

CHAPTER 3

Out of the Nest

August 11, 2026

The 7th of Ascending Water, Saturday, Realm Year 762

I suddenly had need for several skills I had, up to this point, been unpracticed in. I needed to be able to ride, and ride as part of a company of hunters. I needed to wield several weapons—probably a hunting spear and bow; expecting me to manage something complicated like a net would honestly be asking too much of me. I needed gear of at least decent quality, and so on.

It was possible that some of my needs might be solved by some of my gifts; I could certainly launder them into such. But using them now could be problematic. I hadn't been using any of the more magical gifts for a reason. They really needed to be investigated before I could use them in case of subtle traps. Nor could I trade for what I needed in the three days before the hunt left. I probably could get someone here to give me a blessing against the cold that would last me the trip, but I would be exposing my weaknesses.

"What *can* you do as a god?" Vevin asked.

She was helping me go through my gifts, looking for things that were probably safe enough to use. She had set aside a stack of charms—little sutras painted in red on strips of green lacquered paper with complicated edges woven from gold and copper threads. Several of them were reliable thaumaturgy talismans that might help me deal with the cold and thin air. They had probably been intended for me to use on mortal worshipers, but nothing stopped me from using them myself.

"You're very new," she continued, "so I get that you haven't grown into your role yet. But you're ascended, and ascended gods usually have something going for them even before they get assigned a domain."

I shrugged at the question. "Not a lot, really. I can inspire hope—it's technically an Excellency, just one that I can use to empower others as easily as myself. As a blessing, it's rather weak." I shifted uneasily for a moment. I *did* have one other thing.

I made a grasping motion as I pulled... something from the air. For a moment my fingers blurred, and I was outlined in a vague prismatic aura, then it was caught

by my hand, pulled into form, the colors inverting, collapsing into...

It was plaid. The base color was a bottomless vantablack. Over it, a gray like static, uncertain, impossible to focus on. Then faint gold, rarer than the other two, yet the only color your eyes could really track. Then, rarer still the silver threads, an edging of the color so light that it was more a suggestion than a reality.

For a second, I heard whispers, felt the grinding of cosmic gears, and was chilled by a river that wasn't there... then the phantom sensation was gone. It looked no more real than before. It was still blatantly unnatural, but the vague horror of the moment was gone.

It was a mantle.

"I also have this as my Panoply." I let it fade back into my invisible aura. "So nothing really useful for now."

"Hmm, no," she responded dryly, obviously not bothered by... well, that. "What does it do?"

I hesitated a moment. "It... gives me power over reincarnation. Only over whoever is wearing it. I can't just..." I waved my hands vaguely. "I have authority over the reincarnation of anyone wearing my mantle."

"Huh. So could you assign someone to be born Dragon-Blooded in their next life? I get why you don't see it as a big deal, things like that don't really matter, but there are those who would trade everything they have for the use of it."

It was kind of a weird thing to hear, but I guess it no longer mattered to me since gods only died when their souls were destroyed. The godly perception was that reincarnation wasn't punishment or reward, but simple resource conservation. A soul properly recycled through Lethe was indistinguishable from any other soul. There was nothing left, nothing distinguishing to say 'that life happened, and you're rewarded in the next life with *this*.' So while being rewarded with a higher station in your next life was something that happened, it wasn't something gods saw as meaningful. And when gods talked with each other, the cynical nature of the arrangements came out in full display. That said—

"Ah... Kind of? I only got a quick rundown on how Exaltations work. I could make sure you were born into a body that had the potential, but you would still have to earn it yourself. And I'm not sure how that knowledge would affect your chances? Asking for that is a lot more calculating than getting into that life normally."

She snorted, “Don’t lots of people live their lives hoping to be reincarnated as a Dragon-Blooded?”

I wasn’t explaining this well, I realized. How to say it...

“Yeah, but they don’t remember.”

Slow blink.

“Come again?”

“Well... you don’t go through Lethe when you use my mantle.”

“Oh. Okay. I think you really need to walk me through how it works.”

I let out a sigh. I really wasn’t comfortable with that thing.

The Mantle of Rebirth let me kill whoever was wearing it, and in an instant fate them to be reborn... pretty much anywhere, to anything. So long as I wasn’t trying to make someone the child of someone *really* powerful... well, it would happen.

I could set all kinds of things about their next life. How they would look, some of the circumstances going on around their new life, and more. If I got too fancy... well, it would try and fulfill everything, but it might get more metaphorical about it all.

They would be born with whatever level of spiritual grace they had in their last life, though it would start out somewhat dormant. Over the course of several years, they would come to remember their previous life, as their soul synced up with their new body. By puberty their spiritual graces would have reasserted themselves. Generally, spiritual graces they already possessed would take precedence over anything new—so if one of the Dragon-Blooded asked to be reincarnated as the child of a god, they would likely burn away the godsblood by puberty as their previous nature reasserted itself.

“To be clear, I’ve never used it. That’s what they told me in heaven when they were studying me after my ascension. Well, I kind of had an intuition for how it worked, but they told me what that would probably mean. I’ve never even met one of the Dragon-Blooded. The only Exalt I ever met was a Sidereal, and I don’t really remember what that was about.”

“Studying... so that isn’t something assigned to you. It’s not part of your nature as the god of Calibration, but part of your nature because of your ascension? Like the

Mountain Boy's Sutra? Most panoplies are assigned, but... this is a panoply charm born from your nature."

I shrugged. "I don't know who he is. But yes. It's a piece of my soul. Kind of."

"Hmm. Could you reincarnate someone as a spirit? Say, an elemental?"

"Sure? So long as they aren't already something special, at least. Like... I find the whole assigning people to be someone's future mother part kind of creepy, but—"

"I know exactly who can solve half of your problem. Now... This place must have a summoning room."

The 8th of Ascending Water, Sunday, Realm Year 762

This place did, in fact, have a summoning room. After declaring that she had a solution, she had me arrange use of it. Evidently this was enough of an ask on our hosts that we couldn't use it immediately. Owl from the East gave permission, but by then it was already too late to begin that night.

Instead, I had moved on to work with other tutors. Even divine tutelage wasn't going to make me competent with the spear in a single day, but it was making me mildly less uncomfortable holding one. I wasn't entirely sure that was a good thing—it felt like I was being set up to make a mistake.

With the turning of the day, I was led to the room set aside for elemental summoning. Vevin was already there, actually casting the spell.

The room was odd. It was rather bare compared to most of the House. Four braziers were set up: two at the entrance to the room, and two before a set of steps leading upwards. They blazed in four different colors—Yellow, Blue, Green, and Violet. The stairs were short, rising to a landing that looked like it should have a gate or door, but simply ended in the back wall of the room.

Vevin had set herself up in the center of the room, drawing the circles and diagrams she now sat within. She bore no tools, used no reagents. She just occasionally muttered, or drew lines in the air in the darkest of blues and purples. There was a seat by the door where a guest could sit while the sorcerer was working, and a servant of the house had set up a desk beside it, along with study material assigned by my various teachers.

I was reminded once again how amazingly competent everyone working for the House was. I probably didn't work as diligently as I should, but I enjoyed

watching Vevin.

Eventually she reached a lull, and turned her attention away from her ritual. While it would take the elemental four hours to arrive from the time the ritual began, much of that was waiting, simply keeping the channel open through the Dragon Lines.

“So this Gale’s Echo... She’d really work for me for a child? That... That kind of makes me uncomfortable on several levels, but as long as everything is consensual I guess it’s okay. But why doesn’t she just... have one?”

“Hmm. So the Thúroch are not a natural race of elementals. They were created, and how they were put together doesn’t flow perfectly from the nature of Wind. To have children, the wind must be warped into an unnatural state. There’s some rare conjunctions where this just happens, but usually it takes sorcerous workings to twist the geomancy of Creation enough to enable that.”

She made a so-so gesture, “And while she **is** a reliable bodyguard, her service isn’t usually worth enough to justify the cost involved. Well, not if you’re hiring her, and while I know some gods who are happy to just bind elementals, it can make for bad blood in the long run.”

“But I can perform this casually.”

“But you can perform this service casually,” Vevin agreed.

The thing about Panoply Charms is that they were called Panoplies for a reason. They were a Charm, a magic I could call upon, but on some level they were also artifacts. There were charms you could give someone else, even if they flowed and drew their strength from the spirit they were a part of. I could hand the Mantle of Rebirth to someone else, and if I gave it to them with intent, they could use it as if they were me. Of course, I could call it back at any time, and if I was slain it would supposedly fly back to me to recover my spirit no matter how far away we were from each other. But I could almost treat it like an artifact.

For the next hour, she coached me through what I would need to say and do for my first bargain with an elemental. It was almost a relief when the world seemed to tilt, the geometry of the room breaking open to a place filled with white sea foam, and a sky with Sun, Moon, and Stars all sharing the heavens as one.

Gale’s Echo was the silhouette of a horse, woven from strands of whipping tempest clouds. Around her hooves, her mane and tail, they became so fine and

thin it looked like real hair. The rest of her took on a pattern that seemed half organic, half mechanical. And under that was a blackness that seemed to roil, like the darkest thunderhead at night on the new moon.

She neighed as she galloped into the room, and it set the walls to shaking, and the moments before comfortable temperature plummeted like a rock. “I am Gale’s Echo, honored for my guardianship by the Stone Walker, who shepherded the children of Fanoar from harm. I was thanked by Incandescent Decree himself when I took a blow aimed at his child from a Lintha assassin. Who summons me, who summons one of the Tempest Horses!”

“I am Vevin, acting as proxy to Nathan Nozi. Nathan of the Court of Seasons. Nathan, who rules over the exiled days, god of Calibration! He honors you with his summons and his call...”

Well. This was going to take a while.

Our offer was simple. She would be my mount and my bodyguard for a month. In return, she would gain possession of my Mantle for a month, or until she used it once. She was at first unsure why she should want it—I couldn’t quite decide if her questioning of our offer was rude or obsequious, because it somehow managed to seem like both—but once she understood what it did...

“I will serve as bodyguard and advisor, offering my insight into security and protection. I will guard with body and mind and power. I will do so for a year and a day. In return, I may take possession of your Panoply Charm, the Mantle of Rebirth, and use it once. I will hold it for no more than five days, or until used, whichever happens first. I will use this claim within a year and a day of forming this contract, or forfeit my chance to call upon it.”

There was more to it, of course. Rules for my behavior, limits on hers, but that was the core of her offer. She didn’t want the month deadline.

And that was how I gained my first retainer.