**Annotation**

In a realm where gods tread amidst the whispers of the earth and the sighs of the wind, the semi-forgotten goddess Lu found herself at a precipice. Her last sanctuary, a haven of faith and devotion, had crumbled to the sands of neglect. In her desperation, Lu turned to the Pantheon of Elder Gods, those timeless entities whose whispers moved mountains and whose silence could still the oceans. She brokered a deal, a gamble of divine proportions: they would summon forth a great Hero, a beacon of hope and valor, to aid her in rekindling the faith of mortals. This Hero would seek out a new priest, restore her divine might, and with it, the reverence she once commanded. The stakes were as high as the heavens themselves: five years to accomplish this feat, or face obliteration by the very gods she sought aid from, her immortal essence to be scattered to the cosmic winds.

The spell of summoning was cast by the Primordial Mother, her words weaving through the fabric of reality like threads of fate. And thus, in service to the goddess Lu, instead of a warrior of legends or a mage of untold power, there arrived... a 26-year-old accountant from Moscow.

**The Last Priest of Goddess Lu**

**Prologue: The Summoning**

Lu stood in the middle of the vast hall of spells of the Lesser Circle of the Pantheon of Gods, awaiting a decision on her request. Desperation had driven her here after her last temple was destroyed, and the old priest was thrown out onto the streets by the baron's guards. They claimed they needed the building for stables or perhaps a barn. Iliy, in this part of his tales, always got mixed up and would eventually freeze in terror, like a field mouse at the sight of a predator. Yes, the old man couldn't protect her last temple, and the guards arrived just when she was wandering the surroundings, trying to convert anyone to her faith and couldn't assist the priest.

More than five hundred years had passed since she became a goddess of the Lesser Pantheon. During this time, Lu failed to amass a large flock and establish herself in people's hearts.

An epidemic gave birth to the goddess, a monstrous plague that nearly wiped out the densely populated central lands of the Gongorian Kingdom. Afterwards, it spread westward to the sea and the coast of the Tokon Empire and eastward, reaping a vast harvest in the coastal territories of Kleria, Lamia, and the Brenn Republic. It even touched the ever-secluded Lamhitan at the southeastern tip of the continent.

Human suffering gave birth to Lu. As people believed, she was the goddess of sorrow, disease, and plague. However, Lu had no connection to diseases and deaths; she was a goddess of consolation for the suffering, parents who lost children, orphans, and widows. Her first priests, to whom the newborn goddess appeared, tried to convince others, built temples for her, and made sacrifices. But the first priests grew old and died, and the memory of Lu as the goddess of plague remained.

This misconception led the young, by divine standards, petitioner to the hall of spells of the Lesser Pantheon, which she barely broke into with fragments of her strength. Usually, disputes between younger gods were settled here, sometimes with force, but today was different.

Now, Lu awaited a decision from the gods of the Elder Circle on her request, which she audaciously submitted as soon as she arrived in the Pantheon. There they were, all seven of them, silently deliberating while she, Lu, humiliatingly stood in the center, catching their every move.

The young goddess didn't want to die. The process of fading due to oblivion is long and painful: she already felt weakened due to the destruction of her last altar, and the endless prayers of the single old priest couldn't nourish her divine essence. And it would only get worse. She needed new priests to try and start over. But she neither had the strength to appear to humans nor a suitable priest at hand to convert to her faith. The painful process of fading could stretch for hundreds of years until she truly becomes an evil spirit. Then the priests of the Warrior or Reaper would take over.

"Alright... Spirit," said the Mother, looking somewhere behind Lu rather than at her. The goddess flinched at such neglect from the Elder Gods—without priests and temples, the three Primordials wouldn't even recognize her as a minor god, relegating her to the role of an incorporeal spirit, like a house spirit or a field wind master. "We've heard your request, but the Elder Gods don't grant favors for free. What can you offer us in return?"

Lu was at a loss. She had no temples, flock, or priests to offer to the Mother or the other two Primordials. Just as she was about to speak, the Mother gracefully raised her hand, signaling Lu to be silent, then continued:

"No one can say that I, Geora, am not generous and compassionate to younger gods. Neither here in the Pantheon nor there on earth. So, I offer you a trial. We will summon a Hero for you, whose deeds will help you gather strength to initiate a new First Priest and start over. But it will be hard work. You have five years; otherwise, you'll be completely stripped of your divine essence as soon as the term expires. Do you agree?"

"A hero?" Lu asked, ignoring the terms of the deal. "Which hero?"

"I don't know," the Mother shrugged, "A hero who will respond to a call from one like you, wherever they might be."

Lu paused for a moment. A hero. Many brave men praised the Warrior or the Mother, while wealthy merchants openly glorified the generous Kerma—the fifth Elder God, the patron of trade and travelers. A hero who could defeat several armies or save some baroness or even a princess from the clutches of evil spirits or monsters could be useful to her.

A majestic warrior who would glorify the name of Lu in the human world, allowing her through prayers and mentions to gather enough strength to initiate a new Priest.

A splendid warrior who would receive plenty of gifts and seize enough trophies for Lu to finally have her own white-stone temple in a major city.

The prospect of her own temple in one of the capitals, ruled by her Hero in just a year, took Lu's breath away. Why not? Minor gods can also have luxuries; look at the temples, chapels, and altars of the patron of messengers and couriers, swift-footed Key, which stand in every capital of the continent and many large cities near palaces and city halls.

"Yes, of course I agree! I can handle the Hero, oh Mother Geora!" Lu quickly and boldly replied to the elder goddess.

The Mother softly smiled at the goddess, then silently made a wide gesture, as if scattering seeds. The floor of the circular hall was covered with the viscous spell of summoning, the power and complexity of which made Lu's eyes widen. After Mother Geora, her firstborn sons, Warrior Pal and Reaper For, waved their hands, infusing the construct with their divine power.

"Remember, spirit," the Mother remained as beautiful and kind, "You have five years for the initiation of a new priest and the construction of a temple. You will be denied entry to the Pantheon during this time. You will be bound to your Hero. To assist him, you will be in human form, but don't get carried away; no human should know who you truly are."

These additional terms, after she had already agreed to the summoning, should have alarmed Lu. But her thoughts were far away, dreaming of her own altars and chapels in the densely populated capitals of Sharin Principality or Nels Crown.

"And most importantly, you will be stripped of your divinity, reduced to the level of a human, although you can share magical power with your Hero. That is, if you're skilled and strong enough. And once again — five years."

The gravity of the situation began to dawn on Lu, but before the young goddess could object, the Mother swiftly raised the hand she had used to cast the spell net and clenched it into a fist before her.

A flash. For a moment, the hall of the lesser circle was illuminated with pure white light, and right in front of Lu, the figure of the Hero appeared. Then, both were cast down from the Pantheon. Into the world of humans.

**Chapter 1. It seems I've landed in trouble**

How does the life of a sales manager in one of the small communication salons on the outskirts of Moscow go? Don't know?

Let me tell you.

Waking up at 6:00, a lazy tooth brushing, a cup of instant coffee with a sandwich, searching for a clean or relatively clean shirt, and by 7:03, I'm hopping onto minibus #104k, which carries my weary body from Balashikha to Shosse Entuziastov metro station. The journey takes about forty minutes, traffic jams notwithstanding.

Being a manager and shift supervisor, I not only have to arrive at least half an hour before opening but also always have a time buffer, in case I get caught in a jam at Entuziastov. So I show up almost an hour before our salon opens. Then a twelve-hour shift, closing the cash register, checking the hall, locking the salon, setting the alarm, and heading home. After nine, minibus #104k doesn't run anymore, so I catch whatever comes to the stop first that's heading in my direction. In reality, there's a good choice.

By ten, I'm home, settling in front of my laptop, and, with a beer can for dinner, I turn on some series. This routine repeats in a two-on-two-off schedule and has been going on for three years. On weekends, I mostly stay in my room, ignoring the grumbles of my elderly landlord, Valentina Petrovna, who believes my laptop will explode her meter and send both of us to another world. She conveniently forgets about her nearly always-on 42-inch TV, gifted by her children and grandchildren. Especially since her grandson, who she thinks is studying engineering but is actually in a low-grade college, said the TV uses little electricity. On the other hand, he didn't say anything like that about laptops, so my device is consistently blamed for the power overuse in this household.

My arguments that my laptop consumes much less than her TV, which broadcasts trash from federal channels from dawn to dusk, fall on deaf ears with Valentina Petrovna. Because I didn't study engineering, I studied accounting.

Yes, when I was transitioning to my senior class and the question arose about which institute I would enter, my mother decisively declared that I, like her, should follow the path of accountants. In many ways, my mother was right. I had a fairly calm temperament, sometimes almost Nordic. I liked numbers and had an idea of what accounting was from my mother's endless work stories and her phone calls with friends. For a moment, a worm of doubt stirred in me, suggesting maybe I should study programming or another promising field. To this, my mother firmly stated: "Anton! Everyone has to do taxes!". The final nail in the coffin of my personal professional ambitions was the mention that I'd probably be the only guy in a class of thirty.

Of course, there was no wild student life.

Yes, there were parties and other celebrations, many even on the edge of decency, but serious relationships with metropolitan girls were out of the question. Who would want a simple guy from Kaluga when their father drops them off at the institute in a BMW? The simpler girls, from smaller cities or further provinces, who I might have had a chance with, quickly adapted to the capital's rules and also became inaccessible to me. So, my studies passed unnoticed, and I entered full adult life a bachelor, without a job, housing, prospects, but with an accounting degree.

My job search in my field, which I began in my third year, was unsuccessful. Most wanted seasoned professionals at the chief accountant level, like my mother. For junior accountant or assistant positions, girls fresh from six-month intensive courses were preferred over students like me. So I managed to get a half-time job in a grocery store as a merchandiser, and after graduation, my dazzling career continued in this cell phone salon at the Shosse Entuziastov metro station.

My mother called me back to Kaluga, under her wing. At home, through her numerous acquaintances and friends, she could at least get me a junior accountant position at one of the factories or in some firm. But the mere thought of returning to the home of this domineering and cold woman made me nauseous. So, pretending to be very busy, I fended off my mother and settled in the non-rubber (Moscow). Here I am, peddling smartphones, applying protective screens, and signing up new subscribers.

Today was the second working day, meaning I had two days of procrastination and series watching ahead. A thought stirred in my head that I should go for a couple of interviews: a manager's salary wasn't enough. Next month we'll get bonuses for good New Year's sales, but after that, the feast will end, and the ruble's stability wasn't promising. I planned to buy a new laptop and maybe start saving for a vacation in Turkey or Thailand. The previous two years, I "celebrated" sitting in my room amidst Valentina Petrovna's random grumbling, so I didn't want to repeat this experience.

Decided! Today, beer and series, tomorrow I'll see, and the day after I must definitely visit a couple of places. If not for an extra job, maybe I'll find some side gig to improve my financial situation.

With these thoughts, I loaded my clothes into my backpack—I'll go in my work uniform and wash them there—changed my shiny shoes to sturdy demi-season boots, and headed to the bus stop. Almost an hour on the road and here I am, getting off at my unique stop named "Pharmacy." The good thing: right opposite is a "Pyaterochka" store.

I spent a bit more time in the store than I'd have liked. I picked up a whole chicken—to roast the fillet and make soup from the rest, a loaf of bread, milk, a couple of yogurts, some simple doctor's sausage for morning sandwiches. Valentina Petrovna slept lightly and always got annoyed if I made noise with the dishes. On the other hand, having a couple of sandwiches for breakfast suited me. I arranged a full lunch at work, sitting in the storeroom. We had a kettle, a microwave, and even a semblance of a table.

Strictly speaking, I was very lucky with this storeroom. I don't know how employees in malls and other "transit" places survive without food, where every centimeter of rent costs a fortune and companies save on space as much as possible. We were less constrained in this regard, so the whole shift, which was me and two other sales consultants, took turns having lunch in the small room behind the cashier.

In the same "Pyaterochka," I grabbed a one-and-a-half-liter beer and a couple of packs of peanuts on sale. I think I had chips at home, but if not, I'd just make a sandwich. Stowing part of the purchases on top of my clothes in my backpack and the rest in a bag, I briskly headed towards my dwelling. It was just a five-minute walk to Valentina Petrovna's apartment.

As I was crossing the yard, I saw a car approaching me. Blinding light hit my eyes: the driver was an idiot who either had his headlights aimed too high or turned on the high beam. The fool. Shielding my eyes from the bright cold light of xenon lamps, I covered them with my hand and felt a sudden collision.

Judging by the short shriek and slight resistance during the collision, it was a girl. When did she get here? Was she not there a moment ago? Or did she just pop out of the nearest entrance and threw herself under my feet?

I've never understood this. I'm no Andre the Giant, but I'm also not a dwarf. I'm of average build and weight, which means I'm heavier than most modern women. But with enviable regularity, I have to either dodge an oncoming young lady or apologize for almost knocking her over, even though they throw themselves in my path. Just like now.

The idiot with the bright headlights had already left the yard, so I no longer felt the blinding light. I began my usual "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to," but when I lowered my hand, my apologies got stuck in my throat.

"Oops..." That's all I managed to say from my go-to phrase, which, to be honest, didn't make me look very brave in the current situation.

And I could have used some bravery.

To start with, the car, the path in the yard, the surrounding houses, and even Balashikha itself had vanished. Simply disappeared. I was standing on the edge of some kind of forest park, literally in an open field.

The girl, however, was there, and she wasn't alone. Right behind her was an old homeless-looking man, a clear alcoholic. Such characters either glumly watched supermarket customers or, trying to fend off the impending intoxication, which their soaked bodies couldn't handle, asked random passersby to "help them with their cultural event, for which they were short just fifty rubles." The amount varied, depending on the audacity of the bum and the proximity of sobriety. They could ask for ten rubles or a hundred. Once, for a bottle I was supposed to buy for them in the liquor section, they offered to sing a couple of songs. In chorus and with feeling. It's scary to think what kind of concert they could've staged right outside the store for half a liter.

Taking my eyes off the old drunk, I looked at the girl, trying to figure out what she was doing next to this degenerate.

And there was a lot to see.

The girl was short, barely above my shoulder, with fine, delicate facial features, dark hair below the shoulders, and violet contact lenses—so bright that I noticed them even in the surrounding twilight. She looked like a freshman, or at most a sophomore. Although she could still be in her final school year—kids are growing up so fast these days, you can never be sure.

The fact that she wasn't an eighth-grader was evident from her eyes. Younger girls have a more vacant, meaningless look. Now, I was being looked at by a nearly adult female representative of the Homo Sapiens species. But the strangest thing wasn't the colored contact lenses, but the highly specific outfit, which told me she was either an anime fan in cosplay or a regular at role-playing events.

She wore a coarse, dark-grey blouse with wide sleeves and tassels up to the neck, and a leather corset wrapped around her slender waist just below the bust. Over it, she had draped a wide, dark cloak, and from behind her shoulder peeked out the hilt of what seemed, in my estimation, to be a short sword. She wore relatively loose leather pants with straps on the outer thigh for adjustment, and for footwear, she had soft, shapeless boots. I could deduce their formlessness since my foot was currently pressing down on one of them, squishing the toes of the stranger.

I carefully removed my foot and took another look at the girl, who silently pierced me with her violet eyes.

At this moment, I realized that this wasn't just some ordinary situation. Everything around me, the setting, the strange man, and especially the girl, seemed like something out of a fantasy novel or a game. My heart rate increased, and I tried to calm myself down, thinking of a way to approach the situation.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "I'm really sorry about that. But... where are we? And who are you?"

The girl looked at me, her expression a mix of surprise and suspicion. The strange world I had found myself in was about to unfold its mysteries, and I had a feeling that my life was about to change forever.

.No, she's definitely from the role-playing crowd, too focused and determined in her expression to be an anime enthusiast. I have this urge to take her by the hand, share a shot, and go on a reconnaissance mission; she looks that reliable and slightly menacing right now.

But if she's a role-player, how did this drunkard find his way into her company? Their togetherness was clear to me. Is he her grandfather? Doesn't seem like it. He's dressed in tattered rags, like a rural beggar, probably staying in character even outside the game.

My eyes narrowed suspiciously. Is he a freeloader or a creep?

For those unaware:

The role-playing scene is a place always awash with alcohol. I've crossed paths with these folks a few times. Even in the city, spending too much time with two or more role-players can severely harm your liver. When game gatherings are announced, chaos ensues.

Many, instead of energetically running through woods, tossing spray-painted tennis balls that symbolize spells, shooting arrows, and fighting with blunt swords, quickly retreat to the 'dead zone'.

The 'dead zone' is a log, stump, ditch, or any noticeable spot where 'killed' players gather during the game to wait for the next round. The old-timers of the scene barely prepare for the game, in terms of weapons or costumes, just enough to appease the game master and organizers. These veterans feign their deaths, seek quick demises, while the boldest pretend to have a heart attack and, making a lazy circle outside the game's starting field, immediately drop to the dead zone. And there, they drink.

What else is there to do outdoors? At least, that's my experience with these role-playing slackers. But even if there aren't too many eager-to-die players, the first epicenter of the party always lights up at the dead zone. During the game itself, you either risk actual injury or might inadvertently seriously harm someone with a blunt metal piece masquerading as a sword.

Considering the drunkard's appearance, he'd surely not pass up a chance to hang at the dead zone. So, for now, I'll label him as a freeloader.

All these thoughts flashed through my mind as I removed my foot from the stranger's shoe and took another look at the unknowns.

"Excuse me, what's going on here?" I asked hesitantly.

The girl quizzically raised an eyebrow and responded in a language I couldn't understand, maybe Tatar or Uzbek. It could've been any language spoken by the numerous visitors to the capital; I was clueless.

"Hey, can we speak Russian? I don't understand yours," I said, louder than necessary.

She said something else in her throaty dialect, then turned to the old man. The unsettling, moist gleam in his eyes as he looked at the girl made me reconsider that he might not just be a drunk, but someone with unsavory intentions towards young, fit students. He probably didn't have the energy for much else, drained by the green demon of alcohol.

In short, no reaction. The girl turned halfway to me, actively discussing something with her alcoholic companion. I gently placed my hand on her shoulder, trying to get her attention.

"Miss, I'm saying..."

I wish I hadn't, because she didn't let me finish.

Growing up in a small town dotted with factories, warehouses, and plants, you'd expect a fair share of scuffles. But life hadn't prepared me for such a swift, sharp slap across the face.

Beyond realizing it's a bad idea to touch unfamiliar, attractive freshmen without their consent, something else was driven into me.

Images of ancient cities and settlements, mountains, forests, beaches I'd never seen before flashed before my eyes, ending with names like Clerya, Brenn, Sharhozan, the Kingdom of Gongorsk, and two Pantheons - Small and Large. The images were vague and slipped away quickly, leaving maybe 5% of the post-slap information in my memory. But surprisingly, their conversation began to clear up for me.

"Ma'am, Lady Lu, wait, what have you done, my lady..." the drunkard mumbled, wringing his hands and almost whining.

"I don't understand what's happening. I was promised a great Warrior to perform feats in my honor! And this? Do you see this too? Some goofball with a bag!"

Yes, I was still holding a grocery bag from the local store with a beer bottle I was craving just moments ago. I didn't care about the old man's babbling or why he referred to the student as 'lady', but being labeled as a "goofball with a bag" stung.

"Hey, lady," I added a mocking tone, as if doing her a massive favor, "you shouldn't speak that way about strangers..."

"...I could even stab you with a penknife," I thought, mentally adopting the persona of a local tough guy. I wouldn't actually fight; her sword might be sharper than it looked, and drunks can be surprisingly agile. I'd just tread carefully and see where things went without resorting to violence.

She didn't slap me again, though I noticed her slight shoulder twitch. In response to my comment, I was met with a look of disdain and mild disgust, as if she'd just spotted a pile of manure teeming with insects. But soon after, a hint of surprise appeared.

"Do you understand what we're saying?" she asked, her youthful, slightly ringing voice now clear to me.

"Why shouldn't I? You switched to Russian, didn't you?"

The girl and the drunk exchanged glances, then stared at me again.

A single thought crossed my mind: "This is Cleryan, not Russian."

The moment my linguistic abilities garnered their attention, it disappeared just as swiftly. The girl turned away from me and continued conversing with the old man, repeatedly mentioning some "mother". It seemed like she was indirectly scolding someone, but I didn’t bother to understand.

Instead, I recalled a scene from a magnificent film featuring the Aliev brothers and an advice given to them by Private Kachanov, nicknamed "Bullet". The scene felt appropriate to mimic, but with two reservations.

Firstly, I would be the one departing, not the peculiar duo, and certainly not by water. Secondly, the farewell words "take care, ichthyanders", and the slow hand wave, I'd keep to myself.

Thus, attempting to appear as insignificant and unnoticeable as possible, I simply turned and walked away from the forest's edge. There should be a road nearby leading to civilization. How I ended up near this forest with this odd pair didn't concern me at the moment. I'd figure it out later. At home, my laptop awaited, along with the series "The Man in the High Castle", and one and a half liters of beer with nuts.

Then, a peculiar inconsistency struck my awareness. The lack of snow, despite it being December, was normal. For someone from central Russia, especially Moscow, it's no longer surprising to have a snowless eve nearing the New Year—the climate change wheel has turned in full. But the appearance of fresh grass under my feet, instead of the occasional dry winter vegetation, was indeed curious.

I had only taken about twenty steps when I felt something amiss. It was as if an unseen thread connected me to the place I was discreetly trying to fade away from, without bidding farewell to the strange student and the tipsy old man.

"Where do you think you're going?! Stop!"

Following this, I felt a force yanking me backward. My feet were in the air, as if the ground had been pulled from beneath them. Mid-fall, I was relieved I hadn't chosen a glass beer bottle; it would've shattered for sure.

In the final moments of my ungraceful descent, just before making contact with the ground, I caught a glimpse of an unfamiliar moon in the sky and an unusually dark, pristine sky for a suburban evening.

Immediately after this intriguing observation, the back of my head met the ground, encountering a hard rock instead of the anticipated soft grass, and everything went dark.

**Chapter 2: On the Road**

We had been traveling for nearly a week, and all I craved was a shower and a real bed, not huddling close to a fire at night.

As it turned out, fate had placed me in Clerya, a small northeastern kingdom in Talleria. From the fragmented explanations of the old priest Iliy, who I initially mistook for a drunkard, I gathered that modern Clerya was a remnant of the once mighty Cleryan Empire.

Like all empires throughout time and across worlds, Clerya faced a predictable downfall: several failed harvests, a couple of inept heirs to the throne, increasing power of local barons and nobility, and voilà—the empire fragmented into several independent kingdoms and principalities. From the southernmost shard of the state, the Brenna Republic emerged, with its own council elected from affluent merchants and noble warriors.

The town we were headed to was called Serdon, one of Clerya's last frontier towns. Beyond it, via an even more dilapidated road, lay the mining settlement of Zhivobar, nestled at the foothills of the Eastern Ridge, which marked the natural southern border between Clerya and the Gongor Kingdom to the southwest and west, the Nels Crown to the south, and Parinia, another fragment of the erstwhile empire, to the southeast. That's if we moved southwest from our current location. To the southeast was another settlement, Nikka, also mining-based.

Strictly speaking, by my Moscow resident classification based on population, these were more like hamlets. Yet Iliy seriously referred to Serdon, with its two thousand inhabitants, as a major southern city of Clerya.

Urbanization hadn't reached this world. Though I was confident that the capital of some vast empire could accommodate a couple of hundred thousand residents, provided there's enough space and the emperor doesn't lose his sanity prematurely. However, the rural population density was notably high. Almost every field we passed was cultivated. Still, it remained unclear whether these lands belonged to peasants, whether slaves toiled on them, or if free people were merely paying their dues.

We were headed to Serdon for a simple reason: it was the nearest inhabited place that could be reached on foot relatively quickly and safely. The environment here was remote; the road would occasionally dive into groves and just as swiftly emerge into vast fields and meadows, with the peaks of the Eastern Ridge visible in the distance.

Currently, I trudged along, my feet burning from the heat—it was about twenty degrees Celsius outside, and the (presumably) May sun was slightly scorching. Thus, in my winter boots, I felt distinctly uncomfortable. I had immediately abandoned my socks, which now languished at the bottom of my backpack, weighed down by my jacket, and had repurposed my work shirt into makeshift foot wraps. Because if I developed blisters and couldn't keep up with our leader, the goddess Lu, she would quite literally smother me.

At the thought of being smothered, I grimaced and instinctively reached for my neck, where my invisible, yet very palpable slave collar with a mental leash was located. Iliy caught this motion out of the corner of his eye but said nothing. He just irritably pursed his lips and adjusted his shoulder bag. I could empathize with him to an extent, but I wasn't about to prioritize his travel comfort. Once more, I demonstratively rubbed my neck, as if searching for an unseen clasp, which promptly took me back to my first morning in this unfamiliar place.

It felt like I was lying in my own bed, enjoying a well-deserved day off, with no intention of rising. I was at peace, warm, and comfortable.

"Ma'am... What if your champion is... dead?" The voice sounded vaguely familiar, but I just internally winced, trying to sink deeper into sleep.

"Iliy, go to the stream and fetch some water." The second voice was youthful and resonant, tinged with a haughtiness that reminded me of my classmate Anya Kuznetsova, whose father was either a deputy's assistant or some kind of mobster.

Those words didn't raise any alarm, and I almost drifted back to sleep, basking in the warmth of what felt like my own bed, when suddenly I was doused with cold water.

I gasped for air, tried to jump up, and realized I was lying on the ground in an open field. Standing before me was the memorable role-playing student and the drunken pervert who, on her command, had just doused me with water from a small camping kettle.

A sharp pain exploded in the back of my head the next second. Touching it, I felt what seemed like a deep gash – a souvenir from a nasty fall that must have knocked me out cold. "Great, just great," I thought, "What a fine mess this is."

"Are you people insane?" My voice was thick with indignation and bewilderment.

I struggled to my feet, a task made difficult by what felt like a moderate concussion; everything before my eyes swam. My state was miserable. As I awkwardly rose, swaying on my knees and flopping onto my side like a drunkard, the student watched me silently with a deadly glare, while the old man twitched nervously behind her, clutching the handle of his kettle. I had a few choice words for him – my jacket was now thoroughly soaked and caked with mud.

Once I was up, another realization hit me: it was warm outside, and it was only going to get hotter. The sky was brightening rapidly at the edges; the temperature must have been around ten to fifteen degrees Celsius. My shirt was drenched not because the old drunk had splashed me, but because of the humidity that now clung unpleasantly to my back and waist. I unzipped my jacket in one swift motion, threw off my scarf, peeled off my shirt, and rummaged through my backpack for a T-shirt. I needed to change into something dry before I caught pneumonia. It seemed that after knocking me out, they had dragged me into the field. Civilization could be hours, if not days away.

I tried not to think about why, after one night in the Moscow suburbs, it suddenly felt like spring. I tried very, very hard not to think about it, but it was difficult.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the student's anger boiling over at the sight of my bare chest with its modest beer belly, and the old man shrinking in fear. Nonetheless, I managed to find a black tank top in my backpack and quickly pulled it over my somewhat scrubbed body, thanks to the scarf and the damp shirt. Luckily, the crazy old man hadn't soaked my trousers, so my jeans remained dry in the bag.

"Is something wrong?" I asked the girl gruffly, deliberately looking her straight in the eyes. "Never seen a man changing clothes before? Or is there something else you'd like to see?"

At my words, the old man's eyes widened, and he made a gesture that resembled how we sign the cross over the deceased in a coffin – quick, barely perceptible, and filled with immense regret as if to say, 'rest in peace.'

I hadn't grasped why he was suddenly blessing me – whether it was the sight of my beer gut or my sharp words – when I received the second slap in the face in as many days.

You know, it's only in American action movies that adversaries can endlessly punch each other in the face with extremely focused expressions. The turning point of the confrontation is typically a disdainful wiping of blood from a barely split lip. Reality is much more mundane, and I know for a fact that one good blow to the head can knock a person out cold, and a bad one can kill them instantly.

This slap was particularly bad because my head was still buzzing from the concussion I'd received from the fall, and my legs were unsteady. I couldn't tell if this student was a black belt in karate or if I had just hit my head that hard the first time, but everything happened so fast I hardly saw it coming.

There she stood, directly in front of me, her gaze promising nothing good. Then, in an instant, she was a step closer, and my head was jerked to the right by the force of her powerful slap. I was certain it was a slap; had she punched me with her fist with that strength, I would've been spitting out teeth.

Along with the looming prospect of losing consciousness again, I had another revelation. We were in the southern extremities of Clery, not too far from its border. The language being spoken was definitely Cleryan, not Russian as I had assumed the night before. And I learned something else—I was in another world altogether. This at least explained the late spring around us. How I ended up here, however, remained a complete mystery.

"What kind of innovative teaching methods are these?" I wondered fleetingly as I settled back on the ground. The mysterious girl continued to stand over me, looking at me as if I were an empty space.

At that moment, a very, very foolish idea struck me.

If I had known Lu even a half-hour longer than I did at that moment, I would never have dared to pull such a stunt with a goddess. But my brain was feverishly searching for any information, and it seemed I only received it through physical contact with this woman, who I still believed to be a mere aficionado of "Dungeons and Dragons."

So, before the pseudo-student from another world could say or, God forbid, do anything else, I leaped to my feet, grabbed her by the head, and pressed my forehead to hers.

"If this doesn't work, she'll beat me to death here," I thought too late, but the deed was already done, so I had to focus intently on my life back in Moscow, my job, daily routines, and so on.

For a moment, nothing happened, and then a deluge of information washed over me. The Pantheon, the great seven gods, the last destroyed temple, an old priest named Ily, who stood right now behind the girl and who was about to have a stroke from my actions, names of empires, kingdoms, fragments of scenes, landscapes, places, and most importantly—The Name.

Lu. The goddess of consolation for the grieving, the desperate, the orphans, and the widows.

That was the name of the unknown, nearly forgotten young woman before me. Goddess Lu.

Along with the images, I was flooded with her emotions: anger, disgust, immense disappointment, and a sense of fading hope—all directed at me, a cell phone store manager from Moscow with a degree in accounting, living in a small room rented from an old landlady. Why her hopes were pinned on me remained a mystery.

The exchange of information was instantaneous, and then I was shoved hard in the chest, the force expelling the air from my lungs, and I fell to the ground again, painfully bruising my tailbone. Fairly expecting to be finished off with a sword, I didn't even try to get to my feet: the dizziness and nausea from the blow to my head were too much to resist. Besides, why resist? Maybe it would be easier to just let it all end here.

Despite her petite stature, Goddess Lu seemed to loom over me. It appeared that not only had I gained knowledge from her, but she had also peered into my past to understand who I was. Just an average guy who chose the wrong university and career, and just twelve hours ago, had plans for a new laptop and a vacation in Turkey.

The pause lingered.

Lu stood silently, contemplating what to do with me. I sat on the ground, mentally preparing for either decapitation or a sword through the heart, as such an affront to a goddess could not go unpunished. The old, homeless-looking priest braced himself for a solo journey to meet the Reaper Foru. Well, the old man was nearly ancient; his heart would soon give out, and whoosh, his soul would fly to paradise, or wherever it goes to meet the local god of night and the afterlife.

"You are nothing," she spat out, not really speaking but hurling the words at me, "but to offend a goddess requires a certain level of courage. Or maybe you're just stupid?"

"Uh?" I understood that Lu expected a coherent response, but my mind was blank, so I bought myself some time with that momentary pause.

"You saw too, right?" I finally spoke, but, true to my Earthly heritage, I answered a question with a question.

Goddess Lu's eyes narrowed into slits that promised nothing good.

"You saw who I am and where I'm from, didn't you?"

"You're no warrior, you're a useless worm. The gods promised me a hero, and they sent me you."

"And what do you need this hero for?" For the first time, a sort of dialogue began between Lu and me. I understood that my life depended on the outcome of our conversation, and though just a minute ago I had resigned myself to the notion that the foolish girl might lop off my head with her short sword, I still didn't want to die.

Lu hesitated, as if deciding whether I was worth her time.

"I come from a technologically advanced, highly developed world that has devoted almost its entire life to learning various sciences, and as a result, has hardly worked. Because there was studying to do."

I needed to sell this goddess on some aspect of my biography, to make her see me as potentially useful, or at least not kill me. It felt like the most important job interview of my life.

"I spent sixteen years in education, and I'm only twenty-six now. How long do children study in this world?" I asked directly.

Lu pondered.

"They educate the nobility, merchant's children, wealthy town residents, and peasants if they deem any of their offspring worthy of spending money and teacher's time on. Why do you ask?"

"You mean not everyone is educated here?" Again, I responded with a question.

"Of course not," she snorted quietly.

I could tell from her eyes that she sensed where I was steering the conversation. In her gaze, I saw, no, not a goddess's interest in what I would say next, far from it. I saw the opposite: she had convinced herself that instead of me, a hero in shining armor should have appeared, or at the very least, a great mage. Or even better, both in one. This heroic mage-warrior was supposed to chop half of Talleria into fine straw for Goddess Lu to ascend and gain power. I couldn't glean more from her mind as to why she needed such power; I could only guess. But what to expect from an arrogant goddess—those in power are all alike. And those whose power and immortality depend solely on the intensity of worship are doubly predictable.

"Where I come from," I continued slowly and clearly, "all children, without exception, are educated. For a minimum of nine years, they learn dozens of things, not just reading and arithmetic. I studied for sixteen years."

"And what have they taught you? To wield a sword? To shoot a bow? Are you a great mage?" The goddess listed off. "Even in the Magic Academy of Alseford, they study for four years."

"Alseford—capital of the Sharan Principality," flickered through my mind.

"No. I'm not a warrior, nor am I a mage," Goddess Lu's lips tightened into a thin line, "I'm an accountant."

"A what?"

"A bookkeeper and a scribe," I translated the unfamiliar word to this world's terms for the goddess.

(may be better?) "Are you saying the gods have given me a mere bookkeeper instead of a great warrior or a powerful mage?! Truly, a grand jest by the Mother!" Lu exploded.

"Goddess Lu..." The word 'goddess' was hard for me to utter, but calling her simply 'Lu' would have been plainly suicidal. Our negotiations for my future were in full swing, though she likely hadn't realized it yet — I might be the best bookkeeper and scribe ever born or to be born in this world.

Silence hung in the air. Lu looked at me, Iliy was in a state of shock, and I quietly hoped my gamble would pay off.

"I see what you're doing. I may look young, but I'm five hundred years old, and I know how people inflate their worth when bargaining for their life," she seemed almost disappointed. "You were nothing even in your world, and here, without any useful skills, what are you? Just a healthy lump that any baron's retainer or simple militiaman would obliterate in an instant. Your knowledge is utterly useless here."

She turned to walk away, and I finally got to my feet and brushed off my pants.

"I know that in this world there's a god of traders and merchants, which means there are taxes, levies, duties, loans, usury, and everything that deals with money — the very subject I spent my youth studying. You might find me useless, Goddess Lu, but do you really believe that the Mother and her Sons expended so much effort in summoning me just to irritate you? You, a goddess without an altar, with a last priest who can barely stand and seems to believe more in the god of wine and beer than in you, Goddess Lu."

The girl stopped but didn't turn around. She still faced away from me, yet it was evident she was listening.

"I didn't see in the visions you granted me that the gods walk around in jesters' caps, not even the smallest and most forgotten. So no, the Mother did not err. She summoned for you a hero who could set your affairs in order. You expected a huge, strong warrior; it's written all over your face, yet here I am. A learned bookkeeper-scribe from a world without gods or magic."

I sensed Lu was torn inside. I had assessed the situation, and it was disconcertingly simple and frightening: without Lu, I was finished. I needed to at least reach the nearest settlement with her, as I had no idea where I was, knowing only the country's name — Cleria. So it was crucial to sow a seed of doubt in Lu's mind that I wasn't useless and could do something for her, within my limited bookkeeper-scribe abilities.

"You are not a goddess of war and destruction. You are a goddess of consolation, the protector of orphans and widows, I saw that. You are supposed to help the grieving and unfortunate, help them overcome sorrow. Why would you need a great warrior or mage who can only destroy?"

After my last line, the old priest who had been breathlessly watching our exchange hiccupped from an excess of emotion. The old man kept shifting his gaze between me and Lu, and it was clear he was starting to grasp that I was saying absolutely the right things.

Why would a merciful goddess need a warrior who brings death? The main problem of this world is the pain of losing loved ones to poverty, disease, and injustice. Sure, a warrior might defeat an offender, but can he console a grieving woman as well as a graduate from a Moscow institute who listened to three semesters of psychology? Admittedly, I slept through most of the lectures, but I believed I had a better chance than most.

Lu began to understand my words. The goddess turned to look at me, examined me very attentively, and said:

"You're definitely a brave fool. Let's go to the fire; we need to head to the city soon."

Her last sentence was spoken more calmly than anything I had heard from her before. Mature and restrained, though still in that clear, ringing voice. At that moment, I fully realized that the beautiful "student" in the fetching carnival outfit was actually five hundred years old and an immortal goddess. And that she had seen much, much more than I or any mere mortal could ever hope to see or know.

I don't know if I had convinced Lu, or if she had simply decided to fight to the end, but it was clear that the goddess had accepted me into her small entourage.

I was still dizzy, so I carefully bent down to pick up my backpack, the rustling packet of food, my jacket, scarf, and followed the goddess and the shuffling old priest, who was still nervously clutching the handle of his cauldron.

Just a few dozen steps from where I had fallen and passed out, roughly where I first appeared in this world, was a makeshift camp.

Two pine bough beds, a small fire, a couple of sticks stuck into the ground beside it to suspend a pot. The only personal belongings I noticed were a well-worn satchel I was sure belonged to the priest. All of Goddess Lu's belongings were with her; she left nothing on the ground.

By the fire, I immediately said we'd need to delay for two reasons. First, we had to take some time to prepare the food. Second, my head was still buzzing from the knock to the back of my head and two hefty slaps from the goddess herself. Her hand was heavy, despite her apparent fragility. Or maybe a god's physical strength doesn't correlate to their appearance? That's a point I'd have to clarify.

Something must have shown on my face, because Lu spoke to me again:

"What, wondering why you see a goddess in flesh and blood?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Lu appeared on the verge of speaking, then seemingly changed her mind and simply laid her cool hand, slender fingers exuding elegance, atop my head. This latest lesson was a departure from her prior methods of percussive education, where her slaps seemed to hammer the knowledge into my cranium. Instead, it unfolded as a sequence of intelligible visions accompanied by her commentary, transferred through her touch. She stood encircled by the Pantheon, before her the triumvirate of primordial gods, with another quartet of superior deities at their sides. The Mother declared she would journey as a mortal, clad in flesh, performing feats alongside her champion to seek a new Priest.

The vision vanished as Lu withdrew her hand.

I had the distinct impression she hadn't shown me everything; conversations with the gods remained her secret, and the endeavor to find and initiate a true Priest for a deity was not to be taken lightly. No mere passerby would suffice. Yet, I refrained from probing beyond what they were inclined to reveal.

"I wonder, what else might you impart to me in this manner?" I inquired with feigned nonchalance.

"Do you consider yourself an adept swordsman now?"

"No, should I?"

"It seems, at the end, I recalled all I know about swordsmanship, but evidently, such knowledge can't be imparted," Lu responded with serenity.

These were uncharted waters for her as well. She had quieted down, my impassioned pleas for my life prompting her to some deep reflection, and now the goddess was preoccupied with her thoughts.

Foregoing any further supernatural or theological debate, I unabashedly sent Ily to fetch clear water from the stream. The old man's look pierced me, as if cutting through the very fabric of existence, but I simply shrugged it off — he hadn't met my philosophy professor, under whose scrutiny even the dean perspired. I turned my attention to sorting the groceries from 'Pyaterochka.'

The bread was immediately set aside — it would last a few days, maybe even a week, despite being pre-sliced. The two packets of ultra-pasteurized milk were indifferent to their fate, likely to outlast me — I was convinced they had a better chance of surviving unspoiled than I did.

The drinkable yogurts, the bologna, and the chicken required immediate attention. Handing a bottle of strawberry yogurt to the goddess and catching her bemused reaction to such an exotic beverage, I extricated a tiny Swiss Army knife from my backpack, whittled a few sticks, clumsily sliced the bologna, and set it to roast over the campfire's embers.

The chicken proved more challenging. Initially, I had the urge to rinse it in the stream, then remembered that hospitals, antibiotics, and other medical aids were a world away. The prospect of meeting my end due to a bout of violent dysentery courtesy of local pathogens was less than appealing. Thus, the chicken was skewered onto two more sticks, stripped and charred at the fire, then placed over the coals to cook thoroughly. I made incisions in the breast to expedite the process. The juices would be lost, but this was no gourmet salon or culinary show — Gordon Ramsay was not about to leap from the underbrush, berating, "It's going to be dry!" with his Scottish finger pointed accusingly at my poultry preparation.

"Perhaps you're not entirely useless," the goddess mused, relishing the last of the yogurt and reclining on the pine boughs that had served as her makeshift bed, elbows planted firmly in the earth.

My eyes fleetingly traced Lu's form before I promptly averted them. Yesterday, she was just a student cosplaying as an anime character; now, she was a deity with a firm chokehold on my life.

Speaking of chokeholds.

The more I regained my senses, the more acutely I felt this was no mere game. An unseen bond linked me to the goddess, likely part of the spell intended to keep a hero in check. I was loath to test the extent of Lu's dominion over me, but I suspected if this morally fickle deity commanded me to plunge my hand into the fire, resistance would be short-lived. This suspicion was underscored by the faint but distinctly unpleasant feeling of an invisible collar around my neck, its leash seemingly tethered to Lu.

The old, soaked priest was an open book without words. He delightedly fiddled with the half-empty bottle of yogurt I had shared with him. It seemed prudent not to be entirely at odds with the elder; Ily might appear a decrepit drunkard, but he possessed knowledge of this world. He knew how to serve the gods; after all, Lu didn't keep him close for nothing. Perhaps I could coax some valuable insights from him, so sharing the yogurt was no loss to me, even if it was the last yogurt I would ever taste. The small consolation warming my soul was the serendipitous choice I had made at the last moment to take the strawberry yogurt, sweet and delightful, from the shelf — even though I had originally intended to purchase the 'healthy' Greek or plain variety. Thus, things could have been considerably more dismal.

As the chicken was reaching its peak of roasting perfection, I removed the now slightly charred rounds of doctor's sausage from the fire and assembled a few sandwiches for each of us with the sliced loaf. Surprisingly, Lu didn’t turn her nose up at the simple, rustic fare, and the old man all but devoured his portion with what teeth he had left. So, by the time the bird was ready, we were all pleasantly full.

"And where did you procure this feast?" Lu inquired, her mood clearly sweetened by the meal. I made a mental note that, much like any woman, it was unwise to approach the goddess on an empty stomach. But if she was fed, her disposition improved remarkably. Perhaps she saw it as a sort of sacrifice.

Flickers of memory danced at the edges of my consciousness, not the dark scenes of satanic rituals with knives and blood one might expect, but rather the notion that in this world, offerings to the gods were mostly made with food, later to be consumed by temple priests. If a god was particularly pleased with a supplicant, they would accept the offering personally: the gift would vanish from the altar without a trace.

Material offerings could also be made. These were handled differently. If an offering remained on the altar untouched for a day, it became the property of the temple. The priests and acolytes could either return it to the owner or keep it for themselves.

The gods didn't outright reject offerings. Even if they didn’t physically take the item from the altar, they didn’t ignore the act of it being presented. There were several instances where an offering was deemed unacceptable, insulting to the deity, or insufficient for the petitioner's requests. For example, if the request didn’t match the supplicant's means, or was excessively audacious. Like when a wealthy merchant would place a couple of coppers on the altar of Kerma, the Patron of Merchants, seeking success and safe travels—those coins would be flung back in his face without fail. Typically, if gods rejected an offering, the priests found it at the base of the altar or beyond the sanctuary's bounds, especially if the deity was not just uninterested, but also offended.

Each god had their preferences for offerings. The Primordial Mother Geora accepted food and simple wooden household items. The value of the gift to the petitioner was what mattered, not its price. Geora might ignore a jewel-encrusted golden goblet but accept a cherished, cracked-handled spoon from a cook.

The Warrior God Pal favored swords, daggers, and personal weapons as sacrifices. In rare cases, warriors' and nobles' braids, grown as a mark of their profession and status. Offering a braid asked if one's martial exploits were worthy of Pal's favor. If so, by morning, the braid would regrow as if never sheared. Such occurrences were rare but not unheard of, with many witnesses to attest. Attempts to deceive with false braids had been made, but Pal’s wrath for such deceit was fearsome.

The Reaper God For didn't usually accept material offerings. Instead, devotees held nighttime vigils at his altar. The longer one prayed to For on bended knee throughout the night, the greater the sacrifice. For, also the god of the moon and protector of nocturnal rest as decreed by the Mother, favored anything done at the expense of sleep.

The Generous Kerma, patron of merchants and wealth, accepted only crisp coinage or items of gold, silver, and precious stones. Occasionally, expensive and rare goods were offered, their worth deemed fitting for a deity. Kerma might claim such gifts but often redistributed them to altars in other temples if they were in need. Thus, Kerma’s servants never wanted, and he managed his temples with the acumen of a seasoned businessman.

The Patron of craftsmen, artisans, and blacksmiths, the Skilled Sidir, preferred tangible tributes. Weapons, armor, garments, fabrics, harnesses, tools, mechanisms, even raw materials—any craftsman or apprentice could offer the fruit of their labor. If Sidir was pleased, the item would be found at the altar's base by morning. If unimpressed, the offering remained on the stone, and the artisan was encouraged to strive harder. Bakers and cooks were a slight exception; they prayed to both the Mother and sought favor from Kerma and Sidir, which was perfectly normal.

Every artisan's dream was to craft an artifact — an object of such exceptional quality that it would captivate Sidira to the extent that the god would take it to his celestial forge, refine and enchant it, and then return it to its maker. This was considered the official retirement plan for craftsmen and blacksmiths from their deity, for an artifact's value was so immense that its sale could financially secure not only the master himself well into his old age but also ensure a life of prosperity for his offspring. Stealing or forcibly taking an artifact was impossible: if the master did not give it willingly and then live in peace, anything acquired through deceit would be returned by Sidira to the temple from whence it came. Thus, no one even attempted to seize the god-enchanted blades, horseshoes, or armors from humble smiths and artisans — even kings had to pay homage if they desired such unique items. Items enchanted by Sidira himself were truly worth their weight in gold. Swords that had been to the heavenly forges never dulled and could slice through armor as if it were fine cobweb, and horseshoes, once deemed worthy by the god, neither got lost nor wore out.

The most intriguing offerings were those to the Learned Sof. This deity favored a tribute of tales — stories about new knowledge acquired by a person. Be it a fascinating observation of animals or nature, contemplations on existence, or tales of mechanisms. Sof often accepted scientific manuscripts and works; if impressed, he would return the manuscript the next morning with corrections and additions from the omniscient deity himself, thus encouraging his followers to pursue knowledge of the world. Should blatant heresy find its way to Sof’s altar, by morning the manuscript would be torn to shreds, or at the altar’s base, one would find nothing but a handful of ashes.

The rites for the merry goddess Kalita, the patroness of artists, bards, and travelers, were by far the simplest. For Kalita, one could perform a newly composed song or ballad, dance, or demonstrate a unique magic trick. Travelers might share stories of their wanderings and adventures. Kalita protected talented singers and poets and helped travelers find safe paths, saving them from bandits and misfortune, sometimes even appearing on Earth in the guise of a jovial maiden to lead the wayfarer away from danger. Of all offerings, Kalita only took wine — which she always welcomed with joy. The finest bards could dare leave their instrument on her altar for her divine fingers to grace the strings. Such lutes would then never fall out of tune, their strings would not break, and the sound produced by the bard, blessed by the goddess, would delight the ears and please all without exception.

But there was a catch. The playful goddess might jest with an overconfident bard who thought too highly of himself. Kalita could smash such a bard's instruments, and in a particularly mischievous mood, she might enchant them inversely — essentially curse them. The bard might not notice the change, but to everyone else, the sound produced would be unbearable. Moreover, the curse did not bind to the lute itself but to the bard, so replacing the instrument was futile — one had to regain the favor of their patroness. In exceptional cases, if Kalita was truly displeased with a bard, she could strip him of his voice and memory. Such was the fate centuries ago of the chief bard at the court of the Sharin prince: Kalita cursed the singer, robbing him of hearing, voice, and the use of his hands for not only being conceited but also for harming other artists. According to legend, he had tortured several dancers and singers in the palace dungeons, who were particularly favored by Kalita. The goddess appeared in person at a feast held by the prince, smashed the lyre over the cruel bard's head, and cast a curse upon him in the presence of hundreds of stunned guests.

But of course, gods condescended to mingle with mortals not too often, just enough so that people would not forget that gods were not the fabrications of corpulent priests, but a very real force to be prayed to and revered. The exception was the eternally youthful-at-heart Kalita, for whom the confines of the Pantheon were too constraining. The adventuress goddess frequently visited Earth incognito, and at times, appeared personally to her flock. Indeed, people agreed that the likelihood of her appearance was directly proportional to the amount of liquor imbibed by the bard or traveler. Yet no one ruled out that it was precisely to the heavily inebriated that Kalita showed herself in her divine form, considering her spirited nature.

Pondering all this information I had received from Lu, along with the knowledge of the Pantheon itself, I realized that our impromptu breakfast from the goods transported with me was also a kind of offering. I was giving the goddess the last food from my own world, which I most likely would never taste again — and I was doing so openly and sincerely.

For a moment, it seemed to me that Lu caught my thoughts, and with a twinkle in her eyes, she looked at me as if to acknowledge that yes, my offering had been favorably received by my goddess. That I would have to direct my prayers to Lu herself, rather than to any of the major seven deities, I had already understood.

On the other hand, who else can boast of having a personal goddess? Exactly my point.

There are silver linings to be found in everything; the main thing is that Lu doesn’t start to overlook my prayers and offerings, considering the chilling sensation of the slave collar still around my neck. After the meal, I went to the stream and washed as best as I could, given the uncomfortably cold temperature of the water, and we began to prepare for departure. We packed the chicken into my supermarket bag — the supermarket polyethylene was definitely cleaner than Ilya's pouches and rags. I rinsed my pocket knife, filled the empty yogurt bottles with boiling water — containers are always handy, and I hadn't seen any flasks with Lu, nor would I have risked drinking from the same vessel as Ilya. Then I packed all this into the backpack with my clothes. The beer, which I decided not to open just yet, bread, milk, the remains of a loaf, and nuts also found their place there. I then fashioned my now-dried shirt into foot wraps, preferring it to the black T-shirt, stuffed the rest of my belongings into the bag, and we set off on our journey.

We conversed little. I was caught somewhere between stupor, panic, and deep shock – a state too complex to neatly label. And my head throbbed mercilessly. Old Ilya was absorbed in digesting the bounty that had befallen him. His briny gaze told me he hadn’t eaten his fill for a long time, possibly not since his youth. Lu, on the other hand, marched purposefully at the head of our little procession. She had shed her cloak, burdening the old man with it, and I tried with all my might not to gawk at… Well, not to ogle my goddess, whom I now seemed to serve. I was quite proud of my restraint.

At our evening halt, each received their share of chicken, and I couldn’t resist a bit of levity. While I divvied up the provisions — an act, for some reason, no one contested — Lu and Ilya kindled a fire, not partaking in the meal preparation, save for the old man who again fetched a full kettle of water from some source.

With hands rinsed, I cobbled together chicken sandwiches — now incorporating the dark bread. Then I decanted beer into the empty yogurt bottles, ensuring an even share for each. As supper was assembled, I took up Lu’s portion — a sandwich in one hand, a repurposed yogurt jar filled with beer in the other — and presented it to the goddess across the fire with a slight bow, adding foolhardily:

“Accept this offering, oh my goddess.”

Nothing happened for a second, nor the next. My head was bowed in a half-mocking salute, so I missed Lu’s initial reaction until I dared to look up. The sight was one I wished I could unsee, for my position at that moment was precarious.

I won’t lie about life flashing before my eyes in the face of mortal peril; I only had time for one brief, potent, and universally recognized expletive. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ilya cease breathing.

Lu sat bolt upright, as if she’d swallowed a rod. Gone was the slightly relaxed, tired girl from our day’s trek. In her place sat a goddess, affronted by mockery. Her jaw set firm, her lips, usually crimson, paled and thinned into taut lines, and in those large violet eyes raged fury. And pain.

I realized too late to backpedal. No excuses would be accepted. Though she was a goddess without temple or flock, she was still a goddess, and I was but a foreigner in her power. The tightening sensation of the invisible collar at my throat, which tethered me to Lu by the Mother, confirmed my suspicions. I frantically searched for the right words of apology in all the languages I knew, from this world and mine, even venturing into English before realizing the futility.

Then, clarity struck. Yes, I was a fool. A presumptuous fool.

Lu was insulted both as a goddess and, primarily, as a woman.

Do you know the cardinal rule when dealing with a woman? Let someone who spent five years in a coed group of thirty, being the only guy, enlighten you.

One must never laugh at a woman.

It’s common knowledge that women adore a good humorist, but they abhor being laughed at. A woman might jest about her own silliness or clumsiness, but unless you’re an old married couple, the most a man is allowed is to laugh with her at her joke — and only if she’s laughing too. And heaven help you if you laugh louder or longer than the lady. There are exceptions, of course, but they only prove the rule.

Lu believed I was mocking her, her situation, and her very identity. Besides being a woman, Lu was also a goddess — a fact I, the fool, had momentarily forgotten and let my guard down.

Thus, in this predicament, I had to metaphorically steer into the skid, as drivers might, though I lacked a license: show that my intent was sincere.

“Goddess Lu…” Speaking through the pressure of the unseen collar was difficult, so I rasped more than spoke, “please, accept this food and drink as my offering to you.”

And I bowed once more.

Knowing words were insufficient, I searched within for the right feelings — that Lu was indeed a goddess, although just yesterday evening, a staunch atheist, I would have sooner believed in the Flying Spaghetti Monster than in a deity. That I meant no offense, that I did not seek to belittle her, and that I truly respected her.

As black spots danced before my eyes, heralding an ignominious death by asphyxiation, my hands were suddenly empty, and the pressure of the collar lifted.

“I gladly accept your offering, Anton," Lu's voice broke through my relief.

I remained seated with my head bowed, afraid to look up at Lu. I had joked myself into a near-death experience, nearly strangled by a divine glare. When I finally dared to raise my eyes, Lu was finishing her sandwich and sniffing the contents of the yogurt jar curiously.

"This is from the big bottle, isn't it?" she inquired.

"Yes, my goddess."

"What is it?"

"Beer," I shrugged, "When the Mother's spell yanked me to this place, to you, I was on my way home looking forward to enjoying this brew."

Lu's eyes sparkled mischievously as she took a sip.

"It'll do, though it's somewhat odd."

Throughout this exchange, Ilya hadn't made a sound, but at the mention of beer, his eyes ignited with the fire of anticipation, reminiscent of a hangover-stricken man glimpsing a full glass the morning after.

I kept my thoughts on the old man to myself and simply handed him his share. After the sandwich, I also brought out one of the two packs of peanuts I had, shared my beer with the goddess, and demonstrated to Lu how we drink this frothy beverage in my world.

All told, we had a decent time of it. It could have been worse.

The following days passed much like the ones before, with the exception of our dwindling provisions. When my own reserves neared their end, and all had been consumed except for the sacred packet of peanuts that could almost last an eternity, we turned to Ilya and Lu's supplies. If not for the slight padding of my beer belly and the early days' bonus of chicken and dark bread, I would have keeled over from hunger. Fortunately, we happened upon a small village where Ilya managed to buy a couple of onions and carrots with the last two copper coins from the bottom of his bag, and I traded one of the yogurt bottles for some salted meat and a flatbread. The man was quite taken with the lightweight and durable container.

I warned him not to throw the bottle into the fire, cut it, or twist it too tightly, but otherwise, if sealed with wax, it could keep something for a long time. I was pretty sure that within a few days he would strip the thread or break the cap, but I couldn't care less by then: I now had an empty 1.5-liter bottle which I filled with boiled water whenever I could. I still feared drinking raw water, haunted by visions of worms, parasites, and other nasties from educational programs, dangerous for health and to which the locals might be immune, but I was utterly vulnerable.

But all things come to an end, including our trek. On the seventh day, the outlines of houses and wooden walls appeared, signaling our arrival at Serdon. This would be the first city I'd see in this world.

**Chapter 3: Desolation**

Entering the city that Ilya described as a fairly large and active settlement, I realized the... predicament I was in.

Serdon felt like a large village surrounded by a palisade that could fend off a band of ruffians but certainly not a trained army. Dirt roads and streets, some churned into muck by wheels and hooves, a few nondescript passersby in grey garb, a couple of guards at the city gates looking worse for wear from drink. The majority of the buildings were wooden, single-story, although nearer the center stood a few two- and three-story structures—likely the dwellings of the wealthier citizens and the town's administrators.

Upon inquiring with Ilya and Lu, I realized I had initially misjudged the size of Serdon. Yes, within the palisade—more symbolic than defensive—lived the traders, shopkeepers, and skilled folk. But within a ten-league radius of Serdon lay many small villages and several larger settlements, home to up to five thousand souls. Serdon was the hub of a modest district, a place people from all around came to trade, seek work or workers, drink ale or beer, and sit with neighbors in local taverns to share the latest gossip.

The taverns, by the way, were very popular. What other amusements were there for common folk? To drink, eat, and recount how the headman's daughter from the neighboring village had been carried away by a baron's retainer, leaving no trace behind. Gossip and rumors were the lifeblood of this land, with everyone engaged: traders questioned buyers for news, diverse groups took every table in the taverns, and people chatted standing in the streets. The city was also teeming with women who either came on business or with their husbands to enjoy a mug of frothy beer and catch up with their peers from surrounding communities.

Contrary to expectations, the streets weren't overrun with barefoot, ragged children as I might have expected from a medieval settlement. Perhaps that would be tolerated in a village, but here, where merchants and craftsmen made up the bulk of the population, every child was occupied or at least supervised. Just now, a boy of about eight ran by me, clearly on some errand.

As we stepped aside to let a peasant cart pass, pressing against the wall of a house with windows covered in parchment, I pondered our next move.

During one of our stops, we took stock of our supplies and the situation was grim.

Lu was out of touch with domestic concerns. In her travels with Ilya, food was only a concern for the old man because Lu, as a goddess, had no need for sustenance. Now, after the Mother's spell, she had lost her divine essence and gained a stable physical form. So, I faced the problem of feeding three hungry mouths.

Why me? Well, even if Ilya had been more cunning, he was old and not up to much. Lu simply didn't want to bother with it. That left me—the newcomer from another world.

No money, no food, and no help in sight. Only in fairy tales does the hero in distress suddenly find kind souls who feed him, water him, tuck him into bed, stuff his pockets with money, and offer him their daughters in marriage. For the three of us, the very real specter of starvation loomed—if not the prospect of death by hunger, then certainly hunger itself.

Recalling my student days in the dormitory, I can confidently say that hunger is no aunt, nor even a wicked stepmother. Hunger is a despicable, insidious killer that first annoys you, then slowly but surely drains your strength, hope, and even the will to live. Hunger stupefies a person, literally breaking their will from within, and turning into three listless vegetables was absolutely, emphatically not an option for us.

It was already past noon, so finding day labor for a meal and a roof over our heads was out of the question. The sun would soon set, and all work would cease. Trying to get a job as an accountant in the town's administration was also not an option. Such matters aren't settled in a day, not in my world nor in any other, including Talleria.

"To sell something unnecessary, one must first buy something unnecessary, but we have no money!" The line from Matroskin the cat echoed in my head as I feverishly ran through our available options for earning money.

Of course! There were still some things I had with me that could be pawned or sold to scrape together a little money, at least for the short term. I, utterly pleased with myself, beamed with a foolish smile, which my companions failed to understand even after I explained my plan. But first, we needed to appraise what we had.

We headed straight for the center, towards the market square. Ignoring the simple peasant produce and the wares of the occasional visiting merchant, I made a beeline for the small shops and market stalls set up on the ground floors of the two-story buildings surrounding the square, with market tables placed right up against the walls.

An inventory check and price assessment did not lift my spirits. For my possessions, I could get, at best, a handful of silver coins—only if I was left with nothing on my back.

A word on the currency system of Cleria: Most kingdoms and principalities had their own mints and currencies with varying gold and silver content. In Cleria, naturally, the Clerian mint's production was in circulation—copper, silver, and gold clo.

The smallest coin was the copper clo, or simply the 'copper'. Thirty copper clos equaled one silver, and thirty silvers made one gold clo. There were several denominations to facilitate transactions. Besides the common 'copper', the mint also struck larger copper coins of ten and fifteen clos, colloquially known as 'three' and 'half'. There was also a silver coin worth ten silvers, simply called a 'ten'. The most valuable was the large gold coin valued at ten gold clos. Commonly, it was called 'the king' or 'the royal ten'.

The currency of Cleria was straightforward. At first, I wondered why they were fixated on counting by thirties instead of hundreds, as I was used to in my world, but I soon figured it out. Teaching someone to count to thirty was manageable, but to a hundred was much more difficult. Plus, the mint would have had to strike more denominations for each type of coin, which meant additional expenses. An optimal scheme was found where one gold coin contained thirty silvers, and one silver had thirty original denomination coppers. The intermediate coins made life and calculations a bit easier but were not used in accounting.

So, our market survey revealed that if I stripped down to nothing, the most we could get was five or six silver coins. And the lion's share of the profit would come from selling my boots. They were very intriguing to this world—smooth black leather, high soles, treaded, and quite sturdy. For my jeans, they offered only one silver, but the trousers on me, which I had cleaned as best I could at our last rest, were appraised by a merchant at a 'three' coin. By the glint in that swindler's eyes, I saw he valued them at least five, if not all ten silvers—where else would they find such fabric?—but their shabby appearance drastically lowered their price. The backpack was valued at only one and a half silver coins, so I decided not to part with it; the sight of Ilya's worn-out bag made my shoulders and back ache.

Fortune came from an unexpected quarter. A trader of various sundries, in all likelihood a junk dealer, caught sight of my Swiss Army knife. Seeing how his eyes gleamed, I knew things were looking up.

"Well, what do we have here..." I muttered ostentatiously, occasionally brushing my hand against the red Swiss Army knife with its distinctive cross on the side. "What do we have here."

As I played with the trader's patience, I finally grabbed the little gadget and demonstrated its desirability to the junk dealer.

When he realized it wasn't just a pretty object made of an unknown metal and red material, but rather a knife, an awl, and a dozen other tools of mysterious purpose, we entered the fierce bargaining stage.

To withstand the merchant's onslaught, I had to recall everything I ever knew or heard about the bargaining prowess of the Odessites.

The junk dealer's interest in the knife waned, while I flaunted its blade's gleam and sharpness. When he offered five silver coins for the novelty, I pretended it was no big deal and made as if to pocket the knife. After a couple of insultingly low offers of six and seven silvers, I suggested a walk to the nearest blacksmith to appraise the metal, the quality of the craftsmanship, and the finish.

In the haggling dance that followed, it was all about who could out-bluff whom. Would I walk away and keep the knife, or would the dealer make a fair offer? In a world unfamiliar with such finely crafted tools, I had a feeling this little knife was about to become my golden ticket—or at least a silver one.

At that moment, the junk dealer paled and began gasping for air, aware that a blacksmith might appraise the knife at a couple of gold coins simply out of spite. By the way, I didn't actually take it to a blacksmith because there was a risk he might try to test it—as was customary with blades here—and potentially ruin it.

"Esteemed sir, just look how the sun dances on the surface of this exquisite red stone!" I exclaimed, angling the glossy plastic to catch the sunlight.

The knife was almost new, tossed into a pocket of my backpack upon purchase and never used since. Thus, the side panels were absolutely smooth, appearing as pristine as if freshly minted.

"Such a charming knife could be gifted to any noble lady or even serve as a fancy toy for one of the baron's younger children!" I continued, channeling my inner Odessan.

At some point, the junk dealer faltered, and I managed to wrangle fourteen silver coins and a handful of coppers from him—nearly triple his initial offer. And as a last-minute sweetener for this favorable deal, I requested an old knife, well-worn and housed in battered leather sheaths, as a "gift." The trader simply waved a hand at this request, indicating I should take it, so in addition to the coins, an old knife also found its way into my possession.

We shook hands to seal the deal.

"Well, we're in funds," I grinned at my companions, patting the pocket that now jingled pleasantly with coins, "Let's go find an inn."

Having left the market square, I transferred most of the silver into my backpack, keeping a couple of larger coins and some change in my pocket, along with the newly acquired knife—since I had no means to attach the sheath to my belt just yet.

I suggested to Lou that she take on the role of our treasurer, reasoning that a girl armed with a sword—and a goddess at that—would be far tougher to rob than a city dweller from our world. However, to my surprise, Lou declined, pushing the responsibility of managing our group's funds onto me. I declined Ilya's services for obvious reasons; the roving eyes of the priest made it clear he would happily divert my coin to wine and beer.

We located an inn quickly enough. A dark communal hall with a dirt-trodden floor greeted us, as did a surly mustached man behind the counter, presumably the owner. He answered my inquiries about a room and food with brusque efficiency: a single cell for one was half a copper, for three—a silver each. To overnight in the hayloft was five coppers per person. One serving of hot broth without meat and a piece of flatbread was three coppers; with a few tiny bits of meat—five. Porridge was another three coppers, beer two per mug, and a pitcher of young wine was a half copper. There was also fine wine available for two silver a pitcher, but of course, I didn't even consider it.

I did the mental arithmetic. Even if we crammed into one room, that was a silver a day. Plus food twice daily: meaty broth and porridge in the morning, just porridge in the evening, and a mug of beer with each meal. That was another half copper per person, so one and a half silver a day in total. All in all, with quite meager meals—for there was little hope for large portions—it came to two and a half silver coins a day.

I whistled silently to myself. The Swiss multitool that I'd so profitably peddled to the junk dealer, which netted me nearly half a gold, and another knife, would stretch to barely five or six days at this inn. I had expected lower prices, given that Ilya had managed to purchase a decent selection of vegetables for a couple of coppers on our way here, which, with my added salted meat, we had turned into a hearty soup kettle twice over for the three of us.

Seeing my bemusement and readiness to fork over a couple of silver for the upcoming day's lodgings, the old priest suddenly grabbed my arm and pulled me aside.

"Anton, listen, what are you about to do?" he asked directly, looking me in the eye. "One and a half silver is too much; we shall take to the road."

When it came to saving money, the old man transformed. There was a confidence in his gaze, he stood tall, resolute. A true fighter, an eagle, a model of the youth league, no doubt.

"Uh-uh-uh..." was all I could muster in response, scratching the back of my head demonstratively, "any alternatives?"

"Of course," the priest nodded at me, "get our lady a room for half a silver and single meal a day, in the evening, just broth. They will give you water anyway. And we will sleep in the hayloft, in the stables. That will cost..."

I didn't let the priest finish.

"It will be half a silver clo less, right."

"That's a few more days for us. We can buy food for a couple of coppers at the market if necessary, or head to a village if needed. You'll figure out our next steps in that time, won't you?" The priest eyed me carefully, seeking traces of certainty about the morrow on my face.

Tomorrow's outlook promised little good, but I kept such thoughts to myself. I simply nodded in agreement and settled with the innkeeper according to the plan outlined by the priest.

As evening approached, by the time we had arranged our belongings in Lou's chamber—which the innkeeper grandly termed a room—it was time for dinner.

The broth was passable, but the accompanying flatbread was utterly tough and tasteless. Still, it was sustenance, and a sense of fullness came quickly enough. After our weeklong journey, I noticed I had begun to be content with less, even though back home, this bowl would have barely lasted a couple of hours, just a few spoonfuls really. Here, my metabolism seemed to have recalibrated so that hunger threatened only by morning.

Before bed, I went out to the backyard to splash about in a barrel. As the innkeeper rightly pointed out, the bathhouse was available only on the sixth or seventh day of the week, when folks came into town for trading. Today was merely the third day, so the only option for washing off the grime was a barrel of rainwater out back. With no rain for weeks, the container was empty, which they informed me of. The innkeeper offered the services of his younger son, who for a copper would fetch water from the well, an offer I declined. I had arms and legs; I could carry my own water.

I cursed my decision on the tenth trip back and forth. The buckets were small, about six liters, and terribly inconvenient, much like the well itself. Perhaps it was just a matter of getting the knack? Having struggled to fill them, I washed, rinsed my trousers and underclothes, changing into jeans. I also rinsed my T-shirt, rightly judging it would dry overnight, and then draped my jacket over my damp back. Now, after the water ritual, I had to take my backpack up to Lou's room and then to Ilya in the stable to sleep.

I had hardly finished when the goddess appeared around the corner, demanding that I fetch her water. Lu seemed uncomfortable in her human form, though she appeared, to me, never to sweat and always looked unreasonably fresh and lively. But, evidently, she too needed to wash off the road's dust and dirt.

Muttering under my breath, I made four more trips to the well, after which Lou sent me away to start her own bathing routine. Well, that was fine by me; I wasn't particularly keen on watching a half-naked young body... What was I thinking about? Time to bring the stuff upstairs and join Ilya in the stable, to sleep.

The subsequent days merged into a single, continuous scramble. No one needed an assistant who knew nothing of their craft, so my search for quick work was a bust. And our money was dwindling. Another silver went to market produce, which we shamelessly stored in Lou's room, using her space as a makeshift pantry.

The goddess spoke little to me, but I could see her mood darkening by the day.

On the fourth day, luck turned my way. Early in the morning, I snagged a job unloading a cart, which promised a half copper and a meal. However, it wasn't without conflict. It turned out I had taken the work from a village lad who habitually arrived late and had vexed the shopkeeper. Hiring me was the merchant's way of teaching the laggard a lesson.

The lad glared at me maliciously, to which I merely shrugged, suggesting that the early bird catches the worm. One must be more alert.

The work was arduous, but I finished just in time for lunch. Feeling a satisfying ache in my shoulders and back, I devoured the hot soup with soft bread, careful not to scald my lips and mouth. Pleased and full, I received my pay from the shopkeeper, who appreciated both my silence and speed. He even suggested I drop by in a week—when barrels of beer, sacks of flour, and other heavy items were due to arrive. He wouldn't mind my prompt, quiet services for a more challenging task, so we agreed on nineteen coppers and parted on almost warm terms.

Had I known how things would turn out, I would have steered clear of that shop. Content and nourished, confident that I had secured a day's work for the following week, which meant I would certainly eat and earn something for the old man and my goddess, my path was blocked by three young men. One of them was the very villager whose day's earnings I had usurped, and the other two were, presumably, his cronies.

They had already indulged in beer, ale, or young wine, judging by their flushed faces, but it was clear this encounter promised me no good. I was far from a fighter. Even against three city folk from my world, my chances were slim, let alone against three sturdy medieval village lads whose life's amusements were drinking beer, furtively trying to get under a girl's skirt, and brawling.

They gave me a good thrashing, let me tell you. They didn't even consider talking; everything was understood, so they simply started beating me. I didn't try to run—where could I run to? Who would I complain to? Whether the local militia would resolve such issues, or if there was a stockade to cool hot heads, I had no idea, so I had to endure stoically. At one point, they knocked me to the ground and resorted to kicking. I did my best to shield my face with my arms, tried not to expose my kidneys too much, and overall, I resembled an overturned beetle.

When the beating stopped, I felt someone rifling through my pockets. The thief extracted all of my day's earnings, plus a couple of coppers I always carried for small change.

"And don't you dare show your face here again, got it?" hissed the villager.

He looked at me without particular malice or pride for his deed, his gaze direct and open. It seemed to me that he treated my beating as a job rather than an act of revenge—as if to say, I had taken his work, and he had taught me a lesson to dissuade future encroachment.

In response, I nodded silently, signifying that the lesson had been learned.

Once the trio had vanished around the corner, I rose and began to assess myself.

Surprisingly, all bones were intact, though my body ached mercilessly. They had beaten me professionally, I had to admit. Without serious injury, but with humiliating thoroughness and great pain. Yet, this was understandable. If every village brawl ended with gashes, breaks, or mangled limbs, peasants would have long since perished as a class. As it was, they'd roughed me up, taken my coins, taught me a lesson. And there was little to complain about—after all, try proving that I had any money on me, especially an amount so trivial. Well, at least I had eaten.

Limping back to the inn, I immediately headed for the barrel—to wash myself and rinse my dusty clothes. It was during this unsightly task that Lou found me.

"What now?" I asked gruffly without looking at the goddess.

"Just observing," she answered simply.

"And what do you see?"

"That you're certainly no warrior."

"I've already said I'm an accountant, not a fighter."

"Oh yes, I've noticed," Lou's voice carried a venomous undercurrent, "you couldn't fend off even three peasants."

I kept silent. The goddess had a point, but I hadn't signed up for this life. I wasn't even supposed to be here. With a bit more sharpness than necessary, I walked past Lu to the hayloft, not even bothering to take my backpack up to her room, which I had grabbed on the way to the barrel.

The following days proved even more hopeless. Money was evaporating, slipping through my fingers, and I seriously contemplated going to the market square to sell some of my possessions. The last straw for my composure was my trousers tearing live between my legs. I had been too lazy to pull up the knees, and as a result, the overtaxed fabric gave way as I bent over for a bucket.

In frustration, I kicked the bucket aside, sat down on the ground, stretched out my legs, and leaned back against the inn's wall, staring at the dusty toes of my boots. My nerves twanged, my heartbeat thundered in my ears with torrents of blood, and I felt capillaries in my eyes might burst from internal pressure. I had objectively reached the brink of nervous exhaustion. The unending stress I'd endured since arriving in this world, so unfriendly to Moscow accountants, had brought me to the edge.

It's commonly believed that in such a state, a person should jump up, vent, break something within reach, or punch a few faces to feel better. However, I was far from that. Instead, a dark, dirty cloud of despair and hopelessness that I had willed away was now bearing down on me. Despair didn't dissipate; it merely receded to the background, returning in dreams or moments of weakness when I allowed myself to ponder future prospects. Now, I was as tense as I was depleted, unable to continue hauling the mire of my existence.

Lu found me in the throes of creeping catatonia. Whether she sensed something amiss through the magical collar that bound me to her, or she just happened by, I didn't know.

I looked up at her, bracing for another acidic tirade about my helplessness and inability to do anything when she needed a hero.

"Go ahead, Goddess Lu, finish me off, tell me what you think," I bitterly challenged in my thoughts.

She stood beside me for a moment, noticing the hole in my trousers and the bucket cast aside, then simply sat down beside me, back against the wall, hugging her knees.

We didn't speak.

Lu sat silently, motionless, while I wallowed in my own thoughts, sinking deeper into a ringing emptiness of the soul that heralded complete apathy to everything around. I longed to drink and forget.

"Anton," Lu eventually spoke after about fifteen minutes, breaking the silence. "I know you're not a great warrior or a mage, just an ordinary person. But I see you're trying. And I value that."

Her delicate fingers then wrapped around my hand and squeezed ever so slightly. In that moment, I felt the comforting power of my goddess at work.

No wave of vitality swept through me; I didn't leap up ready to slay dragons, nor did I break into a joyous dance or burst into song. But the oppressive black knot that had settled in my chest, making it hard to breathe these last few days, receded. It didn't vanish—I was still fully aware of our dire straits—but Lou had pulled me from my stupor. Gratefully, I squeezed her fingers back, and then her hand slipped from mine, leaving only the pleasant memory of her fleeting touch.

The vice of internal pressure loosened, and I found myself able to think clearly and sanely enough to plan a step ahead. "Has Iliy returned? Or do you have anything?" I asked simply, still staring straight ahead.

The goddess shook her head and explained, "Ily hasn't returned yet, and I haven't found anything, though I have asked around."

A few days earlier, at a council of our small band, we had decided to move out of the inn and start lodging with one of the townsfolk or peasants from the nearby village. The search for accommodation largely fell on old Ily, because at first, Lou flatly refused to engage in such matters, and I was constantly on the lookout for odd jobs. However, after Ily returned empty-handed twice, Lou joined the search as well.

"I suppose I'll have to sell the backpack," I thought to myself, but then a better idea struck me.

No one would pay a penny for torn trousers; their very state made them worthless. But the fabric remained, and it was of good quality. First, I changed into a pair of whole jeans that I had kept pristine, wearing them only when the other pair was drying after a wash. Then I thoroughly washed the torn trousers in the barrel, sparing no river sand from the bucket nearby, rinsed them well, and took out a knife.

"What are you doing?" Lou, still seated against the wall, watched my maneuvers.

"No one will pay more than a couple of coppers for pants torn in the seat, my goddess, even if they are of very fine fabric," I replied. "They're beyond repair, so I'm just going to make something from them that can be sold at a profit."

I didn't delve into further explanations and simply started to rip the seams. In half an hour and a few swipes of the knife, I had four wet strips of excellent fabric, from which a skilled person could tailor smaller trousers or, say, some decorative clothing elements—like ribbons for dresses.

Lu watched my activities intently and even helped when the fabric needed to be carefully stretched on the nearest plank to make a clean and straight cut.

Pleased with myself, I waited for the fabric to dry, made sure it was clean and presentable, and headed into town.

Luck was not on my side at first. The pieces of fabric were too small; here, people were accustomed to trading whole rolls, and I had only four narrow but long scraps. Just as I was beginning to think I wasn't as clever and perceptive as I had fancied myself in recent weeks, one of the seamstresses took an interest in my goods. She thought the fabric could make good ties for a couple of dark shirts and dresses because it was much sturdier than what she usually used.

After a bit of haggling—a necessity—I managed to get seven silver coins for my ill-fated trousers, and when I mentioned I had scraps, she agreed to take them for three copper half-pieces.

When I returned to the inn, my mood was further buoyed by Ily. The old man had found a widow-laundress on the outskirts of the city who lived alone, laundered and mended clothes for the streets nearby her house, and was willing to let us stay for a nominal fee and help around the household.

We began to gather our modest belongings. I packed the remaining items in my backpack, carefully placing my empty containers deeper inside, then headed downstairs. I quickly settled up with the innkeeper for the couple of days we owed; though I had the money, I decided to test this man's patience. The innkeeper didn't fuss much but reminded me twice about payment. Now we agreed that I would settle the bill that evening before bed, and the next morning we would all leave after breakfast.

In high spirits, I returned to my task—job hunting. It was worth another attempt to break through to the administration about work or at least some accounting side jobs—the town head had been absent the past two weeks, paying homage to his baron, but was due back any day. According to the locals, he was a businesslike, unassuming man, so I hoped to find common ground with him.

The town head was not there, but one of the clerks whispered that he would be back tomorrow. Apparently, he had arrived today but had rightfully taken the rest of the day off. He was entitled.

When I returned to the inn, dusk was falling. After a brisk splash in the barrel, I went up to Lou's room to take the money from my backpack to settle the bill.

I found the girl lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling, seemingly just returned and catching her breath like me. After a brief nod, I sat down by the backpack next to the head of her bed and was stunned.

"Lu," I trembled so that I even forgot to add the obligatory "goddess" or "my goddess." I didn't call her "mistress" like Ily did, although her grey-violet eyes constantly hinted at it. "Did you take the money?"

The goddess raised her eyebrow in surprise. "No."

"Then we've been robbed."

Someone had rummaged through my backpack and scooped out all the large coins from the small inner pocket, leaving behind only a few coppers.

Again, a feeling of hopelessness and despair overwhelmed me, and I desperately wished for my goddess to take my hand again, which she almost immediately did, gripping my palm firmly with her slender fingers.

**Chapter 4: The Accountant**

Within five minutes of discovering the theft, I had half the inn up in arms. It was serious business: if anyone could stroll into the rooms on the upper floor and rifle through the guests' belongings, then the innkeeper, who spent all day perched behind the counter or down below, monitoring the comings and goings, was worth a pittance.

Naturally, we first had to wait for Iliy, who had stepped out, likely to finalize arrangements with the widow and discuss the finer points. As soon as the old man returned, he immediately assumed the role of lead investigator and personal headache for the innkeeper, who kept trying to deflect with a "you have only yourselves to blame" stance.

I had come to understand that Ily was a frugal fellow, but to see him lay into a burly, mustachioed publican without getting punched in the face—my hat was off to him. I couldn't have done it. In truth, I was still shaking; the stress of the past few weeks hadn't subsided, and the theft was a significant blow to my nerves.

Only after an hour and a half did I realize that all this time Lu had been by my side, stealthily touching my hand during the most tense moments, when I was on the verge of losing it and launching myself at the innkeeper. To everyone, including my goddess, it was clear that the man would flatten me without effort.

After a lengthy bout of swearing and mutual accusations, Ily managed to extract from the innkeeper that today, aside from the known guests and a couple of passing merchants—whom suspecting of petty theft would be the height of folly—the innkeeper's eldest son had been loitering around with a couple of his cronies. I couldn't see what this would yield, but Ily showed that he had a better understanding of people than I did. With a "honeyed" voice—if one could call the old man's rasp that—he coaxed from the innkeeper information about his son's friends, and it began to dawn on me what had happened.

The picture became clear. Around the same time we had decided to move out, that trio had been lurking near the counter, which meant they could have overheard our conversation with the innkeeper. Plus, I had been shining like a polished copper samovar. The lads made a simple deduction: come morning, these guests would depart, and the missing money wouldn't be discovered right away. Their plan was almost flawless, save for the fact that these dimwits assumed I had already settled the bill and wouldn't check my savings until the very departure.

The innkeeper also realized where Ily's questions were leading, and immediately feigned ignorance—if it came out that his darling boy had pilfered from the guests, the shame would be unbearable. Plus, both the son and the innkeeper himself could face a couple dozen lashes from the city guard. Thieves were disliked here, and doubly so if they stole from their own. Had we been in a larger city, the matter could have ended in amputation of a hand, so lashes were merciful by comparison.

The innkeeper's son and his two companions couldn't be found until morning. It turned out they had squandered almost all our money on wine and snacks, which they had lavished outside the city walls on their friends and girls of easy virtue. This Ily and I learned from one of the shops where the young men had stocked up just before closing.

Judging by their puffy faces, the thieves had heartily enjoyed my hard-earned money, but with every second of conversation with the innkeeper and a couple of other men, they grew increasingly and distinctly pale.

Suddenly, the situation took an unexpected turn. The innkeeper faced me and brazenly declared that his son had taken nothing, and that I, along with my vile old man, was slandering his fine boy.

Truth be told, I had anticipated any number of outcomes, but in all the scenarios I envisioned, my money was returned to me in one form or another, and in the best case, with a couple of extra coins "for the trouble." But now, my companions and I were being blatantly swindled.

It became clear to me that this plan had hatched in the innkeeper's mind the moment I burst onto the first floor and bellowed that I had been robbed in a room rented for such a hefty sum. It seemed the innkeeper had seen both his son and his friends, and possibly even watched as they ascended to the second floor, but initially thought nothing of it. For a moment, the thought flashed that he might have been in on it, but I quickly dismissed this: the man knew I hadn't settled up with him yet and would immediately notice the missing money.

By the pale look of his elder son, a lump of a lad around seventeen with a flat face and small eyes like his father's, I knew that when all was said and done, he would be soundly punished for his actions.

The innkeeper struggled to hide his smug grin, while a couple of men behind him, who had helped in the search, flexed their fists, ready to throw us out.

"I can see where this is going," I thought and glanced at Lou standing beside me, who was watching the unfolding scene with keen interest. I couldn't discern the emotions of the goddess, but they were certainly far from pleasant or cheerful.

"Just don't let her slash anyone," I managed to think before the innkeeper's fist flew towards my face.

If Lu drew the steel of her sword, it would place us outside the law. We had no noble privileges to defend our honor, and simple rules applied: fight with the same weapon used against you. If she unsheathed her sword now as her final argument, Ily and I would likely be subdued by the guards and then hanged as murderers.

I wasn't worried about Lou's safety; she had claimed to have five hundred years to master the art of war, for what else does a half-forgotten deity, who needs neither sleep nor sustenance, have to do? My own well-being, however, was not something I felt so confident about.

The innkeeper struck with a wide, hearty swing, aiming to settle the dispute with a single blow. But it was his overconfidence, and the adrenaline nearly bursting from my ears, that saved me from a deep knockout. I dodged to the side, raised my hands, and braced for a fight. His comrades had already rallied to his side, so things looked grim.

No one was particularly wary of Lou's sword. Firstly, what is there to fear from a slight and delicate girl, easily swept away by any gust of wind? Secondly, if she drew her sword, execution loomed over us all. So, the men simply piled on us in silence—old Ily, the sly dog, had vanished the moment things started to sizzle.

The brawl itself is a blur to me. I'd like to say I dodged and weaved, ducking the countrymen's broad swings and delivering swift jabs like Bruce Lee, but in reality, I took a hit to the ear in the second second of the fight. From then on, it was a free-for-all: the men pounded me, I shielded my head, blindly swinging, trying to land a hit on anyone, while Lu spun nearby, wielding her sheathed short sword like a club.

Without the goddess, I would have been buried there. Even against just the innkeeper, I stood no chance, and the men were so focused on thrashing me that they reluctantly turned their attention to Lou's strikes. The girl, as I later realized, was more accustomed to slashing and stabbing to death than to disabling enemies without harm, so she was simply bewildered.

Suddenly, someone grabbed me from under my arms, and local militia officers piled on the innkeeper and his mates, twisting the brawlers' arms behind their backs.

"Veni! By the Mother, tell me, what have you wrought here?" The voice was commanding. One of my eyes was flooded with blood from a split eyebrow, the other wouldn't open at all—someone had landed a solid punch—so I couldn't quite make out who was speaking.

For order's sake, I twitched once more, just to check how firmly the militia held me, then went limp, as they say, accepting the inevitable with a kind of relief.

"Veni, you cur's spawn, I'm talking to you!" repeated the unknown voice, stepping up to the grimly silent innkeeper, who was casting malevolent glances around.

One of the militia finally let go of my arm, and I was able to wipe away the blood to see the man who was asking such uncomfortable questions of the innkeeper.

In front of me stood a small man, fitting the description of the city head, and right behind him, shuffling from foot to foot, was Ily.

"Ah, you old cunning devil," I thought, nodding gratefully at the elder.

Unlike me, an idiot who takes on the world's challenges with open arms and a cry of "Hit me, I'm not afraid!", Ily was more cunning. As soon as he sensed the situation going awry, which happened the moment the innkeeper didn't send away his men during the interrogation of his son, he dashed towards the administration to bring the guard. There, Ily ran into the city head, whom we all had been trying to track down. The head was just listening to a subordinate's account of a young accountant who had been haunting the administration's doorway for a week, asking for work.

The old man interrupted the local officials' conversation with "Save him, in the name of the Mother! The innkeeper has robbed the accountant and now aims to kill him!" and then collapsed to his knees before the head.

The latter part was unnecessary, as the city head certainly didn't need deadly brawls in his city. So, taking a handful of militia and Ily, the head decided to take control of the situation himself and also to see this audacious accountant who so confidently told his subordinates he could outperform anyone in the job.

Thus, Iliy became the unexpected savior from action movies, bringing cavalry, the national guard, tanks, and helicopters to aid me, barely holding my own in defense.

What happened next is hazy, as I took another concussion. The head forced the innkeeper to return all the money his son had stolen, plus an additional five silver pieces for my shoddy appearance. The men paid silently, knowing that lashes threatened them otherwise.

After leaving the trio to stew over their humiliating repayment of debts and contributions, the head ordered the militia to escort us wherever we wished, and he invited me to visit him at the administration when I could move normally—my audacity had intrigued him too much. He also thanked Lou separately, with a slight bow, for not drawing her steel and allowing matters to be resolved without severe bloodshed.

The reverence with which the city head treated the goddess left me momentarily dumbfounded, and it dawned on me just how foolish I had been all this time.

In my eyes, Lu seemed like a freshman girl carried away by live-action role-playing games. To those around us, however, the girl was at least a well-to-do city dweller from the capital, or a nobleman's daughter who, for some reason, had set out to travel incognito.

I later learned from the people that Lu's violet eyes were not the norm in this world and indicated, at the very least, a magical potential. Most magicians here were of noble birth. However, many potential mages were either too weak or simply incapable of mastering their powers, so the unusual eye color was not entirely unheard of.

Once the image of the world and Lu's place in it finally settled in my dull head, I realized how foolish it was to send a goddess to look for our lodging. I also understood why all our market purchases in her presence cost us thrice as much as if Ily or I had gone alone. The crafty merchants quickly deduced the lady before them and jacked up prices, reasoning that we could afford it. I had thought that with Lu's "beautiful eyes," I could haggle a discount as one might in our world's markets. Such was my misunderstanding of the local mentality.

Later, I took another look at Lu. Sturdy shoes, a slender figure, delicate, clean hands with alabaster skin untouched by physical labor, and narrow palms. A neat, firm chest that suggested Lu had never borne nor nursed a child, though many girls around her age already had at least one little terror. A neat, thin neck and an overly refined, noble face, unlike the simple, albeit often pretty, faces of the peasant women. And, of course, the clothing and the sword. Trousers, a corset, a cloak—all marked Lou as a traveling noblewoman, certainly not an ordinary village girl or someone from a small town like Serdon.

It took me a couple of days to recover from the fight.

We settled with a widowed washerwoman, as agreed. I had imagined her to be a decrepit old crone, but we were greeted by a quiet, tall woman of about thirty-five. Or perhaps younger: people aged quickly here, lacking skincare and other amenities that could preserve youth and skin elasticity, available only to the higher echelons. I handed over our finances to Iliy, wisely deducing I'd make a poor treasurer, after warning the old man not to squander it on booze. My view of him as a drunkard hadn't changed. Iliy feigned insult, but after some belated words of gratitude for saving my rear, he thawed and assured me the money would be safe with him. However, if the old man did spend the coins on wine, he would have to answer to Lou, who now also needed to eat and sleep.

The widow was named Zora. As I later found out, her husband, a tanner, had died a few years back. One of his apprentices had spilled a vat of boiling leather, scalding the poor man to the bone in places. Zora spared the grisly details of his suffering, but knowing various injuries from my world, I could imagine his departure was long and agonizing. Perhaps a nearby healing mage could have pulled him back from death's door, but at a cost astronomical.

Zora was childless. Gossip had it she was barren. And there she was, a little over thirty, still attractive—even I, corrupted by the beauty standards of my world, could appreciate her figure and curves—left utterly alone. The house had been her mother's legacy, so now Zora simply worked, saving for her old age and occasionally aiding her sister, who lived in a village twenty leagues from Serdon.

After apologizing to the widow for not being able to help with the chores as we'd agreed, I slowly recuperated. Eating was the hardest; my lips had been beaten to a pulp, and hot food was a torment. I had to blow on each spoonful for a long while and gingerly feed myself tiny portions.

On the third day, I somewhat recovered, though my face still resembled a massive yellow bruise and the swelling from the ear where I had received the first blow had just begun to subside. I went to the administration office. Money wouldn't earn itself, and I couldn't bear Lou's piercing glares, which she threw my way at any opportunity. Sometimes the goddess was so irritated that I felt the invisible collar around my neck tighten, but there was nothing I could do about it.

The collar, by the way, was a constant nuisance. As long as Lou was in direct sight, all was well, but as soon as we lost visual contact, the symbol of my enslavement would uncomfortably make its presence known. If Lou was in a good or neutral mood, the collar was more or less bearable, but as soon as she got angry, I immediately felt the pressure around my neck increase.

The second issue was my excursions into town. Initially, I made sure to take Lou with me everywhere, or if I went out alone, I didn't stray too far from the inn where my goddess resided. This wasn't too difficult since the inn was near the market and the city center, but now things had changed. We had moved to the outskirts, closer to the wooden wall encircling Serdon, and I was genuinely concerned about the oxygen supply to my poor brain.

Lu and I had a discussion about this, during which she assured me that she had no idea how to remove the spell, nor was she particularly keen on doing so, as it would mean losing her hold on me. I owed her a temple, an altar, a flock, and a new priest – these were the conditions of my release from magical bondage. We agreed that in my absence, she would endeavor to think only happy, kind, and bright thoughts, lest she inadvertently strangle me from afar. Through a series of small experiments, we discovered that if she commanded me to go somewhere far away, the collar wouldn't choke me for the duration of the errand. I even managed a reconnaissance trip to the nearest village without any discomfort.

So, that became our arrangement: like a henpecked husband, I would ask the goddess for permission whenever I needed to venture more than a few hundred steps away, and she would nod regally in response as if bestowing a great favor. At first, this grated on me, but the ability to breathe freely was ultimately more valuable. A few seconds of humiliation, and I was granted safety and comfort after receiving permission to leave the house for my errands.

"Becoming whipped," I thought bitterly to myself after seeking Lou's permission to visit the nearby shop.

I did secure a job with the head of the town. The little man subjected me to a serious interview, more akin to an interrogation, but quickly realized that I was familiar with numbers.

One result of the head's homage trip to the baron was a demand to present accounts for the last five years. The baron was considering restructuring his domains and transferring a few more settlements under Serdon's wing, or if the city's affairs were found lacking, to retract a couple of larger villages.

As the head explained, a portion of the taxes collected settled in the town's treasury, which was then spent on the needs of the city and surrounding villages. This fund was used to purchase forage, new horses, and livestock for the baron's estates, worked by serfs and hired peasants. Plus, the head's income was directly tied to the profits from these estates and the taxes and tributes collected – essentially, the man was on a commission. The baron was no fool and didn't skin his peasants for three layers of hide, although, as I heard, much depended on the individual and the situation could vary drastically from district to district.

My task was simultaneously simple and impossible for an ordinary accountant – to make sense of the last five years' records and report to the head. How he would then sell these figures to the baron was his business. I had a month, until the Summer festival, known here as Ivan's Day. After that, the head would travel back to the baron to resolve organizational matters.

The records at the administration were kept, albeit haphazardly. Some were on waxed tablets, easily damaged, others on thick, brittle parchment of dreadful quality. Precise dates were missing in places, and the totals stubbornly refused to add up.

When I gained access to the archives, I was taken aback. I had realized that the head was more of a tactician than a strategist – effective only in the immediate, short-term actions, which is why the baron had questions about him – but I had not expected such a dismal state of affairs.

Fortunately, along with some knowledge, Lu had hammered clerical literacy into my head during our first encounter. Reading the local script was challenging, like a familiar but not native language. Numbers were even worse. They used a form of Roman numeration, which made me wonder how they managed finances at all in this world.

On the bright side, I was promised half a gold coin per week for six days of work, with one day off, and they even gave me five silver coins in advance. Plus, the head hinted at a bonus of a couple of gold coins, or maybe even a whole "king," if I performed beyond his expectations.

As I understood the man, he hoped I could fish out anything presentable from his archives that he could show the baron without being punished. The local accountant and scribe had lost all hope of managing the sudden task set by the lord of these lands, so now all hope was on me.

The first thing I did was attempt to organize the records by year. The biggest challenge was sorting the waxed tablets, whose entries were all too easy to damage. After the tablets, I would have to do the same with the parchments. To assist, the head assigned me an administrative scribe to command three days a week.

While the scribe wrestled with the heap of tablets and scrolls, I buried myself in several barn books, stitched from the same dreadful parchment. These tomes contained final accounting, and I hoped to get by with minimal bloodshed.

"Yeah, right," sneered my inner voice when I realized that the numbers didn't match at all. It was unclear whether the errors were in the final tally or if the workers had incorrectly transferred data from the tablets and parchments to the summary book. Plus, there was no internal system or sorting. One column included both monetary taxes and natural economy produce as payments. In the end, I had a jumble of monetary units and measures of grain, leather, fabric, flour, vegetables, and onions. In one line, I even found mention of a tribute payment in puppies from a kennel owner in a village ten leagues from the city.

"Great. Just great," my inner voice continued to bolster my spirits, but the keen desire to see what a golden "king" looked like, promised by the head for excellent results, spurred my commitment to the task.

I practically lived at the administration office, and in the first week, I even went there on my day off.

Living at Zora's was both effortless and delightful. At the crack of dawn, I would help the lady by drawing water for washing, splitting wood, and firing up the special stove in the backyard where the washtubs sat. As I undertook these tasks, Zora would either prepare breakfast for everyone or warm up the previous evening's leftovers.

Zora, a native, nourished us well. She procured provisions directly from the farmers and familiar shopkeepers, largely bypassing the market stalls at the center. So, for three silver coins—the agreed price for a week's board—we all feasted amply. Zora also dined with us. Additionally, she charged a nominal three half-coppers for lodging—since I was significantly aiding her with household chores, she had no intention of gouging us.

Her home comprised two rooms and a shared dining area with a large stove. The mistress claimed one room for herself, while the other, previously cluttered with the washerwoman's sewing implements, we ceded to Lou. The old man and I took up residence in the common hall—he on the stove bench and I on a makeshift bed laid out on the benches each evening.

Considering I rose each morning with the hostess and was away all day at the administration, we imposed no burden on Zora. Iliy roamed the town, collecting rumors, occasionally indulging in a mug of beer for a couple of coppers—an indulgence I overlooked. So far, there were no complaints about the old man's treasury skills, nor was he ever found in a drunken stupor, despite his appearance. Hence, a daily pint seemed innocuous, particularly since beer was a staple here for young and old alike.

I, however, was so exhausted daily that alcohol was the furthest thing from my mind. Tablets and scrolls flickered before my eyes, and even in slumber, I waded through the administrative accounts as if they were the Augean stables.

By the middle of the second week, Lu began to tag along with me to the administration. She wouldn't admit it, but I sensed she was simply bored. Over the days, she had watched Zora work and even attempted some darning herself. She was exceptionally skilled, so much so that the young widow offered to take Lu on as a partner, but the goddess quickly lost interest after just a few days of mending other people's garments.

And so, after breakfast, my goddess and I would stride confidently towards the administration.

As it turned out, I should've brought the violet-eyed goddess with me from day one—her assistance was invaluable. Her keen intellect, meticulous attention, and divine memory were assets where I stumbled due to my lack of experience in such matters. I had never applied my field studies in the real world, my only experience being the management of accounts at the communication salon I worked at post-university.

Together, within a week, we had cleared most of the backlog, pinpointing the main sources of income and categorizing them. The primary task now was rewriting and compiling summary tables.

I was acutely aware that conducting business as usual, like the administration's regular accountant and scribe, was simply untenable. The scribe had tried to resist my innovations, so I relieved him of his duties.

Lou replaced him, and not by my persuasion. After witnessing my clumsy attempts with a quill and the resulting paper massacre, she literally snatched the writing implements from me and took to the table herself. I found it easier to work with clay tablets and a stylus, more familiar tools, for my notes.

One day, my notes, scribbled with familiar Arabic numerals, caught the goddess's eye and sparked her curiosity. I had rightly decided that eventually, Lou would transcribe everything into the ledger in the world's customary script under my dictation. It was much easier to operate with the script I had known since childhood. Besides, I could hardly muster the clerical alphabet's symbols and numbers common throughout Talleria. It seemed I had acquired knowledge and literacy, but not the fine motor skills for writing. So instead of the customary signs and symbols—a mix of runes and Korean hieroglyphs—my hand produced mere squiggles. I attempted to impart the basic numerical principles of my world and the decimal system to Lou, but she did not delve deep. We had much work, and there was no time for distractions.

"You know, this system could intrigue the Wise Sofa," my goddess casually remarked as she carefully entered data about grain taxes from another village into the new ledger.

I was taken aback. Iliy had detailed the system of divine communication in this world, and now it seemed Lou was hinting that I could offer a substantial tribute to the sixth god of the Great Circle.

"Do you suggest I should go and pray to Sofa?" I braced myself for a wrathful look and the tightening of the magical collar around my neck. Lu had become quite fond of Mother’s gift and was fully leveraging the opportunity to prod me with it.

"What's wrong with that?" She answered plainly, not looking up from her writing. "Everyone prays to the god they need at the moment."

Her candidness floored me. I had so resigned to my servile status beside Lou that I hadn't considered that other gods' doors were still open to me. Yes, I was bound to her by Mother's magic, but only physically, not spiritually. Yet, I was acutely wary of angering Lu for obvious reasons.

"And you wouldn't be opposed?" I ventured, tossing out the critical question as casually as suggesting to my metaphorical wife the inclusion of another woman in our shared bedroom.

Lu finished writing a line and glanced up from the book.

"Of course not. Especially if it helps the cause," she said nonchalantly, returning to her work. "If you haven't noticed, Anton, I'm not a fool, and I understand we need all the help we can get. Especially if it's from one of the Seven."

She tossed aside her pen and leaned back in her chair, locking eyes with me.

"You've been here for over a month, and all we've achieved is the reorganization of the grain ledgers in the administration. I believed in you, Anton, but I'm realizing that our chances of success are very slim."

Lou pursed her lips in slight discontent, and I tensed for the squeeze of the magical collar, but it never came.

"You were right about who I am," the girl continued reluctantly.

(уже было) I mentally whistled. For a proud five-hundred-year-old goddess, who could spend an entire day without uttering a single word to me, to admit I was right about her nature—that was something from the realm of "the obvious yet incredible." If someone had offered me a wager a week ago and gave me the choice to bet on whether reptilians from Nibiru ruled my world or that Lu would vocally acknowledge my correctness, I would have unhesitatingly put all my money on the reptilians.

"I need a temple, an altar, and good deeds. You're no warrior; you can't obtain trophies, nor can you earn rewards from any king or emperor. So we must simply earn money and build it ourselves. Perhaps then, we might find me a new priest," the goddess continued.

"So, this is our plan—a trap?" I asked.

"A plan... what? Well, yes. That's how I see our path, Anton. That's why I'm here, with you. Earning my way to a new temple," Lou said, her smile lacking its usual cheer as she glanced at the ledger before her, now more human than ever.

Brushing aside the unwanted and even hazardous-for-my-health images that appeared while I looked at Lou—perhaps this vixen reads my thoughts but just pretends not to—I averted my gaze from the goddess and returned to work.

Upon returning home, we found Zora in tears. It turned out that her sister's husband had visited her again today to borrow money. This time the woman refused because they already owed her five gold coins from the past couple of years. According to Iliy's account, the son-in-law insulted her considerably, calling her "a skinny haddock" and "a barren fool"—which were the kindest of his words.

What to do was utterly unclear. It's difficult to console a semi-stranger, especially since I didn't fully understand her relationship with her sister and her family. But leaving things as they were seemed unacceptable.

A solution came from an unexpected source. Into the house walked Irving, the familiar blacksmith who worked in a nearby workshop and often helped the widow with her cauldrons, stove, and other metalwork she actively used in her work. He charged only a nominal fee, usually inviting himself to dinner, so even a blind man could see why he had worn a path to the home of the lone woman.

Irving was older than Zora. I would estimate him to be in his mid-forties, perhaps even fifty. The grey in his hair and beard had nearly completed its task of recoloring the man into an elder, but Irving himself was still a robust and strong man. Of somewhat short stature, almost half a head shorter than Zora, who was quite tall and could look me straight in the eye, the blacksmith seemed almost square-shaped. But that was no surprise given his profession. However, Irving was extremely taciturn and stingy with emotions, and it wasn't just with strangers—even when alone with Zora, he would simply work silently, answering any of the woman's questions in monosyllables.

Irving's two younger daughters were already married off, and his eldest son, whom he had trained in his craft, had moved to his wife's village and was working there with the local old master, which, with due diligence, would eventually allow him to occupy the very respectable position of the village's chief blacksmith. Irving's wife had died long ago, and for at least the last ten years, he had been a widower.

Actually, when the blacksmith entered the house, he stumbled upon a classic "unexpected" scene: Zora crying by the stove, Iliy on the bench at the table, slightly stupefied and content from the beer he had recently enjoyed at the tavern, and me, standing in the middle of the room, looking handsome, grim, and contemplative. Lu was in her room, having decided to lie down after a day bent over writing.

It took Irving remarkably little time to process his thoughts and assess the situation, and he immediately headed in my direction as the potential offender against the woman. And why not? A drunk old man on the bench, a crying Zora fussing over dinner, and me, all handsome, frowning, and thoughtful.

I wouldn't have survived a confrontation with the blacksmith, so I quickly oriented myself and managed to utter two words before Irving rolled up his sleeves and prepared to knock the spirit out of my frail body with a single blow.

"The son-in-law came," my voice quavered, and the end of the phrase came out in an embarrassingly high pitch.

Irving stopped in his tracks after those words. His beard, which a second ago bristled with anger, settled down, and the fire in his eyes that promised me endless torments in hell for offending the widow was extinguished.

Overcoming his usual reticence, the blacksmith moved to Zora and began to quietly speak to her. Meanwhile, the old man and I exchanged looks and made the only right move in the situation—we went outside to get some fresh air.

"Never stand between a blacksmith and his anvil," Iliy muttered, a wisdom of questionable depth.

I refrained from commenting that Zora was far from being Irving's "anvil," as the old man had put it, but I kept my thoughts to myself.

After just a few minutes, the blacksmith burst out of the house as if scalded and, breathing threats, rushed past us and Iliy. Clearly, his heart-to-heart with Zora had not gone well.

We found our landlady in tears again. The woman sat on the bench and sobbed quietly, plunging both Iliy and me into profound embarrassment. After some brief questioning, a glass of water, and encouraging words, we finally learned why she had quarreled with the blacksmith.

"Well, I told him, why do you keep coming to a woman with deficiencies, the whole street is already laughing at you..." Zora recounted through sniffles. "And he just looked at me as if he didn't know me, and then he ran off. Mother! Why is all this happening to me?"

I felt the woman about to break into chest-heaving sobs again, so, finding nothing better, I improvised on the spot.

"Zora, listen. Where we come from, our women in search of solace pray to the local goddess, not the Mother."

"And what goddess is that?" Zora asked mechanically.

"Everyone calls her Lu, like my sister," I replied, and at the mention of "sister," the woman snorted just as she had the first time I claimed kinship with the goddess. It was akin to calling a pig and a racehorse relatives, where I was clearly cast in the role of the pig. For that performance, by the way, I later paid dearly with long hours of suffocation and heavy glances from Lu.

"Lu gives solace to the grieving, Zora. It eases their burdens. Even I have felt her power," I confessed without deceit, for Lu had indeed pulled me back from the brink of a nervous collapse more than once.

"And how does one pray to her in your lands? Will she even hear me without an altar?"

"Lu always hears, especially the lonely women."

At this juncture, I handed Zora into the slightly sobered care of Iliy. The priest began to educate the widow about the power of the "goddess from a distant village" and how to properly offer prayers so that she might respond.

Later, I noticed Lou's silhouette in the doorway, who had, it seemed, been attentively observing our conversation with Zora from the beginning to the end. We stepped out onto the porch, leaving Iliy to converse peacefully with the woman.

"So, you felt her power yourself?" Lou inquired directly. "Anton, you seem to have forgotten that I'm presently in human form." I was taken aback.

"Lu, at least twice you've drawn me back, once by the barrel, and again when the money vanished. I clearly felt it." "Are you certain?" "I know what I'm capable of. It was your divine essence that calmed and consoled me, nothing else. So, just because you cannot assume your true form doesn't mean you're bereft of power."

I saw Lou ponder deeply. My words held truth. According to my goddess, she retained magic stemming from her past divine powers, albeit a very specific kind. Elemental magic was limited to mere ignitions, chills, winds — it was Lu who helped us kindle fires during our rests. Her primary power now lay in the nearly forbidden mind magic of this world, which she kept to herself. Such magicians were always kept under strict watch, usually being killed or coerced into servitude to aristocrats and monarchs, swearing fealty before the Seven. Becoming someone's property was not in Lu's plans; hence, she kept a low profile.

"Help our landlady, and you'll gain another follower," I diverted Lou, suggesting she move from thought to action.

Lu aided Zora. The next day, I saw our tranquil hostess busying herself with breakfast. Her eyes were still swollen, but there was no sign of despair or the dull, old sorrow that usually hovered around her like a heavy aura. She even seemed to stand a bit straighter, which rendered her more attractive and seemingly younger.

Though, perhaps, I was just indulging in wishful thinking, who's to say?

Life continued apace. The summer festival approached; Lou and I were finishing our work in the administration, steadily earning the promised wages from the headman and confidently steering towards a bonus of "kingly" proportions. Overall, things in the Serdon district — my private name for the baronial lands tied to this city — were going well, and in many reports, we found underestimated figures. In total, if we added all the treasury's income items, the numbers were ten percent higher than declared. No mistake had been made in tax payments: the discrepancy hid in the natural dues due to confusion in converting weight measures to the average purchase price of grain, flour, vegetables, and dried fruits. All goods duly made their way by cart to the baronial estate, but the error lay in the conversion of their value to silver and gold. It turned out, over the last five years, the headman had underreported his profits to his suzerain by almost two dozen "kings." To be precise, we discovered in the accounts 176 gold, 26 silver, and 9 copper coins unaccounted for.

When Lu and I submitted the consolidated ledger and the headman digested the final figures, he went pale. Naturally, the poor fellow thought it was a direct shortfall, and for such a sum, the baron would hang him from the nearest tree. It was necessary to calm the headman, and I felt that even Lu might have applied her powers to this, touching the man's shoulder lightly, and explaining how things stood.

After the explanations, the headman almost blossomed. Nearly two dozen "kings" they had simply failed to count! This meant his estate was almost 177 gold richer than the baron believed, and we had audited only the past five years — the wax tablets were not preserved longer and were recycled after that.

The headman was still riding the high point of euphoria, but I could see by his eyes that he was already calculating which villages to request from the baron to attach to the Serdon administration. So I quickly steered the conversation towards the payment of bonuses.

We had finished our task by the middle of the fourth week — five days before the Summer Festival, to which the townspeople and villagers were already eagerly preparing. Naturally, I pressed for the payment of the full wages by the end of the week and the receipt of the promised "king."

From the headman's expression, it was clear he regretted promising the "king" and was loath to part with an amount that could buy half a horse, but a deal was a deal. To finally press the thrifty owner, I once again demonstrated the work done with the accounts: clear columns of numbers, data categorized on separate pages, intermediate calculations for each category, and the final summary table that even a fool could understand, all executed in Lu's perfect, calligraphic script.

Frankly, such a ledger would not have embarrassed me in my own world; Lou and I had formed an exceptionally successful work partnership.

The headman relented. After a show of reluctance, he opened the treasury chest and, selecting a few gold coins, a cascade of silver, and a handful of weighty tens, he loaded it all into a purse and handed it to Lu and me.

"You've convinced me, you've earned it."

The pouch, heavy with gold and silver, felt reassuringly substantial in my hand. I bowed to the headman, thanking him for his generosity. Lu was ready to leave, but I lingered a moment, asking the goddess to wait for me on the street, or to stay here.

I negotiated with the headman for recommendations. In this world, recommendations were worth much more than in my own.

I knew there was no more work for me in the administration. I was no clerk, and the time when they'd need an accountant like me would not come until autumn, with the natural dues from the harvest results. And, frankly, using our ledger as a template, a local specialist at the highest level could handle it. So, we were no longer needed here.

To circumvent the tedium of incessant door-knocking, I beseeched the village chief for a letter of recommendation, to be endorsed with his signature and the official seal of the administration. It was to chronicle my aptitude as an accountant and Lu's prowess as a scribe and calligrapher of the highest caliber. The goddess, who lingered in the chief's office, offered only a muted snort at this appraisal—a subdued reaction, indeed—but remained silent, her gaze fixed upon my endeavors and entreaties with a curious eye. The missive cost the chief little more than the wax for the seal, and as he was indeed satisfied with our service, we soon found ourselves in the open air, a scroll richer and our prospects brighter.

"Anton, you possess a certain cunning," the goddess noted, once we had distanced ourselves from the clamor of the marketplace. "The thought to secure such a letter would not have crossed my mind." "Trust is a delicate commodity when words are the sole currency, but this," I said, brandishing the scroll aloft, "is a tangible testament! With this, our feet shall be spared the weariness of thresholds unkind."

Elevated in spirit, we made our way back to Zora's abode, where we stumbled upon Irving. His intentions were clear as daylight; the blacksmith was unmistakably courting the widow, his invitation to the festival written in his bashful demeanor and the ruddy hue of his cheeks. Feigning obliviousness, we glided into Lu's chamber, where I finally prevailed upon her to safeguard the purse containing our collective wealth. She initially demurred, but relented under the weight of my argument: "Imagine, Lu," — I had again omitted 'goddess', a habit that had grown familiar and now went unchecked — "imagine this purse as the seed of your future sanctuary." I clasped Lu's hand, pressed the purse laden with hefty coinage and a sprinkling of silver into her slender fingers, and enveloped them both in mine. "This is the foundation of your future temple, Goddess Lu. And you alone are its most vigilant sentinel," I reiterated, my voice tinged with a rasp.

Lou's proximity was unsettling; our hands entwined... And abruptly, it dawned on me that a myriad of tasks awaited me beyond the confines of these walls.

In the council of our newly christened band — for with gold at our disposal we had ascended beyond a mere troupe — we resolved to eschew the Summer Day festivities in favor of seeking new employment. Our coffers were amply stocked for provisions, and the possibility to align with merchants or fellow travelers flocking to the barony's central city, Traill, was ripe. This settlement bore the name of Baron Amer Tibbot's ancestor, whose legacy we were en route to encounter.

Our departure was swift. We procured new garments for the priest to shed his pauper's guise. I, too, indulged in a few necessities: undergarments, a pair of robust, homespun tunics, sturdy leather breeches, a belt, and a cloak to ward off the chill. Footwear proved elusive, hence my worn boots remained, their comfort outweighing their sodden state. Lu, in turn, was outfitted with new linen, a fresh shirt, and trousers. She acquiesced without complaint, having fully embraced the human condition over the past weeks.

Nearly two gold coins were expended without regret, for to venture forth without fresh attire would be a grave hardship. Ten more silvers were disbursed for provisions. Having settled our tab with Zora, we joined a caravan at dawn, carrying iron ingots from a mining village, and set forth. The barony's capital beckoned.

**Chapter 5. Traill**

In a week's time, we reached the heart of the barony, Traill. Our caravan's pace was deliberate, ensuring the sixty leagues between Serdon and Traill were traversed with unexpected alacrity. We aimed to rest at night near hamlets or the significant trade outposts that had sprung up through the merchant-metalworkers' initiative.

Our assembly was formidable, and while these regions were not as isolated as whence Lu, Ily, and I had first emerged, they bore a veneer of danger. Still, civilization's nearness brought its own kind of opportunity, compelling the caravaners to vigilance and the company of a dozen guards. Though not an overwhelming force, they were sufficient to fray the nerves of would-be assailants.

Our safeguard, I surmised, was also the nature of our cargo: iron ingots, unappealing loot for bandits, hoisted upon the backs of beasts and wagons, all smelted in the mining town and bound for the baronial city's markets.

The merchants did not scorn the prospect of trading en route, offering their wares to local blacksmiths. Such transactions fostered mutually beneficial relations and, in kind, ensured prompt service for any emergent need, be it shoeing a horse or mending a wagon. These deals were struck at a modest loss, as the city's metal prices commanded a premium, yet these roadside exchanges accounted for but a trifle of the entire payload, and that only if the smiths found themselves in sudden want of iron.

On the eighth day, the skyline of Traill emerged. The city sprawled across gentle hills, their natural fortifications offering the upper hand to its protectors. The sprawling city had evolved from its origins as a solitary fortress to a bustling town, and now, the capital, after Baron Traill's progeny had made it their permanent residence alongside their lineage. The Tibbot family estate, still frequented as a summer retreat and hunting manor, remained a testament to their lineage.

Traill had burgeoned beyond its initial fortifications, unveiling before us a settlement of considerable size, encircling the inner city's high stone walls. At the heart of it all, the initial fort, perched upon the highest local elevation, had transformed into the baron's castle.

As we neared the city, we parted from our fellow travelers, the merchant-metalworkers, with heartfelt farewells. Prudently acknowledging the exorbitant inner-city prices, we sought accommodation in Traill's lower quarters, a place to bide for a few days' time.

Before our departure, Iliy scurried among his acquaintances with whom he occasionally shared a beer and even ventured into a couple of nearby villages. He inquired if anyone had contacts or kin in Treil who might offer us lodging. The old man managed to secure a few promising names with addresses—or rather, with convoluted directions on where to find them.

Clearly, tracking down all these individuals, explaining who we were, and selecting the best option for renting, if they would rent to us at all, was not a minute's task. So for now, we sought an inn or tavern with accommodations for the night.

Taught by bitter experience, upon entering the next establishment, I left Lu outside, rightly noting that such a beautiful maiden doubles the rates with her mere presence.

For calling her a "beautiful maiden," I received my dose of oxygen starvation. After coughing it off, I went inside. Iliy and I had adopted a bedraggled and deeply unhappy demeanor to convey that we were barely solvent.

All the inns and lodging houses bore the same countenance. Again, a dreary hall greeted us, dimly lit by oil lamps in the corners and a few thick candle stubs in a crooked chandelier overhead. Floors trampled bare, stools askew, and old benches by tables as timeworn as the place itself.

To my surprise, we were not met by an innkeeper but by a stout woman of indeterminate age in a grimy, grease-stained apron. Evidently playing both hostess and cook, she wiped her hands on her ample midriff and hips before approaching the counter to inquire what we wanted.

The blatant disregard for hygiene, even by the standards of this world—where they fired up the baths in summer once a week and rinsed regularly in barrels, while the youngsters even ran to rivers and lakes—began to unsettle my stomach. The scent emanating from the hostess compounded my discomfort: the odor of old, sour sweat and a body long unwashed.

Regrettably, the best price was indeed in this "luxury" establishment. The sun had long set, and with each passing minute, we risked ending up without a bed, relegated to the nearest ravine or open field.

The sight of the woman nearly broke me. I was internally ready to settle for a wolf's den, just to breathe fresh air. But Iliy, noting my distress, nudged me sharply and glared menacingly. He had come to understand that my standards of sanitation and cleanliness surpassed anything witnessed in this world. To grasp the depth of the issue, let's just say that back home, in our world, I was more of a slob than not.

We quickly struck a deal for lodging. Two rooms, twenty-five copper for one and half a copper daily for the other, meals not included. When we finished, and I ushered Lu inside, the landlady's eyes gleamed predatorily, but she remained silent.

While Lu settled into her separate quarters, I critically assessed the flea-infested room Iliy and I were to share.

Two bunks, one bare, the other with a mattress stuffed with half-rotted straw. A narrow window covered with oxhide and a wobbly stool in the corner. That was the extent of the furnishings. I claimed the right-hand bunk with the mattress, which I immediately dumped on the floor and shoved into the far corner. Better to sleep on bare boards than on that.

I lay down fully clothed, using my backpack as a pillow. Sleep seemed elusive, yet I slipped into oblivion, which, alas, brought no rest.

Dreams of all sorts besieged me. Working with waxed tablets in the office, the journey to the barony's capital, faces, work in Moscow, and the morning rush in an overcrowded minibus. That last dream was particularly vivid.

The bus was packed, but the faces were indistinct no matter how hard I tried to focus. Lu sat beside me, staring ahead, while Iliy, donning a rakishly tilted cap, manned the wheel. It was winter outside, like the day Mother dragged me from my world into this one, but the sceneries behind the windows were foreign to me. It felt as though we were hurtling towards an impenetrable darkness, about to swallow the old transporter. I tried to take Lu's hand, as I now always did when anxious, but grasped only emptiness. The goddess vanished, the passengers disappeared, and even Iliy was nowhere to be seen. I was alone in an empty bus, speeding into the wintery dark.

When a sense of impending doom nearly threw me into a panic, I awoke. My heart pounded against my ribs, striving to break free, my head buzzed. Fumbling in my backpack, I found a bottle with the clean water I’d filled just yesterday and took several greedy gulps. My head was drenched in sweat, hands trembling, but the water helped a bit.

We vacated that flea pit only on the third day, having lived all the while in a state of siege. On the second night, I slept with a knife in hand—the landlady's sinister glances and the shady figures congregating in the common room downstairs after sundown were too unnerving.

On the third day, having settled the final bill, we took our leave to join Iliy. He had found an elderly woman with relatives in Serdone who rented rooms in the lower city.

A plump, middle-aged lady who ran a small bakery on the ground floor of her home greeted us. The rooms for rent were upstairs. After the vile innkeeper, our new landlady Rinta was a sight for sore eyes. Clean and tidy, the baker exuded strength and health despite her ample frame. Rinta's business was thriving—her bakery seemed popular among the few customers in the shop.

In this case, my fastidiousness worked in our favor. When Iliy, at my behest, inquired about a bath, a barrel, and asked to see the outhouse in the yard, questioning the sanitary condition of the house in every way, the landlady was taken aback. Ultimately, the old man had to confess that his traveling companion was a neurotic accountant, overly fearful of dirt and with some quirks. But the accountant (счетовод) came with recommendations from the head of Serdone and, after all, we were respectable people.

(NEW REQUEST FOR CHAT) Rinta's curiosity was piqued by the priest's discourse on a most singular accountant, a man so fastidious that, given leave, he would abrade his very skin with the river's sands in ablution. And verily, tenants of cleanliness and neatness were a boon to a dame whose commerce was sustenance; for the unsightly mien of her boarders could mar her modest enterprise. Moreover, the endorsements of the city's sovereign, though they spoke only to my vocational prowess, did weigh heavily in our favor. With a silver tongue, Iliy parleyed with our hostess: nine silvers each sennight for our lodgings—five for the larger chamber to house the elder and myself, and four for the separate quarters of Lu. The preparation of our repast from our own stores she offered gratis, on the condition that I lend my sinews to the morning's labor in dough's toil. Chopping wood, drawing water, and such tasks were also to be mine.

First and foremost, I marveled at the abode's cleanliness and the scents that did perfume the bakery below—a delight most palpable to our landlady. Her eyes briefly met Lu’s, yet she refrained from gazing overly long upon one of such noble countenance, deeming wisely that the reasons for our covert travel need not concern her, should our coin continue to flow.

At my behest, Iliy forthwith surrendered a golden coin for a triad of weeks' lodging, which summoned yet another nod of approval from our matron. The remaining three silvers were bestowed as a prelude to the ensuing meals. Our hostess would reckon our needs against the cost of provisions, and by week's end, she would proffer the final reckoning for her culinary labors. I harbored hopes that our expenses would not exceed those three silvers.

Indeed, the cost of living in the barony's seat was not trifling, and it was through Iliy's indefatigable perambulations, which had worn paths through Serdone and the city's nether reaches, that these chambers were found.

A third nod of esteem from our landlady was mine when I queried on the availability of the bath and where one might cleanse the travel's dust, as our previous night's refuge was devoid of such comforts.

The bath was forthcoming in several days, but with the tender of a few coppers for firewood and the labor of fetching water myself, I was granted the boon of immediate ablution.

Regarding the baths, a discourse: Here, the folk bathed not with the frequency of my own world, yet they did so with some regularity. A modest lean-to of logs sufficed for most—a cubicle of two meters square, with a small hearth at one corner and a drain in the floor. They bathed with celerity, standing, diluting scalding water with that from the well, and sand from river or lake served in soap's stead. Those of a mind could lash themselves with larch boughs, akin to our native birch, but most simply scrubbed their hides with sand and rinsed their tresses in a basin. The water, by design, would flee into a subterranean chamber beneath, for the floor of the bath was ever so slightly inclined, from perimeter to center, that it might guide the water to its escape.

In hamlets of greater size, they erected grander baths where one could sit and steam amidst the winter's chill, replete with benches and berths within. Yet the burghers were content with more modest chambers, and not all even had such. Many would pay a copper to neighbors, bringing their own firewood, basins, and buckets when the urge to bathe took them.

Public baths, as in Rome or in my contemporary realm, were absent here, no surprise given the stringent mores concerning unions of unwedded bliss.

No edict against premarital congress was decreed here, as in the epoch of Christendom, but fornication and offspring out of wedlock were looked upon with disfavor. The rationale was largely utilitarian: a child sans father bore less providence, sustenance, and prospects of a decent upbringing. Contraceptive lore was unheard of here. There existed herbal brews to forestall conception, yet they wrought grave harm upon the woman's child-bearing vigor. Thus, such methods found their use chiefly among courtesans and those of lesser social standing.

Concern for the maiden's chastity and purity was the preoccupation of the elite, and even there, should the dowry be ample, the young maidens' indiscretions were oft overlooked.

Thus, the state of carnal matters was much akin to that of the USSR: where sex was purportedly non-existent, yet progeny abounded. I, like countless others, was living testament to this paradox. By daylight and in public view, carnal acts were forbidden, but under the cover of night and blankets, they were tacitly endorsed. Of course, there were women and girls who, in the finest traditions, might proffer amorous favors for coin. In Serdone, such were scarce to my notice, though perhaps I observed poorly, but in Treyal, they were marked well enough.

The priestesses of venal love took note of me as well, their gazes laden with unmistakable propositions. I inquired not of their tariffs, nor did I harbor any desire to partake. The state of hygiene I had already encountered in full measure, and the enigma of venereal afflictions in this world remained unsolved. Hence, the purveyors of local fleshly delights were resigned to watch me, a strapping youth in the vigor of life, depart with looks of chagrin.

Reflections on my eventual return to the embrace of Eros led me to contemplate a life of celibacy, sublimated through the toils in finance's fields. My ambition was to ascend as high as fortune would allow. I recalled a jesting placard once displayed by a youthful mathematics lecturer: "Forswear love's folly, shun the vine, What need hath thee of concerns so benign? In life, one truth shall thee elate: 'Tis higher mathematics that dictates our fate!"

Though fond was I of mathematics, of analysis and statistical lore, and while I harbored warm regard for the physical sciences, our alliance remained steadfastly platonic. Moreover, at the fringes of my consciousness, a loathsome notion persisted, scraping away—it was all due to Lu. This thought, like a pestiferous gnat, I consistently repelled.

The matron's proposition to exchange a few coppers for the use of her bath I accepted with alacrity, surprising her. And without delay, I requested to be shown to her woodpile and well. The motive was plain: the leather garb I donned had fermented most foully, and in my trek from Serdone, I had chafed my legs to the point of cursing both the Divine Matron and her primogeniture with each step.

As my fellows took to their rooms, I fetched water for three and kindled the furnace. The tinderbox I spared, for the art of sparks was not yet mine—I simply borrowed an ember from the hostess's hearth.

Lu, the first, we ushered to the ritual of cleansing.

While the goddess tended to her aquatic rites, I swiftly laid our garments out to dry, hanging them upon a special stick in the inner courtyard of the house, ringed by a high wooden fence.

As soon as the goddess emerged from the bath, Iliy and I followed suit. Although it was a bit cramped inside, it was far more convenient to pour water over each other's backs than to attempt to scrub oneself with sand in one hand while trying not to knock oneself on the head with a heavy ladle or basin.

I changed into relatively clean clothes from my own world, which I had brought with me. The soft touch of the cotton T-shirt after the coarse shirt and the stiff but familiar denim fabric made me realize just how uncomfortable the past few days had been.

Our spirits were lifted when the hostess laid out several pies for lunch, spreading her hands in a gesture of apology that no proper meal would be ready until the evening. We ate in the kitchen so as not to disturb the patrons in the shop.

The pies were beyond praise. With onions and eggs, the baking was simply excellent, so much so that we all devoured several huge pieces and, drowsy from overeating, dispersed to our rooms. All other business could wait until tomorrow.

My first foray into the local administration led nowhere. I initially ventured into the lower town's adminstration, but it turned out that little was decided there. All taxes and levies, as I had expected, were collected by the baron's tax collectors, and there was also a group of accountants who managed not only the bookkeeping of the lands under the direct control of the Tibbot family but also received reports from the controlled towns, which I had already mentally renamed district centers.

The more I learned about how the current Baron Amer Tibbot conducted affairs, the more I appreciated the man.

Amer, unlike other aristocrats of this kingdom, had abandoned the traditional tax collection system, where everyone paid what they owed to their village elder, who then presented themselves before the baron to personally hand over their meager purses. Instead, literally twenty years ago, the future Baron Amer Tibbot, then still a baronet, with the support of his still-living parent, began to implement a tax collection system that had been in use for about three hundred years in the densely populated western regions of the Tokon Empire.

The essence of the system was close to the administrative hierarchy familiar to me, which established a chain of taxation between the simple peasant and his suzerain, reducing the number of points of entry directly to the baron himself. Of course, in the first years, the town heads and elders of large villages, who were tasked with collecting and passing taxes to the baronial treasury, hung on every hook and branch, like bunches of grapes—they stole terribly. But over a decade, Amer managed through executions, persuasions, promises, threats, and generous bonuses to instill in his people some fear and at the same time zeal to do their job well and honestly.

As a result, the Tibbots were relieved of the endless processions of peasant carts that dragged their dues to Treyal, and they were able to establish a steady circulation of finances within their domains. Plus, this system helped to identify which estates and settlements were most profitable and worth investing in, and which, on the contrary, did not bring in income.

The first-ever resettlement of a village and the transfer of peasants to other settlements nearly caused an uprising throughout the south. According to local tales, women wept and threw themselves at the feet of the guardsmen, who only silently dragged the peasants out of their huts and forced them to sit in carts to be taken to new places of residence. The peasants sat, traveled, some ran away on the way to the new village, some—upon arrival. A month after the official resettlement, the "dead" village turned out to be more alive than ever. Not even the confiscation of livestock and seed material helped. People were drawn to the walls in which their grandfathers were born.

The real reason for the near-uprising was Amer's harsh decision, who was tired of sending guards back and forth and, on the last "round-up," ordered to set the village on fire.

The burning of the settlement made an indelible impression on the villagers, and if Amer hadn't backed down at the last moment, or rather, hadn't offered a "carrot" instead of another "whip," he could very well have been hoisted on the pitchforks of his own vassals. The carrot consisted of Amer personally arriving at the "fire victims" in the new village and by his decree ordering the construction of new huts for them. Amer personally paid for the materials out of his pocket, while the village men helped the new neighbors build log cabins and stoves.

To finally calm the people, the baron exempted the village from natural dues for a year, and halved the monetary taxes so that "locals could help the new neighbors settle in and not feel deprived."

Since then, if there was a need to resettle any settlement, Amer used this very scheme: good huts were disassembled and transported on carts to a new location, the old ones were burned to prevent them from becoming a haven for bandits and vagabonds. The resettled were helped to settle in at the new place, and the whole village or town received a "grace period."

The more I listened to these stories about the sensible baron, the more I laughed inside. Yeah, "generous baron," as if. But in my mind, this man was undeniable.

As for the new log cabins— they cost Amer nothing. In fact, he simply allowed the peasants to cut the building wood for new huts without the risk of being impaled. He didn't pay a dime for the ready materials.

The same scheme worked with the "tax grace period," as I privately called the reduction of dues and levies for the village with the resettled.

First and foremost, people missed the fact that Amer rarely strengthened genuinely successful villages with newcomers—they naturally flocked there in search of work and a better lot. All the resettlements were directed at merging two weak settlements to get one decent one with the prospect of good results in two or three years. So financially, Amer also suffered extremely insignificant losses, but his policy allowed the resettled to get on their feet and shielded him from the wrath of the old-timers.

Peasants who fell into the position of serfs for debts lived in their own settlements and were directly managed by the baron's people, so they were excluded from the cycle of free human resources.

Within the barony, free peasants were not forbidden to relocate between villages if they obtained the appropriate charter from the village elder or the city head. In some cases, the baron could even officially release his subject to the lands of another baron, duke, or earl, if the individual held no strategic value for his estates; otherwise, a ransom was required for the documents. However, this did not prevent the free citizens of Cleria, for the most part, from moving throughout the country.

The one act the baron or any other aristocrat could not prevent was the transition of a subject to royal status—that is, resettlement on lands directly under the control of the King of Cleria. Knowing the appetites of the court and that taxes there were even higher than in some baronies, people did not do this too often.

Stretched out on my pallet with a mattress stuffed with fresh straw, I suddenly realized how much I missed home.

I missed Moscow, my simple job, TV shows, a beer after a shift, and the occasional meetups with friends at a bar. I even missed the jolting minibuses that trundled down Shosse Entuziastov, carrying me to work or, conversely, to my rented room. A treacherous lump rose in my throat, which I barely managed to push down. Now to lie here, weep over my heavy fate—that would be a proper course of action.

Overall, my life in this new place, minus the details, was shaping up fairly well. I had certain skills that found application in this world, and I had a goal—to free myself from the slave collar and cease depending on Lu's mood. Yes, for this I would have to help an unknown goddess build a temple and find her a priest, but after that—I would wash my hands of it and fade into the sunset.

Perhaps I'll move to the west, to the southwest coast of the Tokon Empire or to the area of the inner bay, which the people called the Sea Scourge—a long, narrow sea space that sliced through the land and cut deep into the continent for almost a third of its length. The climate there, according to the stories, was very mild, and the sea—warm. There was active maritime and land trade, so the places were developed and well-inhabited. Being almost in the very center of the empire protected the Sea Scourge region, or officially, the Apahabas Bay—named after the main port city and simultaneously the capital of the Empire, which was located at the very top of the Scourge—from military invasion by the eastern neighbors.

Engrossed in such bleak thoughts, I drifted off to sleep. Iliy woke me—it was time for dinner. Rinta had already closed her shop and set the table behind the counter where baskets of goods for sale had stood during the day. Iliy and I helped to pull out the dusty benches from under the table, which we quickly tidied up, and soon Lu joined us. Rinta cooked much better than Zora, our previous landlady. It was evident that the woman earned her living through her culinary skills, so everything was done very professionally and deliciously, even though the selection of produce was small at the start of summer.

The next day I set out to explore the administration of the upper town regarding the position of an accountant. At first, they did not even want to listen to me, but after demonstrating the recommendations of the head of Serdon, the baronial official, a fat man of indeterminate age, finally thawed. It turns out, the head had only recently paid his respects to the baron, having set off on horseback immediately after the Summer festival. There he not only reported on the new figures that Lu and I had managed to extract from the administrative records of the last five years but even bothered to bring the ledger book we had made to confirm his words.

I don't know whether Baron Tibbot was impressed with my work, but his accountants were definitely shocked. At least judging by the way the man kept throwing suspicious glances at me, I understood that they had not even checked the head's work at first. I'm almost certain the local accountants had just tried to find at least one serious error in the new ledger book of the head of Serdon, trying it for errors as though it were a nut to crack. Unfortunately, or fortunately, there were neither blots nor corrections to be found: Lu always wrote cleanly, clearly, and without errors. So, the baron's accountants were left with nothing.

There was work for me, of the same nature as in Serdon. Fools and embezzlers did not last long among the officials of Amer Tibbot, so overcoming the guild envy of my successes in the field of accounting, the man offered me to repeat the Serdon feat with the baronial papers and tablets.

It turned out that I had been conversing with the second manager, that is, the third person in the administration after Mayor Treyl and Baron Tibbot himself. I agreed to the job, on the condition that my assistant-scribe would be with me, and, if possible, other members of the baron's toll brotherhood would lend me every assistance. I did not overprice myself and frankly told the manager, whose name was Mihius, that the work done in Serdon had taken me a full month of intense labor and that untangling the baron's accounts could take at least until winter, or perhaps never finish if I did not get help. In the process, I demonstratively flinched, portraying myself as a man blessed by the Wise Sofa himself—that is, detached from reality, a shy bookworm, a typical nerd from my world.

After confessing that I was not the son of the Wise Sofa in the flesh and, of course, could not cope with the work within reasonable timeframes without the help of Mr. Mihius and his subordinates, the man finally relaxed and understood that I had no career ambitions. I confirmed his guess with a long and tedious story about how exactly we found such a large discrepancy in Serdon's reports and how we counted it all. Somewhere in the middle, Mihius's gaze defocused, meaning he had basically stopped listening to me, but I continued to burden the fat man with more and more details, twisting in scientific terms from my world.

When Mihius finally drifted off, I knew it was time to cut to the chase. "Dear Mr. Mihius, as you understand, the work was very extensive, complex, and completed in the shortest possible time, for which the head of Serdon paid generously. Therefore, I would ask you for a salary of fifty silver a week so that I may not worry about the mundane during my stay in such a prosperous city under the administration of our, undoubtedly, magnificent and sensible Baron Tibbot," I blurted out as honestly as I could.

Visible it was, the moment I had chosen was naught but impeccable. The manager, wearied and lulled into inattention by my interminable tales, could only utter a croak of surprise.

"And further, an additional twenty-five silvers for my assistant and scribe, who fashioned my calculations into such an exquisite ledger," I concluded, cementing Lu's service fee.

Oh, what a fray ensued, good sirs and madams! We haggled over every farthing! 'Twas no trifling matter, for the manager was a seasoned toll-taker, and I, a vendor in the realm of mobile telephony. We sparred over each copper, each aspect of the task. For every argument I presented, the manager countered with two, but I stood steadfast as a bastion.

At one juncture, Mihius and I dropped formalities and even came to grips in a bout of roughhousing. It was plain to see that I had struck a firm blow; the deal would not unravel, and it seemed as if Amer himself had decreed the hiring of a skilled accountant to bring order to ancient records.

"'Tis toilsome work! Wears one to the bone! You ought to supply milk on top of it for the toil," I protested.

"Milk? What milk?" Mihius sputtered, befuddled by my tirade.

"The finest of milk, good sir! To mend health shattered by sifting through these mountains of neglect!" I persisted, fully embracing the role of a contentious Jew.

Passersby began to loiter near the room that served as the manager's office, all eager to discover who could be so boldly debating with their chief—so loud and fierce was the exchange that it bordered on fisticuffs. Our spirited performance lasted nigh on an hour.

But, as with any tempest or natural upheaval, Mihius eventually quieted and conceded. Indeed, he managed to haggle me down, and, in his own estimation, deemed it a victory. We settled on thirty-eight silvers for myself and a tenner plus a trifle for Lu weekly. Moreover, should my work impress Baron Amer, Mihius promised to advocate for a bonus from His Lordship. From his own department, he was prepared to award us two "kings" in bonus upon our completion, should our results mirror the Serdon account.

We shook hands on it.

In sum, our joint income with Lu would amount to forty-eight full-weight silver coins and a handful of coppers for Iliy's ale each week.

With spirits buoyed, I returned to our lodgings to share the auspicious news with Lu.

However, the goddess was in foul temper, and the more I recounted our successful bargain with the manager, the more her wrath kindled.

"Anton, have I understood correctly that you've negotiated work that will take no less than three months, maybe even half a year, without telling me, and you've also leased my services?" the goddess hissed, tightening the magical collar around my neck.

As my consciousness waned, she eased her grip slightly, yet now the collar pricked my skin, as if lined with sharp needles from within.

Lu's gaze upon me was as it was upon our first encounter, as if I were a contemptible worm, unworthy of a second of her attention. Only belatedly did I grasp what had so offended the goddess. Had I taken her along, she, like me, would now be reveling in the deal's success. But I had orchestrated everything behind her back, and Lu's sensitive pride was wounded. In my mind, I had not even considered bringing her, mindful of her quite noticeable appearance and understanding that success in negotiations would likely not have been forthcoming, for the manager, washing his hands of the matter, could easily escalate it to the mayor, and thence to Amer Tibbot himself.

Shining so brightly was not my desire, though I had entertained the notion. Thus, Lu stayed behind while I ventured alone to the manager's. Which is how I came to this lamentable state.

A scornful sneer flickered across Lu's face; her upper lip twitched as if she meant to bare her teeth on one side but thought better of it. This incited my ire.

Struggling to my feet and striving to breathe as slowly as possible—for the collar still bit into my flesh, and the goddess showed no intent of loosening her hold—I straightened up, defiantly meeting her violet gaze. I could conceive of no better retort than to display the "talk to the hand" gesture so prevalent in my world, a light form of saying, "Deal with it."

Lu's eyes widened in recognition. She understood precisely what I meant. In that instant, I felt the full force of mental magic.

With brazen intrusion, the goddess breached my mind, intent on crushing it to punish the audacious human who dared to dismiss a reigning deity. A sharp pain lanced through my head, and I was blinded, collapsing to the floor with a loud groan. A violent spasm wracked my body, contorting muscles and stretching sinews, curling me into a fetal position.

Within my mind, it was far worse. I experienced the full spectrum of pain and suffering that consciousness could endure. I felt Lu tearing down the walls of my will, invading the most secret corners of my soul, desecrating everything I ever cherished or loved. Memories that once brought joy and warmth now transformed into nightmares: through her will and magic, Lu sought to rewrite my life, to strip me of identity, hope, and the very desire to live as punishment for my audacity.

I endeavored to erect new defenses, time and again safeguarding the essence of my very self.

The goddess was taken aback by my resistance. The convulsion subsided, and she focused entirely on our silent, mental duel within my mind. I sacrificed my childhood and school years, offering up the few pleasant memories from my days in a Kaluga school, buying time to reinforce the ramparts of my will in areas that mattered more to me.

The struggle seemed interminable. Lu effortlessly swept away mental barriers as I promptly erected new ones, diverting her with various decoys—some conjured on the fly. I knew I couldn't defend indefinitely—sooner or later, the enraged deity would obliterate the last line of defense, leaving me a docile puppet, groveling at her feet.

Just as hope was fading, at the fringes of my mind, I sensed something amiss—akin to a door through which Lu had entered. It dawned on me—this portal I needed to close, after thrusting Lu from my mind.

Fully restored to consciousness, I occasionally managed to catch my breath and even discern the room before me. There I lay upon the ground, gasping after convulsions, while Lu sat upon a divan a mere stride away, her gaze piercing the void with fierce concentration.

My plan took shape swiftly. I chose a memory laden with meaning: my college companion, Kate, for whom my affection once burned. Forgive me, Kate, but the recollection of you now serves as my lifeline. Bereft of warmth and love, your image must serve as bait to ensnare the goddess, lest I fall to certain doom.

As Lu ravaged and rewrote my cherished memories of the beautiful, ever-smiling Kate Makarova, whom I pined for over three years, I managed to rise to my knees and deliver a powerful slap, more akin to a right hook, upon her physical form.

In the two months spent in this realm, I had lost weight but gained sinew and strength. A diet free from excess, the absence of alcohol, long walks, and the daily calisthenics with Zorya had rendered me more robust than before.

"GET OUT! OF! MY! MIND!" I roared. As Lu's body flew like a rag doll against the wall, I returned to the sanctum of my mind, dropped all defenses, and with the last remnants of my tortured will, I struck a blow to cast the frenzied deity from my consciousness. Lu's image dissolved, and the door to my mind slammed shut as if by a gust of wind.

When my vision cleared, I saw Lu gawking from her divan, her face already spreading with a vast bruise—by the morrow, half her visage would be violet. My own countenance was bloodied, my brow split anew, and my nose swollen. I had battered my head against the floor during my convulsions.

Grimly wiping blood from my eye, I managed to rise and, without uttering a single word, exited Lu's chamber, the door slamming with a resounding thud behind me. How we would continue to work together, or if she would even spare my life after recovering from the shock, I could not say.

**Chapter 6: The Stark Numbers**

Reaching the room I shared with Iliy, I collapsed onto my cot and fell into oblivion. Should the unhinged goddess strangle me in my sleep, it would be a mercy. I was not summoned for supper, nor did anyone rouse me, so I slept until morning.

Nightmares tormented me through the darkness. This time, I was endlessly plummeting into an abyss. At one point, it seemed the very fabric of the cosmos ceased to exist around me, and I found myself in a vast Nothing and Nowhere.

I awoke utterly shattered, yet I tended to the day's tasks. I helped Rinte with the household chores as agreed upon our lodging, and to her silent query about the state of my face, I merely claimed a tumble down the stairs in the night on my way to the privy.

The woman pursed her lips skeptically, clearly not buying the 'fallen down the stairs' story, but she said nothing. The morning passed in silence. I ate hastily and, before Ily and Lu came down, I set off toward the administration building.

There was neither the desire nor the sense in bringing the goddess to work. Yesterday, she nearly killed me, and her romp through my mind left me feeling less myself, in the most literal sense.

Lu had torn a vast swathe through my life and memories, leaving nothing but a bleak wasteland behind. I could still recall most events, faces, and places from my past life, but now they evoked little to no emotional response. Even the face of my mother, conjured in my memories, now seemed alien and cold.

If I could have, I would have wept, but no tears came.

So I trudged toward the administration, careful not to make any sudden movements. After the convulsions and seizure-like episode, compounded by the morning's physical exertion, every muscle in my body ached, and movement was laborious. I felt like an ancient man with a shooting back pain trying to hobble to the clinic, clutching his lumbar region every few steps. Only one thought sustained me: "Complete the task and be free of the collar. If she doesn't release me—invoke the Seven as witnesses."

Ironically, the foreigner from another world, I was probably the most devout person here. Indeed, I knew for certain that gods existed and could heed my prayers. If Lu stood between me and my freedom, my entreaties to the Mother, the Warrior, the Reaper, and the other gods would be more than persuasive.

At the administration building, when asked about my scribe, I dismissed the inquiry with a wave, saying the girl had fallen ill and would be absent for at least a week. I should have claimed something more long-term, but what's done is done. I had bought myself a week free from prying questions.

Seeing Mihius's lips purse in dissatisfaction at my excuse, I added that the initial assessment of the records could be managed by the regular clerk, and my assistant was more a calligrapher, one who beautifully prepared the ledger books. This seemed to mollify him, and the scowls directed at me lessened.

My battered face went unremarked by the officials, though I sensed many biting jokes on their tongues about how vigorously I must have celebrated receiving such a prestigious position.

Indeed, to reach the position of a tax collector for the city administration of Treyla, many of these men had collected dues in villages and hamlets for decades. Here I was, the handsome newcomer, snatching up a special post in a single day, with the baron's direct approval.

"In retrospect, I should have introduced myself not as a mere accountant but as a 'counting auditor,'" I mused belatedly, "then none would grasp my role, and life would be simpler."

I had developed a clear understanding of my place in the financial domain of this world: my mathematical prowess, combined with the ability to manage vast data arrays, positioned me as a formidable auditor, one skilled at detecting errors and setting accounts straight before the next stagnation. The thought of permanent employment as a tax collector or bureaucrat in one of the offices did not even cross my mind. Too tedious for my taste, it seemed.

(уже такой перевод был) The day passed rather swiftly.

A young scribe named Ong was assigned as my assistant.

Ong was a sharp, albeit timorous lad. Skinny and inconspicuous, he was evidently the youngest son in his family, whose parents made the sagacious choice of sending him to learn literacy. Amidst the scrolls and wax tablets, Ong seemed far more in his element than he ever would in a field with a plough or an axe in hand.

He was just slightly shorter than I, but even considering the weight I had shed over the past two months, he was lighter by about fifteen kilograms; a definite weakling. Yet, he executed my directives with precision and had an excellent grasp of the archives.

Ong's initiative was lacking, so he resembled an instrument more than a person. As long as I guided and directed the process, Ong performed impeccably. But should my grip slacken or my gaze divert, he would fall into a stupor, inert until the next command.

On the other hand, such a compliant and unambitious assistant was precisely what I needed.

After outlining the main front of work—I decided to first tackle the records of the last year, then delve deeper year by year, rather than raising data from the past five years all at once—I bid the young man farewell. Exiting, I bowed to the passing officials and the mayor, then escaped into the streets of Treyla.

I had no desire to return home. There awaited me Ily's grave looks, Lu's unpredictable reactions, and the ambiguous attitude of our new landlady.

The magical collar had irritated my skin all day, occasionally constricting threateningly, but I was profoundly indifferent: with my spirit left a scorched field, the prospect of death by strangulation now struck me as exceptionally nonchalant, even dismissive.

If I am to be throttled, so be it. I am but a powerless slave in the hands of a capricious goddess, and there's naught I could do until I earn her a new temple in some populous area.

Indeed, I ought to inquire about the process of erecting temples for new gods here and what it would cost me.

My feet carried me to a street brimming with taverns, and since a handsome advance of five silver pieces, given today by Mihius for my signature, pleasantly jingled in my pocket, I lingered there.

I had no intention of squandering the money, though I recalled drinking beer every evening, which I presumably enjoyed. But I didn't remember being an alcoholic, and most importantly, I didn't feel like one. A hollow and thereby cold reason suggested that alcoholism was not just a mental, but a physiological need for alcohol.

I settled at an outdoor table of a tavern that caught my fancy, and, summoning the serving girl, inquired about the wine.

The variety in Treyla was considerably broader than in Serdone. From young wine at a third of copper per glass to fine, costly wine at two tenths of a silver per pitcher. I chose a young wine from the previous year, recommended by the lass—two silvers and a third for a liter pitcher.

Within minutes of placing my order, a cool pitcher from the cellar was before me, alongside a glass. I filled it halfway and sampled the beverage. My palate immediately recognized the pronounced taste of alcohol and the grape notes. Did I enjoy this drink? Previously, I preferred beer, but that was in another world, and now I felt no particular inclination toward alcohol. I refilled and drank again.

The second glass went down easier, but it didn't make things clearer. Just a swill that could quickly end one's life.

I was slightly unsteady now. My body was on the edge, actively repairing what the goddess had damaged, and I, like a treacherous character from a war film, struck a cowardly blow at the most inopportune moment and now sat drowning my gaze in mediocre wine.

I lingered long enough, no less than two hours. Darkness had thoroughly settled, and the crowd at the outdoor tables had dispersed—some had moved inside the tavern, others had left the drinking establishment entirely. I chose the latter, rose from the stump serving as a chair, and staggered toward home.

Whether due to the twilight or a deliberate decision to lose myself in the night of Treyla, my legs did not carry me to the cozy bench of our housekeeper, but to one of the common temples.

Besides personal temples, the Seven often had a communal temple for the convenience of the faithful. This structure was in the shape of a hemisphere, and along the wall stood effigies of the gods and their altars. At the center were the three Primordials: the Mother, the Warrior, and the Reaper. To their right stood the Merchant and the Smith, and to the left—the Sage and the Bard.

I approached the Sage. Now, bereft of any emotional response to my circumstances, the only thing I retained was my unsteady reason. So I knelt before the altar of Sofa, praying for wisdom and wit to triumph in my struggle with the goddess Lu for my life. That is, to grant me enough wit to ensure my financial audits were conducted correctly.

When entreating the gods, one must always offer something in return. Recalling the strange system of numeration at the clerical, I offered the god of wisdom the system of Arabic numerals with explanations for their appearance. I hoped the numbers would impress the local deity.

Finishing my prayer, I simply leaned against the cold stone of the altar. The common temple was dark and empty now. There were no back rooms or permanent priests; such temples belonged to the officials and served as small chapels where the faithful would occasionally drop by to honor the gods. Serious prayers were reserved for the individual temples dedicated to specific deities.

At some point, I believed I may have dozed off, such was the tranquility that enveloped me, but I mustered the strength to rise and head homeward. The looming castle behind served as my beacon, and, roughly maintaining my bearing, I finally emerged onto the street I sought.

No soul awaited me. With utmost care, I rapped on the door and stood in anticipation of someone's arrival. Sleepy-eyed Rinta answered, and by her weary countenance, I discerned the hour was well past midnight. Entering under the disapproving gaze of our landlady, I made my way to the barrel in the backyard to wash my visage before succumbing to sleep.

Iliy either did not awaken or feigned ignorance of my presence. I had yet to cross paths with the elder since the incident, and something whispered to me that after the "gift" I had left upon Lu's face, our past warm relations were best forgotten.

The days continued to unfurl, one after the other. I completed the remainder of the week's work—two days—and received a partial payment. The work was progressing; Ong was performing better than expected. On Saturday noon, I had an unpleasant exchange with the overseer, declaring that my scribe would likely not work on the baron's reports. I left it at that, without further explanation.

Mihius simply nodded—after all, it was easier for him to pay less for the work that Ong would do anyway for his standard wage. Indeed, the presentation would not be as polished, but being seasoned in managerial affairs, Mihius understood that in financial reports, content is king, and the manner of writing secondary.

Each day I returned after sunset, and though I no longer indulged in drink, I deliberately delayed my arrival for dinner. I claimed my duties at the office were to blame. I convinced Rinta not to trouble herself with warming my meal; leaving it in the kitchen would suffice—I would find it myself. The hospitable landlady, whom I still assisted each morning, failed to comprehend this new behavior of mine, but in truth, I found communication with emotionally complex beings rather challenging.

In the past three days, I realized that Lu had scorched away any semblance of empathy within me, along with my ability to accurately interpret others' emotions. Whether this faculty would heal with time or I was to remain thus forever, I could not tell. For now, I seized any opportunity to evade interaction with the lively bakeress.

Tomorrow was Sunday, and I would have to confront my executioner.

Come morning, after I had attended to all necessary household tasks and hastily broke my fast, Lu descended the staircase. I could have slipped away earlier, ventured into the city—that was how I intended to spend my day off—but sooner or later, I was bound to face the goddess eye to eye.

When Lu entered the common hall, yet closed to patrons, Rinta quietly withdrew to the kitchen, leaving us alone.

A vast yellow-purple bruise marred the goddess's left cheek, her visage slightly swollen. Clearly, I had struck her with considerable force. At that moment, I listened within: was there even a shadow of satisfaction that my tormentor had also suffered? Silence was the answer.

I rose from the bench, straightened to my full height, and bowed deeply.

"My lady," I intoned.

I held the bow for what felt an eternity, a full five seconds, before I straightened and stepped out into the street. The pouch containing my week's wages I had left beside Iliy's bed—let him deliver it to his patroness. I did not rescind the old agreement and decided that the goddess could save for her temple herself; I had other matters to attend to besides withering away over gold.

My walk proved enlightening. At noon, I snacked on a couple of pasties purchased from a tray vendor in the square for five copper coins, then continued to explore the city.

Treyla was in dire need of paved streets, at least in its lower parts. The dirt roads were excessively dusty in summer and, I was certain, turned to impassable muck and mire in autumn and spring. Cobblestones lined the upper quarter, within the fortress walls, but entry there on the seventh day cost a third of a silver, so I remained with the plebs in the lower city.

By evening, my legs carried me to the familiar sanctuary; I had become a regular visitor.

After my first prayer to Sofa, my affairs took a turn for the better. My eye instinctively caught the necessary figures, I swiftly located the essential data and uncovered errors in places where none would think to look. My efficiency in calculation and analysis had never been higher. Perhaps it was due to the emotional void within, but I preferred to believe that these revelations were the handiwork of Sofa. I hoped the god of wisdom appreciated my tales and answered the prayers of a soul shattered by life's cruelties.

Now, each day I imparted to Sofa something new from the science of my world. I had already shown the Sage simple quadratic equations and systems of equations with two variables, outlined the main points of Vieta's theorem—albeit without proof, treating it as an axiom. Next in line were the fundamentals of geometry, and then, with each passing day, the material would grow in complexity.

To hedge my bets with mathematics, I sprinkled in some physics, which I also remembered well. The mechanics I shared and the laws and principles within would suffice for a month of prayers and garnering "momentum" from the inquisitive deity.

Were it not for Lu's maiming, I might have spilled all I knew in a couple of sessions. But now, being a half-dead, calculating sack of bones, who understood no jokes and found no joy in circuses, I strictly rationed information, wringing the utmost from my repository of knowledge. I needed Sofa's support throughout my tenure at the tollhouse, and thus the god of wisdom was on a strict information diet.

My prayer, relative to the very first, also remained unchanged. I sought wisdom and diligence in the auditing of the baron's records.

I returned home as usual, at dusk. Not so late that Rinta had retired, but I still had to scrape at the entrance door. After consuming my cold supper, I retired to my side. Tomorrow marked the start of a new week—back to work.

As time went on, my encounters with Lu grew more frequent, yet our exchanges were limited to my terse and obsequious "my lady" or "madam," accompanied by a deep, precisely five-second bow—no more, no less. Iliy had vanished from my life, and I was reminded of the old man's existence only when I came home to sleep—he always lay quietly on the adjacent bed. I was certain he did not sleep, but I had nothing to say to him.

More and more, I felt Lu's attempts to penetrate the mental fortress I had constructed. In moments of quiet, I dissected our battle for my very existence, always ready for her apparition. The remnants of humanity that yet flickered within my consciousness were encased in a bastion of indifference and will. I did not dare engage with this facet of my being when the goddess loomed near. On occasion, she sought to disorient me with a tight choke of the collar, but these assaults only heightened my focus on my inner ramparts.

I was prepared for the possibility that Lu would attempt to breach my defenses in my sleep. Upon detecting the initial forays into my mind, I would lay down, properly attuned, ready even in slumber. Should the enemy approach whilst I slept, I was prepared, my barriers strong to withstand the first onslaught.

Perhaps this was how the mad Nietzsche envisaged his Übermensch.

Human emotions and morality were now alien to me; I no longer understood them. My body, honed by daily toils sufficient for the upkeep of the household, was a vessel of training; my mind, clear and sharp as the finest razor.

Methodically, on every sixth day of the week, I brought my earnings and silently placed the purse beside Iliy's bed, keeping but a trifle of copper for my Sunday pastries and firewood for the bathhouse—a transaction I preferred to conduct personally with Rinta.

In the second month of my toil, Ong grew bold and invited me to join the scribes and toll collectors for a drink on the sixth day. I did not decline. I extracted a couple of silvers and some copper from my due, leaving the rest in Mihius's office, eliciting his approving gaze. The overseer appreciated my frugality and calculation—traits befitting a professional accountant or toll collector.

The tavern, with its unpretentious name "The Lame Boar," where my colleagues dragged me, was so packed I thought we might have to seek elsewhere. It was then I learned that this was the toll collectors' "home" establishment. A table was always reserved for them at week's end, no matter if only a pair of office workers or, as now, a company of a dozen men showed up. (хозяин) The proprietor, a former office worker himself and friend to many old scribes and toll collectors, always displayed his guild solidarity.

After a few tankards of beer and a half-hour of idle chatter, I finally understood why, in a tavern where the beer was not the cheapest—seven coppers a mug, against five or six elsewhere—there was nary a spot free. A bard maiden ascended a modest riser, an elbow's height, near our boisterously chattering table.

My gaze swept over her, and I understood that even if she stood silent upon that improvised stage for half an hour, she would depart with a hefty gold coin from the grateful audience, perhaps even two.

She was tall, much taller than most women of this world, nearly of my own height. Her impossibly graceful fingers clutched a lute, and a cascade of long, slightly curled red hair was a fiery frame for her finely sculpted face of alabaster and equally smooth, pale neck. Her full, ruby lips stood out brightly against her visage, and her large, blue eyes with a hint of green sparkled.

Her attire was typical for one of her profession: soft, high boots suitable for concealing a pair of knives and a thin purse; light brown breeches; a vibrant green jacket. Her shirt was blindingly white, and the laces across her ample, firm chest, peeking from beneath the jacket, were loosened just enough to stir the imagination while leaving no doubt that there was indeed something to fantasize about. The jacket's short sleeves revealed the smooth skin of her forearms, adorned with numerous simple thin copper and silver bracelets, interspersed with colorful friendship bands. Completing her ensemble was a short green scarf tied around her neck, which I surmised was normally used to tame her unruly curly hair.

Had I encountered this stranger before my clash with Lu, she would have struck a chord deep within my soul, and I would have resembled all the other men in the hall, now greedily devouring the sight of the bard maiden settling herself upon the high stool. It was evident she would sing, and I was interested solely in whether her performance would be as compelling as her presence.

With slender fingers, she struck the strings, coaxing the first notes from her lute, and began a tearful yet heartfelt love ballad with a beautiful, deep voice. Some men were even moved to stealthy tears by the midpoint of the tale, feigning that it was merely the lamp's smoke irritating their eyes.

Following the love ballad, the young woman—whom I'd ascertained to be no older than between twenty and twenty-five, certainly no older—delivered a couple of lively tunes. She concluded her performance with a series of ribald ditties that left my colleagues blushing while I merely grunted in approval, noting the inventiveness of the unknown warrior—hero of the spirited quatrains.

The bard was extremely skilled in performance and adept at engaging the audience. She began by fidgeting on the stool, allowing a good look at herself, then as all eyes were drawn to the opening of her blouse, she launched into the mournful ballad, and to ensure good business for the tavern keeper in beer and wine, she raised the merriment, culminating in a licentious revelry. Throughout, her every gesture, glance, sigh, and the playful bite of her plump lip while tuning her lute's strings were but performances for the crowd.

On the final chord, the girl whipped off the scarf from around her neck, casting it beneath her feet on the platform—for the sound of coin, and bowed deeply to the appreciative crowd, allowing all a better view of her décolletage. In that moment, for the second time, I acknowledged to myself that the girl was a consummate professional; every gesture, look, sigh, and even the puckering of her full lip was nothing but a show for the audience.

Coins cascaded onto the kerchief in a steady stream. Mainly bits of copper, but the gleam of silver was not uncommon, and the front-row merchants, who had a clear view of the treasures barely concealed by the girl's lacing, were especially generous, parting with several sonorous 'dozens'.

The bard bestowed air-kissed benedictions upon her audience, inciting a wave of amiable rumblings. With nimble fingers, she gathered the coins, scooped up her kerchief, and glided to the tavern keeper's counter to render unto him his due for the privilege of song in his establishment.

The common keeper would claim a tenth from such performers, a swift transaction that was promptly concluded this night. In more refined establishments, where the elite supped and made merry, bards were often retained on salary or might pay dearly to lease a stage, gambling on the chance of a golden windfall or perhaps the munificence of a 'kingly' tip from a noble or affluent merchant.

After her reckoning with the tavern master, the minstrel dissolved into the throng; no doubt she sought sustenance and spirits, and after such a fortuitous performance as this night had seen, any patron would count it an honor to proffer her a draught of ale or a goblet of wine. There was no lack of eager benefactors.

The evening waned well; the bard had buoyed every spirit, and the tavern's gloom seemed to lighten. I affected a studious interest in my comrades' banter, and even contributed a tale or two myself—the account of my dealings in Sirdon, where a crafty innkeeper sought to outwit me, served as the evening's crowning jest. I endeavored to laugh with the crowd and don a somber mien when the conversation warranted. My efforts were met with success.

This performance did little to fill the void within, yet it became clear that such a life was sustainable.

I had melded seamlessly into this fellowship bound by numerals and ledgers; their simplicity and genuineness required none of the empathy that had been scorched from my being. Honest and forthright souls, they parted as near friends, and I found myself ensconced within the guild of Treyla's tollkeepers.

Upon the morrow, Iliy met my gaze with an inquisitive lift of his brow, seeking the usual purse of remuneration. I offered no reply; on the morrow, to work I would return, and from Mihius claim my earnings.

That leisure day I roamed beyond my wont, surveying the upper city, having allocated the necessary coin, and later, I retreated to the sanctuary now familiar and dear.

Post revelry with the collectors, the workday's trials lessened. Tasks were accomplished with alacrity, and transactions flowed with ease. I was nearing the completion of the annual accounts and had prepared much of the material for two years hence; the work now proceeded like a well-oiled machine. I performed the final calculations, consulting my notes scribed in Arabic numerals upon waxed tablets, while Ong diligently transcribed the figures into the bound ledger at my dictation.

(уже такое было) The same discrepancies that had marred the accounts of Sirdon were apparent here—measures and values did not align, with a shortfall of some seven hundred gold for the past year alone, a significant sum against the twelve thousand amassed from the principality's natural levy. Yet, the cash holdings were near perfection; midway through my labors, it became evident that the ledgered revenues matched to the last coin.

Were I in my usual state, such a discovery would have stirred grave concern.

A scheme of corruption was unfolding, someone was deftly fleecing the baron, adeptly concealing their trail, precluding the need for a thorough inquisition.

The tollkeepers were beyond suspicion—they mostly dealt with tangible coin and collected taxes under personal surety. Moreover, every cash klo could be easily tallied. The natural levy presented a more complex puzzle, for it encompassed all who were either obliged to pay in kind by the baron's decree or chose this form of tribute, bringing forth the fruits of their labor. Thus, I faced a myriad of items ranging from the mundane—wheat, cabbage, flour—to the exotic—dried herbs, medicinal fungi, and, by some strange twist of fate, the same breed of greyhound pups I had known in Sirdon.

In this maelstrom of goods, someone was expertly pulling strings.

I knew well that no single individual could mastermind such an operation—a considerable group was at work here, acting with finesse and systematic precision.

The theft of the natural levy's challenge lay in its conversion to coin. Should any tax collector or official sequester a sack of flour or a load of cabbages, they would swiftly be betrayed by their own kin or peers. Hence, the natural levy was scrutinized less than its monetary counterpart. To covet an aristocrat's share was to risk swift and severe reprisal. The aristocrat made the rules, for thievery not only pilfered his wealth but also that of the king, to whom he too was tributary.

Thus, what transpired was a classic tale of graft and laundering, transactions conducted at values beneath the market standard.

Such malfeasance, I surmised, was rare, and even if conceived, was difficult to execute; silence was paramount amongst the conspirators. Given the locals' impulsive nature and their inclination towards violent resolution, any such cabal for the pilfering of property was doomed to rapid dissolution, requiring only the sense of inequity to unravel one participant.

To wield control over a person, there are two instruments of motivation: the stick and the carrot. Yet human nature dictates that the allure of the carrot wanes, and desire perpetually escalates, leading me to the logical conclusion that this entire edifice of embezzlement and kickbacks was founded upon fear of someone of immense power, someone commanding enough to be genuinely feared. But who indeed could invoke greater fear than the baron himself?

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The shards of my childhood memory, survivors of the battle with the goddess, obligingly thrust upon me a scene from the television show "Criminal Russia," which often narrated tales of organized criminal groups that terrorized entire cities and “roofed” businesses. It appeared that such a "roof" had indeed taken root in the barony of Amer Tibbot, right under his very nose.

Persistently feigning that all was well, I kept my conclusions to myself, meanwhile pondering how to convey this information to the baron, bypassing direct superiors and numerous colleagues.

Had the shortfalls been negligible, they could have been attributed to the natural spoilage and shrinkage of goods. For instance, if thirty poods of cabbage were recorded and after a month in storage only twenty-nine remained. Indeed, this was the usual explanation. But in my calculations, I had already accounted for this margin of error and cross-verified with the merchant documents, which recorded the sale date of the produce received as tribute and its conversion to solid klo. It was inconceivable that everything uniformly "shrank" by a full 5.8% of its original monetary value, especially since many of the goods did not suffer such depreciation at all. Iron ingots, nails, and horseshoes supplied by the blacksmiths did not just dissolve overnight.

Therefore, my options were limited. I could either make my way to the aristocrat's presence and personally inform him of the "achievements," or take flight from the city. In the first scenario, I could anticipate the baron's favor but would surely acquire grave enemies in the form of those orchestrating this scheme. Who they specifically were, I hadn't the faintest idea, and to suspect anyone with zero empathy and an inability to read emotions was akin to seeking a black cat in a pitch-black room—assuming neither the cat nor the room existed, and you, the fool, were flailing about in an empty field.

The second option would undoubtedly save my skin but meant forsaking a comfortable salary, letters of recommendation, and most importantly—the baron's bonus for a job well done. Flight would nullify all my work over the past two and a half months, forcing me to start anew, possibly in a neighboring barony or duchy, or better yet, in an entirely different country.

(уже так было) My decision was swift and straightforward: I would endeavor to reach the baron. At this moment, my sense of danger was dulled, especially against the backdrop of Lu's attempts to breach my mental barriers, evidenced by the occasional discomfort in my neck area. Thanks to the slave collar, I always knew when my mistress faced another setback.

Lu's behavior since that evening, when the goddess shattered my psyche, had been peculiar; she had not once tried to force her way into my consciousness, but rather sought roundabout paths. I was well aware that to break my external barriers, all she needed was to touch me. Physical contact was pivotal in mental sorcery, simplifying the mage's life and amplifying his abilities.

The die was cast; all that remained was to seize the moment and somehow converse covertly with the baron, who occasionally visited the administration. Personally, I had never seen him; all his visits occurred after my battle with Lu, and I had no interest in the aristocrat. I had a goal, and I pursued it. Now, with my goal altered, it was imperative to be more vigilant of the hustle in the corridors. Meanwhile, I would play the contented fool, oblivious to the significance of what I had unearthed in the records.

After work, I routinely headed to the sanctuary, taking several waxed tablets and a stylus with me. Today's agenda included a minor lecture on physics for Sofa—a discourse on friction and the reaction of the fulcrum. It was standard high school physics, but the formulations from my former world could systematize what was already known to the wise deity. Hence, the need for the waxed tablets, as drawing would be far more effective than explaining with mere fingers. I had elucidated the concept of the direction of force vectors and their summation in my prayers earlier.

It would be amusing if all this was long known here, and the Wise Sofa merely humored the simple-minded human who deemed himself so clever. On the other hand, my numerical sense and memory, which emerged after the first prayer, had not faded. And there was always the chance for a placebo effect or self-suggestion.

I entered the now-familiar sanctuary and sat at the statue of Wise Sofa, leaning against the cool stone of the altar. A moment was needed to gather my thoughts and rehearse what and how I would recount to my patron deity.

As for my goddess, Lu, I spared her no further thought. Mistress, sovereign, possessor—nothing more. My goddess belonged to the realm of soul loyalty, so at present, I was more a man of Sofa, albeit compelled to assist a lesser deity.

My solitude was interrupted by an uninvited visitor, a rare occurrence: in Treil, there were grand temples to all the seven, so few ventured into such small shrines.

At the entrance to the semidome, I saw the familiar actress. She appeared less provocative now, yet still striking. As I suspected, the scarf that had collected coins on the stage now restrained the girl's mane of red hair, tied in a high ponytail. Her shirt was fastened up to the throat, the jacket buttoned, and the lute was encased in a special oiled leather sheath. Only her blue eyes still glimmered from within, as they did on the night of her performance.

"Hey, sir, do you always insult the gods, or is it just with Wise Sofa that you have a score to settle?"

When the girl wasn't singing, her voice was velvety and deep, perfect for a newscaster or, perhaps, a phone sex operator.

"No, it's all good," I waved off the bard, "I have privileges."

"What?" she asked again.

"I mean, Sofa and I communicate regularly, and I'm sure he'll forgive me the slight of not kneeling," I patiently clarified.

It was crucial to practice interacting with people to better guess their emotions. For instance, I forced myself to smile slightly as if I had said something amusing that wasn't for too many ears. I refrained from winking—it seemed like overkill.

(TOO MUCH) The maiden proffered no retort, merely casting a glance at the tablets in my grasp before proceeding to the altar of her patroness—situated a mere few steps from where I was sprawled, legs extended—and began to entreat her goddess.

Disturbing not the devout in prayer, I returned to the principles of friction and my schematics, meticulously etching lines and arrows in various exemplars, enriching my illustrations with the simplest of formulas.

"Thou art an oddity, don’t you know?" the maiden concluded her divine colloquy with alacrity and observed as I prepared pedagogical materials for my supplication.

"Wherefore dost thou say so?"

"'Tis customary to bring offerings to the altar ready-made, not to craft them in situ."

"'Tis here that thought finds me best."

"Ah, that doth make sense indeed."

I regarded the lass, feigning slight vexation that her presence distracted me from my labors.

"Hast thou a name, thinker?" She inquired simply.

"Anton."

"Greetings, Anton. I am called Enji."

"Salutations, Enji."

Our conversation dwindled on its own accord. The damsel lingered a moment longer, disconcerted by such disregard, but decided against further intrusion.

"Know this, Anton, I contemplate wintering here. So, visit 'The Boar' or 'The Lame Goose'..." She paused in the doorway, rattling off a litany of tavern names meaningless to me, where she alternately performed, "We shall share a pint and thou canst divulge that which emboldens thee to so brazenly sit beneath the Sixth's altar, unafraid of his ire."

I lifted my gaze to her. Plainly, she was intrigued, her curiosity piqued, yet her innate pride and independence forbade her from imposing her company further.

"I shall endeavor to attend thy performance."

Enji merely nodded briefly before vanishing behind the door.

My prayer and lecture for the god Sofa proceeded well. I even fancied that the tablets I placed upon the altar stone, and left there, had disappeared before I crossed the threshold of the sanctuary and stepped out into the street.

Night had descended upon Treil, a city that had become almost home. I had learned which districts and streets to avoid, so I took a circuitous route to my abode.

After partaking in a customary cold supper and rinsing off in a barrel, I entered my room. As expected, darkness enveloped it. I had just shed my shirt and was about to cast aside the night's covering when I realized Iliya, who normally lay snoring quietly in his place, was absent, and in his stead upon his bed sat Lu.

I straightened swiftly, bowed, and greeted my mistress.

"My lady."

Five seconds passed with me standing in the midst of the room, expecting Lu to rise and retire to her quarters.

"Anton."

These were the first words the goddess had directed at me since our clash eleven weeks prior.

"Yes, my lady."

I bowed again.

"Why hast thou shut thyself away from me, Anton?" Lu inquired directly.

I merely shrugged. The answer was self-evident.

"Thou didst mutilate my consciousness and soul, my lady, scorching with thy wrath my past and half of mine own self." I spoke calmly, gazing into the goddess's violet eyes. "Then didst thou show me, a mere slave, his place, and I dare not counter thee, my lady. Yet to allow thee entry into my mind without resistance again—I shall not permit. Even if thou wert to scorch it all, the instinct to survive would persist."

Lu watched me in silence.

"I diligently fulfill the terms of my release from thy dominion, my lady. I labor earnestly at the office, surrendering nearly all my earnings for the construction of thy new temple."

Once I might have drowned in those eyes, but now I looked steadfastly forward, reinforcing the walls of my mental defense and bracing for what might be our final confrontation. It seemed the capricious deity's patience had worn thin, and I understood clearly there was no hope for survival, yet with cold calculation, I planned to fight to the last and once more humble my executioner before death.

"Art thou dissatisfied with something, my lady? Am I not toiling diligently enough at the office?"

Instead of replying, Lu rose from her seat and, with a sad smile, extended her hands toward me.

Reflexively, I flinched away, postponing the inevitable touch. The goddess took another step forward. I sought the moment when the collar would tighten around my throat so I could swiftly plunge into the depths of my consciousness—to the last line of defense.

As I calculated the potential outcomes of our mental battle, the goddess drew close and cradled my face in her hands.

The anticipated onslaught never came. Instead, Lu gently but insistently dismantled the barriers I had erected, though at our last encounter within the halls of the mind she had unhesitatingly shattered them with potent mental blows. Straining against the final line of defense, Lu reached for the scorched remnant of my persona.

Her touch was tender and considerate, striving to mend what she had wrought, healing the consciousness she had tormented, reviving memories, and restoring the capacity to feel.

Emotions from days endured washed over me. Deeds and actions were perceived anew, memories gained color, and food regained flavor. Not all could Lu repair, but she invested her utmost effort to extract me from the trauma she herself had inflicted.

"Forgive me," the voice of the goddess resonated in my mind.

Throughout, she looked upon me with wide eyes, filled with genuine remorse, and the mental link conveyed that the goddess was sincere in her regret, tormented after her rage had subsided and Lu had fully grasped what she had done to me.

Lastly, before departing from my mind, Lu brushed against my consciousness once more, like a gentle breeze.

When the connection severed, I was again able to breathe and move. Emotions overwhelmed me, and I could not contain them. I grasped my goddess by the shoulders, buried my face in her hair, and wept bitterly for the newfound ability to feel, for the reclaimed chance to be a living human once more. (THE END OF TOO MUCH)

**Chapter 7: The Beginnings of Learning**

Long did it take for me to regain composure, but when serenity finally reclaimed me, I was engulfed in utmost embarrassment. My goddess Lu's shoulder and a portion of her hair were drenched in my tears and mucus, adding neither honor nor valor to the moment.

Peeling myself away from the deity I had clung to as if a tick, I seated myself upon the divan, and thus our dialogue commenced.

From Lu's tone and words, it was clear she had pondered long on the prospect of our reconciliation and managed, if not wholly, then significantly, to quell her divine pride. For the interim, sans a true acolyte, she remained but in a mortal coil, albeit one endowed with formidable magical prowess.

I relayed to my goddess the affairs at the office, the anomalies discovered within the ledgers, and my intentions henceforth. To my wonderment, Lu engaged in our discourse with zeal, as if a barrier had crumbled betwixt us. Perhaps our mental duel and the ensuing chill had reconciled her to her plight. Or perchance another influence had wrought this change; I played the sage and dared not probe, lest this newfound candor be startled into flight.

My musings on how to extricate myself from our entanglement were promptly dismissed by Lu. Too deeply had I delved into Tibbott's documents to now attempt to hide the proverbial striped elephant in the room.

My goddess concurred that the unraveled scheme was not the doing of one or even a score of individuals, but rather the apex of the pyramid held the rest in a state of fear, possibly even abject terror.

My suggestion to reinstate her as a calligrapher, utilizing her mental magics, was also rebuffed. Nearly three months had passed since I took up my role at the office, rendering the renegotiation of old accords unfeasible. Moreover, Lu's potential as a mighty mage, betrayed by the hue of her violet-grey eyes, was too conspicuous to go unnoticed; and mental influence, if anticipated, could be sensed—especially by the guilty who would surely await such trickery.

"Thus, Anton, we must initiate thy instruction," Lu stated plainly, patting my shoulder.

At first, her meaning eluded me, but as realization dawned, I mirrored the very visage of Edvard Munch's famed masterpiece.

"W-what?!?"

"I am saying we shall teach thee mental magics," the goddess repeated, peering innocently into mine eyes.

Misunderstand me not; deep within, where it was buried exceedingly deep, I was elated at the prospect of mastering the semi-forbidden knowledge of mental magic—a most advantageous skill, indeed. And I might as well wear a target on my back for certainty's sake.

"My goddess, art thou certain? Whence cometh the power? For thou hast said I am neither hero nor mage, but utterly... Useless. In the classic sense of a hero," I managed to articulate, despite the muddle of my thoughts.

In response, Lu regarded me with great attention, and before speaking, took my hand, causing a wave of tranquility to ripple through me. Hmm. With each encounter, the goddess's power seemed to soothe me more effectively, and I found myself liking it. Such intimacy in contact could easily foster dependency.

"Anton. I began to perceive oddities when thou didst respond to all my thoughts and discontents."

"It is but the collar, which would tighten slightly and I..."

Lu hushed me, bidding me close my 'mitten' and heed my elder.

"Yes, thou hast told me. Therein lay the oddity. Understand, the construct that the Mother laid upon thee and bound to me, though secure, is quite simple. It is like a leash..."

Lu's gaze fell, perhaps recalling my assertions of being her slave and my vow to fulfill the imposed agreement as swiftly as possible.

"But nothing more. A man should feel a jerk or a strong squeeze, yet at some juncture, thou beganst even to sense the prickle of my irritation; I saw it. Even the faintest of emotions."

I unconsciously touched my neck.

"I found myself needing to temper my irritation and anger severely, lest I harm thee, for thou wast too responsive to every thought of mine," the goddess continued. "And then, I lost control."

"Aye, and nearly didst slay me."

"And nearly slew thee," she echoed.

She clasped my fingers within her own.

"What think'st thou, Anton? Why do mentalists live either bound by Oaths of servitude or not at all?" she posed an unexpected question.

I pondered. Indeed. I had felt the wrath of a rather potent mentalist and managed to escape his clutches. True, Lu had not wished to finish me, but that was after I had cast out the tempestuous goddess rampaging through my mind. Yet in the heat of it, she was quite prepared to kill me. But still, I had prevailed. This suggested that mentalists were not as omnipotent as commonly believed. I ruminated further on the matter but reached no definitive conclusion, which I relayed to Lu. "I know not why all despise mind mages. Mayhap their countenances are unpleasing."

"Mentalists are denied freedom and bound by oaths because for them, to burst into the mind of a simple man and subdue him is as to swat a fly. Even the weakest can influence consciousness, let alone read thoughts."

I began to grasp the implication of my goddess's words, and it unsettled me.

"Meanest thou, I am a mentalist? How can this be?"

"Thou art not a mentalist, at least not until now. I believe it is the collar and the Mother's enchantment at work."

She rose from the bed and retrieved from my knapsack a dagger, which I habitually forgot to gird and had finally relegated to the sack. As the wise say, if thou cannot wield a knife, those who can will take it from thee and plant it in thy liver. Lacking skill with a blade, I concluded that swift legs would serve me better in an armed encounter than a mere piece of steel.

While I watched the iron, useless in my grasp but menacing in Lu's, she returned to the bed and, with a swift motion, pricked her own palm. Simultaneously, I felt a sting in mine and watched in horror as a droplet of blood began to form on my left palm, smaller than Lu's but in the very same spot.

"This..." The clerical tongue was too impoverished for curses, so without hesitation, I switched to Russian to express my sentiment toward the unfolding situation.

Lu merely drew a deep breath. Though she did not know Russian, my intonations must have conveyed more than words ever could, which the goddess seemed to agree with.

"When did you realize?" I asked abruptly.

"When I saw you for the first time after our... conflict," Lu replied, somewhat reluctantly.

"The bruise?"

"Yes."

In truth, I had sported a sizeable bruise on my left cheek, which had taken an unusually long time to heal. At the time, I hadn't thought much of it; my mind was elsewhere. But now, it dawned on me that technically, it was improbable to have landed so flatly upon my cheek without fracturing a couple of cervical vertebrae in the process.

"Yes..." I reverted to the grand, mighty, and so inventive Russian language.

I had always regarded Lu as the final, unassailable bastion of defense, a divine being immune to threat. A being that, at a moment's notice, would come to my rescue—conveniently forgetting her current human limitations. Now, any harm that befell the goddess would, seemingly, be mirrored in me.

Snatching the knife from Lu's hands, I hesitated for a moment before pricking my right palm with its tip. A drop of blood appeared, yet the goddess's hand remained unscathed, her face a picture of utmost surprise.

"Don't tell me you felt that..."

Lu remained silent. This meant that if I were struck somewhere, Lu, now confined to a human body, would share in the misfortune. What a mess the Primordial Mother had conjured! There was much to say, indeed! Or rather, there would have been, had anyone been inclined to listen.

"But this explains everything, Anton! It explains everything!" Suddenly, the goddess was as animated as a young girl. "You are a parasite!"

"Yes, I am well aware of your opinion, thank you..."

In response, I received a playful slap, a token of affection.

"I definitely overdid it, and you became surprisingly straightforward. And dull," Lu remarked, not in jest, looking at me with a hint of concern. "You are parasitizing on my mental abilities. Borrowed strength."

"Is that even possible?"

I had only heard of the concept of borrowed powers in one context: when mages of the same discipline formed a figure or otherwise linked together to imbue the most skilled among them with magical power to the fullest. And that, I read in books of questionable quality, in the moments between sleep during lectures and waiting in line at the cafeteria. My knowledge of the magic of this world was criminally scant. Mostly, that mentalists here were either executed or enslaved, and the existence of an entire Academy of Magic in the neighboring principality was something I hadn't even considered. But they weren't all playing the fool there; they were studying something.

"Apparently, it's possible. You managed to do it. And in our fight, you resisted me as a mentalist, not just as a simple man. And the barriers I was pushing through were mental ones..."

We sat in silence, pondering.

"Try to reach out to me," the goddess suddenly suggested, only to reconsider immediately, "though let's better try tomorrow. Today has been... complicated."

An awkward pause ensued, during which I decided that having already faced death, there was nothing left to fear.

I simply took Lu in my arms, drawing her close. The collar twitched for a moment, but any discomfort quickly faded to nothingness. Lu patted my back gently, then rose and left the room. Moments later, sleepy Iliy entered, evidently having dozed off in the goddess's chamber. Without a glance or a greeting, the old man collapsed onto his bed and fell instantly asleep. An experienced drunkard indeed: he had navigated on autopilot and would likely have no recollection of moving from room to room the next day.

Sleep eluded me. The scent of Lu's hair and skin lingered on my hands and clothes, unsettling the recently calmed soul within me.

The morning greeted me with a riot of smells, colors, and primarily, Rinta's emotions. Something had shifted in my eyes, expression, and gait, and the baker had definitely taken notice. As a result, she stirred up a whirlwind of activity around my mortal shell: engaging in conversation, chiding, asking for help where it wasn't needed before, and offering to sample a new pastry filling. By the time breakfast arrived, and Lu and Iliy descended, our landlady had thoroughly flustered me.

Today was the sixth day; it was time to head to the office. I toyed with the idea of snagging a street urchin, ever eager to run errands for a penny, and sending word that I was ill, but I quickly dismissed the thought. My lessons in mental magic with my goddess would have to wait until evening.

As I was about to step out onto the street, Lu stopped me.

"Anton, try to think more about me today."

Her words carried an unintended ambiguity, considering the events of the past night and our emotional breakthrough. I blushed slightly, not immediately grasping her meaning.

Realizing her gaffe, Lu gave my leg a light kick. The collar remained silent.

"I'm referring to our connection, you fool," she clarified in a hushed tone to evade Rinta's ears, tapping a slender finger against my temple.

I nodded silently in response.

Work was impossible today. I had joined the customs service as an emotional cripple, and now, I had to get to know all these people anew. Many noticed the change in my demeanor, prompting me to concoct a tale about a sister who had returned from a long journey, easing the anxiety that had gripped my heart.

Most were satisfied with the explanation, and they gave me a reprieve. There was even an invitation to revisit the tavern next week. To avoid standing out, I naturally accepted.

While I had been dead inside, the summer had passed, and now autumn was asserting its presence. In customs and the administration, there was a plethora of work to be done. The main influx of natural tributes was beginning, followed by the collection of cash once the peasants sold their goods to middlemen or at the markets.

As with other aristocrats of this world, Baron Tibbot preferred to levy taxes twice a year. The first occasion was at the onset of summer, when peasants could earn additional wages by working on others' estates during the sowing and planting season. Those who did not seek employment would instead fulfill their barshchina, or compulsory labor, which took no more than two days a week; Tibbot did not hold extensive lands for direct use, preferring to focus on other administrative matters and leasing his "noble hectares" to freemen.

The second wave of taxation coincided with autumn. It included both in-kind and monetary dues, though craftsmen and merchants preferred to pay in coin. The peasants, on the contrary, were more inclined to pay in kind. The prices set for these in-kind payments were certainly lower than the free market, but they were very close to the purchase prices offered by the same merchants who would descend upon the peasant fairs in autumn to buy up grain, apples, and even flour at cheap rates, if there was a miller in the village. Thus, it mattered little to the peasant whether to sell to the merchant and hand the proceeds to the baron, or to deliver all directly to Tibbot and let him deal with the produce.

Baron Tibbot accepted grains, flour, apples, cabbage, onions, carrots, and meat as in-kind payment in any quantity without restriction. As for more uncommon items, the situation was quite intriguing, and for a fleeting moment, I wondered if Amer Tibbot was an outsider from another world like myself.

For rare and industrial dues, the baron would literally issue work orders, which were communicated to the town mayors who, in turn, distributed them as best they could across their territories. For example, one jurisdiction would handle hide procurement because it had ample hunting grounds. Another would be in charge of mushroom gathering. A third was known for its apiaries. Such specialization allowed Tibbot to collect precisely as much produce as his estate could process or profitably sell, and everyone had their role. If the baron's order was fulfilled to less than ninety percent, the shortfall was compensated with money, including a certain penalty. In the end, the entire barony worked like a well-oiled machine—efficiently, smoothly, and with hardly any disruptions.

There were, of course, those within the barony who either could not manage their households wisely or were unable to pay their dues in full for some reason. In such cases, the administration would step in, and if the situation was too complex, the customs office where I worked would get involved.

As I understood, Tibbot was not fond of enslaving people. He held few lands for direct use, and his primary focus was on trade and raw material processing: there were several large mills around the town of Trail, and the city craftsmen were often busy with baronial orders in lieu of dues. Therefore, free labor was often more of a hindrance than a help to Tibbot.

For this reason, customs often granted deferrals on payments if, for example, failure to pay dues was due to livestock death, crop damage from hail, or destruction by drought. If a household's debts grew too substantial and seemed impossible to pay off even over a decade, the debtor's property was auctioned off, and the peasants or craftsmen became serfs. Tibbot would organize such debtors into separate groups that engaged in the most basic, but reliable production, primarily logging and construction. Occasionally, he returned people to the land if there was a redistribution of fields between settlements, creating barren patches. The last resort was to sell serfs to neighboring baronies and counties.

From records I came across, I understood that the trade of live goods was extremely profitable. A healthy man could fetch half a "king," a young woman—three gold coins. If it was a master blacksmith, tanner, or carpenter, the price varied from seven to twelve coins, depending on the age and skill of the serf. Experienced midwives who assisted with childbirth were also valued; even for an elderly crone who could barely move, one could get a couple of gold coins.

Children who had not yet reached working age were considered as an extra, and those under eight had no price at all—they were bound to their parents, and if orphaned, to the elders or masters of their old serf settlements.

Reflecting on how Tibbot came up with such a complex system, I concluded that it wasn't just Amer's doing alone—the need had simply arisen. Unlike most aristocrats of Cleria, who received their personal or hereditary titles for military service, Amer's ancestor, the first Baron Tibbot, was originally a merchant. According to my colleagues' tales, the then-commoner but wealthy and shrewd Tibbot took on a royal contract. The task was to organize the mining of iron ore and the smelting of ingots on the deserted southern lands of the kingdom. The country had just endured a civil war that had shattered the Clerian Empire, and the newly proclaimed Kingdom of Cleria, declaring itself the heir of the former state, was left without metal supplies from the eastern mines, now on the territories of Parinia and Lamia.

Cleria still had access to the Eastern Ridge, so the future Baron Tibbot, the first of his line, undertook the royal mission, for which he was granted a hereditary title.

Thus, these lands lacked the centuries-old culture of serfdom and slave labor: the miners were free peasants and craftsmen who joined merchant Tibbot in an adventurous campaign in search of a better lot. The country was still in ruins after the civil war, and metal was desperately needed by all. Their descendants now lived in Zhivobar and Nikka at the foot of the Eastern Ridge. And it was with a caravan of metalworking merchants from Nikka that Lu, Iliy, and I had made our way from Sidor to Trail.

Slavery was more prevalent in the north—the closer to the sea, the more eagerly aristocrats drove peasants into debt pits, from which they were then detached from the soil and ploughs and sold to maritime enterprises. Some found their fate at shipyards, others to service the docks. All able-bodied men were thrust into service as oarsmen on ships and galleys, and those unable to keep the rhythm and without a trade were purchased into sailor crews. Some became barge haulers, towing sea and river vessels inland along the rivers, or engaged in the rafting of timber downstream, closer to the crown's ship-building enterprises.

With a clear understanding of the barony's financial and economic system, I knew we were entering the "high season." Soon enough, all customs officers would be dispatched with the militia to collect taxes, and whatever the customs officers did not cover, the heads of towns and settlements would deliver themselves.

Interestingly, the mining towns of Zhivobar and Nikka were almost isolated polities: they reported to the baron only for themselves, and their leaders were elected, unlike in other towns, much like in the Brenn Republic. This was a traditional relaxation in control, along with other privileges, which merchant Tibbot, after becoming Baron Tibbot, had promised the free miners in exchange for their vassal oath. It was then agreed that the baron would always be the first buyer to whom the miners would offer their iron, and in return, Tibbot promised fair purchase prices and military support for the settlements. Metal trading held a significant place in the baronial ledger, so the old agreements between merchant Tibbot and the miners' ancestors were still in force and honored by both parties.

Ong's demand for my attention snapped me out of my reverie. I had slightly hastened my work on the first report, and to Mihaius's legitimate inquiry as to why I had shifted to auditing other years' records, I replied that I had been tasked with conducting a review and organizing affairs over the past five years. And that I would not approach the wise Amer Tibbot with only partially completed work, for I feared the firmness with which my head might remain attached to my body.

Of course, I was being less than truthful: Tibbot would not behead me, especially since, as far as I could glean from snippets of conversations among the managers and the mayor, the baron was carefully monitoring my activity through his officials and thus far was pleased with my thorough approach. Indeed, sorting through these papers as I had been doing was previously deemed impossible.

All day, I tried to feel Lu's mental touches. I did not know if she remembered her instruction for me to think of her often today, but I dutifully fulfilled my part of the agreement to the best of my modest accounting abilities. True, the occasional images of the goddess, born from my lively imagination, would distract me from the necessary business mindset, but they did not hinder me too much, only drawing my attention more intensely. Eventually, I entered a strange state where thoughts of Lu and her image constantly lingered at the edge of my consciousness, up until a serious irritant would emerge.

Take, for instance, when Ong dropped several tablets, and I, immersed in a light trance, jolted. The mirage of thoughts about the goddess immediately dissipated, and I had to exert some effort to refocus on the necessary thoughts while continuing my paperwork.

Upon returning home, only Rinta greeted me, though I had expected to see Lu downstairs as well. After washing up and slyly snatching a cabbage pie that lay almost provocatively unattended on the counter, I headed upstairs.

Softly opening the door, I found Lu engaged in what seemed like meditation. The girl sat directly on the floor, legs tucked beneath her in the Japanese manner of my native world. Hands on her knees, eyes closed, her back straight.

"You could have brought me one too," the goddess opened one eye and looked reproachfully at the pie in my hand.

"Have you not eaten yet?" I asked.

"When? Did you not feel that I was with you all day?"

I stopped chewing. Fully convinced that the image of the goddess in my mind was merely a figment of my imagination, I had allowed my thoughts to stray, though not too far. Yet here she was, apparently having been in my head all this time.

"I did not read your thoughts, do not fear."

"You can read my thoughts?"

"Anton, everything is written on your face," she gave me a decidedly sarcastic look, reminding me once again that before me was not a twenty-year-old girl, but a deity of five centuries.

I pretended that everything was under control and sat down opposite the goddess, crossing my legs in the Turkish fashion.

"Would you like to go down for a pie?" I asked belatedly, earning another dose of sarcastic looks.

"Just sit, dinner will be soon. Better to try and fully lower your barriers. I barely made it through them today," Lu replied.

I flinched. Lower my barriers? Although the goddess had repented for her assault and restored me from a vegetative state, I had become so accustomed to maintaining mental defenses over the last few weeks that the thought of removing them seemed improper—as if I were being asked to strip naked and run across a crowded square.

Lu looked at me attentively and encouragingly. She sensed my hesitation, and even if not, it wasn't hard to guess. The goddess gently touched my palm and said, "You know I will never harm you again. Honestly."

My silence was my only reply. After some thought, I nodded uncertainly and closed my eyes. There was much work to be done.

I dived into my mind and was surprised by how vibrant my attic had become. Previously I had perceived it as a vast nothingness, at most an empty sphere with a plateau at the center where my "self" was situated. But now, it was an intriguing place, shimmering with the colors of emotions and memories.

Concentrating on the outermost defense perimeter, which I had constructed specifically to battle with the goddess and which had naturally reformed in my sleep after my mental healing, I forced myself to lower it.

Not to destroy it—that wasn't my intention now. My task was to open the gates, not to demolish the walls.

As soon as the outer barrier, which had been like a shell encasing the entire hemisphere, vanished, I felt Lu's presence.

At the onset, the goddess's semblance was naught but a flickering glowworm, a blend of white and yellow, which in a few fleeting moments took on the spectral guise of Lu. I knew the sensation well, for it mirrored my own when I sought to coalesce my very being into a single locus of thought. Indeed, I was simultaneously each point within the inner vastness of the sphere.

When Lu had fully emerged, clothed in the familiar aspect I knew, fear gripped me fierce. The walls of my mind's sanctum began their ascent, and I, in turn, dispersed my essence throughout the vastness, a spectral mist weaving through the corridors of thought and memory, my true "I" a flickering wraith among the echoes of my past. The longer the divine presence pervaded my consciousness, the deeper the roots of terror burrowed within me. The memories of a wrathful deity laying waste to all within this sacred inner realm were not yet dulled by time.

(I) Panic, a white-hot blade, cleaved through my composure, compelling me to resurrect the bulwark of my defenses and to cast forth Lu from the sanctuary of my mind.

The goddess perceived my surge as a guttural strike, the sort that steals breath. She doubled over, hacking, while I, drenched in the sweat of terror, gasped for air as though I had run a marathon through Hades itself.

"Yes..." Lu managed, her eyes lifting to meet mine from her humble posture. She was still regaining her bearings. "You prepared for the end, Anton, as if it were nigh."

I could only offer a shrug, as if to ask what else she might have expected of me? Would I simply yield, surrender without the semblance of a struggle?

"This will not suffice; such a path leads us nowhere."

I awaited her further discourse in silence, while contemplation furrowed the brow of the goddess.

"Anton, to instruct a mage-mentalist is to engage in an art as delicate as the weaving of fate. Each mage must first enter their own mental sanctum alone, to face and to know oneself in the solitude of introspection. You were cast into these halls by my hand, thrust amidst the slaughter I wrought. Where a common mage might come to the realization of power concentrated into a singular form, you have scattered your psyche in efforts to elude my wrath. Behold," she intoned, laying her hands gently upon my face, our foreheads touching in a moment of shared intimacy.

I was drawn inexorably into Lu's inner sanctum, her psyche. Confusion gave way to clarity, and there I saw the goddess's inner form: she glowed with ethereal light, her eyes a fiery violet. More majestic than her earthly form, she was garbed in naught but a gossamer blue gown, which graced her form while revealing her alabaster shoulders. She stood amidst an expanse of purest white, her short sword held firmly in her grasp.

"At present, I have given form to my construct, shaping it as my sword," her voice resonated without her lips moving, "it now acts as the vessel for my power, the medium of my will."

She brandished the blade, and the scene shifted to the moment of her onslaught upon me. I stood aside, next to the goddess now attired in her flowing dress, observing the tableau of our frozen conflict.

The visage of Lu, marred by fury as she sat upon her bed, and I, a figure writhed in agony upon the floor at her feet. Suddenly, the scene whirred into motion, and vividly I saw myself rise to my knees, striking at Lu's face with the last vestige of my strength. The deity, stunned by such temerity, was cast against the wall. In the next breath, my eyes blazed with a violet inferno and a bestial roar tore from my lips:

"GET THEE HENCE! FROM! MY! MIND!"

With that singular strike, I deflected the goddess's advance, banishing her consciousness back to her corporeal form, now lying inert as a discarded marionette.

The veil of darkness lifted, and there stood my goddess, the widow's comfort, the solace of the forlorn, contemplating her blade.

"I crafted this illusion from the tapestry of my memories, by channeling my energies into the sword's form," Lu elucidated. "Absent it, the magic is beyond my dominion."

Unbeknownst to me, we had returned to the pristine chambers of Lu's mind. She approached and placed a hand upon my roughened cheek. Now, our gazes met as equals, not skewed by the dimensions of the world.

"Anton, my transgressions against you weigh heavy upon my spirit, yet we must endeavor to amend this path. My assault hath altered your trajectory. Instead of seeking clarity and focus, you fragmented your essence, seeking refuge from my ire. You erected towering mental fortresses rather than facing your adversary head-on. Such is a spectacle I have never beheld, and it stands against the natural order."

Her hand withdrew, and I felt the theft of something precious.

"But you breached those barriers once before, when you healed me," I thought loudly, for here, to think was to speak.

"Yesterday, death was but a trifle to you. You were not wholly human then, merely its shadow. Thus you welcomed me, indifferent to your fate, already dead in your thoughts, awaiting only the final battle, hence you offered no resistance when I showed no aggression. But now you are alive, you feel and remember. And therefore, now you fear me."

In Lu's words lay the unvarnished truth. Now, I feared and adored her in equal measure. Adoration was a given; she was a goddess, and I had been touched by her consolations and the healing of the soul. Fear arose for similar reasons. At times it seemed that mere proximity to Lu tainted my consciousness and even my blood, reducing me to the likeness of a callow youth, smitten with the class's sovereign beauty. Powerless to change, yet occasionally, in lieu of the goddess's sublime image, the recollections of a vengeful beast, prideful and cruel, who had stripped away all that was human and cherished, would flash before me.

And thus, betwixt these contrasting visages, the recent days had passed: the benevolent Lu on one hand, and on the other, the spiteful deity, poised to rend my soul from its mortal coil.

"Let us draw a close to this day's discourse. You must ponder whether trust can be rekindled. If so, I can guide you in the wielding of your powers."

"And if trust eludes me?" I pondered with intent.

The goddess offered a simple shrug. The sword had vanished; she was now arrayed in her customary garb, the end of our audience nigh. Yet I understood our exchange was confined to the mind's sanctum, a place where deception is futile. To withhold, yes, but to deceive, never.

"Should your borrowed powers remain unchecked, they will erupt in due course. And you shall surely take a life," she declared with solemn clarity.

I discerned no exaggeration in her revelation; the fleeting succession of visions laid bare the tumultuous onslaught of a mentalist in the throes of panic. Such a scene would suitably be accompanied by an invigorating soundtrack—a vibrant composition within the realms of grindcore or thrash metal. In every conceivable way, it was a spectacle of considerable disquietude.

"I shall strive," I assented with a nod, and the vision dissipated into the ether.

Lu relinquished her hold upon my visage and rose, stretching her limbs which had succumbed to a slight numbness.

"How do you endure existence thus?" she inquired.

"In what regard?" I queried the deity.

"Within these human vessels. They are excessively fragile, intolerably so. And now, all is affliction and ache."

I responded with a mere snort of acknowledgment. The evening repast had been uneventful, following my return from another sojourn through the streets of Ilium. The elder had transformed considerably since our last discourse. On one hand, he appeared more aged, undoubtedly weighed down by the pressing concerns of his mind, leaving Ilium fraught with anxiety. On the other, he had become more robust, his mane tidied, donning new attire which I surmised he procured at a bargain, given his frugal nature.

Before me now stood a man advanced in years, yet his appearance was meticulously kept. The sullied earth-tone complexion that had marked Iliy in our early days of travel to Serdon, followed by our subsequent urban existence, was nowhere to be seen. The patriarch was now cleansed, his vigor somewhat restored. His hair was neatly gathered into a slender gray tail, his beard trimmed and ordered. He bore the semblance of the patriarch of a prosperous and contented peasant brood rather than a destitute inebriate from the backstreets.

The items Iliy had chosen were of commendable quality—a stout shirt, hearty trousers, and sturdy boots. Girt about him was a crimson peasant's belt, a common accessory among the local yeomanry. This belt was a fabric of considerable width, its edge embroidered with elementary runes for health and longevity. Such belts were crafted by the hands of daughters and spouses for their beloved menfolk, who would then present them to the altar of the Mother Goddess to seek blessings for nuptials or to bestow vigor upon their husbands. It was often whispered that Geora herself sanctified these gifts, rendering those who wore such belts immune to grievous ailments and injuries, the efficacy of which hinged solely on the craftswoman's earnest devotion.

From Iliy, we gleaned that a grand fair was imminent in two weeks, coinciding with the culmination of the season and the harvest's totality. By then, all levies would be amassed, tributes rendered, and fields barren, prompting an influx of peoples and tradesmen from all quarters to Trail. The city would also witness an influx of performers and a cadre of itinerant souls, presaging a bustling atmosphere within the barony's capital.

A further stimulus was provided by Amer's proclamation of trials for his retinue—an infrequent event. In the best of times, such selections were made but once every several years. Fresh recruits were sought to supplant the veterans now succumbing to the rigors of age—stalwart young men eager to forsake their ancestral trades for a chance at fortune within the baron's guard.

The station within the retinue was advantageous by every measure—a position devoid of drudgery, with assured compensation. One might even be dispatched to serve within their native hamlet or township, as the urban retinue and watch were comprised of locals or contractors who had purposefully arrived from afar to enter the city's service. And indeed, fealty to the baron was a role of significant esteem, and though it entailed mastering arms and occasionally risking life against marauders or in defense of the baronial convoys, the life of a yeoman or artisan was equally fraught with daily perils. One simply traded one set of risks for another.

The forthcoming tryouts promised the citizenry an additional diversion: a modest arena would be erected on the fields beyond the city, where aspirants would showcase their prowess, dexterity, and sundry skills. Meanwhile, the current retainers, to the amusement of their charges and visitors, would engage in a series of jestful melees.

Upon contemplation of the melee, I initially let out a subdued grunt, and then recollected that besides sparking fervent debates online, it also resembled a chivalric tournament of yore, where combatants clad in full armor, yet wielding dulled arms, clashed in a mêlée.

I had witnessed recordings of such events; it was an entertainment of an acquired taste, particularly for participants. A throng of men brandishing swords, each endeavoring to land a blow with a shield upon another, while reciprocating in kind. But as previously stated, diversions in this realm were scarce, and one of the primary forms of amusement was the exchange of fisticuffs. Perhaps at the royal court, the populace possessed more refined and cognizant sensibilities, appreciating the eternal and the sublime, frequenting theatres. Here, however, on the frontier at the base of an impenetrable mountain range, pleasurable pursuits were in dire shortage.

Tumultuous thoughts preceded sleep. The morrow was a respite, and Lu and I intended to spend the entirety of the day in each other's company. As we laid plans, I could discern the easing of tension within Ilium—he remained on edge, not fully grasping the profundity of the accord between the goddess and myself.

We had concurred that come morning, I would attend to domestic responsibilities—Sundays demanded that I assist Rinte more than usual due to the considerable patronage, followed by ablutions and meditative practices. This day, I had divulged to her my pilgrimages to the shrine of the Sage Sofu, thereby dispelling the lingering enigma of my late-night returns.

Lu endorsed my pursuits. She harbored the belief that I had successfully kindled the curiosity of one of the Seven, an invariably auspicious development. Should Sofu's protective mantle extend over me, it would be to our collective advantage. Nevertheless, Lu playfully chided me that I might also render supplications to the Merchant, given our need for temple funds, placing me in an awkward predicament. For my understanding of fiscal matters was undeniably more profound and lucid than that of advanced calculus or physics. Yet, the Merchant's favor was not won with knowledge but with coinage, thus the reckoning was evenly matched.

Just when I presumed to have emerged from the debate with dignity, Lu delivered a coup de grâce, suggesting I might occasionally offer prayers to her as well—the most authentic and tangible of deities within the entire lesser and greater Pantheon, as perceivable to me.

(MIGHT BE CHANGED FOR MORE PROFESSIONAL VERSION) "Certainly," I began, as Rinta busied herself with the washing up in the kitchen, allowing us to speak freely about our matters. "You are now, are you not, a human being?"

"Yes, and I have bestowed peace upon you and healed you with my human capacities," Lu retorted with a touch of sarcasm.

This matter indeed required some contemplation.

On the one hand, Lu was outrageously human. She ate, drank, slept, perspired, and grew weary—muttering complaints to herself, thinking Ilium and I took no notice. Yet, I had personally experienced the comforting power she possessed. And even if my case were dismissed, one must recall how Lu aided the grieving Zora, who, after ascending with prayers to the goddess, managed to escape the dark pit into which life had cast her. Evidence of this was not only the improved Zora before our departure from Serdon but also the glow of joy from the blacksmith Irving, as if he had stumbled upon a 'king's' treasure.

Mulling over these thoughts once more, I turned towards the wall, trying to regulate my breathing. I had heard somewhere that focusing on one's own breath could hasten sleep. Alas, it proved futile; sleep eluded me in both eyes.

For the sake of order, I decided to occupy myself with something. At first, I reviewed administrative matters in my mind, but soon realized there was nothing to ponder there—I had understood the nuances of work and the shortages, which greatly simplified tasks.

Thus, I swiftly shifted my focus to the mental training with Lu. The shell of mental defense begrudgingly shifted, exposing my mind as if I were a mere human. Straining to maintain this state, I reached out to Lu, mentally calling to the goddess. Lu did not respond. Either I was doing something incorrectly, or she had already succumbed to sleep. Opting not to distress myself, I assumed the latter and continued working on the erroneously constructed walls.

The creation of a mental construct through which I could channel borrowed strength was still too premature to delve into. However, learning to swiftly lower the walls while reaching out to Lu was certainly worth the effort.

Engaged in this activity, raising and lowering the imagined shell of mental defense and invoking the sleeping goddess, I finally succumbed to a deep, restorative, dreamless sleep.

**Chapter 8. Baron Amer Tibbot**

Life proceeded as usual. I worked at the administration, returned home, and spent the late hours with Lu in her room. I did not neglect my visits to the wise Sofu, presenting the curious deity with fresh challenges, formulas, or even theories that I managed to dredge from my beleaguered memory.

There were no significant advancements in my training at first; I still flinched at the sight of Lu in the halls of my mind, and the question was simply how quickly I would falter. To my pride, I could withstand longer each day without panic.

We spent a lot of time with my goddess. Once, she even met me after work, and together we visited Sofu, half-toning our way through the key points of constructing mental constructs and managing the space of one's own mind.

My communication style with the Sage, it must be said, impressed Lu, though she later reminded me that gods are fickle and if I at any point became tiresome to Sofu, my frivolous sitting at the altar and lecturing tone over the tablets might be harshly punished. The thought of what a deity, the protector of wisdom and knowledge, might do to me—when even a forgotten goddess of the second circle could mar my consciousness as the god of my world did to a tortoise—was not something I wished to contemplate, so I heeded Lu's warning.

It was a calm and pleasant time, very similar to the normal life I had left in another world. Yes, I had no family in the conventional sense of the term, but Lu, Iliy, and the spirited Rinta, who like a strict mother first burdened me with work every morning and then fed me generously, took their place. At least she didn't bless me at the doorstep when I left for the administration, which was a relief.

I don’t know what had a beneficial effect, but a breakthrough occurred that very evening after our joint walk. It was the first time I did not eject Lu from my mind and allowed her to stay as long as she pleased.

The goddess sensed my inner tension, so she did not overstay in my attic of thoughts, but by the light in her violet eyes, I felt that I had done well and she was very pleased. Perhaps I was on the mend.

Along with this, I began to have nightmares in which Lu or other gods chased the firefly of my "I" across the entire sphere, demolishing it to its foundations. Besides my goddess, there were the Reaper, the Sage, and even the Bardess made an appearance. Such nights occurred only a couple of times, but everything was so bad that Ilium would wake me up, Lu would come, sit on the edge of the bed, and try to banish the horrors that came in dreams with her gentle strokes.

I would fall asleep again quite quickly, dreamlessly, and what my companions did next or what they discussed—I was not privy to. In the light of day, I preferred not to discuss my nocturnal weaknesses, pretending that nothing had happened.

A week before the festival, Mihius summoned me.

Entering the office, I was greeted with a classic scene that made me want to say, "Hello! Perhaps I'll come back later?" and vanish in an unknown direction.

In the room, besides Mihius, there were two others waiting for me. There was the portly mayor, who managed the city's household, and another gentleman of noble appearance. In this last character, I recognized my direct employer—Baron Amer Tibbot.

Baron Tibbot was a tall, robust man, appearing to be about fifty years old. He was dressed in sturdy, high-quality, and evidently expensive clothing. High boots of tanned leather matched his trousers. A beautiful, cream-colored thin shirt with wide sleeves adorned his torso, and a short vest in tone with his trousers covered his back. The baron's neck and chest were embellished with a thin gold chain, from which hung a medallion—the symbol of baronial power over these lands. The baron sported a small beard and mustache, apparently not fond of spending time on daily shaving. According to Ilium, all young aristocrats shaved. Some even trimmed their temples, leaving only hair tied back from the top of their heads, but Tibbot simply secured his dark, now partially grayed curls with a black ribbon. (THE END OF POSSIBLE CHANGES)

In that realm, a luxuriant mane was a badge of one's station, necessitating incessant attention and ablution—a privilege largely reserved for the nobility's purview.

I, too, had adopted the prevailing style to not stand as an outsider in the sea of people.

In the world whence I hailed, I kept my hair in a practical, short crop, a 'number three' as it was known—a style both convenient and swiftly drying, akin to the peasantry's choice here, and I harbored no qualms about that resemblance. Yet, in Serdon's domain, my scholarly mien, juxtaposed with a short coiffure, begot a discordant note in the symphony of 'expectation versus reality'. Thus, during my tenure in Trey, I allowed my locks to flourish under the nurturing gaze of the summer sun, aided by the earth's bountiful produce, culminating in a typical scribe's topknot, girdled with ribbon at the crest. This modest tuft did not hinder my labors yet subtly proclaimed my allegiance to the realm's literati. For a man not girded by the sword, to wear hair past the shoulders was a privilege unafforded.

Some clerks, in their zealousness, sheared their foreheads from temple to temple, ensuring naught would hinder their inscription of letters and runes upon the venerable parchment. I deemed such measures excessive and contented myself with the mere growing and grooming of my hair in the accepted manner.

Baron Tibbot, in contrast, bore the unbound warrior's tail, which in times of campaign would be braided into a martial plait. Nobles of high birth would oft interlace a filament of silver within, while those of ducal and comital descent might enhance their braids with gold threads and silver rings of ornate filigree. The king, the royal progeny, and their intimate circle would intertwine pure gold within their braids, clasped with gold rings bedecked with jewels—thus, a king's crown in the theater of war was a trove of incalculable worth.

Having swiftly gauged the adversary's strength, I bowed with deference—profoundly to the baron, then, less so, to the mayor and the administrator. Though the latter's acknowledgment was not compulsory, as they now bore a subordinate rank, the flicker of approval in their gaze did not elude me. For me, such gestures were of no consequence, exacting no toll on my spirit or purse, and I was willing to proffer such courtesies. All I implored was the liberty to live unencumbered.

My disposition towards authority did not escape the discerning eyes of Baron Amer Tibbot. He grunted—a nonverbal commentary on my character—following the mayor's perfunctory introductions, and thus we broached the heart of our discourse.

"Young master, Anton, correct?" intoned the baron, stressing the initial syllable, though I was far from the folly of correcting him. Address me as you will; my present endeavor was to maneuver this exchange and gain unimpeded audience with the baron, so I stood at attention. "What of the accounts? We've been dispensing your stipend for three seasons, yet the ledgers remain forthcoming."

A flicker of scrutiny in the baron's eye caused the administrator to recede as if into the very walls, after which he persisted, "The head of Serdon, your esteemed recommender, assured us of your swift settlement of his five-year accounts within the span of three weeks."

"Your Nobility," I offered another concise bow, "may I elucidate."

"Proceed," he invited.

"Your Nobility, the compendium of records in Serdon was but a fraction of the magnitude of your own estate's ledger. Furthermore, at that juncture, I was assisted by a personal scribe, who regrettably could not timely accept Mr. Mihius's offer extended during my engagement, owing to circumstances beyond her influence. I assure you, there is no slight intended towards the operations of your administration. Thus, I endeavored alone, but endeavored with utmost diligence."

Crafting a narrative slightly divergent from actuality, I shielded both my own reputation and that of Mihius, earning from the administrator a fleeting nod of gratitude. For if the baron were to inquire why my scribe was not presently employed—given the administration's awareness that "sister" had returned some weeks prior and was in good stead, a fact that may well have reached the baron's ears—we would be in a precarious situation. I would be compelled to confess my apprehensions of revisiting old contracts, and Mihius would be obliged to divulge the unvarnished truth. My polished rendition pleased all involved, leaving only Lu to bear the brunt—yet her absence from this chamber rendered my account plausible. The crucial matter was to maintain this narrative within the confines of my domicile. My last venture behind Lu's back had nearly seen me dispatched to the Reaper's embrace.

Baron Tibbot remained silent, his demeanor a clear indication of his expectation for the continuation of my account.

"Regarding the affairs, and the outcomes," I continued, "the accounts for the most recent annum are nigh completion, as are those of the year preceding. A trinity of storehouse tomes have been bound and are being inscribed—I projected their culmination within a pair of months, at which time I intended to present the results to Your Nobility."

"And the results of the last year?" pressed the baron.

"I would prefer to convey such information in a setting more conducive to confidentiality, and with the ledgers at hand," I responded boldly, holding the baron's gaze unflinchingly, omitting the honorific in my daring.

Such audacity nearly provoked the mayor to a palpitation, while the administrator seemed to shrink within himself. My brazen comportment was attributed to my inexperience with aristocratic discourse. Moreover, these gentlemen had borne witness to Baron Amer's youthful vigor, as he had, two decades past, affixed the miscreant taxmen and corrupt warriors to the town's ramparts—a practice akin to audits and restructuring. And they remembered well, as the baron's demeanor intimated his readiness to institute such measures anew. They lived with this knowledge.

Maintaining my gaze upon Baron Tibbot, I even dared a sidelong glance. Had our stations been matched, such a gesture would intimate either a clandestine conference or a convivial drink—neither of which I intended. Thus, I silently implored that the baron would perceive my desperate plea for a private audience.

At first, Tibbot's brow furrowed with discontent at the presumptuous accountant before him, but soon his visage eased back into its inherently relaxed, yet authoritatively ennui-laden aspect—befitting only a scion of the aristocracy. Thereafter, he engaged in routine inquiries of no particular import.

I departed from the audience with Baron Tibbot feeling somewhat underwhelmed. What had I expected? That the baron would immediately see through my cunning plan and give me a knowing wink of approval?

After the lofty audience, my work seemed to falter, so I left Ong to tinker with the records of the second year, while I settled down to pore over the nearly completed ledger. Sooner or later, the baron would summon me for a thorough reckoning, and I needed to be prepared with a strategy. The presence of the mayor and Mihius during our conversation was something I had come to accept.

Only the faint touch of Lu, through the invisible mental and physical connection established by Mother, brought some solace. I had almost habitually let down my defenses, allowing the goddess to ‘visit’ my mind. We had yet to master communication at such a distance; for that, I would have had to plunge into the halls of the mind myself and receive her ‘in person’, which would have been quite inconvenient. However, Lu's mere presence was somewhat reassuring.

After work, Lu sensed my anxiety and was there to greet me at the threshold of the administration building. On the way to the sanctuary, where I had literally blazed my own trail, I shared my fears with Lu. My goddess could not offer much in the way of advice, only the reassurance that I was simply doing my job, and what the baron chose to do about it was out of our hands.

I wanted to agree with Lu, but I was certain that if Baron Amer Tibbot launched a zealous campaign to root out the participants in the grey scheme of embezzlement and kickbacks owed to him, the head of the criminal group would want to know who had inspired the baron to such action. And there I would be, a conspicuous figure, a genius accountant who didn’t even carry a dagger for protection.

Lu felt my doubts, so she simply took my arm, and we continued the rest of the way discussing trivial matters, like Rinta’s latest batch of pies, which turned out even better than the previous ones.

By the time I reached the sanctuary, I was calm, and my prayer to Sofu went without issue. My reserve of fundamental knowledge in physics, geometry, and mathematics was nearly depleted, and I was reluctant to divulge anything more substantial, like nuclear physics, to the deity. On one hand, it seemed irrational: Sofu was all-knowing and should have been aware of such basic things. On the other hand, some inner doubt kept me from fully opening up to the god of wisdom.

At home, after a hearty and delicious dinner — Rinta seemed to have improved her cooking since we began lodging with her, though I wasn’t sure how much better it could get — Lu, Iliy, and I each poured a mug of beer and retreated to the room I shared with the old man. Our plan for the evening was to review our finances and discuss future actions once my service to the baron concluded, and nothing else remained to keep us in Trey.

I understood the desire to be on the move. In a satiated and peaceful city, there were no duties for Lu befitting her divine status. Iliy, of course, spread knowledge of the goddess of widows and orphans among his numerous acquaintances and drinking buddies, which he had accumulated over the months in Trey, but Lu was only regularly prayed to by Zora. According to the girl, she felt this every evening or morning.

For the restoration of her divine powers, numerous prayers were as essential for Lu as having her own temple and priest. Thus, we were destined to set out again, much like those pilgrims. Along the way, we would likely meet many new faces, in inns and villages, where grieving widows and unfortunate orphans were not uncommon.

I wasn’t thrilled about this plan, but I acknowledged the goddess’s wisdom. As for Iliy, he simply agreed with everything Lu proposed, taking a very convenient position of a 'compelled man'. After all, he was Lu’s priest until she lost her last temple, so in some sense, he really was under compulsion.

“What about the old temple, anyway? Where is it?” I suddenly realized I had never considered the question of redeeming and restoring my goddess's old sanctuary. In my world, after all, the Bolsheviks had turned churches into stables and barns, and after the Soviet Union collapsed, they were turned back into churches, and everyone was fine with it.

Lu just shook her head sadly. “It’s here, in Cleria, by the coast, but it’s no use, Anton. They desecrated the temple, destroyed the altar, and turned it into a barn. I can’t return there as a god.” It was clear we would have to build anew.

What’s the saying? A man should build a house, plant a tree, and raise a son? Or was it grow a tree and fix a son? Never mind, in short, my to-do list was strikingly similar: build a temple, find a priest, and resurrect a goddess. I just snorted at my thoughts. A to-do list for a superhuman indeed. Whether accountants from Moscow were included in the lists of superhumans, I didn’t dwell on the thought.

The financial review revealed that we had accumulated nearly 550 silver Klos, considering what was left from the Sardonian earnings. When converted to gold, we had 18 gold and 19 silver Klos remaining.

By local standards, it was a considerable sum. For 20 gold, one could buy a fine racehorse, while a modest mare for leisurely travel would cost 10-12 gold coins. The annual income of a whole estate, subject to taxation, rarely exceeded 7-8 gold, and if everything was sold down to the last, leaving nothing for seeding in spring or provisions for winter — 10-11 gold coins. So in the four months I had been here, I had already earned more than a peasant family or a village blacksmith would make in a year. Had Lu been working with me, I could have extracted another four and a half gold Klos from the baron's pocket, a point I made sure to lament demonstratively to my companions.

Lu nearly took offense, mistaking my moans as a slight against her, reacting so sharply that I even felt the pressure of the nearly forgotten collar. But she quickly read the contentment on my face and realized I was merely jesting.

Thus, we possessed nine-tenths of a warhorse and a full measure of uncertainty ahead. Our path was unclear, and for the moment, we considered a route towards the royal road that traversed all Cleria from west to east, not far from the coastal shores. At its narrowest, the distance from the road to the great waters was no more than a score and a half of leagues. Our intent was to join this royal road around the seaside city of Pite — the capital of Cleria — whereupon the choice would be ours: to venture westward towards the Kingdom of Gonog, crossing the breadth of the country, or to turn towards the capital and thereupon decide our further course.

Rightly noting that to make plans was but to jest with the gods — a phrase from my world that my companions found amusing — I declared the meeting of our little troupe at an end.

The grand festivities drew nigh, and the barony's capital transformed. Streets teemed with travelers, merchants, and idle onlookers, while every inn and tavern was so crowded that not even an apple had space to fall. The entire city and its environs were readying themselves for a glorious revelry. The celebration was to begin on the local Sunday — here, simply the seventh day or the day of Kalita — and would last the entire week. Thus, I hastened to conclude my affairs with the first granary ledger, perfecting it near to the ideal. I had also chosen my line of conversation, so I was almost assured that I could extricate myself without drawing undue attention from the likes of Mihius, conveying the necessary information to the baron. The thought of deceiving the nobleman and covering for criminals had never even crossed my mind.

Ong had stepped out, presumably to find some sustenance for lunch, leaving me alone in the archives. At this juncture, one of Amer Tibbot's retainers peered into the room. By the patches on his leather armor, he served directly in the baron's castle.

"The baron summons you. With the book. They will let you into the castle," the man uttered curtly after ensuring I was alone, and then vanished as swiftly as he had appeared.

A cold sweat broke over me, and then it dawned upon me: my audacious conduct had indeed secured the audience I desired.

Yet, on the other hand, this complicated matters. Earlier, I was confident I could simply tell the baron everything as it was, feigning ignorance if necessary. But personal interaction with Amer Tibbot threatened to drag me into the mire of local conflicts, up to my very crown. Only the quill of my scribe's tail might remain visible, the handle by which they might attempt to extract me.

I had scant faith in Tibbot's nobility, so the chances of becoming a pawn or the baron simply neglecting my fate were significantly greater than zero. I grabbed the ledger I had just been working on, quickly swapped it with the accounts for the following year so Ong would suspect nothing, and slipped out of the administration building as smoothly as a greased weasel — lightly, unnoticed, and silent.

The administration was right next to the inner city walls, so the gates were within easy reach. Trying not to look overly furtive, as if I had stolen something or was hiding, I passed the guards who merely glanced at me — as if I were invisible, whereas they usually stopped anyone who did not reside or work within the upper city to enquire about their visit, much like the border guards of my world. I slipped into the castle just as unobtrusively, for the baron had trained his people well, and all who were to cross my path had been forewarned.

Along the way, I lowered my mental barriers and reached out to the goddess with my thoughts. Lu responded almost immediately, as if she had been waiting, and slipped into the chambers of my mind. Finding a secluded corner where I would not be noticed for at least a couple of minutes, I closed my eyes, took several deep breaths, and followed the goddess — inward.

When Lu was "visiting," she appeared exactly as she did in reality. It was in her own halls that she was a majestic goddess, but in my mind, she met me as my companion and, incidentally, my enslaver, in the form that I knew her.

"What is it?" Lu was slightly anxious. She had already sensed my trepidation but had not yet pieced together from the fragments of recent memories what exactly had transpired. Short-term memory is indeed fragmentary.

"The baron has summoned me."

"All will be well."

"I shall endeavor to ensure it, but Lu…"

"Yes, Iliy and I will gather our belongings."

"Try to stay with me."

"You caught me right on the street; I need to leave and return home," Lu now stood like a statue against some wall, just as I did. "Lower your barriers."

Before departing, Lu touched my hand, and a wave of tranquility washed over my soul. She knew well what dose I needed.

There was no time to ponder my narcotic dependency on Lu's divine magic. I peeled myself from the wall of the niche where I had hidden from prying eyes and made my way to the main building of the castle, which I had previously only seen from the other side of the walls.

At the entrance, I was met by baronial retainers bearing the same patches as the recent messenger in the administration. Thus, I obediently followed one of the mustachioed men, who became my escort.

The baron's study did not dazzle with opulence, though it was furnished with a certain taste. Certainly, in the older pieces, one could still see the ears of the mercantile ostentation of Amer Tibbot's distant ancestors, but in the relatively new elements of furniture, likely acquired during the lifetime of the baron's grandfather and father, one could sense an aristocratic dignity. A substantial part of the study was taken up by a large desk made of an unknown dark wood. The desktop was covered in a velvety cloth to prevent papers from sliding, and my keen diamond eye caught sight of a couple of aged ink stains right opposite the working area. This desk was used for real work, not just for receiving guests and subjects.

The baron himself was ensconced in paperwork at his station when I entered, only lifting his eyes to verify who had come. Once he ascertained that the correct person had arrived, he pointed with his quill to a vacant chair on the nearest side of the table without breaking from his task.

We sat in silence. The baron perused his documents, paying me no heed, while I, perched on an unaccommodating chair, fiddled with the granary ledger and surveyed the chamber.

At one juncture, Tibbot broke from a letter, having reached a point to which he could easily return later. I too preferred to pause at certain junctures in my work, never abandoning documents mid-sentence, so I understood Amer's habit well.

There were no greetings, no "Your Nobility," no bows. This was strictly a business meeting. The baron clearly understood the desperate, by current standards, step I had taken by playing the boor at the administration and gazing upon him with wide eyes. Thus, I simply extended the prepared annual account report to the lord of these lands, folded my hands upon my knees, and waited for Tibbot to acquaint himself with the principal figures.

"Mark! Close the door and let no one in, I am occupied. Understand?" The baron shouted to his retainer, who stood guard in the corridor.

"Understood, Your Nobility."

The door snapped shut, and we were alone.

"Seven hundred gold for that year alone?" Amer inquired directly, his eyes flashing.

"Yes, Your Nobility."

"And you are certain there is no error?"

"Indeed, Your Nobility. A similar situation occurred in Serdon, but there it was largely a matter of scribes' errors."

"And here?"

I fell silent, mulling over my options. Should I haggle, then lay out all as I saw it, or feign ignorance and quietly slip away from this tale, embarking on a long journey with Iliy and Lu?

"Your Nobility, I require assurances."

I felt a stir of discontent within me emanating from Lu. The goddess had quickly returned home and was already, for the past ten minutes, with me again, attentively observing from within the recesses of my mind. I understood her, but in response, I merely sent images of safety, a temple, and her own divine form as I saw her in her halls. Lu subsided, remaining as an outside observer, while another wave of calm swept through me, quelling my anxious heart.

Tibbot raised an eyebrow, demanding clarification.

"Your Nobility, in exchange for all information and my assistance with this matter, I ask that you provide me and my companions, with whom I currently live and travel, safety and your patronage," I divulged candidly.

"If you would be so magnanimous as to properly value my contributions," I added.

Tibbot pondered.

"This does not resemble a vassal's oath, which would afford you my protection, Anton," he hinted at my audacity.

"Circumstances preclude me from offering you an oath, Your Nobility. I am already bound by other commitments. Therefore, I seek your clemency and patronage for an accountant who fears for his life," I replied forthrightly.

As for other commitments, no lie was necessary — I was bound to Lu, and any oaths or vassal pledges paled in comparison to my duty to the goddess.

The existence of other vows partially justified me in the eyes of the baron, so he simply nodded in agreement, accepting my explanations.

"And what if I command you to be dragged to the dungeon and coerced to reveal all through the press of thumbscrews and iron?"

I had not considered this outcome. Having spent so much time unraveling the affairs of the baron's estate, I had come to think of him as a businessman, not as the medieval feudal lord he also was. I refrained from mentioning that my goddess-mentalist with sword in hand would immediately follow me, though the thought crossed my mind.

The baron continued to muse over my request. Eventually, he relented and gestured dismissively.

"You shall move into the castle today, to lodge with the servants."

I inclined my head in a grateful half-bow, a feat not without its challenges while seated, but I managed it.

"Now, tell me everything."

I relayed to the baron everything I knew about the machinations with his tributes. I mentioned that the tax accounts tallied to the last clo, but in kind, there was all manner of discrepancy.

"So, it transpires that my stores and goods are being pilfered?" The baron arrived at a simple and apparent conclusion.

By the look on Amer Tibbot's face, it was clear he was somewhat disappointed with the results, regretting the time spent on me.

"Yes and no, Your Nobility," I seized the initiative. "It concerns the documents and the manner of theft. It's not a single individual or even a group of your subjects filching, but an entire network has been established, trafficking goods beyond your treasury's reach."

"Explain."

"It's all in the accounts and the purchase prices. The shortage I've identified in your reports cannot be detected without the merchants' charters and receipts that accompany any significant sale of tribute. And it's these receipts, once the figures are matched, where things begin to look askew."

With a gesture, I requested permission to approach the baron's side, and he waved a hand as if to say, do as you please. Leaning over the granary book beside the nobleman, I began to flip through the report's pages.

"When matters are tangled and disordered, it's nigh impossible to notice a loss, especially sums of this nature. Forgive my frankness, Your Nobility, but your archive is in chaos. Though, I surmise this is the case everywhere."

The baron nodded in agreement. Organizing records for such an array of items, especially when using primarily unwieldy wax-coated tablets, was no simple task.

" (maybe more foremal Вы смотрите) Look here," I indicated with my finger on one of the highlighted lines. "The sale of grain to a merchant of the capital. The officially recorded price is five silvers and three clo per sack. There were four such transactions, all for thirty sacks apiece. In all the receipts the merchant issued to the administration, the cost is noted as five silvers and three clo per sack. There were four sales transactions, all listed in the granary book at the same price, but one receipt, the last one, was for five silvers and fifteen clo per sack. Someone, thus, pocketed twelve silver coins."

The baron listened intently.

"But you show a shortfall of nearly seven hundred gold."

I nodded in agreement.

"Yes, viewed as an isolated transaction, it might seem a mere error. What's a dozen or so against your yearly turnover? Merely a couple of pitchers of wine. But such discrepancies occur throughout the entirety of the in-kind tribute. Here a few copper clo, there a wagon from a half-hundred claimed lost to apple shrinkage brought by peasants, elsewhere an inflated cost for a craftsman's labor in lieu of serfdom, with the difference skimmed off."

The scale of the disaster began to dawn on Tibbot.

"This network has entwined its tendrils throughout all matters of in-kind estate management. When taxes are collected in coin—all is well, perfectly so, for it is easily checked. But as soon as a middleman enters and any bartered transaction takes place, lo and behold, something goes missing. In the end, you lose nearly six hundredths of your gross product."

"Gross product?"

"You are being robbed of approximately one-seventeenth of what the entire barony earns. This is nearly half the royal tithe you yourself pay."

"Every year? And the other records?"

"Every year, Your Nobility. The figures vary somewhat, as harvests differ, and opportunities to steal are not always present. Many transactions are clean. But theft occurs every year, and I believe, has been for a long time."

"One cannot accomplish such in a day. This was built over decades," Amer agreed.

"That is precisely why I sought your protection, Your Nobility," I said, bowing lightly, with a sense of my own worth.

The baron fell into deep thought.

"You say they do not steal money. What if I convert everything to coin and stop taking produce?"

"You know that would paralyze the entire economy of the barony. Too much is processed by your serfs, plus orders for craftsmen from Trail and other artisans also constitute in-kind tribute, Your Nobility," I countered.

The situation looked exceedingly grim. To annihilate this many-headed hydra, one would need to simultaneously identify all the main participants of the scheme within the barony's administrative hierarchy, which Amer had so diligently built all his life, and then begin to lop off heads. The magnitude of the problem suggested that anyone could be involved, or perhaps everyone at once, from toll collectors to the head of the baron's own retinue. Tibbot could trust only himself, as it was his wily subjects who were fleecing him, and to three-quarters trust me, for I had unearthed this whole affair.

The baron's son was currently studying in Pite, squandering his father's coin on women and wine. I was certain that this was how "study" in this world typically proceeded. The baron had no other heirs. So, if one were to twist the dial labeled "paranoia" to its utmost right position, to "maximum," this could all be one grand setup.

Now Amer Tibbot would begin crushing "conspirators" and executing them indiscriminately. Someone might cry out that the lord had gone mad, which would lead to a small but victorious rebellion, during which the bloody baron would be drowned in his own privy. The mayor and the administration would grovel before the son with grim news, and from there it would simply be a matter of convincing the young man to remain in the capital for as long as he desired, while those loyal to his father managed the estate in his stead. Volunteers for this role would be plentiful. Perhaps they might even lay a couple of more appetizing women at his feet, possibly even of noble blood—there was no shortage of impoverished nobility in the capital.

By the time the heir came to his senses, the entire Tibbot legacy would be milked dry if the administrators were shortsighted. But I was more inclined towards a tale of merely increasing the "spiders'" share, those who had spun their webs, say, to a tenth or more of the baron's net income, which would be two or three times the current seven to eight hundred gold clo per annum.

Plus, one mustn't forget the metal trade. The baron was a middleman, a proxy between the external market and the miners, consistently earning his cut from the achievements of an ancient ancestor. If the boy were removed from this chain, for a modest kickback from the price difference, "proper" merchants could be introduced to the metallurgists. And no one, save for the baron himself, would be at a loss.

Contemplating the scheme of "proper" metal purchases, I squinted. The account there wasn't just by the hundreds, but potentially by the thousands of gold per annum, on top of what was already being stolen. Although much was taxed by royal duties and went into the state treasury, neither miners, baron, nor merchants in the metal supply chain knew want.

Tibbot reached the same conclusion, judging by his somber expression.

"Have you thought of your son?" I asked directly.

"Yes. What do you think?"

"They will consume him in an instant, Your Nobility."

The baron nodded in agreement. He could ill afford to risk a "small, yet righteous" rebellion, which in reality would be nothing short of a coup. It threatened not only his life but the very existence of the Tibbot lineage.

Amer rose from his chair and began to pace the room.

"I hold in high esteem the work thou hast done, Anton," he again stressed the 'A,' but I judiciously kept silent, though sorely tempted to correct the nobleman, "let thy companions move into the castle this very day. Methinks word of our lengthy converse hath already reached the ears of those who ought to hear."

The baron now seemed the very image of paranoia, but the kind of paranoia one might attribute to a man truly shadowed by agencies as covert as the (ЦРУ…) CIA, MI6, MOSSAD, with extraterrestrials scanning him by night for good measure.

"What was the steward's price for thy work?" Amer asked pointedly.

I declared the sum of my salary and the expected bonus should my efforts impress Baron Tibbot.

"Oh indeed, accountant, thou hast indeed impressed me," Amer Tibbot smiled ruefully. "Truth be told, I sought an exemplar of neat ledgers and orderly reports, and instead, a conspiracy hath been unearthed. Yet impressed I am."

He paced a bit more and then abruptly inquired:

"How binding are the oaths? Whose man art thou, Anton? The King's?" The baron asked directly.

He was starting anew, and presumably, he thought that I, a man without lineage or name who had revealed this festering sore, might become the first reliable official in his new administration.

In lieu of a response, I merely shook my head and gestured upwards, implying, aim higher, Your Nobility, aim higher.

The baron just chuckled.

"I know thou frequent the sanctuary and pray to the Sage, it hath been told unto me. And I am convinced that he doth not only hear thy prayers, lad, but that he himself sent thee unto me. I'll not ask thee to break thy vows."

Pity struck me as I beheld the baron. Within the last hour, I had shattered his perception of everything he had labored to build all his life. No, his barony was flourishing, wealth was growing, and Tibbot was not in want, but he had failed to eradicate theft and surround himself with men who worked not out of fear, but for conscience—this he sought through his reforms, and yet he had unwittingly nurtured a viper in his bosom. This knowledge now weighed heavily upon him, a ponderous burden of doubts and grim thoughts.

"Herein, I grant thee a bonus of five 'kings,'" the baron began, and I could not help but gape impolitely, "How many companions hast thou? Two? Then three sturdy steeds thou shalt have and provisions. In the armory, arm thyself if thou art wanting. Tonight, thou shalt rest within the castle walls; here it should be safe, and thou shalt blend with the servants. Come morrow, gather thyself, and after sunset, I would advise thee and thy companions to depart from Trail. And 'tis my counsel to travel beyond the reach of my lands."

It resembled an exile, but given my reluctance to entangle myself in local squabbles for power, the baron had rewarded me royally. Fifty gold pieces and three horses from the baron's stables, each worth at least two or three 'kings' themselves, plus supplies. Our parley had cost Baron Tibbot over a hundred in gold, and doubts began to assail me.

The baron noted my silence and pensiveness and understood my train of thought.

"I seek not to lull thy vigilance with promises, accountant, I thank thee for thy service. The Tibbots have been aristocrats for several centuries, yet we emerged from merchants. And we have always paid for services rendered and aid provided," he said proudly, even puffing up a bit. "Now—depart. Convey to the doorward my orders regarding thy accommodations. The matter of provisions and gold shall be settled on the morrow."

I left the office with mixed emotions. On the one hand, the thought of money and horses was heartening; on the other, we had not planned to break our journey so soon. But as is well known, life often dictates its own corrections.

"To make the gods laugh, tell them of thy plans," I recalled a remark I had casually thrown to my companions during our small council, and the stir in my chest told me that the goddess shared my sentiments.

We moved into the castle swiftly. We were allocated a single chamber for the three of us, but we did not complain; we were to be there for but one night, and the morrow would pass in waiting.

We slept in our clothes and with our weapons. Lu—with a sword at hand, I—with my dagger, and the elder had procured a short travel knife from somewhere, likely acquired in the town on some occasion.

As I lay listening to Lu's soft breathing, sleeping on the furthest cot from the door to my right, I finally succumbed to a fitful and uneasy slumber.

I awoke at dawn, feeling utterly spent. Ily, too, was awake and sat with knife in hand, unwilling to leave the two of us unguarded. I exchanged glances with the old man and gestured towards the door. I checked on Lu. The goddess was asleep, one hand clasping her scabbard, the other resting on the hilt of her sword, her legs slightly tucked under. I adjusted her blanket—the castle was drafty with cold seeping from the stone walls—before slipping out of the room in search of someone to inquire about breakfast and the baron's instructions.

The day passed in confusion. We were strangers in the castle, thus without knowledge of where to go or whom to speak with, which constantly irritated the locals. With some difficulty, we were assigned horses and tack, saddled them, and collected provisions from the baron's stores, so ample that we would not soon need for food. And if we bought fresh vegetables in villages and hamlets on our way, we were effectively equipped for a journey to the capital itself.

In the evening, I was summoned once more to the Baron's chamber, where he thanked me again for my service and handed me two heavy pouches: one filled with silver and copper, the other with gold.

"I thank thee for thy generosity, Your Nobility," I bowed deeply, yet without servility.

"Go forth in peace, accountant, and may the wise Soph protect thee," the baron responded. "Should I survive, thou shalt always find welcome on my lands."

I bowed once more and exited. There was nothing left to discuss with Amer Tibbot. From Tibbot's visage, I could tell that soon blood would flow here like rivers, and the castle's dungeons would fill to bursting. The baron's executioner would have much work. If I were a fool, I might have tried to draw Lu into this tale, as a powerful mentalist. With her support, the baron could swiftly restore order to his lands, but afterward, he would be duty-bound to report to the king about the violet-eyed maiden with mind magic. That would lead us to a hunt for Lu and attempts at her enslavement, or, should she refuse, her execution.

So it was that thoughts of aiding Amer were swept aside, as I secreted away the pleasing heft of coin-filled purses and rejoined my comrades. With night’s veil descending, we reined our steeds and stole forth from the city’s embrace, embarking upon the thoroughfare to Courru—the seat of power in the adjacent shire. Trail, with its three months’ span in an alien epoch, lay in our wake. Our journey beckoned us forward anew.

**Chapter 9. The Sword and the Lute**

What may one truly know of equestrian pursuits? To my mind, it had always been the sport of kings or a pastime of the affluent. Riders, in my estimation, were those unburdened by worldly troubles—leap into the saddle and off they gallop toward valorous exploits! This notion was ever fostered by the popular tales of our culture, where the art of horsemanship was portrayed as a trivial matter, nearly as universal as the air we breathe.

Yet, the harsh mistress of reality would brook no such fantasies.

On that inaugural eve, as we fled with haste from Trail’s confines, all seemed to bear a semblance of order. Clinging to the saddle was arduous; my mare was skittish, snorting her discontent and casting backward glances as if to question what manner of imbecile burdened her back. It must be said, I harbored a kindred disdain. As the earth cooled beneath us and we succumbed to slumber, however, the true ordeal commenced.

To be precise, it was an affliction of the posterior, the loins, and the inner thighs that besieged me. I harbored no illusions that the act of riding would be a pleasure untainted or an undertaking devoid of complexity—my experience in the matter was naught—but I had presumed the principal tribulations would arise from the governance of the beast beneath me.

At our halts, the extraction from my leathern perch became a torment most exquisite. As the tension abated from the sinews of back and limb, a veritable purgatory unfolded. There, prostrate by the campfire, I would utter silent anathemas, groan in agony, and curse both the pantheon and the very realm that, despite its sorcery and the erudite Soph, had not seen fit to bestow upon us the simple boon of a 'Zhiguli'.

Old Iliy, that venerable cur, found amusement in my agony, offering acerbic commentary on my various contortions, thoroughly amused by my misfortune. Lu was somber and perturbed, for if flight from pursuers or imagined brigands was to ensue, I would surely part company with my saddle and become a spoil of war most promptly. Moreover, my lack of composure was a source of irksome vexation to her, so much so that for the first time in many a week, I discerned a faint prickling at my nape—the slave collar from Mother was a steadfast companion yet.

Such was the severity of my back's lament that all else became trifling: slice or cleave at your will, for I, a mere ledger-keeper, had glimpsed death and the ire of deities. And now, to the compendium of my worldly experiences, were appended the torments of the damned, rendering fear obsolete. In due course, even Iliy's patience with my laments wore thin, compelling him to withhold his jibes and forgo making sport of another’s grief.

My plaintive cries persisted for days. I oft pondered that had I been astride a horse upon my first day in this strange new world, I would have simply tumbled and snapped my neck. Such would have been the unceremonious conclusion to the accountant-hero’s grand odyssey. However, the regimen of recent months—my daily toil with axe, the hefting of burdens, and the wrestling with dough, from which my shoulders all but dislocated, revealing the reason for bakers’ breadth rivaling that of blacksmiths—had bestowed upon me a semblance of the muscular architecture intended by Mother Nature. Yet still, I spent ample time in a posture known to the contemporary man, seated upon a chair, hunched over parchments and waxen tablets.

Upon the fourth day of our passage, it dawned upon me that such existence could not be sustained. I would either purloin Lu's blade and cast myself upon it as a knave upon thorn, or I would take to gymnastics.

Bearing through the agony, I conjured the teachings of all the schoolyard coaches that had ever attempted to mold my reluctant frame. Bends, twists, stretches—I even indulged in the 'cat's arch,' lowering my hips with a characteristic sway. Ily regarded my exertions as a form of gratis entertainment, offering color commentary on particularly successful postures and movements, advising me to lower my backside with greater abandon.

This ritual was reprised come evening, after our reprieve.

While Ily busied himself with the supper, stirring some concoction in the pot and adding bits of dried meat from the baron's stores, Lu observed my machinations with a keen eye.

“You claimed no warrior's blood,” she addressed me with a note of skepticism as I concluded my impromptu exercise routine and approached the fire for my share of the meal. Each of us now possessed our own modest bowl and wooden spoon, obviating the need to sup from a common kettle.

“Indeed, I am no warrior, as you well know,” I replied, scalding my lips on the hot broth.

“Yet your warm-up bears striking resemblance to that of a soldier. Scribes and peasants undertake not such activities,” she retorted.

I fell into contemplation. Verily, that basic regimen which had emerged from the depths of recollection and which now served as my salvation from the corporeal tolls of horsemanship, in this world, was likely confined to the martial disciplines of flexibility and strength. To all others, it would be deemed wholly superfluous.

“Well, in my realm, nearly all are acquainted with and perform these exercises for the sake of vigor.”

At the mention of my own world, Iliy's ears all but unfurled in eagerness, while Lu feigned indifference, though her curiosity was palpably kindled.

I had been sparing in my recollections of the life I left behind, opting instead to inundate the elder and the deity with inquiries, seeking to grasp the nature of this place I had come to. Now, however, I was compelled to elucidate upon my peculiar knowledge of martial calisthenics, lest my companions be left with lingering doubts.

“In the world whence I hail, there exists neither magic nor deities,” I began, “and thus the people…”

“How can there be no gods?” Iliy interjected. “To whom then do the masses offer their supplications?”

“Gods there are, but not as you perceive them. They are akin to the creations of fable, for none have laid eyes upon them; they dwell within the realm of myth,” I elucidated to the venerable man with forbearance.

The revelation astounded the old priest, and even Lu could not conceal her astonishment, as I continued:

"Such gods as are here do not exist in my world, and thus each people hath their own deity. Usually, 'tis but a single god they worship as the true one, and all others are deemed false, mere fabrications," I said with a wry smile.

Then ensued a brief foray into the history of religious wars and the radicalism of fundamentalists.

"Thus, my world was once akin to this one—with aristocrats, kings, and peasants. But, for want of gods and magic, folk turned more to science, forging discoveries and crafting mechanisms."

"Do they then worship a local Sage?" Lu inquired with precision.

I shook my head:

"No, there be those who simply believe in the supremacy of knowledge and science. We have no deity to patron the learned. What's more, in times of darkness under aristocratic rule, the faithful would burn the wise at the stake as spawn of evil, saying their speeches and discoveries affronted their 'true' god."

Even Lu gasped at such a notion. To burn sages and scholars? Such an act would provoke bloody retribution from the Wise Sage with the Warrior's support in any realm of Tallaria. In this world, learned men were under the protection of a very real and mighty divinity.

"In time, the learned ceased to be fodder for the pyre, and since then, humanity has advanced, creating and inventing anew. We have surpassed this world by centuries of development. It's doubtful this world shall ever near the level of mine," I noted with a tinge of bitterness.

"And why is that? Here we burn not our wise men on pyres," Lu's voice carried a hint of interplanetary nationalism.

I merely laughed at the goddess's words.

"What do the local folk do when the plague winds blow?" I asked, again adopting the guise of an Odessan, answering a question with a question.

"Well, they pray to the Mother."

"And does it avail?"

"If they pray hard enough and make sacrifices—yes. The Mother will aid," the goddess replied, still not grasping my drift.

"See? Illness comes—pray to the Mother. Need arises—pray to the Merchant. Sorrowed—pray to the Bard, and if one wishes for wisdom or inspiration—pray to the Sage, and he shall guide and enlighten. In my world, prayers bore no fruit; people were left alone with their woes. No one came to save them from plague or famine."

Lu began to grasp the nature of the world I had once inhabited, and by her expression, deemed it a place of somber and joyless existence.

"Thus, people began to solve their own problems, not waiting for divine assistance. We found ways to combat the plague—quite simple really,"—Lu and Ily nearly choked—"invented mechanisms to ease life, built houses that stand for centuries yet rise in mere months. We discovered liquid stone, new metals, created carriages that move without horses, and even weapons that make the Warrior's wrath seem but a child's tantrum."

Lu clearly didn't believe the last part, so I mentally reached out to her, inviting her into my mind. When she closed her eyes and slipped into my thoughts, I sent her images of a nuclear explosion: the first bomb test, a few more scenes I could recall, and lastly, the testing of the thermonuclear 'Tsar Bomba', whose shockwave circled the globe thrice, and whose mushroom cloud ascended fifty leagues.

Lu recoiled back to reality, looking at me with something akin to horror. The very possibility of such a creation without magic was beyond her comprehension.

"How have you wrought this without magic? It resembles the wrath of a great god more than a human creation!" She was still reeling from the cultural shock.

I just shrugged.

"Through science, and a rare ore, purified with great care."

After a pause for thought, I added:

"Perhaps the people of my world wish to become gods themselves."

As we settled to sleep, Lu slipped into my mind, and I followed her. At her behest, I shared with her visions of my native world: the science, technology, music. Images of cities soaring to the heavens in glass and concrete, titanic ships cleaving the oceans, and vast airplanes under whose silver wings the world became a patchwork quilt, soaring skyward. I showed her our understanding of manufacturing, resource extraction, agriculture, war, theatre, cinema, and other diversions, imparted knowledge of medicine, physics, and even space.

"Wondrous..."

The goddess was astounded. Against her native world, the place from which I hailed seemed far more multifaceted and complex than she could have imagined. And all this without the use of magic or gods.

Without a word, I slipped from the halls of thought, and Lu followed, returning to her own body. We soon fell asleep.

On the fifth day of our unhurried journey, we approached a sizable village. As it lay on the road from Trail to Courr, it boasted a couple of inns. We handed our horses to a young stable boy, tossing him a trifling sum to ensure they were well cared for and watered, then entered the inn.

Unlike the last lodging in Trail, where my comrades and I had the dubious pleasure of staying, this establishment was remarkably cleaner. Village inns, ever wary of muddying their surroundings and thus inviting disease, maintained a tidier environment. The floor was scrubbed clean, evidenced by the bright planks, and there was little soot from the lamps. A robust woman greeted us, likely the innkeeper's wife. We arranged for our stay at a modest cost, and for an extra fee, secured firewood for the bathhouse.

The desire to bathe was overwhelming. We had made do with water from brooks and wells along the way, but the scent of sweat still clung to me. So, leaving Ily and Lu to settle into our rooms, I immediately sought the bathhouse and woodshed. What I found exceeded all expectations, and I understood why the innkeeper had discounted the use of this luxury. Truth be told, she had undersold it: had she shown me the bathhouse first and then demanded a silver piece, I would have paid without hesitation.

(MAY BE TOO SIMPLE) Beneath the canvas of an azure sky, I discovered the bathhouse in the backyard, a true sanctuary of steam, not the pitiable excuse for cleanliness frequented by the city folk of Trail.

Though aged, with darkened logs and tar-patched gaps, it stood as a proper bath. Inside, I beheld a grand barrel, a water trough suspended from the ceiling that could be neatly tilted with a special rope to cascade over one's head, forgoing the awkwardness of a ladle, benches in the steam room, and a pair of bunks to recline upon, to rest between the cleansing heats or after the washing ritual.

Like a boy who chanced upon a sack of sweets, I burst into a flurry of activity. With another copper offered, I procured a pair of linen sheets for my use from the hostess, fetched water from the well in the yard, stoked the furnace, and awaited the bathhouse to warm.

To speak truthfully, I may have overdone it. The heat was akin to the armpit of Beelzebub, and after I poured water onto the special stone atop the furnace, the steam room was shrouded in a dense white mist. With great satisfaction, I bathed, scraping the dirt ingrained in my skin. Forsaking all decorum and bending double, I submerged myself entirely in the vast barrel, which I had filled but halfway with water. Only the quill of my hair, which I customarily twisted atop my head after washing, protruded from the water. In short, when Ily entered, he beheld not me, but a contented frog blissfully soaking in a barrel, blowing bubbles through its nostrils.

But all good things come to an end. The well water was cool, so I had to emerge from the barrel. The old man too took to the steam room and by the croaks from the neighboring cubicle, he was as surprised by the fervent heat as any.

For Ily and Lu, I refreshed the barrel with new water. After the steam and the wash with hot water, a pleasant lassitude spread through my body, and all I desired was to partake in a meal, enjoy a mug of ale, and fall into slumber, though the evening had only just begun.

We descended to the common room for dinner, joined by Lu and Ily. The place was abuzz with life. The festive week still reigned and the common folk, having toiled through the arduous agricultural season, now indulged in idleness and gluttony, eagerly flocking to establishments of merriment to squander their earnings on ale, wine, and snacks. Elbowing through the throng of men and dodging a petty merchant, I made my way to the counter to place our order.

"The inn is lively tonight," I remarked. "Is it always so during the holidays?"

"Not at all," the woman waved off, "Today they've come for the singing, but usually, it's more spacious here."

I was indeed taken aback by the crowd. The hall of the inn was vast, for the village lay on the merchant route from Trail, so often did large groups stop by. There was ample space to accommodate two caravans if need be, ensuring no loss of profit. I surmised the second inn at the other exit of the village, which first greeted traders from the sea towards the distant barony, must be just as prepared.

Having ensured the hostess remembered where to bring our food, I collected three mugs, a large pitcher of pleasantly aromatic light ale, and retraced my steps to our table.

The ale of this world was, naturally, unfiltered, turbid with sediment, and often either tart or sharply bitter, but I had acclimated to its taste. Occasionally, a pang of nostalgia struck for the fine German brews or the equally exquisite beers of Czech brewers I would never taste again, but happiness, after all, was not found in beer alone. This local brew would suffice to while away the time at dinner.

As we began to eat, concentrating on our spoons, a bard for whom the throng had gathered, ascended the makeshift stage—a raised platform at the far wall. A tall, red-haired maiden, vaguely familiar to me, stepped onto the stage. A flash of auburn hair flickered and vanished behind the backs of other patrons—we were seated in a corner far from the stage, where it was somewhat less crowded.

The first chords rolled through the tavern, and the maiden began a heartfelt, albeit simple, love song. Recalling a performance I had heard in Trail, I concluded this tale was more straightforward—the audience here was different. My expectations were met as the fair voice of the songstress ebbed away on the final note, and after a brief interlude, she launched into a lively tavern song of a cunning shepherd and a greedy miller who fiercely guarded his daughter from the young man's advances.

Song followed song, the enchanting sounds of the lute merged with the deep and beautiful voice of the bard, and slowly, the hall began to sing along and stamp their feet in rhythm. By the end of the concert, the whole tavern was belting out merry tunes about brave sailors, crafty peasants, and valiant guardsmen. Ale and young wine flowed freely, and I witnessed new barrels being rolled out from the cellar to ensure no guest's cup ran dry.

Even after the concert ended, the hall buzzed for a long time. Men, now considerably inebriated, laughed, and women blushed from the young wine and loud songs. Some cleared tables in the center of the room for arm-wrestling contests, which a lively old man eagerly narrated. He also took purely symbolic bets on the wrestlers, encouraging the losers and urging the crowd to cheer for the victors.

"Will you try?" Ily nodded towards the dense circle of people around the arm-wrestling table.

I shrugged. I had no desire to entangle myself in the locals' rowdy revelry. My back still ached from the saddle ride, and we were to be on the road come dawn. Thus, I remained at our table, having preemptively ordered another pitcher of ale from a waitress who scurried about assisting in the tavern that evening.

"No, I might pull something in my back or arm, and then you'd bury me by the roadside for all my whining. It's not worth it," I replied to the old man, who was keen to see if I would test my mettle in an honest fight. Evidently, he was itching to place a bet, but was reluctant to gamble even a couple of coppers on just anyone. (THE END OF TOO SIMPLE)

Iliy but waved a dismissive hand in my direction, as if to say, such are the trifles of an accountant’s concern.

In that juncture, a bard wove her way past our table. Her lute carefully enshrined within its leather sanctuary, her dues to the tavern's mistress fulfilled; thus, her grasp was now committed to a generous mug of ale to quench her thirst, and a platter abundant with cheese and meat. Her eyes roved for a seat where she might sup without undue attention from the local men whose spirits had been inflamed by libations and lyrical enchantments.

Catching sight of us, a spark of recognition alighted within her gaze, and with purpose, she approached. "Anton! To find the baron’s own accountant here was beyond my ken! Recall you me?" Without ceremony, she settled herself beside Ily, stirring within him a medley of emotions. A blush adorned his cheeks, betraying his sentiment upon the sight of her bodice, artfully laced to accentuate her ample endowments, the lower cords drawn tight to uplift, while the upper were allowed some liberty, affording a gracious view to those around.

I remembered her from a past occasion. It was during an outing to the tavern with the toll collectors, and subsequently, our paths crossed in the sanctuary. "Greetings! Enji, is it not?" I queried, and upon her vigorous assent, I made introductions to my comrades and recounted the tale of how I came to know this itinerant minstrel.

Lu initially bristled at the intrusion of a stranger, but upon my explanations, her demeanor softened, and she offered Enji intermittent yet thoughtful glances, all the while lending an ear to our discourse. But this was scarcely a discourse; it was Enji who held the floor. Ily, poor soul, was utterly ensnared by the minstrel's charm, and I offered little beyond nods and the occasional word, to avoid the semblance of indifference. My own contributions were curtailed, for my knowledge of this realm was scant, leading me to parry Enji’s queries with nebulous retorts or deftly steer our exchange towards narratives of my service under the baron. The machinations of graft I had unearthed, naturally, I kept shrouded in silence.

In times past, such tavern visits left me emotionally spent, rendering the affair wholly inconsequential. Yet now, armed with the cognizance of my identity and the peril of exposure, especially over trivialities, engaging with any soul beyond Lu and Ily for more than moments became a laborious task.

However, Enji proved a formidable raconteur. Her bardic tales cascaded freely, and her delight was palpable, having found a haven where she might dine and imbibe without fear of unsolicited advances.

"I've taken to the road," I offered to Enji, "but what of you? Why abstain from Trail's grand festival, with its muster and promised melee?" The query was apt, drawing an approving gesture from Lu beneath the table. It felt akin to that inaugural, innocent question posed by SS Colonel Dieter Hellstrom to the covert British scouts in Quentin Tarantino's cinematic opus.

To liken oneself to an officer of the Gestapo was a dubious pleasure, yet the milieu seemed to indulge such a comparison. Here, though, instead of saboteurs, my company was a fair bard who had for reasons unknown forsaken the year's grandest revelry. Perhaps she had ties to those shadows I had disturbed with my audit, her talents extending beyond her lute’s strings?

My suspicions dispersed as quickly as they had formed. Enji snorted at my wary expression. "You flatter yourself, accountant, be at ease. The truth is, Trail was swamped with bards from all corners, nearly outnumbering the patrons. And such were the costs for stage and lodgings that I stand to gain more here, entertaining simple folk and itinerant traders," she elucidated the circumstances of our encounter.

I nearly succumbed to the urge to request three ales, to persist in the masquerade and perhaps catch her in an errant gesture, but I resisted. The images from the film that haunted my thoughts were so vivid and convoluted that Lu, who kept a watchful eye on my state, nearly choked on her ale when the scene of the German officer's unseemly demise and the ensuing tavern melee flashed across my mind.

As the merriment waned, the arm-wrestling tourney concluded with the blacksmith's predictable victory over the miller. Ily heaved a sigh of regret for his unplaced wagers, while the assembly began to reorganize the tables and benches, their homeward departures imminent. I wagered that the more spirited among them would extend the revelry with private stores, though henceforth away from the inn's confines.

Enji intended to linger in the village one more eve, to grace the second tavern with a performance, thereby reaching those who had not ventured to our present establishment. I apprised her of our dawn departure, which dimmed her spirits, yet with a glint of resolve in her azure eyes, she vowed to endeavor to overtake us. Neither Ily nor I demurred, and even Lu was silent in consent; there is safety in numbers. More so, Enji had her own steed, assuring her travel between hamlets was with ease and would not delay us.

Our libations concluded, our sustenance partaken, Enji rose, bid us farewell, and retired. My gaze lingered, admiring her lithe form encased in leather and the robust curve of her auburn tresses as she departed.

Come morning, we stretched and made perfunctory ablutions in a barrel—the prospect of a proper wash in the chilled water being quite impossible. After a brisk repast served by our drowsy hostess, we settled our dues, led our horses forth, and thus we took our leave of the amiable village.

Lu was pensive. According to our plan, wherever we went, we were to seek out widows and orphans so that Ily and I could tell people about the distant goddess Lu, to whom they should pray for solace. However, during the festive week, all sorrows and troubles receded, and we left having accomplished nothing. At least we had rested.

In the evening, noticing that riding no longer brought me the agony it had in the early days, Lu confronted me with the fact that it was time to take up the sword.

We had contemplated with the goddess the idea that she would teach me to at least hold it properly and not look like a village fool, but the right moment had not presented itself, nor had we had the weapon. And Lu had refused to practice with sticks. Now, however, among the supplies strapped to my horse's saddle lay a simple short blade in a leather and wood sheath. I had taken the baron's offer and armed our troop: I received a sword, and for Ily, under the disapproving gaze of the quartermaster—who, however, did not dare to contradict the baron's will—I took a small crossbow for close combat.

Though small, the crossbow was difficult to cock, so it would only be of use to the priest if we knew of the battle in advance, or if he could break the distance and win time to draw the string.

I understood that arguing with Lu was futile, so after a quick snack, I drew my sword.

It was a perfectly ordinary retainer's blade. Shorter than the swords of aristocrats, and certainly smaller than the large two-handers. A simple and practical weapon, both within the city walls and on the open road. Such a sword usually came with at least a small shield, but I wisely decided not to overburden the horse unnecessarily, and there might not even be time to don a shield. So I took only the sword.

Lu drew her own blade, which was incomparably finer and richer than mine. Sturdy sheath, a leather-wrapped handle of elongated form to prevent twisting in the hand, and a small engraving near the guard. My weapon looked like a mongrel next to a show champion.

As soon as my goddess saw that I was holding the short sword with both hands, squeezing the grip as if trying to strangle the sword, she realized there was much work ahead.

First, we learned simply to stand correctly and hold the sword. Lu turned out to be a good teacher, but the occasional tingling in the neck area showed that she was extremely irritated by my helplessness.

"In your own world, there are swords too! Why do you know absolutely nothing?!" my goddess exclaimed in annoyance when I made yet another elementary mistake.

In response, I could only grunt angrily, positioning my legs properly and turning my shoulders at the correct angle. Why need a sword or a knife if you have a pistol? Cold steel remained the lot of thugs, enthusiasts, and historians.

Our lessons were interrupted by Ily. The priest informed us that if we did not go to dinner now, we would be left with only coals. He could no longer bear to stir the pot on the fire.

The distance between Trail and Courr was about a hundred leagues as the crow flies, but the road constantly twisted, and several times we turned off the road to look into villages and hamlets, so the journey took us more than a week.

The celebration quieted, and the surrounding world returned to its usual dull gray state. Peasants were preparing for the coming winter, gathering firewood and repairing roofs. Soon the rains would start and the paths would be muddied by autumn slush, so after the holidays, people got back to work.

Sorrows that had been tucked away under tables and benches returned. There was at least one widow or orphan in each village we visited, so Lu's flock grew by a dozen people. Many were skeptical of the old priest's words, not believing that some distant nameless goddess would respond to their prayers when even the almighty Mother ignored them. But Lu's mere presence was enough to quickly persuade the doubters.

My goddess even seemed a little cheerier. We were beginning to climb out of the abyss we had been in since I first appeared in this world. We had money, Baron Tibbot had provided us with horses and supplies, I had received my first, albeit poor, sword, and the number of those praying to Lu was slowly but steadily growing.

Of course, many forgot about the goddess as soon as they received the necessary relief and peace, which made Lu a little sad. But the human soul is a complicated thing, and as soon as grief washed over people again, they began to pray to the Seven, now including the little goddess Lu in their invocations.

"I don't understand how you can feel it all? You've said so many times that you lack divine essence," I pondered once again on the paradoxical abilities of my goddess.

"Well, it's more like being trapped in a human body than lacking essence entirely," the goddess replied. "You saw me in the halls."

I nodded in agreement. In the halls of her own mind, Lu indeed felt like a deity.

Along with fencing practice, we continued mental exercises. I finally learned to decently send mental images to the goddess, maintaining a one-sided connection with her. Meanwhile, I could only hear Lu at the level of feeling her emotions, and even then, most clearly if she entered my halls. But overall, my sensitivity was increasing.

I couldn't eliminate the mental walls I had created for the last fight with the goddess. I could only lower them, but I couldn't completely rid myself of the massive construct I had created in fear of Lu. However, I learned to keep my mind open for Lu, so she wouldn't have to, like a dog, scratch through the shell of my mental defenses just to glimpse my consciousness.

Mental magic also helped with fencing lessons. Maintaining a connection with Lu, I could better sense what the goddess wanted from me and when I was doing something wrong. By the time we reached Courr, our evening practices had turned into silent swings of the swords, occasionally interspersed with short phrases.

That very evening, as we were finishing our practice and preparing to dine, Enji caught up with us.

The young woman was shrouded in a dusty cloak, her previous concert attire, which seductively clung to every curve of the bard's figure, was nowhere to be seen. Now she was clad in loose trousers, a sturdy high-necked shirt, and a similar jacket. Her hair was gathered atop her head in a high tail and tightly braided, revealing small, neat ears adorned with tiny round earrings. Her lute was packed and securely fastened to her saddle, along with supplies and a cloak.

"Aha! Caught you at last!" The girl's ringing voice echoed through the clearing where we had stopped, off the road—she almost missed us, but then she saw some buffoon flailing a sword as if he were a windmill. "Well, I think to myself, surely the fair Lu is teaching the accountant how to wield a weapon!"

Enji's laughter was hearty over her own joke, and she even managed to infect both Lu and me with her smile. Her assessment of my skills was quite accurate, I would even say, spot on. I truly was still a buffoon, clumsily waving the blade like a wooden stick, though I had made some progress—I could feel it from Lu, who decided to give me a bit of encouragement.

As it turned out, our paths aligned with Enji's. She was headed toward Pite and the surrounding cities. She had her favored haunts there, where a wandering singer would winter and entertain patrons through long evenings. To my reasonable inquiry as to why she would not spend the winter in a castle, where her singing would surely be welcomed at aristocratic feasts, Enji replied seriously:

"Anton, you're as naive as a boy. Lodging in a castle implies that after performing, I'd be warming someone's bed. A baron's son, the captain of the guard, or a steward—whomever they command. And I, you see, prefer to decide for myself whose bed to lie in, and with whom," Enji answered seriously, without a hint of a smile. "So, until I'm no longer a target for every passing retainer trying to grab my behind, I'll not set foot in castles for winter."

There was reason in her words, but on the other hand, judging by Enji's stories, she barely made enough money for the season, and considering the prices for lodgings in the north of the kingdom, along with her earnings in local taverns and inns, her savings would only last until spring. After which, she would have to set out again, carrying her modest belongings and her faithful lute.

I pondered Enji's future, and it painted a bleak picture. If she didn't find herself a wealthy patron while she was young and beautiful, she'd end up a common beggar, taking any job and occasionally singing in the most sordid of establishments. For a bard, especially a female bard, wasn't just about a lovely voice and the skill to play an instrument, it was an entire show, and a delight for the eyes. And what delight is there in looking at an old woman? Perhaps she would join a troupe where she'd play second fiddle for a meal, but seeing Enji's proud and independent spirit, it seemed to me she'd sooner leap headfirst off a cliff or throw herself upon her long dagger than relegate herself to such demeaning second roles.

The next morning, we reached Courr—the capital of the County of Ansh. The House of Ansh was one of the oldest, but also one of the poorest in Cleria. The metal trade, from which Tibbot made his profits, was not accessible to the Anshes, and the lack of access to the coast deprived these lands of the advantages of maritime trade. The neighboring territories to the west and east of Ansh were in a similar state, so the whole region, deep in the country, was somewhat depressed and solely reliant on agriculture.

The Ansh castle was larger than Tibbot's, but that was where Courr's advantages over the southern neighbor's capital ended. Muddy streets, buildings slanted with age, and shady figures bustling to and fro. This was how I had envisioned the deep and dark Middle Ages, and upon my arrival in Trail, I was quite pleased to have been mistaken. As it turned out, Tibbot's barony was more of an exception, corresponding more to the wealthy coastal territories than to the Clerian hinterland.

Finding a moderately decent inn, we settled for the night. Enji, with a wave, flitted off in an unknown direction in search of evening work—she had redressed in her snug stage attire that morning, not wanting to waste any time. So, slinging her lute over her shoulder and giving us a wink of farewell, the bard was off. I was confident that Enji faced no particular dangers. She was a feisty young woman, her dagger sharp, and overall, in such a dregs of the world, Enji felt as comfortable as a fish in water.

We took two rooms out of habit, one for Lu and another for Iliya and me. Enji declared that she would live separately, and no one tried to persuade her otherwise. The relations between the bard and the goddess were neutral: Lu did not object to her company but would not have been upset if the boisterous lass had left us. No one attempted to convince Enji to settle with Lu to share the rent, and she preemptively refused.

Moreover, it could have interfered with our mental exercises.

With Enji's arrival, we had to conceal our mental abilities, so our evening session, which Lu and I used to have after dinner, had to be conducted on a horizontal plane.

That is, we wrapped ourselves in cloaks and pretended to sleep, instead of the usual sitting opposite each other by the light of the fire.

So now, my goddess and I had some time without prying eyes, and, closing ourselves in her room, we slipped into the halls of the mind.

Come evening, when we descended for dinner, only Iliy was present—Enji, it seemed, had found a free stage somewhere and would return later. We lingered over our meal longer than usual: people were rising from their tables and either stepping out into the street or ascending to their rooms via the narrow, steep staircase. Our supper was a lukewarm stew that faintly suggested a piglet had once scampered past the cauldron, tough flatbread, and a mug of ale each. For this feast, nine clods were demanded of each of us. There had been an attempt to charge even more, but the heavy gaze of the priestess was too much for the innkeeper, who relented a coin’s worth.

We ate without relish. I had grown accustomed to the simple, but hearty fare of the old priest and now this formless mass stirred within my soul the most mixed of feelings. Yet, we had to make do with what was available. The ale, surprisingly, turned out to be quite good. Clearly, more care was given to brewing than to cooking here.

Toward the end of our meal, a disheveled Enji burst into the hall and quickly slid onto the bench next to me.

“Well, how fare thee?” she inquired as if nothing were amiss, though her tense demeanor betrayed her.

“What hath befallen already?” Lu asked directly, having sensed the situation more quickly than the rest.

Enji had just opened her mouth to recount her tale when three inebriated louts stumbled into the hall.

“Where’s that wench?!” bellowed one, scanning the room with bleary eyes.

The men were stout, not tall, but wiry, all slightly shorter than myself, with the one on the far left sporting a nose crooked from a poorly set break.

“Well?! Where is she?!” the middle one roared again, finally setting his sights on our table.

Enji sat, her head tucked between her shoulders, her whole demeanor admitting guilt. However, in her eyes, I discerned not a hint of remorse.

The trio approached. The one who had been shouting, seemingly their leader, grabbed Enji by the shoulder, and the girl swiftly rose from the table, breaking free from the drunkard’s grip.

“I gave thee, wench, two silvers for a private concert, and thou, cur, decided to guzzle all the wine and flee?” he railed at Enji.

“I sang for you, gentlemen,” the bard spat out the last word as if it were venom rather than speech, “after which I deemed our agreement fulfilled.”

“Art thou daft?” The drunkard pressed on Enji, while his cronies closed in, “Come upstairs, and work off every copper clod thou tried to steal.”

He tried to seize Enji by the arm, but she twisted away and stepped closer to me. I glanced at Lu and the goddess’s expression revealed all her thoughts about the reckless behavior of the artiste.

The situation was clear. Enji had chosen the wrong company and instead of quietly melting away amidst the revelry, she decided to fleece three drunks of a couple of silver coins. Whether Enji overestimated herself or underestimated the sobriety of the strangers, her attempt to abscond unnoticed with money given for quite an explicit purpose had failed.

Indeed, it wasn’t so uncommon; itinerant bards were known to dabble in prostitution, many possessing a certain charm, especially the women.

“Ah, so you seek a harlot?” Enji feigned offense. “Then mayhap to the mother of yon sniveling brute you should go!” She pointed a finger at the drunk with the broken nose.

“Alas, why dost thou not hold thy tongue, woman,” I thought to myself in Russian, as the brawl ensued.

The ringleader overturned our table and lunged at Enji, attempting to grab her by the throat and hair to drag her upstairs to “work off” the two coins, while his companions rushed to his aid. I leaped to my feet, and after a brief exchange of glances with Lu, plunged into the fray to save the beleaguered minstrel.

The brawl was a blur. Two of them were upon me: hitting my back, sides, and aiming for my jaw or ear. I fought back as best I could. Enji, while evading the leader and telling him exactly what his mother was known for, drove him around the hall like a mad bull. Lu, sizing up the situation accurately, came to my aid, pulling one drunkard off me and delivering a hearty blow between his legs.

Just when I thought we might escape with but minor injuries, the flash of a knife blade caught my eye. A burning pain seared my side, followed by the heavy thud of a stool crashing down upon the assailant’s head, wielded by Iliy.

Enji had dealt with her bull and was now methodically kicking him, aiming her boots between his legs.

“I. Am. Not. Thy. Whore. Understand. Scoundrel. Understand. Thy. Mother. Is. The. Whore. Not. I. Understand.”

Each word was punctuated with a kick; Enji was venting her fear and indignation. I was certain if they had merely demanded their money back, Enji would have silently returned the ill-gotten silver. But their intent to drag her upstairs and “divide her amongst themselves” was akin to death for a proud woman.

I looked at my bloodied side. The knife had cut shallowly, but deeply enough to slice skin and graze muscle, so blood flowed as if from a slaughtered swine. Clutching the wound, I approached Lu. Wordlessly, she assessed my condition, glanced at the wrecked hall of the inn, and readied herself to confront the approaching, furious innkeeper.

“Charge them,” she nodded towards the bodies on the floor, “it was not our doing.”

Then she hoisted me up and led me upstairs.

“We must away,” I hissed, clutching my burning side, “ere the watch arrives and we are beset with troubles.”

Lu nodded in agreement. Iliya swiftly gathered our belongings while the goddess, tearing one of her shirts into strips, attempted to bandage my wound, before dragging me out into the street.

“Canst thou keep thy seat in the saddle?” Lu asked, concerned about my condition.

She tried repeatedly to infuse me with her strength, but it did little to alleviate the physical pain, though it did bolster my morale. Thus, I was simultaneously unnaturally calm from her touch and pallid from blood loss.

I mounted my steed, and we rode forth from Courra, not lingering in the city for even a day. There was an urgent need to find a village where I could recuperate and regain my strength.

As I teetered on the brink of falling from my horse, we halted at a forest edge. Though there was no pursuit, Lu kept a wary eye out for new threats. In that moment, she resembled a predator irritated by the foolish prods of children in a zoo.

When I finally lost consciousness, lying by the fire and covered with an extra cloak, Enji caught up with us. She dismounted in haste and approached us quickly.

“How fares he?” she inquired.

Lu remained silent, and Iliy busied himself with the fire.

“I ask thee, how fares he?” Enji raised her voice, addressing Lu.

Through half-closed eyes, I saw the goddess deliver a powerful slap to the red-haired bard, nearly knocking her off her feet. Enji stepped back, clutching her face marked by Lu's handprint, but uttered no retort.

“Help us convey him to the nearest village, then begone from my sight,” the goddess hissed, watching as I slowly slipped into unconsciousness.

The last thing I remember before blacking out were her large, violet eyes filled with worry.

Chapter 10. Blood, Sweat, and Magic

The days following my injury proved to be the most arduous. Truthfully, I barely recall them, so in this regard, I rely on the accounts of Lu and Iliy.

They brought me to a village by evening the next day. I was unable to maintain my seat on the horse, frequently losing consciousness, so I was alternately accompanied by either Iliy, Lu, or Enji, each firmly holding me by the waist and shoulders.

Had winter already come, it would have been easier for my companions. They could have fashioned simple stretchers from branches and fir boughs to carry me to shelter with the help of the horses. But it was only autumn; there was no snow, so we had to improvise.

On the day we reached the village, a fine, miserable rain fell. By the time we arrived where people were waiting to provide a bed, water, and bandages for the wounded, in exchange for a bright silver, all four of us were thoroughly drenched.

Lu and Iliy lifted me from the horse and nearly carried me into a house. I was in dire straits, barely conscious. Enji stayed outside.

The wound was grievous: it had become infected. The edges were inflamed, and any touch, even as I slept or lay in feverish delirium, elicited a quiet groan from me.

One thing I remember distinctly: an old local healer entered the room with a basket full of pots and herbs. I was indifferent to the herbs, but the pots inspired little confidence. The only thing I managed before losing consciousness again was to demand that the bandages be boiled and hands thoroughly washed before touching my inflamed side. With a mind clouded by fever, blood loss, and intoxication, I understood the healer's aid would be limited, and my chances of perishing on this bed were not insignificant.

The locals had a vague notion of hand hygiene, and no concept of sterility. I hoped Lu could decipher my disjointed words and at least boil the dressing material; otherwise, my plight would be dire.

Vivid dreams haunted me. I rode my mare, suddenly lifting off the ground, soaring into the sky. The sensation of lightness and flight lent the vision realism, and the landscapes passing by were mesmerizing. At the dream's end, I would crash into an invisible dome of mental protection covering the world, screaming as I plunged into an endless abyss opening right beneath me.

The dream repeated itself, sometimes with minor variations, but it was persistent and unending.

( MAY BE TOO SIMPLE) I also dreamt of sitting in my small room in Balashikha, a strike team standing outside my door. Curiously, they did not break it down, though I could see, with my disembodied spirit, they had both a battering ram and shields. Instead, a diminutive special forces soldier picked the lock, another inspected the hinges for cutting, and their commander politely knocked, asking for the door to be opened.

Without guilt, I dismissed the special forces, not even pausing my serials and beer. So we remained: I holed up in my room, and the special forces scratched at the door. ( THE END OF TOO SIMPLE)

Overwhelmed by delirium, I occasionally emerged from my fevered state, only to find no one by my side. In my inflamed consciousness, the thought flickered that my companions had abandoned me here, a useless accountant unable to fend for himself.

At one point, the heavy, surreal dreams were replaced by emptiness. I wandered its boundless expanse, a blackness devoid of up or down, where time, direction, and temperature ceased to exist. For a moment, I believed myself dead.

Then Lu seized my hand and pulled me into the halls of her mind. There, my goddess appeared as I remembered her: no longer a divine entity, but my modest companion. Lu gazed upon me as if she did not recognize me, then shook her head slightly, a touch of sadness in her gesture:

"Anton, thou must return. Thou hast wandered too long."

I had spent a thousand years in the void, losing myself and any sense of reality. Only Lu's image faintly tried to anchor me back to my former life, beyond this emptiness. Thoughts tangled, and I struggled to find the right words.

"Anton, thou canst not stay there," the goddess nodded somewhere behind me.

I turned and beheld the abyss of the void, where it seemed I had been born, lived, and died tens of thousands of times, yet also experienced only a moment and millions of years. Time mattered not, for in the void, it did not exist.

I gazed indifferently at the goddess. Once, the sight of her violet eyes set my heart aflutter, but after an eternity in the void, that sentiment had turned to dust. Before me stood merely a person, akin to an old acquaintance with whom much had been shared, but with whom nothing now remained in common.

"Pray, collect thyself," the goddess implored, taking my hand. I barely noticed her touch. "Let me show thee the way."

She led me through the halls, across the encompassing void. I followed Lu passively, who struggled mightily on this journey through nothingness. Over millions of years, I had become part of this void, but the goddess at times seemed to wade through thick jelly, her whole body bogged down in the surrounding darkness. I did not hinder her, yet I offered no assistance, merely playing the part of a detached observer. Eternities passed, one after another, and we, too, began to merge with the darkness. The light in her violet eyes dimmed, and she moved mechanically, as if wound up, heading in a direction known only to her. I trailed behind. We were on the verge of dissolving into the darkness.

When light finally dawned ahead, I saw the shattered dome of a vast hemisphere. Recognition flickered and died: I had been here before. Lu led me to the crumbling wall that encased the hemisphere, found a breach, and forcefully thrust my spirit inside.

Then, I awoke.

The room was dark. The candle at the head of my bed had burned out, and in the dim light, I could only make out Lu. The goddess had fallen asleep sitting on a stool by my bed, her arms folded before her, her head resting on the bed. Her face was pallid with fatigue, dark circles of sleeplessness under her sunken eyes.

I focused slightly and saw another figure on a nearby bed. Enji, too, was asleep, sitting with her back against the wall, her head drooped onto her chest. It appeared to be the end of the 'dog watch' — around four in the morning, the time just before dawn.

With effort, I raised my hand and stroked the goddess's black hair. Startled by the touch, Lu jolted awake, disoriented, as if I had pulled her from deep sleep. As she focused, she stared at me, disbelieving I had come to.

"I have returned..." Lu whispered, taking my hand.

Enji stirred but did not wake, merely adjusting to a more comfortable position.

Struggling, I gestured towards the bed, sending Lu the image of her sleeping there. My temples immediately throbbed with an oncoming headache. It was improper for her to sleep on a stool, as if I were about to perish.

Indeed, I had come perilously close. In the days that followed, I learned from Lu and Enji's accounts that I had skirted the very edge of death. The wound was grave, and the old herbalist barely staved off infection. There were even suggestions of cauterizing the wound, but recalling my words about cleanliness and boiling, Lu and Iliy diligently changed my dressings and washed the wound with herbal concoctions. Thankfully, the goddess had grasped the essence of my ramblings about sterility and infection. Apparently, I had muttered about the importance of cleanliness and boiling for half the journey to the village, though I remembered none of it.

Curious about Enji's continued presence, given Lu's anger and the slap she had delivered, I inquired why the bard remained. Lu merely shrugged and said that the "idiot" could not be driven away, and that sullying her sword with the blood of an artiste was beneath a goddess. After threats, slaps, and hissing failed to persuade Enji, Lu simply gave up. Another pair of hands was useful in caring for me, after all.

Had the blade delved two centimeters deeper, the drunkard would have gutted me like a cook eviscerates a fresh fish. But fortune was relatively kind; the knife only reached my skin and sliced some muscle. Had the blade been clean, or had I immediately received proper care with washings and dressings, my recovery would have been much smoother but fleeing to avoid confrontation in an unknown city nearly cost me my life.

I had lost significant weight, as during the most severe days, when fever ravaged me and I was deep in delirium, even swallowing light broth was a major challenge. Later, as I understood, my body could not bear the strain, and I slipped into a coma, where I quietly began to fade away. According to Iliya and Enji, from the moment I lost full consciousness, the goddess scarcely left my bedside, remaining in a strange, trance-like state. Enji believed it to be a stupor of grief and anxiety, Iliya kept his thoughts to himself, but I knew she had been beyond the halls — searching for me.

We barely spoke of what transpired on that other side, how she wrested me from death's clutches — for it was she, I am certain.

Thus, the goddess's tally became "2:1". Twice saved, once nearly killed.

I preferred not to think about how my body had soiled itself during my adventures in the void, and who had cleaned up after me. Caring for a gravely ill person involves minimum romance and maximum dirty work.

On the third day, I grew weary of naught but consuming victuals, slumbering, and requiring Iliy's assistance to approach a pail, which the elder promptly emptied. Thus, I attempted to rise unaided and take a brief stroll. Almost instantaneously, the wound on my flank gaped anew; I felt its betrayal. Upon observing the crimson stain on my bandages, Lu subjected me to a scathing rebuke. At the noise, Enji promptly appeared and, grasping the crux of the matter, fervently backed the goddess's threats to strangle me personally.

Words like "fool," "dim-witted scribe," "I shall sever thine tail," and "not for this did we wipe thy behind and change thy mattresses, only for thee to end thyself now; we shall gladly finish thee here for our own amusement" were uttered. The latter threat – about finishing me themselves – truly instilled fear in me. The unity of the two maidens so impressed me, and their combined onslaught – Lu's cold fury and Enji's scalding wrath – was so formidable that I retreated under the covers and dared not stir without express permission from the higher command.

Alas, in this world, the practice of stitching wounds is not widespread: my treatment consisted of applying bandages, rebandaging, and healing salves of herbal concoction. Firstly, had I been stitched, I would have recovered much swifter. Secondly, such a vile scar would not have marred my flesh. Underneath the salves and drawing poultices, the healing process had commenced, so experimenting with thick curved needles and horsehair held no appeal. However, for future reference, it would be prudent to inquire with city healers in more civilized regions about their methods of suturing. I was quite certain that such techniques were known here; it was just a matter of locating them.

Portions of the tissue around the wound became inflamed and ultimately perished. Thus, upon examining my abdomen during one dressing change, I was unpleasantly surprised. A wide, unsightly scar with jagged edges, some seven to eight centimeters in its main part. Homemade bandages adhered to the wound's surface, causing slight trauma each time. I hissed in pain but endured. How to prevent the dressing from embedding into the wound, I knew not.

During my coma and subsequent convalescence, I had grown markedly thinner and weaker. We had settled in a village, and as I learned, we occupied the home of a lone woman and her son: for a fair sum, they had relocated to kin on the other side of the hamlet, so as not to inconvenience us. Our finances suffered somewhat, but nothing fatal: we still had nearly six hundred silver klo, and the forty gold pieces bestowed by Baron Tibbot in a separate purse remained untouched.

As the wound ceased to trouble me and its edges refrained from parting at every opportunity, I began to slowly rise from my bed and move about the house on my own. Five weeks had passed since my injury, and deep autumn now reigned. I longed for a thorough cleansing, but the notion of bathing was out of the question. I resorted to being wiped down with a warm, damp cloth by Iliya and somehow managed to rinse my hair to prevent lice from taking residence.

I had let my beard grow long and curly, and upon glimpsing my reflection in a polished metal plate, I barely recognized the gaunt man staring back. My nose had become sharper, revealing a hump. The muscles I had developed during my leisurely life and service to Baron Tibbot had withered and almost vanished, the skin in places sagged, and my hip bones protruded unpleasantly from the sides of my flat backside. I began to eat more heartily, but without proper exercise, the process was slow, and obtaining sufficient quality fresh meat in a small village proved challenging. Lu and Enji flatly refused to journey to a neighboring settlement. They were loath to leave me unattended, and the roads were not in the best condition for even short travels, especially the smaller lanes.

Lu spent considerably more time with me, even if it meant simply lying silently on adjacent divans in the same room. The goddess, more than I, languished from idleness. So, when Enji was not bustling about, Lu would quietly explain to me the fundamentals of mental magic, which she planned to continue teaching me as soon as I regained strength.

During these "recumbent lectures," I learned much anew. Mentalists were quite rare in this world; most mages were aligned with the basic elements: wind, water, fire, and earth. Many mages could harness any element, but as expected, they preferred to specialize in one. Only grand masters and archmages could wield all four elements equally, combining them in intricate and unique spells.

Mind magic and its practitioners stood slightly apart. Very weak in elemental magic – I had witnessed this myself at every campsite when Lu barely managed to ignite fires – mentalists were the most formidable adversaries for any person or mage. Yet, they were utterly defenseless against any form of counterattack, be it an icy spear or a mundane fireball. They lacked the magical prowess to erect a decent shield to deflect or repel spells. "The perfect weapon for assault," I interjected into Lu's quiet narrative, to which the maiden nodded in agreement. For a mentalist, the only way to triumph was to strike first and decisively. In open or protracted combat, a mind mage stood no chance; any elemental mage could reduce him to mincemeat.

This was why, as a mentalist, albeit one leeching off Lu's powers, mastering swordsmanship was essential. Many past mind mages masqueraded as skilled warriors, distracting their foes with illusions or misdirection in melee combat. The effectiveness of mind mages in such combat was so great that for centuries, no witnesses survived to recount their tricks.

Mentalists were highly valued in thieving organizations, courts, and even in ranked battle – too skillful and powerful were they as warriors. However, everything comes to an end. After an assassination attempt on a monarch by a mind mage, who drove half the court mad and was stopped only miraculously by a court wizard, a hunt for mentalists commenced. They were subjected to the most harrowing ordeals: incinerated, submerged, or struck down by crossbow bolts after being cornered—a macabre merriment mirroring the zeal of the Holy Spanish Inquisition. As the bloodlines of mentalists, those inheritors of arcane magic, dwindled, a sinister mechanism for their subjugation was devised.

Each mental mage was ensnared, subjected to relentless torment and administered concoctions that clouded their intellect and stifled their mystical abilities, coercing them into swearing fealty before the effigy of the Seven.

Astonishingly, the gods turned a blind eye to these enforced oaths, rendering each ensnared mentalist a docile thrall to their captor. The capture of a mind mage was an endeavor fraught with peril and complexity, thus only the elite aristocrats or sovereigns of the Tallerian realms could afford such a prize. Whispered rumors suggested that the Tokonese Emperor had at his command an entire cadre of mentalist slaves, deployed for personal vendettas against the monarch's foes, loyal solely to the Emperor himself.

With the demise of their master, to whom the vow of servitude was pledged, the thrall, bound by the oath's magic, perished likewise. Consequently, every nascent monarch on ascending the throne embarked upon a quest to enslave a mental mage. Some, in their cunning, attempted to breed them like livestock: men were coerced into attempts at impregnating serving women, while the fate of the women was more overtly grim. Yet, these progeny, bred solely for servitude, lacked the potency and utility of their freeborn counterparts. Mastery of mental magic demanded an inner equilibrium and tranquility, elusive under the yoke of bondage.

My training in direct communion with Lu, bypassing the ethereal mind halls, was arduous. My proficiency was lacking, yet my perception of the goddess had transcended to a profound plane post-coma. The abyss's chill, lingering since my emergence from the coma, was ever-present beyond my mental sphere's periphery. Now, however, I could traverse this void freely, never losing sight of my sanctum.

I sought Lu's insights into this realm.

"It is the essence of reality that surrounds us, merely another stratum, imperceptible to mortals," the goddess elucidated.

"And why must I delve into it?"

"Do you not desire to read the thoughts of others, or at least hear mine?" Lu retorted with her typical inquisitiveness. Admirable, she was learning from the best, as it were.

"Indeed, I do."

"Then in the abyss, you shall seek. Your mind has forged itself into a spherical bastion, the arena of our contest. Mortals meander in this obscurity, their thoughts and selves mere flickers like fireflies."

"Like the nucleus of my being?" I inquired, recollecting how I had isolated my essence into a separate 'firefly,' a desperate gambit to evade the goddess's ire.

To aid Lu's understanding, I projected a mental image of the firefly.

"Precisely. Your task is to learn their detection. But first, you must find me, given our tether." I nodded in concurrence. The intangible bond linking Lu and me, wrought by the Mother, now resonated with unprecedented clarity amidst our intensified mental exercises.

I ceased to shield my emotions and sentiments about Lu, reasoning that a deity of her ancient wisdom had long since discerned them. Obviously, any notion of mutual affection was out of the question. The goddess's concern for me seemed more akin to that for an ally in her quest for divine potency restoration, rather than romantic entanglement. This state of affairs was, in its own right, quite agreeable to me.

On an evening, as we clasped hands, endeavoring to navigate Lu's mental domains within the infinite abyss, Enji, in a state of drunken disarray, stumbled into our chamber. Her inebriation's origins were unclear—perhaps she had partaken in a village festivity where she was invited to perform in exchange for sustenance and libations—but she was unmistakably disheveled. Casting a bleary glance our way, Enji collapsed onto the divan, which by day served Lu and by night Iliy, and promptly succumbed to a sonorous slumber, face buried in the bedding.

With an air of vexation, the goddess shrugged.

"Why does she persist in our company?" I inquired directly, addressing a query that had long gnawed at me.

"I am uncertain. Initially, she was indomitable in her presence, and now, where would she depart amidst such torrents? Thus, she remains."

"Shall she continue on our journey, or what course shall we set?"

While I was not averse to Enji's presence—her intelligence, vivacity, and beauty were undeniable—our inability to engage in mental magic in her company severely constrained both Lu and me. Furthermore, I remained ambivalent in my sentiments towards her. Physically, she was alluring, and her care during my delirium was endearing. Yet, it was her impetuousness that had precipitated my plight, stranding us in this hamlet and frivolously depleting our hard-earned funds on accommodations and sustenance.

A fleeting thought brushed the fringe of my consciousness, eluding capture as I endeavored to crystallize it.

Contrary to my guarded disposition, Enji was unreservedly open, her fondness palpable. Her playful jabs, casual brushes of her hand, and seemingly accidental physical closeness in constricted spaces were unmistakable. My role was merely to reciprocate these overtures, and with the mending of my wound, her presence in my bed was an inevitable conclusion.

However, I restrained myself, avoiding provocation of fate. Lu's disposition towards me seemed clear, and I had no desire to test the goddess's forbearance, nor to entangle myself in potential entanglements with Enji. Departing from Lu and Iliya was not an option, yet the divergence of our paths with the bard loomed imminent, foreboding an awkward and painful separation, chiefly for my own heart. Moreover, the rationale behind the striking performer's interest in a humble soul like mine eluded me, relegating her flirtations and antics to an underlying guilt—a burden of responsibility, for it was I who bore the blade meant for her.

Maintaining such a "nuclear parity" wasn't overly challenging for me, as I had grown into adulthood; I celebrated my 27th birthday right during the outage.

Thus, we lived, somewhat akin to a not-so-close-knit Swedish family.

By the second week after I got out of bed, it was time to return to gymnastics and simple sword exercises. The wound was healing well, though it troubled me during sudden movements, so I needed to regain the flexibility lost during my illness. My first venture into the yard quickly revealed how bad things were.

Within fifteen minutes, my arms trembled with strain, and my shirt, under the quilted jacket, clung to my back and chest, thoroughly drenched in sweat. Yet, I did not abandon my exercises; I simply measured the exertion carefully. I even attempted to haul water, but Iliya quickly put a stop to that, insisting it was too early for me to lift heavy weights. Strangely, I missed the morning chores that had accompanied my life in Serdone and Treyale.

News reached our village slowly and belatedly, so it was not until the second half of November that we learned of a feud that erupted immediately after the festival in Treyale and the surrounding barony villages. As I had anticipated from Baron Tibbot, he surrounded himself with loyal people as much as possible and began a massive cleanup of the criminal network parasitizing his tributes.

The "official" version of the rebellion, spread among the people by thieves, claimed that one of the baron's favored warriors had been assaulting peasant girls and even very young children. When there was a "just" demand to hand over the criminal, the baron responded with repression and bloodshed.

In any case, history is written by the victors, so for the masses, the version of the winning side eventually becomes the truth. Meanwhile, in the Tibbot barony, things were unsettled, and Amer had already requested support from his neighboring aristocrats and even the clerical king, threatening the latter with a complete disruption of metal supplies.

Amer was astute; he sat on a strategic product, and the cessation of iron imports from his barony threatened the crown with extra expenses. Thus, it was easier for the monarch to send several large squads to support the baron, rather than take a neutral position and wait to see who would emerge victorious, as kings usually did during internal revolts in aristocracy-controlled territories. Amer's son, young Gren Tibbot, also played a significant role. Upon receiving a message from his father, he quickly began knocking on doors and demanding the highest audience at court.

I was confident that Amer Tibbot, in his appeal to the throne, had laid out the real reasons for the uprising, and partially described the scheme by which he was being robbed. At least because it drastically changed the nature of the events in the eyes of the high nobility. Whether he mentioned the humble accountant who nearly achieved the impossible by uncovering all this in his reporting, I did not know. I sincerely hoped not, as such dubious professional fame was of no use to me, especially since we had decided to first travel to Pite and the suburbs of the capital, and only then move on, spreading the knowledge of the goddess Lu. Winter was a perfect time for this. Many elders took their last journey to the Reaper during the cold winter nights, and some peasants faced certain needs. So, there should be plenty of work for my goddess.

Gradually, I was regaining my form, and there was a breakthrough in mental practices. I finally saw Lu's consciousness firefly, which she patiently led beyond the confines of her mind's chambers. After that, I almost had an epiphany. After Lu, I found Iliya's consciousness, and after some effort, that of the whimsical artist. They were all different, as unique as snowflakes. If the consciousness firefly of the elder was not so bright, the bard's "I" shone like a little star.

We began training the radius and mastering the technique of detecting people without diving into the chambers of the mind. It was difficult, akin to riding a bicycle and juggling knives at the same time, with the earth burning beneath you. And the bicycle. And yourself already ablaze.

So, the practice of mind magic exhausted me, but Lu pushed me to my limits, understanding that another such opportunity and calm might not come again.

One day, apparently satisfied that I could feel Iliya approaching our courtyard, she switched to more complex constructs. Here began the real combat magic of the mind.

"The most common techniques used by mentalists are illusion and misdirection. These are two basic constructs of mental magic, often used together. Lower your walls and watch. But be ready to raise them at my command, understood?" she instructed.

I approached, opened my consciousness, and began to observe.

"First, I'll show you the construct combo; it's easier to grasp, understood?"

In the next moment, Lu's eyes blazed violet, and she walked from the wall to my cot, where I sat cross-legged. She sat neatly on the edge of the bed and gently stroked my hand, then sharply commanded, "Raise!"

I obeyed, and the walls of mental protection soared upwards, sealing the chambers of my mind with a reliable dome. At that moment, Lu, who had been sitting on the bed and stroking the outside of my palm, disappeared, only to reappear exactly where she had been a minute earlier - at the other end of the room.

"What was that? An illusion?" I asked.

"Not only," Lu replied. "I simultaneously created my illusion, took control of it, and distracted you so that you wouldn't see the real me."

I estimated the number of simultaneous constructs needed to be maintained in the described process and whistled softly.

"And is it difficult?"

"Quite, but you'll be able to master it. Now lower the walls and watch again."

This time, the goddess bifurcated as if by some mystic cell division. Initially, the construct mirrored the original, but soon it began an existence of its own. Raising my mental barriers once more, I found Lu still by the wall, arms folded across her bosom.

"Halt, I was vigilant in my observation; you were yonder," I protested, pointing to a distant corner of the chamber.

"It was a duplicity of illusions, a sleight to deceive. I led you to believe in the creation of a single construct, which I then seemingly controlled independently, to make you think you could track the true me, whilst in reality, I merely diverted your attention. I have not budged from this spot," Lu asserted, her finger emphatically pointing to her standing place.

"Thus, one can conjure multiple illusions whilst simultaneously misleading an adversary's gaze?"

"Indeed. Yet, the more targets one conjures, the more arduous it becomes to sustain focus. You must vividly envision your external appearance to maintain authenticity in the illusion. These are constructs potent in the art of warfare."

"And what of mere diversion? Could one not simply vanish from sight?"

"That is not the nature of it," the goddess replied, her head gently swaying. "Or rather, it works only intermittently. The mind, a labyrinth of complexity, will sense an anomaly and seek you out. Allow me to demonstrate."

In a fleeting moment, Lu vanished. My knowledge of her position was certain, yet my gaze elusively skimmed past her. Only in the periphery of my vision did I glimpse the outlines of the goddess. A shiver, primal and alert, skittered across my skin, akin to the bristling of fur in the face of unseen danger.

"Do you comprehend? A mere diversion is effective only if one is initially unseen. You glide along the fringes of consciousness, unnoticed. But, once seen and then abruptly gone, discovery is inevitable. An opponent's mind will wrestle against the illusion with all its might. The more heightened the situation, the swifter your unmasking. For those mages born of spontaneity, their senses are so sharpened that such rudimentary tricks scarcely take effect. At best, your silhouette may momentarily quiver, like air above a searing heat."

"What, then, shall we practice?" I inquired, the prospect of mastering such arcane knowledge sending ripples of excitement through me.

"The most efficacious construct against a mere mortal in combat is the first. A minor deception suffices, a persuasion that your movement is other than it seems. It necessitates not a complete occlusion of sight nor the crafting of a full illusion, but merely a partial distortion."

"Like feigning a strike from the left whilst delivering the true blow from the right?"

Lu nodded in agreement.

"And a myriad other stratagems exist to lead your foe unwittingly onto your blade. I shall instruct you in the fundamentals, but the selection and mastery of the appropriate constructs must be yours. In the heat of battle, deliberation is a luxury; these acts must spring forth as though by reflex."

I contemplated. It was, on one hand, artifice. Yet, as a swordsman of lamentable skill, such illusions could perhaps level the playing field against a more adept adversary.

With zeal, I embarked on the training, endeavoring to manifest the simplest of illusions for Lu. My efforts were crude, perhaps marred by nerves or a lack of requisite finesse to transcend to a higher echelon of mastery. Nevertheless, Lu's encouragement was unwavering, assuring me that the detection radius of others was but a skill honed over time. Yet the mastery of illusion was imperative for my preservation.

The sole stringent caveat Lu impressed upon me regarding the employment of mental magic was that any witness to such sorcery must be silenced forthwith. This was a mandate not solely for my protection but also for hers. Vulnerable as she was, should The Seven reject her servile oath, she would face either decapitation or immolation.

I absorbed this directive with utmost gravity, vowing to the goddess that I would resort to such magic only in the most dire of circumstances.

That every skirmish or fray, to me, constituted such a circumstance, I kept to myself. Likewise, I withheld the truth of my inexperience in taking life, having never slain beast nor man. My most formidable conquest had been a live carp, foolishly purchased from a market barrel. After hours of struggle, leaving my kitchen awash in fish blood and scales, I vowed never to engage with living prey again. And yet, now I faced the prospect of killing. Mortally. Men. Time for introspection was a luxury I could not afford, so we resumed our training in the construction of illusions.

Post-training, my dinner was a languid affair, and I collapsed into bed, utterly drained. Thankfully, I now occupied the room alone. Firstly, Lu and I frequently tarried here, rendering it uncomfortable for Iliy. Secondly, the old priest had relocated closer to the warmth of the hearth, the chill outdoors gnawing at his aged bones. Hence, my slumber was undisturbed. Enji, as usual, had vanished into the village, and to prevent the inebriated songstress from intruding at night, we left the door ajar. Iliy would surely hear her return and secure the door behind the roisterer.

Deep into the night, a soft creak of the door roused me as the bard entered. Her drunken state evident in the way she gathered her cloak about her shoulders, navigating to her room. I was drifting back to sleep when the sensation of someone entering my room, insistently crawling under the blanket, startled me awake.

Enji, having shed part of her attire en route, pressed her bare breast against my shoulder. Before I could utter a word, she captured my face, sealing my lips with a fervent, inebriated kiss. In the darkness, the scent of spirits wafted from my unexpected guest.

Struggling not to aggravate an injury on my left side, I endeavored to rise and escort the drunken maiden from my chamber. Yet, I found myself pinned beneath her. Enzhi straddled me, her hips and buttocks pressing against my legs. Her blue eyes, drunk and mirthful, twinkled in the dim light. I caught a fleeting glimpse of her bare bosom, crowned with large, rosy nipples, before she enveloped me in another impassioned embrace.

It was in this disheveled tableau that Lu discovered us.

"Anton, have you seen Enji? The door was banging..."

The goddess stood motionless in the doorway, and I endeavored to envision the scene from her perspective. The half-naked bard, trousers still adorning her, had managed to wriggle beneath my blanket. From the doorway, the extent of her undress was concealed – only her bare back was visible, the rest hidden beneath the tossed-aside blanket. Enji merely darted a glance at Lu, then resumed her improper conduct.

"Lu! Wait!" I exclaimed, flinging Enji to the other side of the bed as I leapt to my feet, a blanket concealing my situationally aroused flesh. "She's drunk and unaware of her actions..."

I spoke to the void. Lu had already retreated to her chamber, leaving only a sleepy Iliy in the corridor. I understood that attempting to converse with my goddess then was futile. A thought flickered in my mind, perhaps to capitalize on Enji's attention towards me. It was clear that nothing romantic would develop with the goddess, but the internal tension from forced abstinence, especially in the constant presence of a beautiful woman, was beginning to press heavily upon my mind and nerves.

I was on the brink of deciding to return to bed and fully indulge in the temptations of the alluring singer, even showing her a few tricks and techniques I had learned back home. What happened next would happen.

My attempts to catch up with Lu and subsequent contemplations took less than a minute, but when I turned back to the bed, I found Enji had already succumbed to a deep drunken slumber. Sighing jerkily – the blanket still awkwardly tented – I covered the poor inebriate and lay down on the cot previously occupied by Iliy.

### Chapter 11: Tracks in the Snow

By the end of November, a light snowy blanket had covered the land. Deep snowdrifts, reaching half a person's height, were still a way off. Winter, like a shy maiden, was just beginning to assert her rights over the northern part of Talleria.

After Enji's memorable escapade, something imperceptibly shifted. That morning, I woke in an empty room – the bard had risen earlier and quietly flitted from my den. Grumbling, I ventured into the hall, which doubled as our kitchen and common room, where I found Ilya busily preparing breakfast. The singer sat at the table, pleasantly cooing something to the old man.

Enji playfully darted her eyes at me, but upon meeting my stern gaze, quickly looked away. My unresolved dissatisfaction did not perturb her; she simply continued her inconsequential chatter with the old man, who seemed only too happy to indulge in conversation during the chilly morning hours.

I chose not to broach the topic of last night’s events, and the others remained silent too. Soon Lu joined us, and as was my habit, I gently brushed her consciousness with my greeting. She responded after a delay, and with that, any awkwardness was contained. We all pretended that last night had never happened.

Reflecting on it, other than a few drunken kisses – which, frankly, weren’t particularly aesthetic – and several enticing glimpses and fervent touches, I gained little from the previous night. However, I did earn myself a substantial headache.

Though Lu didn’t show it, I had a feeling I wouldn’t get off so easily, and I was right. Our mental training sessions became even more rigorous. Lu demanded the impossible from me, calling it elementary. At some point, we began combining magic lessons with sword fighting, and the goddess, like Sergeant Hartman, drove me to my limits, nearly shouting after every misstep. Had I not known the context, I’d have thought she wanted me dead.

On the other hand, everything she did fit into the paradigm of our imminent departure from the settlement. The frosts were getting stronger, at night for now, but soon the daytime temperatures would drop below freezing too. Then, with a clear conscience, we could set off towards the coast, in the direction of the clerical kingdom's capital. The frost would do the work for humans, locking the mud in its icy embrace until spring.

Traveling in winter would inevitably be slower than in warmer months. Horses would move more slowly, conserving energy, and setting up camps would take more time. Our hope lay in the numerous inns and courier stations where a traveler could find shelter for the night, if not a tasty dinner and comfortable lodging.

We took care to buy warm clothing for Lu, Iliy, and myself. Enzhi had a fur-lined cloak, and although I, as a northerner, doubted the effectiveness of such attire, the bard insisted it was sufficient. Perhaps the proud maiden disliked the idea of sinking deeper into debt, as she couldn’t afford a fur-lined jacket.

Enji’s plans to earn money on the road to Pite were thwarted by my injury, leaving her somewhat strapped for cash: she had just enough, assuming she quickly found ample work near the capital. I refrained from playing the nobleman and imposing my purse on her, leaving things as they were. The bard conscientiously contributed at least to food purchases from the locals, and our band exclusively paid for lodging.

After ordering and buying winter jackets and woolen trousers, our sizable purse of silver noticeably slimmed, but such was life. I could have forgone a jacket, which turned out to be the most expensive due to its size, because one compartment of my backpack still held neatly folded outerwear from my world. I wasn’t sure if the insulated demi-season coat with synthetic fur could withstand daily horse rides in the frost, but the thought of having something useful from my home world warmed my soul.

At our next band meeting, partially attended by Enji, we decided to set out in a week, with the arrival of the first decade of December. I had regained my strength, muscles reappeared, and the wound on my left side had finally settled into an unsightly scar with still-pink edges.

For all the remaining time in the settlement, Lu and I dedicated ourselves to training. The goddess was not as ferocious as in the days following my pseudo-erotic nocturnal escapade, but the sessions remained challenging.

I failed to anticipate another feint and received a flat-bladed sword smack on my posterior.

"Ow! That hurts."

"That's it, you're dead. I've chopped off your leg."

"More like you've chopped off my backside!"

"You've raised your walls again!"

This was an ever-present problem. Almost every sparring session with Lu, in my absorption, I lost control, and the shell of my mental defenses crept upwards, shielding me from the goddess and locking me within the halls of my mind.

To effectively wield mind magic, these halls must be open, and the wider, the better. I, like a sullen emo teenager, constantly closed myself off, guarding the firefly of my "self" from the outside world. As soon as I did this, I immediately received a painful blow from Lu. She was a far superior fencer, so breezing through my mediocre defense to punish my inattentiveness was no trouble for her.

"Keep your mind open! It's a matter of life and death! Remember?"

"I remember, I remember," I grumbled, rubbing the bruised spot. Another big bruise to add to the collection.

We continued our exercise.

Lu moved like a stream of water, smoothly shifting from foot to foot, wielding her short sword as though it weighed nothing. I didn't know where she got the strength – she was perhaps not double but triple sinewed – because within an hour my arms and shoulders began to feel as if they were falling out of their joints, and my back begged for mercy. But, gritting my teeth, I endured, and time and again I practiced the basic defensive and offensive moves, which in the future I would enhance with illusory constructs.

Constructing another feint took a great deal of effort and time, but I created an illusion to Lu that I was covering my left, while I actually stepped to the right and attempted an attack. The goddess surprised me by simply collapsing into my defense and painfully kicking my leg.

"But I did it! You just see my magic!" "No, I didn't see it. But what I did see was the utter stupidity of such a move. Why would you suddenly start covering your left side? Why freeze like a statue? To counter another attack from that position, you'd have to either step back or make a very long swing over your shoulder. So, I simply approached and punished you for your foolishness."

I was disheartened. Apparently, illusions alone weren't enough; they also had to weave into the pattern of combat in such a way that the opponent did what you wanted them to do, not make decisions like Lu had just now.

I lifted my sword again. "Another round!"

Steel rang out, though my arms and shoulders had long since grown heavy, and I almost couldn't feel them.

I began a motion as if preparing to deliver a powerful overhead strike, grasping the sword with both hands. Judging that I would have a height advantage over most opponents, it didn't look out of the ordinary. The goddess raised her blade to deflect my chopping blow and again kick me in the knee.

Instead of completing the motion and actually attacking Lu from above, I sent an illusion of the strike while pressing my arms to my chest, took a step forward, and slammed my shoulder into the goddess's chest, knocking her into the dirt of the courtyard.

Had I not raised my sword vertically but extended it forward, along the line of my elbow, I would have impaled the girl on the blade like a butterfly on a pin.

Only when Lu hit the ground with her backside did I realize I had overdone it with the force of the blow. The goddess might have been as nimble as Satan himself, but she was a good forty kilograms lighter than me. So, it was akin to a head-on collision between a sedan and a truck.

I quickly lowered my blade and rushed to Lu, expecting her wrath. The girl said nothing, just looked up at me with satisfaction, as if she had been waiting for me to do something like that.

"Enough for today, well done."

I felt Lu restore her mental concentration to its normal level, which she had deliberately weakened during our training and sparring sessions. She quickly got to her feet and went into the house. I, barely breathing, began a series of muscle relaxation exercises. It made it easier to get out of bed later.

Age was indeed starting to make itself known. The carefree days of youth, where you could bend in all directions and any injury or strain healed as quickly as on a dog, were far behind. After the period of illness, when I felt thin and feeble, I started to feel what they call "maturing." My chest had broadened even more, my shoulders were larger than ever, and my legs had slimmed down. I was entering the period of a man's greatest constant physical strength, to which I had to add flexibility and endurance.

The latter posed certain problems. The injury had taxed my body so much that all my morning exercises of kneading dough for pies and turning cubic meters of logs into firewood were for naught. All I could hope for was muscle memory and that my body would fully recover within half a year. Meanwhile, after training sessions, I looked like a wet mouse, all sweaty and trembling.

We carefully followed the stories about the affairs in Baron Tibbot's barony. The revolt had not yet been quelled: royal forces were still en route, and Tibbot's neighbors had wisely decided not to support him, reasoning that if the merchant's offspring fell, they themselves could take over the iron caravan route from the foothills of the Eastern Ridge. All hopes were on the king's troops, who were only approaching Trail. Of course, the clerical king could compel Tibbot's neighbors to assist the baron, but then he would owe the aristocrats, something they would remind him of at the most inopportune moment. So, for the time being, Trail was wracked by revolt, the king's soldiers trudged through the mud, and Tibbot's neighbors eagerly rubbed their hands in anticipation.

It was uncertain whether the baron could retain control over the mining settlements even if the revolt was successfully suppressed.

Before long, metal was expected to surge in price. Rumors abounded that Lamhitan in the south was stirring, its relations with the Nelsk Crown tense. In the event of full-scale war between the two states, Brenn Republic, the ally of Cleria, would undoubtedly be drawn in, though on which side was a matter for speculation. The Brenn Council always pursued its own state's interest, so they might equally support Lamhitan in an invasion of the Crown, or join with Cleria's western neighbor against the southern state.

War in the south of the continent posed a serious predicament for Cleria. If the Republic found itself embroiled in a border conflict, Cleria's eastern neighbors, Parinia and Lamia, would have free rein. Unconcerned about their southern borders, they could together besiege Cleria, whose capital lay dangerously close to the frontier, albeit in a bay that was formidable to defend.

If Cleria's monarch could not swiftly and decisively respond to this eastern aggression, summoning the maximum possible force and repelling the invaders, the Gongors Kingdom to the west might stir.

The Gongors, though actively trading with the east, occasionally cast covetous eyes on their neighbors' lands, preferring skirmishes with them over confronting the vast Tokons Empire at their western borders. Moreover, the lands there were of lesser value. An eternal peace had been signed with the Sharin Principality, unbroken for some three hundred years: no monarch of the kingdom was foolish and fearless enough to hurl their armies against the Sharins' magical divisions. The Magic Academy consistently supplied its graduates to the service of the Great Duke. Rumors were that at least three archmages were always in the army, a formidable force even without the support of swords. The Gongors throne harbored no ambitions to the south.

Hence, the Gongors too had their sights on Cleria, and if the king became mired in prolonged troubles to the east, they might attempt to snatch a sweet piece from their eastern neighbor.

The longstanding dispute between the Gongors Kingdom and Cleria over the Fein Peninsula and the Meller port on its eastern base was at stake. Meller, a strategic trading point and a major transshipment hub for east-west ships, annually contributed more than a hundred thousand gold in taxes alone, not counting active trade, as it lay on the Royal Route. Many merchants bound for the Gongors Kingdom preferred to disembark and continue by land, paying duties and tolls to Cleria's coffers, and then for border crossing, adversely affecting the goods' final cost to Gongors consumers.

The port was also vital for external trade with the east. Predominant westerly winds along the coast meant that a sea voyage eastward, towards Parinia, was with the wind. If Gongors reclaimed Meller, they could bypass the lengthy journey to the Parinian port of Okrev without entering Clerian harbors. This would enable Gongors merchants and manufacturers to sell their goods very profitably in Parinia and Lamia, and even undercut prices in some markets.

Capturing the Meller port had been a pressing issue for the Gongors Kingdom, debated for decades: during the last military conflict, the peninsula, which had changed hands repeatedly, fell to the Clerian king. This was hailed as the greatest defeat of the Gongors Throne, and the neighbors longed for revenge.

The timely supply of quality iron at reasonable prices was now more crucial than ever for the monarch. This also ensured that Baron Tibbot, should he grow too weak, would be sustained by the king, preventing the baron's neighbors from dividing his lands weakened by turmoil amongst themselves.

Upon reflection, the entire uprising in the always tranquil and peaceful Tibbot barony seemed like the machinations of "foreign agents," as they would say in my world, had I not known the real reasons behind the conflict flaring up on Cleria's southern borders. The king could think what he liked, but in essence, he was a hostage to the situation.

Even if the monarch decided to transfer control over the iron trade to one of his more illustrious nobles, he would be in an awkward position. The miners, who had ostensibly sworn fealty to the Tibbots and were the baron's men, were also a free and self-determining caste within the state. Descendants of free peasants and craftsmen, they were free to move about Cleria, accept anyone's vassalage, or even settle on royal lands. An ancient agreement with the first of the Tibbots – merchant Trail Tibbot – not only acknowledged their vassalage but also granted several privileges. Importantly, this agreement was tolerated for centuries by Cleria's higher circles solely because it was made with the first of his line, a newly ennobled baronial upstart merchant. No other Clerian aristocrat would have ever entered such an agreement with commoners.

Thus, transferring control over the barony's southern lands to, say, the noble Counts of Ansham would mean the miners might simply refuse to recognize the new authority. With no legal grounds to enslave them, the people could just leave their posts and depart from the cities. Losing even 15–20% of the miners would be a disaster for the production and supply of iron in a warring state.

For these reasons, the royal troops were doggedly advancing towards Trail, hastening to aid my acquaintance, Baron Tibbot. We were ready to set off. Bags packed, harnesses checked, clothing prepared. We only waited for the sudden snowstorm to pass before we headed towards the capital.

Throughout our journey, I found myself frequently gauging Enji's mood. Since that memorable night, the maiden had conducted herself with relative propriety, refraining from inebriation to the point of unconsciousness. The bard's flirtations persisted, albeit with less insistence than before. This led me to believe that Enji harbored a subconscious guilt over my injury and sought, in her own way, to make amends for the "troubles" she had caused.

At the critical moment, I did not embrace her offered solace, though the opportunity presented itself for a fiery night had I chosen to lay beside her and awaken her senses. But restraint prevailed. Whether Enji interpreted this as a slight to her person, or concluded that I had simply missed my chance and thus owed her nothing more, the tension that once lingered in the air between us had dissipated. No further attempts were made to intrude under my blanket, and it seemed such endeavors were not to be expected in the future.

Though not elated by the stern rebuff, maintaining neutral relations with Enji seemed the best course of events. Yes, the bard would continue with us to the outskirts of Pite, but thereafter, our paths might diverge, perhaps forever. Knowing my own nature, I feared misjudging the burgeoning sexual tension with the flame-haired beauty, which would have only led to torment. Better it had not transpired; simplicity was a relief, especially with the contract with Lu and the pressing need to restore her divine status still looming over me like a Damoclean sword.

In the second decade of December, we saddled our horses, settled our dues for the lodging, and, bidding farewell to the hospitable hamlet, set forth. Ahead lay the journey to Morte, then the road to Gail, followed by a long, exhausting trek of nearly two hundred leagues to Cleria's capital, the city of Pite. Halfway to Pite, we planned to break from the byways onto the Royal Route. Assuming an average pace of three to four leagues per hour, we intended to cover thirty leagues a day, barring major cities and unforeseen events. By month's end, we hoped to arrive in Pite.

Our passage between major cities was uneventful, though it took nearly a week. Leaving Gail, we realized a long and arduous road awaited us. Most travelers headed straight north to the shortest path to the Royal Route, choosing their direction from there. We opted to cut at least a week off our journey: the route to Pite involved a lengthy detour to bring travelers through the ducal capital of Clerne, the city of Radonvir. This logistical mishap would cost us an extra sixty leagues, or two and a half days' travel, three with a city stopover. Thus, we decided to take the shortest route. By my reckoning, had we taken the northern path to the Route and detoured through Radonvir, we would just be emerging from it as we now planned to approach Pite's outskirts. The time saved was clear.

My mare strode confidently ahead, occasionally snorting softly and amusingly twitching her ears. I had grown somewhat accustomed to this beast, and my riding skills had improved, so she no longer cast dubious glances at me, trying to discern what manner of creature sat upon her. The horse behaved calmly, and I let her follow Lu's steed without urging.

Lu led our small caravan for two reasons: she was the lightest among us, making it easier for her horse to navigate the barely discernible path, paving the way for the others. Moreover, Lu was the most formidable of our group.

To my remark that an arbalest bolt usually seeks the leader of a column first – a memory of films and series – Lu merely smirked predatorily and uttered an enigmatic "we'll see." That was enough for me to dismiss potential troubles – let the bold ones deal with her if they dare. This referred to bandits and other rogues, so I felt no qualm about sheltering behind the slender back of a maiden.

The road unfurled beneath our horses' hooves, unraveling into a thin thread of steps from our modest troop. On the first evening, we halted at a small clearing, gathered brushwood, lit a large fire, and, wrapped in cloaks, snatched some sleep. Locals from the city had told us that on the third day, we should reach a large village where we could comfortably spend the night.

On the second day, we heard the howling of wolves. At first, I did not recognize the sound, but our horses immediately grew restless, their ears twitching nervously as they glanced about. After calming the animals, we remained on alert: if a hungry pack found our party in the open field, we would face serious trouble.

The main flow of travelers headed directly to the Route, and this path was less frequented, mostly by locals, and that in warmer seasons. In winter, it was seldom chosen, and I now realized our eagerness to shorten our journey and avoid the detour through Radonvir was mere greed. We could have taken the well-trodden road and then the Royal Route... No, I had to fancy myself the cleverest, cutting corners as if our horses were fed not on oats but costly 98-octane gasoline.

I understood that the pack had scented us and now shadowed us along the road, not daring to attack in daylight. The animals knew what a road meant and the dangers its dwellers posed, so they did not venture out until nightfall. Sooner or later, we would have to stop; the horses were not made of iron. Then, it would be the wolves' hour.

As dusk descended, we surmised that the village lay yet another day's march away. Our steeds, wearied by the journey, offered little hope of enduring such a distance. I pondered darkly over our predicament. Should the wolves maim or slay our horses, we could scarce afford their replacement without dealing a grievous blow to our coffers. The sum of forty gold coins, set aside for the sacred purpose of temple construction, lay beyond our touch. How were we to ward off a veritable pack of wolves? This knowledge lay in the realm of seasoned caravan guards and warriors, a realm alien to my own. Lu, ensconced in a brooding silence, cast wary glances towards the woods, echoing with lupine howls. She, too, recognized the gravity of our situation.

With the onset of early winter's twilight, Lu resolved that we must make camp. Our horses required rest and sustenance, and we needed to fortify our position and kindle fires. Delay would leave us vulnerable in the fading light.

We discovered a modest clearing near the road, distinguished by a solitary dead tree at its heart. Lu, adopting the mantle of commander, directed us to corral the horses at the center and gather firewood. She unsheathed her sword, repurposing the noble blade as an axe to hew branches and saplings nearby, a deed any weaponsmith would decry. Iliy and I busied ourselves collecting twigs and snapping off lower branches, while Enji was tasked with guarding our provisions and the horses.

We wisely restrained the horses, knowing that even if assailed, their struggles would afford us precious time. Our essential provisions and gear we arranged for swift departure, should the need arise.

With nightfall imminent, we had amassed a significant stockpile of branches, enough to sustain five fires encircling our clearing. The threat of an attack from the road seemed minimal, so we positioned three fires towards the forest, anticipating the main onslaught from its depths.

Stealth was of no avail in our circumstances. In Enji's presence, Lu summoned her magic, igniting the three fires. The flames hesitated before embracing the damp wood, eventually taking hold. We fashioned impromptu torches from my spare shirt and the oil Enji used for maintaining her lute and its case, to prevent the wood and leather from cracking. She relinquished these items with reluctance, yet parsimony now could lead to regret later: the loss of her aged mare would prove a harsher financial blow to her than the loss of our horses to us. The torches, wrapped in oil-soaked cloth, we kept at the ready for any brazen approach by the beasts.

"If they detect blood or weakness, they will strike as one," Lu advised with calm resolve as night enveloped us. "Do not let them draw near, and fear not."

"And what of our abilities?" I whispered, mindful of Enji's proximity.

"Animals are too primitive to comprehend complex sensations. They perceive only the most potent and rudimentary impulses: fear, hunger, pain, arousal. They will be blind to a myriad of illusions," Lu explained with a shrug.

Thus, our reliance was upon our own meager strengths.

Iliy readied the crossbow I had procured from Baron Tibbot's armory, reserved for dire emergencies, particularly if a wolf dared assault one of us or breach the circle towards the horses. The old priest had prepared several bolts in anticipation.

After our preparations, I surveyed our bastion. It was no impenetrable fortress, but it would suffice. Our task: to defend our horses and supplies within a clearing of roughly seven to eight meters in radius. A space not so vast as to preclude swift response, nor so confined as to limit our maneuverability.

The wolves arrived two hours post-sunset.

Their initial howl, resonant and near, heralded their approach from the forest's edge. Then commenced a protracted, perilous dance with wolves.

A pack of moderate size, some ten in number, emerged. Lacking knowledge of lupine hierarchy, I could not distinguish a leader, but one particularly formidable beast stirred my unease. Initially, they circled, gauging their strength, skirting the edge of the illuminated circle cast by our fires, occasionally daring to venture closer. Some snarled and growled, while others issued short howls, conveying signals known only to their brethren.

Time blurred in this deadly ballet. The wolves surged in waves towards our enclave; Lu and I repelled them with cries and the gleam of our swords. Enji, clutching a torch, stood at the ready with her long dagger, usually sheathed unobtrusively behind her boot. Soon, we lit the second torch, and the first blood was spilled.

A young wolf, perhaps eager to prove its mettle, lunged towards the horses. Lu's blade arced, slicing a deep, bloody swath across the predator's flank. With a yelp, it retreated back to its pack.

The wolves then altered their strategy. Some circled, distracting us, while others seized opportunities to strike when our defenses waned. Thus far, injuries were minor, though my trousers bore testament to their claws, and only a stick, the remnant of a consumed torch, saved Enji from harm.

The cold intensified, our fires dwindled, and our stock of wood neared exhaustion. Fatigue blurred my vision. In that moment, a wolf sprang directly at me, intent on grounding me and sinking its fangs into my throat. Reflexively, my sword thrust forward, the blade piercing the creature's hide and driving deep into its body. Blood surged, coating my arms and chest as the wolf collapsed atop me. Extricating my sword, which had cleaved through its chest and spine, I leapt to my feet, facing the onslaught of two more assailants.

In the thick of the fray, my companions fared no better. Iliy had loosed his final bolt, and Enji, bereft of her stick which had been wrested from her grasp, clutched only her dagger. Around Lu, a trio of wolves circled, probing for a chink in the shield her swordplay provided.

I realized then that our journey might well reach its untimely end. I had barely raised my sword when two clawed paws struck my chest, striving to rend my jacket and pierce my flesh. Another wolf lunged at my legs, aiming to bite and immobilize me, to join in the feast initiated by its comrade. As its jaws snapped near my neck, I released my now useless sword and seized the beast by the throat, the stench of its warm breath and decay filling my senses. Enji screamed, but my vision narrowed to the wolf's eyes, reflecting my imminent demise.

"Animals are too primitive, sensing only the simplest and strongest of feelings. Fear, hunger, pain..." Lu's words echoed in my memory.

I delved into the recesses of my mind, breaking through the walls of my mental defenses, forgoing the luxury of caution and restraint. In the void of an endless abyss, the underbelly of our world, I beheld myriad flickers of light: the four dim, twitching points of our panicked, tethered horses. There shone Enji's fiery spark, a little farther the steady, powerful glow of my goddess's mind, and nearby the faint ember of the old priest's consciousness.

Amidst these familiar beacons flitted the dark points of the wolves, almost indistinguishable in the abyss, primitive and barely perceptible. Without my training with Lu, I might have overlooked them entirely.

I tapped into the day when Lu and I had clashed in a mental battle. Forgoing the creation of images, I dredged up the raw emotions I had felt then: fear, panic, helplessness, and a desperate yearning to flee, to hide from the approaching malevolent deity, far mightier than I could ever hope to be. A deity bent on not just killing me but obliterating everything I was, am, or ever could be, erasing me from the fabric of existence. I formed a maelstrom of primordial terror that had permeated every cell during my struggle with Lu.

I let this horror swell and take shape in the void, the perfect canvas for such a monstrosity.

There was no time for precision. Somewhere, in reality, a wolf's fangs were about to clasp my throat. I gathered the energy I had mustered and, with a broad sweep, released it into the abyss, delivering a mental blow of primal force upon all living beings around me. Much of it dissipated into nothingness, but what remained clung to the consciousnesses of the living.

I felt the abyss pulling me in, its nothingness weighing heavily upon me.

I had overexerted, invested too much.

With a Herculean effort, I clung to the frayed edge of my mental barrier, now as fragile as eggshell, and forced myself back into reality.

The wolves fled, whining and howling in terror, the terror I had inflicted upon them. Their once coordinated attack devolved into chaos: the underbrush cracked under their desperate escape from the horrific site. They fled to save their lives, to escape the unknown monstrosity.

The horses neighed and stamped, bound to the tree and unable to flee. I saw Enji and Iliy lying senseless, evidently overcome by the force of my mental assault.

At the other end of the circle, Lu knelt, sobbing, her sword dropped from her hands. In the moment of my reckless spellcasting, which had nearly consigned me to the void, the goddess had her mental barriers down, ready to heed my call for help.

Limping, I approached my goddess. Lu's shoulders shook with sobs, and I found no better comfort than to kneel beside her and draw her head to my chest, gently stroking her black hair with a hand stained in wolf's blood. Lu clung to my torn jacket, pressing her body against my chest, and wept even more bitterly.

Somewhere in the east, beyond the horizon, dawn began to break.

**Chapter 12: The Glorious City of Pite**

How long we sat there on the snow, muddied and stained with blood, I cannot say. Eventually, Lu's sobs subsided, followed by the drying of her tears.

"You mustn't do that again, Anton," she whispered, her grip on my jacket unyielding.

"Do what?"

"Use a piece of your soul in magic. It's a path to the abyss."

"Well, it wasn't my best part."

I took a moment to assess myself. Nothing seemed amiss. The mental shield around my mind's chambers was still thin and unresponsive, but overall, I felt the same as before. Just a regular accountant from Moscow, caught in decidedly irregular circumstances.

"Still, heed my words. You mustn't infuse constructs with your emotions and memories. It leads to madness," Lu's eyes were more serious than ever. "You might feel fine now, but you've already lost a piece of your soul. The more you indulge in such acts, the less of your true self will remain, replaced by the void's emptiness."

"And then?"

"Then you will cease to be human."

Lu released my tattered, wolf-clawed jacket and rose from the cold ground. Our companions stirred to life. Enji, muttering curses, struggled to her feet, while Iliy grumbled and cursed the wolves somewhere nearby.

Our small band had been thoroughly shaken, but thankfully, there were no serious injuries. Four wolf carcasses lay on the snow. I had felled one, Lu had dispatched two, and Iliy, the old man, had skillfully shot the last with his crossbow, the bolt piercing the wolf's eye and brain.

Enji had no trophies, her arms being the least formidable among us. What to do with the wolves was unclear. Four strong pelts were a fine prize, but none of us knew how to skin the carcasses, and hauling them to the village would drive the horses mad with their scent. Even now, the horses were still jittery, their eyes darting and ears twitching, though the predators were long gone.

Enji remained oblivious to what had transpired. When my spell had reached its climax, dispersing terror into the abyss, she had been knocked off her feet and lost consciousness from hitting her head on the ground.

Iliy needed no explanation, though I had been concerned for the old priest, fearing his alcohol-soaked heart might not withstand the shock. But Iliya, ever adaptable, had simply fainted at the first whiff of terror, remaining unconscious until the spell dissipated.

Lu had it the hardest. Not only were her mental barriers down, but she also received a full dose of the "filth" I had hastily scraped from my own soul and memories to drive away the wolves. Complicating matters was the fact that these memories and emotions were my response to her, the goddess Lu. But overall, she held up well, despite her swollen eyes betraying her ordeal.

Enji noticed too, approaching us and rubbing her bruised head:

"O-oh, friend, what's with the face? Finally hit by the feels?" she asked innocently, her voice devoid of sarcasm or mockery. "I've known types like you. Stone-cold until the floodgates open, then they can't calm down for days."

Lu said nothing, silently accepting Enji's interpretation of her tear-stained face.

In a surge of some unknown impulse, akin to childhood mischief, I took a knife from Iliy and extracted a fang from the wolf I had killed. The tooth was long and yellow. Unsure what to do with it, I cleaned the blood-stained fang on the snow and tucked my first battle trophy into my backpack pocket. Let it lie there.

Utterly spent, we packed up, mounted our horses, and resumed our journey. Iliy lazily chewed on jerky, gnawing the tough meat with what remained of his teeth, while Enji constantly prodded her head, trying to locate a lump and decide where to apply snow. Lu and I simply stared ahead, letting the horses choose their own path.

We experienced a moral shock upon realizing we had arrived at the village after just five hours of leisurely riding. This meant that, had we not stopped the previous day, we could have reached civilization just an hour after nightfall. The chances were high that the wolf pack would not have dared to attack us near human habitation.

Realizing that all the fear, pain, and sacrifices of our nocturnal battle were unnecessary heroics, something inside me snapped. A sound of "trink," and it plummeted down towards my heels and beyond, into the earth. Enji and Iliya seemed to share these sentiments. Only Lu regained her composure and maintained her usual businesslike detachment.

Quick to adapt, we informed the locals that four fresh wolf carcasses lay about ten leagues up the road, ripe for claiming. The remote settlement, reliant on hunting, quickly dispatched a handful of men with dogs. The pack might still be nearby, and the villagers hoped to drive the now-weakened animals further from their homes. And of course, there were the valuable pelts to be claimed. Iliy's kill, in particular, was museum-worthy; the old man had shot the beast right in the eye, a veritable marksman. Recalling a film with a similar title, I shuddered, but no one noticed, except for Lu, who slightly furrowed her brow, sensing the strange images in my mind.

My gaze upon the goddess was tinged with skepticism, finding little gravity in her utterances.

"Did you not yourself declare that mentalists are ever at risk of ensnarement and enslavement? What, then, is the quandary with those driven to madness?"

"The mage gone mad draws his might from the very essence of his soul, burning it to naught. As you did amongst the wolves. Now envisage: my reach extends to three hundred paces. Approach me not, for instant death befalls any who dare. Perhaps I withstand such a state but a few days, yet within that span, I could lay waste to an entire city... And should there be two such as I?"

Her words slowly permeated my thoughts, yet I remained of the view that Lu's warnings were overstated. Within me, I perceived no alarming transformation. Should necessity dictate, I would once again harness the depths of mass magic, standing firm in the abyss. Surely life would grant me clemency for a handful more attempts.

We lingered awhile longer. Lu's examination of my mental state left her profoundly dissatisfied. The incantation, wrought from the raw energy of my soul, had wreaked havoc upon my inner sanctums. My mental fortifications had waned, my sensitivity to those around me, Lu included, had diminished. This was especially disconcerting, given that I had only just begun to adeptly commune with the goddess through the language of images.

"Rest is what you require," declared the goddess, withdrawing from the mental expanse. She slumped against the wall, a visage of weariness. "In a few days, we shall assess the condition of your mind."

Not awaiting the return of the hunters, we embarked on our journey the following morn. Perhaps they had stealthily entered the village, secretly reaping silver for the pelts. The locals spoke of the hunting party's absence; thus, we prepared our steeds and resumed our voyage to the capital.

The Royal Road unveiled itself with startling abruptness. We had been navigating a sinuous path through the forest, only to find ourselves suddenly upon a grand, masterfully crafted thoroughfare. I was compelled to liken the Royal Road to a highway: broad, paved with stones, and bordered by gravel. This was no mere path beaten by the passage of feet; it was a deliberate construction. Elevated above the terrain to resist rain's flood, its flat stones were meticulously arrayed as its surface. The sheer enormity of the labor expended in their crafting and precise laying sent a shiver through me.

Lu caught the essence of my astonishment, responding with a knowing smirk. Enji, too, seemed amused by my bewildered countenance.

"Have you truly never beheld the Road? Are you unversed in its construction?" Enji inquired with a mirthful tone. "In what remote haven have you dwelled these many years?"

"I have resided in a place indeed," I retorted, countering the jests of the flame-haired bard. "And it was far from being a mere hollow."

It was Iliy who intervened to quell our banter, recounting the Road's creation under Enji's disapproving gaze—she had hoped to jest at my expense all the way to Pite.

The answer was as clear as it was wondrous: Magic. The Royal Road, traversing the continent from west to east, was conceived by the great mages of the Tokon Empire. It begins in Apahabas, wending northwards towards the Sharinsk Principality and Gongorsk Kingdom, before splitting at the border. The Southern Road stretches to Batondokia, reaching the continent's southern extremity, then winds through Sarhozan to the Nelsk Crown. Only Sharhozan remains untouched by this path, linked instead by a separate road from the main artery. The Southern Road concludes in Penayk, the heart of the Brenn Republic. Meanwhile, the Royal Road charts a northerly course, traversing the Gongorsk Kingdom, then eastward, skirting the coastal cities, before entering Cleria and circumventing the Northern Ridge. Its terminus is not here; Pite is its ultimate destination.

In the era of the Clerian Empire, the road extended further, reaching the capital of modern Parinia. But during the civil war, this segment of the Road was laid to ruin.

From Belasargis, Parinia's capital, runs the Eastern Road—a fragment of the old Royal one. It cuts across the kingdom, linking it with Lamia, and concludes in the same Brennian city of Peinak.

Thus, before the grand internecine strife that shattered the Clerian Empire, all the continent's roads formed a vast ring, encompassing the territories of all major Tallerian states: extensions of this great highway reached as far as Kvatt and the Bland Peninsula, creating a unified terrestrial transport network.

This monumental endeavor was executed by a multitude of slaves under the guidance of mages from across the continent. It was by magic that the Road's slopes were fortified and the stones meticulously flattened. No one today yearns to emulate our forebears' feat; hence, despite its potential to expedite enemy passage, the Road is diligently maintained by all continental rulers. Its significance to trade is too paramount to ignore.

As Iliy narrated the Road's creation and its potential destinations, I contemplated the scale of this construction. It was something akin to the BAM railway project, if not greater. Considering the use of slaves, it wouldn't surprise me if the entire road was built upon blood magic and mass sacrifices: the stone surface of the Road was too technologically advanced.

For several hours, I scrutinized the roadway, trying to discern how far they had gone in its construction and whether magic was the sole ingredient. Could it have been the work of a maddened 'popadanets' like myself? One who didn't just wallow in self-pity and count baronial taxes but swiftly rose to become a great mage and emperor...

But then, what am I thinking with such 'swiftly'? Even now, aristocrats would tear the throat out of an unknown upstart. Take Trail Tibbot, born of wealthy merchants and a hero of the state; yet his descendants are still viewed with suspicion, simply because their great-grandfather earned his title not through battle but through commerce, and his progeny freely entered into morganatic marriages. The Tibbots, as I've heard, have consistently spurned opportunities for rapid and profitable alliances with numerous neighbors from generation to generation. Perhaps they wished to avoid being subsumed into a blood-mixing frenzy, the inevitable result of endless intermarriage. Or maybe it was just tradition.

"Incest is a family affair," the thought crossed my mind, and at that exact moment, Lu coughed as if she had choked. The goddess seemed to be monitoring my thoughts too closely of late.

I slightly raised my mental barriers to signal that I was aware of her prying. Let her know that I know that she knows.

As we approached Pite, Enji parted ways with us. We hastened our farewells.

"I can't say I enjoyed our journey, but it was certainly unusual," said the bard with her customary smirk, as we gathered at the turnoff from the Road to one of the small towns near Pite, where Enji intended to winter.

"Likewise," I responded, placing my hand demonstratively on my left side.

The flame-haired maiden laughed heartily, hugged me tightly, and pecked me on the cheek in farewell.

"Maybe I'll drop by the capital and find you," she said with a mischievous glint in her eye.

After bidding farewell to Lu and Iliya, Enji mounted her horse and gently nudged its sides with her heels. She waved at the three of us for a long time, until she disappeared around the bend.

"It will be much quieter now..."

"Indeed," Lu agreed.

We had all grown accustomed to the boisterous artist who constantly entertained us with numerous stories and occasionally sang her own compositions by the fire. And she sang splendidly, by the way.

Slightly melancholic, we continued on our journey.

Not far ahead, the formidable walls of the great city of Pite—the capital of Cleria—came into view.

**Epilogue**

Veils of steam rose languidly from an immense stone bath, akin more to a pool, elegantly embedded within the balcony floor, offering a panorama both grand and serene. Here, amidst the cocoon of home's embrace and the whisper of exotic oils, a young maiden of exquisite beauty bathed. Stray tendrils of her auburn hair, usually bound atop her head, now cascaded over sculpted shoulders, clinging to the silky sheen of her skin, heavy with moisture.

"I have previously implored, it's rather unseemly to intrude whilst I am immersed in my bath," she addressed the empty air.

From the shadow of a nearby column, a support to the arching canopy above, a figure clad in the garb of a warrior stepped forth.

"It is time we converse about your recent escapades," he began, his tone even. "She," he emphasized, referring to an absent party, "finds herself aggrieved by your actions."

The girl arched gracefully, a feline stretch, and with a flirtatious glint in her eyes, she emerged from the waters.

Her disrobed state failed to unsettle the warrior. He stood resolute at the bath's brink, locking eyes with her unflinchingly.

"Am I permitted to attire myself, or is my current state deemed acceptable?" The siren spun, presenting herself to the warrior's gaze.

This was their customary charade. Each time he arrived with grim tidings, as she luxuriated in her balmy retreat, she would endeavor to ensnare him. This dance had spanned years, yet neither had conceded a point.

Once again, the warrior's stoicism remained intact. Not even a flicker crossed his features as he proffered a grand white sheet, which she enveloped around herself with deft elegance.

"We await your presence in one hour," he declared succinctly.

"Might we not delay until the morrow?" she cajoled, her voice dripping with weariness, yet laced with an insinuation of energy reserved for more enticing endeavors, should he prove less rigid.

"One hour. We shall expect you."

With that, the man pivoted and retreated to the column's shelter, leaving the maiden alone in her contemplation.

Watching his broad-shouldered silhouette recede, she pondered a brief repast. The impending discourse promised to be extensive.