

Not My Dream Vacation (Exalted Fanfiction)

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ONGOING

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CHAPTER 1

An Auspicious Start

August 11, 2026

Author's Note

There is a (perfectly legitimate) tendency to dislike a certain kind of surprise being sprung on the reader—where what they think is happening and what is actually happening are quite different.

As such, I am making a note of it right now that there are basic things Nathan thinks are true that are not. Consider this a warning.

The 3rd of Ascending Water, Marsday, Realm Year 762

“Drink, drink. You were human, right,” The Dreamer stated more than asked, “Humans love drinking.”

“Ah, thank you,” I replied, taking a careful sip. To be frank, I didn’t like drinking; it was not a moral objection. I just didn’t like the loss of control. But I wasn’t going to tell my companions that. My appointment could have gone badly, and I wasn’t going to risk it so soon by offending them.

The taste was intensely mineral, which isn’t normally how I would describe something pleasant, but honestly the only reason I wouldn’t call it the best thing I had ever drank was that the private festival I attended as my introduction to the Court had a tea that I could only compare to a religious experience. With fear, to be clear; I didn’t want to want *anything* that much.

“It’s delicious,” I said truthfully.

The Court of Seasons was currently quartering within The House of the Nine Hearths of Emerald and Silver, the home of the Ennead, the patron gods of some nation called the Haslanti League. Evidently choosing them as our hosts was minorly scandalous, a way of pushing back on the authority Heaven had so recently applied to them. Since my appointment was part of that self-same exercise of authority, I was unsure how to feel about it.

We were currently... well, holding court, basically... within a great hall that had been repurposed to hold us. Most of the pantheon giving us shelter were not home. I still was getting my head around the local seasons, but evidently the

Month of Ascending Water was a busy one for the Ennead. It kind of seemed strange to me that we were being given the run of the place, and it was considered a big honor *and* transgressive of us to pick them as our hosts, yet at the same time it wasn't an insult for none of the Ennead to be here.

But then, I had been a god for all of three weeks. So what did I know? Truly, I was grateful and more than a little overwhelmed still. Things could have been so much worse. That said, we were hardly alone. The Ennead had left servants to take care of us, and we were making full use of their home to hold a gala. While by tradition only the god of the preceding, current, and next month needed to be present, there were more of us than that.

For Descending Air, that was The Dreamer, who it seemed had been assigned as my first teacher. Maybe they took up the role themselves? They were friendly enough, but they seemed friendly to everyone, so I wasn't sure how real it was. They were androgynous, and I wasn't sure of their current gender—maybe masculine? While their form did change depending on which way they were feeling, it wasn't always on a level where it was obvious. I was trying to be careful about it. They looked like a hospital patient wasting away—maybe fifty pounds soaking wet, at a respectable 5'8. Though their hair was wine-dark and lush, and they were well groomed. I always got the feeling they were stoned, too. Not just from the name.

The gods of the current month, the Calendar gods of Ascending Water, were the Cold Roars. They were a pair of giant bears. But while the Dreamer was playing host and teaching me the ropes, the Cold Roars had excused themselves the night before to hunt... I think dogs? I didn't quite understand that part, though I felt vaguely horrified about it. But I felt vaguely horrified by many things.

The gods of Resplendent Water, of the next month... They were The Three. They were like a genderflipped witches' coven—The Boy, the Father, and the Codger? Whatever. They were made from ice, and if this was a DnD session I would have guessed they were some kind of elementals. Luckily, I hadn't *said* that, because I'm pretty sure they would have been insulted. And to be frank they gave me witchy vibes, and I didn't want them angry at me.

They were the ones 'in charge' of the current court. But they weren't the only ones present.

I was sure The Whisperer—the god in charge of Descending Earth—was positively

inclined towards me, but mainly because I was essentially told as much. That his support had been arranged. But as he rarely talked, and he seemed to be putting most of his efforts into rebuilding his connections with the hangers on of the Court, we had barely interacted.

Lastly, the Golden Stars were present—six identical women. Their complexions and features struck me as being Arabic—except there was no such thing here in Creation, so I supposed I needed to update my ethnic library. While they were decidedly average in appearance, they all had a vivacious air to them, and I would have been charmed to have a girl like that pay attention to me. Just not *them*, because they low-key terrified me.

And then there was me. The new calendar god, the god of Calibration, the five days that weren't part of any season, a 'month' unto themselves. Theoretically, this was my formal public introduction to godly society. Since I'm pretty sure we would be throwing a festival anyways, I didn't take it very seriously.

The Dreamer picked away at a shallow bowl they had at their side, rolling together a ball of something gray and stringy, before popping it in their mouth, and returning their attention to me.

"So, what you have to understand," they said, resuming our earlier conversation, "is that our job is to represent and inspire."

They languidly gestured at all the strangeness gathered in the hall, the gathered gods milling about the other members of the Court. While the Ennead weren't home, their home was full of people wanting to meet us, along with some of the Ennead's servants taking care of our needs.

"The Bureau of Seasons might make everything run, but they're staid and humorless. See, they don't make people believe that things should keep running. They don't get people invested in the system. People need symbols, patriotism for reality, you might call it."

They threw a few more strands in their mouth, musing over their thoughts before speaking, "The seasons aren't just physical. We might not make it snow, but we make snow a time for families to come together and celebrate. You aren't going to go and fix the Loom during Calibration, no. But it's your job to make it a celebration, rather than let everyone be terrified that a demon is going to crawl through their shadow and eat their spleen."

They took a long draw from their pipe, and the smoke they blew out smelled foul, before even more languidly continuing, “They make nature run. We make people happy that nature’s running. The seasons turn according to the design of Heaven, but we make it so that’s something to celebrate.”

Yeah. My isekai cheat? Literally godhood. As in, I was a god when I wandered, confused, out of that stupid hole in reality. And hey, while I didn’t start out a god of anything in particular, they made me a Calendar God. That had to be a big deal, right? It had to make me a big deal, right? This was the start of my adventure, right?

No. No it didn’t. Instead I got an official apology of ‘whatever hole from beyond you fell through has been *officially* recognized as our fault’, and then whisked off to a position where I couldn’t damage anything with my complete lack of qualification as that apology.

Maybe it was way better than I had any right to expect. Maybe it was an actually prestigious position. Maybe it came with some real respect. But I couldn’t get over the fact that I was a *cheerleader*. As in, my job was to hype up the change of seasons, and run a bunch of parties. Only not actually run the parties, because that was too much responsibility. Enliven them by my presence and claim responsibility for the work more qualified people did.

“Calibration really is terrifying if you think about it for more than a minute,” I said honestly, because it was. “I hope I can live up to the expectations you’ve all placed in me by trusting me with the responsibility.”

The trust in this case was ‘The Bureau of Destiny will help you make a fall guy to cover for your crimes in return for solving one of their problems.’ While I might be misunderstanding the situation somewhat—in fact, I’m sure I was, simply because everyone involved was a lying criminal and I lacked context—the basic gist of it was this. The whole Court of Seasons did *so much crime* that there were binders worth of blackmail material against them gathering dust. They broke Heaven’s laws left and right, and got away with it on account of being popular enough that no one wanted the headache.

And like all things ‘no one wanted’, it was a homeostasis that lasted until someone *did*. Evidently, The Whisperer’s court had been used to launder a little bit *too* much money from Heaven for it to be overlooked. I didn’t really get the context, but for some reason no one who mattered thought the Whisperer himself had

anything to do with it, but it was being held against the Court as a whole. The Unseen—the Calendar Gods of Ascending Air—had stolen something (never named) that they really shouldn't from the Bureau of Humanity. The Seven Fangs—they were these giant maneating foxes, and the gods of Ascending Wood—had killed the godblooded scion of... I didn't quite catch the name... and he had actual legal protection that actually mattered for reasons that escaped me and wouldn't apply to all their *other* murder. And those were only the opening act.

On the flip side, the Bureau of Destiny was always happy to help execute more gods, because dead gods could be turned into some kind of super-special magical metal called 'Starmetal.' Which was an amazingly happy thought to discover, you know, as a new god. And while the crimes were serious, the Court would have been able to avoid being executed. But if they were allowed to *shift* the blame...

Still, shifting *that* much blame around, doing that much of a frame job, was more than the Bureau of Destiny would do *just* for a handful of minor gods getting executed. What they wanted was this:

The Court of Seasons had an open slot. It was prestigious and harmless, and it let them wash their hands of me. There were fifteen months plus Calibration. All fifteen seats had been fighting over getting Calibration, even though Calibration is only five days. Handing it off to me denied everyone the chance to expand their own domains, but I would be weaker and less prestigious than the rest, *and* none of their rivals would get it.

In return, *binders* worth of crime disappeared. The freaky destiny wizards in the Bureau of Destiny got a nice toy. The status quo of the Court of Seasons got slightly more stable without the infighting over Calibration. And Heaven could officially say they did right by me for whatever ripped me from earth to, to... To this messed up fever-dream. Like something between a bronze age Conan-style horror show, and Asura's Wrath.

I set my half empty cup on the dais beside me. "If we're supposed to be inspiration, shouldn't we be out there in the world?"

"Oh," a perky voice interrupted our conversation. One of the Golden Stars was climbing up the steps of the dais, before plopping herself down on one of the floor cushions, "we will be!"

She picked up my cup and swallowed most of it down, before using it to gesture to

the rest of the crowd, “We’ve agreed to hold court within the territory of the Ennead till the next Carnival of Meetings. That said, we don’t want a bunch of mortal petitioners dying in the snow before they even meet us—it would look bad.”

The Dreamer started preparing her a pipe of whatever they were smoking as she continued talking. “We don’t want to be cheap, and some of them dying is good for that. People value something risky more than something safe, you know? And some of us just run very dangerous courts. That’s all fine. But if they start dying before they even reach our court...”

She shrugged as the Dreamer reached past me to hand her the pipe. The smoke briefly made the angles of the room twist, and I held my breath to avoid inhaling any more of the stuff. She took a drag before finishing her speech. “It might hurt how many petitioners we get in the future. It would make more people think they didn’t have a chance, which isn’t what we want.”

She let out a sigh, as she sprawled deeper into her cushion. It would have made for a tempting sight—something I sort of suspected was intentional—except for the part where she scared me, and her statement about the appropriate number of deaths disgusted me.

But I held my tongue as the Dreamer’s lethargic voice picked back up, walking me through all the festivals we were officially responsible for. It made for quite a list. It felt intimidating. The fact that there were no real expectations for me didn’t help.

I had expectations for me.

The 4th of Ascending Water, Mercuryday, Realm Year 762

I looked around my current bedroom. Sometime between going to bed last night, and waking today I felt... better. More grounded. It was the second time that happened. Something about my messed up way of entering this universe fixing itself? Something like that.

I felt good. Great really, physically speaking. That was pleasant, but not so pleasant that it made me want to actually finish getting out of bed, so I sat, half covered in the fur blankets, enjoying the crisp chill.

Against one wall was a dresser with the handful of clothes I had hanging from it. My outfit from the day before hung there—already cleaned by the Sanctum’s

scarily efficient servants. Most of the rest of the room was piled with gifts. Boxes spilling over boxes, forming into drifts that—while maybe not deep enough to drown in—had certainly graduated from ‘tripping hazard’ to ‘navigation hazard.’ Which was fine with me, since I didn’t really want to go anywhere. Though it probably wasn’t to be, since...

My door banged open. Lird Melo, the middle figure of The Three, entered with a purple haired goddess I hadn’t met before, and a trailing tail of house-staff. I wasn’t sure if I would call him a ‘young man’ or ‘middle aged.’ Right on that border, absurdly handsome like a movie character stepped off the big screen. While he was made from ice, that didn’t make him see-through. His colors were off, and he gleamed, but he wasn’t monotoned. He had black hair, though it looked more like ink than human hair, and eyes the dark red of frozen wine. He had that ‘something Asian in the last couple generations’ look of Keanu Reeves, if Keanu Reeves was 6’10 and had biceps bigger than a woman’s waist. Like... he was shredded. *Absurdly* shredded. Grate cheese on his abs shredded. He wore a two-layer robe, but it wasn’t quite closed right, letting a bit of his chest show and leaving him looking disheveled. It was intentional—he *always* looked tousled.

“Slow morning? I’ll join you for breakfast today,” he stated casually as he walked to my small table. “It’s not good for us to be too present since it’s not our month. Don’t want to be too available.”

He casually gestured at the trailing servants to get me dressed as he started nosing his way through the gifts.

“Not a problem for you, really, since you just have the Carnival of Meetings, and that has a somewhat different balance to it.” He studied a velvet bag for a moment. It was sewn shut, but his eyes seemed to see through the cover, and after a moment he handed it to one of the attendants to put on the table, before going back to rooting through the piles.

“Anyways, this is Vevin, goddess of... you’re a lake goddess, right?” At the woman’s nod he continued, “She’s volunteered to teach you Old Realm Script, Geomancy, get you started on basic orphiology... we have you with her for about five hours a day for the next week. See if she’s worth using. Don’t be afraid to toss her if she’s useless. You’re doing her a favor, don’t hand those out if the petitioner isn’t worth your time.” He shrugged, before walking to the table with two more packages.

While this had been going on, the ever-efficient servants of the house had gotten me up out of bed, found several gifts that evidently were clothes (this had been how all of my wardrobe had thus far been procured), and not only had they finished dressing me, they were halfway through applying makeup and fixing my hair.

Makeup, it seemed, wasn't a gendered accessory in Creation. Thanks, Creation. I hate it.

As I was seated at the little table with Lird and the now named Vevin, I studied her while Lird opened the packages he had picked out— the velvet bag held some kind of tea-set complete with a selection of teas, while the other packages turned out to be a cured meat spread, and a kind of large thick cracker. Before he had finished unpacking them, the servants had found a hot-plate, dishes, and silverware from among my unopened gifts.

I couldn't be sure exactly since Creation didn't use American Customary, but I think my apotheosis had put about five inches on my height, boosting me from a sort of average 5'10 to about 6'3. Somewhere in there, at least. Vevin looked to be a bit taller than me, maybe an inch or two. While I hadn't seen her shoes, I had yet to see heels. She wore dark blue, and both her hair and eyes were a purple verging on black. Her dress seemed to swish as if alive as she moved, and for a moment it was like her skirt was a tail—an image that swiftly vanished when she sat, but stuck with me.

She gave me a small confident little smile, unconcerned with Lird's dismissive attitude, and a deferential little bow that somehow managed to be amused. Considering Lird's attitude towards her, there was something wrong here. Like always, I lacked context.

"Nice to meet you Vevin," I said, nodding in acknowledgement, and feeling awkward. I would normally shake hands, but I was told that while there was a similar custom in a few places in Creation, it wouldn't be appropriate. An important god could get away with sticking with their favored cultural norms, but even then, such a gesture was only appropriate towards peers. It left me feeling rude, and I didn't know what to do with my hands instead, so I just played with the silverware. "I just hope you don't find me a frustrating student. I don't know what orphiology is."

She lightly shook her head as I tried a bite of crackers with meat spread. Delicious

of course.

“I’m sure you’ll be a fine student. I’ve taught mortals, I’m sure a young god will prove a more able student.”

I wasn’t.

“Oh,” Lird interrupted, “do you need to top off?” For a moment, a blue-green glow snaked around his fingers like a cat’s cradle.

“Nope.” I lightly shook my head, and genuinely smiled. “I started respiring essence last night.”

“You did?” There was a flash of curiosity there. “It seems your apotheosis is fixing itself. Before long you’ll be a real god.”

Ah, yeah. I wonder why I didn’t want to start the day.

“You couldn’t naturally regain essence?” Vevin asked.

“Don’t ask questions outside your station.” Lird didn’t even look at her when he responded for me, an almost bored tone to his voice. “Anyways, if you don’t need a pick-me-up anymore, I’ll leave you to your day. Resplendent Water is going to be taking our leave of the Sanctum for the day. Only the Dreamer is going to be holding court. It’s really disgraceful the way the Cold Roars treat their court. It’s their month—they’re supposed to be the key figures here. See you tomorrow at the latest.”

He finished his last bite, nodded, and left trailed by servants. Two of them stayed—I guess my escort for the day.

“Before we get started, what should I call you? I only know you as the new Calibration god.”

“Ah. I’m Nathan,” I replied. The first part of my name was just my old name. But the Heavens had assigned me a new one too. Didn’t know how I felt about it.

“Nathan Nozi.”

Author’s Note

So something that I always forget until I go and look at the months...

In Exalted, air is associated with Cold, and the North. Yep, fine. We’re all on a page here. Water is associated with the West, and has lots of variations, but

thematically kind of defaults to a Mediterranean Sea for a Greek Mythology Style. Okay, we're still tracking.

However, the *season* of Air, the season when the elemental pole of Air is ascendent, is *autumn*. Winter is in the season of Water.

Why? Well, I'm guessing early on Water was going to be the 'cold' element, because ice=water, and so they arranged the seasons thus, and it never got changed even after they shifted cold to Air.

Well... this far north, Air is going to be pretty wintery, too. But I keep wanting to call winter 'air' and it's 'water.' Anyways, I thought I would share.

So there's **this old thing** about how spelling and names were done in the Old Realm. Not official, but I like it well enough. In this case, Nozi means Void-link-Lord. That said, this isn't a very expansive list of characters—I'm going with 'there are degrees', and the void in his name is similar but not the same as 'The Void.' In this case, it means hollow.

Basically Nozi means 'hollow lord' or 'lord of nothing.' Officially he has that because Calibration is the 'null' value in the calendar, the time that isn't, so he's the Calendar Lord for 'this time does not exist/the value is NULL.'

CHAPTER 2

Settling in

August 11, 2026

The 4th of Ascending Water, Mercuryday, Realm Year 762

Orphiology, it turned out, was the ‘Study of Deepness.’ In this case not referring to physical depths, but spiritual ones. At the most shallow layer, it talked about how Least Gods interacted with the objects they were attached to. At deeper levels, how Sanctums and similar things existed, and then how gods were attached to concepts.

Honestly, the best analogy I had for gods was that they were strings. Little gods were small strings that were then bundled into sets, that were then bundled into cords, and so on, all leading to heaven. Reality didn’t really depend on them. The little god of my teacup wasn’t necessary for me to drink from it. What it did was make sure that the teacup remained firmly tied to fate. Considering that fate getting entangled was what appeared to lead to the cosmic error that dropped me into Creation, I was firmly on team ‘have fate work right.’

Vevin said my analogy was fine for a basic understanding, but would become less accurate as we investigated deeper layers. That there was a good reason fate was the force usually explained with string metaphors. Also that we wouldn’t be really talking about fate, because that was a whole confusing topic itself and not actually involved in Orphiology. And that while she wasn’t always on the side of those who tried to turn fate into prophecy, she too was on team fate. As was anyone sane.

“So you were appointed to your seat as an apology?” Vevin asked, as she organized her notes.

“Yep. Had nothing to do with gods or... anything supernatural before all of this,” I told her. She was really easy to talk to. Honestly the first normal person I’d met since coming here. Hell, I could almost pretend she was human—enough people dyed their hair. Though an Amazonian punk-chic cosplayer would have totally been out of my league back on Earth. “I was just a normal person.”

“That’s some apology. I’ll admit, you’re not what I was expecting when I heard there was a new god in the Court of Seasons. I’m not entirely sure what I was expecting when I saw the curriculum they had set up. But not you. Who exactly

screwed up enough to feel they had to arrange something like... well... *this*? Don't get me wrong, it's admirable to take responsibility for your wrongdoings, but it's not what I expect of heaven these days."

Well, I'm pretty sure that was super heretical; if true from everything I saw. I wasn't going to tell the censors though, so I just shrugged and went over to my bedside, found the folded letter by my nightstand, and handed it to her as I sat back down.

It was short. Two paragraphs, a closing, and two signed names. I would call it perfunctory. Living in this world for almost three weeks hadn't actually given me enough context to *really* understand the importance of those names. That was something that would only come from years of living. But I vaguely understood.

"... why do you have an apology letter from *Saturn* and *Mercury*?"

"It was something they felt needed to be apologized for? Why does anyone have an apology letter?"

She blinked several times, shook her head. "Okay, I know I was told to keep it to myself, but really, what happened?"

I opened my hands in surrender. "I'm not insulted you asked, but I really can't say. As in, I can not say. I can't speak the words. While the existence of the apology is no secret, the details are. They have been sealed to secrecy by the Maiden of Secrets. No one still bound by fate can speak them, nor hear them."

She sat there for a minute, just thinking. There was a stillness to it that I found momentarily suffocating, something of deep still waters, and the threats that dwelled beneath their too-still surface. Then, like a switch it was gone, and she sighed. She handed the letter back, though she kept looking at it like it was something dangerous.

"Well, I think you'll need more than basic Orphiology if you're involved with such things, but everyone starts somewhere. Let's go over Racha's exclusion principle. It's fundamental to understanding when a subject will be governed by a single god, or multiple. The important thing to understand..."

The next several hours wandered from topic to topic. Whenever I started struggling, she picked up on it. Often the analogies she used left me confused, but she was always able to switch over to a new one, figuring out a better way of explaining it to me. Lake god... it made me wonder what secrets her lake had

hidden in its depths. While gods *could* grow beyond their task, I had already learned that few did so. If she was so aligned with knowledge and the occult, there probably was a reason.

Still, I did not ask. She probably wouldn't tell me, after all.

"You obviously are already lettered. It would make it easier for me to teach you if I knew what scripts you already have."

I hummed, grabbed a sheet of paper half covered with my poor attempts at writing Old Realm, and quickly jotted down, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog."

She stared at it, quirked an eyebrow, then gave an 'ah.'

"What does it say?"

It took me a moment to organize how I wanted to say it. While I seemed to just be able to automatically *speak* Old Realm, it didn't organize the same way English did, and color terms were *complicated*, because colors were associated with magic and metaphor. There were about a dozen ways of saying 'brown fox,' and most of them would add context that I didn't want, but I settled on how I would translate it. It sounded subtly awkward, but it worked.

"Huh." She thought for a moment. Looked over the letters again. "Ah, this is a pangram."

I was the one who blinked several times in surprise. "Ah... yes. All the standard letters at least. There are a few others that get occasionally used in loan words or for historical purposes, but this phrase teaches all the standard letters."

"That puts you at something of a disadvantage. There's an elegance to phonemes, but we all inherited the Old Realm's logographic approach from those who came before, and Heaven's never going to go through the effort needed to change it. Can't, really, it's been woven into the foundations of reality. I don't know your lettering, which just makes me more curious, but it also means I don't know any easy cheats here to get you started. So we'll just have to do this the hard way."

I was disappointed to see her go, and even more disappointed to be paraded out before the Court once again for everyone to gawk at me over dinner. It made me feel like a zoo exhibit.

The 7th of Ascending Water, Saturday, Realm Year 762

I had days to settle into a routine before the Cold Roars finally finished their hunt. It was late into the evening when they returned to once again hold court. With all three reigning seats—the current month and its neighbors—in attendance, the Golden Stars had their position on the dais displaced, and so withdrew. Not alone, I noted. Two of them were trailed by new suitors.

I sort of had the feeling that they had been trying to pull me into their orbit, and... Well, I had seen one of their blowups. I wasn't going to sign myself up for that. I was glad that their month wasn't next to Calibration.

I was instructed to stay. I was supposed to be learning, after all. The Dreamer, looking particularly masculine today, had me sit next to him so that he could continue explaining everything going on.

Honestly, at the heart of it, I don't think his plan was much different than the Golden Stars'. I just found 'Teacher' a more tolerable bribe than 'romance.' Considering some of the gifts the Golden Stars gave to their paramours, maybe that said something judgemental about me? I guess I didn't really care in this instance.

The Cold Roars were two giant bears, though that phrase was somewhat misleading. I'm unsure if the sloth bear existed in my old world, but they were a smaller species of bear in the South in Creation. The Cold Roars were albino, oversized sloth bears. They were 'only' slightly larger than the average polar bears, with delicate and clever claws. So giant for sloth bears, though only frighteningly large on the scale of big bears.

The younger brother, Cold Wind, was using those same clever claws to sew the coats of slain Omen Dogs into a tapestry using only his natural tools and skill. For my part, I was happy to discover that Omen Dogs were not dogs. They were sort of dog-like, but bigged up quite a bit, and much less friendly looking. Saber-Toothed too, which somehow seemed wrong on a not-a-cat.

The other gods who had gone out hunting were circling Sleet Wind, the elder of the two bears. He was regaling the room with tales of their hunts. I was just wondering how many Wind names there were; they seemed weirdly popular. The Dreamer seemed bored, eating what I now knew was hair. Dying people's hair.

Gods were weird.

I was half dozing, wishing I didn't have to be at these things, when something

Sleet Wind said caught my attention. He was laughing loudly, boisterously, his voice carrying across the room.

“That’s right, that’s right! You’re completely right. We really should, we really should. In three days, we’ll take Nathan with us on our hunt. He needs to learn these things! He needs to learn these things.”

... *The fuck.**

*

CHAPTER 3

Out of the Nest

August 11, 2026

The 7th of Ascending Water, Saturday, Realm Year 762

I suddenly had need for several skills I had, up to this point, been unpracticed in. I needed to be able to ride, and ride as part of a company of hunters. I needed to wield several weapons—probably a hunting spear and bow; expecting me to manage something complicated like a net would honestly be asking too much of me. I needed gear of at least decent quality, and so on.

It was possible that some of my needs might be solved by some of my gifts; I could certainly launder them into such. But using them now could be problematic. I hadn't been using any of the more magical gifts for a reason. They really needed to be investigated before I could use them in case of subtle traps. Nor could I trade for what I needed in the three days before the hunt left. I probably could get someone here to give me a blessing against the cold that would last me the trip, but I would be exposing my weaknesses.

"What *can* you do as a god?" Vevin asked.

She was helping me go through my gifts, looking for things that were probably safe enough to use. She had set aside a stack of charms—little sutras painted in red on strips of green lacquered paper with complicated edges woven from gold and copper threads. Several of them were reliable thaumaturgy talismans that might help me deal with the cold and thin air. They had probably been intended for me to use on mortal worshipers, but nothing stopped me from using them myself.

"You're very new," she continued, "so I get that you haven't grown into your role yet. But you're ascended, and ascended gods usually have something going for them even before they get assigned a domain."

I shrugged at the question. "Not a lot, really. I can inspire hope—it's technically an Excellency, just one that I can use to empower others as easily as myself. As a blessing, it's rather weak." I shifted uneasily for a moment. I *did* have one other thing.

I made a grasping motion as I pulled... something from the air. For a moment my fingers blurred, and I was outlined in a vague prismatic aura, then it was caught

by my hand, pulled into form, the colors inverting, collapsing into...

It was plaid. The base color was a bottomless vantablack. Over it, a gray like static, uncertain, impossible to focus on. Then faint gold, rarer than the other two, yet the only color your eyes could really track. Then, rarer still the silver threads, an edging of the color so light that it was more a suggestion than a reality.

For a second, I heard whispers, felt the grinding of cosmic gears, and was chilled by a river that wasn't there... then the phantom sensation was gone. It looked no more real than before. It was still blatantly unnatural, but the vague horror of the moment was gone.

It was a mantle.

"I also have this as my Panoply." I let it fade back into my invisible aura. "So nothing really useful for now."

"Hmm, no," she responded dryly, obviously not bothered by... well, that. "What does it do?"

I hesitated a moment. "It... gives me power over reincarnation. Only over whoever is wearing it. I can't just..." I waved my hands vaguely. "I have authority over the reincarnation of anyone wearing my mantle."

"Huh. So could you assign someone to be born Dragon-Blooded in their next life? I get why you don't see it as a big deal, things like that don't really matter, but there are those who would trade everything they have for the use of it."

It was kind of a weird thing to hear, but I guess it no longer mattered to me since gods only died when their souls were destroyed. The godly perception was that reincarnation wasn't punishment or reward, but simple resource conservation. A soul properly recycled through Lethe was indistinguishable from any other soul. There was nothing left, nothing distinguishing to say 'that life happened, and you're rewarded in the next life with *this*.' So while being rewarded with a higher station in your next life was something that happened, it wasn't something gods saw as meaningful. And when gods talked with each other, the cynical nature of the arrangements came out in full display. That said—

"Ah... Kind of? I only got a quick rundown on how Exaltations work. I could make sure you were born into a body that had the potential, but you would still have to earn it yourself. And I'm not sure how that knowledge would affect your chances? Asking for that is a lot more calculating than getting into that life normally."

She snorted, “Don’t lots of people live their lives hoping to be reincarnated as a Dragon-Blooded?”

I wasn’t explaining this well, I realized. How to say it...

“Yeah, but they don’t remember.”

Slow blink.

“Come again?”

“Well... you don’t go through Lethe when you use my mantle.”

“Oh. Okay. I think you really need to walk me through how it works.”

I let out a sigh. I really wasn’t comfortable with that thing.

The Mantle of Rebirth let me kill whoever was wearing it, and in an instant fate them to be reborn... pretty much anywhere, to anything. So long as I wasn’t trying to make someone the child of someone *really* powerful... well, it would happen.

I could set all kinds of things about their next life. How they would look, some of the circumstances going on around their new life, and more. If I got too fancy... well, it would try and fulfill everything, but it might get more metaphorical about it all.

They would be born with whatever level of spiritual grace they had in their last life, though it would start out somewhat dormant. Over the course of several years, they would come to remember their previous life, as their soul synced up with their new body. By puberty their spiritual graces would have reasserted themselves. Generally, spiritual graces they already possessed would take precedence over anything new—so if one of the Dragon-Blooded asked to be reincarnated as the child of a god, they would likely burn away the godsblood by puberty as their previous nature reasserted itself.

“To be clear, I’ve never used it. That’s what they told me in heaven when they were studying me after my ascension. Well, I kind of had an intuition for how it worked, but they told me what that would probably mean. I’ve never even met one of the Dragon-Blooded. The only Exalt I ever met was a Sidereal, and I don’t really remember what that was about.”

“Studying... so that isn’t something assigned to you. It’s not part of your nature as the god of Calibration, but part of your nature because of your ascension? Like the

Mountain Boy's Sutra? Most panoplies are assigned, but... this is a panoply charm born from your nature."

I shrugged. "I don't know who he is. But yes. It's a piece of my soul. Kind of."

"Hmm. Could you reincarnate someone as a spirit? Say, an elemental?"

"Sure? So long as they aren't already something special, at least. Like... I find the whole assigning people to be someone's future mother part kind of creepy, but—"

"I know exactly who can solve half of your problem. Now... This place must have a summoning room."

The 8th of Ascending Water, Sunday, Realm Year 762

This place did, in fact, have a summoning room. After declaring that she had a solution, she had me arrange use of it. Evidently this was enough of an ask on our hosts that we couldn't use it immediately. Owl from the East gave permission, but by then it was already too late to begin that night.

Instead, I had moved on to work with other tutors. Even divine tutelage wasn't going to make me competent with the spear in a single day, but it was making me mildly less uncomfortable holding one. I wasn't entirely sure that was a good thing—it felt like I was being set up to make a mistake.

With the turning of the day, I was led to the room set aside for elemental summoning. Vevin was already there, actually casting the spell.

The room was odd. It was rather bare compared to most of the House. Four braziers were set up: two at the entrance to the room, and two before a set of steps leading upwards. They blazed in four different colors—Yellow, Blue, Green, and Violet. The stairs were short, rising to a landing that looked like it should have a gate or door, but simply ended in the back wall of the room.

Vevin had set herself up in the center of the room, drawing the circles and diagrams she now sat within. She bore no tools, used no reagents. She just occasionally muttered, or drew lines in the air in the darkest of blues and purples. There was a seat by the door where a guest could sit while the sorcerer was working, and a servant of the house had set up a desk beside it, along with study material assigned by my various teachers.

I was reminded once again how amazingly competent everyone working for the House was. I probably didn't work as diligently as I should, but I enjoyed

watching Vevin.

Eventually she reached a lull, and turned her attention away from her ritual. While it would take the elemental four hours to arrive from the time the ritual began, much of that was waiting, simply keeping the channel open through the Dragon Lines.

“So this Gale’s Echo... She’d really work for me for a child? That... That kind of makes me uncomfortable on several levels, but as long as everything is consensual I guess it’s okay. But why doesn’t she just... have one?”

“Hmm. So the Thúroch are not a natural race of elementals. They were created, and how they were put together doesn’t flow perfectly from the nature of Wind. To have children, the wind must be warped into an unnatural state. There’s some rare conjunctions where this just happens, but usually it takes sorcerous workings to twist the geomancy of Creation enough to enable that.”

She made a so-so gesture, “And while she **is** a reliable bodyguard, her service isn’t usually worth enough to justify the cost involved. Well, not if you’re hiring her, and while I know some gods who are happy to just bind elementals, it can make for bad blood in the long run.”

“But I can perform this casually.”

“But you can perform this service casually,” Vevin agreed.

The thing about Panoply Charms is that they were called Panoplies for a reason. They were a Charm, a magic I could call upon, but on some level they were also artifacts. There were charms you could give someone else, even if they flowed and drew their strength from the spirit they were a part of. I could hand the Mantle of Rebirth to someone else, and if I gave it to them with intent, they could use it as if they were me. Of course, I could call it back at any time, and if I was slain it would supposedly fly back to me to recover my spirit no matter how far away we were from each other. But I could almost treat it like an artifact.

For the next hour, she coached me through what I would need to say and do for my first bargain with an elemental. It was almost a relief when the world seemed to tilt, the geometry of the room breaking open to a place filled with white sea foam, and a sky with Sun, Moon, and Stars all sharing the heavens as one.

Gale’s Echo was the silhouette of a horse, woven from strands of whipping tempest clouds. Around her hooves, her mane and tail, they became so fine and

thin it looked like real hair. The rest of her took on a pattern that seemed half organic, half mechanical. And under that was a blackness that seemed to roil, like the darkest thunderhead at night on the new moon.

She neighed as she galloped into the room, and it set the walls to shaking, and the moments before comfortable temperature plummeted like a rock. “I am Gale’s Echo, honored for my guardianship by the Stone Walker, who shepherded the children of Fanoar from harm. I was thanked by Incandescent Decree himself when I took a blow aimed at his child from a Lintha assassin. Who summons me, who summons one of the Tempest Horses!”

“I am Vevin, acting as proxy to Nathan Nozi. Nathan of the Court of Seasons. Nathan, who rules over the exiled days, god of Calibration! He honors you with his summons and his call...”

Well. This was going to take a while.

Our offer was simple. She would be my mount and my bodyguard for a month. In return, she would gain possession of my Mantle for a month, or until she used it once. She was at first unsure why she should want it—I couldn’t quite decide if her questioning of our offer was rude or obsequious, because it somehow managed to seem like both—but once she understood what it did...

“I will serve as bodyguard and advisor, offering my insight into security and protection. I will guard with body and mind and power. I will do so for a year and a day. In return, I may take possession of your Panoply Charm, the Mantle of Rebirth, and use it once. I will hold it for no more than five days, or until used, whichever happens first. I will use this claim within a year and a day of forming this contract, or forfeit my chance to call upon it.”

There was more to it, of course. Rules for my behavior, limits on hers, but that was the core of her offer. She didn’t want the month deadline.

And that was how I gained my first retainer.

CHAPTER 4

It's an Ill Wind that...

August 11, 2026

Morning of the 10th of Ascending Water, Marsday, Realm Year 762

We were gathering outside the Sanctum, the various members of the hunting party leaving it in ones and twos as odd ripples in the air. Most of them were immaterial, and I watched them move about the clearing like spots dancing across the surface of my eyes. A few of them were material though—moving physical goods about—or were elementals who found materiality a more natural state. Mostly air, though a handful of earth and wood elementals were present. None of Water, evidently out of a long-term conflict between Air and Water, and none of Fire for reasons that had never been fully explained to me (yet I was vaguely certain it would come up at the worst time, in the worst way).

Gale's Echo was directing several minor gods who had attached themselves to me without my knowledge. One of them I had dubbed 'the beholder' in my head, though it was kind of an unfair labeling. They were a... kind of pink cloud, and out of the cloud extended twelve delicate alabaster arms. Eight of those arms held crystalline eyes, while four of their arms extended and shrank in wave-like rhythms as they moved and shifted gear about, loaded pack animals, and double checked sacks and boxes. A gold ring banded around them, with one side of the band opening up into a silver ring in which a larger eye was mounted, moving freely to examine the world like a ball bearing.

"Just a few more minutes," they sang to me in a voice like a guitar. Literally—I found their voice both hard to understand and disturbing, and while they had told me their name, I hadn't actually *gotten* it. I was vaguely hoping someone else would use it nearby so that I could hear how it sounded when a human-adjacent being said it. They were so enthusiastic I always felt a bit guilty that I found them creepy.

At the same time two birdlike gods were hopping on me, straightening the layers of my clothes, making sure all the charms were properly attached. Sometimes when they decided a charm wasn't placed right, or something wasn't tied right, their sharp beaks and vicious claws lashed out, tugging and pulling things into place, then their essence would settle, somehow making the whole thing more...

solid. Fixing the ‘correctness’ into place like glue or cement.

When I first left the Sanctum, I had felt the chill the same way you would in winter even when wearing layers of jackets and heavy clothes. As they worked, that feeling slowly faded away. They were called Nanar and Nayar, and evidently they were the gods of the walls of the family houses for the City of Fair Isle, and they were quite excited to be so close to me.

For her part, Gale’s Echo needed neither saddle nor harness—the tendrils of cloud that made up her body would naturally shape themselves to act as such. That didn’t mean she wasn’t preparing. She had put on a set of complicated-looking cloth barding in the colors of the Maidens, draped with charms and trinkets. She also had the court shoe her ‘properly,’ whatever that meant.

Now that we were outside the Sanctum, she would not move more than five feet away from me—close enough that she could interpose herself at a moment’s notice between me and danger. An intimidating experience because as an Air Elemental she was in constant prancing motion, and was huge even for a horse.

“I hadn’t realized you were naturally material,” she informed me, almost accusatory.

I made an uncomfortable face. “I spent weeks not naturally respiring essence. I’m... a little broken. Maybe it will fix itself? The essence thing did. Though... Calibration is when the spirit and the material are closest together, so maybe it won’t.”

“Protecting a material being is more complicated than protecting a spirit,” she stated, as if it was my fault. “It’s fine. It’s fine. I just need to know these things in advance.”

All activity stopped for a moment as Cold Wind and Sleet Wind loped out of the Sanctum trailed by dozens of courtiers milling around them like remoras on a pair of sharks. Then everyone burst into frantic motion, to finish getting ready. Except for me. It was beneath my dignity to do things myself, after all.

... that was unfair. There were a handful of other gods who were similarly being attended to, rather than attending to things. One of the Ennead was joining us; Master Winter, a grandfatherly figure with icicles for a beard. Though he was grandfatherly in that ‘stern, judgemental, disapproving’ sort of way rather than the welcoming flavor. He had been friendly enough for the three words we had so

far exchanged, but he felt... cruel.

I would have thought him too busy during this season to go on this kind of excursion, but evidently he was a god of preparedness. Or rather, punishing unpreparedness. It was a matter of principle that he rarely needed to work during this season, that he had everything set up long before, and it could just cleanly tick along with minimal input from him.

“This is a good day,” Cold Wind bellowed to the crowd as the last of the preparations finished themselves. “A good day for a hunt! I’m glad you’ve all come to join me! That you’re all joining me for this grand hunt.”

Then Sleet Wind took over, “As you all know, we brothers love hunting the Omen Dogs for their ancient insult against us. You all know it! But we also know that you all love more exciting hunts. That you all want to hunt more exciting prey. To the north. To the east. Yes, to the mountain north and east. There, we will find the land where ancient ice has carved valleys. It has carved valleys deep.”

Everyone stilled, anticipation sharpening the air. My patience for the brothers’ odd way of speaking was at an all-time low, but I forced myself not to react. I wasn’t happy about being pushed to be a part of this hunt.

Others were happier about it. Master Winter, I noticed, had started to smile as the location was laid out.

“In those valleys, the ice has carved open a way deep,” Cold Wind said, taking over the narration again. “It is a deep place, where the light of the Daystar does not reach. From it, forbidden gods have lifted their heads above their station and walked upon the surface. They walk where they are unwanted!”

Yes, Master Winter was smiling.

“We will hunt Omen Dogs,” Sleet Wind said.

“We will hunt Hushed Ones,” Cold Wind continued, egging on the listeners.

“We will hunt Raksha,” Sleet Wind rejoined, his voice rising as they approached the end.

“And we will hunt the Únôlpûr Aithanar! We dedicate this hunt to our hosts! And we gift this hunt to the newest brother of our Calendar Court!” The brothers finished together.

There were cheers. I wasn't one of the cheerers. All of this? This wasn't for me. I was just an excuse to make this a bigger excursion, with maybe a bit of hazing thrown in for good measure.

"Yes, we gift a glorious hunt. We gift glory to you all!"

Gale's Echo nudged me. "It's time."

Tendrils of cloud reached out through her barding, and acted like stirrups helping me climb onto her back. It was a good thing she was an elemental, because I suspected I would have spooked a horse with my ineptitude. She was patient though—she was a bodyguard for children, I remembered, so she probably was used to worse. Then the tendrils lashed about my legs, and around my hips, and I was firmly—but shockingly comfortably—tied to her back.

And then we were off.

Afternoon of the 10th of Ascending Water, Marsday, Realm Year 762

The hunting party, despite its size, moved *fast*. Several gods had magic for speeding journeys, and for erasing presence. Only a handful of them stayed material—even the Elementals dematerialized. One of those who remained material was the beholder, who always stayed near me and who, I suspected, had been assigned as my bodyguard.

Another of them was Vevin—I wasn't sure when she ended up joining, but she had. She wasn't near me at all, but was chatting away with several other gods who had forgone mounts. Instead she was bounding forwards, every pump of her legs a graceful leap, her robe lashing behind her like a tail.

A third was Master Winter. He hadn't started out near me, but as the journey continued his part of the procession slowly, almost imperceptibly edged its way over to mine, until he was riding at my side. His mount was some kind of giant deer, but I was pretty sure it wasn't a real animal, just a piece of his own spirit he had manifested as a separate being.

"You look like a man who has realized he has only provisioned for three months of snow when the ice first comes down. I hope this hunt isn't that intimidating—I know the brothers have picked a mightier prey than they otherwise would as a favor to us."

I lightly shook my head. "I don't really know enough about the Únôlpûr Aithanar

to be intimidated by them. I hadn't planned on becoming a god, so all of this is intimidating."

He nodded sagely. "I rarely have sympathy for ascended god-blooded who find themselves unprepared for their new duties, for they had time and opportunity to steel themselves for what is to come. When apotheosis comes to those without the blood of gods, I may be more sympathetic. I do not know your circumstances, no one but the Maidens does to my knowledge, but unexpected troubles come to every life. Such things are more of Autumn Frost's domain than mine, though I maintain that preparation is still useful even then."

"The only advice I can give is to make each moment count," he continued. "When unexpected trouble visits you, that doesn't mean you can stop preparing, it just means that your preparations must happen on a shorter time frame."

It took me a moment to realize that he was offering aid. It wouldn't be free—but it wouldn't be expensive, either. He was favor-seeking with the Calendar Gods, and he wasn't going to poison our relationship this early.

"Can you tell me about what we're hunting this time?"

He smiled. It was clearly the right question.

"Of course. I'm always happy to help the diligent prepare themselves."

Author's Notes

So there's a minor problem here that might merit mention later, once more is known. That is to say, "Why can Nathan see immaterial spirits?" I would argue that it's completely defensible rule zero territory for... reasons. The reason is going to have half of the long-term Exalted fans nodding along in annoyance. I can't really *explain* without spoiling though.

CHAPTER 5

Fight like a cornered weasel

August 11, 2026

Morning of the 11th of Ascending Water, Mercuryday, Realm Year 762

I had spoken with Master Winter through dinner the night before, the ancient spirit perfectly happy to earn a future favor in return for teaching a subject he appeared to be passionate about. Less the monsters and animals of the North, specifically, and more paranoia about nature. Lots of ambush predators up here, though, so the paranoia ended up teaching a good amount of monster-lore anyway—a bit of a six one way, half a dozen the other situation. That said, he did also focus on some of our targets, the Hushed Ones and the Turrets of the Ice Blossom—the court of Raksha we would be trying to drive off.

Gale's Echo had been able to interject several times as well. Evidently she was even older than Master Winter, but she had also mostly lived in the South, and wasn't actually that knowledgeable about the North. The last time she had been up this way was nearly twenty-five hundred years ago. Still, she had plenty to say about threats common to all directions.

After dinner, I mounted Gale's Echo again to practice the spear and saber from her back. Using a weapon while mounted was quite different, and if I had been riding any lesser mount I would surely not only have hurt myself, but spent half the night unmounting myself.

I probably would have half-crawled into my tent, but the beholder helped me inside, having set it up for me over dinner. I was grateful that I hadn't had to do it myself, but also felt vaguely guilty about all the work everyone else was doing for me, and how it was just expected. I thought I would have trouble with Gale's Echo and the beholder murmuring to each other in low voices as they played guard, but I fell asleep almost the moment I laid my head down.

Then we were off again, bright and early the next morning. At first the hunting party was filled with chatter, until Cold Wind called a halt. A moment later, a message passed its way through the line of hunters.

Quiet. They had found tracks.

That's how I found myself waved to the back of the line of hunters, as we passed

beneath alien trees adapted to an environment only marginally more hospitable than Antarctica.

A few minutes later, I felt my ears pop as Gale's Echo extended some of her tendrils like a cage around us, and the quality of the sound changed. She snorted angrily, and I realized she had placed some kind of privacy barrier around us.

"They're using us as bait."

What.

"Look, everyone close to us is dematerialized. Everyone who's staying material is taking different, more hidden paths, and none of them are nearby. They're having us travel almost openly, and near places where a predator might be hiding in ambush."

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck *fuck*.

"Should we break away?"

She tossed her head, and her whole body rippled oddly, the illusion of her being flesh and blood momentarily disrupted.

"No. Ready your spear. Point it sinister, and slightly down, and get ready to stab."

I clutched the spear, forcing it to point the way she told me while panic seeped into my bones. Why was she having us go along with this, when we could just...

A shape burst from a snowbank to my left, aiming for my throat, and I less stabbed than flailed as my spear jolted once... twice, and suddenly a great weight was dragging at it while hellish animal screams filled the air and a series of thumps sounded.

"Good job, my lord." Gale's Echo's voice was suddenly back to normal, free of that odd enclosed quality of her barrier. "You hunted those ice weasels perfectly."

The beholder had manifested before the attack had even finished, their long arms ringing me with spears pointed outward in every direction, and in their fourth hand a long white furry... snake...? Something larger than even the Cold Roars hissed and flailed. Wait... no... limbs?

I finally realized what I was looking at. It was a ferret... no. A weasel. A weasel longer than two cars put end to end, and thinner around than a wolfhound stood tall. Its fur was white, and ice and snow had frozen to it till it looked more like

some elemental creature of ice than anything living.

My spear had accounted for another. On the ground in front of us where my spear had been ripped from my hands lay a second ice weasel. The spear had gone in through its lower jaw and perfectly intersected its head, as if someone had drawn a perpendicular line through its brainpan. That wasn't me, I was sure. Hadn't I felt an upwards jolt to the spear *before* I struck the weasel?

A third and fourth weasel lay dead—Gale's Echo work. One to my right, her leg resting on its snapped neck, and a final one further away, where wind had picked it up and slammed it against a tree trunk so hard as to smash the tree.

Around us the rest of the party was beginning to converge. Only the beholder and... Vevin? Hadn't she been further away...? Only those two had been close enough to help.

That's when the adrenaline hit me, and my hands began to shake. I stuffed them into my sleeves to hide the motion and suddenly Gale's Echo and Vevin were both talking to the rest of the gathering hunters, making themselves the center of attention.

"Your spear." A boar-head god had retrieved it without me noticing. I looked at it blankly. It was a beautiful thing—nothing overtly supernatural itself, but crafted to a standard beyond mortal hands, and with a talisman fused to the blade to give it potency for the next five days. Other than that, it was graceful but simple steel.

"Thank you for retrieving that, Lord Hoarfrost," Gale's Echo stated for me, taking the spear delicately with one of her cumulonimbus tendrils and turning the attention back to herself.

I felt very alone.

CHAPTER 6

Memories

August 11, 2026

Morning of the 11th of Ascending Water, Mercuryday, Realm Year 762

“I had Ice Weasel once,” Sleet Wind murmured to himself. Three of the giant beasts had been hung from a nearby tree, while he was skinning the fourth. “That I did. It was at Flix Arum’s coming-out ball. He was presenting himself. He had only been Exalted for seven years, for seven years he had been learning under his elder circle mates. But he was ready to leave the shadow of his circle. He was ready to come out.”

He paused for a final moment, studied his work, and then pulled most of the fur from the carcass in a single movement. The smell... it was revolting.

“He took seven meats said to be impossible to make palatable with mortal craft alone, and from each of them made a feast mortal kings would fight over. It’s said a small portion of that meat made it all the way to Yu-Shan.”

I had gotten myself under control, mostly by blasting my own brain with feelings of hope until I dissociated from the moment. Crude, but it had worked. I wasn’t freaking out, but I also just wasn’t really present.

It also meant I wasn’t feeling the melancholy vibe Sleet Wind was putting out.

They had set me up. Yes, gods... well, we respawned on death. But lots of ‘god’ things didn’t work right for me. I had a fallback of course, my mantle would supposedly save me even if I didn’t use it with intention. I was loath to fall back on it.

Frankly, the whole process was gross.

And why was I even in danger? For what? To ‘test my mettle’ or some such nonsense. The Cold Roars had been subtly passive aggressive in their welcome up to this point, but now their friendliness felt more genuine.

I got why Gale’s Echo hadn’t pulled me out. She clearly could have handled them all herself without danger to me, and it let her kill one of them with my hands. It made me look good, which probably made me safer and easier to protect. It was just that, at that moment, I didn’t really care.

“Ice Weasel fur is quite nice. It’s quite pleasant to have,” Sleet Wind told me confidently. “I’ll make you a coat.” He patted my back and ambled off as other gods took up skinning the other three.

“We need to move. We need to hunt.” Cold Wind spoke to the group. “Ice Weasel warrens rarely have fewer than fifteen members, but they’ll soon flee and scatter when this many of their hunters fail to return. Soon, they won’t be home.”

A hauntingly eerie goddess that I could only describe as ‘a yuki-onna from an actually scary manga’ drifted over to stand near me before bowing deeply. I felt as much as saw her gathering reality to her, stepping into the material. Her bare, bleeding feet left no marks on the snow, despite me watching blood welling from cracked soles.

“If it pleases my lord, I will veil your presence as we approach the warren.”

“That would be useful,” I stated. It was the first thing I said myself since the attack, I realized. My voice was calm, disinterested. For today I was done. Maybe I would care about this pit of vipers tomorrow.

A large head lightly bumped my shoulder. I turned around to see Gale’s Echo watching me with a placid gaze.

“Let me check you over.”

“Ah. Of course.”

She spent several minutes nosing at my robes, poking at the various talismans attached to me.

“Two of them broke,” she said, and the sound made me realize she had granted us privacy again. “Not from the Weasels. It looks like they just wore down.”

I frowned. “Are they defective?”

She flicked her tail, seeming annoyed. “No, no. These kinds of tools really need a thaumaturgist to keep them working right. You need to collect one for your household. I’m sure if they had come along, Nanar and Nayar could get them working again, but I lack the technique.”

“Oh. Is this going to be a problem.”

“No, no no. Your setup was picked with some redundancy; depending on the talisman, you can lose between seven and fifteen of them before efficacy starts

dropping. I was going to check this tomorrow, when the real hunting started. I wasn't expecting them to use someone as honored as Calibration of the Court of Seasons as bait. I need to know what my margin is now."

She seemed to settle herself. "I really should have known better. I'm just rusty. I thought the Court of Seasons was better than this."

She sounded genuinely disappointed, but the column was beginning to move again, so I mounted up as the march resumed.

"Never meet your heroes."

"Why wouldn't you want to meet..." she started to ask but she seemed to get it.

"Ah. I'm not familiar with that idiom, but I suspect it's similar to a saying among the Laplanders. Always Dream Northwards."

"Uh... What. Why do you always dream northwards? What does that have to do with anything? Do... Do dreams have directions?"

Her voice was amused as she explained the history of the idiom: its connection to legends of the Lap's neighbors and their hunger for independence from the Realm, and how the Lap, by contrast, enjoyed its status as a satrapy. We got into a debate over whether or not the sayings were actually similar, or both just expressed a more general dissatisfaction with placing ideals above reality.

It wasn't until much later that I appreciated what she was really doing for me.

By the time night fell, our party was laden with the spoils of several successful minor hunts. Weasel fur and bone had multiplied, and were joined by pelts, meats, and other harvestables from a dozen other kinds of northern game. It was a rich enough harvest that part of our train broke off to bring our spoils home to be processed.

I was able to join the rest of the hunting party in chatting over dinner that night, as we ate from the day's spoils. And if I was slightly less friendly, no one seemed to notice.

Morning of the 12th of Ascending Water, Jupiterday, Realm Year 762

That morning, Gale's Echo once again checked over the state of my talismans. Still only two broken, though she said she didn't think another two were going to last the day. Also, at some point during the night Vevin had vanished. Nothing sinister; she had left a message with the beholder that responsibilities had come

up.

“Zivzizov will have your breakfast ready shortly. However, I wanted to go over the itinerary of the day before you eat.”

Considering how she atonally sang it, I was pretty sure I now knew how to pronounce the ‘beholder’s’ name. She was eating her own breakfast. There was a small fire near my luxurious tent, and over it a cauldron was hung, and Gale’s Echo periodically stuck her entire muzzle into it.

“Sure?”

“Essentially, I wanted to ask how risky you are willing to be today.”

“What do you mean by risky?”

She flicked her head lightly. I wished I knew equine body language. Or maybe elemental? “As you heard, we are theoretically hunting Omen Dogs today. They’re not really a threat to even a mortal on horseback, but we’re getting far enough from the Pole of Earth that the wildlife is getting weirder. And stereotypes aside, while I’m an Air elemental, I haven’t historically spent much time in the north.”

She paused for a second and took another bite before continuing.

“I probably can fight off anything we run into. There are animals this close to the poles that could chase me off, but few of them could ambush me. But if we’re attacked by something nasty, I’m not sure if I can do it in a way that keeps the image we established yesterday. On the other hand, if we hang back, that could also tarnish your image.”

“Ah.” I frowned. “I really don’t know the right answer. What would you suggest?”

She tossed her head, and this time her feelings were clear enough. “If I knew that, I would just do it. I’ve done work like this before, but I had more of a safety margin. Sanmai’s mother would have murdered anyone who thought to speak badly of her son, long before his father got involved.”

I filed the name away. Maybe I would look up Echo’s history sometime.

“I suppose...” I started, then pondered for a bit before finishing the thought.

Echo had chosen to have me face the weasels because the appearance of cowardice was dangerous and it was a risk she could control. It had helped, people were friendlier, more respectful, but what respect it had given me was a

shield that could easily vanish. I could choose my dangers, or have others choose them for me.

“I suppose that if we hang back, I’ll look bad no matter how it goes, while if I ride towards the front, I’ll only look bad if something goes wrong.”

Echo lightly kicked the ground, then flicked her tail like slapping away annoying flies. “Fair enough. Front of the column it is.”

CHAPTER 7

Sports Hunt

August 11, 2026

Late afternoon of the 12th of Ascending Water, Jupiterday, Realm Year 762

Six hours into the hunt, swaying on Gale's Echo's back, I had learned that the average territory of an Omen Dog in the far north was 831 Glym. Even if I could define a mile closer than 'this feels like I walked a mile', which I couldn't, that still wouldn't help me. A Glym was a topological unit that was apparently popularized before the fall of the Solars; I really did need to get context for that eventually. By 'topological', I mean informed by topology. It might be a two-dimensional unit, but it wasn't a traditional one—it took into account how slopes and valleys could change how much useful ground there was, and it was supposedly very good at predicting ranges for ground animals, or useful zoning for cities where mortals needed to walk, and also had uses in predicting how streams would move.

"You are correct," Echo replied, unbothered by my objection to such an absurd unit. "As a unit, it's almost completely useless in this degenerate age of sorrow. It requires accurate maps that simply don't exist anymore."

Keep telling it like it is, Echo. Keep telling it like it is.

More than that, I wasn't sure how fast we were traveling. Echo claimed that she could easily keep a pace of 42 Vell an hour, which was a more conventional distance unit (though I was unsure not only of what a Vell was but of the hour itself. Creation, you see, had a twenty-five-hour day, and I didn't know how its hours matched to Earth's). And a proper flat road would translate 50 Vell to 50 Glym. But this far north, there was nothing like that consistency.

"If I had to guess, I would say we're probably at least three Vell to every Glym. Some of these slopes would be impassable to mortal creatures—that greatly expands the needed territory for a pack to feed itself, when so much of the territory isn't useful. Though really, the generic Glym is only marginally useful. There are a number of tools for adapting it more precisely to the question."

In short, it was a value that, if actually useful, probably was only so in scientific literature.

I was starting to tire. Even with Gale's Echo being an unnaturally comfortable

ride, being in the saddle this long was leaving me increasingly sore and stiff. We were regularly finding evidence of the hounds, but nothing recent, and I was beginning to wonder if they had fallen prey to one of the countless threats of the north.

I think I would be fine with that? Omen Dogs were creepy, but were just doglike enough for me to dislike hunting them. Of course, that would move us on to the rest of our itinerary, which...

At the front of the line, Cold Wind held up a paw, bringing the hunting party to a halt, then made several gestures, before loping off in another direction with more focus.

"Tracks, North by West. No more than a day old," Gale's Echo translated.

"Huh. I guess we'll probably get them today."

I was enjoying Echo's sound barrier immensely. She wasn't chatty but she also didn't mind talking. The few times she was worried about an ambush, she would tell me to let her focus, and the rest of the time she was knowledgeable and patient.

As we crested the hill I thought about the rest of our itinerary. The Hushed Ones... they were some kind of mutants, and I was told that they ate people. That sounded pretty bad, but I really didn't know the context—I knew that accusation got thrown around at a lot of 'primitive' groups or tribes back on Earth, that it was literally part of the blood libel, which made me hesitant to accept it at face value. Evidently they had some kind of hive mind. It felt like there should be some way of talking to them, rather than just hunting them down.

After that, the Raksha. I wasn't sure why whatever magic that was translating everything for me translated that name as Raksha, but they weren't tiger men. They... kind of were shape-changers, but not really in the same way people meant when they used the term. More like they could trade bodies, but only outside reality. They had some kind of illusion magic, but it had to be pretty flawed considering how casually everyone was treating hunting them. Honestly, they sounded more like crappy fairies than anything else. I wasn't sure what to think about that.

Generally, in the stories, people hunting fairies were the bad guys. But unlike the Hushed Ones, there were open dialogues with some of the Raksha 'courts.' And

they were big on buying slaves, supposedly? That was pretty unpleasant, but I kinda thought I was going to have to hate everyone if I judged them on slavery, since it was damn near universally practiced here in Creation, and I didn't have that much hate in me.

Maybe I should? Maybe it said something weak about me? I don't know.

As for the Únôlpûr Aithanar... Well, they were the real goal of this hunt, and we weren't really planning on taking one of them out. More harass them so that they wouldn't keep sticking their nose above the surface.

Cold Wind slowed to a crawl, lowering his body close to the ground as we crested the next hill. I wasn't sure why—he was still immaterial. I didn't bother trying to hide, trusting to the snow maiden's veil. A second later he gestured again, and Gale's Echo continued translating.

"The den is here."

Early evening of the 12th of Ascending Water, Jupiterday, Realm Year 762

In the end, only fifteen of us were picked out to be hunters. Arguably sixteen, if you included Gale's Echo. But then you probably shouldn't include me.

Both of the Cold Roars, obviously. That was two.

Then me (and Gale's Echo. But mostly Echo.). Officially three.

Then Zivzizov—they were *totally* a hidden bodyguard. Though probably not assigned by the Cold Roars. Four.

The scary Yuki-Onna girl—her name was evidently Fönn—came riding a deer-like god whose name I didn't catch. Five and six.

A trio of southern war gods joined us. Three brothers—smoldering ash encrusted parts of their forms, and their pale hair blackened and curled at the tips, smoke escaping as the ends burnt away; it grew as fast as it burned. The Elnnti, I think they were called. Nine.

Three bear gods, two tiny things not much bigger than dogs, and one massive one that had to be fifteen feet at the shoulder *at least*. They were part of the Cold Roars' court, though they were only associated with each other out of friendship.

Twelve.

Three elementals—air all—finished the roster. Took the forms of falcons as big as

ponies. They had been ‘given’ to the Cold Roars by the Wind Masters. Fifteen.

The rest of the hunting party would pull back and surround the den so that none of the Omen Dogs could escape. I watched them move away, waiting until they were in position to materialize.

I just felt vaguely sick. The Omen Dogs weren’t hurting anyone. No one here wanted to eat them. They would be skinned, but it was unlikely anything useful would be made from their coats. Their teeth and a few bones would be harvested for artwork. There were a few thaumaturgic uses for their organs, but we weren’t going to bother.

This was exactly the kind of sports hunting I had hated back on Earth.

Still, I was crouched over a surprisingly perfect replica of the area made from snow. Fönn had made it. Maybe topological-based distances *weren’t* useless for gods, if they could get maps this accurate so easily. Well, if anyone was making and keeping those maps up-to-date.

“You, Zivzizov, and Fönn will come from here,” Sleet Wind stated. “That is where you will come from. Zivzizov will stay in the back, to make sure nothing escapes you two, while Fönn will finish off any prey you have wounded. You will be a harasser, you will harass them, wound them, and drive them out. So will I. I will do the same. While Cold Wind will finish the ones I wound, finishing off the bloodied ones.”

He worked his way down the list, giving each of us tasks and positions. The plan was pretty simple. Three lines. The forwardmost—the harassers—were supposed to try and hurt and scare as many of the Omen Dogs as possible. The second line was for the ones who would finish off the injured or running Omen Dogs. The third line in the back would pick off anyone who got past the second line.

And of course, any prey that got past all three lines would have to face the rest of the encirclement.

Those of us hunting ‘in front’ were supposed to keep the magic to a minimum. To keep it sportsmanlike. No such restriction was placed on the encirclement waiting behind us.

That’s how I found myself on Gale’s Echo’s back, holding my pretty little spear, to hunt a bunch of animals who had done me no wrong.

I felt it, this time, as Echo's magic wrapped itself around me. Just faintly. My grip corrected itself just slightly, and I wasn't holding the spear, aiming the spear, wielding it the way I naturally would. As she explained it, after I asked, it was a specialized intersection between Endowment and Possession—while Echo couldn't herself use most weapons, she was actually skilled with them, and could pseudo-possess her rider to channel her own skills and excellencies through them. It was almost unnoticeable, because I was still 'in charge' of what those skills would do. It didn't instigate the normal conflict most forms of possession would cause.

Fake.

Shut up, me.

Ahead of me, from the other side of the den, Sleet Wind crashed down, fully physically, and the den exploded into noise and motion. The Omen Dogs started... yelling? Screaming? It was nothing like the sounds of dogs. More like deeper-sounding foxes, if that made any sense. Pups tried to bolt as adult hounds yelled and screamed. They really were saber-toothed, which still looked so wrong on a canid. And Echo's scarily fast trot had brought me among them, my spear flashing down once, twice, thrice.

I suppose I could have just bloodied them, left them for Fönn to finish, but that felt cowardly, like I was trying to pretend I wasn't a part of this. I wasn't going to go out of my way to try and finish them off, but two of my blows killed, while the third threw my target away as a broken mass of meat, leaving it rolling and yowling in pain, at least until Fönn arrived to silence it. Echo was no kinder. Her hooves struck pups.

I knew I was going to be sick after this.

And then the snow erupted beneath me. Silver flashed. The tendrils that made up Gale's Echo vibrated, and the snow for ten feet around us shivered and was blown apart. The snow was red.

Gale's Echo leapt. In a single effortless arc she took us fifteen yards away, landing weightless as a phantom, stepping lightly upon the ground as if ending a casual trot rather than an impossible leap.

Where we had been there was only a patch of minced red snow and ground meat mixed with tangles of colorful cloth, and a shimmering silver saber sitting

pristine in its corpse bed.

Then, as if curtsying before an audience, Gale's Echo gracefully collapsed into the snow, and I felt her guiding presence withdraw.

What.

"I don't think I'll be able to guard you for the rest of this battle."

What just happened.

"Run."

When was she *hit*? *What the fuck just happened.*

Around us, pale bodies rose from the snow. Black hair, hands that were almost claws, and unnaturally shimmering weapons.

The Hushed Ones, it seemed, decided to hunt us first.

CHAPTER 8

Broken Promises

August 11, 2026

Evening, 12th of Ascending Water, Jupiterday, Realm Year 762

They were more clothed than I was expecting. They had wrapped themselves in strips of torn cloth around their torsos, forearms. The ones without weapons had wrapped their hands. Blue, White, Red, Black, Green. Torn and bloody, obviously once part of something else, there was no order to how they wrapped themselves. Behind me, I heard battle start. Our encirclement was encircled. I swallowed, raised my spear, and prepared to defend my bodyguard.

“I don’t think—” one of the Hushed Ones was on me, and I wildly lashed out, trying to keep the strange boy back. “—there’s anywhere I can run!”

His movements were fluid as he flowed around my strike, lashing out at me. Somehow his clawed hands slipped off me without bite, but I felt a jolt in my robes. Points where my clothes seemed to momentarily catch, and then tear loose, and suddenly some of the cold was cutting through them.

I whipped the butt of the spear upwards, trying to catch him with it, and it slammed into his ribcage, knocking him back. But even then, he didn’t make a sound.

Behind me, I heard Gale’s Echo try to rise, and cry out in alarm.

Then something slammed into my back, and I was plowed into the snow. The force of the blow stole the wind from my lungs, and the cold made me lock up. I couldn’t have screamed, even if I had breath. The numbness was all-encompassing, like my face was gone. Then another blow, and the weight was gone from my back as Zivzizov was lifting me to my feet.

I saw the Cold Roars were fighting a dozen of them. It seemed like I was the only one who got so perfectly ambushed, but both of the brothers were bleeding, and though they lashed out with their magics, they couldn’t seem to find a grip on the Hushed Ones. Every time the Hushed Ones were struck, more of the tattered cloth frayed away, but... at this rate the brothers were going to fall before they tore through those defenses. Then the Elnnti erupted into flames, and I wished they hadn’t. Everything frozen numb suddenly could feel again, but the only thing it

was yelling at me was pain.

I blacked out for a second, and when I came to again, Zivzizov was gone, fighting to drive the Hushed Ones back, and entangling six of them by themselves. Fönn had replaced Zivzizov at my side, and there were three pristine corpses at her feet. Whatever protection the Hushed Ones had didn't seem to save them from her touch, because a fourth one was struggling in her grasp. It hadn't come for free though. A saber was stuck through her head, and an arrow seemed to have been shoved through her chest. Neither wound had downed her, but she was visibly flagging.

She turned to me, as the one in her grip stilled, and I saw her eyes widen. A shadow fell over me. And I knew.

I knew I was going to die.

I was going to die, because I couldn't refuse to come on this stupid hunting trip. Because we underestimated the Hushed Ones incredibly badly. Because I was caught up in reputation, rather than something important.

I was going to die because I was caught up in the expectations for 'A God of Calibration.' Because I obeyed the rules of that role, the unspoken promises that it carried.

I hadn't made those promises. I was going to die for promises I hadn't made.

I was entangled by them, like I was entangled by my own limbs, by this biting cold.

I was...

I saw a boy, laughing, "Don't you know anything? Never trust dragonspawn. I'll show you where you can be safe."

I saw a soulless husk, that had been a boy. I had watched and done nothing. I hadn't understood.

I saw a beautiful face and felt nothing but all-consuming loathing.

I was standing, yelling, punching ineffectually.

I was...

The net was holding me. Entangling promises, enforced role, entrapping safety, and

stolen truths.

The promises were killing me.

Broken things were holding me back, oaths tangling around my limbs like weights. *What if they didn't entangle me?* I cut them free.

I was on my feet, energized and drained at the same time, and not cold. I stepped forward, and the hiss of air told me I had escaped the blow that would have felled me.

I less turned, and more was then facing the other way. This Hushed One was a man, and his wrapping had worn all the way down to a Tarzan getup. I studied him, then. Very very pale. Dark eyes that... I wouldn't call them soulless, but whatever was behind them was alien to me. Oddly perfect, though not in an attractive way. No scars, no extra body fat, a little too symmetrical.

Something predatory from chaos that wanted to eat people. Not a human. Not a person. I felt overwhelming disgust, seeing him. He reminded me of... I wasn't sure. Tip of my tongue, but I didn't care to chase the thought down. I raised my spear, and he set himself, blade positioned to cut me down. There was something casually disinterested in the motion, like he had my measure.

Then I was standing in front of him, less moved and more was just there, swinging wildly, not even trying to make sure the head of the spear cut him, just battering at him with it like it was a staff. He blocked it once, twice, thrice. The sound of impact was wrong, like a hand muffling the world every time his blade stopped me, and he wasn't casual.

Four times, five...

He missed a block, and my spear didn't care that I hadn't used the blade. It carved through him, an arm falling one way, while the upper and lower parts of his torso lost interest in each other. Then the thing that had been alive moments before began tearing itself apart into violet threads, my strike marking what was wrong, and then the world correcting itself.

There was the sound of impact behind me, and I turned to see two more of them being held back by scarlet... ofuda? I was surrounded by burning ofuda. Scarlet flames—the shade of Mars, some part of me noted—leapt from them, driving back two attackers, or knocking aside blows aimed at me. Loathing drove me forward.

Again, I skipped the distance and was in their face. It was one of the ones without weapons, just using hand-wraps, and that didn't block my spear at all as I carved them from crown to hip. The other one had...

Fönn was chewing something, and I realized my next target's throat was gone. Around me, the fighting was quieting.

The fighting was quieting. There were individual Hushed Ones still fighting, but they were being isolated and brought down by groups of angry gods. The ambush had failed.

Gale's Echo let out a pained laugh. "It seems your ascension is continuing to fix itself. Good job."

Sleet Wind inserted himself into the conversation. "It's good you did." He was dragging the body of one of the Hushed Ones with him like some grisly trophy. Good. They didn't deserve respect. Altogether too much like the Raksha, with their hunger for humans and looking like people without being them.

"It's good it happened. They were aiming for you. You were targeted. Hmm. If you fell we would have had to fall back. We would have had to explain." He tossed his trophy aside, then shrugged. "Also good for the dignity of the court that your magic is coming."

He studied me for a moment.

"We must have a mirror. We must have a vanity. You should see, you should look at your ascension." He seemed to notice Gale's Echo's state then. "You did your job. You did good work. I'll see that a healer tends you."

"Thank you, lord."

He nodded before wandering off. I just...

I just wanted to collapse. I felt drained in ways I couldn't really explain.

"I need to see?" I asked, raising my hand to my face. "What does he..."

Blurring. And... I seemed to be jumping back and forth between one and three places, the world unsteady like it was ready to leap into motion. I... didn't feel like I was moving, but I realized I was. It felt like shifting weight back and forth between my feet, but... everywhere, and in a direction I couldn't see. But...

Then I dismissed it.

“Do you need anything?” I asked Echo. “You saved my life. Anything that’s in my power right now.”

She gave me a mildly offended look, then shook her head. “You hired me. It’s my job. Just let me rest until the healers get to me.”

And so we did.

They cleared the bodies away, preparing the clearing in front of the omen dogs’ den as Master Winter started raising a castle of ice for us to shelter in. They gathered the wounded together, and then Master Winter conjured his castle around them. Then once they were placed, he started growing it outwards into a fortified shelter for the rest of us. Some of the gods started shedding... pieces of themselves, who seemed to solidify into lesser gods, and I was shooed away from Gale’s Echo so that the healer gods could tend to the wounded.

About a dozen gods had fallen, and it wasn’t clear if all of them were going to return. Those were god-killer weapons, while the healers were complaining that the unarmed Hushed Ones had taken alchemical concoctions that made them more deadly to spirits.

Almost unwillingly, my gaze found itself to where the dead omen dogs had been piled into a heap at the edge of the clearing. They were simply cleared away like trash—not even the Cold Roars with their irrational hatred of the animals were going to bother skinning them after gods had died. They were already being buried in snow. It felt hollow.

My eyes kept moving, past our hunted quarry, to the *things* that had hunted us as their quarry. The Hushed Ones were in their own pile. The ones I had slain had cleaned themselves away, but few others were so tidy. *Disgusting*. I wasn’t sure where the thought came from, but I agreed with it. *They should all die, just like that bastard Fgan Deedrid*.

Before I could dwell on the thought, Fönn and Zivzizov were herding me into the building. It seemed I had already been assigned a room.

“Well, that isn’t what I was expecting at all.”

Fönn had made that mirror for me. It seemed she was leaping on the opportunity that Gale’s Echo being injured and Zivzizov being assigned to camp defense gave her, and saw it as a chance to get close to me. Which... she had defended me this time.

“Yes, my lord. Your visage is quite impressive.”

She was still marked. There was a hole in her head, a slot that a blade made. It was shrinking almost fast enough to track, but it was still disturbing. Still, most of my attention was on the mirror rather than the horror show of injury.

I... was three people. One of them was constantly fading away, another constantly fading in.

The fading one was itself constantly... unsplitting? Like half a dozen even more faded images were merging into it, to give it their solidity, all of them doing *something else* before moving into alignment with it, and it was only by consuming these other images that it kept restoring itself.

The fading-in image, meanwhile, was constantly dividing itself, spending away its solidity to become more images. Most of which then blinked out of existence, like it was constantly discarding them. And between them was...

The real me? I blurred, smeared. Like an anime trying really hard to tell you I was fast, even when I sat still.

She sat behind the real me, picking at my hair. My transformation had come with a new bauble, a fancy bit of jewelry. It was a hair net, and it had just shown up on my head at some point without me noticing. Kind of like those strange red ofuda that had protected me. But unlike them, it had stuck around. Evidently my hair was supposed to be tied around it, and she was teasing it into place. I was going to need to grow my hair out more to wear it properly.

“I don’t feel like a bunch of eldritch nonsense.”

Fönn blinked, and then let out what seemed to be a genuine giggle. “Now I know you were really a human. Anything as obviously divorced from normal existence as you is either the agent of the powerful, or something powerful themselves. The esoteric is not for mortals to touch.”

She gave me a grin, and I realized she had shark teeth.

“You are glorious, my lord.”

“Glorious.”

I just stared at the icy mirror, wondering what I had lost, what I had severed, to get here.

CHAPTER 9

Kept Promises

August 11, 2026

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

“While we are not experienced with the Hushed Ones, what records do exist on past conflicts with them are clear. They are certainly smart enough to do this—they are incredibly intelligent, and while few hives of them actually make things, few is not none.”

We had all gathered together in the castle courtyard; it was the only space big enough for a meeting like this. While this wasn’t all of us, it was everyone who wasn’t someone else’s servant—everyone who could make decisions for themselves.

“They are capable of understanding speech—they have been known to disguise themselves as humans to sneak into villages and towns, to spy and kidnap. Whatever stops them from communicating back is not a lack of intelligence. No. The problem is twofold.”

The speaker was one of the Elnnti. I thought he was called Painful Lessons, though I might have been wrong. The Cold Roars had respectfully stood aside, letting Master Winter and the Elnnti take control after this shifted from ‘pleasure hunt’ to something more serious.

“The first is that spying on mortals is a very different game from spying on gods, just in a logistical sense. They might have been able to observe that a hunting party of gods was making its way in this direction—again, they are *highly* intelligent. But this ambush would take time to plan and set up. Without access to resources they do not have, they would have had to set this up before we ever left The House of the Nine Hearths of Emerald and Silver. And that’s ignoring the alchemicals they used.”

Painful Lessons was a handsome man, outside of the ashen crust across his face that made him look both wounded and dirty at the same time.

“That’s the second problem. While the weapons are suspicious, they might have just found a First Age cache. No, the damning detail is that they used three different *rare* consumables here. A potion that lets mortals see immaterial gods.

One that lets mortals touch us. And the final one that infects its user with a contagious curse—a nasty thing designed to make wounds take longer to heal, but it can sometimes stop a god from returning from death.”

Master Winter took over then. “The alchemicals they had access to are completely implausible. Even if this group of Hushed Ones *had* delved into Thaumaturgy—something that to our knowledge has only happened thrice—the resources needed to make enough of the alchemicals to outfit the entire group that ambushed us are entirely out of practical reach. Only the cursed moxibustion treatment has any shelf-longevity, and sourcing all of the reagents for making these... We Ennead would find it expensive to source all the way out here. Maybe in the East, or the Blessed Isle, but out here sourcing this much would be punishing for a nation. If the Hushed Ones had that many resources, they wouldn’t be hiding on the periphery. They would be conquering the north by force.”

The Elnnti War God nodded in thanks to Master Winter before he continued. “But that’s not the most damning detail. The armor they had. That was made from the robes of slain Immaculate Monks. The Hushed Ones are dangerous, but we would know if they had slain three full circles of the Sidereals’ hunting dogs. More importantly, we do know of a major Immaculate contingent that was recently slain.”

“It’s how we knew of the Ünôlpûr Aithanar incursion,” Master Winter stated. “The monks drove them off the surface, but didn’t understand how much stronger they grow when standing somewhere the sun hasn’t shone for a hundred years. The last reports they sent back described them chasing the forbidden gods into the depths, after which all communications were lost. Robes from slain monks are the only logical source material for the armor the Hushed Ones were using.”

“This has changed from a surprise attack on a group of unprepared forbidden gods into one upon a group of them who not only are ready for us, but have begun a harassment campaign to whittle us down, and almost certainly will be entrenched by the time we arrive,” Painful Lessons said. “Thoughts?”

“Should we even be continuing?” Zivzizov asked. “Our forces were enough for a decisive conflict with the Turrets of the Ice Blossom, but only if they haven’t received further support. They have a strong relationship with the Guild, and while it would be unusual, it’s not unthinkable for them to hire mercenaries—that

could take the form of Raksha mercenaries, mortal sorcerers, martial artists. There's a major company of ghosts wearing necrotech war engines that have been making a name for themselves in the area, and I know they hire out to the Guild."

"Hmm," Sleet Wind rumbled, "We shouldn't just think of mortal resources. We shouldn't just count the ones paid for by mortal coin. The Jet Court could get involved."

Master Winter made a sour face. "While I hold nothing but disdain for Princess Kyema, I don't think she would involve herself with the Únôlpûr Aithanar. She hasn't stayed on top of the Jet Court for centuries by exposing her back to knives. Since we were going after Turrets of the Ice Blossom, it makes sense for Ellith to be willing to ally with the Únôlpûr Aithanar. But Kyema has something to lose and nothing to gain."

Sleet Wind nodded his massive head and sank back down, deferring to the local expert.

"The specifics might be wrong, but the overall point is valid," Zivzizov sang. "The Guild is only the most obvious thread they could have pulled on. Raksha are highly social creatures. Connections are more real to them than matter."

At some point I had balled my hands into fists so hard my fingernails had started biting into my palms. The Raksha were so disgusting. They should all die. The point was right though. There wasn't a reason for us to keep pursuing this—not the Court of Seasons. We were already doing the Ennead a favor as I understood it. Doing them two favors, including one as risky as this?

No. Still, when I was about to interject something to that effect, Master Winter's voice echoed in my ear, carried there by some hidden magic.

Hold for now, and you will benefit.

I settled down. He had better follow through, because I was done playing along for no reason.

"The Guild simply wouldn't have had time to move mercenaries around, not in great numbers," Master Winter interjected. "Nor could the Únôlpûr Aithanar be too open. Any merchant that knowingly trades with them is unlikely to ever receive a Road God's blessing again. No merchant could afford that. They poured so many resources into the Hushed Ones ambush because it was their best chance."

Master Winter gestured at me. “Young Nathan here is both an important and seemingly vulnerable god. If anything happened to him, there’s no way we could have continued on. We would be dealing with Censors, at the very least. They didn’t prioritize maximizing damage with their attack—if they had attacked a few seconds earlier, they would have caught us in a worse position. But they waited until they could get a strong ambush on Nathan specifically. That was their move. They didn’t have time to prepare something better.”

A god I wasn’t familiar with spoke up then. Raven headed, with arms that bifurcated at the elbows, and dressed in scholar’s robes. “While they might have warned Turrets of the Ice Blossom, the Raksha are no more friendly to forbidden gods than they are to any of the rest of us. Maybe less. I wouldn’t be surprised if they haven’t already raided Ellith to steal thralls from her. The Únôlpûr Aithanar have a never ending hunger for slaves for the Undercity. They’re competitors.”

That started a round of debates as different speakers brought up possible threats, only for other gods to object. I wasn’t knowledgeable enough to say what was and wasn’t reasonable.

All of that hardly laid my core objection to rest. I held my tongue. For now.

That said, it seemed to be enough to deflect the bulk of the objections. While not everyone seemed thrilled to continue, there didn’t seem to be a big push to retreat among the gathered gods. I wondered if hunting the Únôlpûr Aithanar wasn’t a reason many gods had joined this Court of Seasons. I was starting to realize that for a Court mostly known for its extravagant festivals... we had set up in Ascending Water in the far north. A place that had few grand celebrations. And also that there were a *number* of war gods making up the contingent of the hunting party.

I wondered if we were being used to, well, launder the presence of so many gods whose gathering would normally be seen as problematic. Or maybe something else. I didn’t know enough to know what I didn’t know.

“I am here to convince you to go along with continuing the hunt.”

We were sitting in the room that I had claimed. Fönn and Zivzizov had cleared out—I was expecting them to approach me soon to make whatever relationship they were seeking formal—so it was just Master Winter and me.

“I hope you understand why that’s unlikely. From my perspective this whole

hunt isn't just looking dubious now, but like it was dubious from the start. Was it ever the Cold Roars' idea?"

He snorted lightly. "So you noticed?"

I shrugged. "I think everyone has by this point."

He shook his head. "They do hunts every year when it's their turn to head the court. We... the Ennead and the Elnnti... had always planned to use this to move forces across Creation. It let us gather significantly more forces here than we could have normally gotten away with. That said, most of the gods on this hunt are genuine celebrants."

I raised an eyebrow, and he spread his hands. "It's true. We weren't originally going to go after the Únôlpûr Aithanar until Resplendent Water—it wasn't that hard for our mercenaries to find excuses to hang around for a month. Most were going to delay returning home to visit friends, or play tourist. There were any number of reasonable excuses they could invent." He lightly rapped his knuckles on the table. "We didn't need them to stay very long."

"So why isn't that what happened?"

"You know why. The Cold Roars decided to bring you on a hunt, and suddenly every god who thinks they can hold a spear wants to join up. It was going to be very expensive paying for all the mercenaries we would need. The Elnnti alone are costing..." he shook his head. "We aren't a rich pantheon. Borrowing the might of the Court of Seasons made everything simpler."

So he had made this trip—one that I already hadn't wanted to be a part of—more dangerous for me, and then was going to leverage it to extract favors from me?

"That circles back to why I would go along with this? This feels like a lot of risk that I would be taking to help you, when as far as I can tell you're already in debt to the Calendar Court. I'll be honest and admit that I don't really like the fact that you set me up to be targeted here. From my perspective part of the point of my being placed where I was, was to ease my debut into divine society. One that's been partly ruined by your little conspiracy."

"Because we'll pay you."

I raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't know a good deal from a bad one, and after all this plotting I'm not going to take your word on it."

He frowned, then shrugged. "Fair. You want a negotiator. Who?"

I pondered for a moment. "Gale's Echo is the only friend whose motivation I know, and who's actually here."

He seemed thoughtful, but shook his head. "She's not been part of any high level politics. I could easily manipulate her into taking a terrible deal, and she would never know it. That's just setting us up to have a problem in the future. They don't have to be local, we have the magic to contact someone more distant, if it's for a major deal like this. Do you have anyone else you trust?"

I frowned, thinking. Maybe The Three? I didn't really trust them, but they wouldn't want to dilute the prestige of the Court of Seasons by letting outsiders leverage our reputation for cheap. Actually, maybe I should call on The Whisperer? Hadn't his support been bought? I was about to suggest him, when I noticed... Light? Darkness?

The deepest, darkest blues and purples. Light that was blocking light, as my room grew darker and darker. The ground started bleeding little drops of silver that fell upwards. It was like deep waters. Faint at first, but it quickly grew thicker. Silver formed a film, a surface. We were under a lake. I was drowning.

No. No I wasn't. I was breathing air. I had to force myself to remember I was breathing air.

"I'll do it."

Far above, the lake's surface shattered, and then there was something massive and dark that swam through still waters. I fought not to shiver. The water was cold and still. *There is no water.* The mental chant only helped so much, and I started to shiver.

"I was only gone for a *day*. I had to check some things out, see."

Master Winter's eyes were wide.

"Things weren't adding up in two directions. I suppose your little stunt answered one of them."

Vevin strolled out of the darkness, her thick tail lashing back and forth, a circle of silver filled with darkness burning like the blackest night upon her brow.

"Hello Master Winter. I know we just spoke a day ago, but allow me to reintroduce

myself.”

She smiled, and I realized that Fönn’s grin was that of an amateur. I wasn’t entirely sure how that many needle-like teeth fit in a human-sized mouth.

“Light... Lightless Darvne.” He swallowed. “I greet the Moon Sage.”

CHAPTER 10

Under Pressure

August 11, 2026

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

I wanted to say something like *Vevin?*, ask her *What's going on*. I didn't. I wasn't an idiot. She wasn't the god I thought she was. A moon god of some kind? I knew Luna was one of the Incarna. Black. The dark of the moon. Why did her presence feel like being at the bottom of a lake? I looked up and saw its surface far above.

The room wasn't that big.

But the nice thing about everyone knowing you're ignorant is that you just get to ask without embarrassment.

"Moon Sage?"

Her smile brightened a little, into something that wasn't quite so predatory.

"Ah, yes." Her accent was different. Somehow more erudite, though I wasn't sure how I could tell. It just *felt* like it was more clipped, more vowels being properly pronounced, and somehow prettier. "I am, as they call us, one of the Anathema, and not a god. I hadn't yet gotten to the part of your education where I would have covered that. We are Exalted—like the Dragon-Blooded, but more so."

"I... I am just going along with the plan the Twisted Stone Conclave set out," Master Winter defended himself. "I won't deny that I've taken a couple liberties, but part of planning things out is seeing..."

"I'm perfectly sure you did exactly what the Conclave intended," she cut him off, as she began circling the room. The... light? darkness...? it swirled around her like living water. Everywhere else it was still and heavy, and the lake surface above pressed down. Again, I had to struggle to remember that I could.

"I should note that," she began, her voice dropping lower, "while I'm here at their behest, we are not allies." Her voice had taken on a watery, almost serpentine sound. "I would more properly label them as my political enemies. And it seems the favor they actually sought was not the favor they *asked*."

"I..." Master Winter seemed to be thinking over his words. "...am not a party to the infighting within the Silver Pact. I do not know what favor they asked of you, but I

assure you I haven't worked against you."

"Oh," she said brightly. "It was the obvious one, which is why I didn't question it. 'Who is this new god of the Court of Seasons?' After all, the Court is associated with the Bronze Faction, and the Bronze Faction is an enemy of all Lunars."

I was sure he understood the implication, because he suddenly looked less scared and more sour. Like he understood how he had been used, his lips thinning.

"I'll again assure you that I didn't know you were here, or that young Nathan here was your student."

"Which is why you're alive. I've *killed* my elders for playing games with my students."

He seemed to have found his spine, because he met her gaze then. Clearly, he had decided she wasn't going to kill him.

"The Twisted Stone Conclave had expressed a disinterest in Nathan to me, and I had no reason to doubt it. They did not inform me that they had arranged to insert you to spy on him. I suppose it's obvious now what they were after, but I take no responsibility for it. We are allied with the Twisted Stone Conclave, we are not their servants."

She stopped her circling equidistant between Master Winter and me, and grabbed...

Grabbed a chair out of midair and plopped it down backwards, before falling heavily onto it. She crossed her arms on the backrest, and let her head rest on them. "Yes. They intend to use me against the Únôlpûr Aithanar. They aren't willing to risk their own. They obviously had some grasp on Nathan's character. I would not just pretend to be a teacher to such a young lamb. And that—after taking the role of teacher to get close to him—I would be unlikely to abandon it. I'm infamous, after all, for how defensive I am about my students."

I wanted to protest that I wasn't a lamb, but then... didn't I almost just get led to my slaughter?

"They *will* pay for using me this way, but they aren't wrong."

Master Winter nodded. "That's understandable. I would not forgive being used against the servants of Fides-Dumuzid so casually."

“Fides-Dumuzid has been seen on the surface.”

Who was Fides-Dumuzid? Someone connected to Ünôlpûr Aithanar, presumably. But why was he a big deal?

Master Winter stilled. “Ah. That is... brazen.”

“I suspect the Twisted Stone Conclave doesn’t *think* they’ll have to pay me at the end of this. They’re wrong. Even if I do die against him so that my shard can go to someone more *worthy*, they’ll still pay. I have made certain of that. But enough of that. We are speaking of how you will bribe my student to continue on this fool’s errand.”

He paused as if thinking, “I admit I had assumed you were going to talk your student out of it.”

The dark-light started fading then, a gradual lessening of intensity.

She shook her head. “No, I’m going to bribe him as well. If he leaves, half these hunters will leave with him, and I can’t magic up enough of an army on short notice. Fides-Dumuzid *has been seen on the surface*. If the Sidereals did their job the Wyld Hunt would be here instead of running down some poor kid in Great Forks who lit up a week ago. Cecelyne’s teats, the Aerial Legion should be here. It *will* be, if he actually does something notable like kill those idiot brothers.”

Master Winter did wince then. “Please don’t get them killed. The rest of the Court of Seasons would hold it against us, and our legal situation...”

“That’s not really my problem, now is it.”

He quieted then. Then, “What do you need?”

“Nathan’s now a major god of the Haslanti.”

“Done.”

“He doesn’t yet have a Sanctum. The Ennead will front the resources and manpower to build it. Alternatively, if his domain ends up manifesting one, you will support one major initiative of his within Yu-Shan.”

He winced a little. “You know our current problems there.”

She just raised an eyebrow.

“Very well,” he surrendered.

“Finally, Autumn Frost will act as keeper or guardian to anything Nathan entrusts to the Ennead for one hundred years.”

This last one seemed to intrigue Master Winter, but he just said, “There must be limits.”

She nodded. “A Kap. Autumn Frost doesn’t have to drop everything when he calls, but must make reasonable accommodations to do this. We’ll use Deus’s Code of Conduct to define what counts as reasonable accommodation.”

“Fine.” He nodded. “I’ll show myself out.”

I waited until he left the room before starting.

“Please explain. You’re acting like you’re on my side here, but you just admitted that you’re using me yourself. Why should I trust you now? Also, why those three favors?”

She sighed, and her teeth had gone back to normal, though her tail was still there. I couldn’t decide if it was fish-like, or serpent-like, but it bounced in time with her leg.

“Explaining the Anathema and all the politics and history around it would be... I’ll get to that if I survive the coming conflict.”

“As for the three favors?” She continued, “The other fifteen months of the Court of Seasons all have independent power bases and worshipers—they are primarily gods of the Calendar Court, but they have other resources to draw upon and personal courts to leverage. You do not, and your ‘month’ is uniquely ill-suited. You would have eventually made arrangements, but it probably would have involved dealing with complications that you don’t need.”

I thought about it. That seemed to track.

“Likewise,” she continued, “you really do need a Sanctum. You might have a special kind of fallback through your Mantle, but it has a number of issues,” *it really did*, “and a Sanctum is simply *useful* for a god. It also takes a lot of time and resources.”

“The Ennead are an interesting Pantheon. I’ve only gotten into the shallow end of telling you about how gods work, but they’re not a Terrestrial Court. Nor are they a Celestial one. They are a mixed group of Terrestrial and Celestial gods who have essentially banded together to jointly pursue their interests as a way of going

around the bureaucracy of Yu-Shan. Their Joint Sanctum—The House of the Nine Hearths of Emerald and Silver—is in a gray zone. But it probably would not be found legal if anyone got sufficiently interested.”

“So... they’re politically weak in Yu-Shan.”

"Yes." She smiled as if she'd scored a major point. "Why is that useful?"

“Ah.” Why would that be useful? Their favor couldn’t be worth much, and calling it in would make for some bad blood. “Oh. It’s blackmail.”

“Leverage,” she corrected. “They’ll work hard to find something you want more, so that you’ll give it up.”

That... probably would make for some bad blood later, but after this stunt I didn’t really care.

“And the last?”

“If you ever are killed and must use your own path of reincarnation, you’re liable to lose every physical item you’ve acquired. While someone old like me has ways of hiding things away, you’re too young. Autumn Frost is no Madame Marthesine, but Madame Marthesine would charge too much for the service. Hmm. A Kap is a unit for the possessions of the average mortal household—it uses volume and mass. Though it was set during the height of the first age, a Kap is actually a reasonably large unit of storage.”

I nodded. Every concession sounded valuable. Not ‘risk my life’ valuable, but I couldn’t deny that her asks for me sounded thoughtful.

“As for why you should trust me... do you want to hear about me, or about Fides-Dumuzid?”

Which would make me more inclined to listen to her? Fides-Dumuzid was obviously going to be someone terrible. Whoever he was would be fodder to justify and excuse doing terrible things, or extreme things, to excuse *doing what needs to be done*.

I didn’t want to hear about him first. And she hadn’t manipulated me and inserted herself into my life at the start because of Fides-Dumuzid. She had done it as a favor to this Conclave.

“Tell me about yourself.”

She nodded.

“Your areas of ignorance fascinate me. I’m almost sure you must come from some holdout colony that was set up in the first age—someplace outside Creation entirely that a paranoid old Solar created in case Creation itself fell. There really is no other explanation for someone as obviously educated as you to have such massive areas of ignorance. That said, I will give you a high level overview, because many of the topics border other topics that would require weeks to just give a surface understanding of.”

“I was Exalted, became one of the Chosen of the Moon, not long after the Usurpation. The Moonsilver Tattoos—” and for a moment, patterns of silver covered her “—that define our current social order didn’t exist yet—wouldn’t become common for another twenty years. I was born into an age of decline, where every year was marginally worse than the one before, and while the Shogunate was performing an endless series of purges on anything that might even hint at Solar influence. Often, that was other parts of the Shogunate, as the whole edifice cannibalized itself in its quest for purity.”

Her eyes were distant as the room continued to move back towards normal.

“I won’t speak much of my early years. I became a sorceress before I became an Exalted, and I have always defined myself by my sorcery. I suspect the Silver Pact would have made me a Changing Moon if I wasn’t so obviously a sorcerer first and foremost. I butted heads enough with my mentors, didn’t have the approved mindset. But they also worked harder to pretend that Sorcery belonged to the No Moons alone in those days. Such efforts failed, of course. Salina’s gift saved us from such machinations. I would have been a terrible Changing Moon, but many Changing Moons are terrible Changing Moons.”

“I suppose my fundamental disagreement with them peaked during the Contagion and the Balorian Crusade. By then I was well established, and had years to see how their ‘controlled’ descent worked, their efforts to build a society that ‘didn’t depend’ on sorcery and the help of gods and Exalts. Those societies all died when the Crusade reached them, if they weren’t already dead of plague. Not just directly—starvation and malnutrition, banditry, loss of trade, and a thousand other infrastructural dooms took as many as fell to the actual plague. The same continues to torment the Wyld barbarians, some of my compatriots champion. Even groups like the Haslanti are two bad winters away from falling, and they

could never defend themselves from a major Fair Folk invasion.”

“Hmm... but I’m speaking of politics you don’t have the context for. Let us just say that there is a simple answer for how to build a society that does not depend on the Exalted. That no one else champions it among the Lunars, when so many of us claim to be working to build a society that does not need us... That tells you everything. Salina remains right, even if her approach had the flaws so many Solars were defined by.”

“What you should understand is that I have spent the last seven and a half centuries spreading knowledge. I have probably taught sorcery to more mortals, gods, elementals, and even Dragon Kings than anyone else in Creation. I’ve also taught Martial Arts, Thaumaturgy, and more. I would say I’ve done as much or more to slow the growth of the Realm than many of my peers who brag about it, and little of that came from me fighting them directly.”

“So you’re against the Realm?” I asked. “I keep getting mixed messages about them?”

“That’s what you focus on, my relationship with the Realm?” She made a sour face. “It’s complex. Less so than many of my peers. Without the Scarlet Empress, Creation might have genuinely fallen, and while they have destroyed a lot of history, they have also preserved knowledge in many places where it otherwise would have been lost.”

“But I do oppose them, yes. Though the reason I oppose them and the reason many of your peers dislike them don’t match up. The same is true of my own peerage. My reasons are my own.”

“So... you’re a famous sorcery teacher then?”

“Sorcery, whenever I can, yes. Also necromancy, though I find that less useful. Martial Arts. Thaumaturgy, when I didn’t have time or opportunity to teach better. Economics. International relations—I’ve taught a number of mortal princes over the years. Not to be immodest, but I’m probably the most famous Lunar teacher in Creation.”

She paused, then. “Not the best, but I have no respect for *him*.” She rolled her hand dismissively. “He might teach you, but only to extract favors from you later, and he only properly teaches other Lunars.”

“And so I should trust you because you’re a great teacher?” That wasn’t a good

reason, and we both knew it.

“No. I’m going to use you here, and I got close to you to use you. You also don’t know enough to really trust anyone. I will say that I wouldn’t betray you here because it would be bad for my reputation. Pretty much the only good reputation I have is as a teacher. Since I have revealed myself as your teacher, I wouldn’t undermine that now. But you don’t have the context to trust that.”

“Why did you decide to teach me, anyways?”

“I wasn’t going to. Not really,” she shamelessly admitted. “The Twisted Stone Conclave claimed they couldn’t put someone close to you because there were too many eyes watching them. So they would make sure everyone knew where they were while I would show up and investigate you in return for future favors. I was just going to spend a couple days investigating you, but... Well, frankly, you remind me entirely too much of many of the young Lunars I have mentored over the years. Once I pretended... I wasn’t going to teach you poorly. And once I taught you seriously... It’s against my nature to watch you sink.”

“But no, you shouldn’t trust me. No one would sacrifice an ancient reputation over something petty, but there are those who would sacrifice their legacy to destroy an evil as old as Fides-Dumuzid. You would be wise to not trust me here. More than that, I may genuinely die, which is probably why the Conclave arranged for me to get involved in the first place.” Her face was calm and her tone even, but there was a bite to her words as she snorted. “Just another knife at my back.”

“Fides-Dumuzid, the forbidden. Fides-Dumuzid, the loyal son. Fides-Dumuzid, the keeper of the gates. The Steward. Loyal servant to his exiled masters. After the Primordial War, it was unthinkable that he would be suffered to hide. After all, who could feel safe while he yet lived? Wouldn’t he always be a blade hanging above the heads of the gods? Yet they grew used to the blade. Found ways to dull it, to cut him off from his domain more and more.”

“Fides-Dumuzid, who took a minor breed of darkbrood gods and made them the Ünôlpûr Aithanar. Fides-Dumuzid, the first City Father.”

“Fides-Dumuzid. The God of Yu-Shan itself.”

CHAPTER 11

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.”

CHAPTER 12

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.”

CHAPTER 13

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.”

CHAPTER 14

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?"

CHAPTER 15

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.