

Forms of Destiny

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*When nature's time comes round
Seek the Shaper's guiding hand.
Three true forms will be presented,
To these forms your life must yield.*

*In the stillness of the night,
Under the Knot's ever-shifting light,
Mark the ground with the Shaper's seal,
And await your forms of destiny.*

The rhyme tumbled through Mesh'iel's mind, her lips silently forming each syllable as she knelt in the meadow. Prickling knees gnawed at her focus, reminding her that she had been in this position for hours. She hopped onto the balls of her feet and rubbed her hands over her dimpled knees. A quick glance ensured that her movements had not disrupted the pattern of the Shaper's seal she had laid out in the meadow using white river mud.

A cool breeze stirred, chilling her. She drew her cloak tight and focused on the blooming star pattern that pointed north out of the circle she crouched in.

Face first the blooming star,

*Pointed to the truest light of sky,
Await the wings of grace and mercy,
And you will be lifted high.*

Darkness deeper than night fell over the clearing as a cloud passed in front of the Knot. Mesh'iel looked up as the cloud moved on letting the Knot shine bright in the sky once more. Its many tendrils wrapping and writhing in on itself, each changing color as it wound through the Knot's heart. Crimson, azure, emerald, silver, gold, and more, shifting as fast as Mesh'iel could name them.

She held a hand high and watched the colors reflect on the oily sheen of her brown skin, mesmerized by her newfound beauty. Envy had always struck at her heart when she had seen the light of the Knot dance across the skin of her elders. How she had longed for the time when she came of age, and the oil coated her own dry skin. Her delight at this revelation was dwarfed only by her thrill in the knowledge that soon her forms would be given by the Shaper.

A dark form darted between her outstretched fingers and the Knot. Mesh'iel brought her hand down with a gasp, then held her breath, waiting. Silence filled the clearing; even the breeze stilled. Mesh'iel scanned the shadows of the night, her muscles tensing as doubt began to ripple through her. It wasn't unheard of to be killed during a choosing, the poor victim's mauled corpse found days later, if the family was lucky, or not.

She shook her head. *No, Malwa said I would be safe as long as I remained in the seal. Shaper, form my courage.* Reassurance replaced the doubt, and Mesh'iel breathed deeper. Then out of the darkness, dozens of forms surged forward. A startled squeal broke through Mesh'iel's lips as she dropped onto her rump.

Whistles, squawks, trills, and a multitude of other animal cries tangled in the air as the clearing filled with a multitude of winged beasts. A graceful wimiril strode around the edge of the white lines on tall, slender legs. Long white feathers swept back from a short head, held perfectly still atop a long stately neck. Mesh'iel fought the urge to stand and join in a dance with the noble bird.

A hoarse call, followed by a terrible stench, drew her attention away. Out of the flock lurched a dark ukrot. Black fur lay in a tangled mass all over its body, except for its blunt face. The beast's scenting tubes wriggled, tasting the air, as leathery wings pulled it forward across the ground, closer and closer to the blooming star of her seal.

Mesh'iel drew back in revulsion. *Oh dear Shaper, please do not ask me to bear this form!* Her breath froze in her throat as the rank scavenger lurched to a stop at the very edge of the symbol, tubes quivering, dark watery eyes rolling in their sockets. Then with a bubbling *urk*, the ukrot lurched to the side and moved away.

Mesh'iel exhaled in a huff, slumping in relief, only then noticing the bird standing in the center of the blooming star, staring at her expectantly. *Most wondrous Shaper, thank you!* Excitement exploded through her body as she bent closer to the hakeet.

Rich golden feathers whispered in the breeze caused by the numerous wings flapping all around. The bird stood on its four slender legs and stepped closer, narrow wings stretching full on each side, then folding tight. Mesh'iel slowly reached forward and ran her hand along the hakeet's back. The bird responded with a quiet trill from its hooked beak and pressed into her hand.

"Yes, little one, it is time." Mesh'iel closed her eyes and gently probed the hakeet's feathers with both hands till her fingers made contact with flesh. "Shaper of all, I thank you for this form you have chosen. Bind us and give me the wings of grace and mercy."

Warmth surged through Mesh'iel's fingers, up her arms and throughout her body. Images of soaring high above the world rushed through her. The sensation of crisp air riffling through feathers rippled across her skin. She cried out in joy, not in words but in the shrill *screed* of a hakeet. She reveled in the cleanness of the high mountain air, and loamy scent of a great forest.

The warmth faded, and Mesh'iel found herself once more alone in the clearing. Now she saw clearly in the darkness, each spine of the trees, each blade of grass. Even the Knot seemed closer than ever before. Only when she stretched her wings did Mesh'iel realize that she saw through the eyes of her first form, the hakeet.

She concentrated on what Malwa had told her. *One must only will for the shift to occur, and your form will emerge, like the sun at dawn.* Her thoughts turned to her prime form and warmth swept over her, quickly replaced by the chill night air against her bare skin. She wrapped herself in her cloak once more, excitement still coursing through her veins from the thrill of transformation. She longed to soar through the air, but the night was not yet complete.

Face next the forge,

Tracked to catch the Knot's pure might,

Await the paw of courage and strength,

Such will be needed to yeild to the Shaper.

Mesh'iel turned toward the second symbol of the seal, a horned box with flame rising from the top, facing the west where the Knot would set when morning came. She pulled her

cloak tighter and wiped an oily strand of hair out of her face. *What will come next? Malwa said that every choosing is different, that one never knows—*

A terrible roar shattered the silence of the meadow, shaking the trees with its power. Mesh'iel came to her feet before she knew she was moving, lurching to a halt just at the edge of the seal. *I must not run! I am safe as long as I stay in the seal. The Shaper will let no harm come to me.* Another roar shook the world, and made her thoughts seem empty and pointless.

Mesh'iel scurried to the center of the seal, and huddled under her cloak. *Please let me live through this night!* She scanned the forest edge, her eyes wide and her ears straining. The temptation to become hakeet and fly far beyond the reach of whatever raged in the trees ate at her insides. *Give me courage to endure this trial.*

A shape melted out of the forest's shadows and slowly glided toward her. Mesh'iel felt her fear melt away as awe for the majestic beauty of the approaching maquati entranced her. The great beast's pelt glistened under the Knot's shifting light. It padded silently toward her on powerful legs and huge paws. Pointed ears flattened, and its whiskered maw split revealing sharp fangs, as it roared once more.

Mesh'iel trembled at the terrible sound, but forced herself to stand and face the maquati. With a rumbling purr the beast took one more step forward, placing its left paw in the center of the forge. Mesh'iel inched forward, hand held out tentatively, expecting the animal to leap on her and crush the life from her body. But instead it nuzzled her hand, its great wet nose cold to the touch. Whiskers tickled her arm as she stepped closer with confidence, stroking the shaggy coat, resting her cheek on the maquati's thick shoulder.

Mesh'iel closed her eyes and probed with her fingers. "Shaper of all, you bring strength to the weak, and courage to the timid. Bind us now and shape me to your will."

Warmth surged through her body once more. The thrill of plunging into the icy waters of the briny sea coursed within her. She lounged in the solitude of a rocky shore and the contentment in lazing on sun-warmed sand. Fierce courage coursed through her veins in the defense of home. Mesh'iel yelled out in joy with a roar that made the forest tremble.

The warmth faded, and Mesh'iel reveled in the strength she felt as maquati. But the Knot had lowered in the sky. Dawn was not far off. She focused and shifted to her prime form, then wrapped herself in her cloak. Her eyes searched the empty clearing as she turned toward the last symbol.

Face last the scroll,

Unveiled to catch the light of dawn,

Await the spirit of wisdom pure,

So you may know the Shaper's form.

Mesh'iel's eyes caught on the yiwa immediately. The animal seemed to glow among the shadows with a silver sheen. Long graceful legs perched on narrow hooves. Its neck arched to a long head sporting three white horns, aligned in a row down the brow. A thin tail, tufted in black, flicked at its haunches as the yiwa pranced toward her.

Oh, Shaper! Of all the forms you have chosen, I thank you most for this. She reached forward, fingers itching to stroke what must surely be a hide unmatched in softness and beauty. Her eyes roamed over the beautiful yiwa, joy blooming in her heart. Even the hooves sparkled like gems.

Mesh'iel stopped abruptly, her hand just short of the yiwa's head. Her joy died and tears burned behind her eyes. The glittering hooves remained outside the symbol of the scroll. She squeezed her eyes shut.

No, I just saw it wrong. But the yiwa remained outside the pattern when she dared look again. *Shaper! Why do you torture me so? Have I not been faithful?*

A strange sound filled the night air. Mesh'iel jumped and looked around. The sound came again, *fzzzlwop!*

Mesh'iel dropped to her knees, and buried her face in her hands, afraid to look within the scroll. *Please, Shaper!*

Slowly, she raised her head. A strange creature, like none she had ever seen, stood in the center of the pattern. What looked like frayed, dirty-white skin covered its body from its broad snout to the base of its bald, ashen tail. Large eyes with slitted pupils sat on either side of the flat head. A broad mouth opened wide, unveiling a red, toothless mouth filled with a thick tongue. *Fzzzlwop!*

Mesh'iel fell backward in horror. *No, Shaper, you can't ask me to make this choice. Please, I don't even know its name!*

Her eyes shifted from the enchanting beauty of the yiwa to the lowly plainness of the strange creature, its long body supported by sprawling legs ending in thick, round pads encircled by small claws. The chill night air slipped under her cloak, sending Mesh'iel into a bout of shivers. She pulled it tighter about her as tears began flowing over her cheeks.

Who would know if I chose the yiwa? I am alone here. She rubbed her cheeks with the heel of her hands, shame filling her. *Shaper would know. I would know. And Malwa can always tell when I lie to her.*

Mesh'iel shook her head. "Shaper, you blessed me with the gift of the hakeet, and you gave me its grace. I trusted in your strength when the maquati roared, and found your courage within me. I will trust in your wisdom to know the form I need."

Tears streaming down her face, Mesh'iel crawled forward, and with one last, longing glance at the yiwa, probed the plain creature's dry, leathery skin.

"Shaper of all, you give the wisdom pure." Her voice cracked, and she continued in barely a whisper. "Bind us now so I may know your form."

Searing heat flared up Mesh'iel's arms and wracked her body. Her scream melted into a gurgling fizzle as the bonding took hold. Images of sheer cliffs and dark holes. Great beasts of tooth and claw roaring in fury. A shimmering curtain of light. Confusion railed in her as what should be familiar became strange and alien in her eyes.

Finally the pain flowed away, replaced by the soothing night. But unlike before she had not been left alone. The creature remained within the scroll. Mesh'iel focused on her prime form, but the shift did not come. Panic speared her chest. *Did I choose wrong? Oh, Shaper do not doom me to live out the rest of my life in this wretched form! Was it not enough that I trusted you?*

The strange creature chirped, and then, spoke in a scratchy, yet song-like voice. "Fear not the form of another world. Grace and mercy have given you wings. Trust has brought you courage and strength. Faith, the wisdom with which to wound the tyrant's claw. Do not despair, Shaper's child, these are your forms of destiny and with them you shall stem the dark tide that rises even now."

The sun crested the horizon, and as the light touched the creature, it burned fiercely and bright. Then, in a whiff of smoke, the animal vanished.

A strong wind rushed across the meadow, sweeping away the seal Mesh'iel had so carefully laid. She pushed her slick hair away from her face, then started as she realized she had

returned to her prime form. Shivering, she snatched up her bundled clothes and quickly dressed, rubbing the garments against her skin to help them soak up her oil.

She draped her cloak over her shoulders and faced once more the rising sun. One last part of the ceremony remained. She closed her eyes, letting the rising sun's warmth play across her face, then raised her arms to the sky.

"Shaper, you have given me my forms. Let your grace and mercy be my wings."

A vision blossomed before her. As hakeet, she lighted upon a great mound of shattered stone, where a strange form emerged from a curtain of light.

A voice rumbled through her being. *Behold the one who will recognize the spirit of wisdom I have given you. Heed his guidance and the rising tide will not sweep away your world.*

As the voice died, the vision faded. Mesh'iel staggered, her limbs quaking as she continued the rite.

"Let your strength and courage be my protection."

Another vision bloomed. As maquati, she ran among an avalanche of stones, rumbling toward a swelling of black water. As the two forces clashed the voice returned.

Embrace my strength, become a dam that the tide can not overcome, and from this place a spring of hope shall flow.

Once again the vision faded with the voice. Mesh'iel paused, fear clenching her throat. Malwa had said nothing about visions and riddles. *Shaper, what are you asking of me? I don't understand.* Silence and warmth were the only answers. Finally, with a shuddering breath, she said the final verse.

"Let your wisdom guide me to your form."

A vast darkness engulfed her, cold and terrifying. Pain wracked her body, screams tore from her throat. But then a light blossomed, and the voice spoke.

My gift of wisdom is not of this world, and will bring you pain. But through this fire you will be forged and when all is dark, my wisdom will bring the light.

Sunlight kissed her skin once more, and Mesh'iel opened her eyes to the quiet meadow, though tears blurred her vision. Memories of the visions jumbled through her mind. *Shaper, why have you called me to a future of pain? How can I live under this burden?*

Then she remembered Malwa's parting words. *The Shaper does not give forms lightly. He knows what trials you will face, and will give you the grace, strength and wisdom that you need to prevail.*

Mesh'iel dried her tears on her sleeve. She turned her back to the sun, looking west. Then, with determined steps, she began the march toward home.