

Out of Sequence

August 11, 2026

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

After that, Darvne claimed a study and dragged me to it. I barely noticed how my armor continued to lighten as it attuned. Instead, I found myself getting a lot of information thrown at me fast, in a confusing order. An *intentionally* confusing order, I soon realized.

She talked to me about the fourth trial, the trial of fear. She talked about the first trial, the trial of humility. She asked me about my life, and had me tell her about a random day—my fourth day in this world, when I was still being bounced between places in Yu-Shan. She had me talk to her about my revelation—my Sacrifice, that I would *have nightmares if I did nothing*, and why that was a sacrifice.

As a child of the modern earth—a place I would probably never see again— it wasn't complicated, but I wasn't sure I could explain. There were starving children in Africa, after all, but I slept at night anyways? It's not that Creation didn't have that same hardship, but I wasn't sure how to explain the ability to be distant from that hardship, not in the way someone from Earth enjoyed. But she actually seemed to get it.

"There were still places like that when I was young. Not many, but there. Before the Contagion took them. And in the heart of the Blessed Isle, maybe. Though... that environment has its own fears, so it's not really the same."

She talked to me about Journeys, the third trial, and everywhere I had gone. What was willingly, what wasn't? She talked about the second trial, Tutelage.

"I'm probably not your Tutor, for the purposes of the trial. It's usually about learning from those you wouldn't look to, or about finding wisdom that challenges you. You've respected me from the start. Honestly, it was probably the Dreamer. You don't like them, but you listened attentively and have tried to draw wisdom from it for your role."

And questions after questions, so fast I couldn't think about the answers.

Then she went over the trials in a different order, under a different philosophy.

That framed them differently. Rather than Sacrifice, the last trial was Eclipse, the trial of fast choices. Then the second trial was Zenith, then...

I learned a lot, and by the time the midnight passed, I thought I could talk about any of the trials in any way, except possibly in order.

“I think I know what happened here. It explains a lot, though it raises as many questions. Here, give me a minute, I have something I want to test.”

And then she kicked me out of the study with instructions to come back in an hour—maybe get something to eat. Now I was back, and the room had been transformed. The desk and chair—things of ice that somehow were comfortable—shoved into a corner. The bed had been flipped upright and shoved right next to them.

All of that was to make room for the circles that now took up the center of the room. A circle of ‘earth’ inside a circle of ‘sky,’ I realized—Celestial magic. The inner ‘circle’ was green, and made from five interlocking parts, like some kind of labyrinth or maze. I wasn’t sure, but I don’t think any of the five pieces actually touched each other, though it was dizzying trying to follow the lines. The outer circle was a simple ring of silver.

Each of the five inner segments had a hole in them, like a large room in the center of a maze. Fire, Water, Earth, Air, Wood. A burning candle, a cup of water, a pile of dirt, nothing—empty air—and a pile of wheat.

“Could you place The Promised Net in the center please. Don’t worry about the lines—they won’t come off without force.”

That was one of the revelations from her questions—that my artifact had a name. I don’t remember naming it, but it just... had a name. It weirded me out a little, though Darvne found it normal enough.

“Of course,” I said, as I gingerly picked my way to the center of the circle. Somehow I still didn’t want to step on the lines—a thousand stories with broken magical circles and terrible consequences plaguing my thoughts. I pulled at it, but it didn’t want to leave my hair, and I ended up spending an embarrassing minute disentangling it. Darvne didn’t seem to notice. She was sitting on the ground at the edge of the circle, working away on... what honestly was basically a fancy clipboard. But she did notice the moment I stepped out of the circle.

“Okay, this is the first test,” she started, looking up and then motioned me closer.

I sat down next to her. She was... filling out a paper with weird geometrical shapes and lines. Then she simply slapped the clipboard on the silver line and... some of the shapes filled in—usually in a color she hadn't used. Others suddenly had breaks in their shape. Some of them turned into Old Realm script—still the same geometric shape, but rather than simple lines, now complicated calligraphy. Some simply fell apart.

She studied it for a minute longer, then nodded. "That answered more than I thought it would."

"Oh?"

She gestured, "That is not an artifact of a god's Panoply."

"Ah... okay? What is it then? Please don't be mysterious. You've been dragging this out for a while."

She smiled, "I had to be sure, but I am now. That—" she pointed at the hair net "—is a piece of your identity, severed from the rest of you. I've been talking to you about sorcerous initiations all night, and to engage in a little bit more of being the mysterious teacher, I want you to tell me what an initiation is."

That was easy enough. "It's change. You have to change to go through each station. It's framed as growth, but I don't think there's any one universal standard for what growth is. If there was a perfect being, they would have to become imperfect to become a sorcerer. It's not growth, or becoming a better person. It's becoming a different person."

"Hmm," she nodded. "Good answer. Though there's an even more correct one. Initiations are scars. They are being scarred by the world. Or rather, the principles that underlie the world. It's sympathetic, you see—you are scarred, and through those scars you invoke the right to scar the world in turn. It's why the Fair Folk can't practice true sorcery—nothing can permanently mark them except death, and so they can not bear a scar meaningful enough to perform a sympathetic scarring. The Mountain Folk are the opposite—they bear the Great Maker's scars, and so can't form their own."

"That 'panoply' artifact of yours? It's similar to an initiation. Or maybe the opposite. You have severed part of yourself away, declared it not a piece of you anymore. Therefore, some of the ways you are bound to the rules of reality aren't a part of you anymore, and you can act along new vectors. As I said, that isn't a

traditional artifact. It's the opposite of a sorcerous initiation. It holds what you aren't anymore. And what it is, is telling."

"I... what, gave up part of... what exactly." Was I different? I mean, I was obviously different, but I didn't feel like I had vastly changed my personality. What had I sacrificed? How could I not notice something like...

"You have sacrificed your social investment in the illusory identity you have been trapped in."

I blinked. Then I did it again.

"I repeat myself, stop being mysterious, please."

"The Sidereal have a power—I don't fully understand it, and if there is an elder Lunar who remembers, who knew and survived the Usurpation, they haven't shared the knowledge—but they have the power to change other people's identities. Not easily, or casually. They can do that for themselves several ways, and I have a decent understanding of how it works when they do it to themselves. But their ability to do it to others is limited to a handful of the eldest, and the knowledge of how that works is lost to the Lunar Host."

She leveled a stare on me. "This has been done to you. Not long—I think your new identity is part of whatever apology was given to you."

I leaned back, thinking.

"I am not... Nathan?"

"No, I think you are. I don't think they changed a lot. But your arrival? What you arrived as? It didn't happen the way you think it did. You were rescued. Your arrival wasn't anywhere as nice as Yu-Shan." Her lips twisted as she hummed. "You have a few memories you mention that don't make much sense, that you can only barely access. You were chased by the Dragon-Blooded, saved by a boy who probably was a servant of Fgan Deedrid— a Raksha noble who lives near the Ten Tribes."

What? Who the hell was Fgan Deedrid?

"He often steals children and makes them his servants, and when he's done with them he rewards them with the peace of soullessness. Your first rescuer, when you describe him, has several traits in common with his servants."

A boy, laughing. A soulless husk. A beautiful face.

Fingers snapped in front of my face, and I jolted. Then she snorted, “Someone really needs to kill him. But there’s so damn *many* of the parasites. Anyways, I don’t know why he saved you, but one of Fgan Deedrid’s servants did and brought you to him. He showed you hospitality, and then ate your rescuer in front of you. You attacked him.”

“After that, I can glean very little from you. Then you seemed to have been rescued from Fgan Deedrid, probably by members of the Five-Score Fellowship. You don’t seem to have had much emotional investment in things past that point. Or maybe you simply haven’t damaged the false identity you’ve been put into enough. But I managed to get you to mention Sadness in the Blade, who is a Sidereal Exalted. Your rescuer from Fgan Deedrid isn’t her — probably. Sidereals are as hard to pin down as we Lunars are, but the few details I can get suggest Rol, and you also have an expensive gift from him.”

I sat there. I didn’t remember Fgan Deedrid, though I think I would hate anyone with that name. I didn’t remember a Rol, or a Sadness in the Blade, but... Rol had given me a kingly gift. I didn’t know what to think of any of these things. After a long moment, I pushed past all of that. “So, what, they erased a week of memories, and I sacrificed... part of that?”

“More than that—I don’t think you’re a god at all.”

...If I wasn’t a god, what was I? I remembered the mirror, that image of eldritch nonsense.

Still, I gestured to myself. I had gotten into the habit of keeping my selves almost overlapping, so my jumping position was closer to shifting from foot to foot rather than real motion. It didn’t make me *not* a bizarre god-thing.

“Yes, it is interesting,” she conceded. “But while you certainly look strange enough to be one of the more abstract gods, the source of that isn’t your deific design in the Rolls of Divinity. It is how you’ve severed part of yourself away, and used that to define yourself in opposition to it.”

“Honestly,” she continued, “I would have assumed you were Dragon-Blooded yourself, but even filtered through Sidereal identity magic, your own is wrong for that. It has left me unsure. And it was probably more like two weeks that were remade. Your history was clearly real at least around a week before I met you; it’s

when people started reacting to you in a real way. You talked about waiting a while before you got put into the Court of Seasons, but I suspect it actually happened very fast—within a day or two of them giving you your ‘new’ identity.”

I sat there, thinking. I didn’t know if I believed her. I didn’t know if I wanted to believe her. What did that really even mean?

“Why?” I finally asked. “This seems like a pretty big leap to make?”

She grinned, “I do have charms for investigating people, you know. You mention things that are disconnected, and usually don’t realize you’ve said them. They’re always social connections. Your artifact is, as I mentioned, not actually an artifact, even though my senses tell me it is. And your initiation was wrong. You didn’t go through all the stations, provided your journey was what you thought it was. So, obviously, it wasn’t what you thought it was. For example, I think you made your sacrifice first—all those weeks ago. But it was taken away from you when they erased part of your history. Then you had the rest of your journey, and when you severed part of your connection to the mask, your sacrifice was restored. Your initiation started clicking into place.”

“I Would Have Nightmares if I did nothing. You did nothing, and discovered that truth of yourself. Also,” she smiled a little, “you really hate the Raksha. Deeply. That was not true two days ago, and you haven’t met any of them between then and now. But it’s a very natural reaction to anyone who has actually met one—the implication is obvious. You have met the Raksha before.”

I felt paralyzed and violated and confused and... and so many different things. It brought back... Nothing. It brought back a nothing that felt like it would cut a hole in my mind if I tried to think too closely around it, and after a long moment I flinched away from that hole. So did I believe this? And if I did... “What would that even mean for me? I... does it matter?”

“Hmm... not sure. I still don’t know the full context. It explains part of why things happened the way they did. You were being apologized to, and so are given a role of wealth and status. You are not trusted though, so you aren’t being given real power. So it’s the context for that. Outside of that, you need to know what you are if you’re to develop yourself properly. Though I’m guessing you’re some kind of Behemoth? Which is a useless title. True Behemoths are Primordial in origin, but these days it gets used for any one-off creation, which renders the term meaningless. What I’m sure of is that your transportation here changed you, and

now you can sever part of yourself for power.”

She frowned. “Honestly, that reminds me of a few things, but I can’t figure it out under that remaining shell of identity. It’s still mostly intact, and it’s working hard to make you look like a god.”

“What happens next?”

“Well, that’s obvious. You need to learn your first spell.”