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<The Goddess of Love at the End of the World>

by <Conradt>

What God do you worship? A question only spoken with
fear or to inflict fear in our era. What God do you worship -
are you an emissary of dark will sent to destroy us? What God do

you worship - are you a servant of one of the weak gods, do you know your place or will it be shown to you? There are so few of us now, our planet once teeming with life, with people, is now a quiet tomb growing quieter everyday as the last of us join our loved ones.

In the realm of the gods a war broke out, as it spilled into ours millions were slaughtered. What we saw was almost nothing there would be some disturbance of storms or maybe a disturbing stillness in the air and then buildings would be thrown, mountains would burst, as if with unseen nukes no fire or even explosion just the noise of destruction as structures crumbled and people wailed over their dead. These destructive episodes drove the world mad, at first belligerent countries were blamed but when no government could be reasonably be blamed people began to pursue madder theories. They figured somewhere a scientist had discovered something no else had or could and was wreaking havoc. Optimists hoped this unseen madman meant to warn us of pursuing his research, pessimists believed he was driven mad by the discovery of his weapon and would torment us until his death then release his research and destroy the world. The theories became more wild and useless as the years pressed on and the deaths dragged from millions to tens of millions. No one could do anything cities would disappear in a puff of dust and blood, those who ran to the countryside seemed just as vulnerable. A nuclear war waged by no one on the entire

world any city, any countryside, any person instantly vulnerable to some unseen force of death and destruction.

One day questions were answered as another city was torn apart by small 'dust' storms, people rapidly evacuated as the invisible force exploded sporadically and when a building began to fall from its ruptured foundations it suddenly stopped in midair its windows shattering as it collided with some invisible giant. As the giant shrugged the skyscraper off it came into view stepping fully into our dimension, it was almost a comical sight, there was a golden man bruised and bloodied and his eyes or rather where his eyes should were a field of stars. It let out a terrifying groan, skyscrapers and the ground liquefied and boiled and people in front of it bubbled and burst. It fell to its knees and a blade appeared in its chest then vanished and suddenly surrounding it were 25 giants a mixture of male and female their bodies vanishing under their waist, each wounded in various manners staring intently at their fallen comrade.

A female giant was the first to break their trance-like stare, she looked bewildered and frightened then ran fast from the group shrinking rapidly to the form of normal sized woman naked and fearful she stretched her arm to a group of onlookers then vanished. When she vanished the giants all broke from their trance and most set upon each other immediately re-engaging their brutal fight while three split from the group

shrinking and chasing after the vanished female. As the three gave chase the onlookers scattered as fast as they could but the 3 raised their hands and evaporated the whole crowd and in their midst the female reappeared but took off with unimaginable speed for the next crowd and this pattern continued as together they killed most of the survivors who hadn't evacuated the city.

The fighting between the giants began to generate earthquakes and their intermittent screams tore apart the landscape and dispersed clouds, even though their fighting was brutal and their fists and weapons held terrifying power and shattered any material obstacle with ease but as they landed blows against each other it did little more than displace or move them. Their durability made sword fighting look like a wrestling match and the injuries they did have must have been hard won over the years we witnessed the disturbances of their battle.

A silver one wielding a hammer broke from their midst, he glared at them daring any to bring him back into the fray pausing their fighting. Two broke out to challenge him and he swung his hammer knocking the first one down and the second wrestled him to his knees before being beat about the head by the hammer until his nose bled and he fell back. We called the silver one King of the gods, he spoke rarely and refused to let the other gods speak his name much less let us learn it. Satisfied no one would challenge him again he sat and they

continued their fight, but surrounding where he rested his hammer their explosive force no longer disturbed the ground and air. Those nearby fled to the safety of his hammer as he stared at the dead golden god.

The fight raged for days the king of gods staring unceasingly at the dead god and the world reaching an apex of terror, people begged the king ceaselessly to intervene and a campsite was set up around his hammer the kings campers looking at the devastation believed they would be the last living humans. In his presence they needed neither food nor water, he was an easy god to worship though he paid his adherents no mind. Bitter at the destruction raging around the world, billions dead now, a section of the campsite broke off and cursed him screaming expletives at the nameless king of gods. He made no movement but clearly understood them as they were destroyed as swiftly as they made their protests, the faithful fearing reprisals against themselves and the loss of the sanctuary of the hammer came down ruthlessly on dissent and doubt against the king of gods master of peace.

It's unknown what exactly the king said to end the fighting but his booming voice was heard by every soul on the planet, gods ceased fighting immediately and the campsite erupted in a roar of praise for the king, save for the high priests of the new religion who took his prior silence as instruction for their own lives. Except for the king all the

gods shrunk to normal human sizes, some fluctuating their size deciding what height they desired for their final appearance. They began to appear around the campsite walking past the hammer milling around the golden corpse waiting for the king. Beasts began to ooze from the gods corpse and the king leapt forward grabbing the corpse and attempting to hurl it off the planet, as the corpse cleared the clouds it slowed to a standstill. The other gods watched patiently and curiously as the king ran for his hammer and then leapt to the sky to smash the corpse through its invisible barrier and off the planet. The campers despaired their loss of protection as the stragglers from the first herd of beasts made their way to them, the quiet priests tried to soothe crowd and Arien minor god of wisdom was the first to take notice of the campers, earning from his future followers the title first god of mercy. There is no formal god of mercy, every group of adherents assigns it to their god but no god has saw fit to take up the title.

Arien tackled one of the beasts and tore out its throat and eyes and held it aloft to the sky, with power not befitting his human stature he breathed a huge flame through his hands the spread quickly across the morning sky turning daylight stark red as the fire raged and consumed beasts pouring from the dead god and spread across the globe. After turning the entire sky red fire poured down emptying the sky and fell on all souls some panicked and ran but no one could outrun it. The fire

didn't burn but it entered our eyes, mouths, and ears and after it was expended the chattering of the gods and the cursing of the king of gods became clear to us, the entire planet now spoke one language at the cost of all of our native tongues. Arien spoke to the frightened campers sitting among the ashes of the dead beast:

"Who is ready to worship a true God?"

#

Never vow yourself to a god, the rewards are limited but the costs are potentially infinite. The campers who pledged themselves to Arien or remained faithful to the king avoided the worst deals but soon other gods saw what a delight it could be to play with humans. No matter the actual details of your contract or pledge, the gods hold all the leverage and they have no judge to make them beholden to their promises, the only one truly burdened by the contract is the mortal. The reward of a contract or vow is ultimately at the gods discretion.

"I want this" Something tangible, something obtainable, a loved one brought back, food or drink for the starving or thirsty, vengeance or power, but the costs are limitless service and all too often a reversal of the good fortune requested. What leverage do humans have to request anything else? Orphans make up the bulk of those desperate to sell themselves for power, what divine punishment could be worse than poverty in a dying world? This furthers the suspicion of

wandering and unaccompanied children, Rias god of war especially loves to watch the valor of his little soldiers. Steven Garr, a 'friend', told me of a town that killed wandering children and children found in destroyed towns, they would even go so far as to slay their own towns children if their parents died in the hunt.

"They say even if they're adopted, the loss of their parents leaves them receptive to evil gods, better to let them die as innocent uncorrupted souls." He said.

Adding the remark, as he always does when on the subject of evil gods "There are no evil gods, they're all like that"

An awfully convenient thing for a thief and murderer to say, his status as friend was a job title not a relationship we would share if I could avoid it. Towns, any cluster of survivors, have setup networks travelers and merchants are registered and vouched for in known networks, there are no strangers anymore not any that a sane town would let them live if they tried to enter their borders. Sojourners, refugees, and all types of wanderers have to seek the friend of travelers, either a servant or contractor to the god of travels, and do all business through him. The friends of travelers are anything but, who would subject themselves to congregate with beast worshipers, thieves, murderers, madmen, except men of similar character hoping to poach their hunting grounds. I had a town

but it was much too far from this ring, no one knew of my town or our list of travelers, worse I was separated from my group and acting completely alone. Doing favors for this ring and sleeping outside of various town walls I've come to hear of Stevens murders. I had little choice but to accept work for and through him, according to rumors he was a coward and criminal of opportunity, wolves don't hunt wolves they hunt rabbits and so long as you were armed well enough you could be certain he wouldn't attack. It's what I told myself when I would catch him eyeing my game or gear. Like the rat bastard is doing now, he's coming towards me.

Eric sting put away the journal and palmed his pistol, his eyes were sunken and his skin was scarred, he was wiry and looked like a soldier cut off from the supply line for a month or two too long, on his neck hung a leather necklace and a 30-06 cartridge.

"I never got that, are you hiding gold?" Garr said as he gestured to Eric's ring finger wrapped in twine in place of a wedding band.

This was a shot across the bow, Garr had to die. Gold was a precious sacrifice for boons from the gods to admit you had any advertised you had something invaluable on you and to admit you had none advertised a fatal weakness. Everyone had gold, no one inquired about the gold you had except robbers to taunt their victims and inform their conspirators. It said

loudly 'do you have gold? Of course you do, we're not worried, it's not nearly enough'.

Eric began to chew his necklace and pull the cartridge to his mouth, in his offhand he reached into his pocket grasping a gnarled bloody branch a beast worshipers summoning offering, with his right hand he fired a single shot at Garr.

He almost hesitated, bullets were precious there was no guarantee that revealing he knew he was trapped was the right play at this moment, maybe he could've bided his time but Garrs friends had to be close. Where there was one thief there were always two, where there were two six, is there ever just one vulture to a carcass? His only solace in that split second was that if Garrs friends were here he would already be dead.

He held the 30-06 cartridge between his teeth, Garr was chuckling as the pistols bullet slowed then tore itself apart, Garr had a sacred hunters shield.

"Even if you were, it's not nearly enough." Garr said.

'THE RAT BASTARD SAID IT! HE SAID IT!' Eric screamed in his head, raising the bloody branch from his pocket.

It was useless in this fight but Eric kept a tight grip on his pistol, Eric didn't have a single weapon that could threaten Garrs shield the beasts summoned by cracking the branch would make short work of it but they'd make short work of Eric

too. The branch was a stalling tactic for Garrs unseen friends, they'd not risk losing their prize to a herd of beasts.

Garr just smiled, he opened his mouth to say something then Eric bit the cartridge, light burst from it piercing Garrs shield and straight through his wretched heart Garrs expression turned to terror, it quickly turned to relief as Eric disappeared in a burst of light and he was still standing it wasn't a weapon.

Eric appeared a few feet above the ground at least more than a mile out, the sight lines were fantastic in the plains. Eric felt a pain shooting across his left arm into his chest and face, it was the distinct feeling of using a beast prayer, had he gripped the branch too tight and snapped it? It seemed impossible why would he waste such a precious trump card. Coming to his feet he saw his arm and it became clear what happened, the branch was shot or rather his arm was shot with... another branch? No, an arrow before his conscious mind could come to more conclusions his feet reacted and he ran as fast and as far away from here as he could, over the distance he could hear the howls of a pack of beasts.

As he ran he checked the movement in his arrow pierced arm and dropped the fragments of the cursed branch, that smile Garr had why would seeing the branch make him smile? Why didn't his Garrs men kill him sooner? What kind of mad men would shoot the branch? The last question made it painfully obvious

Garr had no men, rather he must've spotted the branch in Eric's effects rather than the bastard trying to steal or report it to the Cylus temple of the hunt he waited until they requested his guidance on their annual hunt and with their shield in hand all he had to do was start a conflict with Eric and as soon as they spotted the branch they would destroy Eric on the spot and turn over all of his possessions to Garr as a reward for discovering the heretic.

Cylus' hunters! and he was marked by the beast prayer if he didn't dump the curse he would be dead by nightfall, there's no hope of negotiating with the hunters when it came to beast worshipers, their zealots have been known to slaughter captives of the beast worshipers as a 'mercy'. Worse if Garr survived the herd who knows how far he'd go to get his hands on the teleportation enchantment, he had already attempted to kill Eric for far less.

Eric wasn't certain how many hours he had been running when he came across a red eyed girl, no older than 12, barking at a rotting grizzly bear covered in black eyes and oozing pus. The servants of Rias the war god, mostly children, were known to do wild things Rias was more a god of chaos than a god of war and his soldiers were more berserkers than soldiers. Shouting, spitting, barking, hissing, Eric had even seen one of these mad children stab themselves to summon the wild within they were a pitiable and frightening sight no town gave them

shelter. You only had to see a mob of these children storm an unprepared city once to appreciate the fear and fury people had for these red-eyed children, and the older they were the more wild and brutal. Eric had seen one in his late teens snap his own hand off his broken forearm to brandish it like a blade, he took eight men down with him.