and silent night, worse for Aster because she did not sleep. She had hours to wrack her brain. Question herself for a lack of grief.

The best explanation was that it was related to the shot, that the gods had done this to her. But that answer didn’t put her mind at rest. Lately, it seemed like she’d never find rest. The obligation to stay in one spot, wait for her companion to wake, seemed a burden of a duty. She wasn’t tired anymore. She could probably run forever.

But she waited, and the next morning matched the previous night- long and quiet. Wren seemed better. Probably looking at the destruction hidden by the mountain would have triggered another bout of angry depression, but he was wise enough to avoid such things.

“Where are we heading next?” Senya asked. He caught up to Aster, who had been leading the group, and held her hand. She looked about immediately, but couldn’t see any signs of Ikina.

“The south, I guess. Been everywhere else.”

“True, but do we have some sort of aim here? A goal to work towards?”

“We need to stop Aera.” Wren said. “So let’s wake Aelen.”
“I’m not sure having two horrible demons roaming the earth will do much good, per se.” Senya said.

“No, they’ll fight, and defeat each other.”

“I don’t think they’re evenly matched. I mean, they’ll probably fight, but one will win, and then we’re back to the same place we began.” Senya said.

“In addition, it will take time before they find each other and begin to fight, so there will be mass destruction then. And likely when they fight, it’ll be on land, or a coast, and bring with it even more ruin.” Aster said.

“Plus, it’ll keep Ikina alive, and I feel like it’s our group’s goal to stop that from happening.” Senya added.

“But it could save lives.” Wren insisted. “Either we try something terrible, or Aera definitely will destroy the world. We can’t fight it ourselves. So we’ll wake a monster to do it for us.”

“Fine.” Aster said. “You’re right, I mean, and we have nothing else to do. So let’s give it a shot. How do you wake these things anyway?” She looked over to Senya.

“It’s- It was fairly simple. I’m not sure how someone hadn’t woken the thing earlier. I only had to stand in there for a bit and talk to it, and wait a bit, and there it was. Laila was there- I suppose she might have had a role in it.”

“So I guess Silan will be in Ae-ah? And he’ll help us?”

“Guess so. But there has to be more to it than nothing.” Aster said. She looked to Senya, who merely shrugged and shook his head. “Now, how exactly do you think we’re going to cross Sved?”

“Find a boat? There’s no way we’ll be able to sneak into Sved, let alone cross it.” Senya said.

“I don’t think now is a good time to explain to you which city was the major boating city in the northern hemisphere.”

“Let’s just try and cross. You two still have the gods paying attention to you, right? And we’re maybe still immortal as well. Unless Ikina took us off that list. But still, we try and cross, and if anyone stops us just grab their wrist and point to the gods.”

“That’s another crazed and dubious theory for you to suggest, Wren.” Aster said. “I’ve never thought you to be the type.”

Wren was silent. It then sunk in to Aster that perhaps this change from careful and caring to apathetic and daring might not have been a good change for Wren to go through.

“The worst that can happen is that we’ll all die. But honestly, the odds of us all dying is still pretty good if we don’t get moving, so I’m all for this plan.” Senya said.

“If worst comes to worst, we can always steal a boat.” Aster added.

“And hey!” Senya smiled. “I actually know how to drive one.”

It took them a full day to cross into Roria, the country that bordered Sved to the north. They had learned to be silent around each other, and nothing happened that day.
It was still hot, too hot for a sleeping bag, and the bag was unzipped to be used as a blanket. Aster slept in the middle without meaning to. She originally was next to Wren with little room to spare, and then Senya had come and lay next to her.

The two had ceased their relationship-like habits, it seemed, entirely. And considering Aster had spent the every hour with them lately, it appeared to be an unspoken agreement.

Aster was sort of glad to see them fall apart, but she didn’t really know where it left her.

Sved was a country of general anarchy, at least to outsiders. Its political state was really best understood by those who lived in it, as news never really passed from its borders. The most anyone in Roria or the south-bordering kingdom of Aeis knew was based on what was heard: explosions and gunfire.

In truth, there were many small cities, countries, and pockets of peace spread throughout the country. But it was still dangerous, and unfortunately not made any safer by it’s status as ‘the land bridge between continents’. The advanced kingdom of Aeis wanted to own the country for itself, likely intending to invade from the south. So newly born governments in Sved had both neighboring states and an entire country to deal with on the path to peace.

Things, generally, did not go well in the country of grasses.

The northern border was heavily guarded by Roria, and as they walked towards it, Aster remembered their odd plan involving the gods. She hadn’t really sensed them in the last day- and she looked around to confirm they weren’t there. So that was out. But if they were going to be reckless, there were still many other tricks to try and pull.

As they came closer to the border, two guards with rifles came running towards them.

“'The gods have sent us on this holy quest!’ Wren shouted suddenly in the loudest voice Aster had ever heard him utter. ‘We must pass!’”

They did not stop. Wren nudged Aster. “Grab their wrists when they get close.”

“They’ll shoot me for sure.” Aster whispered.

“So? There’s no way you’re not immortal at this point. It'll really freak them out if you survive a shot to the head.”

“Okay, but I don’t want to get shot in the head.”

“You two have the worst sorts of conversations.” Senya said, waving them off with a flick of his hand. “Here, I’ll do it.” He walked forward, arms in the arm, and met the soldiers mid way.

“...I think we really ought to be more concerned for Senya.” Aster said plainly to Wren as Senya talked with the guards.

“What? You think he isn’t immortal anymore?”

“I meant mentally.”

Senya did something with his hands and one of the guards jumped back in alarm. Then he grabbed their wrists, gently, and pointed at something in the air. Without thinking, both Aster and Wren looked too, but saw only empty space.
The guards seemed frightened. Senya let go of their wrists and seemed to be talking again, but a moment later one of the guards readied his gun and shot him in the head.

“I mean, he’s fine.” Aster said, jogging forward. “Hey!” She called to the guards.

They shot at her immediately. She kept moving forward, as they kept luckily missing- but then they dropped their weapons and ran off. And it took her a moment to realize they hadn’t been missing at all- she just hadn’t been feeling it. She looked down- she was bleeding a pale and watery sort of blood, and covered in bullet holes that were rapidly healing.

She swore, and looked over at Wren, who had been hiding behind her. He was completely unharmed, though visibly disturbed.

“I knew you’d be fine. Do you think they’ll let us cross now?”

“I don’t think we have to worry about anything getting in our way ever again.” Aster said miserably. “There’s no such thing as a challenge if you can’t even die.”

They waited for a minute while Senya slowly healed, the process probably slowed while his brain repaired itself. He then shook himself awake, touching the blood on his forehead and frowning.

“What do you think it’ll be like when Aera destroys the world if we can’t even die?”

“I’ll actually and legitimately punch Ikina in the face if they don’t give us our mortality back by then.” Aster said.

Wren yawned. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves too much. I didn’t take any damage, so we don’t really know if I’m immortal still or not...”

Aster and Senya looked at him. “You are.” Both almost said at the same time.

“Silan wouldn’t let you die.” Aster offered, and Wren frowned.

“Don’t remind me.”

“What do you have against Silan being your father anyway? It’s not like much has happened because of it. It’s just like... something helping keep you alive.”

“I don’t know. It’s like, why did he even have to tell me about it in the first place if it’s so meaningless? He showed up to me that night when everyone was meeting the gods, you know, back in the forest? He appeared and said ‘I am your true father’. And left it there. Like, he said he’s been watching over me, but he watches over tons of people, and I doubt I’m his only kid and... I mean, why even bother? It just irritates me.”

“At least you know now. I mean, it’s only something for you to know. And knowing doesn’t harm you.” Senya said.

“But I never needed to know. If he had never said anything, just appeared and acted normal, I would have gone on thinking my dad was... my dad. And that would be it. Nothing really has changed.”

“But you know now.” Aster pointed out.

“Yeah. I know now. It’s just so pointless.”

They crossed through the border’s gates without conflict, as the other guards had seen what little could be done to stop the kids.
Past the border was nothing special. Just grassland. Sved lay right on the equator, and the southern part of the country was mostly desert. The north was grassland, similar to Roria, but flatter. Strong and hot wind ran through dune-like plains.

The goal of their trek through Sved was to make it as quick as possible. Parts of the country were definitely dangerous, controlled by hostile regimes. Immortality was not necessarily a gift of safety-someone more inclined to creativity might realize how easy torture would be on someone who never stopped healing. Or, perhaps, one might be buried alive. And never die.

It took them about half an hour before they came to a sprawling city, low and flat as if bracing itself against the wind. Considering its size, the group decided it might be safe to visit. As long as they didn’t make it clear they were foreigners and didn’t stay too long.

While the city seemed poorer than Wren and Aster were used to, it was peaceful. There were plenty of children running through the streets and squares, and a few bustling markets were tucked into the corners of city streets. There didn’t appear to be a rich or poor part of town- everything was just a simple mess.

The town ended up being named Verise. The group was completely out of money, and they stopped at a drinking fountain to make their plans for the day.

“We’re going to have to steal.” Senya said. “If we play it up enough, the not-dying angle, we can probably rob a store blind. Tell the owner it’s Ikina’s judgement that we need their money.”

“I’m not going to ruin someone’s life. We probably do need to steal, mind you, but let’s stick just to some fruit and bread from one of the markets.” Wren said.

“This seems like a poor town.” Aster said, nodding. “We could really hurt someone if we take too much.”

Senya groaned. “Rich kids! This place is thriving. People are selling things everywhere, and people are buying them. Look at how all these jewelry stands, and how well they’re doing! If people were super poor, they wouldn’t have the expenses to dress so richly.”

“You can’t really trust people to skimp on luxuries even if they can’t afford them.” Aster pointed out.

“Okay, sure, but I’m used to poorer towns. This place is doing pretty good, okay, and I’ll make sure we find a place to rob that wouldn’t suffer too much. If you really think this place is doing bad, wait until you see the rest of the south.”

“If we’re going to be criminals, fine, let’s hit some high end shop.” Aster concluded. Senya just grinned.

He took them through the streets like he knew the city, turning through alleys and intersecting the crowd with a keen-eyed direction. Sometimes he’d turn around, like wealth was an animal he could track.

Finally, he came to a large house. It didn’t look all that special, though admittedly somewhat nicer than those around it.

“The economy here is mostly based on farming, but there are several mines in the area as well. They export many of their metals, such as copper and uranium, to Aeis via the sea. This is the home of the mine owners.”

“How did you learn all that?” Aster asked.
“Listening. Asking a few questions, which I suppose it’s apparent you weren’t listening to. It’s not like this is a low profile family. Hard not to hear about them.”

“So how do you break into a house again?” Wren asked.

Senya shrugged. “Just walk in. We’re doing the holy thing, remember?”

Senya walked up to the door and found it unlocked. He went inside and motioned for the others to follow.

Aster entered last, and found herself in a dark room. She turned around and found the door had disappeared behind her- and when she spun forward again, Ikina was standing in front of her.
Ikina's moraless tale

Chapter Summary

This is petty, but I just feel the need to note: like, I know how dialogue tagging works. this story is from before... I did, however. And I've been too lazy to edit that. Don't mind.

“I don’t want you getting caught up with petty criminals.” They said.

Aster grit her teeth. “They’re just my friends.”

“I gave them the gift of life for your sake. If you misuse it like this, I will take it away.”

“So let me out of this... room place and put me back in the house. I’ll tell them to stop it. But if you leave me here, you can’t really fault me for their actions.”

“You have your morals, Aster. Don’t toss them away.”

“You’re the one who gave me a shot that’s taking away my humanity! I really don’t think you have the right to be ordering me around.” Aster snapped.

Ikina looked to the side. “That was Artemis and Eii’s doing.”

“So? You’re a god. Why don’t you show some responsibility and fix me. I mean, it’s taking away my feelings, right? I didn’t even cry when I looked at Baased, and...” Aster sighed. “That probably wasn’t related to the shot, was it?”

“People grieve in different ways, Aster. You’ll figure it out some time later. And it will be okay.”

Aster frowned and ran her hands through her hair.

“Don’t try and revive Aelen.” Ikina shook their head.

“Why?”

Ikina almost spoke, and the paused. “Look.” They said, and they walked through the dark room until it became a cliff overlooking Verise.

“I remember this. Looking over the plains of Sved. Why did Laila and Silan save me?”

“I don’t know why. Laila was there when your mother tried to dispose of you. The two of them are my creations, and I suppose some of my fondness for humanity- and children, especially- leaked into them.”

“Why do you like humans so much? My mother... tried to kill me, I guess you’re saying. And you still say you like them, and Laila still saved me.”

“That never was your fault.” Ikina sat down. What appeared to be a cliff was more a floating platform that resembled a cliff. “And I only love humans this much because I grew up with them.”
“So you’re like Artemis? A human? He and Eii made you sound more like some sort of god-king...”

“Never human.” Ikina corrected. “But mistaken for one. I am- if I had grown on this planet, you would have called me a demon, like I had been called on my home planet. The irony is not lost on me.”

“But what is a demon?” The word generally meant ‘bad thing’ on Daliis, not referring to any mythical creature.

“I am from a godless world, and the odd rumors you hear about those places are true. Creatures with powers that delve beyond science arrive there. And yet, almost mystically, humans appeared. It’s a mystery before my time why humans have become the template of a species that they are now...” Ikina had a hard to understand face, but they appeared caught in thought. “Do you know the name Ioro?”

“It’s yours, right?”

“Yes. I figured Eii and Artemis had been using it without my permission around you.” As they spoke, they lingered long on every sentence, as if thinking was hard. “I was born Ioro, an incubus, in a household of humans. I didn’t know I was one until I matured, some twenty years in. The incubi were human-like, but had evolved to feed off of human’s energy, primarily through sexual intercourse.”

“Oh!” Aster exclaimed. “That’s what you’re doing now, right? Feeding off of energy?”

Ikina gave a soft smile. “Yes. But that is leaping far ahead. Incubi are shapeshifters, bound through old science to do things impossible to replicate in a lab. They- We, sorry, I always forget I am one-shift sexes freely, thus taking the sperm from one man and inserting it into the womb of another woman. The purpose of this I never understood, but it was a ritual I found myself practicing regardless. And I do apologize for having to be so blatant about these sexual things, but it is part of what I am.”

“Then how were you born?”

“I appreciate your apparent interest, but I will get where I need to arrive without your commentary. It’s hard for us to reproduce, but in theory it’s possible for two incubi to have mate with each other and have a child. I was placed with a human family- likely, one of my birth parents switched me out with my new family’s newborn child.”

“They killed it?”

“Yes, of course.” Ikina said. “I grew up thinking I was human, only figuring something was wrong when I started to die. I fed for the first time by accident, by laying with my then girlfriend, who proceeded to die. It was unnerving, but something in my biology kicked in, and I came to accept what I was with ease. People usually died when I copulated with them, but I should note it was not a guaranteed thing. I don’t know what triggered death, but I was not leaving a perfect trail of bodies for the police to track. No one knew what I was, and I didn’t even know- in those days, the world was modern and monsters like me had learned to fade into society. I never met another of my own kind.”

“Never? How old are you again?”

“I suppose it’s part of the reason our numbers were so low. We changed appearance daily, and there was no hope of there ever being a safe place for us to meet others. The world was city, in those days.
Sometimes I’d chase someone I thought was like me, only to steal their soul the next morning. But I liked humans- I still saw myself as one of them, after all. I tried to go without feeding for as long as I could muster. And then, naturally, researchers came to my planet. It happens all the time to natural worlds- an enlightened race comes by to study them. They weren’t even discreet about it- and they were human, too.”

Ikina paused. Aster had never heard them speak so much, and their voice sounded strained. Not emotional, but perhaps having difficulty with their words.

“I thought they were terrible. They rounded people up- having quotas for each continent, race, age, and gender. I volunteered to go. They extracted blood and DNA from many of the humans, screening them, and then either killed or froze them. No one was allowed to return home. When they came to me, they knew something was wrong the moment I walked through their sensors- they all started shouting and calling for others to come and view me. I was powerless against them- my only gift, remembering, was changing appearance and killing people I had sex with. Nothing magical I could use to slaughter them. Not like I had a desire to kill them, mind you.”

“Isn’t that what Artemis and you do though? Travel around and view planets? I mean, even if you don’t round people up and kill them, I was under the impression you studied them.”

“He studies them. And I protect you. Artemis is disloyal to my interests, but he upholds my laws. He, and a few other of my past apprentices, are part of an order I instated to prevent that sort of thing. To leave other planets alone, and let them come and find us on their own.”

“Wouldn’t visiting planets be good though? Not like as researchers, sure, but as benefactors. You could cure diseases, bring peace, and whatever else.”

“There’s nothing that is instant, and especially not instantly worldwide. If I came to a virgin world and gave them the technology for space travel, they wouldn’t be able to understand it- and even if they did, they would likely use it against their rivals. There’s no such thing as total peace, I might as well add while I am listing the impossible. No matter where you land, you’ll be in a country- and they’ll be the first to benefit.”

“You sound like you’re talking from experience.” Aster said quietly.

“Of course. When I was on that ship, they became so curious about the powers I possessed they stopped processing the humans and merely killed them all at once. I was the prize of the expedition. They did not harm me, and they did not dehumanize me very much- I was allowed to talk and stand on my own. But even when I was allowed to eat dinner at their table, they would gaze at me with gleaming eyes and make comments on what body I was wearing today.”

Ikina glanced to Aster, perhaps expecting her to interrupt again. “It was a long voyage to their planet. They hadn’t quite mastered fast space travel, but were on the right path, and it took perhaps three months. I hadn’t warmed to any of the members, so resentful of their presence I never bothered to remember their names. But eventually, of course, it happened: one of them came to sex with me, and I was so low on energy I didn’t try and warn him. When he was found dead, I was finally treated like an animal. But I also was wide awake, on the sort of high I would get on after a kill, and I ran away and hid in the maintenance shafts of their ship until they landed.”

“Didn’t you starve?”

“I hadn’t needed food since I was a child.” Ikina shook their head. “I escaped the ship once it had landed on the ground, and from there I went insane. I killed people and took their form. I traveled as far away as I could before I even remembered my morals. And then, I made a vow to myself that I
wouldn’t do that again. I traveled their unknown world for a few years on the brink of death— it was true I didn’t need food, but I could eat it to gain a tiny amount of energy. I had to gorge myself to stay alive.”

“But how do you make the transition from wandering demon to all-powerful god?”

“Science.” Ikina gave something like a shrug. “If you desire the short tale. I found a lab researching aliens. I stole a spaceship from them. And I found I could feast... I don’t know how. When I came to alien cultures, young races of humans mostly, they would look at me with fear and admiration, and I learned to live off that. I could feel their energy, from their questions of me, and I lived again. It took many tries to get where I am today, to have Daliis as my source of life— but now, I am no longer weak. I remain chaste.”

“But you’re immortal, too. Were the other incubi immortal? I mean, you can grant other people immortality on whim, and you can create life from your fingertips, and all these other incredible things. What happened to you?”

“...A few modifications, and Eii. Eii came to me— she sought me out. And she has an eye for life. I’m not sure what she is, what planet she came from, but she feels life in the same way I feed off of it. I had already had the potential for life-work, you see, as my shifting between forms was a lot like creating a body and moving a consciousness into it. She taught me to apply it— and somewhere, something changed. I do not know about the other incubi. My planet was long destroyed, and it’s without a doubt that I know I am the last of my kind. But evolution is miraculous. There may millions out there in the infinity of space.”

“But you’ve never sought them out?”

“I have you now. You referring to your planet, of course. I’m not sure yet if you’ll experience it for yourself, but once you have planet that’s yours, that you created it’s— it’s... I’ve always thought it’s what it’d be like to be a parent. I can’t run off seeking follies now.”

“But you’re trying to end it.” Aster pointed out.

“...Yes. True.”

“So that’s sort of against your message, right?” Aster wasn’t really sure where she was heading with the conversation, or what she expected Ikina to do. “You’re telling me being a god is better than love, but you’re going right ahead and massacring your family.”

“Look, Aster, we both know I’m not one to be worn down by insistence. When I am dead, I will leave you a letter that explains everything, okay? So there won’t be loose ends. But rest assured, it’s better this way.”

“Nothing seems to be better when you become involved in it.”

“Dearest Aster, the problem with that statement is that I am involved with everything. I am everything.”

Aster frowned and crossed her arms, but suddenly felt aware of how childish that was to the being before her- a creature she only now realized she had never sought an age for.

“You’re different then, okay? You were born to be a god. I was born human, and I’m a mark too regular to be worth any kind of planetary responsibility. And forcing a serum into me hasn’t exactly made me more amiable to the idea.”
Ikina sighed, but it sounded more like a simple exhale. “Artemis and Eii’s idea was to give you a little more power, start you off a little more divine. I didn’t want them to do it. Your greatest weakness is how average you are, but the good side of that fact is that you are aware of it. When you shift closer to that unobtainable ‘perfection’, your true flaws often become so muddled that…” They didn’t finish.

“So what did they do?”

“You’ve already seen most of it. You don’t have a need for any of the essentials to define life- food, water, shelter, light. Your body is always working. Eventually, you will move away from the need for blood and air. And then you’ll exist in a permanent state of stasis, an unmoving condition of health and age that will heal instantly when harmed.”

Aster probably gave an audible gasp. It wasn’t like the possible conditions she had been undergoing were surprising. But hearing them laid out together was harsh. “I don’t want any of that! I mean, you’d think eating and drinking would be hard to miss, but they help pass the time, and I quite like the idea of aging.”

“I imagine the next step is for you to gain power. Eii knows what she’s doing. Shape-shifting will be one of your powers, so at least you can pretend you are aging.”

“Can I stop it?”

“Not a common problem, I would think, for Eii to tackle. But she’s more intelligent than I am, surprisingly enough. I would think yes, there is a way. But you’ll have to ask her.”

“When will I see her?”

“I’ll ask her to visit you on Daliis soon. I have to go anyway, so I’m afraid our lengthy and rather unproductive chat session must end. Any further questions can be directed to Laila, Silan, or basically anywhere on the planet considering I am always listening. Or you can speak right now.”

“Nothing much, but... If you switch sexes, what are you?”

Ikina seemed amused by the question. “I was likely born a male, considering I grew up in the body of one, but there is no way to affirm what I was in the womb- perhaps my species switches around during birth? Either way, it does not seem to matter much. Personally, I do not consider myself to be male, or female, or any other gender. I think in the sex I wear. You are free to continue to call me ‘they’, but if you use any other pronouns, don’t go fearing a wrathful damnation.”

Aster didn’t have a comment to make, she just looked behind her, perhaps wondering how she would be leaving this simulated cliffside.

“Aliens will be aliens, Aster.” Ikina said, and they laughed like a bad actor.
Aster was back— if that was the word, as she had never really arrived in the first place— in the house. Senya and Wren were a step ahead, looking at the lavish decor of the house. Fine statues made of silver and personal altars to each of the gods decorated the entrance hall. Anything could be stolen here and sold for far more money than they needed.

“We can’t do this.” Aster said.

“What? You’re just having some nerves. Don’t worry, the first time is always the toughest. You’ll get over it.”

“No, I mean, Ikina told me we can’t steal. Probably you’ll lose your immortality.”

Senya and Wren looked at her for a moment, wide-eyed. Then Senya shrugged. “Okay. Whatever. I never planned to be immortal forever, and I’m super hungry right now.”

Senya turned around and grabbed a small statue from an altar of Ikina, a winged Ikieen staring up in devotion to the sky. He slipped it into his pocket and walked up to Aster.

“It’s done.” He said with a mock seriousness. He then hugged her quickly, like he was about to embark on a life-threatening mission, and laughed.

“I mean, it’s sort of a life lesson we’re teaching here. If the owners ever notice the figure is gone, they’ll learn the good lesson that is ‘locking one’s doors.’ I don’t mean to blame the victim here, but they were sort of asking for it.”

“Let’s put it back.” Aster said, standing in the door way and preventing the boys from leaving. She looked around, perhaps expecting Ikina’s wrathful visage to appear behind them.

“No. We need to eat.” Senya lightly pushed Aster aside and walked out.

“I love mortality.” Wren added, following him.

There was nothing left for Aster to do but join them. A bit down the street, Senya pulled the figure out of his pocket and examined it further.

“Pure silver, I’d expect. Gold detailing. Small diamonds crested on the wings. We can buy a lot more than food with this.”

“Once we stop using it to survive, the morals of the crime become testy.” Aster warned.

“Everything helps us survive. New clothes and a boat down to Ae-ah certainly help our mental state survive by letting us circumvent the hardships of walking.”

“You think you can buy a boat in this city?”

“With the right connection, I think I can buy anything.”

For maximum profit, they had to search for a specialty shop that knew worth when it saw it. And preferably was not affiliated with the people they had stolen this from. A bit of asking around cut out their first few choices.

Eventually, Senya found a shady kind of man in a place that smelled of smoke and alcohol. The
statue sold well, but not nearly at full price. It was plenty coin to buy food though, and certainly rid
Aster of the anxiety that the police were going to show at any moment and arrest them all.

“Is the boat idea out?” Aster asked as Senya counted his coin in between his dinner of bread and
soup. She felt like she could have run across the ocean if needed, but would have liked it if the boys
didn’t have to walk- and complain- the whole journey over.

“I’m not actually familiar with the economy here.” Senya said testily. “But I’m good at bargains. If
we buy one tonight, we can sleep on it and leave in the morning.”

“Are we... even near the ocean?” Wren asked.

The answer was no.

“I figure we can buy a ride to the coast pretty easy and work from there.” Senya shrugged. “Money
is pretty good at getting things done. You two seem the type to know that.”

Both of the Baasedians missed the accusatory tone of his remark. They looked at him blankly, and he
sighed.

They found someone with horses and a cart and endured a bumpy and increasingly cold ride close to
the dunes of the coast. A small city lay in a long and skinny line near the shore. It was only three
streets thick, but an end couldn’t be seen.

The sun was mostly set, and doing business at this time of night was typically classified as ‘odd’.
Still, Senya led them to a marina with enough intention that it felt like he knew the place. He
approached the first person he saw.

“We’d like to buy your boat.”

“Huh?” The man said.

“How’s this?” Senya said, and he took out three coins that he determined to be of some higher
worth.

The man lightly shook his head. Senya added five more of the coins.

The man sort of half shrugged. “For that price.” He extended a hand out.

“Wait, which boat is yours?” Wren asked. The man led them to an old sailboat.

“Who owns that one? Do you know?” Aster had noticed a more modern boat, the kind they had in
Baased that ran on a motor and a sail.

“The owner of the marina, I believe. You’re not buying my boat then?”

“What’s the owner’s name? Where do they live?” Senya said.

“Just- over there.” The man pointed to a nearby house.

“We’ll buy his boat then.” Senya announced to the group. The man, realizing he had nothing to add
to whatever was happening, left.

Senya didn’t knock on the door, just forced it open. The supposed owner of the marina, a woman
who had been eating dinner alone, had already drawn a gun and was aiming it towards the intruding
trio.
Senya has his hands in the air, and he was grinning. “We want to buy your boat. How much?”

The woman’s hands were steady. “You don’t have enough.”

This was probably true- it was a very high end boat, an import from a ruined city, but Senya did not seem worried. He backed up, hands still in the air, and then shoved Aster forward with all his force. Caught off guard, she tumbled forward, right at the woman.

There was a gunshot, a trigger pulled by a startled nerve. Aster fell on her knees and felt her chest- the wound was already closing. It only took a second for the bullet to be purged out of her skin and fall into her hands.

She stood up, looking at the dented bullet. It hadn’t hurt, but she was reminded to give Senya a dirty look later. Talk about low morals- the poor woman dropped her gun, eyes frightened, and seemed to be shaking.

“Your boat?” Senya asked. She pointed a finger to one of the walls, where a key hung. Senya took it, and after a second’s pause, the gun as well.

“We need it.” Wren said to Aster, quietly. It wasn’t really an excuse.

Senya knew how to drive a boat. That knowledge extended into motor boats as well, it seemed. He gathered spare fuel, bought food and water, and drove the boat quite professionally. Aster waited and Wren slept.

Night had come by the time they left the dock. Aster sat above deck, feeling the wind in her hair and watching as Senya looked over a map.

The stars were out. There were words to describe them, but the truest summery of their scene was best described as out. In the sky, bright, and trillions of miles away. One of them probably had its own planet, with its own denizens to gaze up and stare. There was probably a chain of people out there, planet to planet, staring at the stars across the entire galaxy.

“Do you want to learn?” Senya said simply. His voice was honest for once, lacking energy.

The wind had a sound, but Aster heard the waves over it. “Not really.”

“Just thought if you learned I might be able to go to sleep.”

“Just go.”

Senya shut the boat off and threw a small tube overboard. Some kind of inflatable anchor. “Sorry for getting you shot.”

“It didn’t hurt.” Aster said without emotion.

“But I still kind of did that without warning. I should have given you a heads up. So you’re not psychologically damaged.”

“I’m not really. Like, I get why you did it. Didn’t even sting. Only took a second.”

“I’m just trying to look out for you.” Senya sighed. Aster wasn’t facing him, and she heard the door to the lower deck close.
The waves were very loud. It took Aster a moment to realize she should have thanked Senya. He was apologizing. And he probably needed a bit for positive reinforcement for his efforts.

The night moved on, defined by waves and starlight. For a few moments, Aster thought she saw the shadow of a monster under the crest of sea. Another time, she saw something flying in the sky, only for it to blur and shift out of existence. Her experience of time seemed to have changed, the hours passing without a feeling of boredom, but her thoughts were slower. It took her a while before she sensed Silan’s presence circling the boat, or realized Ikina had been the creature flying the skies.

The next morning, Aster felt like she had come to terms with something, but she had yet to figure out what.

It took three days at sea before they reached anything. The thing they reached, however, was not land but another boat. An Aeian warship, it seemed, a rather square sort of thing painted in a sea green.

It had pulled rather close to their tiny boat, alarmingly so actually. Aster didn’t know much about boats, and had zero interest to learn- but she was somewhat impressed at how well this boat had managed to sneak up on her. And come so close to their dinky little ship.

It was quieter than Aster would have thought possible for a gigantic warship. Surely, its stealth was due to the ever glorified sciences that Aeis studied and hoarded.

Aster had to go below deck to wake her companions, who, like her, had somehow missed the arrival of the other boat.

Senya only made a face at Aster, raising his eyebrows up and pulling his lips. Trying to illicit a laugh, perhaps, but that made little sense.

“What do they want?” Wren asked.

“I don’t know. They haven’t done anything yet.”

“They’ll want to take us back to Aeis. Hold us in jail for trespassing.” Senya said.

“You’ve dealt with them before?”

“Not at sea, and not in any formal manner. But I understand that’s what they’ll probably attempt.”

“So what can we do?” Wren looked about. “Escape?”

“We have to go on board, for one.” Senya said. “And I guess we’ll be relying on Aster for most of this, which is why I must pose the question now: Do you want to do something horrific, or lose a solid month trying to escape from jail?”

Aster blinked. Horrific was not a word she liked to associate with her actions. But maybe it was the path she had to trend lightly on, for now. “In a month, there probably won’t be a world left to escape into.”

Senya didn’t grin, as expected, but seemed sort of sad. As did Wren. As did, maybe, Aster.

The following events were observed by a remarkable amount of gods. Laila and Silan, beyond marine borders, watched together. Ikina, far off, had been talking with someone else at the time- but then Eii called them up. Encouraged them to watch.
They observed through the eyes of their gods. The people they were with, sitting with them in a long and grey room, asked them to display the event on the wall for them.

So even more gods got to watch.

Eii was always watching, and Artemis was in the room with Ikina.

It was the definition of a spectacle-

Nothing happened.

The promise of horror failed to deliver as Aster climbed aboard the Aeian warship, surrendered, and found herself quite unwilling to relentlessly attack the soldiers around her. Her human empathy had never left her, even if some of her emotions dubiously had. She couldn’t kill everyone on board and flee to the south. She was led to a cell and sat in silence. Wren and Senya soon joined her.

Perhaps this display was horrific. The matter of killing a few hundred human was awful, but if she didn’t hurry and try to revive Aelen, weren’t thousands more going to die? The weighing of lives is a reflex, and maybe it was awful Aster had lost the ability to do it anymore.

Or, on the contrary, she had done a pretty good thing in not committing mass murder. One ought to decide these things on their own.

It was hard to tell what Ikina thought of the events, or what Ikina thought at all. Slight irritation would have been the answer, though that was entirely directed to Eii for calling them about this in the first place.

The other gods in the very long and very grey room had watched as well. But they were of Ikina in the same way Artemis was, and dared not to form an opinion until their patron had.

“That was nice.” Ikina said after a long silence.

The room erupted into small sects of conversation and applause. The words ‘that was nice’ were echoed until they were meaningless.

“There’ll always be another chance to escape. And it doesn’t have to take months, or involve killing, or even involve dying. Or even escaping. We’ll get out.” Aster said, speaking like she was trying to inspire morale.

“I know.” Senya said. “It just seemed like, at the time, it might be worth a shot.”

“It was a bad idea.” Wren said.

“We should move past an idea that never happened. Bother to forget it, maybe.”

It was one sentence half an hour ago. Why did Aster get the feeling it had been even the slightest bit important? The moment she started climbing the ladder up the side of the ship she knew she wasn’t actually going to kill everyone. She hadn’t actually thought it even when she gave a solemn nod to Senya and Wren before leaving.

But the feeling that it had meant something persisted.

She blamed, rightfully, the gods.
“Let’s leave now.” Wren helpfully suggested.

They were in a dark room with a barred window. They weren’t tied up, but were in handcuffs. The guards had been fairly polite, actually, about having to take them to Aeis for questioning.

“Great idea.” Senya said sarcastically. “Let’s just get up and go! We’ll just swim back to our boat and be at Mount Ae-ah by lunch.”

“Aster can do it.” Wren said, frowning from Senya’s taunts.

“He’s got a point. I can probably do anything.” She was not happy to admit this.

“Do something then.” Senya said.

“Uh.” Aster was sitting on the floor. To feel more formal, she stood up. Thought a little bit. “Any suggestions?”

“We could convince them we were sent here by the gods. Have them take us to Ae-ah.”

“That’s not a plan, Wren, just a happy thought.” Senya said.

“Are any of the gods here? Do the thing where you make them visible.”

“The guards wouldn’t let me touch them.”

“You’re like, a minor god right now, correct? Something like one at least. Can you... create fire?”

Aster gritted her teeth. “No.”

“I’m out of ideas.”

Aster sighed and sat back down again. “It’ll work itself out.”

It did the very next day as they came to the shore, as even if the group was out of ideas, ideas, so to speak, came to the group.

And that was a rather drawn out way to say that, the next day, Eii solved a number of problems.

Gods, it might be noted, are rather prone to pulling *dues ex machinae*. 
The figure of lapis lazuli

A switch up in narrative tone is usually a good idea for dramatic scenes, but this isn’t one in particular. What happens is mostly conversation and a boat ride, and then some walking. No one has an emotional breakdown. No one dies. It’s all very tame.

Still, isn’t it nice to shake things up?

It was never very clear what Eii was, and the assumption she even had a race or a home planet was typically made without her consultation. The only definitive truth about her was what could be observed: she was an awfully skilled shape shifter, and could quite easily weave life together with her hands like she was directing a symphony.

Ikina changed appearance with such random frequency that only those who had known them in the beginning- that is, Eii- knew what they ’really’ looked like. Really is in quotes there, as, naturally, Ikina is a fluid organism who lacks a true form.

But when they were young, they looked a certain way that only Eii knew.

Eii always looked the same. She dressed the same too. Pink. Kind of alien, kind of average. Clothing is constant in the universe, and numerous planets all developing it at once have had some overlap.

Eii liked suits. Suits weren’t something that developed on every planet, but certainly in the infinity of space, there were more than a couple designers out there. She looked sort of awful, but again, in the infinity of space, it really wasn’t fair to go about judging anyone’s appearance.

All of this has been preface for one sentence: Eii was dressed in human skin when she came for Aster, but her clothes caused quite a stir regardless. Not a big enough confusion that anyone stopped her from waiting at the shore for the Aeian warship to dock, and again she walked quite unimpeded to join the procession as they were unloaded.

There was an assumption that she knew what she was doing, and a further one that her outfit was in some way relevant to this world- perhaps a new fashion from the First City?

Her promised dues ex machina was no more exciting than having a conversation with one of the chief guards and lying about who she was. Then she was allowed to walk a little closer to the prisoners.

“Ey.” She said. Anyone could be listening, but she wasn’t being very discreet.

“Ey?” Aster replied.

“It’s Eii. We’re here to assist you.”

“You’re doing the plural thing again.”

“I like doing the plural thing. See- We are here to assist you. Take you where you need to go once you’ve seen what you need to see.”

“Please don’t be cryptic.”

“I like being cryptic.”

“This is the bald hyper girl from space you were talking about, right?” Senya asked.
“She wasn’t bald.” Wren quickly corrected. “She was described as having wispy hair.”

Eii blinked blankly. This part of the conversation did not interest her. “You’ll be here for as long as I’d like you to be here. Then I will take you quite instantly to Ae-ah in order for you to complete your thing.”

“So you’re in favor of trying to prevent Ikina’s death?”

“I’m in favor of everything you’re in favor of. I’m here to help.”

“You’re not very useful.”

“I’m actually just very subtle.”

The Aeian countryside was very green. Having to stare at it for a solid hour while she walked had brought this conclusion to Aster. Aeis had some good countrysides. Fairly flat, with maybe a risk of flooding but certainly some very green plants.

Despite the addition of a god to her travel party, Aster was bored. Even when the city-unnamed at this point, as the procession taking her there was utterly silent- came into view, she was unimpressed. It looked boring. Grey walls of square stone. A large triple-spired building in the center that was likely a religious altar. It wasn’t a particularly inspired place.

“City Eight.” Eii said as the procession checked in at the gates. “I will lead you from here.” She then looked around at the soldiers and spoke up. “I am leading them from here.”

There didn’t seem to be a problem. As soon as they entered the gates into the grey city streets, Eii lead them away.

“Was there ever a point where you gained authority over them?” Wren asked when they had left their group behind. “Because I feel like I missed something. Why did they let you take away their prisoners so easily?”

“They’re just soldiers.” Eii said. “Coming in with some suspicious persons, sure, but otherwise here to rest briefly on their voyage or whatever. I didn’t bother to check up on all of their life stories.”

“But you barely spoke to them.” Senya said.

“I told them I was going to take you, and then I fulfilled that promise. I’m quite trustworthy in that aspect.”

“So... We’re free? Good to go?” Aster said.

“Our boat isn’t.” Senya whined. The thing had been tied to the warship and left in the harbor.

“You’re not free from we!” Eii cheered. “Ah, see, if I had used singulars that wouldn’t have rhymed as well, would it?”

“You would have used me.”

“Yes, but really listen harshly to that sound. It’s not as pleasant as we. But I am digressing. I have business for you.”

“Like... work? A job? What do you mean?” Aster was having a hard time paying attention as Eii
took them from side street to side street in a pace that almost encouraged a jog. She knew she ought to bring up what Ikina had told her to ask, to discuss reversing her godliness. But it didn’t seem to come up naturally.

“Business as in a seminar as in I’m going to drag you somewhere and talk excessively.”

Senya groaned, and Wren looked at him once and shrugged. “Okay.”

Senya groaned again.

Wren nudged him. “Come on, it’s not everyday we get hijacked by an alien god. Probably ought to seize the chance and relax about it.”

“You just delight in the holy, don’t you?” Senya said. “More and more these days I want to just have house and sleep in it. I’m done with the trying to die thing. I’m done with the traveling. I’d like to be done with this god thing as well.”

“Oh, you’re done with the dying thing? That’s good to hear. We were wondering about that earlier, you see.” Eii remarked off hand. She had a weird way of walking where she swung on her narrow hips and flung her hands in the air whenever she pivoted to face the group behind her. “Are you still romantically tangled? We were wondering about that too.”

“No.” Wren said quickly. “We never really... were.”

“We were concerned with that.”

“...So what exactly are you going to show us?” Aster said. She was not exactly invested in the subject at hand.

“History! This city of the eighth isn’t exactly a wonderful place for it, but they still have a school. Did you know every city in Aeis has a school? They have a whole standardized education system here. It’s pretty silly for a world like yours to have only one country be this advanced.”

“It doesn’t seem very advanced.” Aster remarked. They passed a bakery. It was neat and clean, but easily could have sat in any city.

“Aster.” Eii turned to her very suddenly and looked her dead in the eyes. “They have a standardized currency system.”

“That-”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, it’s not exactly the biggest achievement. But it sure beats every other country here! I don’t really spend much time here, you know, it’s Ioro’s garden and all, but I’ve been learning a lot in these last few hours that he’s never bothered to inform me of. Anyways, what I’m going to show you is something I’ve never informed him about.”

“What?” Senya blinked. “What does that mean?”

“He knows, course, but he doesn’t. It’s not his, you know. But he knows now. But there was a time when he didn’t- Oh, I’m rambling!” She giggled. “We’ll get there soon.”

What could Ikina have not known about their own domain?

Well. The answer was, it turns out, a lot. More on this subject will be discussed later.

Eii finally stopped at the steps of a long and flat building that was generally identical to its neighbors.
A sign outside named it ‘The Academy’. A tall iron gate prevented them from entering.

“Here we go!” Eii said, jumping the gate with a few steps and a leap that were definitely impossible for the humans behind her.

She waited on the other side and gestured with excitement for the others to follow. They stood still and looked amongst themselves.

Wren shook his head as Aster started to examine the wall next to the gate for footholds.

“What, really?” Eii said with shock. “Ah, oh, here.” She walked to the gate and did something with her hands. There was sudden and localized pop of noise, and for a few seconds the group lost their hearing. It slowly came back as they walked through the newly open gate, its lock melted off.

“Will Aster be able to do that?” Wren said casually, and the still unsure-of-her-emotions Aster found herself glaring.

“By the time she’s done, she should have just transcended to another plane of existence. So no need to bother with physical alterations, yes?” Eii said. “You three do walk very slowly, don’t you?”

“By what standards?” Senya asked.

They entered the academy through another destroyed door. When Wren inquired about the aftereffects of leaving mysterious broken locks everywhere, Eii waved it off and promised it didn’t matter in the slightest.

Senya was keeping quiet, his exact emotional perimeters kept vague. Displeased, perhaps, at Wren’s sudden rejection of him? Or was he happy with that, that finally the clingy rich kid who had been trailing him for so long was ready to leave him alone? And what exactly did he think of Eii?

Well, the entire group shared a single reaction to Eii: Abrasive. Maybe in different ways. Aster feared for her future, Senya was simply unnerved about the alien god, and Wren was doing his best to placate Eii with his questions as to not alert her of his fear.

Eii knew all of this, naturally, but it was all standard fare when it came to dealing with mortals.

She led them up the stairs and to a locked door in the middle of the building. She opened the door and kept walking forward with her head to the ground, as if leading them again somewhere else- but this seemed to be their destination.

If it wasn’t, then Aster couldn’t be sure what was. The room was almost empty. Certainly there was a lot of stuff in it, but the walls were high and the stuff was localized enough that the place simply felt lacking. And it was dead quiet too- and again, yes, there were sounds. The street outside, the breathing of Senya and Wren, even the wind. But it was still felt dead.

Off to the side in what felt like a deliberate attempt to avoid being in the center of the room, there was a statue made of blue gem. It wasn’t too big, maybe the perfect size to barely squeeze through the doorway. But its presence made Aster and her friends uneasy.

“Is that from here?” Wren asked.

“Yes. Dug up just recently near here, buried in the sands of the Sved desert.” Eii answered.

“Oh, so it’s- Svedian?” Senya said, frowning.
Eii looked carefully at him, and raised her nearly nonexistent eyebrows.

“I think it’s made of... lapis lazuli, right? Which isn’t really...” Wren was saying.

“Yeah.”

The figure was made of lapis, a gem that was fairly rare and the largest mine of which was in the country of Stemale in a small community in a sheltered plains. While lapis was traded and mined in other locations, it was extremely rare, and Stemale’s open hostility to its neighboring countries made it very hard to obtain any large quantity.

But material origins aside, the statue had another strange detail. It was of a woman. Which, obviously, wasn’t the odd thing about it- any country worshipping Lailana was bound to have a few figures of her in a human shape, and besides that, non-religious sculpture was perfectly regular.

But this woman was kneeling on the ground and had four legs, each rigid in their direction and forming a sort of wheel. She was naked and armless, but had a pair of large insect wings on her back. Her face, looking up, seemed angry.

“Sometimes these things are found.” Eii said, walking around the room and examining other, smaller finds. Little figurines and drawings made of dusted rock. “They don’t fit in with your perception of history. They don’t belong to your world. But you won’t be surprised to hear they do, will you?”

She gazed directly at Aster as she said this, challenging her to some competition she could not name. “I want you to reverse whatever you did to me. The shot thing. This whole god thing. The immortality.” Aster said suddenly.

“You’re not going to want me to do that.”

“Yes, I do. I can’t stand this. I want to save things, and help things, and all that, but I just want my life to be a step less complicated.”

“Your life is easy. So easy! So simple! And did you not hear me? You’re not going to want me to do that.”

Aster stomped her foot on the ground and immediately felt foolish. So she took to yelling instead. “I know what I want! No, I don’t, but- I don’t want this. I’ll save the world. Just let me go after it.”

“Save the world?” Eii raised an eyebrow. “So after you revive Aelen, and Aera is stopped- that’s when you want me to take away your power? When this world is saved.”

“Yes.” Although it wasn’t quite what she had planned- she honestly would have preferred simple communication that the immortality and lack of feelings thing was completely gone- Aster knew it made a lot more sense to save the dying until after the world was saved. Putting aside her own feelings for that nice, near hundred percent chance that came with immortality that she was going to reach her destination.

“Shake on it?” Eii said. Aster almost did until both Wren and Senya chimed in frantically warning her not to. “I don’t need a spectacle to complete the job.” Eii laughed lightly and gave a small bow.

“I will leave you then.”

“Already?” Wren said with poorly disguised relief.

“Wait. Before you go. Can you check if we’re-” Senya pointed to him and Wren- “Still immortal? Ikina threatened that they’d take it away, but I haven’t seen them in a while, so...”
Eii laughed loudly, which slowly dissolved into a giggle. “Yes! Of course you are! Ioro would never punish you.”

“What about the whole Aera thing? The giant monster killing everyone in the north that they just sort of left... sleeping. For anyone to awake.”

“Didn’t you do that? I mean, it’s not his fault if you or one of his minor gods messes things up. As long as it isn’t his fault, it’s not his punishment. You allowed it to happen, so the blame is on you—that’s a fairly basic thing you’ve got to learn about gods. The blame can never be on us, because in theory, you could have prevented it.”

“That’s—” Aster started to say. Then she decided to stop. “Weren’t you leaving?”

Eii gave a curtsey despite her lack of skirt, and disappeared with a strange shifting effect that left Aster’s eyes hurting and ears ringing.
“She didn’t say anything about what she wants us to do next, did she?” Senya asked. Though he still had some coin from Stemale, Aeis had its own stamped currency, forcing him to go without eating- or just swipe an apple when no one was looking. Aster objected on principle alone. Ikina didn’t seem to be punishing them, no matter what they had warned her.

“I don’t think so. She didn’t even talk with us that long.” Wren was also enjoying some stolen fruit. This country was nice and temperate, and the day was sunny. They all sat on the edge of a fountain, the kind engineered to have a little geyser in the middle.

The rough trauma of the last few weeks seemed to have been put on hold for this rather nice day- but maybe, actually, they’d never return to it. Maybe, if they were lucky, they could all go on in a silent agreement to never bring up how Wren used to feel about Senya or whatever unemotional crises Aster was facing. If the gods- or better yet, the stars- favored them properly, maybe they could just get back to questing. Hunting wolves and saving the world in proper exaltation.

“We head south now.” Aster said. “Maybe I’ll do it.”

“Huh?” Wren turned his head sharply.

“I don’t want to leave you or anything. Might be impossible to find you again. But it’s the most practical choice. I know you guys can’t die either, but I’m on the next level of immortality. I can walk nonstop across the country, and I’m sure it won’t be too hard for me to find my way to Ae-ah.” Aster didn’t want to make eye contact with either of the boys as she spoke.

“I think that’s a good idea.” Wren said immediately. Senya seemed ready to object, and he caught Wren’s gaze with an open mouth. “I’m not going to lie. It’s just more practical. And maybe that’s something we should be.”

A hot breeze traveled across the grey square. The drab architecture was forgivable in the Eighth City when the climate was this pleasant. “Yeah.” Senya concluded.

They waited a few moments.

“So what was up with that statue?” Wren said. “Eii was making some very menacing remarks back there. At least they felt menacing. I didn’t really get what they actually meant.”

“Aliens?” Senya tried, and he shrugged.

“It’s something about Ikina.” Aster was still staring straight ahead through the town square. “I’m pretty sure Eii is older than them. And there’s some big secret that we’ll probably be informed about against our will relating to that.”

“Hey Aster.” Wren said after another windy pause. “What should we do while you’re gone?”

“I’d might take me... a week to get there. I mean. Do whatever you want with the time.”

“I don’t really want you to go.” Senya said like he was announcing it.

“Yeah.” Aster turned to look at him. “Thanks.” She almost blushed while she did it. She knew she didn’t really like him, and she doubted that as long as all this crazy stuff was going on in her life, she wasn’t going to be able to properly crush on anyone. And maybe when she was done with this,
She’d still be messed up inside—unable to understand love and uninterested in seeking it. Or maybe she’d always been like this. She didn’t mind either way, honestly.

She thought Senya was beautiful. Wren did too. But they both knew him too well now to really obsess over it.

“But you’ll be ok.” Wren smiled, and about gestured into the air. “Can’t die. Can’t anything. So we don’t have to feel so solemn. We’ll all be fine.”

Aster bit her lips, sucking on the chewed up skin. She considered being solemn. She thought about being quiet. And she forced herself to smile. It wasn’t like the smile was fake— it was just an effort large enough to warrant a ‘forced’. She hadn’t been unhappy. She was simply bad at smiling.

Wren put his arm around her and shook her shoulders. It felt like a weird move to do, but overall Aster didn’t exactly mind. She tried to do the same with Senya, and though again it just felt weird, it’s not like anyone took the time to complain.

There was a time where they sat there, arms around each others shoulders, and sort of smiled, sort of laughed. It didn’t last long, but it was a moment. When they stopped, it was awkward and silent. But that was the sort of moment you were bound to forget when you got older, the negative and short kind that follows the good.

“We’ll be fine.” Senya said in agreement. Aster looked at him and thought about kissing him. It wasn’t the first time, and just like the others, she decided it wasn’t at all worth the hassle.

“Yeah.” Aster said. Next to her, Wren was also thinking of Senya. Not much about him though. And certainly not of kissing him.

“Can I just say?” Wren said, suddenly shy. “It feels wrong to say these things out loud, but I mean, why is it so weird to- Uh.” He sighed. “We ought to be friends by now.”

“Sure.” Aster said, smiling again and shifting her sitting position so her legs could properly dangle off the fountain’s edge.

“It’s been long enough.” Senya was grinning. Were these people, these maniac rich kids, his friends now? He couldn’t bother to disagree. No matter how much truth was in it, it certainly was a nice idea to have.

They waited on the fountain’s edge for another long moment. It wasn’t silent. But their words weren’t worth remembering, idle chitchat that meant absolutely nothing but stood for a rather lot of things.

Aster decided she ought to leave in an hour, and that hour came quickly. And since she had already decided it, there was little she could do to protest leaving. If she didn’t go now, she’d probably find a way to never go. Or at least, waste a good amount of time before finally departing.

She left. And in doing so, she began to walk.

The Aeian countryside was really very green, but Aster had turned off most of her thoughts by the next day. She could barely think about anything. Even her basic senses of sight and sound were warped, ignored by her brain and entirely wiped the moment something changed.

She was in a state of mind she had never been in before, and it would have scared her if she was able
to feel fear. But this altered consciousness she found herself in didn’t let her feel concern. It only held her mind in stasis and reminded her subconscious that everything was always going to be fine.

She didn’t stop walking, a whole day now, and it was like she didn’t have legs. There was no sensation of weight, just the knowledge that she had it. There was no movement of muscles and bone. Just the reminder that they existed.

Her mind saw and heard, but it did not think in anything more than a glorified list of cardinal directions and a simple endgame goal.

Aeis was a long and large country of little interest sight wise. But its advantage lay in its location, a sunny grassland that had been urged away from desert by careful irrigation. Aeis was a country of science and the sky god, a position solidified by the odd sorts or artifacts they kept finding as they dug canals through their lands and the Eastern Waste.

People in Aeis were curious about Aster, but her mind was too far gone to talk back to them. When it rained, and someone called her in from the cold, she only moved forward, skin drier than salt. When the wind blew her hair against her face, she closed her eyes and kept moving. The world became bigger the longer she walked, her senses began to dull as a new one took shape in her mind: a collective sense of time. What things were and when they were. And Aster slowly began to know how large her world was, and when it would end.

But she had to stop when her feet reached the ocean’s shore, and in that moment, everything was forgotten again.

She blinked. There was still a sound in her mind, but it was retching free as the wind and the waves become much more real.

She looked out at the southern sea. Its existence was. She blinked again. Did she even need to blink anymore?

It had been a month.

She looked out at the sea. She knew Silan was there. She turned back to the land- and again, she could feel Laila’s influence. It was heavy and seemed to smack her in the face like a galestorm. She wasn’t certain what had happened to her, but she knew Ikina was coming before they appeared on the beach beside her. There was simply a feeling deep in her mind of a pulling and an essence of energy, and she knew it to be Ikina.

They lacked an apparent sex today. She almost wanted to place their body as male, but there was something soft about their features and odd about thier eyes. They were weak, clear-eyed and glassy skinned. Not holding up to their facetious humanity.

“Stemale’s gone.” They said, standing beside her and watching the sea. “Your mother is dead.”

Aster was quiet. “But they worshipped the land.”

“Yes. I’ll take you to Aelen.”

“What’s changed in me?” Aster sighed.

They looked her over, eyes widening as if that would help in determining an answer. “Not much.”

“I don’t like any of this.” Aster said, not even glumly. She just said it, shaking her head. “I hate this.”
“You were meant for this. I’m sorry for this to happen to you. I know it is awful. But it is what you were always meant for.”

“I thought it was my normality that made me so special. I thought this was the opposite of destiny.”

Ikina ignored her. “What would you have preferred to do, instead of this?”

“I don’t know. I guess I wanted to graduate high school. Maybe go into computer programming.”

“But why learn to program computers when you can learn to program life?”

Aster thought for a moment. “I’d rather learn to program computers.”

Ikina was very silent for a moment. There was an absence of sound like they were breathing in. “I would have liked to be a doctor. But we were both meant to be something more. Do you believe in destiny, Aster?”

She shook her head. “Only if it’s the name of some god I’ve yet to meet.”

“I’m sure it is. But you know it’s a concept, an idea solidified only by the people who believe in it. But the people who believe in fate and destiny are also the people who run universes. And so, it is your fate to be like this.”

Aster sighed. “What are the odds.”

“None at all. You’re not normal. You’re so far from it that- We always meant for you to do this. It was planned.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was planned. You’re not normal- you’re fated. There are powers out there beyond me and beyond Eii that decide these matters of the stars. You’ve never been normal. You are the only one on this planet with this divine potential. Eii can still take away what she’s given you- but you’ll always be meant for more.”

“But what are you trying to say with this? Is there something you want me to understand here?”

“Even if Eii never gave you that shot, gave you these gifts, you’d still have become something inhuman. It’s what you are. And I have known it since you were born- why else have Laila save your life? Your friends, they’re almost the same as you. Why else would I ensure you met them? Why else would I keep them alive?”

Aster was quiet.

Ikina looked at her, and leaned over, fingers lightly touching her hair like they meant to comfort her but couldn’t go through with the action. “Fate is real, and it has never been mine to control, Aster.”

Their voice was weak, so extremely weak that Aster might have reeled back in shock if she had been capable of the emotion anymore.

With a very long movement, Ikina grabbed Aster’s hand and took a step forward, bringing her and the world forward as everything blurred into a rainbow of colors and time- and then everything stopped, and Aster was at the base of a mountain and Ikina was flying through the sky like a shadow of a bird.
This was Ae-ah, the mountain of the sea. The knowledge of cold air clung to Aster’s fingertips as she walked, and the anticipation of what was to come kept her from slipping into another trance of action. There was still another walk to do, and with her mind open again, all Aster could think about was Ikina’s words.

Destiny, fate, and immortal star-bound gods. Was this what was guiding her life now? Or had this invisible idea always been there, watching her and waiting for her to watch it back?

She looked up at the stars like they would answer her. But all she saw was lights.

The path up Ae-ah was well worn- to a point. The first part of the trail was littered with shrines and idols along a path of pine. But it eventually came to an end at a crack in the mountain which exhaled a fog of freezing air.

The entrance was narrow and pitch dark. Aster felt her way through, surprised some godly power of hers hadn’t kicked in to let her see- but evidently that was beyond her. She walked through the dark and uncut path. Senya had said this was a journey meant only for spare princes. A path meant to be walked once a generation.

It showed. There was no sense of humanity to the place. While Ae-en carried old structures that gave the impression the mountain has at one time been a park, Ae-ah was raw and uncharted. The tunnel through had tiny gaps and alternate paths leading in every direction from the main trail, and the wind in the tunnels made an odd sound, like someone wheezing weakly. When she first saw light, it was streaming from above her, through a tiny hole that obviously didn’t lead outside- and when she tried to look through, she found the hole too small to do so.

The second time she found light, she had emerged out of the tunnel- and into a larger one. But it was large enough that it didn’t feel like a tunnel anymore. Perhaps a chamber.

It was cast in a soft shade of blue and teal, and jagged walls of grey rock bordered Aster as she walked. There was a rough trail here, one that felt deliberate- as did, somehow, the patches of silver and blue gems that occasionally shone on the walls.

The room smelled of the sea and of ash at the same time. And overwhelming them both was the clear scent of the moss that grew on the ceiling and hung on the stalactites.

It was still dim, but the light slowly began to overtake the dark as Aster approached the end of the chamber. Here was the first true sign of human activity, an arch that led again into the darkness and carved with a series of very simple shapes. If there had once been more complicated designs on the arch, they were very long gone- all that could really be seen were shapes and the occasional suggestion of a curve.

There had been a crack on the ceiling that looked to the stars in the previous chamber, but the next one was again pitch black. Aster took a few steps forward before she realized something was strange about the place- and she kicked a rock forward to confirm. This chamber was much, much larger than the last. She whistled to try and gage the scale, and it echoed.

She edged forward cautiously, and her suspicions were confirmed when she found herself gazing down on a pool made of dark crystal and the odd sort of dark gem that lay in the middle.
This was the atrium. That was Aelen.

Aster looked about, hoping to sense Silan nearby, expecting him or perhaps Ikina to help her awake the creature below. But all she could sense was something heavy and thick and very very blue—something she thought was probably Aelen itself.

She closed her eyes, though it made little difference in this dark, and tried to determine what would wake Aelen. Senya said he had talked to Aera, and somehow it had worked. But talked? Just causally? Or was there some sort of incarnation she was supposed to know?

“Hello.” She said to the beast.

And the beast awoke to greet her.

With a crackling and a crumbling, something in the ceiling crashed into the tidepool below, and starlight fell on Aster’s face. Aelen rose from out of the water slowly, head looking to the stars. Like Aera, it seemed to have trouble settling on a face for itself. Its snout was sharp like a foxes, and its eyes were holes in a rock face of crystal that reflected light in a pattern that perfectly made them look human. Slowly, horns came to settle far on its long head, fused of fossils and slate with water acting as glue.

It looked to the stars. And then it surged. Everything around Aster broke as everything around her became Aelen. Veins of ore rose to the surface of its body, and everywhere, water seemed suspended like it gravity had ceased to function.

The ground beneath Aster quaked as it formed part of Aelen’s back, and she ran forward as she struggled to keep her footing. But no matter how fast she could run, the great god-creature was too massive for her to reach anywhere. She took a wrong step and fell right into the pit, smashing her skull against the rising rocks and eventually falling into the the empty pit of crystals below.

She didn’t die during this, and when she hit the water, she immediately swam out and found her clothes were entirely dry. A couple more boulders smashed her bones as she tried to stand up, but her recovery was so miraculous that the only difficult thing about her process of near-death was that she kept flinching.

Aelen rose and Aelen was, and soon the mountain of Ae-ah became a lovely moonlit cove. The stars were shining bright tonight, brighter still when reflected off of the watery skin of Aelen. Its animal body was naturally peppered with a few fins and gills, and embedded on its back were rocks and ancient skeletons. And the occasionally waterfall, it seemed, falling from no where. Aelen dripped, and it dripped back into itself.

It began to move, and when it became to sink under the waves, its body became an island— a glowing, beautiful island.

As the dust settle on Ae-ra, Aster leapt into the water and swam to Aelen. Its tail caused massive waves and its treading feet brought currents that dragged Aster underwater— but she eventually made it, and climbed to a small spire of rock patterned with indents of long-dead plants. She sat politely, and waited.

Wren and Senya had had little to do in the most since Aster’s departure. They didn’t dare to spend much time in any of Aels’ cities because they were worried about the strict regulatory patrols. And they couldn’t leave the country for the exact same reason— the military had a firm grip on the
country’s only border, the northern one to Sved. And even if they could leave, they were concerned it would be too hard for Aster to find them again.

The first week they stayed in City Eight in anticipation. The second week they did their best to do the same, but were interrupted halfway when a soldier grew curious about who they were. Though he did not make any real threats, the boys became nervous enough that they immediately left.

Senya had mostly been stealing meals for the two of them, or occasionally he would go out and forage. They paid for a room at an inn by selling off their Svedian currency to a couple of shady types, and made enough paper- as Aeis had paper money for some reason- to pay for a ride to another city.

City Twenty-Three was where they eventually wound up waiting for Aster, a small town on the very edge of Aeis but south enough that the border patrol wasn’t around to harass them. The city was somewhat new, and one of many settlements that were positioned on the border of the Western Wastes.

The wastes brought waves of hot dust every time the wind blew in from the west, and City Twenty-Three was constantly hammered by it. Houses were mostly underground, and cloth covered every window. It was not a pleasant place to live- which was why most of the residents here were either firmly devoted researchers and archeologists, or being paid for their cooperation.

Wren and Senya stood right out, but no one was around to care. They bought a room at a house and stayed there. Talked a lot, as one is inclined to do with company, but did so nervously. Neither wanted to address that they had sort of had something, briefly. There was a silent agreement between to forget about that and move on- but either seemed to worry the other wasn’t over it yet.

They had just agreed to be friends a week ago. But it was taking longer than expected for that to come true.

Aeis was a country of the sky god, but Ikina couldn’t be bothered to visit them- and the other gods weren’t allowed in either. Wren passed much of his time on a hot hill beyond the town, a half hour’s walk, where he could just barely make out the ocean. And sometimes he would see Silan there. His father, Silan. The title never felt important enough to include.

To help sustain their money, Senya and Wren had found themselves a sort of unofficial job that paid in a lower rent and free dinners- they helped the scavenge the wastes twice a day, when the temperatures were most agreeable. Most of it was running through dirt and sand and tripping over bones.

There was absolutely no available history on the Western Wastes. Back in Baased, Wren had only been taught it existed- as had Senya. It existed. No one lived there. It wasn’t even a desert, or a grassland savannah- it was just a Wasteland.

Viewing it for themselves had not improved the boys’ lackluster education. No one ever said anything about it, or stopped to explain what was going on. People just worked on it. Dug things up. Shipped them to the First City.

Some of the things they shipped were bones. Human bones, but animal bones as well. The boys were trained not to pay too much attention to the bones though- the city had all the ones they needed. So most bones became a nuisance- unless, as their boss said ‘they were very exceptional’.

Their work was suspicious, but Wren and Senya really couldn’t be bothered much. They were busy waiting for their semi-godly friend to return from reawakening an apocalyptic ocean god. Weird
bones and meaningless wastelands weren’t too unique.

One day, perhaps a month and a half since they had last seen Aster, Wren came upon some very exceptional bones. He didn’t think they were bones at first- he only saw one, and it mostly submerged in the earth. All he saw was one very long groove, a slightly curved line that might have just been a rock.

He didn’t know it was a skeleton until the wind came, revealing in a dust storm a slightly scattered ribcage composed of bones some forty feet long. Before Wren could really reveal in this site, they were gone again, buried by another cloud of sand. He would have gone to mark their spots, perhaps shouting for someone to come over and help him with this discovery, but he was distracted by yet another cloud of dust- and he risked a few cuts on his cheeks in order to turn around and face the storm.

This is when Wren caught sight of Aster. Or just Aelen, as in truth he really had no way to see the tiny speck that was his friend on the monster’s back. All he saw was a fox-faced water god with a body of debris and teeth of sandstone flailing onto the shore.

It wasn’t really flailing. That would be a rude way to describe an ancient being. It was slowly making its way onto the ground, and its tail was lashing about as it adjusted its balance, causing great sandstorms.

Wren turned around and ran for Senya. Senya was already running towards him. Giant monsters are fairly hard to miss.

On Aelen’s back, Aster couldn’t see much. A desert, of some sort, was where Aelen had decided to go. She realized shortly into her ride that she lacked any means of controlling this thing, and that she was going to have to find a way down- and away- as soon as it found land. And from there, she guessed it’d be a bit of an adventure to find her friends again.

As Aelen slowly got its feet onto land, Aster looked about for a way down. Its legs were currently numerous and thin, meant for swimming. They were also incredibly far off the ground. In theory Aelen was about the same size as Aera, but Aster had only seen Aera from a distance- Aelen seemed ridiculous giant.

Though Aster knew she could simply jump off and be fine, she was still somewhat scared of heights and her body still had some of the reflexes in place that kept her from jumping into places her mind still loyally thought would kill her.

She couldn’t really walk- Aelen’s back shifted greatly with every step it took. So she slowly felt her way across the beast, gripping on the various rocks and the occasional cache of ice as she headed towards its head.

Aelen had a long neck that occasionally extended in a trail of water. She climbed onto the base of its head, gripping the base of one of the rock formations that formed a curled horn.

Her plan was to jump the next time Aelen looked down near the ground, but as she held onto the foundation of its skull, Aster realized she could sense its life. Or at the very least, its intention- its programming, its mortal code of action. It was barely alive beyond its need to destroy, and it could register the authority of none but Ikina.

As she felt the monster’s mind, she came to feel the framework of its actions, and the tiers that dictated its needs. It had to rest when a certain quota of destruction was met, and on a higher tier was its longterm goal of the death of Aera. And on a lower tier were its actions now: its movements.
Aster almost wanted to be shocked when she realized she had some control over Aelen after all. She could feel her own ability to insert a few basic commands to the terminal that was this thing’s brain. She felt like she should have reeled back in shock, or at least, in stunned revelation over this power. But even when she did back up a little and let her face look surprised, her new sense did not fade. Her mind was the same as this monster’s, and there is little uncomfortable in finding kinship with your peers.

She asked Aelen to lower its head. It did, and she climbed right off its snout and into the sand. And then she asked it to carry on, please, and even sent along a small image from her memory of Ikina, just because she knew it would please the horned god.

She walked through the desert until she found the nearest city. It had been long since she had been around other humans, and she carried her earlier lack of shock into this immersion. She could feel something different from the humans around her. She knew something new about all of them. She didn’t like it much, but something in her mind was telling her that was the wrong way to approach things, now.

She still had the odd clothes from Artemis- the grey dress and the thick stockings- but somewhere on her walking they had become wrinkled and torn. She realized how long it had been since she had bathed, and how disgusting she must be, but there was nothing she could do about that now.

She walked carefully- there were few people in the town, she knew, but they were all quite worried. She wasn’t. She even knew where Wren and Senya were- something surrounding her, something gold, seemed to have told her. Ikina, she thought.

She found her boys waiting in the town’s center, and she hugged them both. Wren wanted to say how unlike her it was, but then he noticed how dull her eyes were and kept quiet. Senya patted her on the back once.

They all looked to Aelen.

“Isn’t there something wrong with me?” Aster said without looking to Wren.

“It’ll be over when this is over.” Wren said apologetically.

“Eii assured it.” Senya said. “And wasn’t Eii just the most trustworthy person?”

“She will make me human again.” Aster said finally. “When this is done. I don’t think her the type to break promises.”
At the beginning, in the end

In the beginning there was a void, and from this void came a thing that was not of it- an anti-void, an egg. And from this egg came the great god Ikina.

In this time, there was no land or sea, only void and Ikina. But Ikina was displeased with this existence, and gave an idea, which gave the great sea god, and he brought water into the void.

Now there was Ikina and the sea god, and they watched their new creation with curiosity. The Sea was pleased with what he had made, and looked to his wife and father for approval. But Ikina was displeased. The sky god felt something was still missing, and so gave another god, the Earth, to complete it.

The Earth was a woman, and the god of the land, and she was meant to bring balance to the Sea. But though the Sea loved the Earth, he was bitterly jealous of her existence, for he wanted to have Ikina all for himself.

The Sea thus tossed the Earth from the heavens and into his sea. Where her body fell became the land, and where her blood splattered became the islands. Her brown hair became the northern mountains while the green of her dress colored the southern plains.

This was before death had come to be, so she was not yet dead, but Ikina was displeased with her and her husband. The sky god took from each a single bone, and sealed them away in the sacred mountains of the north and south, far away from each other.

From the bone, Ikina whittled two new gods: Silan of the ocean and Laila of the land. They were less powerful than their ancient selves, and easier to control.

Now that there was land and sea, Ikina found new displeasure in the emptiness of it all. Something was missing. Silan and Laila tried their best to find what it was, and each presented Ikina with their creations: valleys, coastlines, canyons and waves. But Ikina was not happy.

Much thought was put into what was missing from the world. Finally, a thought came to Ikina from the void: life. Not beings like Silan and Laila, but life- and so, the idea of Life and the idea of Death came at once to the world.

Life became trees and grasses and fish and animals, each taking hundreds of forms. Death was not as imaginative, and only took on their partner’s ideas and gave them an end. And with that end, a meaning.

Now the world was full of life and death, but Ikina still felt displeasure- though the creations of Life were interesting, they were not not fulfilling for Ikina to watch. The gods needed acknowledgement for their work, and worship.

The trees and the grasses and the fish and the animals were unable to worship, being too dumb. Ikina took some of Life’s oldest children, the dragons, and removed their bones. And from these bones, Ikina tried to make new living things. But these creatures were still too dumb to praise the gods, and in frustration, Ikina buried them in sand.

For many years, life on the land and sea had to endure maelstroms and windstorms as a frustrated Ikina thrashed about in the sky, creating grooves in the earth that became rivers, canyons, and lakes.

Finally, a Creator came from the void to comfort Ikina, and this Creator brought with them the stars.
and the moon. From the union of the Creator and Ikina came new beings with new shapes, and these children became humanity.

The humans were wise enough to pay worship to the gods, and Ikina was pleased.

However, Silan was jealous now, as the humans were not able to live and worship in his ocean. In his anger, he flooded the world and drowned the humans. This is why there is more ocean than land. Ikina made the sea subside, but was too late to save many lives.

Those who lived near the sea and on the lowlands died, those who lived on the high lands lived but lost much of their land, and those who lived on the mountains lost nothing at all.

So it came to be that some humans hated Silan, and others loved him. And the ones who hated the sea turned to worshipping the Laila. A great divide emerged among the people of every nation.

This did not please Ikina, but it was of humanity’s nature to seek divides. Ikina allowed the humans to fight, but warned them to always praise the sky, lest it be taken from them.

All was well, and the world grew old. Ikina was pleased. But the Creator was not. Upset at the warring ways of the humans, her children, the Creator made a promise of her own: Life and Death, once servants of the sky, were now gods of the universe. And they insured that life existed in every star- and death would come to each in turn. And Ikina would fall under their rule too, as would the planet, and this day would be known as the End Day.

Aster, Wren, and Senya waited on the wastes as the gods assembled. Aelen had settled in the desert a few hours ago, standing nearly still and clearly waiting. Word had gotten about from fleeing refugees that Aera was coming now too, passing through Sved at the moment and seeming to head right towards the wastes.

It was getting to be night. Freezing cold for those who weren’t Aster. A crowd had gathered to watch Aelen, but most people were wise enough to seek shelter as far away as they could from the beast.

Wren and Senya had found a blanket from somewhere, and were huddling for heat. However, neither had the patience Aster had been gifted.

“I’m going to freeze to death.” Senya complained.

“You’ll just come right back!” Wren cautiously whispered back.

“Only to freeze again a second later, I’m sure.”

Aster was standing, dramatically, a few feet ahead of them and staring at Aelen. She turned around to look at her friends. “Here. Do I give off any heat? I will join your blanket.” She placed a hand on Senya’s forehead.

He reeled back. “Ug! I think you just sped my death up tenfold.”

Aster looked at her hand and frowned. “I hate this non-scientific science.” She sat down on the sand.

“Whatever.”

“I know we can’t die, but don’t you think we ought to back up a little more from the fighting area?” Wren asked. “I don’t fancy getting hurt.”
“They’re just... giant monster things. I’m not sure their fighting is going to have a large area of impact.” Senya said. “They’ll probably bump into each other a few times until one of them dies.”

“I think Aera is going to lose.” Wren said.

“Yeah. Probably going to get thrown into the sea or something. I mean, water versus fire? It’s not a very even match.” Senya said. “Hey Aster? How is this plan supposed to work again?”

“They’ll defeat each other and the world will be saved.”

“Except Aera is clearly going to lose.”

Aster sighed. “I don’t know. You’d hope Ikina made them equals, being equivalents and all.”

“Sure, but... land. Sea. And we all know how this went down last time they supposedly fought.”

“Did you have the same creation myth we did? I would have thought a Lailanic country like Iixo would have had a story where the Earth killed the Sea.”

“Guess not. I mean, worshipping Laila was never about being superior to Silan. It’s praising her for... providing land.”

The general panic brought by having a very large beast appear had temporarily allowed for a truce between Svedian nations and Aeis. A series of guard towers marked Aeian borderlands, and they had in addition to allowing fleeing Svedians into the country, they had opened communications with similar guard posting in Sved. A simple method of fire was the undisputed method for tracking Aera’s path.

A soldier ran into the desert near City Twenty-Three and shouted. Aera was in Aeis. Making its way down. Some of the people gathered decided now was probably a good time to get moving. One concerned family even stopped and asked if Aster’s group wanted a ride east.

There were still a few people left watching when Aera came into sight. One soldier with a camera was quite dedicated to capturing the scene, relying on several rolls of film which she quickly would wrap up after a few shots. Quantity over quality.

Aera, like Aelen, was absurdly large and surprisingly fast moving. It walked on long and skinny spider’s legs, trailing ashes in its wake.

It still took a while for it to arrive in the wastes, but once it did, the heat it gave off made the night feel like a particularly hot day. Wren and Senya were thankful, but not overjoyed at the presence of the monster.

It walked right past Aelen at first, who simply continued to stand still. Then, carefully, Aera stepped to a precise spot across from its counterpart. It too stood very still.

The humans watched as nothing happened. Far off, the gods of the universe were beginning to do that too- the waiting and the watching.

Somewhere away from Daliis, there was Artemis and Eii, sitting at a very long table in a room surely grey for some deliberate reason. The others in this room, creators of planets, watched with interest the images displayed on the walls. Ikina Ioro couldn’t be here today, what a shame. But the others would watch in their stead.

“Very nice.” Artemis suggested to the crowd. A couple of voices echoed the sentiment.
There was a shiver that only Aster reacted to, and then a tone that she didn’t. A single note, not high or low, rung through the crowd. Someone screamed, and no one but Aster heard it. There was a shaking light, and then there was a new person in the crowd. Wide-eyed and golden haired, with just a couple of scales and a pair of inconspicuous horns.

Ikina sat down next to Aster. “I hope you always remember what I’ve told you to remember?”

“What?” She said.

“Y-You were meant for this. You always have been, and you were never meant to be anything less.”

“Right.” Aster held her knees to her chest. “I’ve been working on taking it to heart. It sounds... nice. But I don’t know if I can get used to the idea. Eii promised to make me human again once this is all done. I’ve maybe changed my mind a little. But never, I think, all the way.”

Ikina placed their hand on Aster’s shoulder. It was soft, and for the first time in a while she could feel heat radiating off of them. “You were meant for more.”

Aster further balled herself up. “I’m sorry.”

There was a rumble through the earth, and a few standing people fell to the ground. Aelen and Aera were moving again, running at such a slow speed that they really were just walking. But each dashed forward with jerky and fluid body movements to give emphasis to a seeming hatred they held.

The god of the sea smashed into the god of the land with so much force that the latter fell to pieces for a second, lava guts falling into the sand. Then its body reformed, and it charged Aelen again. Its horns caught the cracks in Aelen’s body, filling the watery beast with a steady red glow.

Aera tried to throw Aelen, but failed the second it tried. Aelen bashed against Aera, who again easily shook off the attack.

Without being aware of it, Senya and Wren had moved to sit next to Aster. Ikina was gone. “This isn’t a very exciting battle, is it?” Senya said.

“True.” Aster said. “I’m not sure what Aera is trying to do. Throw Aelen into the sea? This really isn’t... fair.” She sighed.

Aelen ran into Aera’s legs, and the land creature fell onto its body, legs tangled together. It let out a cry, a thing which it felt like it shouldn’t have been able to do- but it did, and it made a strange cry like a train horn in the midst of a hailstorm.

Aera was not having a good time. It tried to reshape its body and roll off of Aelen’s back, but before it could, the more advantaged god stabbed it with spikes of ice that formed on its back and pierced through the fire of the land god’s skin. Aera cried out again.

Aelen jerked forward, taking a shape more like a dog. It threw Aera forward, where the deer collapsed on the ground, fiery horns falling to the earth in chunks and features melting. Aelen grew tusks of sandstone and sea, and charged its eternal foe, cutting right through the beast’s body. Then it threw Aera forward, where it splattered in the sands, body all at once dissipating into bones and stones. The magma of its blood hardened into new rock, and the trees on its back withered and were soon covered by the sand.

Victorious, Aelen howled- another uncomfortable sound. It was like a man screaming after losing his lungs. The sea god howled again, and stood about looking very proud, if such a thing was possible. Then, it paused again. Stood absolutely still.
“Is that it? Is the world saved?” Wren whispered.

“I doubt it.” Senya declared.

“I was kind of hoping they’d just kill each other...” Aster said.

“And I was betting it’d go something like this.” Senya said.

“Well, it’s not moving right now. Maybe after besting Aera, its just going to go dormant again?”

Aelen continued to stand still.

“Maybe?” Senya shrugged.

Aster stood up. “I can go check.”

“Sure?” Senya shrugged again.

Aster looked about as she walked, seeking some sign of Ikina. She took a few steps forward, and someone tried to stop her. She did stop walking, but only because her mind was preoccupied with Ikina- if she could just find them again, she could speak to Eii again.

She didn’t know how magic was supposed to work, so she closed her eyes and thought. It seemed like the right thing to do, somehow, like magic was some function of the brain she only needed to learn to unlock.

It almost seemed to work. Like she had been able to tap into Aelen’s mind, Aster felt she could almost tap into the earth- but it still wasn’t perfect. She only could sense some sort of clacking network- not enter it.

But there was definitely a sense there, a voice that ceased the second she started to listen. She opened her eyes, and Ikina was again next to her.

“I’ve said what I had to say.” Ikina said. They looked bedraggled, with heavy bags under their eyes and a face so gaunt it was quickly leaving the realm of resembling a human.

“Ask Eii to come here, please.” Aster said. “The world isn’t going to die.” She looked at the still standing Aelen. “...Maybe. You’re not going to die. And I need to reclaim my humanity.”

A weary Ikina turned their head and smiled. An actual smile, but it was weak. “Very well.”

They disappeared. Aster waited. In a minute, a slightly upset Eii appeared. She was a lot less human than usual, her eyes even larger and her lipless mouth seemed to be sporting a number of thin and sharp teeth.

“The world is better now.” Aster said.

Eii looked concerned. “Well, what, you lost the entirety of the north? But otherwise, sure, world saved.”

“So.” Aster swallowed. “You know. Aera is dead. Aelen is revived. The world is saved.”

“Yeah.” Eii wasn’t looking at Aster, staring straight ahead.

Aster leaned over to look her in the eye. “Yes.”
“Yeah.” Eii said again.

With a great heave, Aelen howled again. And then it flung its body back into its sea-faring form, long and many limbed, with a heavy historic shell and a tail of sea foam. It howled, and the sea howled back, the sky whipping up a frenzy of wind that churned the ocean until great waves were lapping at the ocean god’s heels.

City Twenty-Three panicked and scattered, but Wren and Senya loyally ran towards Aster instead of away from the threat. However, this didn’t seem to matter anyways, as the tides only lapped at Aster’s ankles- and seemed bent on avoiding Eii altogether.

Aelen walked north, into the desert, and the ocean follow in its wake, tearing the Eastern Wastes apart as it stepped. 

Eii moved only her head and looked at Aster with pale blue eyes. “Looks like you still have your end of the bargain to fulfill.” And she disappeared with a spin and the sound of bells.
Aster saves the world

As soon as Eii left, the ocean held no regard for Aster- a great wave came and instantly knocked her and her friends off their feet. She winced, still, as the waves crashed around her, circling and collapsing into each other. She curled up, holding her eyes closed so tightly that they seemed to shake, and she felt water fill her mouth and ears.

As she was being thrown about, the thought came to her that she was fine. And she was. She couldn’t bring herself to open her eyes for a very long time, but finally she did, and she could see the waves and ocean in perfect clarity. She was fine.

Wren and Senya were less lucky, of course, one having drowned and the other having his head smashed in by a debris. But then came back, right back again, and again suffered a similar fate on repeat until they felt something lifting them up.

Aster carried her friends up to the surface, and they gasped for breath hoarsely as she surveyed the sea. It wasn’t very deep, just a wake following the god of the sea, but it thrashed with white waves and the remains of City Twenty-Three. Aster took a moment to try and breath, and then realized how little point there was to worrying- the waves were beginning to ignore her, circling her like a whirlpool. She was fine. She climbed, just easily stood up and climbed, until she was standing, carefully, on the crest of the sea. She reached down and pulled the boys up beside her, holding their hands so they wouldn’t fall.

Wren was still coughing seawater, but his lungs eventually recovered. “What?” He managed to spurt out.

Aster led them forward, not quite on the waves anymore but simply hovering near the air- not quite hovering though. Walking, like the air was solid, sturdy, and perfectly even.

“I’m only going to get more powerful, I think.” Aster said. “And Eii still wants me to... save the world before she does anything.”

“I really doubt this is a bargain she’s planning to fulfill.” Senya said.

“Don’t have much else I can do.” Aster frowned. “I’ll turn to begging if I have to. Or maybe this will get to the point where I’m simply capable of removing my own powers.”

They moved forward slowly, still somewhat hesitant in step. “Where are we going?” Wren asked.

“To kill Aelen.”

He didn’t bother to look nervous about this idea. “Sure. Seems possible.”

“Too possible.” Aster lamented. “And far too simple. I miss the concept of a challenge.”

“Or the idea of danger.” Senya helpfully added. “The presence of adrenaline. The fear of blood.”


“Shivering at the mere thought of gore.” Aster said.

“Catching a fever!” Senya added with near joyfulness.

“Caution with fire!”
“Mourning your loved ones!”

“Throwing up!”

“Properly drowning!”

Eventually, they got to laughing over these ridiculous things and concepts, things which they knew they would never experience again. It was a good time for them, walking on air and thinking of death- and if it wasn’t actually a fun time, it was a very good fake.

The god of the sea wasn’t a very fast moving beast, but then again, it’s not like there was a real scale of comparison to be had on the matter. Aster caught up in a short time, walking nearly on the waves until she was walking parallel to Aelen’s neck.

Gripping her friends’ hands tight, she headed for the rocky back of Aelen, occasionally floating above the tall wakes, but more and more simply finding the wakes parting in her path. Once she was on solid land, or flesh, or whatever odd mix this thing was, she let go.

“Are we going to ride this out then?” Wren asked, sitting on a crag and kicking his feet restlessly. “Aren’t we heading north? Shouldn’t this thing be heading to destroy a land that actually had people left on it?”

Aster surveyed her surroundings. “Sved is mostly left. I guess it just wants to be thorough.” She hopped up on a jagged stone spire that pointed from Aelen’s neck, and when she found herself struggling to maintain a grip, leapt back into the air and floated her way up. “I’m going to kill it before it reaches land though. Wait here.”

“Shouldn’t we go with you?”

“Do you want to?” Aster made a face of confusion. “It’s not going to be exciting.”

Wren shrugged. “I guess not then.”

Aster bobbed in the air for a few moments, still getting used to the nonphysics of flying. Then she jumped forward, leaping with an impossible lack of weight from jutting rock to external spine until she found herself with a solid grip on Aelen’s spiraling horns.

She steadied herself, needlessly.

The droning feeling of the creature’s thoughts began to echo through her mind as she stood still, the blips and jumps of its mind finding their way into hers. Her breath changed to match its, and her heartbeat slowly settled to the same slow pace as its. She gripped the horn tighter. The thoughts became clearer.

It was moving, and its thoughts were of that. Beyond the simple empty space of its mind, devoid of ambition, there was another layer of subconscious. And deeper then that, there was series of switches, of checks and reactions so deep in the programming of the monster that they manifested only in the slightest of chemical ticks.

It was noticing how every step it took landed on the ground. It was sensing the wind and feeling the water. It knew what wet was, and it knew what that was. It knew it could not die from it, but deep in its instincts, there was the fear of the cold.
Aster probed the poor shell’s brain, its lack of impulse and its half finished framework. It was an unfinished creation made only to die, a being with a single purpose: water. And bringing it. It would flood, and then it would continue to move until someone flipped the off switch.

Aster reached through its mind. She told its brain to stop. She told its heart to end. She told its legs to stop moving.

It died. She leapt from its head as it began to fall apart, as the water left and the bones began to sink, far too slow, into the churning waves. She dove to its back and grabbed her friends and stood still as its back crumbled below them. They kept on the surface, waiting for the sea to calm.

“So now, do you think...” Wren said.

“I don’t know.” Aster replied. She continued to wait.

When at last the sea was calm, the debris fallen to the depths of the sea floor, Aster grew impatient. With her new sense for switches and trails, she pulled with her mind the world around her until she at last tracked something down. She did not call Ikina, but she pulled their strings.

And they came, forming out of the air far too fast for anyone but Aster to appreciate, an explosion of elements and wasted energy. They were like a dragon of gold, or at the very least, had the talons of one.

“So.” Aster said, as the sky god finished forming from the dust in the air and the foam on the sea. “Where is Eii?”

Ikina shifted their head. They nearly leapt forward and took up their human form, walking towards Aster until they were a mere foot away. Their hair was neatly trimmed, their small eyes watery, and every step seemed to be a stumble. “I’ll ask for her.” They said, hoarsely.

Wren was taken aback at the sound of their voice. “Are you- Are they- Alright?” He wasn’t sure if he was allowed to speak to them.

“Well.” Ikina said. “I am dying.”

“You were dying.” Senya pointed out. “Not anymore.”

They shook their head. “I am dying. It is not something that can be stopped.”

Eii had arrived while they were speaking, and she stood quite solemnly next to Ikina rather than announce her presence. Only when there was a sufficient silence did she join in.

“Ioro’s dying.” Eii said, the emphasis on the word going into a particular sing-song effect. Like she was passive-aggressively explaining the concept to a child. “Sometimes, things have to die.” She stood a respectable distance from Ikina, hands behind her back and eyes dark.

“Gods don’t die.” Aster said. “If there’s one thing I’ve lear- experienced, it’s that Gods can’t die. The definition of god includes the word immortal.”

“A god is only a thing that exists to have power over something, and power over humans. All gods fade and die.”

Senya groaned, most likely for the sake of humor, but halfway through he cut the sound, perhaps feeling like it was a rather inappropriate time to make a joke. He steadied his voice and coughed. “...So Ikina going to be dead.”
“She could die now, if willed.”

Ikina turned their head towards Eii.

“...They could.” She corrected. “You know, in my language, we don’t even have the third-person perspective. And besides, as a sex-fluid being, it really doesn’t- ah. They could die any moment, is what I am trying to explain. It has been a long time coming, a lesser time known.”

It meant something else to Ikina. They cupped Aster’s face gently, a gesture that felt like it should have been uncomfortable, should have been awkward, but all it really felt was warm.

“How long does it take for you to die?” She asked.

“Any time at all.” They answered. “I tried to end the world like this because I had to. If everyone died-” they stopped talking for a moment. Breathed. Had Aster ever noticed them breath before? Had they ever needed to? “Remember what I’ve said to you. You were always, always meant for this.”

For a moment, Ikina lifted their head and looked to the boys. And both of them shifted, feeling so out of place at this gathering. “What about Silan?” Wren asked. “And Laila?”

“Over powered by their older counterparts, I’m afraid. When all the focus is on the ancients, when I am dying- they fade into uselessness. They’ve always been shells. Creatures with simple purpose. I’m sorry if you’ll miss them.”

“Silan was my father.” Wren said.

Ikina looked sadly towards him. “Yes. He was a simple automation, capable of many things but rarely having a need to pursue them. They still exist. I could call them here now. But they will die with me.”

“And when are you going to die?” Aster asked again.

Ikina looked at Eii. “I was always meant for this as well.”

Eii walked closer to Ikina, and then placed a hand on their shoulder. She was greatly shorter than them, almost to comical effect, and they leaned over slightly so she should trace her hands across their face.

She gently closed their eyes with two fingers, and instantly they fell, the air no longer harboring them. They sank into the ocean’s wake without a sound or movement, just falling until they could no longer be seen.

But presumably, they were still sinking. And clearly, they were very dead.
Maybe a bad idea

“Oh.” Wren said.

“Now then.” Eii said, walking forward. “No need to spend any more time on this dying planet, is there?”

She swiped her hand twice, first seizing the humans with some otherworldly force, and second to change the environment in an instant. They were in a new, steel sort of environment so fast their eyes stung from attempting to readjust.

Aster didn’t let go of her friends’ hands until she was sure the ground was real. Slowly, sensory details came to her, delayed by a soft hum of popped ears. This was probably some space craft. Judging by the searing lights and square halls, Aster would assume it to be Artemis’- but maybe all spaceships looked the same. Even with semi-godly powers of omnipotence, she still lacked a frame of reference.

Aster opted not to say anything to Eii. It felt like she had been through this too many times already, the waiting and asking if things were over. Eii would probably start talking if left for a while in silence anyway- probably even if no one else was around.

Wren and Senya, the lately rather useless boys that they were, began to wildly look about their new environment, peering at the odd architecture and lights. At one point, Wren motioned for Senya to look at a small niche he found and the particularly odd electronics inside. Every so often, they looked back at the girls. Waiting, distracted, for one of them to speak.

Eii was smiling. It was a small and light smile, one perhaps expected to go alongside a phrase like ‘good morning’ or ‘have a nice day’. Her eyes, a pink to match her skin, were wide and bright. She tilted her head with good manner.

Aster stared Eii down until she was forced to grin harshly- but then she swallowed that. She fell to a simpler tone. Gave in to the silence.

“What was all that about then?”

Immediately, Senya joined in, gripping Aster by her shoulder but speaking cautiously from behind her back. “Is- Are they dead? Like really dead? How can you do that?”

“You can’t do that.” Wren added with a confused emphasis.

“They died a death. Everything dies like everything is born.” Eii stepped forward, her shoes making a distinctive clacking sound as she did so. “Remember this, perhaps, as a guide for life: We are all going to die one day, and it’s not going to be in order.” She paused. “I’m afraid I don’t quite get your question. Were you asking why death occurs?”

“Ikina was a god. They shouldn’t have been able to just- fall down like that. And die.” Aster said.

Eii waved off her words. “See my previous point! Everything dies.”

“Can you die?”

“You sound like you’re challenging me, but I do hope you recognize how useless an idea that is. I can die and I can’t die, and it really isn’t worth an attempt to determine if I’m telling the truth.” Eii’s
smile had fallen slightly, but she propped it up again, practiced. “Ioro is dead. We still have business to condu-”

“No.” Aster said.

“We had a deal.”

“No.”

“You didn’t shake on it.” Wren added, trying to be helpful in a situation that didn’t need his presence.

“Why would a verbal agreement rely on the clutch of a physical signing?” Eii gritted her teeth between smiles. “Aster, Ioro is dead. I didn’t kill him. He was simply dying, and then he was dead. Without him, your world is going to collapse.”

“No.”

“No?” What are you protesting anyways? You think a world can support itself without a patron god?”

“I’m saying no to your next question.”

Eii shook her head. “It was never going to be a question. The world is ending. You can save it. There’s no question if you can.”

“The world’s already over!” Aster snapped. “Aera and Aelen destroyed the entire north. Probably the south has suffered as well. And even if I haven’t- Well, it’s not my home. I don’t want to protect it. I don’t want to protect anything! And I can’t stand to be one hundred percent sure of anything either. I don’t want to know that I can do anything- that’ll only make it worse when I fail.”

“You can’t fail.”

“Well, I’d like to be able to! I don’t want commitment. I want something to be capable of going wrong so I can get out of it when it does. And I don’t want to be a god. I really, really, don’t want to live this kind of life any longer.”

Eii threw her hands up. “Fine. I can change things. Make you human and leave you on that collapsing planet. Place in a southern country you know nothing about and see how long it takes for you to mourn your parents. But Aster, please, stop picturing me as your villain. I’m not here to shoot down your hopes and dreams- it’s more like your aspirations were simply misguided to begin with. You were never meant for less than godhood.”

“Human in misery sounds better than god in... whatever emotions you’re capable of feeling.”

“I can feel everything a human can. Maybe more.” Eii looked somewhat abashed, and gave a shy and sly smile. “It’s only your half-state that is limiting your moods and feelings. If you were to be a proper god, you could be anything you wanted to be. You could revive the dead. You could remake the world.”

“I’ve heard enough stories to know reviving the dead is a terrible idea.”

“It’s not technically necromancy.” Eii said, frustrated. “Most of the bodies have been destroyed. But you remake the body, retrieve as much of the brain as possible, look through Ioro’s old database- You can do it. Okay? Human lives are pretty simple to squander about with.”
“I don’t... want it though. Please stop.”

“You could fix things. And then stop. Gods have the power to stop being gods. Like Ioro did. You could fix everything, and then be a human. You only suffer when you’re in this half state.”

“Then take away the bad half. The god half.”

Eii groaned. “I can. I will. Just- I’d rather get this over with now as opposed to later. Time still matters to beings like me.”

She lifted her hand and again the humans were caught by some other force, and with a small tilt she bought them to a bright beach on the outskirts of a city. She flicked her finger again and there was a feeling of movement, like their bodies were moving rabidly for barely a moment. Their eyes were still readjusting to the light, and when they could see properly a few seconds after arriving, Eii was gone.

Aster knew what was different immediately, and she almost fell into hyperventilation from the sudden senses of heat, hunger, thirst, fatigue, and age. She was overwhelmed with emotions as well, as though they perhaps had not been sealed in the same way her physical needs had been, they had certainly be limited in their own specific ways.

Senya noticed her shaking. “What’s wrong?” She staggered, and he caught her against him. “Everything, evidently.”

She fell to her knees from exhaustion, and nearly began to cry from the emptiness of her stomach and the sweat on her skin.

Wren frowned, and moved down behind her, hesitantly helping Senya lift her to her feet. “Are you-? I mean, Eii didn’t-?”

It took a minute for Aster to calm. “I need water.” She said, naturally in a very dry voice. But when Wren continued to fret, she did her best to indicate her wellness through a series of waves.

“We can die now.” Wren emphasized.

Aster grinned for a short moment before retching over.

“Let’s just- Here.” Senya helped Aster stand again, and placed her arm around his shoulder. “With any luck she’ll be okay.”

They took Aster to the nearby city and found the first pleasant cafe they could to retrieve water from. Short on cash, it was all they could do, but it seemed to help immensely. Then they found a small park, and Aster slept for half an hour before the city’s law enforcement started giving them second glances. So they moved to another park, and Aster slept for a good hour.

When it began to rain, they found themselves a small stone arch to stand under. Aster was groggy, but a lot better than she had been two hours ago. “What are we going to do now? Also, where are we?” She yawned. “I haven’t really been paying attention.”

“Still in Aeis.” Senya said. This is a pretty big city, so I think we might be near the capital. Might even be the capital.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to do.” Wren sighed. “We should try and get out of this country, but with most of the north obliterated, I suppose we’ll have to head down south. If we’re near the capital of Aeis, then the nearest southern kingdom is probably...” He struggled to bring to mind an image of
“I think Kren.” Aster said.


Senya seemed to be patiently waiting for them to finish. “Kren’s to the east.” He said at last. “Iixo and Se-oh are likely the ones nearest to us. I know you two grew up with standardized schooling, which I have to say, continues to surprise and disappoint me.”

“Iixo’s your country though. If we head there, at least you’ll be familiar.” Aster said.

“They’re not very friendly.” Senya said. “Plus, as the last living member of my island, I really don’t have much standing for me. People will either be mad I survived or doubtful I’m telling the truth.”


“Do we have to leave the country at all?” Wren said. “I mean, we’re not wanted here. We just don’t have any money. It shouldn’t be impossible to fix.”

Aster was silent for a second. “Yeah. You’re right. It’s not really worth the hassle to leave, and I’m sure there’s somewhere we can slip through the cracks. We’ll flee if we have to, and I guess, we don’t really have to right now. I’m so used to having some long term goal to travel towards that it feels odd to just not bother.”

“It was either this or... eternal, limitless life.” Wren said.

Aster frowned. “Please don’t tell me you agreed with that demonic Eii.”

“If it had been me making the decision, I would have done it.” Wren said. “But it wasn’t, it was you, so I’m not going to complain.” After a pause he said. “I bet Eii is listening right now. She can probably hear you insult her.”

“I hope so.” Aster declared loudly, looking about. “Because I am really less than fond of her.”

“...She hasn’t been bad.” Wren said, and he nearly shrugged.

Senya stepped between them, placing his hands heavily on their shoulders. “You know, the only work we’re going to be able to get is probably farm work. And that’s just awful.” He clapped them on the shoulders once more, smiling.

It didn’t take very long for the world to learn what had happened to the north, a fact greatly helped by the new ‘lack of the north’. There were a great deal fewer people left to learn about it.

Rumors were spread as equally as knowledge, but the core concepts- everyone was dead, the great gods had walked on land- got through. Unfortunately, many of the people who had witnessed the initial event had later died in the subsequent flooding, so the true accounts were hard to find.

Most people knew that the sea god had bested the earth, though a popular telling claimed they had killed each other, as to explain where the sea god had gone off to. The majority of the southern nations- Se-oh, the kingdom of Iixo, and the republic of Leian- were land worshippers. They weren’t pleased to hear about their patron god’s defeat, so the myth spiraled into claims that the land god had won, and any alternative claims were false.
In two months, it became apparent something had gone terribly—really quite awfully—wrong with the world. It wasn’t a conclusion anyone living would have come to, really, because it all happened so gradually that it nearly snuck up on the general populace. But from the perspective of an outsider—say, Artemis and Eii, sipping hot drinks on the deck of some long grey spaceship somewhere else—it was really, really clear Daliis was doing poorly.

The first sign, besides the instigating event of ‘everyone in the north dying’, was the weather. It was bad. It was winter in the south, supposedly on the cusp, and the the weather was simply bad. It wasn’t too harsh, or frightening brisk, or painfully humid. It was simply poor, and in any of the grand cities of Aeis people would chat meagerly about how awful the weather had been. Too hot for winter, but not really, and painfully windy.

Next was a simple eerie feeling in the air. The country of Se-oh, two peaceful islands that prided themselves on agrarian life with little amenities, found their dogs nervous and their forests suspicious. Perhaps quiet, or restless, but anytime someone went into the woods to listen, a bird always seemed to be chirping, as if to maintain the facade that nothing was wrong—because no matter what was heard, the hunters were having poor luck trapping anything.

Nearly next, perhaps unfair to even include, came the strange feeling of serenity among the ever-troubled nations of Sved. The war-torn land bridge suffered little from odd weather and missing animals, but most from the destruction of the north. The larger collectives had had their trade ties to Stemale and Renen, and now were forced to look for other solutions to maintain stability. The poorer parts of the country could offer little, but they would have to suffice until the ashes cooled in the north and the country could push its borders further.

There was peace in Sved. It was uncanny. Next.

The air, all over, was heavy but not humid. The wind was strong and always hot. The animals took to making noise and the humans started to give odd shadows second glances.

Then the weather got silly, or at least nearly, as it would have been humorous if it didn’t ruin so many lives. A blizzard came to every country that still had inhabitants. It was never determined if it bothered to visit the ones where most of the people were dead.

It lasted a few days, the snow, seeing as this winter had been fairly warm, and it wrecked the season’s crops. But people would survive—after all, they had been expecting winter. It wasn’t a total upset.

Then, a week later, a blizzard came again and failed to stop. There was snow, and ice, and it generally did not let up. Countries unused to heavy snowfall had houses collapse. People were dying from the cold at first, then dehydration, and soon starvation.

Some were fairing well, of course, but it has to be noted that the minority was not of much interest in this scenario.

Certain poor farmhands were fairing especially badly.

“Dehydration is welcome after non-hydration.” Aster said proudly.

“Are you honestly saying that with a straight face?” Senya said.

“She doesn’t want to admit she might have made a mistake.” Wren said.

The three of them were living in a hayloft with about twenty cows, five goats, and three horses. They did what work could be done for a food, and since the blizzard had set in, had been holed up with
very little. In fact, they had run out of food the day before, and had no sources of water— all they could do was collect snow in a barrel and heat it up by holding it in their laps. Despite being semi-clean water, it did not seem to hydrate well, and was always painfully cold. Everything was painfully cold, and miserable as well.

Especially Aster, who had no warm clothes, a heavy sense of pride, and a distaste for watching animals starve to death.

Still, she didn’t make any efforts to wish for anything else, and considering she lived in the same cramped space as them, neither did the boys. They were not content, or particularly happy.

And that feeling persisted, even when Artemis stopped by with a couple cups of water and a lovely new winter coat for Aster to wear.
Artemis looked cold, somehow, though Aster knew a god like him probably couldn’t feel such things. But his cheeks were pink and he was squinting his eyes, and he was wearing a heavy black coat lined with fur.

He hadn’t knocked, merely stepped inside and poured three glasses of water. Aster didn’t realize his presence until he was standing before her, glass in hand and coat on the crook of his arm.

She downed the glass in less than a minute, and Artemis refilled it. Only three glasses in, on the eve of a stomach ache, did she stop. “What.” She said to him.

“Thought I should stop you from dying. That’s all. Where’s the boys?”

“Up above.” Aster said, gesturing with her head. Senya was already looking down on them from the loft, and began to climb down.

“I’m surprised you don’t have frostbite.” Artemis said. Something in his voice sounded stilted, like he had no idea what he was going to say next. Or he did, perhaps, but knew it was going to be a hard subject to discuss.

“I’m ok.” Aster said, putting on the coat Artemis had brought with him. She drank another glass of water as Senya and Wren made their way down to join in the drinking.

“So we know why you’re here, right?” Wren said, weak, tired, and pointing at Artemis. He turned to Aster. “You do know you’re going to have to do this? We are legitimately going to die a slow death like this. You have to do whatever he says.”

“He hasn’t spoken one word on why he’s here.” Aster said. “Cept the water bit. So we’re dying-whatever. Haven’t you been trying to die for months now? Weren’t we just fondly missing what it was like to suffer not long ago?”

“Actually suffering about is far less fun.” Senya said. “Though. Artemis. Aren’t you some sort of alien? Can you just sneak us past Eii and out onto some other planet?”

Artemis was mostly waiting for the kids to figure themselves out. “I could.”

“So we do that.” Senya said. “Everyone’s happy. The sky knows we’ll manage to adapt.”

“Yeah, but our planet dies.” Wren complained. “Because that’s where this is going. Everyone’s all going to freeze, or drown, or maybe just burn to death at some point. Who knows. But it’s our home.”

“Uh. Your home got wrecked by a lava monster, remember? And mine was destroyed three years ago. We’re in Aeis. And do you honestly care about Aeis? The war-mongering, technology-hoarding science freaks. Let’s find some other planet.”

“I do feel sort of bad about abandoning everything though.” Aster said.

“Oh, your family’s all dead!” Senya exclaimed. “Everyone that you know, sans me and Wren, is dead. Even our gods are dead! Let’s move on.”

“I guess.” Aster said, and Wren made a noise of frustration. “This isn’t much of a life. But are we
“Yeah!” Senya said. “We’ll travel until we can settle, and then marry each other and have ten kids and thirty cows. You could train birds. Who knows. There is no limit. I don’t know what alien planets are like. I don’t know what aliens are like! But Artemis and Eii look fairly human, so I figure we’ll find our way to blend.”

“I want to stay where I know things.” Wren said. “If there’s a way to save this place, instead of letting millions die, why shouldn’t we do that?”

“Because it’s not a ‘we’. It’s an ‘I’.” Aster said. “But I do sort of think— Ikina kept saying, the last few times we met, that I was meant for this. That, you know, destiny was a thing. That I didn’t have a choice, even if I wasn’t going to be forced. Maybe I should trust that things will be fine.”

Artemis, on the verge of tapping his toes, decided to speak again. “Actually, that is nearly the reason I came.” He reached into his coat and gave Aster a small envelope. It was wrapped with an orange ribbon, carefully, and had her name on the outside. As Artemis continued to speak, Aster began to open it. “They made me promise to deliver this to you. Said you knew why you were getting it. I didn’t have to bring you anything else, but I couldn’t stand to watch you die. Up—”

“Oh.” Aster said, only half listening. Inside the envelope was a folded letter and a long, golden feather. One of Ikina’s, like Wren used to own. It glimmered and sparkled like some sort of fake treasure. Instead of reading the letter, Aster place the envelope in her pocket and twirled the feather about. “Sorry. Continue.”

“We watch you, you see. The other gods. Ikina was nearly our leader, but in their absence a man named Drasil has been- Oh, no need for you to hear this. We watch you. Eii is not in charge, or even on our counsel, but she visits. She kept you immortal, and I knew if you were to die, she would have further altered your form in your death sleep. Thought you should be awake and give consent on your own terms.”

“What’s with Eii? What is she, anyway?” Wren asked.

Artemis shrugged. “We don’t know. She isn’t evil, even if I can’t stand her. I just figure you should be alive when it comes time for you to... change.”

“She has to do it?” Senya said, surprised. “You sound more and more like it’s inevitable. What about our planetary getaway?”

“I could do that.” Artemis said. “But... Aster, you’re going to be a god. We aren’t psychic. We do not have time travel. But this fact is... known.”

“What is it like?”

“A lot.”

“Fine.”

The boys watched her.

“I’ll take you then. Only takes a day or two.”

“Will I have to be called Ikina?” Aster asked.

“There’s no need. You can go by any name you wish. In one hundred years or so, it’ll be dogma.”
Artemis began to walk out the door, Aster following. “Are they coming?” She asked, looking back.

“It only takes a day.” Artemis said in response. He left his water with them.

Not long after they had left, Wren turned to Senya.

“That could have turned out better.”

“No, I’m not very sure that’s true.”

Artemis’ ship picked them up with its dubious teleportation capabilities, and soon Aster was following Artemis through his halls into a bleak medical room. It reminded her all too much of visiting the doctor’s office.

She sat on a cold plastic bench. Two of Artemis’ animal attendants waited next to her as Artemis rummaged through a cabinet.

“What are these then?” Aster said, pointing at one of the creatures.

“Mine.” Artemis said, looking up briefly at her.

“What are they though?”

“Very well trained. And mostly human, with a little bit of dog in there.”

“So these are what made Ikina so upset?” Aster could remember how irate the god had been when discussing Artemis, and his enjoyment of genetics. “You know, I though genetic manipulation was the main role of godhood. You know, all that bear-editing. I never learned how to do that computer stuff. Are you going to have to teach it to me?”

“That was... before plans changed.” Artemis said simply. He paused. “I want to inform you, professionally, that I am under instruction to withhold certain information from you.”

“Even after I become a god?”

“No. Just until.” He continued his searching. “I can still teach you if you want. Ikina... didn’t like it much. They had their reasons.” He stopped for a moment to look up and gesture to one of the hybrids. “They used to be human children.”

“Oh. Guess I do mind that a little bit. But that alone made Ikina resent you so much?”

He shrugged. “They weren’t fond of me. I was sort of like you, you know. Lost, but more eager. For me, things were- When I became a god, I served under Ikina. They told me not to experiment on humans. So I did. Call it the resentfulness of youth. The determination to have a rebellious phase. Of course, I still dabble, even in my older ages- but now that Ikina’s dead, I suppose there is less point to it.”

Aster examined at the furred guards. “Are they... consciously aware?”

“Of course. Fully self-aware, sentient, capable of higher thought. Whichever. As I said earlier, they’re very well trained. Ah!” Artemis finally located what he had been looking for, a thin piece of plastic, identical to the shot Aster which had first given Aster her powers. “Take off your coat and roll up your sleeves.”
“Why’d you even give me the coat if we were going to leave the planet?” She said, obeying him.

Artemis did not reply, and again searched his cupboards until he found a small, green tab which he wrapped around the tip of the shot. “This will hurt.”

“Yes.” Aster said, impatient for the preparation to end.

Artemis carefully inserted the plastic thing, easily gliding it into her flesh without a jolt of pain. It was slightly cool, and Artemis dug the tip slightly up as he finished inserting the length of the shot into her.

The pain came gradually, a cold sensation that started as a slight sting and soon felt like it was fizzling. The area the tip was in began to feel like it was burning, and quickly her whole arm mimicked the feeling. The worst part was waiting for it to spread, as she could slowly feel it travel throughout her body.

It was burning, colder and colder, for a while before it simply began to hurt. Then there was no fancy way to explain her feelings. It hurt. It was painful. She screamed, and Artemis politely covered his ears. One of the dog attendants left the room. The other sat next to her, and Aster clung to its fur as she writhed on the bench, howling and screeching to the best of her ability.

At some point, she blacked out, only to wake up and feel generally fine.

“Oh.” She said, and she realized she was extremely thirsty. Artemis already had a cool glass of water on hand. She couldn’t feel the cold in her mouth, but whatever, she was very thirsty.

“There’s a few more of those. But that one’s the worst. You probably won’t black out on the rest.” Artemis said cleanly, holding a box of needles and colored tabs.

“How bad will it hurt then?”

“Oh. Terribly. But it’ll be a lot more drawn out. Do you want any music, or would you prefer silence?”

“Can you talk?” Aster said, bracing herself as Artemis prepared the next shot.

“Don’t have much to say.”

He inserted the next shot, and Aster began to scream, and then moan, and groan, and yell, and so on. Many noises with just as many words to describe them. Sometimes she talked, nonstop, and Artemis would stop telling his story until she ushered him to continue.

Collected, without breaks of gibberish or foul, pained sounds, is what Artemis decided to tell:

“Back on my planet- Seltiabah- the idea of mixing animal and human was always popular. You see it all over the galaxy, actually, among every group of human and alien. Mixing things together is one of the foundations for civilization, whether it be animals, people, objects, or trees. Who knows the psych behind it. My culture had it, and I liked the idea.

...I suppose there’s something empowering about the idea, the wild and the familiar, mixed together-and animals are so aesthetically pleasant anyways, surely that’s why we are so insistent on imaging them instead of ourselves-

Anyway. I liked the concept of merging. So I set out to merge. Ikina always told me not to do it, and I went out and did it. And the funny thing about the universe is that there was no punishment. I
disobeyed a god, specifically the god who had created me, and there was no divine wrath from some external source. I suppose there was divine judgement- You never knew Ikina Ioro very well, but they were the most judgmental person I knew. Looked down on us all.

Ioro really did have that divine air to them. I didn’t know why for a very long time, you see. But it was always so apparent they were sacred in some other way than the rest of it. Half of it was because they were a great actor. The other half...

Right. I liked the idea of animalistic humans, so I took out my genetics software, bought a few children- the universe is not a kind place, Aster- and found a few animals. I could have done it in the womb, you know, but I didn’t. I don’t have justification for it. I just wanted to experiment on children.

That’s always what got to Ioro. The children. They loved children. Big waste of resources, I always thought, though I’ll admit that’s the Seltian bit of me speaking. Overpopulation got to be a problem.

Oh, but I had a kid, yes. Many of them, in fact. Back when I was a more hands-on god instead of living alone in this little ship, I had numerous children. Quite virile, quite fertile, as I suppose I had decided that’s what a god was supposed to do.

One of my sons was named Garth. I probably had more than one son named Garth, honestly, as it was a very popular name at the time. I probably had a daughter named Garth as well.

But this was Garth- Garth, I guess. I don’t know his surname. But for some reason, I knew him. Didn’t care for his mother, or stepfather, or any of his siblings. I stumbled on him when he was young, just saw him when I was wandering the city one day and knew he was my son. Some sort of bloodlink, a gift I’m sure came from Ioro. They delighted in dealing thoughtful punishments for anything they qualified as morally despicable.

So I took to watching, on occasion, as some sort of terrible bond forced me to care. A timer ran against me, making me stop and watch him every few months. Nothing would have happened had I resisted, but I was too compelled to.

He was a boring, weak kid. I watched his life with no interest. Other gods knew about my curse, and would tease me, especially Ioro. They would look me in the eye and lightly smile, pleased about their actions and no doubt thinking some other way to punish me for my human experimentations.

Whatever, I thought. I watched the kid grow. He was somewhat younger than you when I decided to take him, some sort of paternal instinct leaving me long enough that I decided to do something about this boring situations. I am older than his probable life span of one hundred years, but the compulsion to watch was making me itch.

I took him. He was scared, but I told him I was his father and this ship was his home, and he warmed up to the idea quickly. We have a popular idea on Seltiabah, of the weak becoming heroes through odd luck and fate. He probably mistook his life for one of these tales, and assumed his blood status would-

I don’t know. Make him like you. Set him on the path to godhood-

Divinity is not in the blood. It cannot be passed on.

(Aster got very quiet here, but only because she fainted, and Artemis had to wait for her to wake up before continuing.)

Garth was thin, and he didn’t like my guards very much, scared of how the drawn ideals of man and
beast did not translate into beauty when conveyed in the medium of flesh.

He had red hair. Even though now he was with me, traveling the worlds of the universe and wandering about my ship, I was still compelled to keep track of him. But he would get into trouble, embarrassing me in front of the other gods.

Ioro liked him. That’s what really got to me. Ioro liking him, telling me it was nice to see me spend time with him. Saying he was a smart kid, a good-hearted kid.

He was though. But it got to me.

I was already experimenting on humans. I experimented on him. I tore his flesh open with more vigor than typical and gave him weird legs. I gave him horns, and tried out various wings, and for a while he was a woman, and for a while he was blind, and eventually I grew tired.

Now he is a dog.

Ioro was really upset with me over that, I remember, but Garth didn’t mind. I had modified his mind enough that he wasn’t capable of it. I’m not sure what he thinks, as I’m sure he does, but I do know he makes a good dog.

I told Ioro I would do this to any other children they tried to place in my vision. They said, alright. And we never spoke about it again.

It’s nice to say ‘never’, isn’t it? I will truly never speak with Ioro again. It’s a nice, true statement.

There was a weird feeling that came after all this. It wasn’t a curse- the realness of curses, I should note, being questionable regardless. But it was a weird, weird feeling.

I was bothered that I had done this. Disturbed, the more I thought about it. Garth was a kind kid. Garth was a lot like me, even looking like me due to the whole nasty affair of genetics.

He thought he was going to see new world, train under his father, escape his boring old life. He was small and shy, his family poor, his mother overworked. He was too average to ever make it on such a highly populated planet. He had nothing to set him apart. He was too normal to live.

And now, I guess, he wasn’t, but no one was going to know that. I suppose in another way he has stood out from his peers- going missing, and such. Never returning, and being thought for dead. I’m sure his classmates will always vaguely remember him with best regards.

It took me a long time to realize I was sad the brain was too complicated to ever fully repair- and that, if I did, I was going to have no explanations for my son. Nothing at all.

Ioro could have done it, I think, sat the kid down and explained why his father had torn him apart and practiced horrible medicine on him.

But I am not able.

(Artemis was quiet for a bit, like he was pausing, but then he began to whistle. He completed a full song before he spoke again.)

So. That’s why I live like this. That’s who those dogs are. Children. One of them mine.

They are very well trained.”
Aster ascends

Aster woke, and she was well.

It was a strange feeling. She hadn’t lost any of her senses, and she hadn’t seemed to have gained any either. She didn’t feel any different, just grateful the process was over. She rolled off the table and stood up, awakening a glum looking Artemis.

“What?” She said.

“You okay?” He asked

“I think so. What’s supposed to be different?”

“I don’t know.” He said sadly.

“What should I do now?”

“Well, you’re about a god. I should think you can do whatever you’d like.”

“But I don’t know how to do anything!” Aster said, upset at the notion. “I need someone to... teach me these things. Ease me into it.”

Artemis raised his eyebrows, let them fall, and remained in silence the entire time.

“Fine then.” Aster said. “I’ll go about looking like and idiot and see if I can’t stumble onto something on my own.”

“I’d help you, kid, but I truly don’t know how. I don’t have much in power besides immortality, eternal youth, and heightened strength. I’m a bit run of the mill- you have the full package from Ioro.”

“Well, could you try guessing how they did it?”

“Effortlessly?”

“Hm!” Aster said. She decided it was probably something in the mind, recalling her previous brushes with extrasensory abilities. She thought hard about a lot of things. Could she light the floor on fire? Evidently not. Could she turn into a bird? Evidently, no. Teleportation? Not a possibility.

“Do you want me to ask someone? Eii would know.”

“No, I don’t need her.” Aster said. “Though I’d really like to check in with-”

She stopped mid sentence because, mid sentence, she was there. At a whim of a thought, at the idea that it’d be nice to figure out how to teleport, she had done it. She was standing in the barn between her two friends.

“Neat.” Senya said, pointing to her. “How far can you go with that?”

“I’m scared to find out.” Aster said, now afraid the slightest misthought could whisk her away to somewhere else, or perhaps cause some horrible happening. “I haven’t got the hang of this yet.”

“Can you grab us some food?” Senya said.
“She has to hurry and fix the weather.” Wren said insistently. “We’ll survive another hour.”

“In theory, so will the planet.” Senya said.

“Yes, but no.” Wren faced Aster, holding her hands in front of him. “You’ve got this fine. Ikina must have ensured it.”

“Ikina...” Aster began to say, but she had no idea what she was going to end it with. “This ought to be short. I hope.” She said.

She took herself away, first, to a small grassy field on the outskirts of one of the cities- an area she had passed and thought nothing of. But she didn’t want to try anything with the boys watching, afraid of error, so she figured this field would be a fine practice ground.

Of course, really nothing could go wrong, her being a god and all. Any errors would be divine ones, surely able to be interpreted as intentional. Still, she did not want to folly about.

She did her best to think, lightly, like anything odd had always been part of her, a muscle as automated a her heart and lungs. She breathed in, and she jumped-

It was less of a jump and more of a hop, and certainly not a leap. It was unimpressive. She had her eyes closed, her posture stiff from her tiny hop, and she never hit the ground.

The air was an axis she rarely got to travel on, and she did a small spin in the air. Then she went for a flip, and found herself grinning at the lack of sickness. She did not have an up anymore, a concept of direction. She could go- she was- everywhere now. Nothing about her person was correct, or tuned in any certain way anymore.

She stood in the clouds, feeling the water collect on her body without seeping in. Wind blew her hair all about until she made it stop, and clouds blew quickly past her until she gathered them around her.

She was in a cocoon of the dark and cold, and she allowed herself to breathe and float. She could understand the air now, every bit of it, the densities and the formations, the small molecules that led every bit of their unconscious minds.

She spread them out and lay them flat, dispersing them across the vastness of the sky- which was very big, she was only just realizing. So big, as was her planet- realizations she had always knew but somehow had never occurred to her.

She took herself, half flying half moving, across the sky, and she cleared the clouds. She let the sun shine and diverted the winds. The snow wouldn’t melt naturally, not quite yet, but when she landed back outside the barn her friends were staying in, she left a trail of puddles.

She didn’t open the door. She placed herself beyond it.

“Clear.” She said.

Senya and Wren went outside to check, astounded by the sudden pleasant day.

“What about the food?” Senya said.

“Wow. Thank you for your kind words of thanks.” Aster said in reply.

“A good god would grant her people many gracious gifts, especially to the poor and the hungry.”

“Well, I’m appreciative, Aster.” Wren said, smiling. “We were going to die! It’s a good thing Ikina
Senya wrapped his arms across Aster and Wren’s shoulders, pulling them towards him. “Just think! Everyone else is out there dying, suffering, dead, and we just happened to draw the lucky straws of knowing Aster that placed our lives above all others.” He grinned. “Hey, if Wren didn’t have such poor decision making skills and a weak will, I would’ve died with the rest of the north months ago.”

“I think examining things like that is... a negative perspective. I would prefer, and I do think Ikina implied, that we think of fate sparing you. Like there’s nothing better about you guys, it’s just fate singling you out and...”

“Well!” Senya said brightly. “You’re fate now, so you can single us out basically whenever you want.”

“I don’t think she’s fate.” Wren said.

“I’m not fate.”

Wren pointed at her. “You’re Ikina now, right?”

“No?”

“Then who is Ikina? Artemis?”

“No. I think I’m just... me. And I did mean what I said about you guys being singled out by something else. Ikina said they kept you alive for a reason, and I think...”

“Yes?” Wren said, fairly eager.

“What were you- are you going to do without me?”

“More of the same, I guess.” Senya said. “You could help us out, but I suppose ruling the world would come first. Traveling. Farm work.” Senya looked over to Wren like he was expecting a nod of confirmation. “We’ve been through a lot, you know. It’s too much to commit too, but I do think it leaves the prospects of ‘later’ all too foreign.”

Wren stood somewhat slack jawed as he thought. “I guess I might get back into painting.” He said finally.

“Yeah.” Senya said. “I don’t have any hobbies, and despite the wonder of trying to date our mutual friend here, I’m absolutely no closer to knowing my preferences and aspirations in that field of life. For some reason, I keep focusing on settling down, and on love, and then I realize- wow, I’m nineteen! Isn’t it a bit early? Course, I don’t think you care much either ways- I assume you’re planning to ask about something dreadfully more dire.”

“Yes.” Aster said. “It’s not a nice idea, I don’t think any of this really is- but it is what Ikina seemed to tell me to do.”

“Shouldn’t we get it tighter than an implication?” Senya said quietly, and it was ignored.

“There’s always three. Ikina and their gods. Ikina, Artemis and Eii. And us- I think that’s why we had to happen, why Laila had to spare you and how Wren became my friend. We each have a link- and it’s about perfect.” Aster stared at the ground, wide-eyed. “It’s so obvious. Ikina had to keep you alive because, while I could maintain the world on my own, there needs to be a land and an ocean to match.”
“If you don’t need our help, why take it?” Senya said, again quietly, but he wasn’t against the idea.

The unfortunate fact was that their childhood was gone, though perhaps not their innocence. There was nowhere that would take them in with a shroud of familiarity, only strange lands with people who would only be glad to meet them for the first few days.

They were young. They had died countless times. And now they were to become gods.

Have stranger things happened?

Yes.

Aster didn’t quite know how to make gods out of her friends, but she figured it out eventually. She was near omnipotent now, after all. She could give them power, slowly, merely through thought. And the occasional wave of her hand, as somehow linking the physical gesture made the mental work easier.

She didn’t quite know what Laila and Silan’s powers were, so she did her best to supplement her friends with a list of things that seemed likely. Teleportation, flying, shapeshifting, heightened senses- she’d have to check in with Artemis sometime to confirm she was making the right choices.

“If you can just give this much power to anyone in seconds, why not make the whole planet super powerful? We could have a planet of gods, and totally beat up all the other aliens.” Senya said.

“I think I shouldn’t do that.”

“Alright.”

“Laila and Silan had certain restrictions to where they could go based on which country worshipped them, right? Are we going to have that?” Wren asked.

“I don’t know- The north is all gone, and with it, the majority of the Silanics from Roria and Renen.”

“Ha!” Senya laughed. “That laugh was for you Wren, the ocean guy, not having as many worshippers. Not, by the way, for your country being destroyed and all. That still sucks.”

“I’m not putting the limit on you. I don’t think it needs to be there.” Aster said.

“Yes. Unless, heavens forbid, me and Wren accidentally start getting at it again. Then you need to separate us with all the invisible magic you can muster, because I think neither of us is interested in that sustaining itself.”

“Honestly, I think Laila and Silan were simply... different. Not human.”

“That’s a harsh thing to say about our dear friend’s dad, you know.” Senya mock covered Wren’s ears.

Aster stared for a moment, like she was trying to think of something to say on that subject.

“What do we do, as gods?” Wren asked, batting Senya’s arms off his head.

“Just about whatever.” Aster answered.

“Hm. Just as aimless as mortality!”
Now, here is the part where many things must happen, and unfortunately, not all of them can be paid the same amount of attention. It’s a nasty bit of business, time passing, as a year is a disgusting thing to look back on, and every further year that ages it only adds to the rot. Things change, yearly, and the average human is too focused living through it to really pay much mind.

Aster, Wren, and Senya were still alive, of course, but they had become a little bit more than that. They could witness time pass a little less actively. A year went fairly quickly, especially compared to their last busy one. They met nearly every day, teleporting in from across the planet, talking about whatever they might’ve done.

Wren could still paint despite primarily being a deity. Senya used his powers to wander obscure parts of the globe, willing himself to find new niches every time he set off for a walk—a journey that occasionally would take him several days to finish.

Aster was busy making sure things went well. She could turn herself invisible, and lately incorporeal, and she watched the countries recover from the disasters. She sometimes nudged something along, finding it easy to plant ideas in the minds of world leaders. She occasionally found time for a miracle—a lucky bit of coin, a good catch of fish, perhaps a good find of food in a rubbish bin.

Artemis and Eii did not stop to speak with her during this time, but she was acutely aware they were watching, and when their presence was especially strong she would take time to roll her eyes in the direction of their energy.

The next two years were faster. Time is a fairly consistent thing, but it traveled quicker for them. They no longer met every day. The world was healing well, and Aster started to do less. Wren grew tried of painting, his unlimited power removing the general challenge of transferring an image to canvas. Senya knew the maps of the world by heart.

They could spend each day sleeping, alone, or perhaps watching the sky. When they sat on the rooftops of the First City of Aeis, they could watch the crowds move below so fast and so unaware, and they would become knowledgeable about every person simply by sitting there.

Something came to Aster when she was doing this one day, sitting in silence with her gods and learning about her people: no one was normal, it turned out.

Artemis started to spend time with Aster, and soon there were visits with him to break up the short days of Daliis. Before long, she was seated in a long grey room with many other gods, observing happenings and listening to short speeches. There did not seem to be an agenda to this group, but she appreciated that it was something different to do.

Eii was nice to her. Sometimes, she would take her down to another planet, and let her explore that for a while. She showed her new creatures she had invented, and lectured her on biology. The past was not brought up.

A couple more years and it occurs to Senya that he would be a man by now. Wren and Aster, though younger, realize similar things. He looks at himself in the mirror, and changes his face, slightly, to reflect this idea.

Within another year, the concept of boredom is brought up. Aster shows off a trick she learned from another god and turns into a large wolf. Impressed, the idea is never discussed again.

They don’t see each other very often from this point on, but it ought to be said, the boys see Aster far less than each other. The world is getting better, and Aster spends much of her time with the other gods. There is less need, with the seasons, to interact.
Something sets in sometime this decade that maybe this isn’t a good thing. But they still meet, sometimes, to talk. Aster has found a grassy plateau near Sved she could now fondly remember, and it became her new home. As long as they met sometimes, the occurrence would keep them happy and assured, the event always feeling closer than it had been, always striking a contrast from the days surrounding it.

To fill their need for interactions, they all found occasional relief with the flesh of mortals. Wren even found himself dating one for a few years.

They found their ways to each other, eventually, with respect to their orientations. Senya and Wren never seemed right, but over all those years, it had to happen. Senya and Aster wasn’t right either, though Senya became increasingly affectionate- it was up to Aster to remind him never to mistake her actions for romantics.

Aster spent more and more time as a wolf. The animal choice was not deliberate, but later she would pretend it had been, representing herself as the first creature to spill her blood.

She had grown differently, of course, as she did so. She used to sit and watch the cities from the roofs and sky, invisible. Now she would sit and drink with the mortals, judging them carefully. Saving their faces for later, thinking of ways to decide their fates.

She began to play games with them- she had always had her trouble relating with others in the past, and now she had no use of an excuse. Who relates to those who are unlike them?

She ran as a wolf, when needed. When Aeis went to war with Se-oh, she ran across the waves in the dead of night, rocking the warships. She howled, once or twice, in the dead of the early morning.

When Aeis invaded Sved, Aster howled during long battles. Once or twice she disguised herself as human- as that was what she wasn’t, these days- and snuck in with the soldiers only to attack to them in the night.

She did not crave bloodshed, but it felt like justice.

People did not learn her name, and she paid no attention to theirs. When Sved was conquered by Aeis and new nations were formed by refugees in the north, she only watched the violence.

She had begun to keep her dark claws on her human hands, and let her fangs show to those she spoke with. It took her years to realize people did know her name- Asteris, they called her, the great wolf that stalked the darkest moments of the earth, illuminated only by starlight.

She liked that.

It was one day out of many when Aster found Senya among the humans, having dinner with a family. She had only been flying over when she sensed him there, and she fell through the roof and reformed herself by his shoulder. There might have been a flicker as she did so, the electric lights paying their unfortunate homage to her powers- but at least the blip of darkness helped her sudden appearance seem less so.

She put a hand on his shoulder- he looked different now, aged up, with a beard and a new set of facial tattoos that were quite vogue in this era. Below this, Aster still could see the residue of his true, eternally captured face.

He knew her instantly, of course.

“Sit.” He said, and she pulled a chair comfortably close to him. They were in a proper restaurant, a
formal sit down sort of place that had rarely existed in Aster’s first age. “This is an old friend of mine.” He said to the table.

“Your family?” Aster asked, briefly observing the gathering of faces.

“I’ve stepped into that role, yes.” Senya said.

“Does this mean you have taken a new name?” Aster said coyly, the carefully public exchange of information a practiced routine for them.

“No, same as you’ve always known me- Aifen Les-Rou. I don’t believe Ilis and I are quite at that next stage.” His eyes twinkled good-heartedly. It was an unknown expression for Senya to pull off, and Aster smirked as she felt his small twinge of anxiety.

He never liked it when she did this, though did it she often did. Everything becomes practiced when you grow old, and though many humans never quite become elegant in their actions, a lifetime exclusively of youth- and one that lasts forever- allows for a great deal of practice.

“I just happened to see you here. Thought I should visit with you.” Aster smiled broadly despite her concise tone. “Do you think I should call for our mutual friend to join us? He does tend to be lonelier than either of us, after all. Less dinner parties.”

“Oh, Thesi.” Senya sighed, staring her down. “Can we not go through this?”

Aster grinned. She did this a lot, disrupting his life whenever he managed to capture one. It was a game to her, and supposedly one to him too, since both knew there would always be more days ahead of them.

“He hasn’t been happy lately.” Somehow, her eyes crinkled sadly as she grinned. It looked obscene.

She tried to summon Wren to her, as she had often done, and found there was something in her way. The world wasn’t conforming to her properly. She raised a hand, resorting to physical gestures to ease her through the action. It still did not work.

Her smile faded. “Where is he?” She said. She could still feel him. But not call to him.

She flicked her hand and brought the whole table to him, Senya’s new family landing with a bump as arrived in a cold cliffside in the north. Fear crept into their faces until Aster flicked her wrist again and they were removed.

The table gone, Senya took on his true appearance. He too had taken some embellishments- little horns, black eyes, an air of discontent- but he was still stuck mostly in stasis, still resembling a teenager.

Wren was standing in the tundra of the north, a tall cliffside overlooking the sea. He was staring down at a coat.

Artemis was there too. He turned to face them, and then disappeared.

“It’s your coat.” Wren said. He looked wholly the same. “I guess it’s still intact.”

“Yeah.” Aster said, looking at it. It was the coat Artemis had given her on the day of her ascension. An odd thing to have survived this long.

“How long has it been?” Wren said. “I stopped counting.”
“Me too.” Aster said. “I suppose one of the other gods would know.”

“Well.” Wren said. “You’re the one who talks to them. Tell us, next time.”

“What’s going on?” Senya asked. There was a grave feeling to the conversation that gave everything said a worrying edge.

“Just wondering things.” Wren said.

“I was trying to call you over to me. I think having dinner would have been a much cheerier event than standing in the circle around an old coat.”

“Would’ve been.” Wren said. Aster noticed something in the palm of his hand- the old feather of Ikina’s she must have left in the coat. One of his fingers was stroking it absent-mindedly. “I’ve been killing kids lately.”

“Yeah?” Aster said.

“Seems like something I ought to do. Silan did it. They call me Rheyan, you know. Rheyan of the deep, the great serpent that winds without end. I think it’s weird of them to decide that for me. I would’ve liked to have some part in that decision.”

“Silan and Laila at least resembled what they were supposed to be. Or was that a compromise?” Senya shrugged. “I’ve been lucky. I’m some mostly human thing that stalks the forest and abducts travelers. I think Aster’s more the everything god these days, so I guess I’ve been confined to the realm of evil.”

“You don’t actually abduct travelers, do you?” Wren asked.

“I don’t. Sometimes, but the fun only lasts so long.”

“I do accept sacrifices.” Wren continued to sound distracted. “I don’t like it. I hate killing kids. It gives me nothing- but I keep doing it. It’s nearly like-” He paused for a while. “I’m praying to a higher power. Hoping something significant will happen if I do what I think I’m supposed to do.”

“Wren. What was Artemis doing here?” Aster said.

“It’s like I’m praying with other people’s blood and waiting for the sun to show.” Wren continued.

“Is this a preface for something of substance?” Senya said.

“Artemis was here, Aster.” Wren said. He handed her the coat, and she felt something in one of the pockets.

She took it out- it was the envelope Artemis had handed her with the feather, the one she had forgotten to read. Perfectly preserved.

It read like this:

“Aster-

There are a few truths in this world, and I have tried to keep them close to you. I hope this will be enough. I have put you through a lot, and you have endured through that lot.
So here is the terrible short of it all, which I do hope will clear everything up quite simply—

I lied.”

Aster folded the letter and put it back in the coat’s pocket. She then dropped the coat on the ground, wondering if perhaps, now, it would begin to rot.

She placed her hands on Wren and Senya’s shoulders, smiling. “Well. Too late now.”

She went in for a hug.
Acia Fei-Ikacu was fifteen when the great goddess Asteris appeared before her in the forests of Milyur and took her away from her home. She had been gathering flowers- a move all too risky, honestly. Bad things always seemed to happen to young girls who liked picking flowers.

The legends of Asteris said the goddess, great roamer of the earth and sky, only came to those who deserved it. She appeared among corpses and ensured misfortune to those who overstepped her Bounds.

Acia was undeserving, but that did not matter for very long. Like any wise traveling girl who meets a wolf in the woods, she ran to the nearest tree and scrambled up it.

It took her a moment to realize this was not an ordinary wolf- the fur had a deep hue of purple, and was spotted with long streaks of black. Feathers, Acia realized, as the wolf walked forward.

It was not a situation that called for a process of elimination. It was Asteris. Here for her. Praise the Deep and let the Horned find her, the great goddess had appeared before her.

It was never good, Acia thought, in any of the stories. Asteris was always showing up where she needed to be, but always uninvited, crashing events in order to proclaim her law. Exposing evil. Protecting children.

Acia wondered if she was still a child to the goddess.

“It’s alright.” The wolf said to her, and as she stepped forward the fur fell around the shape of a woman, turning into a large cloak. “You have been chosen.”

“For what?” Acia asked, breathless.

“Have no fear.” The fanged god shook her head kindly. “You have always been meant for this.”

Thanks for reading!

No, really, thanks. Ascension tends to be my least fav book, so I hope you enjoyed it, and I'm happy you've paid it any mind at all. Something to consider: I have a couple other stories up. Some here, all on my wattpad (crow-caller). That's also my tumblr, check me out.

I'm also a published author (eep!)- you can find and support me and my good ol' book 'Angel Radio' (A M Blaushild). Keywords: Horrorterror angels. Not as silly as this book can be, but plenty weird, and again something you shouldn't take 100% seriously. I just like to have fun.

Thanks!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!