

CHAPTER 7

Sports Hunt

August 11, 2026

Late afternoon of the 12th of Ascending Water, Jupiterday, Realm Year 762

Six hours into the hunt, swaying on Gale's Echo's back, I had learned that the average territory of an Omen Dog in the far north was 831 Glym. Even if I could define a mile closer than 'this feels like I walked a mile', which I couldn't, that still wouldn't help me. A Glym was a topological unit that was apparently popularized before the fall of the Solars; I really did need to get context for that eventually. By 'topological', I mean informed by topology. It might be a two-dimensional unit, but it wasn't a traditional one—it took into account how slopes and valleys could change how much useful ground there was, and it was supposedly very good at predicting ranges for ground animals, or useful zoning for cities where mortals needed to walk, and also had uses in predicting how streams would move.

"You are correct," Echo replied, unbothered by my objection to such an absurd unit. "As a unit, it's almost completely useless in this degenerate age of sorrow. It requires accurate maps that simply don't exist anymore."

Keep telling it like it is, Echo. Keep telling it like it is.

More than that, I wasn't sure how fast we were traveling. Echo claimed that she could easily keep a pace of 42 Vell an hour, which was a more conventional distance unit (though I was unsure not only of what a Vell was but of the hour itself. Creation, you see, had a twenty-five-hour day, and I didn't know how its hours matched to Earth's). And a proper flat road would translate 50 Vell to 50 Glym. But this far north, there was nothing like that consistency.

"If I had to guess, I would say we're probably at least three Vell to every Glym. Some of these slopes would be impassable to mortal creatures—that greatly expands the needed territory for a pack to feed itself, when so much of the territory isn't useful. Though really, the generic Glym is only marginally useful. There are a number of tools for adapting it more precisely to the question."

In short, it was a value that, if actually useful, probably was only so in scientific literature.

I was starting to tire. Even with Gale's Echo being an unnaturally comfortable

ride, being in the saddle this long was leaving me increasingly sore and stiff. We were regularly finding evidence of the hounds, but nothing recent, and I was beginning to wonder if they had fallen prey to one of the countless threats of the north.

I think I would be fine with that? Omen Dogs were creepy, but were just doglike enough for me to dislike hunting them. Of course, that would move us on to the rest of our itinerary, which...

At the front of the line, Cold Wind held up a paw, bringing the hunting party to a halt, then made several gestures, before loping off in another direction with more focus.

"Tracks, North by West. No more than a day old," Gale's Echo translated.

"Huh. I guess we'll probably get them today."

I was enjoying Echo's sound barrier immensely. She wasn't chatty but she also didn't mind talking. The few times she was worried about an ambush, she would tell me to let her focus, and the rest of the time she was knowledgeable and patient.

As we crested the hill I thought about the rest of our itinerary. The Hushed Ones... they were some kind of mutants, and I was told that they ate people. That sounded pretty bad, but I really didn't know the context—I knew that accusation got thrown around at a lot of 'primitive' groups or tribes back on Earth, that it was literally part of the blood libel, which made me hesitant to accept it at face value. Evidently they had some kind of hive mind. It felt like there should be some way of talking to them, rather than just hunting them down.

After that, the Raksha. I wasn't sure why whatever magic that was translating everything for me translated that name as Raksha, but they weren't tiger men. They... kind of were shape-changers, but not really in the same way people meant when they used the term. More like they could trade bodies, but only outside reality. They had some kind of illusion magic, but it had to be pretty flawed considering how casually everyone was treating hunting them. Honestly, they sounded more like crappy fairies than anything else. I wasn't sure what to think about that.

Generally, in the stories, people hunting fairies were the bad guys. But unlike the Hushed Ones, there were open dialogues with some of the Raksha 'courts.' And

they were big on buying slaves, supposedly? That was pretty unpleasant, but I kinda thought I was going to have to hate everyone if I judged them on slavery, since it was damn near universally practiced here in Creation, and I didn't have that much hate in me.

Maybe I should? Maybe it said something weak about me? I don't know.

As for the Únôlpûr Aithanar... Well, they were the real goal of this hunt, and we weren't really planning on taking one of them out. More harass them so that they wouldn't keep sticking their nose above the surface.

Cold Wind slowed to a crawl, lowering his body close to the ground as we crested the next hill. I wasn't sure why—he was still immaterial. I didn't bother trying to hide, trusting to the snow maiden's veil. A second later he gestured again, and Gale's Echo continued translating.

"The den is here."

Early evening of the 12th of Ascending Water, Jupiterday, Realm Year 762

In the end, only fifteen of us were picked out to be hunters. Arguably sixteen, if you included Gale's Echo. But then you probably shouldn't include me.

Both of the Cold Roars, obviously. That was two.

Then me (and Gale's Echo. But mostly Echo.). Officially three.

Then Zivzizov—they were *totally* a hidden bodyguard. Though probably not assigned by the Cold Roars. Four.

The scary Yuki-Onna girl—her name was evidently Fönn—came riding a deer-like god whose name I didn't catch. Five and six.

A trio of southern war gods joined us. Three brothers—smoldering ash encrusted parts of their forms, and their pale hair blackened and curled at the tips, smoke escaping as the ends burnt away; it grew as fast as it burned. The Elnnti, I think they were called. Nine.

Three bear gods, two tiny things not much bigger than dogs, and one massive one that had to be fifteen feet at the shoulder *at least*. They were part of the Cold Roars' court, though they were only associated with each other out of friendship.

Twelve.

Three elementals—air all—finished the roster. Took the forms of falcons as big as

ponies. They had been ‘given’ to the Cold Roars by the Wind Masters. Fifteen.

The rest of the hunting party would pull back and surround the den so that none of the Omen Dogs could escape. I watched them move away, waiting until they were in position to materialize.

I just felt vaguely sick. The Omen Dogs weren’t hurting anyone. No one here wanted to eat them. They would be skinned, but it was unlikely anything useful would be made from their coats. Their teeth and a few bones would be harvested for artwork. There were a few thaumaturgic uses for their organs, but we weren’t going to bother.

This was exactly the kind of sports hunting I had hated back on Earth.

Still, I was crouched over a surprisingly perfect replica of the area made from snow. Fönn had made it. Maybe topological-based distances *weren’t* useless for gods, if they could get maps this accurate so easily. Well, if anyone was making and keeping those maps up-to-date.

“You, Zivzizov, and Fönn will come from here,” Sleet Wind stated. “That is where you will come from. Zivzizov will stay in the back, to make sure nothing escapes you two, while Fönn will finish off any prey you have wounded. You will be a harasser, you will harass them, wound them, and drive them out. So will I. I will do the same. While Cold Wind will finish the ones I wound, finishing off the bloodied ones.”

He worked his way down the list, giving each of us tasks and positions. The plan was pretty simple. Three lines. The forwardmost—the harassers—were supposed to try and hurt and scare as many of the Omen Dogs as possible. The second line was for the ones who would finish off the injured or running Omen Dogs. The third line in the back would pick off anyone who got past the second line.

And of course, any prey that got past all three lines would have to face the rest of the encirclement.

Those of us hunting ‘in front’ were supposed to keep the magic to a minimum. To keep it sportsmanlike. No such restriction was placed on the encirclement waiting behind us.

That’s how I found myself on Gale’s Echo’s back, holding my pretty little spear, to hunt a bunch of animals who had done me no wrong.

I felt it, this time, as Echo's magic wrapped itself around me. Just faintly. My grip corrected itself just slightly, and I wasn't holding the spear, aiming the spear, wielding it the way I naturally would. As she explained it, after I asked, it was a specialized intersection between Endowment and Possession—while Echo couldn't herself use most weapons, she was actually skilled with them, and could pseudo-possess her rider to channel her own skills and excellencies through them. It was almost unnoticeable, because I was still 'in charge' of what those skills would do. It didn't instigate the normal conflict most forms of possession would cause.

Fake.

Shut up, me.

Ahead of me, from the other side of the den, Sleet Wind crashed down, fully physically, and the den exploded into noise and motion. The Omen Dogs started... yelling? Screaming? It was nothing like the sounds of dogs. More like deeper-sounding foxes, if that made any sense. Pups tried to bolt as adult hounds yelled and screamed. They really were saber-toothed, which still looked so wrong on a canid. And Echo's scarily fast trot had brought me among them, my spear flashing down once, twice, thrice.

I suppose I could have just bloodied them, left them for Fönn to finish, but that felt cowardly, like I was trying to pretend I wasn't a part of this. I wasn't going to go out of my way to try and finish them off, but two of my blows killed, while the third threw my target away as a broken mass of meat, leaving it rolling and yowling in pain, at least until Fönn arrived to silence it. Echo was no kinder. Her hooves struck pups.

I knew I was going to be sick after this.

And then the snow erupted beneath me. Silver flashed. The tendrils that made up Gale's Echo vibrated, and the snow for ten feet around us shivered and was blown apart. The snow was red.

Gale's Echo leapt. In a single effortless arc she took us fifteen yards away, landing weightless as a phantom, stepping lightly upon the ground as if ending a casual trot rather than an impossible leap.

Where we had been there was only a patch of minced red snow and ground meat mixed with tangles of colorful cloth, and a shimmering silver saber sitting

pristine in its corpse bed.

Then, as if curtsying before an audience, Gale's Echo gracefully collapsed into the snow, and I felt her guiding presence withdraw.

What.

"I don't think I'll be able to guard you for the rest of this battle."

What just happened.

"Run."

When was she *hit*? *What the fuck just happened.*

Around us, pale bodies rose from the snow. Black hair, hands that were almost claws, and unnaturally shimmering weapons.

The Hushed Ones, it seemed, decided to hunt us first.