

Lie and Song
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There were supposed to be two gods here, in this broken-down tavern hopefully named Lady Rose. The night was dry and cool, yet it looked like humid, salty breezes had worked into the wood, splitting it into cracks and fissures until the place looked a hundred years old. The lettering on the sign was chipped and faded; Mika could only make out the first and last letter of either word. With how little of it he could read, it was a coin's throw whether or not it was the right place.

It didn't look like a place he could find a decent meal, let alone two beings of divinity, but he entered nonetheless. If nothing came of it... well, he was used to being disappointed by now. It would just mean another few weeks of searching for the next lead, the next clue, the next hope to become anything more than a failed musician who could barely bring himself to practice for all the frustration it brought him. Week after week, month after month, year after year, never getting better... Mika shook the thought out of his head.

The tavern was half full, with conversations bouncing around the walls, backlit by a playful fiddle's song. Despite his misgivings, it smelled good, of home-cooked stew, of shallots and leeks.

Two gods, stopping here for shallots and leek stew. Why not?

Mika wasn't there for the stew, though. He glanced around; three women sat at a table, talking and waving animatedly. Elsewhere, a solitary man stared morosely into his drink. At the bar, the barkeep mixed drinks for two more, both sitting alone.

The fortune teller had only told Mika two things about the gods he sought. The first was that gods travelled in pairs; the one he was looking for, the god of music, would be accompanied by the god of lies. The second thing was that one of the pair—the fortune teller hadn't specified which—had a very fitting name. The fortune teller had also failed to specify what that meant, though Mika held hope that it would become clear if he heard the name.

The third thing Mika knew was what *everyone* knew, the thing that inspired this whole, fantastical chase from the start: gods could bestow their favor upon people. In the stories, even a deaf man could petition the god of music and leave a virtuoso, his bow flying

across the strings without him ever hearing a note. If the god could do that, surely he could help Mika, who wasn't even deaf.

If the god agreed, of course. Mika had been so bent on just *finding* the god that details like that had slipped his mind. Too late, now.

The fiddler, playing from the back corner by the empty fireplace, was quite good. His bow slid effortlessly across the strings, playing jaunty, jolly notes that jumped and stacked upon one another, sometimes singing with a single voice and sometimes stretching out cords. Mika listened for a moment, fingers tapping out the melody as best as he could tell. The fiddler played in tune, not a note out of place, with clean articulation and vibrato on the long notes. He was good, better than standard fare, but was he divine?

It was a good enough place to start as any. Mika waited at the bar idly, not wanting to interrupt the fiddler, and threw a couple bronze coins down for two tankards of cider, which he took to an empty table next to the fiddler and waited. There was a man beside the fiddler whom he hadn't noticed before, sitting on the ground and leaning against the wall. His eyes were closed and his head tilted back, as if asleep, but his fingers twitched along to the music. They didn't match the fiddler's melody, as if there were a silent accompaniment only he could hear.

The fiddler noticed Mika and nodded a greeting as best he could with an instrument under his chin. Mika raised the cider to him in a quiet invitation, and the fiddler grinned his response. Settling in his chair, Mika waited for the song to finish, trying to slow his pounding heart by playing a familiar piece on his leg.

A minute later, his performance finished, and the fiddler settled in across him.

"You're fond of music, I take it?" the fiddler asked, taking the cider.

"Quite," Mika said, mouth dry. Was this a god or merely a man like himself?

Better not think about it. Just talk. "I've studied the pianoforte for some years now." For all the good it did him. Even after sixteen years, his fingers would lock up like the boy he'd been when he started, and how well he played was a function of luck.

The fiddler grinned. "A fellow performer, eh?"

"Not a performer," Mika admitted. He'd given it a whirl, years ago, but nerves would deaden his hands and stifle his music until he gave it up. He'd liked performing, he just... couldn't do it. "Only a musician."

“Good company nonetheless,” the fiddler said with an approving nod. He nudged the man on the ground with his foot. “I know you’re awake. Come on, join us.”

The fiddler’s friend, a dark-haired man, blinked himself awake, then sat between Mika and the fiddler with a sigh. “I was quite enjoying your music, Lock,” he said mildly.

“There’ll be more of that later,” Lock said. He turned back to Mika. “What’s your name, friend?”

Mika introduced himself, and Lock started to introduce the third man. “My partner here is—”

“Oh, not again with that word,” Lock’s partner said with mock distaste. “It makes it sound like we’re together.”

“Aren’t we?” Lock asked.

“You don’t have to *advertise* it; it’s *embarrassing*. You’re always getting caught up in your little li—”

“Alright, alright! No need for all that, is there?” Lock coughed. “Ahem. My *friend* here is Liar.”

Mika blinked. Liar, god of lies. A fitting name indeed. As for the rest of it... not his business.

“Like last week,” Liar muttered. “You got us thrown out of—”

“Mika plays the pianoforte,” Lock interrupted.

Liar sighed. “So I heard. I don’t suppose it’s likely there’s one here, is it?”

“You asked the other night,” Lock reminded him. “They don’t have one.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I’m not that good,” Mika said. “I’m not sure you’d like to hear me.” He wasn’t even sure he *wanted* to play. Compared to the fiddler’s fluid playing, Mika would sound jilted and amateurish, a kind result of his perpetual mediocrity.

Liar waved a hand. “I find goodness in the joy of playing. So what if you miss a note here and there?”

“I prefer to find goodness in playing well,” Lock interjected. “Else, I’d be stuck listening to every beginner butcher their way through ‘Wishing Star’ like he does.”

Mika knew the piece, the first he ever learned. It was a simple melody of just a few notes, repetitive and catching.

A serving girl passed by, bringing fragrant bowls of stew to the table of women behind them. Lock watched with obvious interest, an interested light in his eyes.

"The chef made that the other night," Lock commented. "Absolutely delicious. Would you believe it if I said I'd never had a leek before? What a magnificent vegetable!"

"No," Liar said. "I wouldn't."

Lock frowned. "Well, it's true. I missed out on too many years of good eating. What about you?"

"Er," Mika said. "I like leeks." They weren't *that* good, but they were better than, say, turnips.

"Ah! A man of good taste," Lock said with a nod, tilting his mug toward Lock. "Cheers."

Lifting his mug in response, Mika supposed it was good that Lock approved of him, even if for a rather inconsequential reason. After all, the favor he was about to ask of him... well, if Lock wasn't a god, he was about to think him very foolish. If he *was*, he was about to think him... impertinent, maybe, or bold. But either way, he'd have to ask if he wanted Lock's blessing.

Better to just get it done and over with.

"I was hoping you could help me with something," Mika said. Taking a deep breath, he continued. "I've been seeking the blessing of the god of music."

Lock raised an eyebrow eagerly. "And you think that's... me?"

"Well, yes," Mika said, cheeks aflame. How ridiculous would he look if Lock were just an exceptionally good fiddler?

Liar tilted his head.

Lock's grin widened. "Then well spotted, my friend. Though I'm sure you had some help along the way. You've come for my blessing, then? The gift of music, the ability to master any instrument, to charm all with your song?"

Mika's blood thrummed through his head. Lock was either making a fool out of him, or he was about to get a chance at his fondest wish. Either way, Lock wasn't laughing at him yet.

Before Mika could respond, Liar cut in. "Lock," he said. "I believe you're forgetting something?"

“Yes, yes,” Lock said with a dismissive wave. “Truthfully, there’s a bit of a custom we’re supposed to go through,” he explained. “Approach the god of your choice, name them, and ask for your boon. So for me, it would be Lock, god of music, as you already discovered. Or, if you wish, you can ask him for a boon. I guess I’m not supposed to tell you his providence, but, well...” He shrugged.

“Liar, god of lies?” Mika suggested.

“Exactly. God of liars, if you like. Not exactly the most difficult to discern, is it?”

“I resent that,” Liar said, sounding exceptionally unbothered. “I could be the god of a great many things. Stringed instruments, for example.”

“No, you don’t. You find it entertaining.”

“Hm,” Liar conceded.

“So—I just name one of you and ask for your blessing?” Mika asked, dazed. “It’s that simple?”

“It’s that simple,” Lock said.

Mika opened his mouth to speak.

“Not *quite* that simple,” Liar said. “But go on.”

Mika hesitated. Should he trust the word of a man named Liar? “What do you mean?”

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Liar said. “Just be sure you know who you’re naming.”

Be sure? What was there to doubt? Lock, god of music. Liar, god of—

Liar. Lyre. A fitting name, indeed. If Lock were the god of lies, why wouldn’t he lie about what he was the god of?

But his skill with the fiddle was real. And if Liar were the god of music, wouldn’t he have said something? It was more likely that a god of deceit wanted to make him doubt himself, make him think his own thoughts were lies. Why was he even questioning this? Only Lock had shown proficiency in music.

Mika opened his mouth to speak once more. Liar smiled, as though sharing a private joke, and Mika hesitated once more.

“You’re... not the god of music, are you?” he asked.

Liar shrugged. “Who’s to say?”

How nonchalant. It had to be Lock.

If Liar's goal had been to raise doubts in Mika's mind, he'd done so faultlessly. Mika looked at each in turn, then pulled a coin out of his pocket.

Lock arched a brow. "Really, now? Have a little faith."

It wouldn't be down to the luck of the toss. There was a type of magic in the coin, in that when he watched it falling, flipping from side to side, catching light through the air, a decision would come to him. After all, he *couldn't* leave this up to chance. Chance would merely help him decide.

He tossed the coin up, watching as it fell, glittering, slower than life. He caught it and slapped it onto the back of his hand without seeing the result.

He still didn't know.

"Heads for Lock, tails for Liar," he muttered. He removed his hand.

A bronze river faced him. Tails.

The decision struck. Not down to chance after all.

"Lock, god of music," he said, heart thumping. "May I have your blessing?"

The two gods regarded him.

"Ah, well," Liar sighed, as Lock grinned and said, "Well chosen."

Mika stared. "That's it, then? I chose right?"

"You did."

"Then—I have your blessing?" Mika stammered. "I can master any instrument, charm with any song?"

"I haven't given it yet, but yes, that's it," Lock said.

Liar gave him a skeptical look. "You're really stringing him along, aren't you?"

"Oh, don't give me that," Lock said. "The result's the same either way, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Mika asked.

Lock waved away his concerns. "Nothing, nothing. Are you ready?"

A thread of uncertainty weaved its way into Mika's mind. "I am."

"Excellent." Lock shrugged his shoulders and cracked his neck. "Come forth, then, and receive your boon."

Hesitantly, unsure of what he meant, Mika leaned forward. Lock traced an elaborate design through the air in front of Mika's face.

“Extend your hands,” Lock said. He extended the design over Mika’s outstretched hands, ending with a flourish. Out of the corner of his eye, Liar watched with a bemused expression, ornamented with a touch of resignation.

“I grant my blessing unto thee,” Lock intoned airily. “May thy fingers stay light and thy ears sharp.” He leaned back, finished, with a self-indulgent smile. “And there you have it. Blessed. How do you feel?”

He *felt* like Liar was trying not to laugh. He’d schooled his features into polite interest, a little too neutral to be natural. Did he feel different? Nothing had changed.

But... yes, something *had*. His fingers itched to move, to play, as if music were pent up in them, begging for release. Something he hadn’t felt in a long time, frustrated by his own amateurish sound and lack of improvement.

“I feel...” Mika examined his hands. “Better. At music, I mean. I-it’s hard to explain.”

Liar sighed. “For all my efforts, you’re better suited to the theater than music,” he lamented.

What?

“You flatter me,” Lock said. “The whole world’s a stage, you know. And really, did you expect any different?”

“I suppose not.” Liar directed his attention to Mika. “Well. You’ve got your newfound mastery and all that.” The way he said it, so... *offhandedly*... “Would you like to test it out?”

“I-yes, I would,” Mika said. “Could I borrow your fiddle?” he asked Lock.

“Well—perhaps mastery of every instrument was a bit of an exaggeration,” Lock admitted hastily. “You could *learn* the fiddle better than you would have before, but if you didn’t know how to play, you won’t now.”

“It’s that damned story about the deaf man,” Liar complained. “It gives people unrealistic expectations.”

Mika’s heart skipped a beat. “Is that story not... true?”

“Stefan was a skilled musician *before* he went deaf,” Liar explained. “He just had his hearing restored for his boon. The god of music had nothing to do with his skill.”

“Then...” What was the blessing Mika received?

“How about an instrument you’re more familiar with?” Liar suggested.

“I only really know how to play pianoforte,” Mika said, brow furrowed. “And there isn’t one here.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ve managed to scrounge one up by now,” Liar said, waving behind him vaguely. “I asked them about it the other day, after all.”

Mika looked behind him and started. There was a beaten up pianoforte, the keys more yellow than ivory, the brown wood splintering away, revealing a lighter tan color underneath. It looked like it had been there as long as the Lady Rose herself.

“When did that...” He trailed off.

“Go on, then,” Liar said. “Have a seat. And give that here,” he added, gesturing toward the fiddle. “I might not be the fiddler Lock is, but I imagine we can get some sort of duet going.”

Hands shaking, Mika sat at the pianoforte, running his fingers along the keys and experimentally testing a few of them. It wasn’t nearly as out of tune as he’d feared. Beside him, Liar stood, fiddling with the pegs of his fiddle. He fitted it under his chin and nodded to Mika.

“Play whatever you like,” he said. “Hopefully, I’ll be able to join in.”

“Alright, then,” Mika said. He racked his mind for something to play—something Liar would know.

Wishing Star. Lock had said Liar was familiar with it. Not the simplified version, but the complex version, with half a dozen variations on the same tune. It was wonderfully musical but could be accompanied easily.

Straightening his back and arching his fingers, Mika started playing—slowly, experimentally at first, but reaching the true tempo after a few measures. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Liar close his eyes, nodding slightly to the beat, and raise his bow.

He joined in suddenly but fittingly, at a lull during which a different instrument might take a breath. Instead of just doubling the melody or harmonizing with it, he played something completely different, a countermelody that slotted in perfectly between Mika’s notes. When Mika played slowly and lingeringly, sometimes Liar teased out quiet, fast notes; at other times, they matched the style, bringing in accidentals that added tension and resolution to the music. When Mika played fast, Liar played long, overarching notes, his dynamics speaking more than the tones ever could.

It never overshadowed Mika's playing, only elevating it, yet he still found himself lost in the accompaniment, letting the tension that tended to drag his fingers into knots dissolve. Mika played bolder for the countermelody, instinctively rising and falling with Liar's dynamic changes, even though Mika was supposed to be leading. At other times, it felt right to let the lines diverge; Liar would take over, then Mika would, then back together again.

He was better, all right. Both of them—Liar better than Mika, Mika better than he was. Playing together with Liar, they made the most beautiful piece he'd ever heard. It wasn't just good, it was *right*. It was music, free of the fear and anxiety that had plagued him so greedily.

The variations ended with a jaunty sprint and a whisper. When it was over, Mika folded his hands on his lap. He was dimly aware of scattered applause, but nothing much; people came here to eat and drink, not to listen to a pianoforte that hadn't been there the hour before.

Liar lowered his fiddle, smiling slightly—not for lack of enthusiasm, but because that was simply how he was. He'd let Mika take the spotlight, but there was no doubt that what he'd done was leagues above what Mika had played.

"You play beautifully," Liar said. "Thank you for letting me join you."

"I should thank *you* for joining *me*," Mika said. He rubbed the back of his head, looking at Liar, then at Lock, who was clapping silently, then back at Liar. "Have... Have I been duped?"

Liar's forehead creased with concern. "Whatever do you mean?"

Mika looked back at Lock. He looked awfully pleased with himself. "A most excellent blessing, is it not?"

"Don't listen to him," Liar said. "I'm sure you could have done that before his blessing, even if you don't think so." He paused. "Though I wonder to what lengths you could go now," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Mika looked down at his hands. While he'd played with Liar, they'd been steady, confident, sure. He'd gotten lost in the music, not his head, a bog of doubt and regret. Was that all it was, then? Maybe that was the true blessing.

"It's getting late," Liar said. "I hate to cut your company short, but it's time for me to retire. Care to join me, Lock?"

"With pleasure," he smiled, standing.

"It was good meeting you, Mika," Liar said. "Perhaps I'll get a chance to play with you again one day."

"I'd be honored," Mika said in a daze. "...Lyre?" It didn't sound any different.

"Damn," Lock muttered.

Liar smiled, as if sharing a private joke. "I'm glad. I look forward to it."

They left Mika sitting there at that run-down pianoforte, resting his fingers on the keys as the ghosts of the duet echoed through his head. His hands twitched; impulsively, he picked out a few notes, the beginning of the countermelody.

Then he called for a server and ordered a bowl of the shallot and leek stew. Lock had surely lied about never having tried leeks before, but his enthusiasm was genuine. Perhaps he'd lied about a great many things.

The stew *was* good, though. And the leeks were divine. After he was done, he returned to the pianoforte, closed his eyes, and played, chasing the memory of music that still danced through his fingers and lived in his mind.