

CHAPTER 4

It's an Ill Wind that...

August 11, 2026

Morning of the 10th of Ascending Water, Marsday, Realm Year 762

We were gathering outside the Sanctum, the various members of the hunting party leaving it in ones and twos as odd ripples in the air. Most of them were immaterial, and I watched them move about the clearing like spots dancing across the surface of my eyes. A few of them were material though—moving physical goods about—or were elementals who found materiality a more natural state. Mostly air, though a handful of earth and wood elementals were present. None of Water, evidently out of a long-term conflict between Air and Water, and none of Fire for reasons that had never been fully explained to me (yet I was vaguely certain it would come up at the worst time, in the worst way).

Gale's Echo was directing several minor gods who had attached themselves to me without my knowledge. One of them I had dubbed 'the beholder' in my head, though it was kind of an unfair labeling. They were a... kind of pink cloud, and out of the cloud extended twelve delicate alabaster arms. Eight of those arms held crystalline eyes, while four of their arms extended and shrank in wave-like rhythms as they moved and shifted gear about, loaded pack animals, and double checked sacks and boxes. A gold ring banded around them, with one side of the band opening up into a silver ring in which a larger eye was mounted, moving freely to examine the world like a ball bearing.

"Just a few more minutes," they sang to me in a voice like a guitar. Literally—I found their voice both hard to understand and disturbing, and while they had told me their name, I hadn't actually *gotten* it. I was vaguely hoping someone else would use it nearby so that I could hear how it sounded when a human-adjacent being said it. They were so enthusiastic I always felt a bit guilty that I found them creepy.

At the same time two birdlike gods were hopping on me, straightening the layers of my clothes, making sure all the charms were properly attached. Sometimes when they decided a charm wasn't placed right, or something wasn't tied right, their sharp beaks and vicious claws lashed out, tugging and pulling things into place, then their essence would settle, somehow making the whole thing more...

solid. Fixing the ‘correctness’ into place like glue or cement.

When I first left the Sanctum, I had felt the chill the same way you would in winter even when wearing layers of jackets and heavy clothes. As they worked, that feeling slowly faded away. They were called Nanar and Nayar, and evidently they were the gods of the walls of the family houses for the City of Fair Isle, and they were quite excited to be so close to me.

For her part, Gale’s Echo needed neither saddle nor harness—the tendrils of cloud that made up her body would naturally shape themselves to act as such. That didn’t mean she wasn’t preparing. She had put on a set of complicated-looking cloth barding in the colors of the Maidens, draped with charms and trinkets. She also had the court shoe her ‘properly,’ whatever that meant.

Now that we were outside the Sanctum, she would not move more than five feet away from me—close enough that she could interpose herself at a moment’s notice between me and danger. An intimidating experience because as an Air Elemental she was in constant prancing motion, and was huge even for a horse.

“I hadn’t realized you were naturally material,” she informed me, almost accusatory.

I made an uncomfortable face. “I spent weeks not naturally respiring essence. I’m... a little broken. Maybe it will fix itself? The essence thing did. Though... Calibration is when the spirit and the material are closest together, so maybe it won’t.”

“Protecting a material being is more complicated than protecting a spirit,” she stated, as if it was my fault. “It’s fine. It’s fine. I just need to know these things in advance.”

All activity stopped for a moment as Cold Wind and Sleet Wind loped out of the Sanctum trailed by dozens of courtiers milling around them like remoras on a pair of sharks. Then everyone burst into frantic motion, to finish getting ready. Except for me. It was beneath my dignity to do things myself, after all.

... that was unfair. There were a handful of other gods who were similarly being attended to, rather than attending to things. One of the Ennead was joining us; Master Winter, a grandfatherly figure with icicles for a beard. Though he was grandfatherly in that ‘stern, judgemental, disapproving’ sort of way rather than the welcoming flavor. He had been friendly enough for the three words we had so

far exchanged, but he felt... cruel.

I would have thought him too busy during this season to go on this kind of excursion, but evidently he was a god of preparedness. Or rather, punishing unpreparedness. It was a matter of principle that he rarely needed to work during this season, that he had everything set up long before, and it could just cleanly tick along with minimal input from him.

“This is a good day,” Cold Wind bellowed to the crowd as the last of the preparations finished themselves. “A good day for a hunt! I’m glad you’ve all come to join me! That you’re all joining me for this grand hunt.”

Then Sleet Wind took over, “As you all know, we brothers love hunting the Omen Dogs for their ancient insult against us. You all know it! But we also know that you all love more exciting hunts. That you all want to hunt more exciting prey. To the north. To the east. Yes, to the mountain north and east. There, we will find the land where ancient ice has carved valleys. It has carved valleys deep.”

Everyone stilled, anticipation sharpening the air. My patience for the brothers’ odd way of speaking was at an all-time low, but I forced myself not to react. I wasn’t happy about being pushed to be a part of this hunt.

Others were happier about it. Master Winter, I noticed, had started to smile as the location was laid out.

“In those valleys, the ice has carved open a way deep,” Cold Wind said, taking over the narration again. “It is a deep place, where the light of the Daystar does not reach. From it, forbidden gods have lifted their heads above their station and walked upon the surface. They walk where they are unwanted!”

Yes, Master Winter was smiling.

“We will hunt Omen Dogs,” Sleet Wind said.

“We will hunt Hushed Ones,” Cold Wind continued, egging on the listeners.

“We will hunt Raksha,” Sleet Wind rejoined, his voice rising as they approached the end.

“And we will hunt the Únôlpûr Aithanar! We dedicate this hunt to our hosts! And we gift this hunt to the newest brother of our Calendar Court!” The brothers finished together.

There were cheers. I wasn't one of the cheerers. All of this? This wasn't for me. I was just an excuse to make this a bigger excursion, with maybe a bit of hazing thrown in for good measure.

"Yes, we gift a glorious hunt. We gift glory to you all!"

Gale's Echo nudged me. "It's time."

Tendrils of cloud reached out through her barding, and acted like stirrups helping me climb onto her back. It was a good thing she was an elemental, because I suspected I would have spooked a horse with my ineptitude. She was patient though—she was a bodyguard for children, I remembered, so she probably was used to worse. Then the tendrils lashed about my legs, and around my hips, and I was firmly—but shockingly comfortably—tied to her back.

And then we were off.

Afternoon of the 10th of Ascending Water, Marsday, Realm Year 762

The hunting party, despite its size, moved *fast*. Several gods had magic for speeding journeys, and for erasing presence. Only a handful of them stayed material—even the Elementals dematerialized. One of those who remained material was the beholder, who always stayed near me and who, I suspected, had been assigned as my bodyguard.

Another of them was Vevin—I wasn't sure when she ended up joining, but she had. She wasn't near me at all, but was chatting away with several other gods who had forgone mounts. Instead she was bounding forwards, every pump of her legs a graceful leap, her robe lashing behind her like a tail.

A third was Master Winter. He hadn't started out near me, but as the journey continued his part of the procession slowly, almost imperceptibly edged its way over to mine, until he was riding at my side. His mount was some kind of giant deer, but I was pretty sure it wasn't a real animal, just a piece of his own spirit he had manifested as a separate being.

"You look like a man who has realized he has only provisioned for three months of snow when the ice first comes down. I hope this hunt isn't that intimidating—I know the brothers have picked a mightier prey than they otherwise would as a favor to us."

I lightly shook my head. "I don't really know enough about the Ünôlpûr Aithanar

to be intimidated by them. I hadn't planned on becoming a god, so all of this is intimidating."

He nodded sagely. "I rarely have sympathy for ascended god-blooded who find themselves unprepared for their new duties, for they had time and opportunity to steel themselves for what is to come. When apotheosis comes to those without the blood of gods, I may be more sympathetic. I do not know your circumstances, no one but the Maidens does to my knowledge, but unexpected troubles come to every life. Such things are more of Autumn Frost's domain than mine, though I maintain that preparation is still useful even then."

"The only advice I can give is to make each moment count," he continued. "When unexpected trouble visits you, that doesn't mean you can stop preparing, it just means that your preparations must happen on a shorter time frame."

It took me a moment to realize that he was offering aid. It wouldn't be free—but it wouldn't be expensive, either. He was favor-seeking with the Calendar Gods, and he wasn't going to poison our relationship this early.

"Can you tell me about what we're hunting this time?"

He smiled. It was clearly the right question.

"Of course. I'm always happy to help the diligent prepare themselves."

Author's Notes

So there's a minor problem here that might merit mention later, once more is known. That is to say, "Why can Nathan see immaterial spirits?" I would argue that it's completely defensible rule zero territory for... reasons. The reason is going to have half of the long-term Exalted fans nodding along in annoyance. I can't really *explain* without spoiling though.