

First Steps?

August 11, 2026

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

As another weapon—an axe this time—joined the pile of tools I shouldn't use, it drove home again why I had picked an unenchanted spear the first time.

"It just has a spying function built in. It would probably be safe enough; I'm doubtful your eavesdropper would sell your information to the Steward. But it's not impossible."

"Wise," Zivzizov hummed back to her.

Before even leaving the room, Darvne had started to change. She became shorter—still tall, though no longer taller than me, and reduced more by a slight hunch she had taken on. Her skin turned to a clammy paleness, her eyes growing larger and just a bit too far apart. I struggled over whether to call it a 'dead fish' or a 'reptilian' stare. Her hands had become taloned with long serrated bone claws, and her skin was covered in loops and whorls of silver. And while it wasn't as extreme as that one smile she had graced Master Winter with, her slightly unhinged grin had far too many teeth.

She had already been dressed differently than I was used to, but the look had finished her transformation into some kind of primeval animalistic fish goddess. As we had made our way to find Zivzizov, we had encountered two reactions when people saw me walking with her. Some gods froze on sight of her, all prey. Others brightened, emboldened and hopeful that such a figure had joined us.

Drowner. Lightless. The Lake Dragon.

The same names, sometimes in fear, others in respect. I would have thought seeing a water elemental call someone the Drowner in fear would have been incongruous at best, but it was just terrifying. Who exactly had I gotten myself entangled with?

She hadn't explained herself when she found Zivzizov, just told them to 'Gather Nathan's tools.' They had some kind of god magic meant for the logistics of cities under siege, and could move goods between nearby friendly 'fortresses.'

They had been happy to provide. They were one of the gods who seemed happy to see her, and I got the feeling they knew each other—that is, they knew her in her identity as Darvne.

That was the end of things that made her happy. Darvne's judgement of the weapons and armors gifted to me hadn't gone nearly as cleanly as their summoning.

"Hmm... Mountain Folk mass production crap," she muttered as she studied a baton. Then she tossed it to me, "Try it. It wasn't made for the Enlightened, but it doesn't have any hidden traps."

It was, as I said, a baton, about a foot and a half long. It felt incredibly solid, and was far too heavy for its size, but otherwise... I noticed a button on the handle. I had a thought, but it couldn't really...?

I hit the button while flicking outwards, and with a blindingly fast *snap* I was holding a small spear. Not as small as it *should* be—around four feet of haft and more than another foot of blade shouldn't have collapsed into what I was holding.

She glanced over at Fönn. If Zivzizov had been happy to see her, Fönn fell into the *very quiet and still* category. Darvne didn't seem to care, and just gestured to the pile of booby-trapped artifacts.

"Deal with these."

She frowned at the sets of armor and weapons left behind. Considering how many gifts I had been given, it was disturbing how few remained.

"I knew some of the artifacts gifted to you would be traps, but this many shows a certain level of disrespect. Get the names of the gift givers from Fönn later. You're going to have to make examples of at least a few of them."

"I... is that really something I should be bothering with? I obviously need the names so that I don't trust them in the future, but should I really be spending my limited energy on revenge?"

"Honestly, yes. Some of them can be allowed to think they got away with it, and not all of these traps would have been made by whoever gave you the gift. But neither can you just not respond. Don't worry about it for now—the rest of the Court of Seasons will help you with something like that."

I had five different artifact weapons that weren't traps, but most of them were just

not useful weapons to a rank beginner like me.

The super-sized Zweihänder was a ‘positional’ weapon, and too ‘technical’ for a beginner, while the firewand was cool (it was basically a pistol that shot thirty-foot-long cones of flame), but a complicated weapon to use and dangerous in the hands of an amateur.

The axe was too heavy for me; and unlike the one dumped in the trash heap, it was theoretically a shockingly expensive and high quality artifact. It was also on its third regifting for a reason. Darvne’s words on it were, *‘I could use it in my warform, but not in my human one. And I prefer a lighter, faster fighting style.’* I wasn’t able to budge the thing, which is all that needs to be said on the axe.

That left just the collapsible spear, and a basic giant sword—a ‘Reaver Daiklave.’ She was going to have me use that oversized slab of metal before we found the Mountain Folk spear since, *‘You haven’t had that much training with the spear yet, and it’s better than a mundane weapon.’*

“More importantly—you might only have a limited choice for weapons, but you have three choices for armor.”

A fur cloak—ward against the elements—could be worn over two of the armors. The third would require me to keep depending on the talismans. After how *fast* I started to freeze when the talismans broke earlier...

“I definitely want the cloak, so no to the big guy.”

“The big guy’ was this whole suit of fancy armor made from countless prayer strips braided together into what looked like a three layer robe. That didn’t sound traditionally tough, because it wasn’t. Rather, it was ablative, but it was a lot to ablate through. Another extravagant gift even out of everything I had been given. I studied the signature on it for a moment, wondering what this Rol wanted from me. I was pretty sure it was the one Darvne wanted me to pick, but she set it aside easily enough.

“So between the lamellar or the woven armor. The lamellar is more protective, but will slow you down, and you’re completely unfamiliar with dealing with its weight. This isn’t that heavy though. The woven armor is very discreet and light. Its biggest virtue isn’t really relevant—you shouldn’t care about how subtle it is right now—but it wears like normal clothes, and wearing armor is a skill.”

“I think I’ll stick with the lamellar. Getting hit just once pretty much took me out

of the last fight.”

Maybe it was bias, but the woven armor just looked like fancy clothes. That was the point, it was made to look like normal (well, rather fancy) clothes rather than protection. But I wasn’t trying to be discreet here.

She just nodded, then glanced at Zivzizov. They hummed, evidently understanding her, then she turned to me. “Strip. We want you to get used to what wearing it feels like.”

“Ah... sure.”

It was less awkward than it would have been a couple weeks ago. I had increasingly gotten used to maids and other servants dressing me, but it still wasn’t something I enjoyed.

“Here,” Zivzizov sang, holding some kind of weird jacket.

“Ah,” it took me a second to realize it was a gambeson. “Thanks.”

Parts of it tied, parts of it fastened, and it had ties and straps for attaching the armor to it, so it didn’t simply sit on top of it. The padded pants were similar. Neither of them fit right at first, but delicate pale hands reached out and tugged one way, pinched another, and I felt the underarmor adjust itself to Zivzizov’s touch.

“Thanks.”

“Of course.”

Zivzizov’s voice remained creepy, but I think I was getting used to it.

Then Zivzizov was busy putting me in the armor. It wouldn’t have been possible for me to equip it on my own—maybe there was a trick to it, but I couldn’t see how a mortal could reach some of the places where the lamellar was attached to the underarmor. It was also unspeakably heavy.

“Walk a bit,” Darvne instructed. “And keep focusing on the armor. It will help you attune it faster.”

“Okay. I was planning on checking on Gale’s Echo,” I stated. “I can keep attuning this while I check on her.”

Darvne smiled at me approvingly—a much less reassuring gesture on her current

face. “Good habit. Always look after those whom you depend on.”

Then we were off again. Much slower this time, since it was hard for me to move before the armor finished attuning. Word of Darvne’s presence seemed to have spread. There were still reactions as we moved through the halls, but they were less dramatic and more expectant. She didn’t seem to notice either way.

Gale’s Echo had been placed in the same room as the other injured. A large hall with a mix of beds, cots, pens, and other arrangements appropriate for forms both near human and utterly alien. Gale’s Echo had been laid down on a pad on her side.

The blade had cut her from her hip all the way through the majority of her torso, ending a little below her neck. If she had been a mortal horse it would have dumped her entrails all across the ground. Instead she looked like a bundle of ropes that had been partially cut open. The tail ends of the strands that made up her body were faded and fraying into mist. Inside her was a cavity of black cloud that churned and seemed to pull inwards trying to avoid exposure to the environment around her.

She also just looked smaller than she had been, as if she had lost mass—which was probably true. All that said, she looked better than she did the last time I saw her. Smaller yes, but leaking less, too. And her body was starting to build itself back into its normal shape.

She was also reading a book, which was a more amusing image than I wanted to admit.

“Hey hey, how are you doing?”

She kept reading for a moment more before she responded, eyes tracking away from her book as she spoke.

“Well. I am doing well enough. I should be ready to guard you again by—”

I barely saw her move, as she shoved herself between me and Darvne *before* she even started trying to struggle back to her hooves.

“You need not fear for your charge,” Darvne responded calmly, unbothered by the unprovoked aggression. “I am on your side here.”

Gale’s Echo snorted, but settled down.

“Like you were on Fnekinir’s side?”

Darvne waved the question off. “I make no bones about how I treat betrayers.”

“And hence I don’t trust you, when you’re the only one who saw betrayal.”

Darvne frowned then, a cold dead look on her, but shook it off.

“If that was so, Fnekinir wouldn’t have run *before* I heard of it.”

The two of them stared, before they seemed to mutually lose interest in each other.

Echo turned back to me. “Why has Darvne joined us?”

“Evidently,” I stated, using the answer she had told me to use, “Fides-Dumuzid has been seen.”

She seemed hesitant, but then responded, “That was always a possibility.”

“For weeks,” Darvne stated.

I couldn’t read what Echo was thinking, but after a few moments she sighed.

“Help me back.”

“Of course.”

And when I went to do so, I realized... The armor didn’t feel so heavy. Gale’s Echo herself was surprisingly light.

“So she’s talked you into staying the course,” Gale’s Echo responded after I filled her in on the situation. “If he’s starting to make major moves, you ought not get involved.”

“I’m not a great person or something,” I said, defending my choice. “But if I stood by and did nothing when a great wrong was going to happen, one I could do something about—”

I saw a boy, laughing. I saw a soulless husk. I saw a beautiful face.

“—I would wake up with nightmares.”

I said, speaking [Truth].

And the world flexed.

“That’s no excuse to risk—” Gale’s Echo started.

Darvne was in front of me, holding my head, looking into my eyes.

“Like that? That was all it took?”

She snorted.

“Well that settles it.” She let me go then, pacing a bit.

Gale’s Echo was trying again to force herself up.

“If you’ve been honest with me, and I think you have been, then there are things that happened you don’t remember.”

There were things I remembered not remembering. I didn’t remember what I remembered. I remembered not remembering them. I shouldn’t remember them.

I saw ☐☐. I did nothing when ☐☐. It wasn’t my fault, I hadn’t understood.

If I did nothing again, I would have nightmares.

I just didn’t want the world to scar my heart again, didn’t want to be there. I grounded myself in the now. I could walk away if I had to. I wasn’t such a good person that I couldn’t. But I wouldn’t be able to pretend I hadn’t afterwards, and I would have nightmares.

I couldn’t be ignorant of the fact anymore.

“No one initiates themselves into sorcery *that* easily.”