

A Simple Transaction

August 11, 2026

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

‘How we did this’ turned out to be reasonably simple. We needed a contract, a witness to notarize it, and to properly send the contract to heaven. Normally that would require a third party, but about five minutes into getting everything together Lasting Consequences—who had volunteered—noticed that I seemed to be doing it on my own.

“You’ll probably naturally curse anyone who breaks an oath to you. Or maybe anyone who breaks an oath you see. Be careful with that one—it’s a rare and valuable gift, but it can be double-edged.”

Was that interesting or alarming? I very much needed to find out the specifics.

Gale’s Echo ended up writing the contract, and Master Winter reviewed it. The use of my mantle was put down as ‘an Invocation of the divine panoply, as outlined in the verbal negotiations.’ We weren’t putting down what it did on paper, which... I wasn’t sure what to think? It seemed weird to me that it still counted as a legitimate contract. I wasn’t going to finalize it until I had Darvne check that I wasn’t making an obvious mistake.

That evening as we camped, Darvne came by and checked in on me and my progress.

“I’m not quite sure what you meant when you told me to think of earth drinking darkness? I mean, I can see how the earth would drink light, but it feels like the earth would make darkness. I guess it’s just a mnemonic, but I don’t understand what I’m trying to focus on.”

Darvne hadn’t physically changed, but her voice had gone back to that of a normal woman, and she looked approachably amused. “Oh, and is scouring water better?”

“Sure. Like, isn’t that what a water jet is?”

“What’s a water jet?”

It took a little bit of explaining, but about five minutes into my explanation she

started just... making one, as I talked her through how it worked. Silver light made rock bend, and gestures and chants animated it. Snow and ice melted for her, and she just crushed stones between her hands to make the abrasive. It took her only a minute more to make a quick dagger with it, simply twisting a short metal bar this way and that, uncaring of the jet trying to scour her hand.

“Reminds me a bit of how Mountain Folk approach things, though I don’t think they have that. This rock is a terrible abrasive though. I bet if you showed this to an Artisan they would iterate on it a dozen times within a week until they found the right one. They like automata, which this really is.”

She let the construct fall apart.

“Hmm? What about burning water—what’s your image for that mnemonic?”

We spent a bit of time going through how I was thinking about each of the mnemonics. By the end of it, her look was, if anything, even more amused.

“I think you’ve settled an old argument for me—prior education can really make the first steps into sorcery harder, even if it does make initiation easier. I guess I’m glad I never actually made that bet with Raksi.”

And her face twisted into something ugly, then she shook it off.

“Hmm, so each of the mnemonics is supposed to create a sterile association, a spiritual barrenness. You then use that barrenness, move it around to make the world a place that will not birth wonders. The mnemonics are intended to give you paradoxical imagery that you can’t imagine anything coming from—you’re trying to communicate that association, that uselessness, to the world. Then you invest it into your warding gesture.”

“Oh,” I sighed. “Fuck. So I’ve wasted a day.”

“Not really, you’ve been practicing moving your essence around. I don’t think it really sets you back at all. But it is annoying—terrestrial circle sorcery responds best to ideas grounded in the elements and the physical world—celestial circle sorcery is where you start trying to communicate using the concepts themselves.”

“If you can imagine interesting, productive, or even just grounded examples for all the mnemonics I gave you, it’s going to be hard for you to get started,” she lectured in her teacher’s voice. “With more experience you’ll be able to simply know what you’re trying to communicate to the world, and you don’t need such

internal sleight of hand, but you're not going to be there for a while."

Her lip twisted a bit. "I've only educated a handful of savants, and even they were grounded in this fallen age. They might have a depth of knowledge you lack, but they lacked the breadth of casual trivia. I've seen magnesium fires, but among this group, probably the only ones here who have seen something similar are those who enjoyed the fruits of the First Age. And even for them, that's just magic. I doubt any of them understand it as a basic alchemical reaction."

She shrugged. "Most gods are incurious and rarely try to improve themselves."

I was a little surprised that magnesium was a thing. I didn't think Creation was made of atoms. But she knew about it, so it was real here too.

We spent the next hour going over alternative mnemonics, until I had a new set. Lead took the place of rust, and a number of synthetic images took the place of natural ones—I wasn't sure if Teflon and plastic were a thing, but there were First Age materials with similar properties, and even if they didn't exist they were valid imagery.

Then she went over the contract I was going to sign.

"It's a good deal. I'm not familiar with Fönn, but getting the services of the Masks is valuable, and a Scarab Guardian is a worthy defender. Though you'll probably have to be careful about setting boundaries—they're less personable than most guardian gods, and are quite likely to kill guests who step the smallest amount out of line. That's not entirely a bad thing, but you need to be watchful."

"In an earlier age you might have had some problems with the level of secrecy in the contract, but there was always space for it. Secrets are one of the guiding principles of heaven. A bigger problem is simply that you aren't really getting the value of what you're selling, but you never were going to. Not starting out. I would renegotiate in ten years, but for now it's a fine way of starting your household."

Morning of the 15th of Ascending Water, Sunday, Realm Year 762

With a snap, every practice talisman pasted to my armor broke, and... I got it. I understood the whole of the spell for just a moment. I was talking to... I was marking... I was...

There weren't words for what I was doing. But for just a moment, I held the whole

of the spell, something that had taken me nearly fifteen minutes to put together piece by piece, step by step, too big to hold complete within my mind's eye. It also was just a simple statement, a command to *be not*, and with a clink and a burning of—something, some part of me that hurt—it settled into place.

[A Spell is a Scar]

It was a Truth. I hadn't known it before that point, but a true spell was a scar. I would never need to go through those mental steps to summon it up again, because I now bore it as a scar. I could present it to the world. Using it right... that might take a little skill, but I would never struggle with countermagic again.

"Congratulations, my lord!"

Two voices said it in unison, as the paper strips fell into burning fragments that never reached the ground. Then a moment later, "The Lord of Calibration is talented in Brigid's Gift," Lasting Consequences said.

I just blinked, somehow wrong-footed after what I had thought was going to take me all day happened so quickly.

We had been riding for... an hour? Two? Not very long. We had set out with the first light of dawn, and it hadn't been long at all.

Where we were now... it was an odd sight. I knew that Creation was flat, but the fact of the matter was that few *places* were flat. The lack of horizon was rarely obvious in hilly places, or forests. But we had reached a flat piece of rock. Not quite flush against the ground, it was set at a slight angle, like a flagstone imperfectly pushed into the ground. Nothing stuck to it—not ice or snow. And it had to be thirty miles long at least. At the far end of the 'flagstone', on the left side was forest, while far in the distance and to our right was some kind of drop-off. It was disorienting to me. We shouldn't be able to *see* that far. It felt like standing at the top of a mountain, but we were riding slightly upwards—maybe half a degree?

I wanted to feel vertigo, but didn't. It was wrong.

And in the direction of the drop-off, I saw a column of... smoke? Steam? A thin trail barely visible.

I pointed toward the column. "Is that...?"

"Yes, it's the manse," Justified Fears stated. He was older than the other two war gods. A gnarled old man, though an unreasonably buff one. "It is a series of hot

springs in underground caverns. We will stay on the surface, while The Drowner descends and then leads the Stone of mercenaries up.”

“How far is it? We can see it now. I thought we weren’t getting there till late afternoon?”

“We won’t. That column of steam is nearly a Vell across.”

I didn’t have a firm grasp of what exactly a Vell was—I had been mentally translating it as ‘mile’, but I was pretty sure it was more like somewhere between 1.3 and 1.8 miles.

My senses were *slightly* superhuman, and that column of steam looked about as wide across as a human thumb—it was only clear to see because it moved.

“Oh.”

“Well, if you have no more lessons to practice, that means we two will have to keep you entertained with our company,” Justified Fears said.

“A terrible burden,” Lasting Consequences joked. He looked older than Painful Lessons, but younger than Justified Fears. Maybe forty or fifty?

For the next half hour we talked about various things. I learned a little bit of the Mountain Folk, who were... not exactly dwarves and not exactly elves but somewhere between the two. They were great craftsmen and children of the Great Maker—he was some kind of Prometheus-like figure, a primordial who had sided with the gods. It was said that he had left a long time ago. I vaguely wondered if he had secretly been tied to some mountain and was having his liver torn out, because it felt on brand for this world. But that was mostly my narrative sense speaking.

I also wasn’t quite clear if they were literally his children or just metaphorically. Nor were either of the brothers when I asked.

“It kinda can be hard to say with Primordials,” Justified Fears spoke in a musing tone. “They’re complicated beings, and make little distinction between progeny, tool, and organ. They’re collective entities, and on more levels than just the obvious.”

But eventually they found their way to asking the question they were really after.

“Have you decided where to set your Sanctum? Most of the Court of Seasons set

their sanctums within the direction of their Season—all of them but Earth—but you have no direction.”

So that was what they were after? Hmm.

“I suspect I’ll set it in the North, since the Ennead have agreed to help me make my Sanctum, and I’ll be receiving some amount of worship here.”

“They have agreed to arrange it. We’re willing to acquire that debt from them.”

We rode for a few minutes as I thought.

“Why? While I know the Court of Seasons is respected, we’re a mobile court, and I am the youngest. My personal presence is unlikely to be that valuable.”

“Hmm. What you need to understand is that, while the South is quite populated, that’s only really true where water is near, whether from the Inland Sea, or because of its proximity to the West. It gives the direction a reputation inhospitable, and having the least livable land beyond where it hangs close to the Pole of Earth,” Lasting Consequences began. “Despite this, of the four directions, the Southern Wyld is the most visited. There’s a number of reasons for this, but the simplest is that the Southern Wyld has the most easily extracted wealth. For this reason there are a large number of communities that stretch from those centers of civilization, deep into the South. And because of how weak the Realm’s hold is on the Delzahn, Paragon, Varangia and Gem, the Blessed Isle has little reach beyond the rim of the south.”

I nodded like I understood what this meant, and made a ‘go on’ gesture to the war gods.

“Because of this, despite how hostile it is to mortal life, many terrestrial gods and their courts work hard to promote and encourage life and communities to grow through these regions. Using the wealth of the Deep South, it’s possible to maintain communities in areas quite hostile to life. And unlike the East and even here in the North, because of those communities’ reliance on trade, they become more centralized. More centralized makes for better worship. Most of them are small fort towns or cities that are states unto themselves. This is an easy setup to hijack—it makes them popular with the Hundred Gods.”

“Hundred gods?” I asked.

Oops? Maybe I shouldn’t have asked? But Justified Fears just waved off the

question. “The Hundred Gods Heresy—it’s what the Immaculate Faith calls the worship of individual local gods. It’s been in use long enough that in areas where we terrestrial gods have to work together and coordinate our efforts between many small pantheons and courts, many of us will refer to this arrangement as the Hundred Gods. The Court of Seasons wouldn’t use the term, because they see themselves as a bridge between the Celestial and Terrestrial Gods. The Ennead wouldn’t use the term, because they focus on themselves as a distinct pantheon. Someone like Ahlat wouldn’t use it, because he’s strong enough to stand on his own. It’s unsurprising you haven’t heard it.”

“Anyways,” Lasting Consequences resumed, “we’re one of a number of divine groups involved in maintaining these southern communities. We generally bless forces that fight against Wyld Barbarians and Beastfolk and Raksha, and act as intermediaries between mortals and several communities of Fire elementals, though we also work to keep the Immaculate Faith out of the South.”

“Okay, I sort of get where you fit into things. That doesn’t explain what you want from me?”

“Your patronages,” Justified Fears stated, then gave a sour smile seeing my look. “You haven’t really studied what they are since your nature clarified itself a bit, have you? Your blessings are towards helping Creation stand fast. You grant protection to those of Creation. You hide people from the sight of the Raksha and the Demon, and help people stand against threats and hazards born of the Wyld.”

“Ah. I do?”

“Yes,” Lasting Consequences cut in. “I am a thaumaturge. Before the ambush it was very hard to feel out your influence, but after it—it became quite clear. There’s something odd about it, but you can clearly give blessings towards those patronages.”

I turned over his words. “So, you’re not asking for me to set up in the area because I am a member of the Court of Seasons. You’re asking because of my actual influences.”

“Yes. We’re willing to take on the debt of the Ennead if you’ll set up in the South.”

“Huh.” A beat. “So I get why you might want this. Why would I want this? I see why you’re all invested in maintaining these communities, but the Court of Seasons is worshiped in four directions.”

“It’s also worth remembering that while the Immaculate Faith don’t have much reach beyond the rim,” Gale’s Echo cut in, “That doesn’t mean they can’t. All the major centers of civilization in the South are up against the water, but it’s been clear for years that She is tired of the Perfect. I wouldn’t be surprised to hear She finally deploys the legions against him, threat of a new Deathland be damned, and then pulls the noose tight on Varangia and makes them properly bend the knee. Those communities you speak of could be reined in whenever the Empress wanted. It’s the cost that holds Her back, and that won’t work forever.”

The brothers frowned at Gale’s Echo’s interjection, unhappy with her undermining their pitch, but they did not disagree. The discussion of why I should pick the South took hours. By the end of it, I hadn’t been convinced. Honestly, I saw little reason to *want* to pick the South. I had nothing against it either, just nothing for it. I could tell the Elnnti weren’t surprised by my non-committal answer to the whole thing. I didn’t want to close off my options... but I probably wasn’t going to go for it.

Still it passed the time, and as we rode, the column of steam grew larger and larger.