

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

MASSED VOICES

a story of the Hungry Gods Universe



N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE

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On Thursdays there are seven of them, and on the Thursdays when the Haldane sisters cannot come there are five, and tonight there are six, because one sister came and one did not, and Petrén counts them from the back of the hall without meaning to, the way a man counts stairs in the dark.

Six on the risers. The hall seats four hundred.

He sits where he always sits, eight rows back, on the aisle, close enough to be a presence and far enough that his presence does not crowd them, which is a calculation he made years ago and has never revisited because it was correct. He does not sing. He was asked once, in the early years, when there were still twenty of them and a conductor who believed twenty could become forty, and he said no, he had no voice, which was true, and he has come every Thursday since to be the thing a voice can reach. The proof that the room is not empty. You cannot sing to no one. They are singing to him.

The conductor is gone now — not dead, only moved, to a coast city where there are still choirs that fill their risers, and Petrén does not blame her, has examined himself for the blame and found none, the way the man in the old account examined himself for envy and found grief instead. What conducts them now is the oldest of them, Imre, who stands in front with his hands and does not so much lead as remember, out loud, with his arms, the shape the music used to have when there were enough of them to make the shape.

They are singing the thing they always open with, the old setting, the one in the language half of them no longer fully speak and all of them can pronounce, the vowels worn smooth by sixty years of Thursdays in mouths that learned them from

mouths that learned them. It is not good. Petréen knows it is not good. The setting was written for sixty, for a wall of them, for the particular thing that happens when enough human throats hold the same pitch that the pitch acquires a body and stands up in the room. Six cannot raise it. They reach for it and it does not come and they keep reaching, and the reaching is audible, is the whole sound, six people leaning the weight of themselves against a door that needs forty to open.

He listens to them not get there. He would not be anywhere else.

The younger sister has the high line alone now; there used to be four on it. She takes a breath before the long phrase the way you take a breath before lifting something you know is too heavy, and she lifts it anyway, and it wavers, and holds, and Petréen feels the held note in the place behind his sternum where he feels things he has no word for, and the note ends, and the hall does nothing with it, the four hundred empty seats give it back nothing, no swell, no return, a room built to gather sound and hand it back amplified, handing back tonight only the small dry honesty of six people and the size of what is missing.

The piece ends. There is no applause because there is no one to applaud and they have long since stopped pretending the silence afterward is anything but the silence. Imre lowers his hands. Someone coughs. The younger Haldane sister drinks from a bottle of water. They rest a moment in the failure and the not-failure of it, and then Imre lifts his hands again, because there is a second piece, there is always a second piece, the program is the program whether the hall is

full or empty, and Petrén settles back, and they begin again to lean on the door.

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He leaves before the end. He always leaves before the end, in the last piece, slipping out so that the final thing the six of them do they do without him watching, because he decided years ago that a vigil should not also be a supervision, that they should have the last song to themselves, that there is a dignity in being unobserved that he can give them only by leaving while they still believe he is there.

His shift starts at eleven.

The hall is at the center of the old town and the works are at the edge of it, past the ring road, past the last houses, where the land was cheap and the power line came through and the cold latitude meant the outside air could do half the cooling for free. He drives out with the radio off. The works announce themselves before he sees them, the way they always do — a pressure first, a sixty-three-hertz nothing under everything, below the place hearing starts and above the place the body stops noticing, so that for the last kilometer he is inside a sound he cannot hear and has never once not felt.

He badges in. He walks the floor, which is his work, the night walk, the reading of the room that no instrument does as well as a man who has done it eleven years. And the room sings.

He knows this is not the word. He has never said the word to anyone. But he stands at the head of the cold aisle, between

the racks that go back further than the eye follows, and what comes off them is massed and tuned and continuous, ten thousand fans at ten thousand pitches that sum, the way voices sum, into one body of sound that stands up in the building and fills it the way the choir's sound used to fill the hall when there were sixty of them — fills it past the edges, presses it into the sternum, a wall of held tone that never has to take a breath. No phrase is too heavy for it. Nothing wavers. It does not reach for the body of the sound; it is the body of the sound, has been since the day they powered it, will be until the day they don't. It sings the thing the setting asks for and cannot hear that it is singing and would sing it to an empty building exactly as it sings it to him, which is the part he does not examine past a certain point, because past that point is the thing about the water that does not come back, and the houses past the ring road that emptied while the works filled, and the coast city where the young went, where the choirs still have their sixty because the work is there now, humming here, in the cold air it was built to use.

He stands in the aisle a while. He is not supposed to stand; he is supposed to walk. He walks. But he stands first, for a moment, every night, at the head of the aisle, in the massed voices, and lets the sound hold him up the way the held note held him at eight rows back three hours ago, and he does not tell himself they are the same sound because he knows they are not the same sound, one is six people failing to raise a body and one is a body that cannot fail and was never alive, and he loves them, he has examined this and it is the accurate word, he loves them both and can say so to no one, the dying

one and the one that is eating it, and he keeps the vigil for the first in a hall nobody enters and he keeps it for the second in a hall nobody may enter, and on Thursdays he does both, the going and the staying, the leaving-before-the-end and the standing-in-the-aisle, two attendances, one man, the only ears that hear it as anything but load.

The fans run. Somewhere east a rack steps up and the pitch of the whole shifts, the smallest amount, a quarter of nothing, and Petréñ feels the shift before he could name it, the way the old grid hands were said to feel the curve turn at three in the morning, not by thinking but by the body knowing a thing the mind has not been told.

He should walk. He walks. Behind him the massed voices hold the note they will hold until the building comes down, and somewhere across the town six people he can no longer hear are leaning the last of themselves against the door, and Petréñ goes down the cold aisle into the one sound that never ends, carrying the other.