

First Steps

August 11, 2026

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

I frowned.

“You absolutely know that means nothing to me. Like... I understand vaguely what you’re saying. The Gods overthrew the Primordials, in the time before. The Primordials were some kind of titanic entities that are not gods by the actual occult definition of the term, but were worshiped in those early times, and made the gods as their servants to... basically act as an...”

I struggled for a second to find the right words. Gods were basically some kind of merged responsibility structure, half-API and half Agent for the Loom of Fate, but I didn’t have the words in Old Realm.

“Sorry, I know how I would describe it in *English*.” I used my mother tongue for a moment, before going back to the language of the gods. “But—”

Vevin—no. Not Vevin. I should use her actual name even in my own thoughts. *Darvne* looked amused. “We really need to cover the Exalted for you, because you won’t understand our role in things until you do. The Gods did not rebel. They created us to rebel in their place, as gods like you—” *and there was something ironic in her voice* “—can’t actually directly strike at the Primordials. Actually, for lower ranks of gods it’s an even more extreme restriction.”

She stood, spinning her chair so that it faced the right way. With just the two of us, and her restoring something of her old posture and attitude. It was comfortingly familiar.

“Still, that’s a solid enough basis for us.” She started as she sat herself down properly at the table with me. “Fides-Dumuzid did not rebel. He was... honestly treated pretty well. Probably among the best-treated of any god not counted in the Incarna, and his responsibilities were such that unlike them, he wasn’t forced to stand by and watch behavior he disliked, wasn’t forced to perform actions against his nature. He was the steward of Yu-Shan. The groundskeeper. If new sections had to be raised, and the Primordials didn’t want to do it themselves, he was the architect and engineer. And he was a line of defense—the first, and maybe

least of them, because he wasn't supposed to risk his own destruction in its defense. He was supposed to make assault harder, not stop any force actually able to fight the Incarna or the Primordials themselves."

"He should have died during the Primordial War, really. But Qaf, the Heaven-Violating Spear, saw in him a weakness in the defenses of Yu-Shan, one that the Primordials themselves might take advantage of in a later day, and preserved him. He went to another Primordial, He Who Bleeds the Unknown Word, and together they performed a work."

"Fides-Dumuzid was twisted to exist in some small way inside the Geas the Primordials used to bind the gods. The one that forces them not to strike at the Primordials. It's imperfect protection—it won't save him if he strikes first, and any god he has struck against can strike at him forever more. If he pushes it too far, he loses protection forever against whole classes of gods. We know this because he already has. Honestly, if he was ever truly before the Incarna... Well, they could certainly find a way to force him to breach the protection. But it's enough. Saturn couldn't fate his ending. The Unconquered Sun couldn't simply strike him down. And he has made sure that he wouldn't ever be truly before them."

She looked frustrated at what she was explaining. For my part, I was getting a bit of a sinking feeling. I hadn't really thought about the possibility that gods had built in weaknesses. I should have—all of Vevin's, no, Darvne's, lectures had made it clear that gods were a system, and that system had an engineer.

"He hid. Normally creating a Sanctum is hard for a god. It isn't for Fides-Dumuzid. Technically it's all a disconnected annex of Yu-Shan. A space for him to make components that can then be moved into the City of Heaven. And he built Sanctums there. Billions of sanctums, some of them as small as a closet, while others were palaces fit for a Primordial's Jouten. This is the Undercity, the network city of the Únôlpûr Aithanar."

"And he invested a little bit of his life into them, so that a god striking at them is striking him. Luna could have certainly snuck into them and captured him, but not even she could do so without harming a single one, for some of them are impossibly fragile. The Sun could have scoured them all away, but again that would be striking at him first."

"Early in the First Age, the Solar Queen Merela set a great hunt against the

Undercity. Useless—the only record of that invasion mentioned that not a single Celestial Exalted died, but that it was a huge waste of time and manpower. I know that the Hierophant held it against her in later days. There’s some hints that the Hierophant even cut a deal with Fides-Dumuzid.”

“As I said, he was a great architect and engineer, a maker of homes and palaces and manses without comparison outside the greatest Twilights. And as the Solar Exalted grew more insular in the later days of the high First Age, they all had their own concerns.”

I nodded. There was a lot of context here I wasn’t getting, but I thought I understood the basic gist of it. “He sounds like he doesn’t really matter? He’s been hiding for... however long it’s been since the Primordial War? What happened to make him a big deal again?”

“The Usurpation. Fides-Dumuzid had no illusion that he could face the Solar Hosts. But after the Sidereals and their Dragon-Blooded pets broke the Solar Host and crippled Creation, things were different. He started pushing the Únôlpûr Aithanar to grow. He made his first play during the Contagion.”

“He had granted to the Únôlpûr Aithanar some ability to grow the Undercity, but their command of it is flawed. They are Creatures of Darkness, and so they cannot build upon any ground that has seen the sun in a hundred years, nor freely manipulate any portion of the Undercity that has come under the Sun. Fides-Dumuzid is not a Creature of Darkness—that, ultimately, is a political label. A political label with concrete metaphysical consequences, but declaring someone a Creature of Darkness is a hostile act—a first strike, by the Geas’s accounting. He could not be so labeled, and so he has no such limitation.”

“We don’t know his end goal, but he started extending his cities across the surface. While the Incarna never showed up,” her face turned momentarily bitter, “the Aerial Legion did. He fought them several times—this is where we learned the limitations of his protections—and lost. Then the Balorian Crusades rolled over everything and erased what little progress he retained. He’s made a few more attempts—largely put down by the Realm during its early years—before settling into his current pattern. He basically baits the Aerial Legion. If they don’t show up, he does as much damage as he can until they do. If they do, he retreats, but tries to waste as much of their time as he can. While he does this, the Únôlpûr Aithanar try to build up a presence on the surface, create contacts and establish

agents, cults, and resources for later. Even after they're driven off, those resources remain."

Her sour face returned. "We—the Lunar Exalted—don't think he has a current end goal with this. He clearly did with his cities, but he has been convinced he can't win even against the degraded Aerial Legion of the modern day. So he's just working to build up resources for later. He's very patient—he waited the entire First Age after all. But just because he doesn't have an immediate goal, doesn't mean we can let the threat grow."

She then waited, the silence growing heavy as I thought.

"So you're saying you want me to join in a fight against someone I can't even strike at?" I finally asked.

She just shrugged. "I suspect you can. He's fought a lot of gods, and -" she shook her head, "you probably can. Even if you couldn't, he would lift that ban the moment he struck at you. But frankly, I don't want you anywhere near him. You aren't a combatant at that level—you aren't really a combatant yet at all. No, I just want you to remain present to keep the rest of the host present. More—I'm planning on using you to gather others. Voharun and Nasamara and their hosts certainly—I could have gotten them anyways once Fides-Dumuzid himself showed his face. But others as well who wouldn't have been so fast to answer my call. Many groups wanted the Ennead to fight it themselves when it was just the Únôlpûr Aithanar, but Fides-Dumuzid makes the situation too serious. With you here, there are others who might flock to this fight."

She tapped at her leg, fingers drumming. "The Cold Roars are... not the worst choice for the current Court leaders, but are less well connected than some of the others. But even with them, well. While the Court of Seasons is associated with the Sidereals, they do have Lunar friends as well. Mostly young, but I might be able to get another two or three Exalted between both groups. I really don't want to reach across the aisle that way, but while I have no doubt of winning against Fides-Dumuzid in the open, I don't want to fight him and hordes of Únôlpûr Aithanar alone, and do it while in the Undercity. He'll have certainly extended it across the surface by now."

"Gods aren't the greatest weapon against him," she admitted, "but they're fine against tangling the Únôlpûr Aithanar, and if he leverages the Undercity too aggressively, or tries to support the Únôlpûr Aithanar, he'll be striking at gods

and only weaken his protection further. There may be a point where it collapses entirely.”

I nodded slowly. “I’m tentatively convinced about the severity of all this. Like... I have your word about this, but you’ve admitted to manipulating me. I don’t really know enough to have my own strong viewpoint. This sounds incredibly dangerous, and for what? I theoretically have forever. Why should I put my life—my actual life, not just this incarnation—at risk for this? I don’t want to sound selfish, but this...”

“These aren’t really your lands or your people, no,” she stated. “I suspect you would agree even if I offered nothing.”

It was my turn to grimace. I cared nothing for the expectations of ‘The God of Calibration.’ Why should I feel tied to a role imposed on me? But if his plan really was to cause devastation until he forced Heaven to respond... I don’t think I could stand by and do nothing in the face of that kind of suffering. If I tried to walk away from that I would have nightmares about it.

“But I’ll give you three things,” she continued. “First, I will tutor you in sorcery, to whatever extent you can grow to. Second, I will study your nature—I was doing that anyways, but I’ll help you come to understand yourself. You aren’t a normal god on some level—that’s been clear for a while. Third? Third, I will forge you armor. Not soon—I will have to gather the materials, and I have a number of responsibilities. But I’m one of the few Smiths in the world who can still forge armors fit for the First Age. Not to be immodest, but while I am not the greatest No Moon Smith alive, I am an Elder No Moon with all that implies.”

I made a face, and she laughed. “Yes, I know you don’t know what that implies. Patience, young Nathan. Patience.”

“Fine,” I bit out. “Fine. You’re right, I couldn’t sit by and watch. I’ll do it. I’ll stay with this stupid expedition.”

“Good.” She glanced around the room. “First things first—let’s actually check your gifts. As Vevin I couldn’t properly look through them, but you have some valuable ones—we’ll get you geared up right.”