

CHAPTER 5

Fight like a cornered weasel

August 11, 2026

Morning of the 11th of Ascending Water, Mercuryday, Realm Year 762

I had spoken with Master Winter through dinner the night before, the ancient spirit perfectly happy to earn a future favor in return for teaching a subject he appeared to be passionate about. Less the monsters and animals of the North, specifically, and more paranoia about nature. Lots of ambush predators up here, though, so the paranoia ended up teaching a good amount of monster-lore anyway—a bit of a six one way, half a dozen the other situation. That said, he did also focus on some of our targets, the Hushed Ones and the Turrets of the Ice Blossom—the court of Raksha we would be trying to drive off.

Gale's Echo had been able to interject several times as well. Evidently she was even older than Master Winter, but she had also mostly lived in the South, and wasn't actually that knowledgeable about the North. The last time she had been up this way was nearly twenty-five hundred years ago. Still, she had plenty to say about threats common to all directions.

After dinner, I mounted Gale's Echo again to practice the spear and saber from her back. Using a weapon while mounted was quite different, and if I had been riding any lesser mount I would surely not only have hurt myself, but spent half the night unmounting myself.

I probably would have half-crawled into my tent, but the beholder helped me inside, having set it up for me over dinner. I was grateful that I hadn't had to do it myself, but also felt vaguely guilty about all the work everyone else was doing for me, and how it was just expected. I thought I would have trouble with Gale's Echo and the beholder murmuring to each other in low voices as they played guard, but I fell asleep almost the moment I laid my head down.

Then we were off again, bright and early the next morning. At first the hunting party was filled with chatter, until Cold Wind called a halt. A moment later, a message passed its way through the line of hunters.

Quiet. They had found tracks.

That's how I found myself waved to the back of the line of hunters, as we passed

beneath alien trees adapted to an environment only marginally more hospitable than Antarctica.

A few minutes later, I felt my ears pop as Gale's Echo extended some of her tendrils like a cage around us, and the quality of the sound changed. She snorted angrily, and I realized she had placed some kind of privacy barrier around us.

"They're using us as bait."

What.

"Look, everyone close to us is dematerialized. Everyone who's staying material is taking different, more hidden paths, and none of them are nearby. They're having us travel almost openly, and near places where a predator might be hiding in ambush."

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck *fuck*.

"Should we break away?"

She tossed her head, and her whole body rippled oddly, the illusion of her being flesh and blood momentarily disrupted.

"No. Ready your spear. Point it sinister, and slightly down, and get ready to stab."

I clutched the spear, forcing it to point the way she told me while panic seeped into my bones. Why was she having us go along with this, when we could just...

A shape burst from a snowbank to my left, aiming for my throat, and I less stabbed than flailed as my spear jolted once... twice, and suddenly a great weight was dragging at it while hellish animal screams filled the air and a series of thumps sounded.

"Good job, my lord." Gale's Echo's voice was suddenly back to normal, free of that odd enclosed quality of her barrier. "You hunted those ice weasels perfectly."

The beholder had manifested before the attack had even finished, their long arms ringing me with spears pointed outward in every direction, and in their fourth hand a long white furry... snake...? Something larger than even the Cold Roars hissed and flailed. Wait... no... limbs?

I finally realized what I was looking at. It was a ferret... no. A weasel. A weasel longer than two cars put end to end, and thinner around than a wolfhound stood tall. Its fur was white, and ice and snow had frozen to it till it looked more like

some elemental creature of ice than anything living.

My spear had accounted for another. On the ground in front of us where my spear had been ripped from my hands lay a second ice weasel. The spear had gone in through its lower jaw and perfectly intersected its head, as if someone had drawn a perpendicular line through its brainpan. That wasn't me, I was sure. Hadn't I felt an upwards jolt to the spear *before* I struck the weasel?

A third and fourth weasel lay dead—Gale's Echo work. One to my right, her leg resting on its snapped neck, and a final one further away, where wind had picked it up and slammed it against a tree trunk so hard as to smash the tree.

Around us the rest of the party was beginning to converge. Only the beholder and... Vevin? Hadn't she been further away...? Only those two had been close enough to help.

That's when the adrenaline hit me, and my hands began to shake. I stuffed them into my sleeves to hide the motion and suddenly Gale's Echo and Vevin were both talking to the rest of the gathering hunters, making themselves the center of attention.

"Your spear." A boar-head god had retrieved it without me noticing. I looked at it blankly. It was a beautiful thing—nothing overtly supernatural itself, but crafted to a standard beyond mortal hands, and with a talisman fused to the blade to give it potency for the next five days. Other than that, it was graceful but simple steel.

"Thank you for retrieving that, Lord Hoarfrost," Gale's Echo stated for me, taking the spear delicately with one of her cumulonimbus tendrils and turning the attention back to herself.

I felt very alone.