

CHAPTER 8

Broken Promises

August 11, 2026

Evening, 12th of Ascending Water, Jupiterday, Realm Year 762

They were more clothed than I was expecting. They had wrapped themselves in strips of torn cloth around their torsos, forearms. The ones without weapons had wrapped their hands. Blue, White, Red, Black, Green. Torn and bloody, obviously once part of something else, there was no order to how they wrapped themselves. Behind me, I heard battle start. Our encirclement was encircled. I swallowed, raised my spear, and prepared to defend my bodyguard.

“I don’t think—” one of the Hushed Ones was on me, and I wildly lashed out, trying to keep the strange boy back. “—there’s anywhere I can run!”

His movements were fluid as he flowed around my strike, lashing out at me. Somehow his clawed hands slipped off me without bite, but I felt a jolt in my robes. Points where my clothes seemed to momentarily catch, and then tear loose, and suddenly some of the cold was cutting through them.

I whipped the butt of the spear upwards, trying to catch him with it, and it slammed into his ribcage, knocking him back. But even then, he didn’t make a sound.

Behind me, I heard Gale’s Echo try to rise, and cry out in alarm.

Then something slammed into my back, and I was plowed into the snow. The force of the blow stole the wind from my lungs, and the cold made me lock up. I couldn’t have screamed, even if I had breath. The numbness was all-encompassing, like my face was gone. Then another blow, and the weight was gone from my back as Zivzizov was lifting me to my feet.

I saw the Cold Roars were fighting a dozen of them. It seemed like I was the only one who got so perfectly ambushed, but both of the brothers were bleeding, and though they lashed out with their magics, they couldn’t seem to find a grip on the Hushed Ones. Every time the Hushed Ones were struck, more of the tattered cloth frayed away, but... at this rate the brothers were going to fall before they tore through those defenses. Then the Elnnti erupted into flames, and I wished they hadn’t. Everything frozen numb suddenly could feel again, but the only thing it

was yelling at me was pain.

I blacked out for a second, and when I came to again, Zivzizov was gone, fighting to drive the Hushed Ones back, and entangling six of them by themselves. Fönn had replaced Zivzizov at my side, and there were three pristine corpses at her feet. Whatever protection the Hushed Ones had didn't seem to save them from her touch, because a fourth one was struggling in her grasp. It hadn't come for free though. A saber was stuck through her head, and an arrow seemed to have been shoved through her chest. Neither wound had downed her, but she was visibly flagging.

She turned to me, as the one in her grip stilled, and I saw her eyes widen. A shadow fell over me. And I knew.

I knew I was going to die.

I was going to die, because I couldn't refuse to come on this stupid hunting trip. Because we underestimated the Hushed Ones incredibly badly. Because I was caught up in reputation, rather than something important.

I was going to die because I was caught up in the expectations for 'A God of Calibration.' Because I obeyed the rules of that role, the unspoken promises that it carried.

I hadn't made those promises. I was going to die for promises I hadn't made.

I was entangled by them, like I was entangled by my own limbs, by this biting cold.

I was...

I saw a boy, laughing, "Don't you know anything? Never trust dragonspawn. I'll show you where you can be safe."

I saw a soulless husk, that had been a boy. I had watched and done nothing. I hadn't understood.

I saw a beautiful face and felt nothing but all-consuming loathing.

I was standing, yelling, punching ineffectually.

I was...

The net was holding me. Entangling promises, enforced role, entrapping safety, and

stolen truths.

The promises were killing me.

Broken things were holding me back, oaths tangling around my limbs like weights. *What if they didn't entangle me?* I cut them free.

I was on my feet, energized and drained at the same time, and not cold. I stepped forward, and the hiss of air told me I had escaped the blow that would have felled me.

I less turned, and more was then facing the other way. This Hushed One was a man, and his wrapping had worn all the way down to a Tarzan getup. I studied him, then. Very very pale. Dark eyes that... I wouldn't call them soulless, but whatever was behind them was alien to me. Oddly perfect, though not in an attractive way. No scars, no extra body fat, a little too symmetrical.

Something predatory from chaos that wanted to eat people. Not a human. Not a person. I felt overwhelming disgust, seeing him. He reminded me of... I wasn't sure. Tip of my tongue, but I didn't care to chase the thought down. I raised my spear, and he set himself, blade positioned to cut me down. There was something casually disinterested in the motion, like he had my measure.

Then I was standing in front of him, less moved and more was just there, swinging wildly, not even trying to make sure the head of the spear cut him, just battering at him with it like it was a staff. He blocked it once, twice, thrice. The sound of impact was wrong, like a hand muffling the world every time his blade stopped me, and he wasn't casual.

Four times, five...

He missed a block, and my spear didn't care that I hadn't used the blade. It carved through him, an arm falling one way, while the upper and lower parts of his torso lost interest in each other. Then the thing that had been alive moments before began tearing itself apart into violet threads, my strike marking what was wrong, and then the world correcting itself.

There was the sound of impact behind me, and I turned to see two more of them being held back by scarlet... ofuda? I was surrounded by burning ofuda. Scarlet flames—the shade of Mars, some part of me noted—leapt from them, driving back two attackers, or knocking aside blows aimed at me. Loathing drove me forward.

Again, I skipped the distance and was in their face. It was one of the ones without weapons, just using hand-wraps, and that didn't block my spear at all as I carved them from crown to hip. The other one had...

Fönn was chewing something, and I realized my next target's throat was gone. Around me, the fighting was quieting.

The fighting was quieting. There were individual Hushed Ones still fighting, but they were being isolated and brought down by groups of angry gods. The ambush had failed.

Gale's Echo let out a pained laugh. "It seems your ascension is continuing to fix itself. Good job."

Sleet Wind inserted himself into the conversation. "It's good you did." He was dragging the body of one of the Hushed Ones with him like some grisly trophy. Good. They didn't deserve respect. Altogether too much like the Raksha, with their hunger for humans and looking like people without being them.

"It's good it happened. They were aiming for you. You were targeted. Hmm. If you fell we would have had to fall back. We would have had to explain." He tossed his trophy aside, then shrugged. "Also good for the dignity of the court that your magic is coming."

He studied me for a moment.

"We must have a mirror. We must have a vanity. You should see, you should look at your ascension." He seemed to notice Gale's Echo's state then. "You did your job. You did good work. I'll see that a healer tends you."

"Thank you, lord."

He nodded before wandering off. I just...

I just wanted to collapse. I felt drained in ways I couldn't really explain.

"I need to see?" I asked, raising my hand to my face. "What does he..."

Blurring. And... I seemed to be jumping back and forth between one and three places, the world unsteady like it was ready to leap into motion. I... didn't feel like I was moving, but I realized I was. It felt like shifting weight back and forth between my feet, but... everywhere, and in a direction I couldn't see. But...

Then I dismissed it.

“Do you need anything?” I asked Echo. “You saved my life. Anything that’s in my power right now.”

She gave me a mildly offended look, then shook her head. “You hired me. It’s my job. Just let me rest until the healers get to me.”

And so we did.

They cleared the bodies away, preparing the clearing in front of the omen dogs’ den as Master Winter started raising a castle of ice for us to shelter in. They gathered the wounded together, and then Master Winter conjured his castle around them. Then once they were placed, he started growing it outwards into a fortified shelter for the rest of us. Some of the gods started shedding... pieces of themselves, who seemed to solidify into lesser gods, and I was shooed away from Gale’s Echo so that the healer gods could tend to the wounded.

About a dozen gods had fallen, and it wasn’t clear if all of them were going to return. Those were god-killer weapons, while the healers were complaining that the unarmed Hushed Ones had taken alchemical concoctions that made them more deadly to spirits.

Almost unwillingly, my gaze found itself to where the dead omen dogs had been piled into a heap at the edge of the clearing. They were simply cleared away like trash—not even the Cold Roars with their irrational hatred of the animals were going to bother skinning them after gods had died. They were already being buried in snow. It felt hollow.

My eyes kept moving, past our hunted quarry, to the *things* that had hunted us as their quarry. The Hushed Ones were in their own pile. The ones I had slain had cleaned themselves away, but few others were so tidy. *Disgusting*. I wasn’t sure where the thought came from, but I agreed with it. *They should all die, just like that bastard Fgan Deedrid*.

Before I could dwell on the thought, Fönn and Zivzizov were herding me into the building. It seemed I had already been assigned a room.

“Well, that isn’t what I was expecting at all.”

Fönn had made that mirror for me. It seemed she was leaping on the opportunity that Gale’s Echo being injured and Zivzizov being assigned to camp defense gave her, and saw it as a chance to get close to me. Which... she had defended me this time.

“Yes, my lord. Your visage is quite impressive.”

She was still marked. There was a hole in her head, a slot that a blade made. It was shrinking almost fast enough to track, but it was still disturbing. Still, most of my attention was on the mirror rather than the horror show of injury.

I... was three people. One of them was constantly fading away, another constantly fading in.

The fading one was itself constantly... unsplitting? Like half a dozen even more faded images were merging into it, to give it their solidity, all of them doing *something else* before moving into alignment with it, and it was only by consuming these other images that it kept restoring itself.

The fading-in image, meanwhile, was constantly dividing itself, spending away its solidity to become more images. Most of which then blinked out of existence, like it was constantly discarding them. And between them was...

The real me? I blurred, smeared. Like an anime trying really hard to tell you I was fast, even when I sat still.

She sat behind the real me, picking at my hair. My transformation had come with a new bauble, a fancy bit of jewelry. It was a hair net, and it had just shown up on my head at some point without me noticing. Kind of like those strange red ofuda that had protected me. But unlike them, it had stuck around. Evidently my hair was supposed to be tied around it, and she was teasing it into place. I was going to need to grow my hair out more to wear it properly.

“I don’t feel like a bunch of eldritch nonsense.”

Fönn blinked, and then let out what seemed to be a genuine giggle. “Now I know you were really a human. Anything as obviously divorced from normal existence as you is either the agent of the powerful, or something powerful themselves. The esoteric is not for mortals to touch.”

She gave me a grin, and I realized she had shark teeth.

“You are glorious, my lord.”

“Glorious.”

I just stared at the icy mirror, wondering what I had lost, what I had severed, to get here.