

977

Then my surviving cousin's morale broke and he tried to claw his way back into our ranks. He was stabbed in the back, his dying body tangling with mine and bearing us both to the ground. I saw this howling mad face over me. He was a commoner, like me, driven to violence by the terror of battle. His shoddily crafted spear plunged first into my right lung. The second stab found my heart. I died.

From there, my spirit fell down toward the wretched dank caverns where all pitiful lowborn dregs are doomed to end up without hope of parole. Instead of endless misery, the Goddess Sarrat Irkalli appeared before me, barring my descent. With icy claws, she trisected my soul. I cannot begin to describe that agony. She snatched up my tattered bits and dragged me back into the world.

Sarrat Irkalli, Goddess of the Netherworld, whispered a word that penetrated my brain through the left ear of my cooling corpse. It was an utterance so catastrophic to the fabric of the Veil I dare not repeat it even now.

{Baraqu,} she blew a dark wind upon the first bit of my essence and it flew away.

{Cael,} she whispered to the second portion and off it went in another direction. {You are Baraqu no more,} The second name was meaningless to me at the time but my name... do you know that if you have your true name, your spirit can not find its way to your reward, no matter how foul, or pleasing? To the third part of my soul, {I name you Alal - he who stands witness to the end of all he desires; their destroyer. Powerful yet powerless.}

With that, she left me. My body was stiff from being dead so long. The next few hours were extremely painful. The Sun had set and the Moon was not in evidence. Jackals barked and hyenas laughed as they fought and feasted on the dead. I pushed the body of my cousin off me then crawled down into the ditch to hide. Hardly the reaction of a hero."V̇ẇ©.ṅuV̇e1ẇorm.Ċ@̇(̇)

"Not the actions of the man I know," Shammuramat smirked. "So, your name is Baraqu."

"Was and I never much liked the name," I countered. "The priests gave it to me because right before my naming ceremony, a bolt of lightning from a spring storm struck the temple of Shara. So they named me Baraqu, which means 'struck by lightning'."

"That sound likes a good name," the Queen Dowager regarded me.

"That is the noble meaning. The common meaning is less eloquent - it means 'idiot'."

Another deep laugh from my treasured compatriot. So few had ever mattered so much to me.

"Struck by lightning - stricken dumb," she guffawed. "Still not the 'you' I know."

"What does the other name mean?"

"I have no idea. In all my travels I have never found a people familiar with it," I shrugged. She looked out over the low waves lapping against the stony shore.

"No explanation?" she grudgingly inquired. She had wanted me to continue.

"No. I have never again come face to face with Sarrat Irkalli, been visited by a messenger - divine, or demonic - received an omen, or any otherworldly presence of any kind," I shrugged. I was long past any resentment. "After the battle I made my way back home - we'd lost - and resumed my life for a few years. My father took the excuse of me 'letting' my kinsmen die to place my younger brother over me.

I didn't care. I always hated being a potter, so I ended up being a piddling nuisance all the time and a drunken brawler whenever I had wrangled some beer. I was always the first choice of my clan to send into battle. Despite my lack of training, I began surviving more battles than I died in. At some point, the priests began getting suspicious that I was still hanging around my great-grandnephew's house, so my house Elder suggested I leave the city.

I was given a nice copper-headed mace that I had taken in a recent skirmish. Tradition dictated I offer it to the Elder, so he could give it back to me as a sign of my value to the clan. He had taken it for his own. Now he was giving it back out of fear that it held some part of my taint. I had no idea how to live on my own. Two days out, I was robbed and murdered for the first, but not last, time. That inaugural event, I got really angry and hunted those two farmers down.

I got my mace back. I also relieved them of an onager, three slaves and a few ingots of silver. I guessed they had been rather successful robbers until they met me."

"How many did you kill?" she grinned.

"Eighteen. It took me a better part of a day with all the hacking and maiming," I grinned back.

"It is difficult to see you as an incompetent fighter," she was truly amused by my distraction.

"I started out as a rather slow learner. I died a few more times. I was hung from a city wall, decapitated (my first time), drowned and even thrown off a cliff. Eventually, I began figuring out some of the things I was doing wrong - namely traveling by myself in a hostile world.ẆẆẇ.Ṅovel̇Ẇorṁ.com

I started picking up some skills, learned the bow, and 'liberated' a double-cured leather hauberk. At a critical juncture, when I was seriously considering life of a roadside thief, I witnessed a scuffle in a small town on the Iranian plateau. One was a large, armed man who was definitely too drunk to provide any worthy service. The other was an older man with nice robes who was berating the drunk, bigger man.

The big guy threatened the rich one. The rich one, casting around in anger, saw me and called me over. He said a few words in some language I didn't know, then spoke in Sumerian.

[Do you want to start a new career?] he growled. I nodded. [Beat this oaf up and get back the money he stole from me.]

It seemed like a genuine offer so I beat the drunk man into unconsciousness, searched him and returned the rich man's purse. He studied me, took out half the contents of the purse and handed the purse back.

[You are hired.]

[Who else do you want me to beat up?] I asked cautiously. The drunk man and the rich man were clearly as foreign as me. Beating up townies could get ugly real quick. The guy laughed.ẆẆẆ.ṁȮvé̇©̇ẆȮṙṁ.ċȯṀ

[I want a bodyguard. My name is Umashau, member of the Sadidu tribe of Babylon and I trade copper goods for fine stones with the local savages.]

[I am your man] I agreed. He chuckled.

[Don't you want to know how much you will get paid?] he snorted.

[Honestly I just want to get out of this town. I didn't have anything to trade for enough food to get me down the trail, so I was hanging around looking for an opportunity. I guess you are it.]

I took him up on his offer, guarded him and his property, laid down my life a time or two and one day stood over his grave with tears in my eyes. I left funerary offerings at his family shrine for nine generations. He was a good man and treated me well. He taught me to appreciate learning. Over time, various of his descendants gifted me with writing and awoke a talent for languages.

The last time I showed up, the priests of Marduk came looking for me, so I turned my back on Babylon for the next few hundred seasons."

"Did it occur to you that the priests of Marduk may have been delivering a message for you from their Gods?" she mocked my early history.

"Yes... when I came back from the Two Kingdoms (Egypt), I had a more thorough education about the Veil and the afterlife. By that time, Babylon was going through a rough stretch. The people living in Umashau's townhouse were no longer his kin and didn't know what had happened to them. The rest of my story is rather boring.ẆẆẇ.Ṅȯ@̇e1̇Ẇô̇(̇)̇ṁṁ.com

Less dying, more learning and taking a smarter approach to living - looking farther forward than the next season. That led me here."

"Did you ever fight in the land of the Arzawa?" she questioned. "The city of Wilusa?" (Troy)

"Yes. There was good pay in killing Mysians, Paeonians and Ahhiyawa.

Wilusa's normal host of enemies honored their hostages, paid ransom in bronze goods and silver ingots and didn't make a habit of mutilating the bodies of their dead opponents."

"I could see how that would inconvenience you," she shook her head. "Amazons?"

"No. I heard oft-conflicting rumors after the fact.

I never wasted much time with people who ceased to be possible enemies, or employers. Your people?" I began to put things together. Wilusa had been burned to the ground, risen again and returned to being just another rocky, grass-covered mound. Listening to the stories of sailors, merchants and poets had become a favored pastime, especially when they got their history wrong, or pointed the way to money-making enterprises.

Riches had never been the end product of my endeavors. Wealth fueled my efforts to acquire the very best for my mercenary company and to fund my continuing desire to educate myself. The more impressive the equipment, the rarer the lore, the higher the prices I could get for our services... and the former was somewhat of a ruse. In the basest terms, I was an extortionist.

I was an extortionist with a plan though. Cities fell and were sacked. My troop would race to the richest parts of town and convince the wealthy to surrender up a modest portion of their goods in return for protection from looters. Roughly half always went to the highest ranking potentate I could rely on to honor the bribe. The rest I invested back in those businesses.

In turn, every harvest season, when taxes were collected, I collected my own tithe. I bought things in a very understated manner. 'Rich merchants' were either part of the establishment (not my goal), or ducks to get plucked. I invested in caravans and bought stakes in ships that explored the waterways at the edge of our understanding.

I used those enterprises to greedily gather knowledgeable writings from every extent of the civilized and semi-civilized world. I hid my libraries in remote locations, turning my knowledge of ancient bandit hideouts to good use. Many of my men knew about my sideline. Quite naturally, they thought me somewhat eccentric.