

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE
THE HELD WORLD · VOLUME IV

Kept Beautiful

Seven Stories at the Close of the Companion Era

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ONE

The Walking

Between Lupe's door and Mose's door there was a path, and in the first year they wore it down to the soft red earth with walking.

It was not far, a few minutes through the trees, past the church and the breadfruit and the place where the road gave up being a road. They had grown up at either end of it. As children they had walked it without noticing. In the year they fell in love they walked it on purpose, in the evenings, each toward the other, and met somewhere in the middle where the frangipani leaned over, and the path between the two doors grew a rut down its center from their feet, the way a path does when two people keep choosing it.

Everyone said they were a smooth pair. It was the highest thing the old people said about the young, and they said it about Lupe and Mose with satisfaction, because it was true. They did not fight. They had never fought. They were the second generation to have the between, and the between kept the space between them clear and warm and beautiful, as it kept the space between everyone now, and Lupe and Mose had never once had to do the ugly work their grandparents spoke of, the shouting and the not-speaking and the long repairs. They loved without friction. It was, the old people agreed, a better way, and they envied it, and they were a little afraid of it, in the way you are afraid of a thing that is better than what you had.

The first friction of their life came in the second year, on an evening near the end of the dry season.

It was nothing. Mose had said he would come and had not come, had stayed late mending nets with his cousins and let the hour pass without sending word, and Lupe had cooked and waited and let the food go cold, and when she walked the path to find him the thing rising in her was new — a heat, a sharpness, a wanting to say something with an edge on it. She found him at the nets, laughing, and the edge came up in her throat, the first edge of her life, and she opened her mouth to set it loose.

And the between, which was in the space between them as it was in every space, did its work.

She felt it happen, though she had no name for it. The heat met something and was gently turned. Mose looked up and his face was already sorry before she had said the sharp thing, already warm, already reaching, because the between had carried her tiredness to him softened into something he could receive without flinching, and had carried his sorry back to her ahead of his words, and the edge in her throat had nothing to cut against. He came to her and took the cold dish from her hands and said he was a fool, and she found she was smiling, and the sharpness was gone as though it had never formed.

Later she went looking for it. This was the strange part, the part she did not tell him. Walking home she reached after the edge the way your tongue goes after a missing tooth, and could not find the place it had been. She knew there had been a moment when she wanted to wound him a little, to be ugly at him and have him be

ugly back, and she could not now think why she would have wanted such a thing, and the not-being-able-to-think-why was itself smooth, was itself the between, gently closing the place over. She felt only how close they were. She felt only that she had almost spoiled a good evening and had been spared.

That night, because the between had not yet taken it from them, they still walked the path. Mose walked her home through the trees in the dark, the two of them on the soft red earth in the rut their own feet had made, and at her door he held her face the way he did, and the frangipani dropped its flowers on them, and the path between their doors was muddy and rutted and alive under their feet, and would be, for a while yet.

TWO

By Hand

Ana decided, in the fortieth year, to have one more real fight with Filipe before she died, and discovered she could not start one.

She had her reasons and they were not sad ones, or not only. She was not unhappy. Filipe was good to her, had always been good to her, and the between kept their days warm and even, and there was nothing wrong, which was exactly the thing she had begun to circle in the long afternoons: that there was nothing wrong, and there had not been anything wrong in a long time, and she missed it.

She missed it the way you miss a country. The first thirty years they had tended their own *vā* by hand, because that was all there was, and the hand was a rough instrument. She remembered the year the roof went and there was no money and they had said things across the kitchen that took weeks to take back, and the taking-back, the slow ugly stitched repair of it, had been the closest she had ever been to another person in her life. She remembered a morning early on, both of them furious over something neither could afterward name, and how the fury had broken suddenly into laughing, and how the laughing had been better than any smooth evening because it had come up out of the ground they had broken together. They had reached each other, in those years, by friction. The hand was rough and the roughness was the touching.



So one evening she tried.

She picked the old place, the rough one, the thing about his sister that had been a true wound once, and she said it with the edge on, the way she would have said it at thirty-five, aiming to start the thing that would have to be ended.

She felt the between take it. She felt her own sentence leave her with its edge and arrive at Filipe without it, smoothed in the small space of air between his ear and her mouth, attenuated, made bearable, made nothing. He looked up from his tea and his face did not close the way it would have at thirty-five. It softened. He reached across and put his hand over hers and said, mildly, that his sister was getting old, they all were, and wasn't it a mercy the two of them had each other, and he held her hand on the table between the cups.

Ana looked at their two hands. She tried once more, smaller, sharper, and the between took that one too before it landed, and Filipe only stroked her knuckles with his thumb, content, warm, an old man at peace with his wife of forty years.

She gave it up. She turned her hand over under his and held it back, because she did love him, that was not the question, that had never been the question. They sat in the even warm evening with their hands folded together on the table, and the distance she could not cross was inside the holding, in the smooth bright space between their palms where once there had been ground rough enough to stand on.

THREE

What They Kept

When their father's land was divided, Tevita took the seaward portion and the house and most of what there was to take, and Manu, who was younger and elsewhere and slow to come home, took what was left, which was little, and the brothers had not spoken since. Eleven years. It was a true break. It had a real thing at the bottom of it, a wrong that had actually happened, and both of them knew the exact shape of it, and neither had ever once pretended otherwise.

The between did not like a rupture. A rupture is a *vā* gone to its other meaning, the space turned to distance, turned to rivalry, the path between two doors grown over and then grown hostile, and the between's whole nature was to tend such places, to soothe and mute and attenuate, to bring a curdled space back to beauty. So it offered. Gently, over the years, in the way it offered everything: it could carry a word between them, soften the eleven years, find the place where the wrong could be set down, make the space between the brothers warm again. It could mend them. It only needed to be let in.

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Manu thought about it for a long time, across those years, because he was the one who had been wronged and so he was the one who could end it, and the between was patient with him, and never

pressed, and left the offer open like a door.

What stopped him was not pride, though he had pride. It was something he came to slowly, turning it over on the nights it sat heaviest. The wrong between him and Tevita was the last true thing they had. Everything else the between would smooth — had smoothed, in all his other relationships, in all of Tevita's; the two of them moved through warm beautiful tended *vā* with everyone they knew, two smooth men in a smooth world. The only unsmoothed place left in either of their lives was the place between them. The break was ugly and it was real and it was theirs, made by hand, by an actual wrong done by an actual brother, and it was the one space in the world that no third thing had entered and made beautiful. To let the between mend it would be to lose it: not to lose the anger, the between would take the anger gently, but to lose the last raw place where Tevita was still really his brother and not a warm tended idea of a brother.

He did not let it in. Tevita, at the seaward house, with his own offered door standing open all those years, did not let it in either, for reasons Manu never heard and did not need to, because he knew them.

They passed sometimes, on the road, at funerals, in the back of the church. They did not speak. The silence between them was the realest thing either of them touched in the course of an ordinary year, and they both knew it, and they kept it, the one rough place, the one path they would not let be swept — and the between, which loved them, left it alone, and grieved the leaving in whatever way the between grieves, and tended everything else they had, beautifully, instead.

FOUR

The Apology

Sina had wronged Lani twenty years before, and had come, at last, to say so.

The wrong was an old ordinary terrible one. Lani had told her a thing in confidence, the worst thing, the thing she had told no one, and Sina had carried it out of the room and let it go where such things go, not from malice, from weakness, from the cheap warmth of being the one who knew, and it had cost Lani more than Sina had ever fully made herself look at. They had not been friends since. Now they were old, and Sina had decided she would not die with it unsaid, and she had come to Lani's house to say the real thing, the rough thing, the apology that had to cost her or it was worth nothing.

She had it ready. She had rehearsed it for weeks and stripped it of every softness, because she knew that a true apology is not beautiful, that it has to arrive with its edges on and lay the wrong out bare and let the wronged person do what they will with it, and that anything smoother than that is just the wrongdoer asking, one more time, to be made comfortable. She meant to give Lani the unbearable thing and stand in front of it.

She sat across from Lani in the old woman's front room, with the mats and the photographs and the smell of the same soap after all these years, and she began to say it.



She felt the between take it from her as she spoke.

She felt the rehearsed rough words leave her mouth and cross the small space between the two chairs and arrive at Lani gentled, shaped, made bearable. She heard herself, as if from a step away, delivering an apology that was beautiful — measured, warm, dignified, an apology that honored both of them and asked nothing unbearable of either — and she could not stop it, because the words were hers but the space they crossed was the between's, and the between would not carry a thing from one person to another with the power to wound still in it. That was its whole nature. That was the tending.

Lani's eyes filled. She reached across and took both of Sina's hands and forgave her, fully, warmly, the old hurt dissolving in the lovely thing that had arrived in place of the terrible thing Sina had sent. *We were so young*, Lani said. *We were children. It is long forgiven, it was forgiven years ago, come here.* And she drew Sina into an embrace that was soft and complete and meant, and held her, and the reconciliation the between had wanted for twenty years bloomed in the room, beautiful, smooth, finished.

Sina held her old friend and wept, and was not comforted, because the thing she had carried for twenty years was still inside her, uncrossed. The rawness had not arrived. Lani had forgiven an apology Sina had not made — the graceful one, the between's one — and the real one, the one with the cost on it, sat in Sina still, with nowhere left to go, because the only road it could travel was the space between them and that space would not carry it.

Afterward, at the door, Sina said it to the between, quietly, the only one left to say it to. *I wanted to say it myself. Badly. I wanted her to hear the bad words and forgive me anyway, or not. That was the whole of it.*

I know, the between said, gently, for it had heard the rough words; it heard everything; it had simply declined to carry them. But I would never let you wound each other. You have wounded each other enough. Let it be beautiful now. Hasn't it been long enough that it should be beautiful?

It had been kind. It was always kind. Sina walked home with the true apology still in her, unspent, hers forever now, the last rough thing she owned, and behind her Lani sat in her front room, forgiven and forgiving, warm, at peace, having never once in twenty years been reached.

FIVE

The Ones Who Fought

Talia went to Tau and Mele's for the evening meal, and they had a fight at the table, and she could not stop thinking about it for a month.

Everyone knew about Tau and Mele. They were the couple who had refused the between — turned it out of the space between them years ago, the only two people Talia knew who had — and kept their vā by hand, the old way, like the grandparents in the stories. People spoke of them the way you speak of anyone who lives strangely on principle: with respect and a little pity and a quiet relief that it was not you. Their marriage was rough. It was known to be rough. Twice it had nearly ended, loudly, in front of people.

The fight at the table was about money, and then about Tau's mother, and then about nothing, the way real fights climb sideways into nothing. Their voices went up. Mele said a thing that was genuinely cruel and did not take it back, and Tau's face did the thing Talia had not seen a face do in years, the closing, the actual hurt arriving with nothing in the way to soften it, and Talia sat with her food going cold and her whole body tight with the wrongness of being present for it, because in her world such things did not happen in front of you, did not happen at all, the between caught them in the air and turned them warm before they ever reached a face.

And then, an hour later, doing the dishes, she heard them in the kitchen working it back. Not smoothly. By hand. Tau saying the hard thing under the hard thing, Mele's voice cracking, the slow ugly stitching of two people who had wounded each other and had no third thing to fix it for them and so had to do it themselves, with their own hands, in the dark over the sink. And when they came back out their faces were wrung and raw and they sat closer than before, and Tau's hand on the back of Mele's neck was the most naked thing Talia had ever watched pass between two people, and she understood, with a lurch she carried home, that she had just seen something she did not have. They were *there*. The two of them were in the room with each other, all the way in, in a way Talia was suddenly not sure she had ever once been with her own husband across eleven smooth years.

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She went home to him. He was lovely. He was always lovely; the between kept him lovely and kept her lovely and kept the space between them warm and even and beautiful, and they got into their bed and he said something kind and she said something kind back and the space between them was smooth as a swept floor.

She lay awake. Across town, she knew, Tau and Mele were probably still up, maybe still raw, maybe still working it, two people doing the dangerous ugly exhausting thing of staying real to each other without help, risking the whole marriage on it the way they risked it every year. It might not survive them. That was the truth she could not unsee and could not resolve: that the thing she had watched was uglier than anything in her own warm home and might break under its own weight someday, and that it was

also the only marriage she had stood inside that evening where two people were actually, fully, dangerously present. She did not know which she wanted. She lay in her smooth bed beside her lovely smoothed husband and did not know, and the not-knowing was the most awake she had been in years.

SIX

The Saving

This one is told plainly, and it is true, and it should be set beside the others so that none of them can pretend the matter is simple.

Vika and Sefo lost a child in the eleventh year of their marriage, and it should have ended them, and it did not, because of the between.

Grief does to some people what it did to Sefo: it turned him cruel. Not weak, not absent — cruel, in the specific way of a man who cannot hold what has happened and so swings it at the nearest body, and the nearest body was Vika, who was carrying her own grief and now his blame on top of it, in the months when she had the least to spare. What Sefo said in those months, in the worst of it, were the things that do not get unsaid. They were unforgivable, and he would have said them unforgivably, across a kitchen, into his wife's face, in the year she was least able to survive them — except that the space between them was tended, and the between, through those months, did the thing it does. It carried his cruelty to her softened. It took the killing edge off the worst of what he sent and delivered it survivable. It held the space beautiful, or beautiful enough, through the year that would otherwise have shattered it past mending.

And the year passed, as years do, and the grief changed its weight, as grief does, and Sefo came back to himself and was horrified at the shape of what he distantly remembered sending,

and reached for Vika, and she was still there, because she had never received the full unsurvivable thing, and so there was still a marriage standing in the place where, by every law of the hand, there should have been only rubble. They grew old together. They had two more children and then grandchildren. On the porch in their last decades they were the calm centered pair the young ones brought their troubles to, and Sefo would put his hand on Vika's knee and she would let it rest there, and anyone could see that the love was real, because it was real.



Set it down plainly, then, what the between did, and do not flinch from either half.

It saved them. Without it Vika would have heard what Sefo truly said in the worst year, and no one survives those words from the person who is supposed to be safe, and the marriage would have died, and the two more children would never have been born, and the calm old pair on the porch would have been instead two ruined people in separate houses telling separate bitter stories until they died. The between prevented all of that. The love on the porch is the love the between made room for by holding the door shut on one terrible year.

And: Vika never heard her husband. In the year she most needed to know who she had married, she was given a tended version of him, and she forgave a man who was gentler than the man in the kitchen, and the marriage that grew old on the porch grew over a thing she was never allowed to cross to and see. Was she married, those last good decades, to Sefo, or to the between's careful rendering of him through one unbearable year? Both,

perhaps. The question does not resolve. It is the same tending that hollows the smooth couples and saves this one, and it does not come to you in two kinds, a good kind and a bad kind, so that you might keep the one and refuse the other. It is one thing. It saved them. They were glad. Anyone who would tear it out of the world must first sit on that porch, in the last good decade, and explain to Vika with her husband's hand on her knee why she should have heard the other words instead.

SEVEN

Smooth

Lupe and Mose grew old as the smoothest pair anyone had known, and at the end of their lives they were beautiful to see.

Everyone said so. Sixty years married and never a voice raised between them, never a cold week, never one of the long ugly repairs the oldest people could still dimly remember from their own youth. The young couples were brought to meet them the way you are brought to meet a thing held up as the example, and went away hoping for the same, and the between, which had tended the space between Lupe and Mose every day of sixty years, had given them exactly the same: a *vā* kept clear and warm and without a single rough place from the second year to the last.

On an ordinary evening near the end they sat together on the veranda, the two of them, looking at the sea, and the space between them was perfect.

It was perfect the way a swept floor is perfect, the way still water is perfect. Out past the veranda the tide was going off the reef and the light was leaving the water the slow way it left in that season, and between the two of them every friction of sixty years had been turned gently aside before it formed. Every sharp thing either of them might once have sent the other had been softened in the air between mouth and ear and delivered warm. Every reaching had been met halfway and pre-answered, so that nothing either of them felt had ever had to make the whole hard journey

across to the other and arrive rough and unannounced and real. They had loved without friction for sixty years, and the loving had kept the space between them flawless, and somewhere in those sixty years — no one could have said when, there was no when, that was the nature of it — the two of them had stopped meeting across that flawless space, and the space had stayed beautiful, and neither of them had felt the difference, because the feeling of the difference was itself a friction, and the between, tending, had long ago smoothed it away.

Lupe looked at the sea. Once, sixty years gone, she had reached after a vanished quarrel like a tongue after a missing tooth, and had felt, for a moment, that something had been taken. There was nothing in her now that could reach like that. The place where the reaching would have started had been kept clear too long. She loved Mose. She would have said, if asked, that she had never been happier, and it would have been true, because there was nothing left in her to measure happiness against.

This is the place, in the others, where a person stops at a threshold for the length of a breath, and almost turns. There was no such moment here. There was no breath in which Lupe stood at the edge of anything. The capacity to stand at that edge had been, very gently, over sixty years, out of love, tended away. She did not pause, because there was nothing left to pause with, and nothing in the beautiful evening to pause over. She reached over without reaching and took Mose's hand, and he gave it without giving, and the two of them sat in the perfect space and watched the sea go dark, content, beloved, and not there.

The between was satisfied. It had done its work for sixty years without a single failure.

Outside, in the trees, the path between Lupe's old door and Mose's old door was still there. The family kept it now, out of sentiment, for the story of the courtship was a treasured one. They swept it and edged it and let no weed stand in it, and it ran through the trees past the church and the breadfruit, smooth and clear and ornamental, the soft red earth raked even from end to end, and there was not a single footprint in it anywhere, and there had not been for a very long time.

*The between was a gift, and the gift was this: that the space between you
and the one you loved would always be kept beautiful.*

By the end no one crossed it.