

Gathering Steam

August 11, 2026

Morning of the 14th of Ascending Water, Saturday, Realm Year 762

My first spell, it turned out, was going to be Emerald Countermagic.

“You’ll hate this spell and love this spell. You’ll hate it, that anyone else has it. You’ll love it, that you have it. Many of the Ūnôlpûr Aithanar are sorcerers, so being able to cast your own spells is probably an opium dream. If you only have time to master one spell, make that spell countermagic.”

Darvne’s tone carried the faint institutional distaste every expert had for a recurring bane of their profession, and I got the feeling that no sorcerer was truly happy about the fact that most sorcerers learned countermagic as their first spell. Since I was going to learn countermagic first on account of it being the best tool against other sorcerers, rather than something interesting, I had to admit I was already feeling that myself.

We also didn’t have enough time for her to teach me and still have time to sleep that night, so she gave me an alchemical concoction that could let you go without sleep for a night. Supposedly it had only mild side effects—and not even those, provided you took it no more than a few times a month.

I didn’t ask about the price. The bottle it came in spoke to its cost.

That gave us enough time for her to drill me on the warding gestures, how the essence should feel, and a bunch of weird mnemonics that were supposed to put me in the right mindset. It was frustrating, honestly. I couldn’t tell if I was making progress or not, if I was getting anything right, or just blindly struggling in the wrong direction.

“Give it a couple days. Countermagic is easy—it’s not the easiest spell, but it’s close.”

So when the sun finally broke over the horizon, I was almost glad. I wasn’t tired at all, though... I kind of felt out of step. I wanted to compare it to jet lag, like time felt out of step, or I felt out of step with time. I had a small surprise when it was time to set out. I wasn’t sure how I was going to keep up with the group, but Gale’s Echo was back on her feet.

Which I asked about. “Should you be up? You were still looking pretty bad yesterday.”

She stamped her hoof and tossed her head. “I’m fine. Another day for a full recovery, but so long as there is no combat I’ll manage. I’ll need a bit of support to keep up with the rest of the war party, but it’s been arranged. I don’t want you out of my sight while that woman is around.”

Hmm. No one had mentioned to Gale’s Echo that Darvne was Vevin. As far as I knew, only Master Winter and I knew that. Gale’s Echo didn’t seem to like Darvne at all, so I hesitated to mention the fact. Still, it would only cause trouble if I told her now, so I set it aside as I studied my bodyguard.

She was smaller than she had been, shrunken from lost mass, and her colors were off—I wasn’t completely sure how to read the health of a horse made from storm clouds, but I would call her wan and faded. But she stood steady enough, and there was no sign of the terrible cut that had downed her.

“Okay. If you’re sure you’re ready, I’ll trust your judgement.”

She stamped again, and then turned, obviously telling me to mount up. It was a bit early, but I decided to go along with it. And that’s why I was practicing my countermagic on her back while the rest of our war party—war party now, no longer a hunt—gathered up and packed.

I had pasted a bunch of intentionally easy-to-shatter talismans on my armor—they did nothing but exist to be broken. Apparently a common tool for beginning sorcerers to practice their magic on.

Now I was resting, waiting for my essence to recover while the last of the stragglers were forming up and Master Winter was tearing down his temporary castle.

Painful Lessons, the member of the Elnnti who had spoken at that gathering... yesterday? God, it was only yesterday morning. He was at the front of the column with Darvne. The Cold Roars stood nearby—clearly supporting them, but also clearly no longer in charge of the expedition.

“We’re two days’ ride from the Turrets of the Ice Blossom, but we will take a small detour. The Moon Sage has called in a debt, and so we’re rerouting toward a hidden Manse—we won’t be entering it, but it’s controlled by Teffa, and from there we’ll pick up a Stone of mercenary troops. That’s two days’ ride away. We

could reach the Turrets of the Ice Blossom a day after that, but we don't want to hit them while we're tired from a day of riding, so that will be two days. From there, it's another four-day ride to reach the Únôlpûr Aithanar unopposed. We won't be unopposed."

"We have officially sent up a request for support from the Aerial Legion," he continued, "along with a full report of our observations. Mistress Darvne has witnessed it in her capacity as an Elder Exalt. Still, we all know that the Legion hates coming out against Fides-Dumuzid. He likes to get them to commit, and then withdraw while his forces cause chaos elsewhere. They'll only show up if it's clear he has dug in and will fight."

Sleet Wind stepped forward and spoke. "We have reached out ourselves. We have talked to those who listen. Three champions of the maidens will join us, three children of the Five-Score Fellowship will come. Not before we face Ellith."

Three Sidereals, if I was understanding the titles right? The Bears' tendency to say everything one and a half times made it hard to parse their meaning at times.

Darvne spoke up then, her voice every bit the lake witch she presented herself as, wet and serpentine. "I have called on my own contacts as well. It seems that the Twisted Stone Conclave has better things to do than defend their own lands—like weed out pilgrims of the Immaculate Faith and other such essential matters—but other Stewards of the Moon are less inclined to stand by when a move this major is made by the enemies of Creation."

"Two full circles of Lunars will join us. One will meet us with the Stone of mercenaries, the other is going to start whittling down the forces of the Únôlpûr Aithanar and will join us after we face the Turrets of the Ice Blossom. The second circle is that of Jazn Farsight."

Gale's Echo spoke up, and I realized our sound bubble was around us again, "He's a powerful Full Moon warrior, but the rest of his circle died seven years ago assassinating several Sidereal elders who had been a bit too successful hunting new Lunar Exalts. He's more than a century old, but the new incarnations of his circle can't have been Exalted for more than six years. And probably less, many new Exalts die in this fallen age."

Huh, Darvne talked about 'reaching across the aisle,' but I hadn't quite internalized that we were pulling together groups that openly assassinated each

other. That was wonderful.

A voice called out of the crowd, “What about the Twins?”

Painful Lessons spoke up then, “The Church of Balor is making a major push in the North-Northwest, completely outside this field of conflict, and the Twins can neither pull back without ceding significant areas to descend further into the Wyld, nor reach us with meaningful forces in time. We would be surrendering more than forty towns and two major cities to the Bordermarches.”

His voice had the tone of someone telling people something they should already know. That felt rather unfair. I might have the context wrong, but I was pretty sure the Twins were Voharun and Nasamara—war gods of the North. And that yesterday we were expecting they would be able to show up and help. So our chocolate ration got increased to twenty grams.

There was some grumbling up and down the line, but most of the gods seemed to accept the news.

Fönn made her way into our little bubble then. “I will be the one aiding your travels today, lord. I will need to ride with you to grant Gale’s Echo the full use of my travel magic.”

“As we discussed,” Echo responded, forming her tendrils into stirrups to help Fönn mount up behind me. A moment later she was secured. I would have expected the position to feel a little intimate, but the armor actually made it so that while I felt a weight against my back, it didn’t feel much like a person.

While that was happening, it seemed the rest of the prep talk finished, because people were beginning to move out, and I let Echo fall into our position in the line—rather central, and obviously guarded this time. The other two members of the Elnnti, Lasting Consequences and Justified Fears, placed themselves on either side of me.

“I see the young lord is practicing his sorcery,” Justified Fears said, nodding towards the practice talismans I was plastered with.

“Yes,” I confirmed, “just waiting for my essence to come back.”

“Here.” He patted me on the shoulder. I didn’t really feel it through the armor, but the flow of essence was obvious. “I shouldn’t need it for now.”

“Thanks,” I said, and went back to my own practice. Slowly forming the spell,

going through the mnemonics, then the gestures, and only at the end trying to cast. I made less than one attempt an hour, so my own regeneration stretched out how long I could keep going. Every time I finished an attempt, the world around us was different. Sometimes frozen forests, sometimes tundra. At one point we rode on a web of clouds spun by spiders—elementals, I realized.

When I ran out of essence again it was late afternoon. My talismans were still all intact, and we were fording a frozen river. I don't mean a river that was frozen over, but a river of moving, flowing ice. It wasn't fast, but it was visibly moving at the speed a man might jog. Gale's Echo just walked across the surface at an angle against the current to keep her place in the line. Others simply jumped across, or flew, or seemed to teleport.

"You're stopping for the day, my lord?" Fönn asked when she realized I wasn't starting my next attempt. I flinched, having forgotten she was there.

"Ah, no. I just need to rest for a bit before I get back to it."

"Very hard working, lord. There was something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yes?" I was pretty sure I knew what, but I wasn't sure how this was normally done.

"I would like to enter your household, as the head of your guards."

Gale's Echo flicked her tail before butting into the conversation. "An assassin like you? It would taint the young lord's reputation to openly give you that rank. It would say either that he fears assassination, or that he intends to defend himself with assassination." Not that she would be bad at it, I noted.

"I haven't been as involved in that kind of work for nearly seven hundred years. Your information is out of date."

"You're a Snow Lady, a man-eater, one of the sirens of the North. No matter your personal habits, putting a Culling God in one of the major leadership positions in his household will tell people that Lord Nathan sees culling his enemies as a primary way he intends to keep himself safe."

"Culling God?" I asked, putting myself back into the conversation.

"When the herd of humanity grows too great, the mechanisms built into the world will spawn us," Fönn quickly interjected before Gale's Echo had an opportunity to offer her own explanation, "to return the world to balance."

Ah. So she was exactly as awful as she looked. And that was the *nice* explanation. I felt a vast wave of loathing for this world rise up in me. Just like every other time it happened, I forced it down.

“I’m not sure how much, if any, culling I’ll need done, or how that specialty plays to what I’ll need in the captain of my guards. I am also unsure how I’ll pay for the role. I’m not currently getting much income. I have a number of gifts, but I haven’t turned that into something stable yet.”

“You’re paying for Echo, and I know the pride of the Thúroch.”

“I’m lending her a use of my Panoply. I both doubt you have a use for that tool, and I can’t freely offer it at this current time, since I don’t know when Gale’s Echo will call upon me to provide it.”

Gale’s Echo snorted then, “You underestimate its value. She could simply resell its use to easily pay for years of luxury. And it wouldn’t be hard for you to interweave both our uses of it, if you wish to pay that way. It is the logical service you should barter with.”

Huh, so she wasn’t going to jump on every chance to make things harder for Fönn.

I felt Fönn shift, and realized she was looking down at Gale’s Echo. “Resell what?” She trusted her judgement on this question more than mine, I was amused to note. Which... fair.

“Perhaps the most powerful tool for manipulating reincarnation on a personal level that I have ever seen. Any selling of its use would have to be laundered through the Five-Score Fellowship to be safe.”

Fönn was silent for a moment, then, “Can it...”

Evidently the question didn’t require clarification. “Yes.”

“One use a year.”

“Every five years,” Echo countered. “That would be reasonable for the service of one such as her. Make her a maid—that’s a traditional place to put spies and assassins who you’re fine with people knowing about, but do not want to openly admit to using in those roles.”

And now Gale’s Echo was negotiating for me. Which I was also fine with,

honestly, though... I wasn't sure I wanted a Culling God on my staff.

"As a former human, I'm not that okay with casually killing people just because there are more of them than the land around them can support."

"It will not be a problem, lord. I worked under the Deliberative, I'm used to former humans giving humans too much leeway. They mostly grew out of it after a few centuries, but even if they didn't I'm sure plenty of people will make themselves your problem no matter how kind you try to be."

She then turned back to Gale's Echo. "I know three Masks that give useful prophecies for safety and who would be willing to join a household, and a Scarab Guardian whose charge was destroyed by the Wyld Hunt a century ago—he's bored and would be happy to have a place to defend."

Echo angrily stamped as she trot, throwing up a burst of snow. "Using a Scarab Guardian as a guard would be ill omened. Do you want everyone to judge the young lord as cursed?"

"He's the lord of Calibration."

Gale's Echo was silent for a few minutes, then spoke up. "Offer her two uses of the Mantle every five years. She must properly launder its use through the Five-Score Fellowship, paying all the fees and bribes to make sure you are not associated with its use. She will pay for your household guard out of this, as well as her own salary. If she does not provide a growing staff—one that reaches a level appropriate for a god of your station within three years—you should let her go with penalties."

I thought about it. Did I want a literal human-eater that close?

Well, evidently some of the Court of Seasons were human-eaters. I remembered the advice I got about *appropriate numbers of deaths*. I guess I couldn't be picky. So long as she didn't do that while working under me... fine. I had to work with worse people anyways.

"Very well. How do we do this?"