

CHAPTER 6

Memories

August 11, 2026

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

“I had Ice Weasel once,” Sleet Wind murmured to himself. Three of the giant beasts had been hung from a nearby tree, while he was skinning the fourth. “That I did. It was at Flix Arum’s coming-out ball. He was presenting himself. He had only been Exalted for seven years, for seven years he had been learning under his elder circle mates. But he was ready to leave the shadow of his circle. He was ready to come out.”

He paused for a final moment, studied his work, and then pulled most of the fur from the carcass in a single movement. The smell... it was revolting.

“He took seven meats said to be impossible to make palatable with mortal craft alone, and from each of them made a feast mortal kings would fight over. It’s said a small portion of that meat made it all the way to Yu-Shan.”

I had gotten myself under control, mostly by blasting my own brain with feelings of hope until I dissociated from the moment. Crude, but it had worked. I wasn’t freaking out, but I also just wasn’t really present.

It also meant I wasn’t feeling the melancholy vibe Sleet Wind was putting out.

They had set me up. Yes, gods... well, we respawned on death. But lots of ‘god’ things didn’t work right for me. I had a fallback of course, my mantle would supposedly save me even if I didn’t use it with intention. I was loath to fall back on it.

Frankly, the whole process was gross.

And why was I even in danger? For what? To ‘test my mettle’ or some such nonsense. The Cold Roars had been subtly passive aggressive in their welcome up to this point, but now their friendliness felt more genuine.

I got why Gale’s Echo hadn’t pulled me out. She clearly could have handled them all herself without danger to me, and it let her kill one of them with my hands. It made me look good, which probably made me safer and easier to protect. It was just that, at that moment, I didn’t really care.

“Ice Weasel fur is quite nice. It’s quite pleasant to have,” Sleet Wind told me confidently. “I’ll make you a coat.” He patted my back and ambled off as other gods took up skinning the other three.

“We need to move. We need to hunt.” Cold Wind spoke to the group. “Ice Weasel warrens rarely have fewer than fifteen members, but they’ll soon flee and scatter when this many of their hunters fail to return. Soon, they won’t be home.”

A hauntingly eerie goddess that I could only describe as ‘a yuki-onna from an actually scary manga’ drifted over to stand near me before bowing deeply. I felt as much as saw her gathering reality to her, stepping into the material. Her bare, bleeding feet left no marks on the snow, despite me watching blood welling from cracked soles.

“If it pleases my lord, I will veil your presence as we approach the warren.”

“That would be useful,” I stated. It was the first thing I said myself since the attack, I realized. My voice was calm, disinterested. For today I was done. Maybe I would care about this pit of vipers tomorrow.

A large head lightly bumped my shoulder. I turned around to see Gale’s Echo watching me with a placid gaze.

“Let me check you over.”

“Ah. Of course.”

She spent several minutes nosing at my robes, poking at the various talismans attached to me.

“Two of them broke,” she said, and the sound made me realize she had granted us privacy again. “Not from the Weasels. It looks like they just wore down.”

I frowned. “Are they defective?”

She flicked her tail, seeming annoyed. “No, no. These kinds of tools really need a thaumaturgist to keep them working right. You need to collect one for your household. I’m sure if they had come along, Nanar and Nayar could get them working again, but I lack the technique.”

“Oh. Is this going to be a problem.”

“No, no no. Your setup was picked with some redundancy; depending on the talisman, you can lose between seven and fifteen of them before efficacy starts

dropping. I was going to check this tomorrow, when the real hunting started. I wasn't expecting them to use someone as honored as Calibration of the Court of Seasons as bait. I need to know what my margin is now."

She seemed to settle herself. "I really should have known better. I'm just rusty. I thought the Court of Seasons was better than this."

She sounded genuinely disappointed, but the column was beginning to move again, so I mounted up as the march resumed.

"Never meet your heroes."

"Why wouldn't you want to meet..." she started to ask but she seemed to get it.

"Ah. I'm not familiar with that idiom, but I suspect it's similar to a saying among the Laplanders. Always Dream Northwards."

"Uh... What. Why do you always dream northwards? What does that have to do with anything? Do... Do dreams have directions?"

Her voice was amused as she explained the history of the idiom: its connection to legends of the Lap's neighbors and their hunger for independence from the Realm, and how the Lap, by contrast, enjoyed its status as a satrapy. We got into a debate over whether or not the sayings were actually similar, or both just expressed a more general dissatisfaction with placing ideals above reality.

It wasn't until much later that I appreciated what she was really doing for me.

By the time night fell, our party was laden with the spoils of several successful minor hunts. Weasel fur and bone had multiplied, and were joined by pelts, meats, and other harvestables from a dozen other kinds of northern game. It was a rich enough harvest that part of our train broke off to bring our spoils home to be processed.

I was able to join the rest of the hunting party in chatting over dinner that night, as we ate from the day's spoils. And if I was slightly less friendly, no one seemed to notice.

Morning of the 12th of Ascending Water, Jupiterday, Realm Year 762

That morning, Gale's Echo once again checked over the state of my talismans. Still only two broken, though she said she didn't think another two were going to last the day. Also, at some point during the night Vevin had vanished. Nothing sinister; she had left a message with the beholder that responsibilities had come

up.

“Zivzizov will have your breakfast ready shortly. However, I wanted to go over the itinerary of the day before you eat.”

Considering how she atonally sang it, I was pretty sure I now knew how to pronounce the ‘beholder’s’ name. She was eating her own breakfast. There was a small fire near my luxurious tent, and over it a cauldron was hung, and Gale’s Echo periodically stuck her entire muzzle into it.

“Sure?”

“Essentially, I wanted to ask how risky you are willing to be today.”

“What do you mean by risky?”

She flicked her head lightly. I wished I knew equine body language. Or maybe elemental? “As you heard, we are theoretically hunting Omen Dogs today. They’re not really a threat to even a mortal on horseback, but we’re getting far enough from the Pole of Earth that the wildlife is getting weirder. And stereotypes aside, while I’m an Air elemental, I haven’t historically spent much time in the north.”

She paused for a second and took another bite before continuing.

“I probably can fight off anything we run into. There are animals this close to the poles that could chase me off, but few of them could ambush me. But if we’re attacked by something nasty, I’m not sure if I can do it in a way that keeps the image we established yesterday. On the other hand, if we hang back, that could also tarnish your image.”

“Ah.” I frowned. “I really don’t know the right answer. What would you suggest?”

She tossed her head, and this time her feelings were clear enough. “If I knew that, I would just do it. I’ve done work like this before, but I had more of a safety margin. Sanmai’s mother would have murdered anyone who thought to speak badly of her son, long before his father got involved.”

I filed the name away. Maybe I would look up Echo’s history sometime.

“I suppose...” I started, then pondered for a bit before finishing the thought.

Echo had chosen to have me face the weasels because the appearance of cowardice was dangerous and it was a risk she could control. It had helped, people were friendlier, more respectful, but what respect it had given me was a

shield that could easily vanish. I could choose my dangers, or have others choose them for me.

“I suppose that if we hang back, I’ll look bad no matter how it goes, while if I ride towards the front, I’ll only look bad if something goes wrong.”

Echo lightly kicked the ground, then flicked her tail like slapping away annoying flies. “Fair enough. Front of the column it is.”