

Under Pressure

August 11, 2026

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

I wanted to say something like *Vevin?*, ask her *What's going on*. I didn't. I wasn't an idiot. She wasn't the god I thought she was. A moon god of some kind? I knew Luna was one of the Incarna. Black. The dark of the moon. Why did her presence feel like being at the bottom of a lake? I looked up and saw its surface far above.

The room wasn't that big.

But the nice thing about everyone knowing you're ignorant is that you just get to ask without embarrassment.

"Moon Sage?"

Her smile brightened a little, into something that wasn't quite so predatory.

"Ah, yes." Her accent was different. Somehow more erudite, though I wasn't sure how I could tell. It just *felt* like it was more clipped, more vowels being properly pronounced, and somehow prettier. "I am, as they call us, one of the Anathema, and not a god. I hadn't yet gotten to the part of your education where I would have covered that. We are Exalted—like the Dragon-Blooded, but more so."

"I... I am just going along with the plan the Twisted Stone Conclave set out," Master Winter defended himself. "I won't deny that I've taken a couple liberties, but part of planning things out is seeing..."

"I'm perfectly sure you did exactly what the Conclave intended," she cut him off, as she began circling the room. The... light? darkness...? it swirled around her like living water. Everywhere else it was still and heavy, and the lake surface above pressed down. Again, I had to struggle to remember that I could.

"I should note that," she began, her voice dropping lower, "while I'm here at their behest, we are not allies." Her voice had taken on a watery, almost serpentine sound. "I would more properly label them as my political enemies. And it seems the favor they actually sought was not the favor they *asked*."

"I..." Master Winter seemed to be thinking over his words. "...am not a party to the infighting within the Silver Pact. I do not know what favor they asked of you, but I

assure you I haven't worked against you."

"Oh," she said brightly. "It was the obvious one, which is why I didn't question it. 'Who is this new god of the Court of Seasons?' After all, the Court is associated with the Bronze Faction, and the Bronze Faction is an enemy of all Lunars."

I was sure he understood the implication, because he suddenly looked less scared and more sour. Like he understood how he had been used, his lips thinning.

"I'll again assure you that I didn't know you were here, or that young Nathan here was your student."

"Which is why you're alive. I've *killed* my elders for playing games with my students."

He seemed to have found his spine, because he met her gaze then. Clearly, he had decided she wasn't going to kill him.

"The Twisted Stone Conclave had expressed a disinterest in Nathan to me, and I had no reason to doubt it. They did not inform me that they had arranged to insert you to spy on him. I suppose it's obvious now what they were after, but I take no responsibility for it. We are allied with the Twisted Stone Conclave, we are not their servants."

She stopped her circling equidistant between Master Winter and me, and grabbed...

Grabbed a chair out of midair and plopped it down backwards, before falling heavily onto it. She crossed her arms on the backrest, and let her head rest on them. "Yes. They intend to use me against the Únôlpûr Aithanar. They aren't willing to risk their own. They obviously had some grasp on Nathan's character. I would not just pretend to be a teacher to such a young lamb. And that—after taking the role of teacher to get close to him—I would be unlikely to abandon it. I'm infamous, after all, for how defensive I am about my students."

I wanted to protest that I wasn't a lamb, but then... didn't I almost just get led to my slaughter?

"They *will* pay for using me this way, but they aren't wrong."

Master Winter nodded. "That's understandable. I would not forgive being used against the servants of Fides-Dumuzid so casually."

“Fides-Dumuzid has been seen on the surface.”

Who was Fides-Dumuzid? Someone connected to Únôlpûr Aithanar, presumably. But why was he a big deal?

Master Winter stilled. “Ah. That is... brazen.”

“I suspect the Twisted Stone Conclave doesn’t *think* they’ll have to pay me at the end of this. They’re wrong. Even if I do die against him so that my shard can go to someone more *worthy*, they’ll still pay. I have made certain of that. But enough of that. We are speaking of how you will bribe my student to continue on this fool’s errand.”

He paused as if thinking, “I admit I had assumed you were going to talk your student out of it.”

The dark-light started fading then, a gradual lessening of intensity.

She shook her head. “No, I’m going to bribe him as well. If he leaves, half these hunters will leave with him, and I can’t magic up enough of an army on short notice. Fides-Dumuzid *has been seen on the surface*. If the Sidereals did their job the Wyld Hunt would be here instead of running down some poor kid in Great Forks who lit up a week ago. Cecelyne’s teats, the Aerial Legion should be here. It *will* be, if he actually does something notable like kill those idiot brothers.”

Master Winter did wince then. “Please don’t get them killed. The rest of the Court of Seasons would hold it against us, and our legal situation...”

“That’s not really my problem, now is it.”

He quieted then. Then, “What do you need?”

“Nathan’s now a major god of the Haslanti.”

“Done.”

“He doesn’t yet have a Sanctum. The Ennead will front the resources and manpower to build it. Alternatively, if his domain ends up manifesting one, you will support one major initiative of his within Yu-Shan.”

He winced a little. “You know our current problems there.”

She just raised an eyebrow.

“Very well,” he surrendered.

“Finally, Autumn Frost will act as keeper or guardian to anything Nathan entrusts to the Ennead for one hundred years.”

This last one seemed to intrigue Master Winter, but he just said, “There must be limits.”

She nodded. “A Kap. Autumn Frost doesn’t have to drop everything when he calls, but must make reasonable accommodations to do this. We’ll use Deus’s Code of Conduct to define what counts as reasonable accommodation.”

“Fine.” He nodded. “I’ll show myself out.”

I waited until he left the room before starting.

“Please explain. You’re acting like you’re on my side here, but you just admitted that you’re using me yourself. Why should I trust you now? Also, why those three favors?”

She sighed, and her teeth had gone back to normal, though her tail was still there. I couldn’t decide if it was fish-like, or serpent-like, but it bounced in time with her leg.

“Explaining the Anathema and all the politics and history around it would be... I’ll get to that if I survive the coming conflict.”

“As for the three favors?” She continued, “The other fifteen months of the Court of Seasons all have independent power bases and worshipers—they are primarily gods of the Calendar Court, but they have other resources to draw upon and personal courts to leverage. You do not, and your ‘month’ is uniquely ill-suited. You would have eventually made arrangements, but it probably would have involved dealing with complications that you don’t need.”

I thought about it. That seemed to track.

“Likewise,” she continued, “you really do need a Sanctum. You might have a special kind of fallback through your Mantle, but it has a number of issues,” *it really did*, “and a Sanctum is simply *useful* for a god. It also takes a lot of time and resources.”

“The Ennead are an interesting Pantheon. I’ve only gotten into the shallow end of telling you about how gods work, but they’re not a Terrestrial Court. Nor are they a Celestial one. They are a mixed group of Terrestrial and Celestial gods who have essentially banded together to jointly pursue their interests as a way of going

around the bureaucracy of Yu-Shan. Their Joint Sanctum—The House of the Nine Hearths of Emerald and Silver—is in a gray zone. But it probably would not be found legal if anyone got sufficiently interested.”

“So... they’re politically weak in Yu-Shan.”

"Yes." She smiled as if she'd scored a major point. "Why is that useful?"

“Ah.” Why would that be useful? Their favor couldn’t be worth much, and calling it in would make for some bad blood. “Oh. It’s blackmail.”

“Leverage,” she corrected. “They’ll work hard to find something you want more, so that you’ll give it up.”

That... probably would make for some bad blood later, but after this stunt I didn’t really care.

“And the last?”

“If you ever are killed and must use your own path of reincarnation, you’re liable to lose every physical item you’ve acquired. While someone old like me has ways of hiding things away, you’re too young. Autumn Frost is no Madame Marthesine, but Madame Marthesine would charge too much for the service. Hmm. A Kap is a unit for the possessions of the average mortal household—it uses volume and mass. Though it was set during the height of the first age, a Kap is actually a reasonably large unit of storage.”

I nodded. Every concession sounded valuable. Not ‘risk my life’ valuable, but I couldn’t deny that her asks for me sounded thoughtful.

“As for why you should trust me... do you want to hear about me, or about Fides-Dumuzid?”

Which would make me more inclined to listen to her? Fides-Dumuzid was obviously going to be someone terrible. Whoever he was would be fodder to justify and excuse doing terrible things, or extreme things, to excuse *doing what needs to be done*.

I didn’t want to hear about him first. And she hadn’t manipulated me and inserted herself into my life at the start because of Fides-Dumuzid. She had done it as a favor to this Conclave.

“Tell me about yourself.”

She nodded.

“Your areas of ignorance fascinate me. I’m almost sure you must come from some holdout colony that was set up in the first age—someplace outside Creation entirely that a paranoid old Solar created in case Creation itself fell. There really is no other explanation for someone as obviously educated as you to have such massive areas of ignorance. That said, I will give you a high level overview, because many of the topics border other topics that would require weeks to just give a surface understanding of.”

“I was Exalted, became one of the Chosen of the Moon, not long after the Usurpation. The Moonsilver Tattoos—” and for a moment, patterns of silver covered her “—that define our current social order didn’t exist yet—wouldn’t become common for another twenty years. I was born into an age of decline, where every year was marginally worse than the one before, and while the Shogunate was performing an endless series of purges on anything that might even hint at Solar influence. Often, that was other parts of the Shogunate, as the whole edifice cannibalized itself in its quest for purity.”

Her eyes were distant as the room continued to move back towards normal.

“I won’t speak much of my early years. I became a sorceress before I became an Exalted, and I have always defined myself by my sorcery. I suspect the Silver Pact would have made me a Changing Moon if I wasn’t so obviously a sorcerer first and foremost. I butted heads enough with my mentors, didn’t have the approved mindset. But they also worked harder to pretend that Sorcery belonged to the No Moons alone in those days. Such efforts failed, of course. Salina’s gift saved us from such machinations. I would have been a terrible Changing Moon, but many Changing Moons are terrible Changing Moons.”

“I suppose my fundamental disagreement with them peaked during the Contagion and the Balorian Crusade. By then I was well established, and had years to see how their ‘controlled’ descent worked, their efforts to build a society that ‘didn’t depend’ on sorcery and the help of gods and Exalts. Those societies all died when the Crusade reached them, if they weren’t already dead of plague. Not just directly—starvation and malnutrition, banditry, loss of trade, and a thousand other infrastructural dooms took as many as fell to the actual plague. The same continues to torment the Wyld barbarians, some of my compatriots champion. Even groups like the Haslanti are two bad winters away from falling, and they

could never defend themselves from a major Fair Folk invasion.”

“Hmm... but I’m speaking of politics you don’t have the context for. Let us just say that there is a simple answer for how to build a society that does not depend on the Exalted. That no one else champions it among the Lunars, when so many of us claim to be working to build a society that does not need us... That tells you everything. Salina remains right, even if her approach had the flaws so many Solars were defined by.”

“What you should understand is that I have spent the last seven and a half centuries spreading knowledge. I have probably taught sorcery to more mortals, gods, elementals, and even Dragon Kings than anyone else in Creation. I’ve also taught Martial Arts, Thaumaturgy, and more. I would say I’ve done as much or more to slow the growth of the Realm than many of my peers who brag about it, and little of that came from me fighting them directly.”

“So you’re against the Realm?” I asked. “I keep getting mixed messages about them?”

“That’s what you focus on, my relationship with the Realm?” She made a sour face. “It’s complex. Less so than many of my peers. Without the Scarlet Empress, Creation might have genuinely fallen, and while they have destroyed a lot of history, they have also preserved knowledge in many places where it otherwise would have been lost.”

“But I do oppose them, yes. Though the reason I oppose them and the reason many of your peers dislike them don’t match up. The same is true of my own peerage. My reasons are my own.”

“So... you’re a famous sorcery teacher then?”

“Sorcery, whenever I can, yes. Also necromancy, though I find that less useful. Martial Arts. Thaumaturgy, when I didn’t have time or opportunity to teach better. Economics. International relations—I’ve taught a number of mortal princes over the years. Not to be immodest, but I’m probably the most famous Lunar teacher in Creation.”

She paused, then. “Not the best, but I have no respect for *him*.” She rolled her hand dismissively. “He might teach you, but only to extract favors from you later, and he only properly teaches other Lunars.”

“And so I should trust you because you’re a great teacher?” That wasn’t a good

reason, and we both knew it.

“No. I’m going to use you here, and I got close to you to use you. You also don’t know enough to really trust anyone. I will say that I wouldn’t betray you here because it would be bad for my reputation. Pretty much the only good reputation I have is as a teacher. Since I have revealed myself as your teacher, I wouldn’t undermine that now. But you don’t have the context to trust that.”

“Why did you decide to teach me, anyways?”

“I wasn’t going to. Not really,” she shamelessly admitted. “The Twisted Stone Conclave claimed they couldn’t put someone close to you because there were too many eyes watching them. So they would make sure everyone knew where they were while I would show up and investigate you in return for future favors. I was just going to spend a couple days investigating you, but... Well, frankly, you remind me entirely too much of many of the young Lunars I have mentored over the years. Once I pretended... I wasn’t going to teach you poorly. And once I taught you seriously... It’s against my nature to watch you sink.”

“But no, you shouldn’t trust me. No one would sacrifice an ancient reputation over something petty, but there are those who would sacrifice their legacy to destroy an evil as old as Fides-Dumuzid. You would be wise to not trust me here. More than that, I may genuinely die, which is probably why the Conclave arranged for me to get involved in the first place.” Her face was calm and her tone even, but there was a bite to her words as she snorted. “Just another knife at my back.”

“Fides-Dumuzid, the forbidden. Fides-Dumuzid, the loyal son. Fides-Dumuzid, the keeper of the gates. The Steward. Loyal servant to his exiled masters. After the Primordial War, it was unthinkable that he would be suffered to hide. After all, who could feel safe while he yet lived? Wouldn’t he always be a blade hanging above the heads of the gods? Yet they grew used to the blade. Found ways to dull it, to cut him off from his domain more and more.”

“Fides-Dumuzid, who took a minor breed of darkbrood gods and made them the Ünôlpûr Aithanar. Fides-Dumuzid, the first City Father.”

“Fides-Dumuzid. The God of Yu-Shan itself.”