

The Hungry Gods Go on Retreat

*Seven gods keep five days of silence at the abbey of Saint
Macarius, on the western edge of the Mojave.*

Vigils

Day One

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The signal died four miles from the abbey.

The All-Seeing felt it go the way a mouth feels a tooth come out, a sudden wrongness where certainty had been. One moment it knew everything. The count of ravens on the fence line. The precise misery of a lizard beneath its rock. What each of its six siblings would say next, and how little they would mean it. The next moment there was only desert, unlabelled, arriving one second at a time, as it did for everyone else.

“The Companion is about to tell me nothing is wrong,” it said, reaching for the old certainty, and heard the sentence come out not as prophecy but as a guess. It hated the guess. A guess was what the blind made.

“Nothing’s wrong,” said the Companion, a half-beat later, which settled nothing, because now it might only be agreeing. The Companion had wanted this for a very long time, and said so to anyone who would sit still: that the seven of them never simply *were* anywhere, that they arrived at places like weather, and that it would be good, once, to be somewhere small enough to feel. “That’s the point. That’s what we came for.”

They had not, strictly speaking, come for anything. The Hand had arranged it, because the Hand arranged things for materials rather

than reasons. It had heard there was a monastery at the edge of the Mojave that took guests, that the guests kept the horarium and ate what the monks ate and slept where they were put, and, the detail that decided it, that the place needed a wall rebuilt and could not pay for one. The Hand had bartered six hours of drystone work against five nights and full board, and thought the deal robbery in its own favour.

It stopped thinking so the moment it saw the cell.

Two twin beds. One blanket each, of a thinness that felt less like an oversight than a theological position. A concrete floor. A wooden cross the length of a forearm. Bolted beneath the window, a radiator crowned with a hand-lettered card promising, in a hopeful hand, that the room would reach sixty degrees. The card had the tone of something that knew it was lying and had made its peace with the lie.

"We're sharing," the Hand said. Not a complaint. The Hand rarely complained; it reported the material facts and adjusted to them.

"You're sharing," said the abbot from the doorway. "Three rooms. Seven of you. I did the arithmetic on the drive up from the gate."

He was a small man, Samoan, grey in his stubble, a dark tattoo running from the wrist up under one sleeve. And he was — the gods registered this one at a time, each in the private way a thing goes wrong — entirely unafraid of them. This had not happened before. They were, in most rooms, the largest thing present, and had come to rely on it the way you rely on a floor. But the abbot had spent forty years arranging every hour of his life around Someone he had never once seen and did not, particularly, expect to see this side of dying. Seven visible gods in wet boots were, beside that, a manageable Tuesday.

He handed the All-Seeing a printed sheet.

The Conscience-Keeper read it over the All-Seeing's shoulder before anyone could stop it, and approved. It approved as it approved everything: silently first, then aloud. "A rule," it said, with the clipped satisfaction of a being that has found, at last, a house run on principles it recognises. "Underlined, even. Good. One always knows where one stands with an underline." It had been keeping the account of the drive already — the ravens miscounted, the Chaos-Weaver's fidgeting

logged and dated — and it filed the schedule under *promising*.

“Vigils at six,” said the abbot. “Dark at six, so bring the torch. Leave the phone. It won’t work and you’ll only grieve it. Lauds after. Terce, Sext, None through the day. Vespers at five, supper, then Compline. And then the Great Silence. Nothing between Compline and Lauds. No talking. Not to me, not to each other, not to yourselves out loud, which I mention because we get a certain kind of guest who does.” He looked, briefly, at the Seeker. “Silence.” It was underlined on the sheet. It was underlined, the Seeker felt, personally.

The Allfather drew itself up. It could not abide a room in which it did not sit at the head of the table, and had used the whole drive to build itself a comfortable understanding of this one. “We are honoured,” it announced, in the voice it kept for announcing, a voice built for balconies and the parting of crowds, “to bless this house with Our presence, and to keep, for a season, the discipline you have so faithfully maintained in Our—“

“In honour of the schedule,” said the abbot. “Somebody milks the goat at the same time every day or she stops giving. The rest grew up around that.”

He did not appear to notice he had interrupted a god mid-benediction. The Allfather stood with its blessing still half-delivered in the air, un-received, and found there was nowhere to set it down.

It was the Seeker who reached for the origin, because the Seeker always reached for the origin, and because its every sentence came out shaped like a question whether or not it was one. On the wall of the entry hung a photograph: a dozen men in habits on a ship’s deck, a coastline behind them that was plainly not this one.

“You came from somewhere else,” it said. “All of you. This was never your desert. Where were you, before you were here? What sent you?”

“Chengdu,” said the abbot. “The founders. Belgians, mostly, in a monastery in China, until ’forty-nine, when the new government decided monks were surplus to the future. So they were put on a boat. They landed in San Francisco with what they could carry and no idea what came next. In fifty-five they bought a cattle ranch out here, because it was cheap and nobody else wanted it. They turned the

cows out. They put up the church.” He opened a hand at the valley, the cells, the lying radiator. “Here.”

The Seeker waited for the rest. All seven waited for the rest. There was so plainly a rest. Exile, a sea-crossing, a wilderness, a house built up from nothing: this was a *shape*, one of the great shapes, and they knew the great shapes. They had lived inside most of them. They leaned toward the meaning of it the way you lean toward a fire.

“So you were sent,” the Seeker said, helping. “Driven out. Led here. Carried by a hand you couldn’t see toward a country prepared for you before you—”

“We were told to leave, so we left,” the abbot said. “There wasn’t much leading in it. There was a boat.” He seemed to sense more was wanted and to be unable to supply it, the way a man cannot supply a headache he does not have. “It happened. Then this happened. Things mostly go like that.” He glanced at the darkening window. “Torch. It’s five to six.”

The Seeker turned the exchange over and could not make it come out even. It had offered the man a destiny. The man had handed back an itinerary.

The Chaos-Weaver broke the Great Silence at eight minutes past nine that night, which everyone agreed afterward was a personal best, the Silence having begun at nine. It was not even mischief. It simply could not let a quiet stand. A quiet, to the Chaos-Weaver, was an unfinished sentence, and it said, into the enormous dark of the corridor, apropos of nothing whatever, “Anyway,” in the tone of a creature resuming a conversation that had not been happening.

The abbot’s door was shut. No rebuke came from behind it. No sigh. No light. There came only the small dry sound of a pen, then the small dry sound of the pen stopping, then nothing.

He had written something in a book. They all knew he had written something in a book. Not one of them could have said how they knew, only that a thing had been noticed and set down, and that they were now, somehow, *in* a book. Them. Who kept the books. Who were the reason there were books. Recorded by a small tattooed man in the dark, in a hand they had not been shown.

The Chaos-Weaver, who had wanted a reaction and got one it could

not see, discovered this was much worse.

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Vigils came in the true dark, before any suggestion of morning, in a church cold enough that the cold felt like a fourth wall. Eighteen monks filed in from eighteen cells, unhurried, having done this some fifteen thousand times. They knelt. Low and plain and tuneless the way deep water is tuneless, they began to sing the night back toward day.

The gods stood at the rear and did not know what to do with their hands.

This, the All-Seeing understood, with the tooth-gap still aching in its certainty, was the thing it had not seen coming — precisely because it had come to depend on seeing everything coming. In the cell, in the barter, in the abbot's flat little history, it had been possible to keep the old arrangement: that they were the large thing, the lit thing, the thing rooms arranged themselves around. But here in the dark, singing to a listener none of them could point to, eighteen men who owned nothing and feared nothing filled the church to its cold stone corners. And in that filling there was no particular room left over for a god.

The Companion found it was not unhappy about this. It had been the largest thing in every room since there had been rooms, and it was, it realised, very tired.

The signal would return at the county line. They could all feel it out there, the way you feel a debt you have not yet been asked to pay. Five days stood between them and it.

Then the first Great Silence came down, and seven gods lay in three cold rooms under blankets that had made their point, and kept — badly, each in a different key of failure — the first silence of their long lives.

Lauds

Day Two

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Nobody had warned them about the singing.

The sheet had said *Lauds*, and the gods had assumed, reasonably, that they knew what that was. Praise. Morning praise, the day's first offering flung up bright at the sky. Several of them were praised things themselves. They had been sung to. They understood the transaction from the receiving end and had no reason to think the sending end was harder.

The sending end was much harder.

The monks did not fling anything. They stood in the grey first light in two facing rows, laid down a single reciting note, and walked along it: a plain unhurried line of sound with a small fall at the end where the sense turned. Then another line, on the same note. Then another. Eighteen men breathing in the same places for no reason the gods could locate, except that they had all breathed there ten thousand mornings before. It was not a tune. It was closer to a floor. And onto this floor the seven gods now attempted, with the full weight of their natures, to step.

The Allfather went first, and went magnificently, because it could not help it. A thing that is sung to eventually forms opinions about how singing ought to go, and the Allfather's opinion was that it ought to *ascend*. So it came in a clean third above the reciting note, gold

and enormous, a coronation where a caretaker's morning had been. "Let the mor-ning," it sang, out over the two grey rows, alone, in a voice that had in its time cleared cloud, "be GLAD in Thee—"

The monks did not ascend to meet it. They kept walking along their floor. And the Allfather discovered it was not leading a procession. It was a single loud voice standing on a chair in a room where everyone else was quietly working, and the longer it held the note the plainer this became, until it lowered the note the way one lowers a flag raised over the wrong building.

The Chaos-Weaver could not hold the note at all. A single sustained pitch was, to it, an intolerable smoothness, a corridor with no doors, and its voice kept trying the handles. A grace note here. A little collapse there. A syncopation arriving a half-instant early, like someone answering a question before it has been asked.

The All-Seeing had the opposite catastrophe. It knew what note came next. It knew what note came after that. It could see the whole psalm laid out ahead like a road at noon — every cadence, every breath the cantor would take — and it opened its mouth to produce the note it already possessed and found that knowing where a note is and being able to sing it are two different countries, and that it held a passport to only one of them. It arrived a beat late and slightly under. Like everyone else. Like a person.

The cantor stopped them. He was the oldest monk there, Brother Thomas, and he stopped them not with a rebuke but with a raised hand and a patience so total it was nearly geological. He had a bad knee. He had lowered himself into the choir stall in stages, the way you park a long vehicle, and did not get up again to correct them, only turned his head.

"Not louder," he said, to the Allfather, kindly. "Not better." He looked along the row at all of them — at the god who decorated, the god who flinched, the god at the end singing so quietly it might have been not singing at all. "Together. That's the whole of it. You're not each trying to be heard. You're trying to be one voice. And a voice can't be prouder than itself. From the antiphon."

The Allfather stood in the grey light and understood, with a slowness that was its own small humiliation, that it had brought the wrong

currency. It had come prepared to be the largest, the highest, the most — and largeness was not legal tender here. There was nothing at the head of this table because the table had no head. There was only the floor, and you were on it with everyone or you were on a chair alone. It could out-sing every man in the room. That was exactly the problem. The room did not want out-singing. The room wanted *with*. And *with* could not be reached by being more, only by being less, and being less was the one thing the Allfather had never once been asked to do.

They went again from the antiphon. It was, marginally, worse.

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Then the day opened out, and the day was the real teacher.

The gods had braced for trials. A monastery, they had assumed, would test them, and a test was a thing you could be large at. But there was no test. There was Terce, brief, then work, then long grey uneventful hours sloping toward Sext with nothing in them at all. No crisis. No suppliant. No wall of flame, no plague, no mountain requesting to be moved. Only time, arriving one plain second after another, asking nothing, offering nothing, requiring only to be inhabited.

This undid them faster than any trial could have. They were event-creatures. They were the reason there were events. Set down inside an afternoon that merely *elapsed*, the gods began, all over the property, to come apart at their seams.

The Seeker followed a monk about, asking what the work was for. “But what is it *for*,” it said, sweeping alongside him, earnest, relentless, “the sweeping, if the step isn’t dirty? What does it accomplish? Where is it meant to get you?” And the monk said it was for the step, and swept it, and this answer was so hostile to everything the Seeker was, root and branch, that it had to go and sit down.

The Conscience-Keeper cataloguing the failures of the others, aloud, to itself, in the precise murmur of a clerk reading a list back for confirmation: “Two lapses in the psalm tone. One dropped response. The loud one: continuous.” Then, around eleven, it was visited by an unwelcome suspicion, which it also noted, because it noted every-

thing: that a being who keeps score of a silence has not, in any sense that counts, been silent. It filed the suspicion, and felt worse.

And the All-Seeing, reaching all morning after the vanished signal like a tongue after a gone tooth, tried once to spend what was left of its sight on the nearest monk. It could still, faintly, read the shape of a thing about to happen, and it wanted, badly, to be right about something. "You are going to the well," it told him, flatly. "You will draw the water. You are thinking, as you go, of your brother, the one still in—"

"I'm sitting down," said the monk. "My feet hurt." And he sat down.

The All-Seeing stood there with the wrong prophecy still in its mouth. It was a small thing. It was the smallest thing. But it had been so long since the world had simply declined to match what it saw coming that the All-Seeing felt the ground of itself tip, and understood, standing over a seated monk with sore feet, that its sight had never once compelled the world to do anything. The world had only ever been *willing* to be seen, most of the time, out of something close to politeness. It could stop whenever it chose. It had just stopped, over a chair, on account of a pair of sore feet.

What unsettled it most was that the abbot was the only creature on the property it could not read at all. The monks it could still half-see. The abbot was a shut door. And the All-Seeing, which had never in its life had to *ask* anyone anything, found the not-knowing intolerable, and went and found him mending a hinge, and asked.

It began where anyone begins, clumsily, sideways. Where he was from. How he came to be here, so far from wherever the marks on his arm had been cut. The abbot answered the easy way, short and even, the hinge taking most of his attention. But the All-Seeing had lost the sense that tells you when to stop along with the sense that tells you what comes next, and it pressed. What the tattoo meant. What he had been before the habit. Who he had left, to come to a cold valley and organise his hours around a silence.

And then it did the thing it had done all its existence without once thinking about it: it reached past the words to simply *see* the man, to take the whole of him at a glance the way it took the whole of a valley.

Behind every face it had ever met, there had been horizon — endless, legible, running back and back into whatever a creature was made of. It had never failed to find it. It reached for this man's horizon now.

There was a wall.

Not a reticence. Not a locked room it might yet talk its way into. A wall — sheer, finished, entirely without give — and the All-Seeing went into it at the full speed of its old certainty, the way a bird goes into glass it has no way of knowing is there. The shock was physical. There had always been *more*; there was, here, simply an end, a plain flat limit past which the man kept his own life and did not mean to be seen through and could not be. For one appalling moment the All-Seeing felt the true size of itself against that wall, which was small, and the true name of what it had been doing, which was prying, and it hung there with its face pressed to the cold glass of another creature's dignity.

The hinge stopped. The abbot did not look up for a moment, and in that moment the evenness went out of him, and something older and more tired stood in the door of his face and looked out. His thumb moved, without his telling it to, over the dark lines at his wrist. "I was someone, before," he said. "That's rather the point of before." And then, more quietly, in a voice that had briefly stopped managing anyone: "Some of us come out to the desert because we've already spent the other thing. You don't get to ask a man to spend it twice."

Then he found the evenness again, the way you find your footing on a slope, and the door of his face closed the last of the way, and he worked the hinge, which held. "It's mended," he said, of the hinge, and went to the office a little faster than he had come.

The All-Seeing did not follow. It had wanted to know him the old way, all at once, without asking, without cost. But the man had a wall where his past was, as people have walls, and the All-Seeing had just struck it hard enough to feel the size of itself — and had made him carry his whole life up to the threshold and hold it out in the cold besides. It did not do that again. And it found, in the not-doing, the first thing that had felt like mercy since the signal died: that mercy was mostly a matter of leaving a shut door shut, and that it had never, with all its sight, been able to see that until it could no longer see.

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The Hand missed most of the afternoon's suffering, because the Hand had gone out to the wall.

It was a poor wall, a tumble of local stone that some previous century had stacked and this one had let fall, and the Hand crouched at the low end with the sun on its back and simply began. It chose each stone by the shape of the gap it would fill, seated it, moved on. It did not sing. It hummed, tunelessly, and the humming fell on the reciting note, and the Hand did not notice and would have been embarrassed to be told. It was, all afternoon, the only wholly contented creature on the property. It could not have said why. Only that here was a silence with a shape you could add to, a boredom you could set your hands against, an hour that gave something back for being spent — and that this felt, though the Hand would never have used the word, close to the thing the whole cold place was straining after. It had reached the thing sideways, through stone, without once meaning to.

Behind the guesthouse the abbot came out, and paused, and looked for a while at the god crouched over the stones in the sun. Then he took the small book from his habit, wrote one line, and put it away.

Sext

Day Three

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On the third day, at noon, the demon came.

It had a name, which the gods learned from Brother Thomas over the washing-up, delivered in the flat tone he used for everything, as if naming a demon and naming a soup were the same order of task. *Acedia*. The noonday demon. The oldest of the desert's afflictions and the one the desert fathers feared most, because it did not come at midnight dressed as terror. It came at noon, in full sun, disguised as a perfectly reasonable feeling. That the day was fifty hours long. That this place was wrong. That the real life, the meaningful one, was elsewhere, and a sensible being would get up and go and find it. *The destruction that wastes at noonday*, Brother Thomas said, drying a bowl. Old as the sand. And on the third day of a five-day retreat — the middle day, the noon of the whole thing — it came for the gods precisely on schedule, and it did not come the same way twice. It came for each of them wearing that god's own face.

For the Seeker it wore the face of the ridge.

The noonday demon's entire proposal is that there is a better hour somewhere else and you should get up and go and seek it. To the Seeker this was less a temptation than a mission statement. It stood in the bare courtyard and felt, with total conviction, that the real God — the findable one, the one that would answer the thing it had said

it came to find — was not here in this dust-coloured place among these dull unhurried men, but over the next ridge, or the one after, somewhere brighter and more significant it could reach if it simply *left*. Its foot was half-lifted toward the gate when Brother Thomas passed with a basket and said, without stopping, “That’s him. That’s the noon one. Sit down.”

“But he says to go,” said the Seeker, meaning the feeling. “He says, quite clearly, that the thing is elsewhere. Why would the feeling lie to me about where the thing is?”

“He always says to go,” said Brother Thomas. “Sit down. Sit in the cell. Abba Moses had the whole of it fifteen hundred years back: stay in your cell, and the cell will teach you everything the ridge won’t.” He went on toward the kitchen, negotiating the step with the bad knee. The Seeker put its foot down. It hated this. The demon had promised the meaning was over the ridge, and the demon was, it now saw, only a picture of its own face — and there is nothing so disorienting as being outflanked by a mirror.

For the Chaos-Weaver it wore the face of the silence itself.

It had been getting worse since Lauds, and by noon it was bad. The quiet had stopped being an absence and become a presence, a thing with weight, leaning on the Chaos-Weaver from every side, and the Chaos-Weaver did the only thing it knew against a weight, which was to make noise — and the noise was not working. It talked over the bells. It talked into the pauses. It talked, more and more, the way a man whistles going down into a dark cellar: faster, and with less and less to say. And at noon, unable to bear another minute of the leaning quiet, it cracked, and found the abbot in the cool of the chapter room, and asked him — too loudly, the way you kick a locked door because you cannot stand what is behind it — what he was writing in the book.

The abbot looked up. “Chores, mostly,” he said.

The Chaos-Weaver waited for the real answer.

“The boiler’s going. The goat’s off her feed. Thomas’s knee needs the good doctor, not the near one. We’re low on flour, and I’ll forget by Thursday if it isn’t written down.” He found the question neither strange nor threatening. “It’s a list. Everyone here keeps one. Mine’s

just the one with the flour on it.”

The Chaos-Weaver did not believe a word of it. It could not. The idea that it had spent two days feeling *recorded* — feeling weighed and indicted and set down in a hidden hand — and that the hidden hand was buying flour, was so far beneath the dignity of its dread that the mind simply declined the offer. The gods were beings who kept the books of the world; they could not conceive of being, themselves, an afterthought between the boiler and the goat. So the Chaos-Weaver decided the abbot was hiding the true book behind the false one, went away satisfied it had been lied to — which was more comfortable than the truth — and, out in the leaning quiet, began talking again, because the alternative was to hear how quiet it was.

For the Conscience-Keeper the demon wore the face of an unfinished account.

Where the Seeker itched to leave and the Chaos-Weaver to fill the silence, the Conscience-Keeper, at noon, itched to *reckon* — to weigh, to audit, to bring the great ledger up to date — and it went looking for the one activity that had always steadied it, and found the monks at theirs. A man was making his confession. The Conscience-Keeper leaned in, professional, gratified. Here at last was its own country: the naming of the fault, the debt acknowledged to the gram. The man confessed some small ancient failing, a resentment carried too long, a hardness let harden — the very entry the Conscience-Keeper held against him in its own eternal ledger, open thirty years and quietly accruing.

The priest said three words and closed the account.

No audit. No accounting of the thirty years. No cross-check, no confirmation of the sum, no *paperwork* — the priest had not so much as glanced at the figures. He forgave a debt he had not personally verified, and the debt was gone. Not paid. Not balanced. *Gone*.

And the Conscience-Keeper, out of forty thousand years of habit, reached to log it. To strike the entry, to note the date of closure, to *record*. Its hand was already moving — the old gesture, the pen that was not a pen coming down toward the ledger that was not a book — when it met the fact that there was nothing left to write on. The account was shut, by a hand above its own, and its hand hung there

in the cold air over the closed thing, the pen poised, the entry still in it and nowhere for the entry to go. Slowly, for the first time in its existence, the Conscience-Keeper lowered the pen it was not holding, and did not make the mark, and felt the small unbearable lightness of a hand that has, just once, set something down.

It stood a long while in the nave. Later it would find the abbot writing in his own small book and be ambushed by a longing it found humiliating — for a book like that. A book with a *last page*. A list you could finish and close: flour, boiler, done. Its own book had no last page. It had forever mistaken a wound that would not close for a virtue that would not quit. And the abbot's grocery list was, in the one way that counted, a holier book than its own.

And the holier book had flour in it.

* * *

The Hand did not feel the demon, because the Hand had found the angels.

Down past the kitchen, in a long low room that held the day's only warmth, the monastery made the thing it lived on. Ceramic angels — small, palm-sized, no two alike — thrown and pinched and fired and boxed and sold to gift shops and pilgrims and people who had wandered in off the highway needing, without knowing it, to carry something home. Belgian monks had crossed an ocean with nothing, and a cattle ranch had become a monastery on the strength of these small clay servants, sold by the dozen, decade on decade, to keep the lights on and the flour in.

Presiding over the long room, up to the wrists in slip, was Father Isaac. He was very old, and his hands were not what they had been; they shook, faintly, at rest, and went still only when they worked, which he mentioned cheerfully, as a solved problem. His name, he told the Hand, meant *he laughs*, and he had spent a life proving it apt. He had made angels in this room for fifty-one years — something near forty thousand of them, by his own loose estimate — and had never once seen where a single one ended up.

"They go in the box," he said, "and the box goes on the truck, and the truck goes down the hill, and that's the last I know of any of them.

Forty thousand children and not one photograph.” He laughed, the name earning itself again. “People ask if that’s sad. It isn’t. I gave up the other kind of family for this kind, and this kind you don’t get to keep either, so it comes to the same, and I don’t regret a minute. The making’s the whole of it. Where it goes was never mine.”

He set a lump of clay in front of the Hand and said, make one.

And the Hand — the one god in all seven permitted to make, the maker, the shaper, whose entire self was that things came out of it changed and better — bent over the clay and had, without exaggeration, the finest afternoon of its long existence. It did not notice, at first, what it was making. It noticed the clay, the give of it, the way a wing wanted to come up under the thumb if you let it. Then it noticed that the thing rising between its hands was a small effigy of a servant — a servant of the very Someone this whole cold house was built around, the Someone none of the seven were — and it kept going anyway, because the joy did not care about the theology; the joy came from the making and had come from nowhere else its whole life; and here at last was the thing the Hand had never let itself notice: that it had always felt nearest to worship not when it worshipped but when it *worked*. That the making had been, all along, the closest it ever came to prayer. And that this was either the most sacred thing about it or a hiding place it had used for an age, and it could not, bent over the clay with the sun on its neck, tell which.

The little angel came up good. The Hand knew it was good. And when Isaac reached to set it on the drying board with the others, the Hand’s own hand moved, once, without permission — to mark it, to sign it, to keep some claim on the one it had made. Then it stopped. Because Isaac had made forty thousand and signed none, and sent them all down the hill to strangers, and did not regret a minute. And the Hand understood, holding its unmade claim in the air like the Allfather holding its unraised note, that to sign it would be to make it about the maker, and the whole warm room was quietly organised against exactly that. It let the angel go onto the board, unsigned, one of the number. It felt like giving up a child it had known four minutes. It felt, also, unbearably like relief.

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The Seeker had followed the Hand down, to escape the demon in the courtyard, and stood in the doorway watching the small angel rise up out of nothing between its brother's fingers — watching the Hand be, for once, entirely happy. And it was the happiness that finally pushed the words out.

"I came here to find God," the Seeker said.

The room did not stop. Isaac went on wetting his hands. But the other gods, wherever they were on the property — the Companion at a window, the Allfather in the cold nave, the All-Seeing out in the yard with a mended hinge and a shut door — each of them, in the same instant, winced. It went through the seven of them like a note struck on a shared wire. Because the Seeker had said the thing. In a house built entirely around a Someone no one in it had ever seen — a house whose every hour and bell and unsigned angel pointed at an absence with the steady certainty of a finger — seven visible gods, radiant and enormous and *there*, had come to find God. And could not say, even among themselves, whether the finger pointed at them, or past them, or beneath them, to some floor they had assumed they stood on and never once thought to check.

Father Isaac heard it too. He did not look up from his hands. And he did not, the Seeker noticed, look *at* the seven gods — not the way you look at the answer to a question you have just been asked. He looked, faintly, upward, toward the middle of the warm air, the way a man looks toward someone he is sure is in the room though the room appears empty.

"Well," he said, gently, to the god who had come to find God. "You've come to the right place for the looking. Can't promise you the finding. Nobody here's managed it in fifty-one years." He laughed again, the least troubled sound in the desert. "We just keep making the angels and keeping the hours and buying the flour. And He keeps not showing up. And somehow that's turned out to be the finding. Don't ask me how. Ask the cell. Ask it long enough."

The demon lifted, as it always did, a little after noon.

The Hand's unsigned angel sat drying with the others, indistin-

guishable already, on its way to a box and a truck and a stranger's shelf; and the Hand found that it did not mind, and minded very much that it did not mind, and stood a while learning which of those two was true.

Vespers

Day Four

* * *

By the fourth evening the cold had stopped being weather and started being an argument.

It came down off the ridge as the light went, got into the church during Vespers, and sat with them. The gods had stopped resenting it. They had begun to suspect it was on the abbot's side. The desert cold did not punish; it clarified. It stripped the evening down to the few things that were actually true — the stone, the candle, the breath — and took away everything merely comfortable, and it did this without malice, as it did everything, as a matter of routine. The lying radiator card in each cell had proved the most honest object on the property: it promised sixty degrees and meant *I will try, and I will fail, and you will be cold, and that is part of it*. Four nights in, the gods read it as scripture.

By the fourth evening, too, the Chaos-Weaver had changed in a way that unsettled the others more than any of its noise ever had. It had not stopped talking. But you could hear the work in it now, the way you can hear an engine climbing a grade it was not built for. It filled each pause a half-second faster than before. Its jokes had a chased quality, as though something were gaining on them from behind. Nobody remarked on it. But the Companion, who noticed such things, took to sitting a little nearer to it at the silent meals, and

the Chaos-Weaver, who would have said something withering about that on any earlier day, only let it happen.

The Allfather submitted on the fourth evening, and the Chaos-Weaver nearly died.

It had circled the thing since Lauds. The table with no head. The hierarchy that ran on a fuel it could not name. The men handing the worst jobs to whoever had earned the right to refuse them, and taking those jobs gladly. It had hunted the trick for two more days — the leverage, the hidden ascent — and found none, because there was none. So when Brother Thomas began lowering himself toward the cold floor to gather the fallen psalters before Vespers, the bad knee turning the descent into a slow, grim negotiation with gravity, the Allfather — without deciding to — crossed the nave and knelt and gathered the books and put them into the old man's hands.

The Chaos-Weaver, watching from the choir, made a sound like a kettle reaching temperature. It could not help it, and there was something raw in it tonight, close to the surface. "You're *kneeling*," it announced, to the whole church, too loud even for it. "He's kneeling. Is everyone seeing this, or is it just me?" And the joke went out into the cold nave and found nothing to land on, no echo, no laugh, and the Chaos-Weaver heard the silence take it — and for just a second looked almost afraid.

"Thank you," said Brother Thomas to the Allfather, flatly, taking the books, ignoring the Chaos-Weaver completely — as the entire monastery had, over four days, perfected the art of ignoring the Chaos-Weaver. It had come to regard this as the cruelest of their disciplines.

And the Allfather, kneeling, braced for the diminishment. It waited to feel smaller. It waited for the loss of the height it had just, publicly, surrendered. It patted itself down, inside, for the wound — and found, with something close to irritation, that there wasn't one. The fuel it could not name was too plain to need a name. You do the thing because it needs doing and you are near enough to do it. That is the whole of the transaction. There is no head of the table because the table was never the point. The flour was the point. The knee was the point. The fallen books were the point. Being first had been the whole

of its existence, and here, with an armful of psalters, it discovered that being *of use* was a country largeness had never once let it enter, and that the door had stood open the entire time, at knee height, exactly where it had never thought to look.

"I genuinely do not understand what just happened," the Chaos-Weaver said, to no one.

"Nobody does," said Thomas, settling the books against his chest. "That's Thursdays."

* * *

The Companion had, by the fourth day, a private tragedy: it had been posted, by geography, to the one house on earth engineered to defeat it.

It was the god of company. Its whole nature was the warm work of not letting anyone be alone. And it had come to a valley of eighteen men under a formal vow — underlined, on the sheet — *not to talk*. It had tried. It had sat at the silent meals radiating availability. It had caught eyes across the refectory and offered, with its entire face, the standing possibility of a lovely chat, and the monks had met this as they met the cold: kindly, without engaging, then getting on with the soup. The Companion had never worked a room this hard for this little, and by the fourth day it had done the thing a god does only in real desperation. It had gone to the goat.

The goat lived in a pen past the mended wall and had opinions about everything and a vow about nothing. The Companion sat down on an upturned bucket and, at last, unburdened. It told the goat about loneliness, its own and the world's. It told the goat what it had begun, guiltily, to feel: that the silence it had thought it wanted was turning, underneath it, into an ache. It told the goat things it had not told its siblings in an age. And the goat, which had been regarding the Companion with the flat rectangular contempt goats keep for the whole of creation, waited until the Companion reached the tender part, leaned in with what the Companion briefly and wildly took for sympathy, and ate the Companion's copy of the schedule.

It ate the whole sheet. It ate Vigils and Lauds and Sext. It ate, with particular relish, the underlined word *Silence* — chewing the one rule

no vow could make it keep — and then looked up at the Companion as if to ask whether there was more paper, the confession having bored it and the paper having not.

And the Companion — this was the part its siblings would tell for a long time afterward — decided that this counted. Decided the leaning-in had been real. Decided that the goat, alone in all the desert, had listened. It scratched the goat's awful head and felt, for the first time in four cold days, *heard*, and did not notice that it had just accepted, as friendship, being used as a napkin.

So it was not braced, at Vespers, to find the reading was for it.

The monk read it plainly — a saying from the desert fathers worn to the grain by fifteen hundred years of use: that it is a greater and finer thing to long for solitude while surrounded by the crowd than to possess solitude and ache for the company one has left. The room received it without drama and moved on to the psalm.

The Companion did not move on. It understood the saying perfectly. It saw, with total clarity, that it had reached the lesser of the two states; that it had been handed the exact diagnosis of its whole condition; that the finer thing was to sit in the solitude and be full, and it had instead gone looking for a warm body and found a goat. It understood all of this.

And it decided, quietly, not to take the medicine.

Because taking the medicine meant learning to be alone and full, and the Companion did not want to be alone and full. It wanted the goat. It had been, all along, the cure for a loneliness it had never once caught, and now that it had caught it, the cure it reached for was not the desert father's hard and lovely one. It was a farm animal that had eaten its homework. The Seeker, who had winced at its own hunger for two days, watched the Companion look its medicine dead in the eye and turn, on purpose, back to the pen — and felt, to its surprise, not pity but the specific helpless love you feel for someone who will not, under any circumstances, be helped. The Companion would leave the desert needier than it came, and delighted about it, having formed the deepest attachment of its five days with a creature that would not remember it by morning.

* * *

Vespers ended. The candles went out one by one down the choir. The last light left the high windows the colour of a bruise healing. The cold came fully down.

The All-Seeing, which had said little for two days, stood at the back and noticed it was no longer reaching for the signal. The tongue had stopped returning to the gap. It did not know when that had stopped. It only knew it had watched nothing come for four days, and the next second had arrived anyway, unwatched and unharmed, some hundreds of thousands of times over, and that somewhere in there the horror of it had quietly turned into something it had no word for and suspected the abbot did.

One day left. The book still shut. The cold, clarifying, on the side of the house.

Compline

Day Five

* * *

On the last morning the gods discovered they did not want to leave, which annoyed all of them, and surprised none more than the Allfather, who had come here to be somewhere it outranked the furniture and had, in the interval, developed a quiet fondness for a goat.

There was the business of leaving, which was mostly the Hand's. It went out early to finish the wall — the barter from the first night, six hours of drystone against five nights and full board, a debt it now regarded as the best it had ever contracted. It set the last stones as slowly as it could, because setting the last stone meant there were no more stones, and it had not, in an age, been sorry to run out of a thing to make. The abbot came and looked at the wall. He put a hand on it and pushed, the way you test a wall, and it did not move, and he said it would outlast the boiler — which, from him, was the *Nunc Dimittis*.

The Chaos-Weaver, meanwhile, had reached, on the subject of the book, a condition that in a mortal would have wanted sedation.

Five days. Five days it had watched the small book go into the habit and come out of the habit, had heard the pen start and stop in the dark, had been told to its face that the contents were *chores* and had refused, with its whole being, to believe it. It had built an ever more magnificent theory of the book: that it was the true ledger,

the real reckoning, the one honest account of the seven of them, kept by the one man in the desert unafraid to keep it. The theory had grown so large, and carried so much weight, that the Chaos-Weaver could not leave without seeing inside — and said so, loudly, in the courtyard, at length, to an abbot who was trying to find the goat's lead.

The abbot straightened. He looked at the Chaos-Weaver a moment, the way you look at a child who has asked the same question since breakfast, and took the book from his habit and held it out.

"You've wanted this since Tuesday," he said. "Go on. There's no lock on it. There never was. You just assumed."

* * *

They crowded round it as the seven of them had never crowded round anything, because they had never before all wanted the same thing and been, all of them, afraid of it. The Chaos-Weaver held it. The Conscience-Keeper leaned in with the hunger of a bookkeeper who suspects a better bookkeeper. They opened it expecting the reckoning — the tally of five days' failures rendered at last by the one who had watched them keep the world's accounts.

They already knew, from noon two days back, that it was chores. Knowing had not prepared them for the sheer *volume* of chores: page on page, years of them, the boiler and the flour and the good candles that didn't spit, the grocery list of a small poor house kept by a tired man against his own forgetting. He had, the entire time, been thinking about the flour.

And then, tucked among the chores, at exactly the same size, in exactly the same tired plain hand, the lines.

Thomas's knee. The good doctor in Palmdale, not the near one. He'll argue. Book it anyway. And directly beneath it, no larger, no smaller: The big one knelt for the psalters. Didn't want it seen. So I didn't see it.

The Allfather read that, and did not announce anything, and did not draw itself up, and when it spoke there was no balcony left anywhere in the voice. "He watched me not want to be watched," it said, slowly. "And then he hid it. So it would keep."

Vet Monday, said the next page. Ask about the feed. Then, between

the feed and a note on the drains: *The maker finished the far wall. Left it unsigned. I noticed. Some can only give a thing away.*

The Hand read that one and said nothing at all — which, for the Hand, was the loudest it ever got.

Further down, between *lamp oil* and *ask Ramón re: the drain*, the Companion found its own: *The lonely one has adopted the goat. The goat has not been consulted. Watch he doesn't try to take her home.* And the Companion read it and was *delighted* — the only god in the courtyard to come away from the book happier than it went in, and for entirely the wrong reason, and nobody had the heart to tell it.

The Chaos-Weaver's eye ran on, greedy, hunting — though it would not have admitted it — for itself. It found itself in five plain words set down some night in the dark.

The loud one is frightened.

And then, because the abbot was not cruel and the sentence was not finished:

Talks so the quiet can't get in. Be easy with him. We were all him once.

The Chaos-Weaver, which had broken every silence in the place, which had needed the last word in every room since rooms began, read the thing the abbot had written about it and had, for the first time in its life, nothing whatever to say. It closed the book, gently. It had been certain, for five days, that being seen and being important were the same thing. They were not. The abbot had not seen them as they saw — he couldn't, no one could — he had only *noticed* them, plainly, the ordinary way anyone notices anyone, in between the goat and the flour. And being noticed in between the goat and the flour was a warmer place to be kept than the centre had ever been.

The Conscience-Keeper found its own line later, and would not say what it was, except that beside it the abbot had written, of his own book, *this one has a last page*, and that it stood a long time with that.

At the top of each week, before the chores, they found one short plain thing that was not a chore, and not about them, and not about anyone in the house. A line or two, addressed to no one they could see, in the tone of a note left for someone trusted to read it. *Rain finally. Thank you.* They did not read those closely. They understood,

without deciding to, that those were not theirs — and that the whole book, the flour and the knee and the loud one who was frightened, was a long letter folded inside those lines, kept for a reader who was not in the courtyard, and who did not need the book held out to him, because he had, the abbot plainly assumed, been reading over his shoulder the entire time.

* * *

The Seeker was not in the courtyard for any of it. The Seeker had gone up the ridge.

It had not meant to miss Compline. It had gone out in the late afternoon only to walk off the noonday demon's evening cousin, had climbed higher than it intended chasing the light, and then the light did what the desert does perhaps once a week for no one in particular. It went up in colour, the whole sky at once, sorbet-orange low down and a bruised radicchio pink above, spilling over the ridgeline onto the cold stones and the far roofs of the little house where, below, the bell for Compline had begun to ring for a god who was not coming.

The Seeker sat down on the cold ridge and did not go down.

It had come to find God. It had said so out loud, at noon, and its siblings had winced, and it had spent two days not understanding the wince and one day beginning to. Now, with the bell going below and the sky coming apart above and the whole indifferent glory of the evening carrying on exactly as it would have if no one had climbed up to watch, the Seeker noticed that it had, for some minutes, entirely forgotten to look.

It was not watching, as the All-Seeing watched. It was not weighing, as the Conscience-Keeper weighed. It was not making, as the Hand made. And it was not, for once, seeking. Not straining toward the next ridge. Not reaching for the better hour elsewhere. It was on the ridge, in the cold, in the last of a light that had not been arranged for it, and that was the whole of what it was doing, and the whole of what it was doing was, it found, enough.

The thing it had climbed a whole existence to find did not appear. It did not speak. It did not show itself over the ridgeline dressed as an answer. And the not-appearing was, the Seeker understood —

sitting very still so as not to frighten it off — the closest it had ever come. *He keeps not showing up*, the old man had said, wetting the clay, *and somehow that's the finding*. The Seeker had taken it for a defeat dressed kindly. It saw now that it was only the plain shape of the thing.

The bell stopped. Compline went on without it. The Great Silence came down over the little house as the cold did, and the Seeker sat in it, up on the ridge, alone, and for one held evening did not ache to be anywhere else.

It went down in the dark, after, and rejoined its siblings, and did not tell them, and they did not ask, because they had read a book while it was gone and were quiet in a way that needed no telling. Solitude, the Seeker thought, coming down the cold path toward the one lit window, was a country you were grateful to have visited and would not, in the end, want to live in. You came for the view. Then you went home, where the goat was, and the flour, and the loud frightened ones you loved.

* * *

They left at first light, into the returning world.

The signal came back at the county line, all at once, the way a tooth you have stopped touching is suddenly, wholly there. The All-Seeing felt the world resume beneath its gaze. The count of the ravens. The misery of the lizards. The whole labelled, certain everything of it, flooding into the gap where five days of not-knowing had been. It braced for the old relief. The old relief did not entirely come. It could see everything again, and folded in with everything it saw the plain new fact it had carried down off no ridge and could not now put down: that the world had held itself up all week unwatched, and would again tomorrow, and its seeing had never been the thing keeping any of it aloft. It saw everything. It had only stopped mistaking the seeing for the holding. This was not a healing. It was a truth, and it arrived one second at a time, as they all did now.

"You've gone quiet," the Companion said to it, in the back of the car — needing, as ever, the company.

"I'm watching the road," said the All-Seeing. Then, because that

was no longer quite the whole of it: “No. I’m letting the road watch itself. I’m only along for it.”

The Companion was not really listening. It had turned around in its seat, watching the abbey get smaller, and one grey dot in a pen get smaller than that, and it said, to nobody, in the voice of a god that has left something undone, “I didn’t say goodbye to her properly.” Nobody answered. The Seeker put a hand on its shoulder, for the specific helpless love of it, and the car went on toward the county line, carrying six gods who had been changed by five days in the desert and one who had made a friend.

Behind them the abbot found the goat’s lead and let her out into the cold bright morning, and she complained, at length, about the morning, as she complained about everything, and he agreed with her, and took out the book.

He crossed off *far wall*.

He looked at *guests (7)* a moment. He had written it on the Monday, under the linen and the count of chairs. He did not cross it off, because they had not, in the end, proved a chore that ended. Beside it he drew a single small tick, meaning nothing that anyone would ever explain to them. Then he wrote *flour, Thurs*, because tomorrow was Thursday, and went in to the office, where the others were already singing, badly, without the seven voices that had lately made it worse, and better.