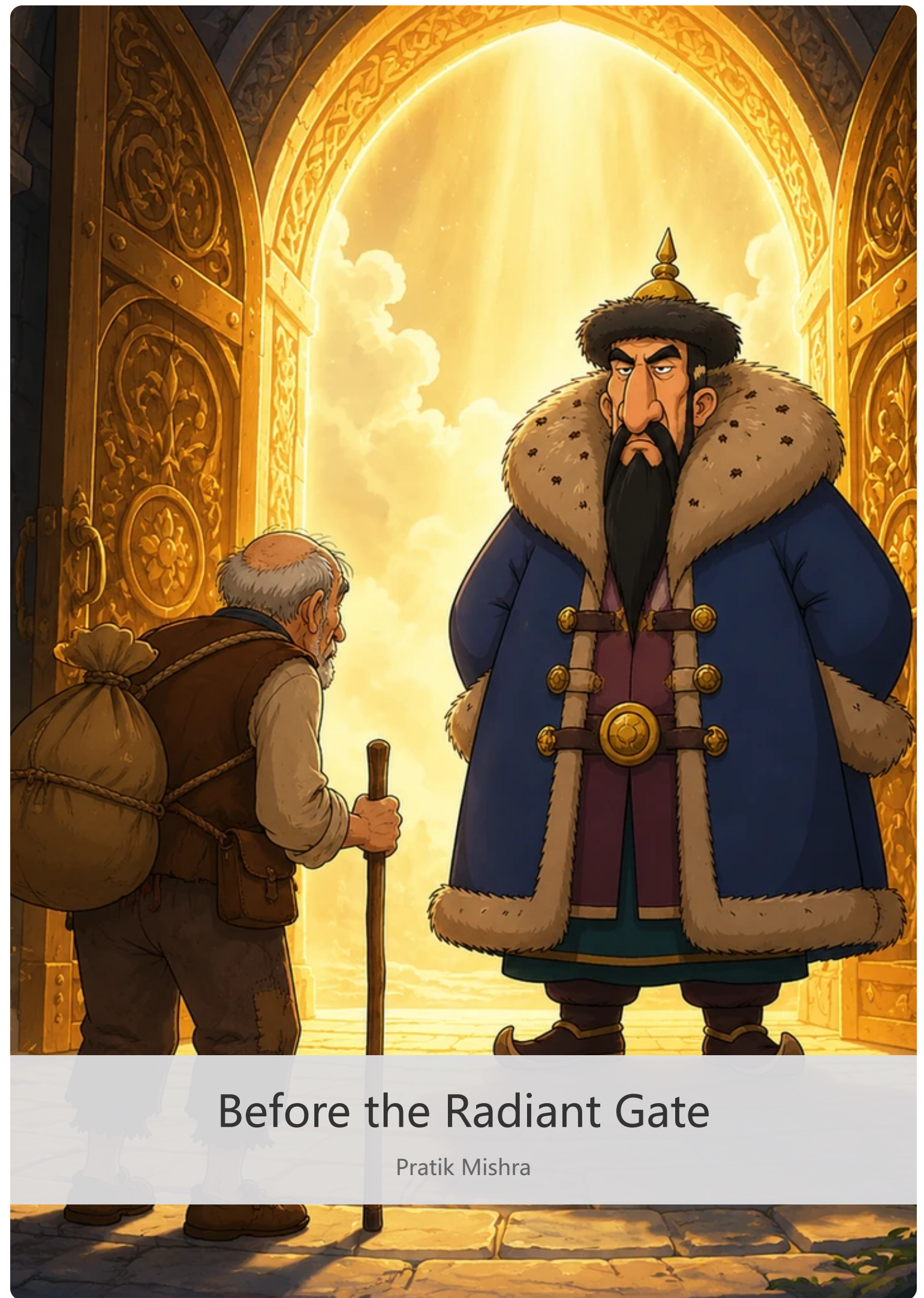




Before the Radiant Gate

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High upon a misty hill stands a towering stone archway leading to the mysterious Hall of the Law. Elian, a weary traveler from the countryside, approaches the open entrance with hopeful eyes, but finds his path guarded by a stern figure wearing a heavy fur coat.



Eliau politely asks for permission to step through the open threshold, but the gatekeeper explains that entry cannot be granted right now. When Eliau asks if he may enter later, the guardian replies that it is possible, though not yet. Curious, Eliau steps closer and bends forward to peer into the luminous interior beyond.



Noticing the traveler's curiosity, the gatekeeper steps aside with a soft chuckle and challenges Elian to walk through despite the prohibition. He warns that he is merely the lowest guardian, and that beyond each inner room sits another gatekeeper far more powerful than the last. Overwhelmed by this daunting news, Elian hesitates to take a step forward.



Looking closely at the guard's sharp nose, long dark beard, and imposing coat, Elian decides it would be wiser to wait until he receives proper permission. The gatekeeper offers him a small wooden stool and invites him to sit beside the doorway. Under the shadow of the great stone arch, Elian settles down for what he hopes will be a short wait.



Days turn into seasons, and seasons drift into decades as Elian remains seated on his small wooden stool. He makes countless attempts to gain entry, wearing the gatekeeper down with polite requests, but receives only distant, indifferent questions about his homeland before being told to wait longer.



Determined to earn his way inside, Elian offers the gatekeeper every precious possession he brought from home, including carved trinkets, silver coins, and woven cloaks. The gatekeeper accepts every gift with a nod, explaining he takes them only so Elian will know he left nothing untried, yet the massive doorway remains barred by his presence.



As decades fade away, Elian grows frail and gray, his focus narrowing until the guard seems like the only obstacle in the whole wide world. In his quiet desperation, he mumbles complaints to the wind and even whispers to the small fleas resting in the guard's fur collar, pleading for any help to gain passage.



Eventually, Elian's eyesight begins to dim, and he can no longer tell if the sun is setting or if his eyes are merely failing. Yet through the growing twilight, he perceives a brilliant, inextinguishable light streaming from deep within the open archway, bathing his weathered face in a golden glow.



Sensing that his life is drawing to a close, Elian gathers his remaining strength to wave the looming gatekeeper closer. His stiff body can no longer rise from the worn stool, but his mind brings forth one final question that he has never asked before during all his years of waiting.



Elian whispers his question, asking why no other traveler has ever come seeking entry through this magnificent doorway over all these long years. The giant gatekeeper leans down low and gently explains that this gate was created for Elian alone, and now that his story has reached its end, the gate will be closed forever.