With Heavy Wings: A *Magical* Gender Journey

Division III By: Nyk Lifson
A note from the editor:

Dearest,

We learn and grow from the mistakes of the past. And we find wisdom and power from the activists who came before us to document those lost to history. I have pieced together Iphis' scaled tales as best I can, in hopes that you--kind stranger--may gain knowledge from this work about a very dear friend of mine.

I am the author and editor. This is an amalgamation of extensive research and extrapolations based on my findings. I am the transcriber, bringing all of these differing languages in each city-space Iphis inhabited and person's that Iphis ran into along the way together into a text that may be read in the odd language of english. I purposely changed letters and misspelled words to hide a secret message for my long lost love. This is a lie, I just am quite horrendous at spelling. I use my dictionary as a pillow but my skills have not improved. Or maybe it is not a lie and Jacqueline will return to me one day. Oh well. I was getting about the same amount of sleep either way.

Before we begin, I use 'it' pronouns because I am a shape-shifting dragon which makes pronouns quite pointless. For me, at least. Everyone else makes quite a stink about it all. I think there is prime potential in just
using a single pronoun for everyone but that is also an unpopular opinion. Anyways, enjoy the book and have a splendid day.

Drink a cup of tea, and all that.

A forewarning,

My name is kitābkāna, or maktaba, depending on who you ask. I hoard stories. I could have all the gold in the world but shiny tokens can never compare to a good story. This particular tale is one of both great joy and sorrow. This is not a romance. Put this down if you think that there will be lots of ‘who likes who’ and dating. That rubbish is nice for different kinds of days, but today calls for an adventurous plot. One with twists and sudden up drafts. Soar through this tale with me, or don’t, doesn’t matter. If you are looking for something with a happy ending, look elsewhere. If most life ends in death, then it is hardly surprising that there are not many happy endings to be found.

So make some tea, lie down a reasonable distance from the fire, and prepare for an epic quest. This is a travedy, a bit of tragic comedy, if you will. This is the story of Iphis, based on their oral accounts, journals, and a boat-load of investigation done by yours truly. This is for all you younglings out there; gender is a magical journey. Not a straight line. Most of the languages used are elvish or pictographic, but thankfully this
work is transcribed by me, edited for you, printed to collect dust on a shelf or warm a lap.

Iphis is not your typical hero or princess and this isn’t really a typical story. Or maybe it is and you’ll laugh at me when it is all said and done. I’m not called Maktaba the Foolish for nothing. Well, i am not really called that…so it is for nothing. But you can call me that if you like--give my weary skeleton a good rattle.

Now, it all started during an unexpected summer of flames...
Note: This part of the story takes place in areas of tall grass and grains.
Prologue:

**Interpreted from Journal Excerpts**

Crochet lace drapes. Leucinda’s abuela had made them. Each stitch sewn in candlelight before bed. The curtains framed the first floor window. Light flooded in through the glass panes from dawn till dusk. Leuce had helped her gram-gram dye them dark blue with the juice from leftover *zilchberries*. During the harvest blue-fuzzy-ones had been deemed unfit for fermenting. Now, from swaying in the sun’s rays all day long for decades, they had softened to a powder blue. Next to this window, were the stairs going down to the cellar and up to the bedroom.

The forest opened up to a field where the town of Dilchlam grew. Grasses and wildflowers ran amuck.

To build a house of wood, everything had to be hacked.

That’s the noise axes make—Hak hak hak hak.

A *woodweaver* was too expensive to hire for a whole house, but their chairs were made by esmeralda. Guests felt supported and surprisingly comfy in seating—that from the outside—seemed unyielding.

Every day on the outskirts rang the song of the spitting and cursing of lumber laborers sweating under the sun. Building a town from scratch.

Carving a community out of the endless woods. The ancients. Their history
was sealed in the wood chip insulation and in between the cracks of the floorboards.

Their home was a simple and sound design. A gopher lived under the one stair that they labeled the porch. They had named him Samuel. Abbas, good-naturedly, joked about making a hat out of samuel “one of these days…”

The step was actually just a large, smooth rock. The structure was painted evergreen in reference to the the materials’ origins. It sat ten miles away from the ‘hustle & bustle’ of the town-center. That’s how they liked it. Alone with each other.

Leucinda had pieced together a cradle out of the same grain as their sparse furnishings. A group of villagers had chopped some birches with the intention to create stools. She loved the feeling of her overworked muscles after sanding down the pieces for the crib. After it was puzzle-pieced together, the couple had placed it lovingly by their own bed upstairs. So excited, so scared, so different. This piece of furniture solidified the prospect of being called mom. She was prepared, the baby had a place to sleep.

Not anymore. That future caved in, around her.

The books they owned were mainly different herb identification books for the area they moved to since neither of them had lived there before. A fresh
start. Alongside these botanical encyclopedias were Abbas’s joyous historical romance novels. He’d tell neighbors they were Leuce’s because he was embarrassed for having such an odd guilty pleasure. Across the room, behind the extendable table and left of the two-burner stove, stood the proud dish container, the ceramics cabinet. The cabinet was barely dry from the fresh stain painted on two mornings before. The wood was leftover from Cercie, a kind neighbor’s, flooring. Abbas had whittled two love birds into the center of the doors, the lock was hidden in one of the roost’s eggs. A small brass master key hung on the hooks next to the door, polished from continuous daily use. There were two other nails, one for Leuce’s ring and one for Abbas’s.

Abbas, a farming man, had a key to the two town silos on his ring next to a mid-sized iron latchkey—to get into his house. His non-verbally agreed upon hook had a bit of fuzz stuck on the end from catching on his shirt cuffs. He always overshot and hit the nail (when hanging up his keys). Thus, the left arm of every long-sleeved-shirt was frayed at the end. Leucinda and Abbas gave up on patching them after realizing they needed—at the minimum—daily repairs.

The basement has mud floors and rafters that serve them well as a cloth and herb drying rack. Without trying to outdo the community’s healer, Leucinda had acquired more natural cures to ailments than any other being within fifty miles. She was suspicious of anyone who practiced
seithr-based healing and always aimed to be prepared for any circumstance. Albeit, except for natural disasters. But this firestorm is nothing close to what nature intended it to be. This is a ritual, the coming of a new age.

This fire is searching. Searching for the woman who lived in this cosy home. This house, you see, is burning down. By tomorrow there will be little left besides the stove, a hole in the ground, and quiet country dreams left in the ashes.

A soon-to-be-mother comes back from the depths of her nap.

Leucinda—Leuce to friends—is drenched in sweat. She is sitting in a tub of liquid. Not actually a tub, a rocker. The rocking chair has a hollow divett that fitted to form, that was now filled with this. Colorless. Odorless. The baby kicked. She rocked back and forth a few times, droplets ker-plashing onto the floor and sprinkling onto the forgotten book about medicinal kelps. The book had walked her into an unscheduled afternoon nap. She often perused pages till dozing off—after bouts of morning sickness. But, that, is a digression.

“Oh gods.” Contractions. “Abbas?”

(The baby is coming.)
She took another swig of reality when she looked out the back window. The sun is nowhere in sight. The forest was... orange? The leaves hadn’t started to die off, yet. She blinks once. Twice.

Fire. Everywhere.

She panics and jumps out of her seat only to fall to her knees. The wood grain knots swirl and writhe as her body morphs.

Leuce was on the ground, coughing-coughing-cough.

Her lungs are on fire. The world is on fire. Dilating. Pain. Not now. Not here. This isn’t how the baby was meant to come into the world, they had made plans with a midwife. But that had never been the universe’s plan.

The ancient pines can only grow once the seeds are put through immense heat. This child could only be born in these exact circumstances, and from the ashes will rise a magyc that has been forgotten, but dearly needed. She crawled past the book shelves and banister to get to the cellar, her only salvation from the heat that threatened to collapse her walls.

There hadn’t been a summer of flames in over a hundred years.


Pangs pangs pangs pangs pangs pangs of pain.

The baby was coming and they seemed destined to go up in flames. Leuce felt the cool mud floor against her cheek. She grabbed a rag often used for
holding vegetable shavings and wiped her brow. She inched her way over to the potato sacs, her face never more than two feet from the ground. Her ears filled with the roars above, the fire was feasted on her and her husband’s hard work. Familial hopes up in smoke.

Her vision became as blurred as her brain, From the smoke? When did the room become this hazy?

Her thoughts were replaced with overall nausea (from inhaling toxins). Needing an anchor, she hugged the potatoes, as salt water leaked from her eyes.

I’d give anything to take his place. His?

Why did she suddenly think the baby was a boy? Her body convulsed. She vomited into the peel bucket. No mess yet. Easier clean up for later. By that point smoke had clearly clogged her logic.

Ironically, their house at its conclusion, made of wood floors and wood walls, was the perfect kindling. They called it their little slice of log-heaven.

In this state, it more resembled hell.

But, where is Abbas?
Herding cattle into the town hall, wishing for the fireproof enchantments to hold. Talking the nervous cows down. Mabel gave Abbas the most trouble by mooing at an uncomfortably-high-decibel. He kept praying that lovely Leuce and the baby-to-be stayed safe in this unexpected season of kaos.

Ripping of fabric. Unheard sobs. Leucinda chewed on stingers to numb her insides. She usually makes tea out of this fowl root for women in labor, but unfortunately she is nowhere near the probably-melted kettle. Her fingers twitch. Both eyelids are glued closed and lines have formed battalions on her brow. Please don’t let us burn to death, she begged the powers at work. The fire heard her cries, but inched closer, hoping to meet an old friend. Screams under earth. Screams under a burning skyline. Screaming. Screaming. A head and two legs. A body of flesh.

The fire is here. Is now. The heat licks Leuce’s heals racing up, competing to be the first being to interact with them. The flames once in contact with Iphis stopped the search, all congregating around the spectacle on the floor. They wailed, confused as to how lungs worked. Their eyes had not opened yet.
Persiphis was born from the overwhelming heat that had been seen as a bulwark of destruction. The pine seed has awoken to a new world with a bit less decay and a hopeful future full of new growth on the horizon.

Maktaba at your service:

Anytime I deadname Iphis is because they have allowed it for better historical context. Please do not refer to them as Persiphis. That is not who they are—nor ever have been. It’s who others thought they were.

A pinecone when overrun by hellfire will flourish. A mechanism was triggered from within creating a phoenix to be born from the ashes. An anchoring pine seed shoots out into the soil.

Fire is the agent of rebirth. Fire is a magyc that brings new paths and life.

Leuce flopped over and crawled to her baby, wearing bright pink new skin. They are red and radiant surrounded by flames. It must have been the vapors poisoning her brain but she thought she saw small lines of flames curling around her baby’s arms like a garden snake coiling in comforting
hug. Swaddling the babe, sensing ancient power incarnated inside their small form.
Chapter 1:

**Aerial Arrival**

Thunderous wings sliced the air, booming--crashing. A call and response of mayhem. The sky opened up and a volley of hell rained down from above, fire, brimstone, and all that jazz. A glaring light so ubiquitous that it deprived all current inhabitants the ability to see. That is why the most ancient slugs are blind.

Molten rivers rushed to meet with oceans of tears. Salt water streaming out of double, triple, and lidless eyes. For a homeland freshly lost. An impenetrable fog rose from the cacophony. Winds wreaked havoc on current geological formations creating new contours and dips. Years of weathering came from the flapping blasts of heavy wings and tumultuous emotions.

This is the origins of fire on this lovely planet Quandom, home to the infamous Iphis and this pile of scales.

Or, so the remaining ancient homeland survivors have said.

Ah, the age-old fable of ruthless reptiles destroying, creating, and hoarding their lives away over nonsense and greed. Such a ridiculous stereotype. Been there, heard it, read it, archived it.

How do I know all this, you might be asking yourself? Why does an odd-runt of a dragon like me care about the past?
Ye see, dearest reader, I am the official historian of lore. Folktales.
Memoirs & legends--any story that is worth a hoot. No dazzling trinket
compares to hot coals under my wings and a fantastic book.

Chapter 2:

The First Spark

Iphis grew. The house was rebuilt, smaller, sturdier. In the aftermath (of
the fire), there was no wood left for log designs. So mud bricks and ash
paste became the main construction method, except for old Macus’ place,
which had miraculously survived. Abbas used straw and ash cakes. Molding
shelves and cabinets into the structure of their home.
Abbas said “the more insulation the better” and meant it. Dirt floors and
moss rugs. Iphis grew.

Among flames of kaos, Leuce had circumvented having to explain Iphis’ odd
birth. Their joint survival story staying her secret to bear. No one seemed
to care, the villagers were just grateful that the medic did not die and was
somehow well enough to tend to the many burn victims who had not been as
lucky. Between making salves and draughts; not to mention how day and
night Leuce was wrapping and unwrapping and rewrapping and boiling
bandages. Abbas was in charge of helping make sure enough food had been
safely stored for winter and shepherding the animals that had gotten loose. Both were so tired by the end of each day that they fell asleep in their clothes right after a lukewarm broth dinner.

Abbas had gained animal-calming as a seior skill his grandfather had studied for decades. He had read the grimeware-study log. His handwriting was atrocious, all scrawling together. It didn’t help that strong drink ran in his veins as much as blood. That’s why he felt confident when his newly-wed asked to try their luck outside of the hustle-n-a-bustle of the city, Abdola, both of them had immigrated to and met in. He used certain hand signal figurations to communicate to the animals or knew just where to rub or give TLC. That’s what made Leuce smitten, seeing his bedimmed-postage-stamp-room he shared with two of his buddies from home. In addition to the ever-growing stray population. There was fur everywhere, but he had house trained all the animals besides one especially stubborn gravel-puss.

That also lead to her agreement to have kids. A man that tender with a three-legged bovine was absolutely father material, in her eyes.
They were a quiet newborn. Always warm, not with fever, thankfully. The baby was strapped to either parent’s back for half the day and then the bundle could be handed off after unswaddling and reswaddling. Breastfeeding was done on the move.

Rush rush rush.

How’s the baby? Still eating? Still pooping? Still breathing. Good. There was no panic. Every person fell into a job. And that was life. The burned wilderness began to heal with each water replenishment. The stream came back with a roar. The waterhole was usable again. Hardier crops were planted for the next foretold season. Iphis grew. The town had now restarted and order was returned. Daily lives regained structure. A grey season transitioned into a windy season. Many nights were spent in the cellar hoping the roof would hold.

*Please hold. Please.* A mother’s prayers.

Her husband closed his eyes and his breathing became snores—listening to the winds howl in heartbreak, trying to infiltrate every home in search of a lost love. The pair often read to Iphis, told them stories. They cooed and gurgled in the way that infants do in appreciation of art. Then slumber.

Iphis’ mother used *apalochlam* to cook instead of fire. Growing in the afterquake of tumultuous flames. It grew in plenty, replacing grasses and
shrubs in places the flames had gone higher-than-roofs. Townspeople had all but converted to apalochlam due to the surplus. needed a single spark and then embered for hours. This intrigued the baby to no end. Their eyes turned orange in the glow.

Only Leuce noticed the change. She added it to the journaled-list of unmentionable traits her child possessed.

Iphis learned to crawl. And crawl they did. Anywhere and everywhere. For a small being who has no sense of direction, they managed to find more ways to get lost than found. Under cabinets, on shelves, behind desks, in buckets. Gathering dust-bunnies, crumbs, and caked on mud.

“The child needs a leash or a watcher. We are gonna lose her--if I do not lose my mind first...”Leuce began to scrub her child’s already soiled dress. Abbas let go of his pile of fabric when he heard the tears hiding behind her eyes, “With the amount of dirt that accrues on this kid I say we just make her clothes dark” a chuckle ends his sentences while maneuvering around their awkwardly placed stone table. He hugs her from behind. Leuce hiccups. She looks at the crib stained with soot that will not wash away. She lets out all the air in her chest. Turns around in his arms. Eyes closed. Face to shoulder, face to collar bone. They swayed, like seaweed in an underwater forest.
Meanwhile, the topic of these first time parents’ conversation, had risen from their nap. Vibrant green eyes crumple and blink. The world is too bright. So much stimulation, big yawn. Lips widen to show teeth coming in. Rosy red gums, raw from their efforts. Little white pearls poking out on all sides. One sharp incisor is fully in. A gum-filled smile. As if they broke their teeth into bits chewing on rocks. One fist shoots out from the blanket, a test. All clear.

“A-chew” A small nose squeaked out after inhaling dust that was not quite cleaned up from weekly sweeping.

They fell asleep in a pile of fabric scraps that morning. What was a comfy spot then, became a prison of inter-knotted bits that tangled around them whilst dreaming. They squirmed and twisted and plunged their limbs in many directions. Until, they are freed from the final bits of flannel that held them. Iphis rolled onto their hands and knees. They wriggled like an eel—zigzagging across the carpet.

The floor is dirt, a normalcy, comfort. Bits of grime dot their legs, feet, and hands as they scooch towards a smell. Familiar. Bump bump bump. They see a toy in their periphery, it’s their belt-bat. For teething. They can chew on the leather head and wings cut from old belts. And cuddle with the stuffed body. Two button eyes—one bright cadmium-tinted glass—the other is iridescent, made from a barnus’ greyish shell.
Hello, it's the editorial staff again:

Which consists of one very exhausted dragon. A barnus is a mud-feeder found in the shallows of smaller bodies of freshwater. By shell I mean a body exoskeleton. It looks like a lobster without claws. Hiding amongst shiny river pebbles. At one angle the layered chiton is grey and at another looks like a dazzling water-created-rainbow-refraction. Growing up to the measly size of a hatch-wings toe-claw. The exoskeleton is molded into buttons, earrings, and glitter dust for facial elegance of some groups. Said to give a ‘youthful glow.’ Seems like these fleshy beings are trying and failing to emulate scales. But, the barnus is a noble benthic dweller.

But, they ignored this distraction and reached a large basket with a lid. Iphis recently reached that in-between wherein they can not walk, but they can stand a while if holding onto something for stability. They touched the intricately woven reeds, shaped into a diamond pattern using the contrast between different stalk shades. They reach out and run their hands over the small ridges. The smell is coming from here. The baby’s
curiosity is heightened by the mystery hidden beneath the basket' lid.
Most baskets in the house are open with a handle. Or they are clay urns.

What is this? What is inside?
Iphis grabs handfuls of floor and spreads their legs real wide. Similar to a drunkard's sense of balance, they dip this way and that, landing again and again on their butt, trying in vain to stand up. A sleeved arm leans against the cold stove. Perfect prop. In a series of pushing each limb out to full length with all their might Iphis stands and with one hand on the side of the stove they grab at the lid with the other, bouncing to maintain the little stability gained. They then reach-reach-reach till their stubby little fingers barely graze the lid enough to push it back. Victory.
“EEE!”
Their back dips back and they fall forward grabbing onto the top. The basket rocks. A little bit towards the wall. A little bit backwards. Swaying, like the couple downstairs. This is a precarious position where Iphis stomps a foot for strength, but the socked toes slip. They impact with the contained. With one support beam gone wild, Iphis tries to hold onto the edge more.
The basket hesitates and seesaws, Iphis is knocked onto their back. Wumpf.
The basket topples over with from combined weight.
“Crash!”
The contents tumble out.

“Pitter-patter-pitter-patter.” “Pit-pit-pat.”

Beginner parents looked towards the ceiling. “Speaking of infuriating infants...” The two locked hands and gave each other tired smiles.

“Bum-bamp!”

Worried looks exchanged,

“Thu-thud thu-thud thu-thud thu-thud thu-thud.”

The twain took the ten stairs two-at-a-time. The wash forgotten, left to soak. The scene unfolded. Leuce’s eyes took in damage.

First, empty blankets, at least Iphis was not being strangled by them.

Then, no baby choking on fabric. Different snippets of jackets and patches were thrown about, to the left of their mattress on the floor. A single bit from the hem of a yellow skirt had landed on her pillow.

Next, chairs are all upright not crushing her child. With each discovery she felt her anxiety heighten coming up with more grizzly scenarios.

Where? Where?

“Persiphis? Sweeety?”

She proceeded in a direction where one could glance behind the table--

“ack”--Leuce swings her head over to Abbas. Mid cringe--

“I stepped on the bat.”
They both hear a giggle that echoes off the stove. Red bursts across the room, blinding the adults. Both stagger. Leuce’s eyes adjust, dotted with black spots. The room dulled to a calmer hue of red. She cautiously walks over to the stove.

There lies Iphis, covered in *apalochlam*, the waxy leaves have already been used up as a natural wick. Each little spiral burned up while the stem continues to burn at a low flame. The light changed and each small patch of stalks flickered. They were dotted in whispers of azure.

Blue sparks. Blue blood. Blue fire dancing in the afternoon light.

The baby wasn’t crying. No smell of singed hair or flesh alight.

“Is this a dream? Are you seeing this darling?” He looked to his wife for clarity.

The color had drained out of Leuce’s face. She began to shake.

This woke Abbas from his shock. He had to do something. Help. Get water. He began to put out the danger. Pouring water on the plants ring by ring. Circumambulating his child until he reaches a sleeping Iphis. Not a single burn on their soft skin.

With tears in his eyes he picked up the infant.

“She’s breathing.” He looked at ‘her’ as if holding a wild *dozaerk* and not his flesh and blood. Turned. “Guess she’ll never have to worry about misplacing or sitting on and bending a spark-maker.” --both actions Abbas was guilty of from time to time--
Leuce’s eyes were puffy. She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Deep breath. She went over to the new shelves in their second house and grabbed a cloth-bound-olive-green journal with twine stitching. “I think...I need to tell you about what happened...that summer...when Persiphis was born.”

Chapter 3:

Wild Child

Hello it’s your friendly historian here again:

My ancestor once told me that when your ears turn red it means someone is talking about you.

Iphis’ ears turned red when they hadn’t let out heat in too long. The fire within them was at capacity. So they’d touch their ears, nod, and light all the candles in the vicinity. Then drink some water, just to be safe. A solution that came from an abundance of wax.

This is one of the many parts of Iphis’ blossoming talents that Leuce kept track of. Iphis new they could go to her when they needed to talk.

Her locks thick long and curled, the color of wet bark after a summer shower. She wore it up in a hair wrap often, appreciating the vows she took
in Abbas's religion and language, as much as her own. She would read Iphis stories while Iphis stroked their father's coarse beard—lying in between the two in bed. A different but—just—as—familiar texture. They would learn of far away castles and wish secretly to grow a beard longer than his while drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 4:

A Long Winter

The seasons rarely cooperated. Similar to young emotions, they flip-flopped often. Iphis’ especially. They would burn holes in their clothes saying dresses “looked better that way”. Leuce stopped fighting it and put them in shorts and Abbas’s big overshirts. That was just how it went. The seasons existed in their own logic, not governed by any reason but the stars above. If beings existing in the grasslands were lucky there would be bountiful warmth—with just enough rain to grow food. If not, well that’s what magyc and internal stores of seior were for. The first sign of winter came with the pines dropping needles, keeping only what was necessary.

Two moons casted different glows. And two suns created intense double shadows. A world of dragons who inhabited than nomadically travelled across the land over centuries; finally settling at the tallest
peaks and lowest depths imaginable. Closest to the stars and nebulas far away. Some introverts went off by themselves.

The unknown lingers on the tongues of each desert snake and child. This world imbued with seior spills and seithr-filled beings. Grains of time fell as towns and cities were built along the backs of rivers. The rolling hills were made during an initial battle of wills between water and earth dragons, when the earthen ones laid down their tired eyes (in a fog settling over the land), sent by water-weaving winged beings against those who fly without the aid of appendages. It was a sleeping mist, meant to last for all of eternity. Each rock and boulder, low hills, full mountains. A tomb for an ancient beast who created this world. Originally inhabited it. A tomb. But all that energy was not forgotten—soon thistles and sprouts shot up and covered their knolls. The mines were said to be filled with their golden scales and diamond hearts. The city of Koumbi lies in the middle of these hills and lowlands, surrounded by heartland or dense forest.

When I tell you that the seasons seem to cooperate never and change on their own time, well I guess you’ll just have to take my word for it. That’s where we find our hero, heroine. Gosh darn it, I forgot the gender-neutral term for that. Wait I’m looking it up, seems to be champion. Interesting.

It’s silly that your ‘english’ is so gendered. Why not have multiple words
for hero that describe the kind of leader they are? That's what draconian has evolved to. Translating to the languages of earth are always so difficult. So many languages have very gendered terms or no gender neutral option at all. English is despicable, if you ask me. But, that might be my historical bias, after all.

Chapter 5:

What the Snow Took

Elodie had been born just a week before the first flake fell. Iphis, now no longer a terrible tot, marveled at how small and dark their baby sister was. Iphis’ had not been that close to coffee with milk in it, as a baby. Their skin became more olive-toned as the sun warmed their face. Their skin relished sunlight—a a trait passed down from both parents. Now it stayed consistently toffee-like. Whereas, Elodie was already born with thick black locks on her head.

Leuce and the baby’s immune systems were shot, and the cold crept in like a unwanted visitor who comes a-knocking far past twilight. Iphis could only keep one of them warm. So they held the swaddled being like mama said and kept hot tea boiling at all hours. Pulling down the different herbs from the rafters and letting the leaves steep, not sure what the right amount of time was for each tincture.
The drapes flapped, enraged by the gusts hurtling indoors. The window was blown open and melting ice caused the boards below to sodden. A freak blizzard piling layer after layer of powder in front of the door and membrane-openings. Not as nice or clear as glass, but much more resilient against kaotic weather.

And Leuce's star began to waver. The lights in her eyes dimming, Her long hair spilling around her. And there was nothing Abbas--waiting on her hand and foot--or Iphis could do. She was so cold...eyes vacant. She was dead. Her body disappeared, most likely to the danse macabre, amongst icicles and wispy ghosts on the tundra. Abbas went searching for the corpse after calling a stag to help him keep his direction underneath the deluge from above. Alas, he came home blue and shaking. No corpse to be found for the burial. Numbness lasts and snow banks remained predatory in size till spring. An icy mystery, unresolved. No tracks left in the snow. The case went cold.

A few words from your editor:

Iphis' mom dying is no laughing matter, of course. That is not at all my insinuation. Blasted editing notes. Can't I make a joke? Just hear me out;
the one certainty is death and I hope to have fun with the reaper before I'm through.

Abbas began to go mad. From loneliness. A part of him went with his spouse. He was just as lost in the ether as his wife. Her lidded eyes and sallow skin followed him across the day. His misery held him enthralled when the sun went down. Nightmares of her undead form strangled him in the night. A memory of her form re-lived in his night terrors. He tossed and fretted. His snores—whimpers and hoots—made Iphis clamp wool over their ears, or leave the homestead altogether. Finding comfort in a weighted blanket of galaxies with kids with moms and no seithr swirling like a living snake in their guts.

Chapter 6:

Move Along

Months vanished. There was a lapse, filled with taking care of their sister, Elodie. They fed and bathed and burped and played with her. They made toys out of grass and mudpies full of bugs for her to look at. And at night they read to Elodie until she fell asleep. If she woke crying, Iphis was at her side, holding and bouncing her. Humming softly into her small
ear to lull the bundle back into dreamland. They had no idea what they were doing; but, Abbas wasn’t a full person, much less a parent after he lost his wife. (It was all too much.)

He tended to the cows and persuaded critters to not live in folk’s homes. A routine kept him going. He would eat breakfast after feeding a stray dog he named, Abir, because he smelled.

Iphis often came downstairs in the morning to find Abbas asleep on the futon, surrounded by an old-shirt-scrap-quilt. Which still, miraculously, smelled like Leuce--lavender and agave oils. She had learned how to weave that kind of magyc from her sister, Aunt Yedra.

Iphis lit the stove and ground the beans. Crunch-screech-click. The handle stuck every third spin. Abbas rolled over a few times, not ready to leave his love’s venomous apparition arms, that he craved a bit too much.

The water had boiled by then and been placed aside for a time. They poured the dark brown grit into the bottom of the press, pushed down tight, carefully they lifted the kettle to pour the bubbling water. The look when he first left any bed those days was one of confusion and dread. Reality hit and he started meticulously wiping layers of crust from his eyes. Head in his hands, his next substantiality: a steaming cup of sugary-dirt.

They wished for different times; earlier memories of falling back asleep after being awoken to their father’s morning prayers on a carpet
woven by Aunt Yedra—a resewn wedding gift for his spiritual practices.
He had once been a morning person.

“Thank you,” his voice crackled.

Back to the shell of a dad they had. Right on cue. Losing one parent is like losing two. Processing an unbearable loss of the love of his life showed in his deepened eye sockets. Bags attached to heavy lids. An pack of wild dogs that surrounded the hut. Him trying to fill a whole his wife left.

They poured the leftover hot water into some oats in a ceramic bowl and added lumps of brown sugar creating a melted-sweet crust to the bland breakfast item. They sat the mush down in front of elodie and began to make faces at her until she would open her mouth wide enough for the spoon to go in.

Abbas realized, slowly, that Iphis was doing more parenting than he was after the first few months of grief came and went. “Don’t you want to go out and explore? Seems like a nice day out.”

Iphis just looked at him funny.

Elodie bu-rgled.

No, she had not stolen anything, though babies have been known to snatch keys, hair, and tickets. She burped and gurgled at the same time. Bu-rgled.
For more food? Attention? Who can really tell what a baby is after? Except, a mother.

Help came in the form of a letter. An archaic way to communicate. It was Yedra. Her grief was “endless.” She offered her home, “of course,” and to help Jeb get back on his feet.

Iphis did not quite recall how they got to their aunt Yedra’s or what color the sky was the day of the funeral. The uproot was not too bad, because when you are small and have lost your mom there is very little anchoring you to the world anymore. What was a once pillar in your life is gone and there are few handholds for such tiny fingers and toes.

Iphis wasn’t sure how long the move took. Deciding what to put in a few boxes. They needed a displacement charm. Abbas took out a bèi, his mother had taken him to get one forged once his face-scruff started to show. You only needed one, so long as you did not lose it. The monsoons caused the wheels to get stuck in ruts made by previous travelers, who had long-since gotten to where they were getting. Their sister acquired the sniffles, Iffy discreetly turned their chest into a heating pad, to prevent alarm from non-familial companions, and checked the viscosity of Elodie’s flem intermittently.
The vagabonds showed up on Aunt Yedra's stoop looking like something pulled out of the drain after bathwater has dissipated to the streams below ground.

Did Abbas bring Iphis and Elodie to their Aunt Yedra's for lack of a mother figure? Was he worried he was “turning” Iphis too “masculine”? Little did he know--Iphis had always stayed true to themself. And mainly, he missed his job at the city stray pet shelter. Where her first met Leucinda and her witchy sisters. There was nothing left out in the plains for him anymore. Gender is more of a river than a quaver. Iphis flowed away from the last stable concept of home they would have for many years.

Editorial notation:
A bèi is a small doohickey created by arcane smithing that involves blood of the owner and molten metal that has been cleansed of any political affiliations. You, dear reader, might be asking what possible politics metal ores have? The vein they came from. The history of the rock they are embedded in. The impurities of the environment (they are created in). Air bubbles can be just as dastardly as misplaced intentions. On an elemental level it must be able to openly receive one end of communication. Life must imbibed within this hunk of junk, turning it into a fantastic way to
contact each other no matter the distance. Community at the reach of a thought while in contact with the totem. The mind's longing and murmuring. This magyc was discovered by dragoons, I apologize and think I'm funny, normal dragons, not dragoons, combining technologies of long-distance thought-projection. An astral sort of mumbo-jumbo. And welding artists who became obsessed with low-heat vein-molding. The infant of creativity. Lengthy communicators that were portable—and downright fashionable—engines. Run on min(e)d power. They take many shapes. Emblems that bodies were often buried with. Maybe we could still communicate in the great beyond, eh? Keep loved ones safe? Leuce should have been buried with hers. A thin silver disc with etched swirling designs. It had been removed for washing her skin while bedridden. With a lack of body, Iphis claimed it as their own. Wearing it around their neck. Holding onto her fading presence. Filling it with thoughts they hoped would reach her in the afterlife.

Bèi's only work for their owner and creator, containing a piece of their seior intertwined into its smallest components. And it would be years until Iphis constructed their own.

For your obviously piqued interests: mine is shaped like a waning gibbous and it clips into a hole in one of my ears.
Abbas’s was in the form of a geckos claw. He had, had many tail-less friends running around in the corners of his childhood room. He kept it on a cord around his neck alongside a small pleather pouch. He used this to call Yedra, accepting the offer to go back to his old job taming wild dogs and raise his children, under her roof, in the city. Till he was back on his feet.

A displacement-charm is a way to move objects over long distances without having to carry or pay to transport them. It takes quite a bit of stored energy, magical fines with coaxing the immaterial plane, being strong enough to use raw magic based on physical endurance of spells, or a natural talent. Most with this natural ability just move people’s possessions they care too much about that will one day disintegrate. Yet will leave a haunting feeling wherever these nostalgically charged items are dispersed. That is who most people have graveyards or ashes of the dead or barrow dirt that can soak up those potent memories.
Note: This part takes place in a city in built on top of a "peat"
(bodies of perfectly petrified dragons) bog by a river.
Chapter 1:

**Beginning New**

This part of the story starts outside the *azamuos* of one of the Great Kingdoms, Koumbi. Which is situated close to the portsmouth, but upriver enough to not be as easily attacked by nefarious-sails or beaten by sea-storms. A huge mercantile town built up over years and years. Their economy prospered from the close-by jewel mines and fertile soil. The mines contained stones of every color imaginable that a *magycian* might use as a consort for their *seior* or gemstones that had particular vibes.

The city gleamed and glistened due to the glorious walls (*azamuos*). Smoky-quartz structures that had been formed by dragons who originally inhabited the area, coveting the mesmerizing minerals. One drag, named Saleh, became so despaired by how his brethren would take, take, take the beauties in the area (for granted) in unsustainable amounts. In a desperate act, he cut off the heads of the three greediest dragons of the time, stuffed sapphires up to their eyelids and tossed the tetes into the crevices far below what flammable folks can handle. Their lust for diamonds leaked to the surface above as gold-ore veins. Saleh then created a burial mound for Waggada, the most serpentine of the three. This created the first organic wall. And from Waggadas blood flowed an underground spring, as clear as his coveted crystals.
The second body belonged to Mende. Her scales were the toughest and shiniest. So he used them to cover the quartz **azamuos** he raised from the ground. A beacon to ships and a glare in enemies eyes. The rock is a hazey-light-rose palette, but the scales ranging from fist-size to bigger-than-a-coffee-table-or-the-room-it-adds-too exude carnelian rays in the dark. Yet, are all glittery-citrine once morn breaks.

The third dragon? It was The King. It called itself The King and wanted everyone to defer to it in such ways as The King deserved. Only speaking in third person. Only taking, never giving. Not a very fit leader. But, it was The King. So the ineffable Saleh took The King's bones from its rotting carcass and built the royal palace--using the gullion-encrusted osseous matter as the flying buttressing making up the main support-beams for the castle. Saleh built a palace fit for The King.

Saleh then crowned himself the first Queen and decreed only feminine dark elves could rule over such excess. Womyn, in his humble onion, were less likely to succumb to the selfish-lavishness. And so this tradition is observed to this day in Koumbi, even after the republic was added as a much-needed balance to having one ruler.
Note: Drawing out formations from a planet’s crust is similar to *winyyan-drinking* (soul-drinking). Both take an enormous amount of energy and the *essence* that is unearthed, can never be replenished.

A series of dams and locks kept the sewers from flooding. Aunt Yedra’s house sat on the fork in water currents, sluice gates rising and falling with the larger sun. The *azamuo* were made with shells, stones, and secrets.

The dark elves inhabited the land after the dragons left; a race older as dirt and skin the color of the richest top-soil, living in the forests along the coast. They were tough. Tough as *bloodwood*. Their warriors have the scars to prove it.

Some say Saleh swallowed seven fertile hen eggs whole, down his gullet. The chicks grew up inside the beast’s acid gut until they hatched. While the great monster lay sleeping they lifted his great maw and escaped into the night. Their fresh skin, chameleon at first, reflected the sky. And so be the resilient origin race of dark elves came to be. They were beautiful, peaceful, but you should never face one in a battle. You would lose. These
are the matriarchs who even when they decided it was best to let their people vote have managed to stay as ruling family. There are, of course, the council of Wyzdom, and caucuses to vote upon different miniscule issues.

Historical Note: Most everyone has one main “ability” but can learn to do others but the others take learning in multiple forms. Seior radiates through the air and water and very molecules of the land here. Most can do basic magic such as finding objects, casting orbs, or communicating far-reaches. Unfortunately, many require incantations and practice harnessing this muscle; other ‘spells’ are only acquired by a potion, ex: invisibility. Harnessing the unseen is very tricky biscuits to make. This alchemy was achieved by studying techniques of the famous thief, Levi Tate Faar.

There are different common stereotypical abilities such as: carrying water, thus the Commune of Phantogoria, and there are sander-nomads who create glass. There are alchemists who can see how things work, and create new lifeforms based on principles of the universe. There are the engineers who create trolley cars, planes, mechanical objects. These folks created the main communication system of personalized bèis. There are mind-readers who are limited to which jobs they can hold by law. Gambling rings have tests to check if you are a mind
reader. There are people who have premonitions and are fortune-tellers. Most of those are not the “real deal” and had irregular premonitions. But sometimes, sometimes one could encounter a real Winyyān-reader. When they tossed shells, they already knew your plenary fate by just gazing at your iris lines.

Chapter 2:

Welcome to the Family.

Welcome Mawu & Lisa. Welcome Teka & Teko.

Welcome sleeping in the same room with three other children.

Welcome Aunt Yedra, Fraprea, & Sinead.

Welcome cranky Grandma Amina who smells like cheese.

Welcome Quiston, the bouncing baby boy.

Welcome Zeek, and the ever-looming Chekide.

Welcome working indoors. Going to stuffy school soon.

Welcome strangers.

Is this home?

Aunt Yedra had been ‘caught’ making a quilt magically at a young age. She would weave patterns that needed a third arm. So she was shipped off to school. She was told she needed to learn to be an alchemist to have a steady income. If anyone had those kinds of skills it needed to make an income.
Iphis saw her routine of work for four hours, then take a two hour break to recharge her vitality. She was a curvy strong woman with time to gab but no time for nonsense. After the first few weeks of training Iphis was able to also take a nice time off. Many of the other kids took naps, but Iphis went to explore the area.

Yedra did laundry and textile work for her area and quite a bit of the city. So Iphis would come along to different friends or clients houses she went out to interact with. They often have tea at her best friend’s shop. Yedra always munched down corn-cakes and lemon cookies. Slurps coffee and does not stop talking.

Her family sent her and Leuce away for safety. Being a magic user was strictly controlled back in her otherland.

But she makes the nicest bedding in the area. If you are a friend of Yedra’s long enough, you will receive a quilt. And it will be exactly to your liking and dimensions. Her children receive the most interesting socks for presents and have clothes that never tear. This habit had carried over well when she majored in alchemy. She was the only one in the family to get a degree of any sorts. She felt responsible for the family, being the eldest.

Yedra had forgiven Leucinda only halfly for leaving. And, not at all for dying. Leucinda had been the eldest sister who had made living in the new
city easy. She could be their healthcare Yedra would mend the clothes and Sinead would bake. But then Leuce and Abbas wanted to build a house of their own together after the marriage. But Yedra loved anything Leucinda loved. So Yedra took in Leuce’s family without question. She had been taught as a middle child to always respect and uphold family. She sent money back most often to those so close but so far away.

The sign was woven threads soaked in moss-water to grow cjhuilt-based sign for the shop.

Brshh ca brshh shloop slosh
Brish brish bresh brish sploosh sploosh slosh
Clank clank clank thud clank thud clank clank
Tssssssssap tssssap tssssssssap

The sounds of cleaning and drying clothes have a roaring rhythm. Yedra ran her shop as tidy as a single mother using her kids as half her staff could manage.

It seemed like yesterday where Iphis was first introduced to apparatuses that seemed too big for teensy hands and threads that needed no needle. The pervasive smell of shaken-out-dust brimming the olfactories. Making coughing and sneezing a full-time occupation for anyone whose lungs could not stomach the barrage. Which was often Elodie. When she was old
enough to start folding clothes and using a scrubber, her sinuses went
down the drain.

She quickly started trying to improve herself physically. To be strong and
agile. Agile enough to run different errands the shop needed. She had a
very short gangly phase. Some people are blessed to grow into their body
well. She always strived to get better every day.

Los gemelx

The twins loved to laugh. Everything was a joke. A new game—competition.
The positive output of these malicious qualities was with stringed
instruments in hand. They traded clothes too often, making it nearly
impossible to tell them apart. Hopefully, once they hit puberty it will get
easier, but probably not. Lisa hated skirts and mawu played with dolls.
Both will respond to the other's name. Folks have taken to joing their
names and calling them at the same time. It's like this beast that lived in
Yedra's house. A gremlin with two heads. They were actully Sinead
children, but she did not have the kind of funds or space to keep them
occupied.

Yedra enseñaba classes on martes noches to whomever could fit, there was a
material fee up front. The rest was donation based. Often, these evenings
became a community potluck. Children running around in the back. Parents drinking sweet wine and idly chatting over projects.
This remained Yedra’s favorite part of owning a family-run business.
Conversely, organizing the classes was also the hardest. She always ran out of fabric or ordered too much. Needles disappeared at an alarming rate only to be stepped on by a customer in week-long aftermath.

Then there was corralling the twins into playing something reasonable for such a gathering. The duo provided their art as muses for the crafting neighborhood adults. A musical interlude for those hard at work whispering incantations over twine. Many looked foolish when trying to persuade a scarf to knit itself.
The twins were an odd pair. Either lazing about disinterested or wired and planning. On monotonous days the two could not be bothered. On the latter the two controlled large spaces of the house with props and always lots of ingredients. Maniacal musings with pulleys and gears and often tacks. Large buckets of sluice-sludge. Bugs and dead rats. Yet, their lowest lows included skipping school and pretending to have an incurable disease.
Other weeks one would be manic while the other slept and ate/starved their misery. Lots of pacing and sobbing. Not much bathing. Scheming and screaming.
"How come daddy never loved us. How come you are the favorite twin? The diagrammatics are illogical and the pieces will never be put back into place."

"DRINK THIS TEA AND STOP BEING MOROSE IMMEDIATELY. Can you not see time's a-wastin? We are running out of it! We could have dark months as the next season!"

"I am a waste! Of space! And your time, dear sibling. Go on and seize the day without meeeeee. Waaaaaa"

It was anxiety inducing to get caught in between two extremes. Better stay out of their shared bedroom that night. One would just be up muttering to themself. Drawing schemes. The other snoring loudly.

It really isn't their fault I heard their father was quite a drinker. 'Bit of a fish.' Is what Yedra called him.

Chapter 3:

**New Buddy**

He was known for tantrums. It was an artform, really. Nothing could take the fight out of this kid. Governess after governess. Combat instructor after another. Eventually he would go into a rampage. Erol wanted to be a hired mercenary when he grew up—when is the kind of wish that a child can not fully wrap their head around. It sounds glamorous and gory. Seeing
death us quite different than feeling it ebb in the palm of your hand. Even with a weapon separating you from a victim.

He was mad that his father decided to leave his career as a ship’s hired guard. He never used the word pirate but Eril could hear the maid’s talk sometimes through the vents. His father had quite a scoundrelous reputation on the high seas. Stealing from his own father’s shipments in his youth.

“Growing old makes your heart die, but not me.”

“If you plan to knife me, do so in the front!” he yelled at invisible enemies and started slashing at the drapes in the room he met with his new language tutor. He ran out of the study—bald head glistening in sweat. Tan suit flapping behind him. Briefcase forgotten.

“Ah, well hello Eril. What did you ruin this time?”

He glared at Yedra and stuck his tongue out. Iphis barked out a laugh that quickly was covered with coughing, not wanting to get on the bad side of family. Nothing being certain of their place thought it had

Eril sauntered over to the twins and chit-chatted till Yedra left the room after telling everyone to get water and some soup fruit from the cabinets in the back room. He then inquired into their recent hijinks on certain guards. Iphis was pouring the pre-potions onto the fabric over a bucket.

*Not very cool. Not cool at all.*
He glances over as they start putting the cloth into a sack to throw into the large contraptions that Iphis felt nervous about being trapt inside. Not that any of that was possible. It would not turn on if living energy was inside. Such were the required safety regulations of any cleaning device of this proportion. So Yedra and Iphis unplugged it and used scrubbers the size of brooms to clean the inner tank.

Chapter 4:

A Day of Climbing

Iphis yelled “wait up Eril!” as they tried to climb the tree as fast as their friend.

Eril’s laughter could be heard from above. The branches subtly quivered from being used in his conquest of the top.

“Come on slowpoke!”

Iphis hugged the tree and kept going, hoping to not fall. The adrenaline was infiltrating their head, or was that the vertigo? *Don’t look down.*

Directly after that thought, of course, Iphis glanced at the world far below them. They sucked in as much air as their chest could contain, held it for a few seconds, and then deflated.
They reached for the next branch while standing up on the limb that was currently acting as a launchpad. Iphis tested this new tree-arm to see if it could hold their weight; it wavered but had no intention of snapping. They pushed off, exerting their calves.

This particular tree was an excellent find—due to the foliage density. You wouldn't have to be tall to clamber up it, just capable.

Iphis hugged the base like a close friend and felt sticky sap clinging to their hands and clothes, trying to hold them in place and stop them from continuing this mad venture.

Eril poked his head through a large clump of leaves and stuck his tongue out while shrieking like a howl-owl, trying to startle Iphis. His tongue was lolling out and his eyes traveled back into his head, leaving more sclera visible than anything else. He looked absurd. They rolled their eyes and laughed while shimmying around the trunk towards a sturdier looking “wrung” on this living ladder to the sky. Climbing trees was always so thrilling for the two of them. The pair spent whole days forgetting about the forest floor below.

“Hey Iphi, d’you wan’ta go all the way to the top?”

Iphis paused their actions momentarily contemplating and smiled as if they were being offered a sweet-treat for free.
“Of course yah nillweed, unless you’re a scared baby field mouse.”

Iffy stuck out their tongue after delivering such a bold line and revamped their clamoring up the tree with a newly instilled vigor. Eril and Iphis came up with the dangerous game of trying to shake branches that the other was on. Not that either actually wanted the other to fall. These are the kind of tricks that only kids with little sense of their own mortality play on each other.

They pushed the last few branches aside. Iphis was confronted with the lackadaisical image of their friend swinging his legs and eating an apple smiling in delight of himself, as per usual.

“I hope you fall and hit every branch on the way down.”

He cachinatted and flipped himself till he was pendulating by one arm and a leg—wiggling the other two appendages in proof of his strength.

“I can see the palace from here!” Eril exclaimed to all living beings within range. Being the younger of two siblings, he enjoyed trumpeting his triumphs to anyone who’d listen. His noble parents were often tied up in political affairs, leaving him much time to make mischief. That meant his punishments were not too severe, much to Iphi’s jealousy.
That day's adventuring would cost them doing the linen laundry for a week, which wouldn't have been that bad, but the twins loved to prank anyone allotted this specific duty. Teka had seen hallucinations of yellow lizards for the past week due to twin tampering with sud-sprays. Yet, a sunset with a potential lifelong pal, was worth it.

"Don't singe your wings. You'd miss me." He teased.

Two could play that game, "Well I know I would never miss your hooliganry. Because I am a law abiding goody-good."

The sun was a still-burning ember, leaving purples, pinks, and a rich vermillion instead of ashes as an aftermath. The heat of the day was over and soon night brought a chill that made Aunt Yedra question whether or not Iphis was going to wear something warmer. Even though she knew Iffy did not get cold, ever.

She was trying to do her sister justice, Leuce, Iphis' mom. And just like that thoughts of her came creeping up like a disease that will not go away. She had died giving birth to Iphi's baby sister, Elodie. Who carried the weight of her death since the day she was born, blaming herself for not having a mother in her life. For changing everything. Iphis loved Elodie and never blamed her once. Now Yedra, was nothing like their mom.
Stop thinking about her. Stop. You are not allowed to get upset. Not here, not now. What will Eril think? The fiddle the memento around their neck—looking skyward to keep calm.

“Hey Persiphis...”

Their skin crawled at the name. It tasted like venom.

Swallowing poison, they turned to him, he was covered in orange light. His eyes were not meeting theirs; half of his face hidden in shadow.

Oh right, I need to reply. That’s weird. Why can’t I remember my own name?

Iphis inhales through their nose and let out the first sound that could pass for conversation. Fiddling with their fingernails that become pahoehoe oozes. Magma cooling on their nails forming hardened surfaces when hitting the tree-top breeze.

The smell is thankfully going with the wind so Eril does not notice this oddity. Just another random seithr leak. But they kind of liked the basalt polish.

“I’ve been thinking about going by just Iphis actually...?”

“Yeah? That’s cool. I’m still going to call you a berry-head.”

“Pffft.”
They give him a shove, still gripping the grey-breen bark with their other hand. He pretends to fall dramatically but then crawls back to his perch. A pause of silent reflection on both their parts.

*That was so easy! He was just fine with it?*

*I will not cry.*

They had seen him cry before, but that was a tantrum he threw. Iphis did not want him to get the idea that they were some *week-lerk.*

“Wait this is perfect for you! I’ll call you “Iffy” because of how wishy-washy your gender identity seems.”

Their father had told them, one winter night many many harvests ago, that “crying gets you nowhere.”

He had to be right. He was an adult, after all.

The sun may be gone, but they felt like the world had only gotten brighter. Even with such a puerile nickname. They rip off a few leaves and examine them for bug-trails. Curious children often get up to impressive feats of impishness.

“My dad, Sir Regina is my biological parent I incubated in and popped out of.”

They eye his dark-braids hoping to get to one day meet this mysterious man.
Eril rested his head on Iphis’ shoulder,

“Well, this was a lot of fun, thanks for hang’n and swang’n. Maybe if we hurry back we can lessen the worry of your aunt, hmm?”

They jerk their head and nod in agreement, *yes we should leave the forest*... even though neither really wanted to.

Chapter 5:

The Wisdom of Turtles

Everything felt wrong. ‘Persiphis’ had felt wrong for a while. Years of not responding when called, in outer space. A pre-teen never wanting to wear a clay mask for dress-up.

Feeling morose, they went wandering on a path they had seen on the way into the city—until it ended—then stepped over a rotted log, housing slimy fungi that could explode into spores, if only touched. It was like their legs new which way to go.

They came upon an abandoned temple.

Lazuli-mosaic tiles littered the ground. Walking over them felt like walking on the sky. But, not in the vertigo-inducing way. The protective stone wall was crumbling, making it look like the old place of worship was
amongst the clouds. They held their breath so as not to fall through the cracks. A mere mortal navigating their way through gods-lands. A path not traveled in many a moon.

The once golden dome had a chunk missing, as if someone-or-thing had taken a bite.

They heard an animal of the sky rustling the tree canopy. They pushed the stone door, breaking a sweat. It budget just enough for them to slide through.

In old places of worship there was still a *magyc* in the air, faith bound itself into the skeleton of a building. The ground is hallowed here, and Iphis could feel it. They breathed a sigh of relief. Old power is not to be trod upon, though, so they walked with care—gliding their fingers across the cool marble entranceway. The *seithr* could be relied upon for quick reflexes if the ceiling collapsed.

The land is ancient—suns and moons will rise. Stars will shine in the distance. Stories will always be told. These are truths sewn into the fabric of being. The ground and this temple will be here, ever-changing, when all of us have turned to dust. Iphis took solace in these truths, but needed to be reminded often. That's what always lead them back to the
woods. The place had not shared its existence with another in a long time. Structures need to share themselves, just like siblings. The desire might not always be apparent, but the need is still there.

They stumbled in the dark over and under stones. Through corridors. Blindly feeling their way. They hit a mass of boulders that “thwumped” them onto the ground.

_oof_.

They closed their eyes and concentrated on the heat that rolled beneath the surface of their skin. Small flames encircled their finger tips in neon bands. Looking like fine jewelry. Iphis climbed the rubble, pebbles and debris rolled past them clacking onto the floor and rolling off into the dark unknown.

A large turtle, older than any tree, sat on the main altar. Beautiful writing was scrawled over the back altar, an ancient elvish language lost to the winds. The words glowed copper. The missing bit of the dome allowed rays of light to shine in, letting the gods back in to what was rightfully theirs.

Iphis could see the wisdom in his wrinkles. They knew he understood a great deal more than the stars did. He had lived lifetimes, turtles have
time. Time to think. To have tea with death and cake with life. His eyelids
opened. His shell was a dark, dark jade, reflective and magnificent. His
toenails were like polished stones.

They held themselves, someone had to. Touched their mother’s bèi “I am
lost.”

Iphis had been told by their aunt that turtles were good for figuring out
those kinds of things. The deep water topics.

“Who am I?”

They just stared until the walls became floating panes.

You have dragon’s veins. The answers are within.

They closed their eyes and listened to the world around them. Crickets.

Drips. A spider with a meal. And entered a trance.

Chapter 6:

Phoenix

They had traveled into the void within themself while meditating on a
bug-eaten carpet. They centered themselves to find the turtle was gone.

How something so large and heavy could silently disappear was a mystery
to muse over at breakfast. Their stomach rumbled.
The sky greeted them; Iphis' favorite moon walked them home.

That night they cut off all their hair with a knife. They hacked and huffed in front of a wash basin, not caring about neatness. Checking out their muscles in the mirror, blowing kisses to admirers. The mirror had rust at the bottom that if they stepped in the right spot hid the right parts. Making them feel normal. And cute as heck. They had grown their hair to fit into the family and to match their mom's. But that was not them.

There was a pile on the table and some trimmings on the floor. Iphis gathered up each strand, delicately preparing the corpse of others' expectations and assumptions. Outside in the cool night air, the now detached body parts could be burned.

Just like that, Iphis set them alight. And the hair too, became ash in their hands. Just like the secret epistles boys gave them. Just like their first home. Just like a dead walrut's body Iphis had discovered with a friend.

This wasn’t a burial, it was a send off.

“Goodbye.”

Chapter 7:

The Same, But Different
The next morning Zeek teased them. “Your head is small and fuzzy, just like a walrut’s butt!”

Iphis smiled and took it.

Smile. Smile. Smile.

Wait till they are all gathered.

Abbas came in. Perfect timing. Their sister gave them a curious morning smile.

Aunt Yedra made a comment. “Persiphis, all your long, beautiful hair is gone.” She teased. It stung.

“So is Persiphis.” The room went silent. The twins both held spoons suspended in mid-air over porridge covered in hot sauce; Abbas turned around with one mud caked boot still on.

A spell was upon the room.

“I am not Persiphis, I am not a lady, I am Iphis. I am going to wear my hair short and that is that.”

The adults exchanged looks. She smiled. Abbas nodded.

The twins poked each other with their utensils. Iphis’ younger sister grinned a half-tooth grin. Each sound or movement in the room was
overwhelming for Iphis. They turned their back as time slowed. Their hands shook as they got a spoon and a bowl out from the cupboard. They held in a sigh.

Iphis ju-jumped when their father’s hand landed on their shoulder. They stood still for a moment listening to his breaths, longer than their own. The turtle was right.

“I love you, no matter how long your hair is, per--Iphis.”

Tears filled their eyes, but they didn’t want Teka to think they blubbered like a wee babe. They sniffled.

And then Iphis found themselves enveloped in a dad hug. Broad shoulders and long arms held them, keeping them on the ground. He must have knelt down so that he need not be awkwardly reaching at an angle, but it was one of the best hugs Iphis had ever had. He loosened his arms. Iphis turned and buried their head in his chest. His beard tangled with the newly formed, bristly-mop on their head.

Time resumed. Normalcy fell back into place with routine. But Iphis had shed a layer of skin.

Chapter 8:
Ecdysis

At school, the students did not recognize them. Even though their personality hadn't changed, even though this is who Iphis always had been. Girls stuck their tongues out at the new creature while the boys watched from afar, calculating. Iphis kept quiet, so as not to break the facade. They weren't an actor anymore, but had been thrust into the spotlight. "Are you a boy or a girl?"

Iphis smiled. "I'm faster than you!" and tagged marleiah whose fjärils burst from her tummy. Magenta wings flapping quickly.

"Pers--dungit--sorry, Iphis. There is someone we know who is literally a shrub that you see everyday." It was pretty awesome how quickly children pick up on new language. Kids are much smarter than adults give them credit for. Especially kids who grow up learning and speaking multiple tongues in such a centered city.

The evolution of their name was delightful. Everytime they introduced themselves from that point forward, a smile glittered on their lips. A gleeful feeling overcame them. And for others to use 'Iphis', well let's just say, they felt like they could fly to the moon and back.

Chapter 9:
**Floating** (Iphis)

The cliff face looms before me. The shadow from an overhang blankets me, the sun is close to setting. I got here early so I could take my time learning to climb this, I am determined to conquer this wall.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

*You can do this. You can do this. I can do this.*

I chant over and over in my head. I reach up and grab the first sturdy-looking handhold. The rock face is rough, but my calluses are up to the challenge. My right foot finds a hollow to dip into and I begin to ascend. Hand over hand. Constantly calculating which route gets me to the top most efficiently. I dread the little moments where nothing be within reach of their worn-cowhide boots. I tried to keep my mind on the climb. Unfortunately, I was getting distracted by thoughts of my best friend. *If Eril can do this, so can I. I will not be left behind.* He had taken the rock by storm as if he was shimmying up a ladder, not bouldering at a seventy degree angle.

My palms have already started to sweat, great.

I am searching for the next crevice to borrow my hand into, acting as an anchor for me to swing my leg up to an indent that looks a bit like an eye near my waist. I stretch on my toes. *Almost there.*

My breathing is choppy from the adrenaline and exertion. I need a break, but know that I have to keep going. My destination is a ledge still that
sits approximately fifteen feet above my head—which is, apparently, the new “spot”.

Eril always loved a challenge. Iphis mainly felt like they were constantly trying to keep up with a hurricane, except when it comes to adventuring, that is why their bond stayed stable as a scale. Neither of them could settle for kicking rocks around the market with friends after school. The rascals had rendezvous in the woods since they were old enough to dash off into them when teachers and parents were not paying attention. With the chaos of so many children and so few adults to watching over them, it was too easy. And after we climbed to the top of one of the old-growth trees together—jackal laughing all the way— instant friendship.

Since then, Eril and I started picking spots to rendezvous. We changed it every week. That way if anyone tried to find us, that task turned out to be nearly impossible. This particular meeting location was by far one of the more difficult points to reach. I did not want to appear weak when he suggested it the other day, he was practically bouncing out of his skin
with joy at the prospect of us exploring possible caves at such great heights. I could not take that happiness from him, even though my stomach felt knotted when I saw how high up the ledge was.

My legs are too short and I am pulling myself up purely by my arms to the next single crevice that barely fits my toes. This is getting hairy, but I am so close.

My arms start to shake with tremors of exhaustion. I stayed up too late looking at the stars. Hand over hand. My calf and thigh muscles strain to keep me balanced and lift me further.

My head smacks into the overhang, I see spots. I am stunted. One rookie mistake and my hand misses the bump I was grabbing at.

Falling.

I am falling...falling...down. The air rushes past my ears. I hold my breath. My eyes are shut tight to the point of making them water. My body is weightless. My stomach can not keep up with the velocity at which I am most likely hurtling towards the tops of trees.

The tips of tree limbs tried to halt their fall, lashing out at exposed skin in a vague passing. The limbs wanted to pull them into a safe embrace, but not today. They start picking up speed, hurtling towards the ground like a meteor. Panic took over. Their skin was red hot, itching. Every moment was so fast but so slow, the hypocrisy of time during free-fall. Their lips open and a yell was ripped from within them. The forest canopy above—a blur,
everything—a blur. No time for the famous pre-death playback, there wasn't enough time to dig up a list of regrets.

*So this is how it ends.....*

Suddenly the heat radiating from their limbs jolted as if conducting a beam of lightning. Their vision exploded to white. Did they hit the ground?

*How many bones did I break?*

A ball of energetic-chaos lit up their nerve endings, harshly. Prognosis: not dead, yet. This illumination spawned from deep, deep within them, different from their storehouses of seior.

Iphis opens their eyes finally only to be blinded by brilliance, again. If not for being both a first hand witness and participant, they would not have concluded what happened even in their wildest daydreams.

*But, I should be dead?*

My body gleamed all over, personifying a torch. Astoundingly I managed to pause a leaps distance away from solid ground. At first my head is pounding too much for me to freak out. I am frozen in this position. A gust of wind circumambulates around me and through my hair, *I am alive?*
Air gurgles out of me, sounding like the moan of a dying animal. I start sobbing and drinking in as much oxygen as my lungs will allow. My limbs flail and I struggle to gain a sense of gravity with no relief. I am still suspended, this moment is still happening. It hits me forcefully that I have somehow managed to produce magyc, and on top of that anxiety-inducing revelation, I am able to fly.

Oh gods. This is not going to end well.

I try to clear my mind and just breath. I will never get out of this situation if I do not calm down. My little heart is trying to win a race out of my ribcage.

Breath in. Breath out.

You can do this. You can do this. I can do this.

My eyes flutter close and my mind slowly approaches the atomic-energy blazing out of my chest cavity. I feel my thoughts being singed. I am burning alive as I am sucked into this ball of chaos my spirit has created. My skin is humming with more energy and I feel like one of those torches that crackles and and is not satisfied with slowly burning. I am rising higher into the air. I know this because I feel the warmth of the sun's rays hit my arms. I try to think heavy thoughts.


I shiver and some of the heat is released. I think back to the winter when we did not have enough and my baby sister's feet were purple. I held him
close to me sharing my warmth. I tried to image the fire and love within me flowing into him and how I truly felt the ice of winter sinking into my bones for the first time. I think of jumping into Oniron Lake with Eril right after the first snowfall and how our lips were blue and our teeth chattered. My body is quaking as my feet touch the ground.

*Thank the gods.*

I am made of ice and stone. I shiver on the ground too cold to yell for help. Too cold to move. I hear crunching leaves and panting, my fingers anxiously grab handfuls of dirt for support. Eril is next to me, I try and become a small field mouse who can scurry away.

“Oh my divines. Iphi...” his pre-pubescent voice cracks, “that fall—you should be...”

I hear the word he almost said bounce off bark and around my head.

“Are you ok?”

I peer up at his shoes. My body is still not my own.

*I hardly know.*

Chapter 10:

**Ancestors of the Night**

“All of the houses are made out of shimmering white sky rock, and the best thing to do when overheated is to lie down on their cool surface. During
the hottest days of a season lizards can be found basking on the stone, with
the sun on their backs and the cooling powers on their tummy.”

“Where did they come from?”

“There are many hills and valleys in the area where the dragons of old hid
in caves both high and low. Before the dragons came they sent smaller
reptile brethren out into the sands to see if it was habitable. These
camouflaging serpents scoured the land searching far and wide until they
found what is now the location of Kingdom of Abdola, they all shed their
skin so when the great flying giants were overhead, they knew where where
to make a good home. If you go to the ruins in the middle, you will see
scorch marks and carvings made with claws. The dragon-gods deemed it the
perfect oasis in such a harsh climate so they left guardians to watch over
the land after they had moved on. That is why there are more types of
snakes in Abdola than anywhere else, all with intricate patterns and
different bodies.”

Then their father pulled out the pouch he kept attached to a cord around
his neck. He undid the bronze clasp to show them a piece of snake skin
shimmering like a diamond. Iphis’ eyes widened into plates.
“It is said that the gods are a race of *Serpentem* from another time who came here for sanctuary after a great war destroyed their society. They came just after the stars had kissed the ground and before the decades of floods. They were intelligent and breathtaking, with wingspans wider than a gorge and teeth as thick as brackwood-ash trees.”

They paused to pour water from their *kanten*, a water container *magically* connected to the source, down their throat. Some ran out onto their cheek for lack of sitting up. They wiped it away and clicked the cap securely back on.

“Some say the sun came from 100,000 of these creatures breathing fire onto a third moon we had, starting it on the path to become the sun. There was a time of prosper, until elven-bipeds came along. These two legged mutts were nothing compared to the might of *Bidea the Sky Snake*. Bidea was a bit of a trickster, while many others had found eternal companions or went off to explore more, she studied these elves. Helped them succeed, but also played wicked tricks. Her laughter echoed for days when flying away after a classic gag.

She demanded artistic tribute. Pottery, landscapes, scarves, and murals filled her cave. She drink with the warriors and gave advice to single mothers. Her laugh made the ground shake and her temper blinded anyone
too close. As time went on she became older and less interested in meddling in the short lives of two-legs. Bidea hardly left her cave, content to be surrounded by years of craftsmanship by those she had loved. Eternity became a grave affair in her eyes. One day she was out hunting when she heard a scream, searching frantically she came to find a little girl unconscious with large gashes on her head and back. The blood colored the sand to look like coral. Bidea knew there was no time to bring this child back to a healer. So the great serpent ripped off some of her belly skin to patch the child’s wounds. She then took her claws and slashed past the scales on her shoulder. It oozed out slowly, similar to sap. She gently held the frail youngling up to her collarbone, to drink back blood that had been lost. Part of the drag’s magycal essence was deplenished after giving away so much of her body. She began to shrink while holding her blood-kith. With a final effort she flew both of them back to her cave. Instead of going out to replenish herself, Bidea cried healing tears out of her second lids. With each drop the dragon shrunk. Smaller and smaller. Till she was elfish. With draconian additions of parietal eyes and double lids. With long, dark hair. With scales protecting her joints. Pointed ears, dark skin.

And the child, named Abdola, awoke with centuries of power tied into her being.”

—Abbas’s bedtime-tale of his family heritage and first home.
Chapter 11:

**Tantrums**

There were no books left on any shelves in a palace corridor and every bit of furniture he could lift had been toppled. Eril had screaked and screamed. Yipped and howled. His anguish echoed off the walls for hours after he had settled down, which in turn caused a complete uproar with the staff. Usually he cried when in a fury. Which just added to the frustration of it all.

Chapter 12:

**Fine Dining**

Eril grunted and scuffed his boots. He didn’t usually visit in the morning, the two tried to keep their antics below sightline if they could help it. Yet, here he was. Not even looking Iphis in the eyes. Odd.

“Iphi, you know how I got a bit upset and broke some stuff in the house last week...”

Air whistles through his gritted teeth.

“Well my parents are making me go to this banquet with other nobles and royals and the whole barkin lot of posh ‘who’s who’...ugh”

His scowl deepens.
“Since you were there and my parents seem to think we are more than friends—”

“They know about us being blood beasts?”

Finally a hint of a smile, he shakes his head, but this time he is looking his companion in the eyes.

“They have extended an invitation to you, Iffy old pal. and, and, You definitely don’t have to come if you don’t want to!” He examines his shoes. The house he has yet to be invited into.

a heartbeat or two passes.

“Yeah I’ll come, but there is no way in bums that I am wearing a dress, got it?”

They are sitting on an oversized pillow that is acting more like quick-sink than a plush velvet seat cushion. There are a lot more forks than Iphis knows what to do with. They had, thus far, only touched the silverware that others were using and had not requested anything of the watchful servants, even when the soup was in dire need of flavoring.
Everyone stands for the royal family, six beautiful women emerge and one lanky figure in a cape, all with circlets on their heads except for him. The queen entered last with a smile in her eyes and a gold circlet on her head. Balanced on top of her billowing afro.

“Friends, family, colleagues. Let us be seated.”

She takes the first sip of wine—as is customary of any host—the goblet changes shape and wine appears in front of every member. A smaller chalice appears in front of Iphis. They take a sip and hate the bitterness.

Iphis realized that everything had been appetizers beforehand, which was unfortunate since they had already eaten their weight in bread. Eril snickered from across the table. He was getting pure amusement from his pal entering his boring world.

One of the most beautiful people Iffy had ever seen actually sat in the empty seat next to them. He smiled at them, their mouth was dry. Everyone sat, Iphis spilled water in their lap and tried to play it off by covering it with a napkin, they refused to make eye contact with Eril.

Three roast pigs were brought out. Iphis began to sweat and tried to pick the right fork.
They could feel his closeness when they were cutting roasted green
verduls. Iphis had only ever eaten purple ones.

They touched hands when reaching for the butter plate. Goose pimples
broke out on their arms.

They felt ridiculous in the suit Eril had loaned them. The sleeves were too
long, but the shoulders fit. The white shirt was itchy and had two-too
many ruffles. Their only comfort was the worn leather of their dad’s old
boots.

Their skin crawled every time a lord or lady glanced their direction
inquiringly, they didn’t belong here. But, Eril just smiled, and the two
talked with their eyes.

*Don’t spill anything. Don’t touch or say anything. Don’t bring attention to
yourself. Don’t, please don’t embarrass yourself.*

Eril knew that they were attracted to both boys and girls, but it’s hard to
tell a schoolboy that you out-wrestled him to the ground because you
think he has a good smile. So Iphis mainly flirted with female classmates
and awkwardly tried not to hug anyone too long.
They tried their best to eat leaves and oil without having a mouth made of green, but that is nearly impossible. Munch munch munch.

"Are you adopted?"

For some reason the world makes it that a crush will look over when someone is doing something stupid. In this case Iphis had to chew and swallow with oil dripping out one side of their mouth, in the form of spit trails, while making eye contact, as the most attractive boy Iphis had met awaited an answer. Never-the-less, Iphis considered the fact they hadn't spit out their food a victory.

"um, no—I mean why—"

"I have never seen you at any of these boring suppers before, so thought you might be a street rat that some house adopted to lessen taxes."

"does that really happen? umm and I am not a miscreant, not that there is anything wrong with livin haphazardly if life dealt you that... " fantastic conversation, this is going wonderfully. Throwing out political views already, and he dissed Iphis.

"Are you a boy?"
Iphis almost spat out the water they were drinking to keep their voice working.

“ughum, no.”

“you sound like a girl—“

“so?”

Iphis had already been in the ring enough times to try and stop this conversation, but did not want to stop hearing his voice. Or watch his lips move. The girls eyes were bright purple, complimenting his pale skin. Most royals were darker, that’s how you could tell the true lineage. So who was he?

He thought something over, but his face gave away no secrets.

“I’m Charris, first born, waiting in line.”

“What are you waiting for?”

He cracked a quick smile. His blood red lips sharply contrasted by his light face. “my mother and sister to die”

“well that’s a bit rude” Iphi’s eyebrows furrow, and treasonous. Were all royals like this?
“I’m just joking, I sweareth. So what are you then? and what do you call yourself?” His smile seemed fake. It seemed not to reach his irises. They hoped it wasn’t because of them.

“M’name is Iphis and that’s who and what I am.”

They shoveled mashed trousses into their mouth. This cruel guessing game hurt more coming from such a figure. But they wanted attention from him, the good kind, hopefully. Any would do, though.

His was a tunic made of robin’s egg silk and the hems were lined with deep-water-blue jewels. One gem caught the sun and redirected into Iphi’s eye.

“You have lovely eyes, Iphis. They are a transparent sort of fern color, did you know?” he leaned forward and really saw them, it felt like.

Iphis was not at all used to pretty boys handing them compliments. They grinned for days.

“Plip-plap”

The trouze had dribbled out the corners of their mouth and onto their already waterlogged lap. “oh dear” their cheeks went as rouge as the wine being served.
Charris laughed, laughed, laughed, snorted, and banged his hand on the table.

Eril shot Iffy a crossed eyed look followed by a double thumbs up, he had witnessed the whole interaction.

All dignity lost. For weeks.

Later, it was smoked back out when Iphis showed him how they could light a torch through a wall.

But that happened the week after, this was now. And there still was food in their lap and the curious stares of the whole dinner party—including the queen—awaiting an explanation. Not for the first time, they were at a loss for words.

Chapter 13:

To be a Queen

Charris gripped their hand tightly, deftly maneuvering the duo through the bowels of the castle. Iphis just hope he didn’t notice the pink tint dotting their cheeks.

“I was looking through the vaults to see if there was any way I could become queen without any family deaths, dethronings, beheadings, or
generally not wanting to rule, and I came upon something I thought you’d regard interesting…” He said.

Iphis saw there had been queens who had been deemed male when they were born but had changed their names and gender allowing them to take over the throne.

“I did not know about this till I found a someone named Gilberto who ruled for over thirty years. Ze was called “Jil” by hir ladies in waiting. But, ze never identified as male or female. Ze took herbs to lengthen hit hair and augment hit chest. Isn’t hir story incredible?”

Hundreds of years ago a ruler was genderless. This single manuscript was proof that Iphis was far from alone.

“I had our official record keeper, Melinda, make a copy for you.”

Charris pulled out a scroll held closed with an official royal red ribbon. This was more than enough proof that they were not the only one who felt this way. They read over the names and clung to the scroll. This was all the evidence they needed.
Melinda loved her job, surrounded by the musty smell of old parchment. And, most importantly, very few people. In fact the book to people ratio was almost perfect. Pages, squires, and many academics visited. All required to sign in with Melinda. She mainly did this to judge a person’s character based on their penmanship. She could judge a thief from a pastry chef any day of the week. You see—people can lie—but the pen! The pen says all! Just by looking at how hard someone presses combined with weather or not they are left handed already speaks full volumes. Melinda bet her mother’s bones that she could tell a forged signature from the real even if she had never met the author, if anyone asked her. No one asked her. Instead she just went and bet on mystery potion contests on her days of when she was feeling especially rambunctious.

Chapter 14:

Turning 12

((Tw) period dysphoria, transphobic comments)

Some days getting out of bed is not the best plan.

My head ached and ached and ached. Naturally, I hid under the bed. It’s dark and safe under there. Two of my fake “siblings” ran into the room giggling. Their feet thumped on wood, sox quieted their overwhelming energy.

I AM THE MONSTER UNDER the BED. There are monsters in my head. Mom’s corpse and pale fingers. Those fingers chase me in my dreams like spiders.
I fell asleep for the first time in weeks under that bed, curled in a ball. I knew what I was doing was odd, but nothing in my life seemed to be like other kids. achoo. I need to dust under there next time I want to take a nap. Gods I am so tired. So small and tired. I count my toes by wiggling them awake.

I wait for it to get as dark around me as my eyes need.

---------Two days later---------

I woke up to blood. It was all over the sheets. I started to move around to see what was wrong and felt a knife in my stomach. How could someone have stabbed me with so many light sleepers under one roof? I winced and tried to hold my guts, but could not find a wound. I wrenched the blankets off to find, surprise surprise, more blood. But where is it coming from?

My everything ached and I wanted to crawl under the bed and hide alongside all of my sister's broken toys and lost socks. I imagined myself leaving this pain and stickiness and turning into a ball of dust, floating down to the ground. A breeze trickles through the window and I am pushed under the bed where it is dark and safe for me to live my dusty life. My daydream is short-lived.

I am still mysteriously bleeding. I am not so mysteriously in pain. Blood is life. Pain is blood. I sit up fast, hoping the head rush will make it
easier to get out of bed. I swing my lower half around as if to get up and have to lie down again. I realized too late that now my shirt had the potential to also be covered in fresh and not-quite--fresh blood.

“Great.”

This is nauseating. This is the point where I should have cut my losses and stayed in bed, but I did not. I pushed off from my arms and slumped out of bed. I start crawling towards the stairs, hoping no one asks why I am a bloody mess.

Lowering my body onto each stair is a new and exciting amount of pain with each step. On the second landing I put my head between my knees. I am utterly dizzy from moving. I need water and to pee and maybe eat chocolate. Nothing is certain. I started laughing at how pitiful I was. Now there are permanent dark stains on the stairs where I sat for too long.

“What happened?” Aunt Yedra found me, thankfully?

“I think I might have been stabbed?”

“What?? Where?? Does your father know??”

“well I seem to be bleeding from somewhere below my stomach. My guts feel like I swallowed a blade...”
She started to smile “oh honey you are becoming a lady” And her dumb face is laughing at me. The world is laughing at me. Control is a false sense of security that can be pulled out from under me at any minute.

I looked at my now dark red shorts. I looked at the wall, I tried to look past the wall. Sometimes, I wish I was a wall.

And the flames ate my insides away until small fires started to escape from under my fingernails. I couldn’t control them. I couldn’t control me. I couldn’t even control my body. It was as if every lie that had ever been told to me had just been revealed. My heart was frozen but flames slithered out of my eyes and down my neck.

I saw dark red.

I saw the blood.

She was caught off-guard and it was too late to retract the hurtful words. She did not understand why they were hurtful. She never understood. She thought I was going through a lapse in judgement. A youthful rebellion.

“I’m sorry dear but all women bleed...”
That one phrase stopped time. I stood up and yelled. “I will never become a lady, no matter how many people stab me. AND NOT ALL WOMEN BLEED. NOT ALL MEN DO NOT BLEED.”

I realize now I overreacted. I know how much I scare her. She is afraid that I’ll burn the house down or hurt her children. But, she should not have said that. I want her to know not to lump me into a category, especially while I was on the ground in agony. Don’t kick me while I’m down because I BITE.

I made more stains by my feet burning their outlines on each step down the second flight of stairs. scorch marks. Burn. The wood was acrid in my lungs, but binding has made not breathing apart of my skill set. And then I walked out the door into the downtown, only in my night clothes, trying to hide my rage. I walked over both bridges with mud and blood on my ankles. Guards jaws fell and mothers gave me hideous looks. a little boy in an alleyway to my left stopped kicking a rock to stare.

Chapter 15:

Eril to the Rescue
Eril went looking for Iphis in lieu of their school absence. He was bored, cranky, and ready for trouble. As he crossed the inner bridge going towards the outer gates of the school, he saw two toddlers scrapping over a biscuit. The biscuit was being crumbled to oblivion but that just worsened the tussle between the two. He watched the victor shove one small piece into their gum-filled mouth with the rest of the food left for the birds.

Many people had just finished eating lunch and were starting to work again, lots of carts on the street, but more mules than people. Eril sidestepped animal scat and turned down a side street where at the very end was a house that sat directly on the fork in the water, allowing for night swims and early morning boat-hands hollering. The locks were in place one with water flowing into town, one with it flowing out. The walls had redirected some of the streams foolishly. Early--quite frankly--misused, magyc. But he did not sense Iphis coming from that direction.

Eril walked to the song in his head. The crowded cobbled streets comforted him—having lived in a city his whole existence up to that point. The ditty brought him down side streets and over bridges—wanting to be both confined and free. He avoided large crowds with too much hubbub that could have drowned out his inner tune. On other days it might have be
comforting to be in such close proximity to all those bodies but Thankfully for Iphis, he was too restless. To be young, jobless, and bored. The young lord got up to all kinds of mischief due to sheer and utter boredom. His parents were loving but as distant as he felt in a crowd.

He walked on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on.

Until, a large tug on his shirt brought his melodic meander to a halt.

Elodie, Iphis’s baby sister, had her hands over her head in efforts to catch her breath.

“Whoa, slow down there little sis. Why the rush?”


“Iphis is in trouble.”

“Capital or lowercase trouble?”

Elodie gave him the oddest look. Crimson cheeks and wild eyes. He pulled at the seoir well inside. His tracking senses kicked into overdrive. He turned and took off in a sprint that rivaled Elodie’s speeds.

Chapter 16:
Blood & Guts

They shook as they walked. Bare feet slapping against stone, dirt filled in cracks between cobblestones and between their toes.

She had never tried. It had been three years and she still could not correctly gender them. It takes on average 18–254 days for an elf to construct a habit. The period it takes to begin to overcome grief is one year. That being said, Iphis had not died.

Iphis had to change their name, pronouns, way of walking, and their body. They asked for family to love and support them by changing four words.

Persiphis Iphis

She They

Her Them

Hers Theirs

It took Yedra two years to forget Persiphis.

Elodie once asked, “Why does Aunt Yedra never use your name when you aren’t around?”

“I don’t know Elodie, I really don’t know.” They stared into their rice, hunger lost, looking for answers—a rare occasion where Iffy was without witty retort or quick quip.

No one has a manual for how to transition that says how much emotional labour to give to cisgendered family members. After the first year Iphis started yelling every time their aunt Yedra used an incorrect
name. This led to many shouting matches between the two, with both storming out and Abbas having to mediate. Family and friends seem to think that gender fluidity is some sort of attention ploy or phase. This is false. The moon is still the moon when going through phases. And Iphis shone just as brightly regardless.

A snake does not have to explain why they shed their skin.

Chapter 17:

Hot Gossip

Yedra was “of course, of course” a supporter of transgendered men and women. It’s a lot easier to accept a binary transgender individual. It is even easier when that being is not in the family.

Yedra pulled on the bèi earring she wore in her second ear piercing. It resembled a spool of thread,

“These kids are driving me up the wall. Wish they all were walls, the has would be more stable.” She takes a sip of wine and talks to the orb while unwittingly taming a teetering pile of overalls all missing buttons.

Silly button pixies.

“Too bad none of your sister’s had kids with a carpenter. I here those kids can patch a roof lickety-split.”
“Leaving a girl without a mother, that’s what did it. If my sister had been alive to raise this child, Persiphis would definitely be a normal girl. I’ve got to be more motherly and feminine with my own children from now on!”

“But Elodie had even less time with Leuce and she still wants to be a girl?” Besides I know someone with a tyner relative.

“Will you stop defending my niece?!? She tried to burn the house down when she got her period! Who does that? Now I’m going to have to figure out how to get burn marks out of my staircase! This is not a normal problem.”

Elodie—who had followed burnt footprints downstairs—overheard Yedra’s yelling threw a closed study-door. Time to fret. Will she be able to find Eril in time? He would know how to calm her afflicted sibling.

Chapter 18:

**Outside the Walls** (Iphis)

I walked and walked and walked. My feet led me past farms to an already burnt part of the forest and screamed. Fire escaped my mouth, surrounding me with light. I felt the heat covering me. I wanted to rip my hair out, sew my mouth shut, and break every bone in my body. Waves of betrayal added fuel to my pyre, but only I can burn me alive.

Every ounce of restraint slipped away in my solitude. *No more nice girl.*

*No more girl. No more Iphis.*
I start punching and kicking and yelling, each movement sending out sparks or fully torching the air. And leafy topsoil only needs a small ignition.

I raised my arms high into the air; needing to be large--needing to breathe--needing to take up space--needing--needing--needing--needing to offload rage.

Rage is an acid tearing down intestinal lining and redirecting brain pathways. Years of hiding fell away as I yawped. Resentment is a poison you inflict upon others, but drink down yourself in hopes of hurting the other.

The sun, in sympathy, started to set. The world continued to spin.

All I see is red.

Tears remained unshed, evaporating faster than forming.

Their lungs cried in outrage. Finding oxygen in the eye of a blaze is an unmanageable task.

Their throat blistered, unused to being a vessel for such awesome heat.

Truth: This body is not my own. But it is the only one I have.
Ashes are falling around them. Soot is in their lungs. And the overwhelming heat is a comforting friend. A friend who listens. A friend who is warm and compassionate. That is never ending.

“Pant pant pant.” When will the smell of burnt memories ever leave their nose?

“Stop Iffy! Please! You are going to burn our forest down!” But his shouts fell on steamed ears.

Their irises glowed red, their pupils had expanded in an other-worldly way. Only flames filled their vision. Eril stepped back unintentionally, unable to find his reflection in his best friend's orbs. Internal fire transferred into external rage. He did not know what to do. He could not begin to understand what they must be going through. Iphis was looking right at him, but was not there. He could not reach them. One can not converse easily with flames.

Eril started chanting incantations to keep out smoke. To keep in air. He hummed heat resistance into his seithr-tune. The melody and intent surrounded him. His ear itched, a usual side effect of using his gifts.
He tried to work his way over by sidestepping 'bad spots' or moving around large burns, but he became wearier faster than anticipated. He made the executive decision to go directly to the source. He barreled through pandemonium, stumbling over embers and ash piles.

Iphis formed the other. No hair on their body had withstood their inferno. Without dark messy curls or bushy eyebrows they seemed smaller, younger. Their eyes seemed to be reading a book written on their eyelids, moving back and forth.

Air went into them in the form of a low-bent-whistle. Breathing out a hiss. Then came the hollow coughs. Eril picked them up and cradled them to his chest. Tears landing on skin that had not yet seen the light of day. His vision was so very blurry from the smoke. It felt as if someone had poured onion juice into them. He staggered and lost his footing--dropping their legs.

Wheezed inward, croaked outward. “You gotta help me--help you--you gotta help--Iphis?”

Their chest rose, shook, then fell.

He slung their right arm around his neck, dead weight. “Come on, come on.”
His left arm hooked firmly around Iphis’ waist, resorting to dragging them in what was hopefully the right direction. His head was too foggy from fumes to function. Eril’s inner compass was spinning in circles. Dithering. Exhaustion was taking over and the two could not possibly make it back before the azamuos evening patrol begun. Eril could not have even tilted his head back to look at the city skyline—for fear of passing out. On a normal night the pair would have scaled the wall after Iffy raised them above the smooth-stone parts.

He tripped. Iphis landed face down, smacking their head. Eril crawled on his stomach to Iphis. He grunted and flipped them over and maneuvered their limbs into the recovery position; placing the arm nearest him at a right angle to their body with hand upwards, towards the head. Then he tucked their other hand under the side of their head, touching their cheek. On the bright side, Iphis’ nose had not broken in the tumble.

Eril curled. Closed his eyes—but received no relief from the bright dots of light burned onto his retinas. They flashed and swam behind his lashes. Unlike floaters, these remained. Going in and out of focus alongside his conscious state.
The night air crept up causing sweat to cool too quickly. Shivering, he put his arm over his closest companion, trying to keep them warm. Iphis stayed as cold as the royal catacombs.

His inner arms felt raw and ached from Iphi's scalding hug, earlier. He was not mad at them. They didn't mean to hurt him. They didn't mean to burn down swathes of fresh foliage. They didn't mean to forge a new clearing.

He grabbed Iphi's chilled hand, felt their pulse ticking away. His cheeks stung as wind scraped wet trails stemming from his lower lid. His eyes felt glued shut, too heavy to lift. The world around him disappeared as his inner needle swung in circles searching for safety.

"I'm the one who is supposed to throw scary tantrums. How dare you steal my signature move, idiot..."

Witching hour creeps and crawls came out in search of food, as all creatures must intake nutrients. A beetle's wings hummed. Ants paraded past. An anonymous night-screecher shrilled a list of grievances to all those within range.
Gnarmon the neafilim fused out of the bark of an old oak. Xyr eyes were two thoraxes creating an eerie tint. The luminescence emanated out onto xyr mossy face. Being more flora than fauna xe grew two arms, creaking along with trees positioning themselves amidst a gust.

Shushashush.

Xe picked the two organisms up. The hairless one had caused quite a commotion. Harmed many of xyrs friends. The neafilim decided to get them to safety, but mostly away from angry tree embers.

Eril remembered the sensation of being carried the next day. Besides that no other explanation was forthcoming.

Abbas paused his pacing, crossed the hallway and swung open the door. An astral part of him, next to his small intestine, told him that his child had made it over the azamuos. Following his gut, he grabbed his coat and almost forgot his keys in his rush to search for Iphis and Eril.

The two kids were found by a startled healer who had left the room, drinking more herbal tea with three spoonfuls of honey. Trying to stay alert. Trying to stay vigilant during such a late hour. She returned moments later to find two burned teens on medical beds--encrusted with
leaves and dirt. Twigs had knotted themselves into the young boy’s hair. His snoring was only interrupted by bleary-eyed coughing fits.

The two would be alright, hair grows back. So do wounded egos.

Chapter 19:

When You Comfort Me

Eril woke up first.

He was in a tub filled with green gel.

“Whaaaa--”

“Good morning dear, glad you are awake. I’ll alert the staff and your parents.” A much-too-chipper voice spoke.

“Wait?”

But the feminine-seeming voice had already left. He was alone. In a tub. Filled with some, unidentifiable (to him), yet, incredibly viscous, liquid. His head pounded. Shiver. How did I get here? The fire came back to him through muscle memory. Parts of his body felt like they were still in a dragon’s gut.

“How are you feeling dear? You gave us quite a fright this morning.”


“Now, how on earth did you two get here?”
He could not focus on this woman. His eyes were tearing up, but not from emotion. "I-I- can’t see you?" He heard bustling and the healer’s breathing. She puts a warm compress over his eyes.

"Seems the smoke damaged more than your lungs. You’ve sustained multiple burns all over your body, but your heat shield seemed to save you from the brunt of whatever happened out there. Your friend had most of her hair burned off but seems quite all right besides that."

"They. They/them/their."

"Oh, I apologize, young lord."
Scribbles down note. Taps a small grey box on one of three counters, places scrap inside. A whistle of swift air and the paper is gone. The cabinets above and below are sanded smooth but still show the gnots and grain. Each line telling a tale of drought and winter.
Another nurse opens the evergreen door. The hinge gives a pipe, not in protest, to bring attention to one of its screws being turned too tight. Her slippers slap against the slate-tile floor. Tile is easier to clean blood off of, with a bit of vinegar and lemon juice.
She then starts whispering incantations to heal his skin. Somewhere far off there was the steady drip of a tap that needed tightening.

She takes the compress away and Eril begins to open his eyes. The healer is looking at a particularly nasty burn on his forearm. Her hair is bright pink and she has some kind of sparkly makeup around her eyes. It dazzles him for a moment.

“Alright, let’s put some balm on these and wrap you up.”

His cheeks turned pink as he started to get out of the tub—realizing that he was naked. “Uum... do you have a robe or something I can wear?”

His arms and chest seemed to be burned the worst, which she decided made no sense. “Why do you think that you are more burned here?”

This put Eril in a tricky spot. He can’t just tell everyone that Iphis burned him or others might think they ought to be arrested; or at the least have their seiir source investigated. The magycal limitations were very relaxed here under the queen’s compassionate rule. There was no one in the history of the kingdom that could conduct fire so easily, except for the dragons of old. But they had long—since moved on to higher heights.

“I moved a burning tree branch off of Iphis. The fire came out of nowhere. My protection enchantments wore off too quickly.”

She finished checking his seiir levels to confirm, “those can be reapplied once you get your full strength back.”
Soon the freak fire in the woods would be a buzz on the lips of the town. Eril kept his answers vague on his comrade’s involvement.

“Why were you even in the woods, dear?” his mom asked while helping him check out.

“I was looking for Iphi.”

“Why did you think to look there?” He could not give away that the two had be traipsing through the surrounding forest since primary school. So he stared out the window.

“They were upset and wanted to be alone. Where’s dad this time?”

A tight smile, “He’s sorting out the damage--”

“--we didn’t cause it--”

“While that may be the truth you are holding, their has been a public inquisition for the facts.”

Erol shook his head and moved his feet back and forth under the covers of the lyme-smelling blankets he had been given.

Seems Yedra had been on double-duty providing sterile bandages and the like while her nieph--his best buddy stuck around, unconsciously.

“I’m already visiting daily, the least we could do is lend a hand in her--err--their recovery.” Yedra said while gathering up bed linens soiled with cleansing ointments.
She came along with Abbas, to wait for any change to happen; he read books to Iphis, keeping a vigilant watch on their condition. Distrusting medics to do their job. Yedra gossipped with the staff anxiously. Asking for the talk of the town just to not be idle. She was upset, but also terribly worried about Iphis. She bought the paper and tried to solve the riddles on the back.

Note: Neiph is a combination of niece and nephew. English does not really have a simple gender-neutral term for that. I mean nible is ridiculous. Is an aunt really planning on eating her sister’s offspring? Not in this species.

On a more personal note, I prefer to eat organisms with less bones. Bad for the digestion.

Chapter 20:

And then: Iphis stirred.

Blink. Blink. Blink–ba–blink. Squint. The light was harsh after being in the dark for so long. They had slept for a few days, completely drained of power. Visions of ash-transformed-to-endless-snow fading at a glacial rate.
Still aching. But something was different, their back stung. A low thrum. Their shoulder-blades.

Their eyes adjusted.

There was a window in the room but it was inky outside, only a wyszy ball suspended above a lopsided stump-table filled the space with a glow. Well, the werelight orb was actually hanging-around right next to the papers Sir Reginald was going over. It was navy but cast a halo of warm light that never caused a glare on his reading spectacles. Spectacles that were attached to his shoulder-padded wool coat. His shirt tunic was down to his knees and he wore sandals. An odd combination of partially comfortable and still stately.

"Eril’s dad? Wh--"

“You’ve been out for eight sun cycles. Both of you were unconscious when dropped off here. My neafilum friend, Gnarmon thankfully found you all and brought your sorry hides here."

“Neafilum? Wait is Eril ok?”

He nodded. And finally looked up. Smug. The wyszy moved to his shoulder and filled his crow’s feet with shadows. Deepening his eye sockets. For only a moment, he looked as tired as Iphis felt. Then it was back to his masculine confidence.
"You honestly think that I don’t know where my own son is? I asked gnarmon
to keep a few spores on the two of you. Just so you didn’t, ya know, pull
some hooligan stunt. Like burn down half the forest..."

Iphis looks at their hands. Terrified of their body and the powers they
have no map to.

He chuckled, then stopped, recognizing their awkwardness. “Too soon?”

Iphis felt numb. Numb and sticky; remnants of their fever’s-past.

“I think I’ve seen him before.”

"Xem. Xe/xem/xyr"

“That’s awesome-paws. I saw xem around the time I changed my name and cut
my hair.”

Iphis goes to run their fingers through a ghost on their scalp. Nothing but
air and fuzz.

“Well--the first time I did at least, heh” Sigh.

“Yedra told me what happened. That your bleeding--”

“--ugh garlicked-mousebreath that is so embarrassing! Their body still
tries to reached for drained seithr.

He stood up and walked over. Crossing the grey floor. And he hugs them. It’s
a bit weird with their arms squished at their sides and their belly
hurting.

“Is this ok?”

“Yeah, thanks. I guess..."
“I remember when I first had that happen. I was dismayed to no end. After laying in bed for an eternity, I went to the water. It seduced to me. That week I elected to be a deckhand on a local schooner. I just had to prove it did not define me. I get it.”

He rests his chin on their scalp. Scruffiness from days without shaving.

“But this city is not the place to learn water or fire magyc. People here are open to gender-swapping, but do not get how fluid their own ideas of it all are.”

His coat was coarse against their nose. They deemed not to ruin the moment by sneezing and getting mucus all over it.

“I know of a blacksmith who always needs fuel out in Phantogoria: a city of swamp, sea, land, and good folks just trying to survive in all of those environments. Peacefully. Together. Real groovy place I palled around in, met the first girls I brought home to my parents there.”

Iphis pulled out of the hug, “girls?”

He just smiled and turned.

He just waved on the way out the door looking for Iphis’ family and a healer. Leaving them alone with many questions and torments. Iphis was floored at the amount of personal information Eril’s parent had just shared. They never knew how alike they were to the lord.

Sir Reginald had really sold out—-if he used to be so cool.
“Makes sense why Eril is so mad that he is a business square now.” I wonder about this place, Phantogoria...

Chapter 21:

Home is Not Home

After such an incident, Aunt Yedra believed it was no longer safe to have Iphis stay in her home.

This suited Iffy “just fine.” Door slam. Too tired to put up a real fight.

Feeling low, so low. Tight skin. They “did not want to be there, anyways.”

Iphis packed a bag after the yelling match: socks for dry feet, a shirt, underwear, binding cloth, toothbrush, their mother’s journal that they took over cataloging their powers when Abbas stopped. They slipped out the window that night and lowered themself to the ground. Their calf-length cloak billowing upwards, making them feel like an inside-out parasole. They chucked rocks at the shutters around Eril’s window screen.

He had colored-glass windows—which the two had learned, easily shatter.

The window pane shifted a few inches. His velutinous bed-head groggily peered into the night.

Two quick, shrill whistles exchanged. The window opened.
A single candle flame illuminates them when they scoocho from the sill. Eril is lounging on his bed, but with the shadows he seems to be another pillow.

“Thanks for letting me in.” Their bag tha-wumps as it hits the ground. Most likely from a few books in their sac.

“I was dreaming of dancing till my toes bled.” He rubbed his face, pink fingernails contrast with his dark skin.

“Was it fun?” They try to chip off their own nails.

His features are hidden, but they hear his laugh. An echo as big as the room. A mouse starts in a vaulted corner behind them. Iphis lifted the flame above their head.

A squinting Eril revealed, “Why do you always come so late? You do know some of us aren’t nocturnal?”

Iphis never slept. But, they did dream.

*Should I tell him what happened? Is this my fault?*

“My fight with my aunt last night ended with an ultimatum.”

“Yeah, ‘cause those always work out just greaaaat”
“We were yelling and then she told me to either get out or never use magyc again--”

“Which is impossible”

Iphis rolls their eyes and then examines their hands. Out of their peripheral they calmly try to judge their best friend’s reaction. Sigh. “So I was wondering if I could crash here for a few days? Until I figure out where I will go.”

“Of course. Forewarning, I had many beans for dinner. And they are quite a magycal fruit.”

“So are you, dufus”

Darkness and nonsensical talk continued for a time—until Eril’s breathing shifts—where his windpipes were taken over by ground-shaking-demons.

“Someone someday is going to want to cuddle with you at night only to be awoken to this mess.” Iphis shifts in the trundle of Eril’s bed, watching the ceiling lighten, waiting for daybreak.

Later that morning when the birds first twittered sounds:

Iphis descended down the side of the manor, making sure to hug the walls. They go on a morning stroll smelling artfully-messy flowers and shrubs. Sounds come from the kitchen vents. These folks will have already been up for some time preparing daily buffets for the high and mighty. Eril’s
family had done splendidly from trade. Iphis decided to remove leaves and some debris that had been missed by the gardener.

All good gardeners talk to their plants. This helps them grow. Antirrhinum, she/her, shared stories or gossip in the beds. The best is when she sang love songs to the willow trees. One morning Iphis overheard her weeping to the lavender bush, asking for forgiveness. They politely left these two friends to patch things up.

The next day a twig of lavender was left in a thin box in every window in the manor attached with a purple warning, “Do NOT Remove, Keeps away SCORPIONS.” This caused Eril’s room to smell extremely pleasant for the next few days.

This plant, sadly, reminded them of their mother’s arms and herb garden.

“Lavender oil is a relaxant, my dear. I know you are very worried about your field mouse friend.”

Leuce dabbed a few drops onto her fingertips; then kneeled down to Iphis’ eye-level. “He might wriggle a bit so hold him close” With tears streaming down their eyes, they let their mother help a recently burned friend. The lavender helped them stop hiccuping and breathe. The mouse’s heartbeat stayed frantic, trying to claw away. Iphis had just wanted to cuddle, but
burned him when he surprisingly bit them. When they were first learning the dangers of playing with fire.

SQUEEEEek Squeak. Squeek squeek squeek SQUEEk.

“There, now let him go. We have enough mouths to feed already with the pets your father voluntarily fosters.”

Sigh. The flashback ends. A chill.

It ended in chills or night sweats when thinking about her.

Life comes back. *Would she have been afraid of what I have become?* A single butterfly with iridescent wings crosses their path. No, she would have wanted to help me, I think.

Yedra’s words from the night before hurt. Lashes like ‘monster’ and ‘fiend from hell’ left track marks on their heart.

So they ran up stairs 3-at-a-time with added lift from within. Yedra somehow kept up huffin’-and-puffin’-and-hollerin’ all the while. No need from breath. From ‘irresponsible’ to ‘your mother be disappointed in you!’ ‘How could you mar her memory like this?’ ‘All this bed press hurts business and slanderizes the family name.’
Their father; a shy man, not too terribly keen on conflict. Started making himself scarce during such clashes of will. Yedra hollered. Iphis would shrug their shoulders just to be annoying or yell back. Abbas would try to keep the peace afterwards, carrying the loser out of the ring. Licking both side's scrapes. Trying to give each the other's perspective. Knowing how similar the two were.

It is not that Iphis and their female guardian could not get along...It simply was that Yedra had a lot to learn and Iphis had no patience, yet. As most teens have not learned how much of life's monotony is the capability to hurry up and wait.

They clench and unclench their fist while digesting poison. Guardians with loose rhetoric can cause some unending damage on youth that will dog their self esteem for years. But hear this youngling: Adults are often wrong.

*I need to learn to self care. I have to soothe the burns in my soul. Pour some water on the embers and mend in the steam. Then maybe I will be allowed back home. Not that I want to get on Aunt Yedra's good side, but I want to be near Elodie and my friends. A new adventure. A new summer. A new beginning.*
New section of book: Swamps and the Sea
Chapter 1:

Captain Danube

The water sloshed against both sides of the boat. It sighed in the night and left quite a wake in the day. Some get seasick. Something in the guts that stays in a limbo with nausea. And some were aquatic in another life. That is the kind of man Captain Danube is.

He had found a kitten a few years ago, half-drowned, in the muck collecting near shore. A black cat with the piercing grey eyes of a wolf. Must have come from a familiar litter. He took off his jacket and wrapped the small fluff in warmth. The cat never mewed in distress, nor comfort. It seemed quite small and fragile in this big-wide-world. Danube looked all over for a loving home, but no one wanted such a spooky cat in their barn or near kids. He named her Onyx. And took her aboard. She remained his closest companion for eleven years. The day after he set her lifeless body afloat, he found Iphis searching in the muck. A new lost cat. Searching for answers. In the early morn.

“Whatever you are looking for ain’t going to be there.”

The boy glared at him. “I’m watching this spider walk on water.”

The spider scurried away.

“I’m Danube, Cap’n Danube. Where is your parental, son?”
They rolled their eyes and gestured vaguely behind them to the left.

“Looking for a ride up river. What about you? Where is your supervision?”

They sloshed over to the dock and clambered up onto the planks. Danube got a closer look and noticed the boy’s bright hazel eyes. With the sun hitting them at this angle they sparkled in the same way that the sun glints off a river’s surface around six am. Shining through the first hands-reach down. Their eyes were the shade of the waxy side of a leaf today and seemed older than the body that caged them. Such odd eyes struck a chord in Danube. He decided—then and there—he’d get this child to where they needed to go.

“Seems I need to supervise us both, let’s find your dad. He has found his ride.”

Danube had bought Iffy cornloaf to munch on from a stall. The crumbs made a meandering path. Iphis stayed alert in case Danube double-crossed them. With their own body a traitor, everyone became more suspicious in their mind. Every interaction had to be calculated. It was exhausting. They felt sore and tired and just wanted to eat sugar-covered-pasties curled in a ball in a bed, hopefully one with sheets. They found Abbas drinking with some old sailors in the third tavern they looked in, asking prices and hitting wooden pipes. Iphis and Abbas promised to create a shadow-self of
Danube’s old cat and provide food supplies, a very low price. Danube claimed he was already going in their direction.

Iphis and Abbas had traveled quickly by boat down the river, helping hands on Danube’s steamship, carrying cargo to a town near Phantagoria.

“Water’s a flowing just right t’day, don’t you agree lad?”

Iphis was always a bit shocked when other people gendered them as male. Still wrong, but less often heard. Iphis decided not to correct this fellow.

Hiding in masculinity! What a riot. The captain could think that this was a father-son adventure. A quest even! Yes, they enjoyed this idea immensely. Seemed as long as they talked low and had a stubbly head they seemed like a moody teen boy to this man. They just had to be careful not to pee around him. Manageable, to say the least.

Chapter 2:

Next Morning

“Abbas, ya gotta fine young boyo” Danube said while kicking having his morning tea on deck.

Abbas smiled to himself and shook his head.

“They have been growing up strong—willed. Like their mother. I hope I am doing the right thing...”
He whistled to his ghost companion that Abbas and Iphis the first twilight on the water. "His heart seems to be in the right place."

Crusty eyes and floaters in their skull. The dawn glinted off the morning ripples. Gnats and dragonflies pipped around the reeds. Abbas came out of the hull to find his child, eyes closed, smiling. They had their mother’s smile and laugh. It both hurt and overjoyed him. He did not want to cut this moment of solace short, but his need to make sure Iffy was safe seemed more important.

"The captain seems to think you are my sweet little son."

"Well that can’t be true--" yawn "we both know I am a cursed ghoul, how dare he call me sweet. The nerve of some people" One eye quirked open mischievously.

Brush brush. Gargle gurgle.

"Do you want me to correct him, on your pronouns?"

"Good morning to you too, dad-o." They sighed out a tired sound somewhere between a laugh and exhaling. "I’m not sure, I kind of like being your son, just for a few days. Don’t get any ideas. I still want you to use they/them only and this changes nothing outside of this trip." It was a soothing balm putting puberty on pause, if only momentarily. They could pretend for one moment that was gender not complicated.
The two had had an argument the night Iphis came out. Abbas said things like “if you want to be a boy that is completely fine.” And, “I will welcome a new son with open arms.”

But they weren’t a boy or a girl. Mostly wanted to look like a boy...but also are in a family of proud women? With thick eyelashes and thicker skin. And shouldn’t they be proud of their heritage? High cheekbones and strong shoulders.

Those wounds had closed and mended a little more every time he got their name right or corrected Yedra when discussing his first born.

“Well I love you--don’t really understand what is going on here--but you call the shots kiddo. Hopefully these friends of Eril’s dad can help you gain more insight into all this.” He rubbed their head and pulled them close by the shoulder. Dad side-hugs are such a supported place to be, sometimes.

Abbas had learned from his mother that the women in his family had magyc boiling in their veins. That was why his sister became an artist. That was why he got away from all that drama. With fiery tempers came
late-night-arguments. Too much drinking. And a dull headache at school. His father left. His mother raised him to be respectful and caring. And he tried his best every day without his wife. He knew it was the wrong move for Yedra to give an ultimatum. It was her house, and she had taken them all in with Leucinda gone. He often wondered what Leuce would have done. “Your mother would be so proud of you. She would love the person you are growing up to be.” He smiled to himself.

Leuce had taken all of Iphi’s mysteries in stride—keeping a journal of paths their powers traveled. Loving the journey. Loving their child with no strings attached.

Chapter 3:

**Alone on the Road**

Captain Danube had only promised to bring Iphis to the edge of the swamp. Where thrushes became taller; and serpents longer than a boat lived in the undercurrent.

Scuff—scuff—dink—tink—tink. They kicked pebbles along the riverbank. Sweat crested their brow. Mosquitos came in waves. Victim to victim. Iphis is safe from these blood-sucking fiends. There is too much power beneath their skin for a small bug to handle.
A bridge with peeling paint and metal that’s rust-resistant oil has worn off. Giving it a cracked teal surface. The old green paint is confused, where it does end, and the moss growth began.

There is a sign that they can’t make heads nor tails of. It’s in a local language that Iphis has never seen before. Hopefully, it says welcome, but the characters are partially worn away. That sign points in the opposite direction of Phantogoria. They do not cross the bridge. That path is for later in our “hero’s” story.

Iphis continues on into the woods, hoping it goes towards the seaside. They find paper bark and some nettles for fire—even though they can produce flames without kindling—it is always good to keep up appearances.

--------Day 3--------

And the further they go the harder it is to keep their feet from pruning like the sweet dates from their father’s home. Old home. Origin. That he would talk about when he could not sleep at night.

One day I too will return to the sand tombs encrusted with diamonds—or so he says.
Editor's note: There is in fact a space in a mountain for their ashes. It's very pleasant, overlooking a valley...well as pleasant as piles of bodies rebuilding a mountaintop can be. Space rocks had crash landed there years ago creating public art, of sorts. Odd swirls and transparencies. The molten glass had formed into intricate glowing crystals. They became a pilgrimage sight in addition to a funerary location. A museum stands and the base of the mountain created by two neighboring couples that connected their houses and opened their living rooms filled with rocks to the public. Lovely swirls--some as tall as three cottages--were surrounded by oases in the endless red sand; supposedly, that had been created by dragons who flocked to see such coveted shiny objects and had made off with the less cumbersome pieces.

The vines striated off, thin--occasionally wrapping a bush or trunk. But the foliage got thicker, and thicker. and the canopy grew denser overhead. The trailing plants were growing from the top down, not the ground up. Stealing sunlight from health trees. Some were as thick enough around the middle to be mistaken for skinny trunks and they were sturdy enough to swing on, if that sort of notion were to strike your fancy.
Iphis was the kind of creature who shimmied up a vine without restraint, knowing no fear of falling after their floating incident. Losing gravitational fear is a gift and a gamble in the same swallow. Spooooky fog rolled in— in what seemed liked minutes. Where did this mist come from? A wind soulfully moaned, blasting a chill in their spine. A branch snapped somewhere behind them, too close for comfort.

“Who’s there?”

The path became a line of dirt surrounded by vapor clouds who decided that today was the day that gravities harshness brought them down to the forest floor.

Out from the gloom,

Something snags on their bag— slingshotting them back three paces. PANIC. They throw their elbows back hoping to cause solar plexus damage to the mugger/potential backstabber/highwayman. They land no hits.

Fists come alight from adrenaline. Each finger acting as a candle-wick.

More spindly vines grab their legs and they become entangled. The massive thicket to their right had become full-blown shrubbery of doom. Thorns tore at their calves, leaving long, angry red lines ending in a released stinger. Blood excites the carnivorous bush. Burrs latched onto their clothes and fell in their hair. A dusting of dangerous deviants danced in the darkness above. Mildew entered their nostrils closing needed airways.
The hedge snaked out, clamouring for space with each twine of gnarled bramble.

It was as if the bloodthirsty bush was trying to encapsulate Iphis how spiders evermore go about trapping a buggy-victim. A cocoon for leaching. Suffocation is quite terrifying—"no sir, not today!

I am not being digested!"

Their hands put gloves on. Only the gloves were flames, so not actually gloves. Probably warmer than your average glove, not as good for delicate gardening. But, excellent for killing vindictive-overgrown-weeds.

"That is. not. On. MY. List of to-dos. Today!"

They slashed and smashed and strangled and cussed and ker-chopped and untied and unknotted this way and that with a flair and a shake of their hands. They kicked their boots struggling against impending inveiglement. The vines and thorns shrieked—as most beings do when being burned—seither-filled or not. So the reaction in hindsight was not surprising, yet for a bush to be screaming is quite off-putting. So Iphis started yelling more, just to maintain balance.

"This bag was a gift! Hand sewn by my aunt! Lovingly covered in patches by yours—truly when she made me learn to sew “like a young lady ought to know”! WHICH I feel weird about but it is mine—-you have no use for it anyways!”
The plant recoiled in at their tiny fury. While relinquishing its hold of Iphis' valuables and personhood a warning slash was left on the left side of their cheek. They stumbled to left--off the overgrown path and the not-so-menacing vine-statuary.

The poison filled their veins. A loss of feeling in their extremities. The vines slither in and out of their vision. The path was left behind--what seems like--eons ago. The topsoil is damp, there must be a marsh lowland transition close by. A group of cicada skins are stuck on a nearby lichen-covered-trunk. Left behind callous shells. Their many owner's chirps fill the air. A nice reprieve from the silent mist and screaming rose-bushes, without the flowers.

The lichen seems to bubble and ooze. A lunar hawk screeches for light. A young sapling neafilum morphs from the cellulose in the bark.

Editor's note: Neafilum are capable of traveling to any neck of the woods as long as there is a large enough organism that contains seeds or spores.

Gnarmon sprouted from the dank earth. Two arm-long worms burrowed beneath them. The creaking of each ring expanding to fill out xir form was
soft and soothing. Seed pods burst and twirled down from xir shoulders-area.

Addendum:

**When Life Gives you Wings**

They stumbled and swayed into the cave after floating up. Their vision swam and they can barely make out the wall they are leaning on, a swamp-lizard’s distance past the entrance. Their skin feels like anger-filled-red-crawlers are digging tunnels.

Burrowing—burrowing—each layer of their angry, narrow, flying, stingers trying to rip free. Their body is aflame. Everything is glowing brightly, angrily. The wall is cold and grounding. The atmosphere is unable to decide whether it wants to be thick or thin. They feel light-headed. They are short of breath.

Iphis clutches at their skin, their head, their chest, their back. They swim through a cloud of pain. Their brain is muddled. They slide down—down the wall and start crawling towards the center of the front cavern. There is a ring-shaped beam of moonlight in the center. It seeps through a fissure in the roof that is reminiscent of a kauna’s smoke-hut chimney. The air has a new layer of friction that is more and more foe than friend. Their chest constricts.
They look around wildly for relief and plunge forward toward the ground, leadened with the rapid weight of their seith trying to pull them inside out. Their knees crumple. Iphis starts to emit a low groan and claw at their back again with a new sense of desperation.

The stingers need to be released. Iffy is incapable of holding this power inside any longer— the energy has been caged for too long.

—they lose themselves to a new power—

Their being engulfed is in the turbulent flames emanating from their core. A rider who will spontaneously take the reigns and all iphis can do is hold on. Unlike other youths who have this mysterious gift, which first surfaces usually during adult-growths, Iphis has a more difficult time with control than others they have seen.

For this reason, they try to hide whenever this source is tapped and wants to dominate their every sense and action. People in the city suspect them of hidden talents, including their nosy aunt Yedra, but have not caught Iphis in the act thus far. That is how they have avoided going to servants-of-choice school which Eril complains of everyday.

They let out a whimper...then shout the cry of a guard giving in to a prison mutiny.
The ground is alive and Iffy begins to make out it whispering “hold on” and they rip clusters of soil up with their hands. They dig holes to bury their pain.

Iffy heard every burrowing-bug *munching* away on the cave floor. Their brow-sweat trickles down to mix with tears and drips into the packed earth.

They have to think think think about consciousness. Hold it close. Look into the light and stay in their body.

Iffy heard the world moving with time slowing, everything is bathed in red light. The moon kisses their sweaty brow. “This too shall come to an end—or perhaps a new beginning—my sweet child,” comes a screeching voice, and then just as suddenly, silence. Two beams of light swirl out from their scapula.

“Pop! Pop!”

Two talons wrench their way out of Iphi’s back, tearing a path up through flesh and muscle for a breath of air. Four wing fingers emerge and grow joints and muscle.

They shudder in waves of shock and bite their lip till it drips life-sap. Iffy grunts and lets out a shaky-sob. They try to breathe, testing their lungs ability to function while other body parts revolt.
There is a sound amid voices in the dank room. The sound is suspiciously similar to bones cracking. It fills the silence, alongside Iphi’s exhausted panting.

They pray to the moon for help and guidance. They pray for strength to overcome this battle with their body. Iphis has lived through so much already, this will not break them.

Suddenly, a breeze, that has been trapped in these caverns since they first were first shaped from ice, soothes their burning frame.

“You will soar little one, you will soar as I once did.”

Their ears rand from sensory overload.

The bone-cracking increased as their back rolled and bulged. Lumps behind curious scars.

A thunder-drum rings out, a storm must be close by on the outside. They rock forward as another clash reverberates in the cave. They flatten their whole body, lifeless on the ground.

The air crackles and a flaming wing emerges from a fresh gash extending from the original. It’s blaze illuminates the small tunnel off to the left with tiny quartz cemented in small pools of runoff that somehow wind down the mountain and hide in these caverns. The heated air shoots out through the sky-cracks and the mouth of the cave.

Another wing covered in flames launches into the night air. They twitch and shake with newborn potential. They flap aggressively, unfolding a
large wingspan, a hair's breadth away from the cave's periphery. Embers flake off from the movement and fall into the moist dirt, squelched. Water trickles in from the skylight and dribbles from the ceiling onto their quaking back. "Sizzle"

Their back is so raw and scalding. It feels like someone struck them with a smoldering fire-poker.

The fresh wings flap in delight. Their birthing was a brilliant scene to behold. They look leathery, but are not quite as opaque as expected. They reflect the moon's illuminating presence, they shine like melanite or alexandrite. The veins are bright-blood-red seeming to fade and grow in tune to the raising and lowering of Iphi's chest. Fire thrives with more and more oxygen, this situation follows those laws. Each nerve ending was raw. Iffy could could hear further and was overwhelmed by the added noise.

Iphis sat alone and strained their arms behind their back. Afraid. They couldn't go home, everyone would know. The monster swelled inside. Their wings wouldn't be folded neatly, like paper. Instead they crumpled and quivered, full of life. Iphis' wings were so large.

"I can not control you!"

They put their head in between their knees.
The trees listened in—an audience full of groans and chatter. The wings quieted after Iffy stopped fighting to hide them from sight.

They dried their eyes and brushed hair off of their forehead. They couldn't go home with these massive wings, how would they ever explain any of this? They laid down, planning on spending the night. Or maybe forever. People would want to chop them off, which although Iffy hated the darn things...the wings were also so beautiful. Each scale shimmered in the low light. These limbs were apart of them. They got up to pace, the wings dragged behind them on the ground shluuummpp shluuummp crunch crunch. *Maybe I can fly away?*

They started to climb and cursed each time a wing scraped against the craggy rock-face. The wings were bigger than a sack of potatoes and much more cumbersome. Their back muscles were exhausting with the added weight. But when life gives you wings you can't help but try to

Fly.
They crash-landed in a rubbish ally two blocks away from home. They found a moth-eaten cloak in a pile of moldy fabric and used it to cover their back. The wings folded well enough that no one at this hour would look twice at Iphis' back.

They slinked through the front hall, feeling like an intruder in their home. Climbing the stairs, avoiding spots that creak and parts of the banister that “groooaan” under pressure. Thankfully the only noise was the cloak sliding over wood and the wind starting to pick itself up outside.

Iphis covered themselves up to their neck with two quilts, not because they were cold, but to hide. One blanket was made up of old work pants that could no longer be patched together. It always smelled reminiscent of a mill, sweat and grains. No one but Iphis used it. It weighed more than other covers, which at night felt like a comforting embrace to lull Iffy to sleep. Now the fabric itched against new skin and Iphis could not seem to find the right position to fall into dreamland.

Shuffle shuffle, swish
Toss left.
Shuffle shuffle, scratch
Toss right.
Shuffle shuffle, fwump
This is why bats sleep upside down. Wings are tough to lie on.

Thud.

Two digits had shuffled off the bed.

Sigh.

This was going to be a long night.

They went through lots of candles as if waging a war on darkness. A soothing outlet their mother had given them with their own creative flourish. They made odd wax monsters by heating up their fingers and molding it into shapes to scare away evil spirits under Elodie’s bed. Sometimes they would leave a figurine behind one of the twins’ pillows to freak them out. Retribution for the many times they played practical jokes on the others every week.

Every sculpted statue ended up with wings, not by conscious design. Their hands just led them to form talons, patiums, and bones bending at angles induced by flight. Seeing freedom in soaring.