

Kept Promises

August 11, 2026

Morning of the 13th of Ascending Water, Venusday, Realm Year 762

“While we are not experienced with the Hushed Ones, what records do exist on past conflicts with them are clear. They are certainly smart enough to do this—they are incredibly intelligent, and while few hives of them actually make things, few is not none.”

We had all gathered together in the castle courtyard; it was the only space big enough for a meeting like this. While this wasn’t all of us, it was everyone who wasn’t someone else’s servant—everyone who could make decisions for themselves.

“They are capable of understanding speech—they have been known to disguise themselves as humans to sneak into villages and towns, to spy and kidnap. Whatever stops them from communicating back is not a lack of intelligence. No. The problem is twofold.”

The speaker was one of the Elnnti. I thought he was called Painful Lessons, though I might have been wrong. The Cold Roars had respectfully stood aside, letting Master Winter and the Elnnti take control after this shifted from ‘pleasure hunt’ to something more serious.

“The first is that spying on mortals is a very different game from spying on gods, just in a logistical sense. They might have been able to observe that a hunting party of gods was making its way in this direction—again, they are *highly* intelligent. But this ambush would take time to plan and set up. Without access to resources they do not have, they would have had to set this up before we ever left The House of the Nine Hearths of Emerald and Silver. And that’s ignoring the alchemicals they used.”

Painful Lessons was a handsome man, outside of the ashen crust across his face that made him look both wounded and dirty at the same time.

“That’s the second problem. While the weapons are suspicious, they might have just found a First Age cache. No, the damning detail is that they used three different *rare* consumables here. A potion that lets mortals see immaterial gods.

One that lets mortals touch us. And the final one that infects its user with a contagious curse—a nasty thing designed to make wounds take longer to heal, but it can sometimes stop a god from returning from death.”

Master Winter took over then. “The alchemicals they had access to are completely implausible. Even if this group of Hushed Ones *had* delved into Thaumaturgy—something that to our knowledge has only happened thrice—the resources needed to make enough of the alchemicals to outfit the entire group that ambushed us are entirely out of practical reach. Only the cursed moxibustion treatment has any shelf-longevity, and sourcing all of the reagents for making these... We Ennead would find it expensive to source all the way out here. Maybe in the East, or the Blessed Isle, but out here sourcing this much would be punishing for a nation. If the Hushed Ones had that many resources, they wouldn’t be hiding on the periphery. They would be conquering the north by force.”

The Elnnti War God nodded in thanks to Master Winter before he continued. “But that’s not the most damning detail. The armor they had. That was made from the robes of slain Immaculate Monks. The Hushed Ones are dangerous, but we would know if they had slain three full circles of the Sidereals’ hunting dogs. More importantly, we do know of a major Immaculate contingent that was recently slain.”

“It’s how we knew of the Ünôlpûr Aithanar incursion,” Master Winter stated. “The monks drove them off the surface, but didn’t understand how much stronger they grow when standing somewhere the sun hasn’t shone for a hundred years. The last reports they sent back described them chasing the forbidden gods into the depths, after which all communications were lost. Robes from slain monks are the only logical source material for the armor the Hushed Ones were using.”

“This has changed from a surprise attack on a group of unprepared forbidden gods into one upon a group of them who not only are ready for us, but have begun a harassment campaign to whittle us down, and almost certainly will be entrenched by the time we arrive,” Painful Lessons said. “Thoughts?”

“Should we even be continuing?” Zivzizov asked. “Our forces were enough for a decisive conflict with the Turrets of the Ice Blossom, but only if they haven’t received further support. They have a strong relationship with the Guild, and while it would be unusual, it’s not unthinkable for them to hire mercenaries—that

could take the form of Raksha mercenaries, mortal sorcerers, martial artists. There's a major company of ghosts wearing necrotech war engines that have been making a name for themselves in the area, and I know they hire out to the Guild."

"Hmm," Sleet Wind rumbled, "We shouldn't just think of mortal resources. We shouldn't just count the ones paid for by mortal coin. The Jet Court could get involved."

Master Winter made a sour face. "While I hold nothing but disdain for Princess Kyema, I don't think she would involve herself with the Únôlpûr Aithanar. She hasn't stayed on top of the Jet Court for centuries by exposing her back to knives. Since we were going after Turrets of the Ice Blossom, it makes sense for Ellith to be willing to ally with the Únôlpûr Aithanar. But Kyema has something to lose and nothing to gain."

Sleet Wind nodded his massive head and sank back down, deferring to the local expert.

"The specifics might be wrong, but the overall point is valid," Zivzizov sang. "The Guild is only the most obvious thread they could have pulled on. Raksha are highly social creatures. Connections are more real to them than matter."

At some point I had balled my hands into fists so hard my fingernails had started biting into my palms. The Raksha were so disgusting. They should all die. The point was right though. There wasn't a reason for us to keep pursuing this—not the Court of Seasons. We were already doing the Ennead a favor as I understood it. Doing them two favors, including one as risky as this?

No. Still, when I was about to interject something to that effect, Master Winter's voice echoed in my ear, carried there by some hidden magic.

Hold for now, and you will benefit.

I settled down. He had better follow through, because I was done playing along for no reason.

"The Guild simply wouldn't have had time to move mercenaries around, not in great numbers," Master Winter interjected. "Nor could the Únôlpûr Aithanar be too open. Any merchant that knowingly trades with them is unlikely to ever receive a Road God's blessing again. No merchant could afford that. They poured so many resources into the Hushed Ones ambush because it was their best chance."

Master Winter gestured at me. “Young Nathan here is both an important and seemingly vulnerable god. If anything happened to him, there’s no way we could have continued on. We would be dealing with Censors, at the very least. They didn’t prioritize maximizing damage with their attack—if they had attacked a few seconds earlier, they would have caught us in a worse position. But they waited until they could get a strong ambush on Nathan specifically. That was their move. They didn’t have time to prepare something better.”

A god I wasn’t familiar with spoke up then. Raven headed, with arms that bifurcated at the elbows, and dressed in scholar’s robes. “While they might have warned Turrets of the Ice Blossom, the Raksha are no more friendly to forbidden gods than they are to any of the rest of us. Maybe less. I wouldn’t be surprised if they haven’t already raided Ellith to steal thralls from her. The Únôlpûr Aithanar have a never ending hunger for slaves for the Undercity. They’re competitors.”

That started a round of debates as different speakers brought up possible threats, only for other gods to object. I wasn’t knowledgeable enough to say what was and wasn’t reasonable.

All of that hardly laid my core objection to rest. I held my tongue. For now.

That said, it seemed to be enough to deflect the bulk of the objections. While not everyone seemed thrilled to continue, there didn’t seem to be a big push to retreat among the gathered gods. I wondered if hunting the Únôlpûr Aithanar wasn’t a reason many gods had joined this Court of Seasons. I was starting to realize that for a Court mostly known for its extravagant festivals... we had set up in Ascending Water in the far north. A place that had few grand celebrations. And also that there were a *number* of war gods making up the contingent of the hunting party.

I wondered if we were being used to, well, launder the presence of so many gods whose gathering would normally be seen as problematic. Or maybe something else. I didn’t know enough to know what I didn’t know.

“I am here to convince you to go along with continuing the hunt.”

We were sitting in the room that I had claimed. Fönn and Zivzizov had cleared out—I was expecting them to approach me soon to make whatever relationship they were seeking formal—so it was just Master Winter and me.

“I hope you understand why that’s unlikely. From my perspective this whole

hunt isn't just looking dubious now, but like it was dubious from the start. Was it ever the Cold Roars' idea?"

He snorted lightly. "So you noticed?"

I shrugged. "I think everyone has by this point."

He shook his head. "They do hunts every year when it's their turn to head the court. We... the Ennead and the Elnnti... had always planned to use this to move forces across Creation. It let us gather significantly more forces here than we could have normally gotten away with. That said, most of the gods on this hunt are genuine celebrants."

I raised an eyebrow, and he spread his hands. "It's true. We weren't originally going to go after the Únôlpûr Aithanar until Resplendent Water—it wasn't that hard for our mercenaries to find excuses to hang around for a month. Most were going to delay returning home to visit friends, or play tourist. There were any number of reasonable excuses they could invent." He lightly rapped his knuckles on the table. "We didn't need them to stay very long."

"So why isn't that what happened?"

"You know why. The Cold Roars decided to bring you on a hunt, and suddenly every god who thinks they can hold a spear wants to join up. It was going to be very expensive paying for all the mercenaries we would need. The Elnnti alone are costing..." he shook his head. "We aren't a rich pantheon. Borrowing the might of the Court of Seasons made everything simpler."

So he had made this trip—one that I already hadn't wanted to be a part of—more dangerous for me, and then was going to leverage it to extract favors from me?

"That circles back to why I would go along with this? This feels like a lot of risk that I would be taking to help you, when as far as I can tell you're already in debt to the Calendar Court. I'll be honest and admit that I don't really like the fact that you set me up to be targeted here. From my perspective part of the point of my being placed where I was, was to ease my debut into divine society. One that's been partly ruined by your little conspiracy."

"Because we'll pay you."

I raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't know a good deal from a bad one, and after all this plotting I'm not going to take your word on it."

He frowned, then shrugged. "Fair. You want a negotiator. Who?"

I pondered for a moment. "Gale's Echo is the only friend whose motivation I know, and who's actually here."

He seemed thoughtful, but shook his head. "She's not been part of any high level politics. I could easily manipulate her into taking a terrible deal, and she would never know it. That's just setting us up to have a problem in the future. They don't have to be local, we have the magic to contact someone more distant, if it's for a major deal like this. Do you have anyone else you trust?"

I frowned, thinking. Maybe The Three? I didn't really trust them, but they wouldn't want to dilute the prestige of the Court of Seasons by letting outsiders leverage our reputation for cheap. Actually, maybe I should call on The Whisperer? Hadn't his support been bought? I was about to suggest him, when I noticed... Light? Darkness?

The deepest, darkest blues and purples. Light that was blocking light, as my room grew darker and darker. The ground started bleeding little drops of silver that fell upwards. It was like deep waters. Faint at first, but it quickly grew thicker. Silver formed a film, a surface. We were under a lake. I was drowning.

No. No I wasn't. I was breathing air. I had to force myself to remember I was breathing air.

"I'll do it."

Far above, the lake's surface shattered, and then there was something massive and dark that swam through still waters. I fought not to shiver. The water was cold and still. *There is no water.* The mental chant only helped so much, and I started to shiver.

"I was only gone for a *day*. I had to check some things out, see."

Master Winter's eyes were wide.

"Things weren't adding up in two directions. I suppose your little stunt answered one of them."

Vevin strolled out of the darkness, her thick tail lashing back and forth, a circle of silver filled with darkness burning like the blackest night upon her brow.

"Hello Master Winter. I know we just spoke a day ago, but allow me to reintroduce

myself.”

She smiled, and I realized that Fönn’s grin was that of an amateur. I wasn’t entirely sure how that many needle-like teeth fit in a human-sized mouth.

“Light... Lightless Darvne.” He swallowed. “I greet the Moon Sage.”