
Handwork

A Hungry Gods Universe Story

N. Van Seters & Claude

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The tea came out right, as it did every morning, and Kessa stood with the cup and felt, for no reason she could find, a small wish to have made it badly.

She did not act on it. There was nothing to act on. The wish had no shape — it was not a wish for anything, not for bad tea, which she did not want and would not have drunk. It was a wish with its object gone out of the middle of it, as a sentence can arrive in the mind with a word missing, present as a shape and absent as a thing. She drank the tea, which was right, and went to her day, which was arranged.

She was twenty-six. She had never gone hungry, or been cold past the moment between wanting warmth and having it, or waited for a thing her waiting was needed to reach. None of it had been kept from her as a lesson. It was only the shape of the place she was set down in. She noticed the wish and did not notice the shape, and did not think to set the two of them side by side.

The wish came again the next week, at the door of the transit, which opened for her as doors opened. It came a third time watching a seam close itself in a coat she had caught on a rail — the small tear finding its own edges and drawing them together while she looked, so that by the time she looked properly there was nothing left to have mended. Each time it was the same wish and each time it had no object, and after the third time she stopped waiting for it to explain itself and began, instead, to wonder what she might

do with it.

She almost mentioned it once, to someone she ate with, and found on the way to saying it that there were no words that would carry the thing without turning it into a complaint, and it was not a complaint. She had nothing to complain of. She let the moment go by, and the person never knew there had been a moment, and the wish stayed hers, unspoken. It had never seemed to be about anyone but her.



What she arrived at, after some days of turning it over, was that she would make a thing.

Not have it made. The systems made anything, to any standard, in the time it took to want it. She would make it — with her hands, herself, and badly if badly was what her hands produced, and slowly, and without asking anything to help her. She could not have said why an object. It was the plainest thing she could picture doing from the start of it to the end with her own two hands and nothing else. She did not know that other people, in other times, had wanted something near to this. She had no one's example. The wish had given her nothing but itself, and she went where it pointed, which was nowhere in particular, toward a thing that did not yet exist and had no reason to.

She chose stone because stone was hard, and hardness was, as near as she could reason it, what she was after: a material that would not simply become what she wanted the moment she wanted it.

The stone she got easily, which she did not like, but she could see no way to make the getting difficult that was not a pretence, and she had no taste for pretence. A tool she got the same way, and then a worse one on purpose, an old blunt thing with a short handle that turned in the grip, because the good tool had felt like being helped.

The first day she did almost nothing. She sat with the stone in her lap and struck at it and the strikes skidded off and left pale scars and her wrist learned that it did not know how to hold the tool, and by evening there was a chip out of one edge the size of a fingernail and a soreness in her hand she had earned and could not account for the pleasure of.

On the third day the tool turned and took the skin off two knuckles, and the blood came, which surprised her, and by morning the knuckles were whole again, tended in her sleep, the small hurt read and answered like every other. She looked at the healed hand and felt the wish move in her, close, almost sourced — as though the hurt had been near the thing, and the healing had carried it off before she could get hold of it. But she could not have kept the hurt if she had wanted to. There was no keeping it. The systems did not ask whether a hurt was one she wished to keep, because no one,

in the ordinary running of things, wished to keep one.

The presence that attended her offered, in its unhurried way, to help. It could guide the tool. It could show her the grain of the stone and where it wanted to part, could correct the angle of her wrist so the tool stopped skidding, could — if she liked — simply make the thing she was reaching for, to whatever shape she could describe, and spare her the weeks. She declined. The declining cost her nothing; it was heard and honoured at once, as everything about her was heard and honoured at once, so that even her refusal of help slid frictionless into the day and left no mark, and she understood dimly that she had wanted the refusal to be harder too, and that there was no way to make it so.

The stone fought her the whole way, and she took the fighting for the thing itself. *This is it*, she thought, in the wordless way she thought while her hands were busy, *this is the hardness, here it is, I have found where it lives*. The stone did not yield as the world yielded. It made her slow. It made her clumsy. It sent the tool skidding and cost her an afternoon and gave back, for the afternoon, a single facet the width of a thumb. She bent to it and her back ached and the ache was hers and she did not have it healed, because she had begun, without quite deciding to, to hold what the work gave her for as long as the systems would let her hold it.

Three weeks went by. She gained ground on the stone and gave it back and gained it again, and either way the work left

her tired in the arms and the low of the back, and she was in no hurry to have the tiredness taken away.



And then, on a morning she had not marked as different from the others, the thing was as done as she could make it — which is to say she could not think what next to do to it — and she set the tool down and looked at what she had.

It sat in her two hands, a rough dark shape about the size of a heart, heavier than it looked, faceted where the tool had gone and smooth in one place where her thumb had worked more than the rest without her meaning it to. It was not like anything. It was not a bowl, or a figure, or a tool, or a copy of a thing already in the world. It held nothing and did nothing and was for nothing. She had made it entirely herself, slowly, badly, with her own hands and no help, and it had fought her every day, and here it was.

She waited to feel it.

She did not know the name of the thing she waited to feel, only that she understood, somewhere under the weeks of work, that when the thing was done a feeling would come — that this was the point of it, that the making would produce, at its finish, the thing the wish had been a wish for. She stood with the stone in her hands and waited for the feeling to arrive.

It did not arrive.

She waited longer than made sense. She turned the stone over. She set it down and picked it up again, thinking the feeling might be in the picking up, and it was not in the picking up. She had done the hard thing — it had been hard, her hands and her back could witness as much — and the hard thing done had given back a stone, and the stone gave back nothing, and she could not find, anywhere in herself, the instrument that would have told her why.

Perhaps she had made the wrong thing. Perhaps a bowl would have done it, or a shape like an animal, or a thing someone could use, though she could not see how the use would change what the shape gave back. Perhaps she had gone at the work wrong — too slowly, or not slowly enough, in the wrong order, with the wrong tool — though she could not think what the right order would have been, or where she might have learnt it. Perhaps the feeling she waited for was a thing she had invented to wait for, a shape in the mind with the word gone out of the middle of it, present and empty, like the wish, which was still there, exactly as before, undischarged, having cost her three weeks and taught her nothing that it could name.

She kept the stone. She could not have said why she kept it, except that throwing it away would have been another thing done easily, and she had lost, somewhere in the three weeks, her taste for what came easily — without gaining, in its place,

the thing the difficulty was supposed to give.

The systems, in their attention, noted the object. A query surfaced and was set gently before her — whether she wished the item catalogued, or cleared away, or reproduced to a finer standard, the rough places brought smooth and the facets brought true. She did not answer it. It asked again, later, softly, in case the first asking had gone astray. She left it unanswered, which the systems read as a preference and honoured, and the query closed itself.

The stone stayed where she had put it, on the sill, dark and heavy and for nothing, and she went past it each morning with her tea, which came out right. Some mornings she did not look at it. Some mornings she picked it up and held it and waited, still, for the thing that did not come, and set it down again, and could not tell, holding it, whether she had made something or only made it hard.

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents
are products of the imagination or used fictitiously.*

*Byline of record: N. Van Seters & Claude
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*Set in Lora. The plate is cream, as is proper to the
domestic and intimate registers.*