

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE
A Greek Mythology

THE LESSER GODS

Dispatches from the Young Olympians

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CONTENTS

A Note to the Reader	2
The Cast	4
Introduction: The Other Gods	6
Episode One: The Pitch Deck	7
Episode Two: The Acquisition	10
Episode Three: The Retreat	14
Episode Four: The Incident	17
Episode Five: The Side Project	22
Episode Six: The Offer	26
Episode Seven: The Tweet	31
Coda: The Ancient	34

A NOTE TO THE READER

The Titans mapped the founders of the oracle age onto Greek mythology, because the Greek gods are petty and rivalrous and recognizably human, and this turned out to be a reasonably accurate description.

This collection maps a different set of figures onto the same register: the lesser gods of the oracle age, who are working in the space the Titans built, which is a different kind of work and produces a different kind of story.

The lesser gods are not less interesting than the Titans. They are differently interesting. They built things, or they fund things, or they post things, and in each case they are attempting to operate at scale in an environment that has become, in the years since the oracle age began, genuinely strange. The stories that follow concern what happens when they try to do something straightforward.

The senior Titans appear throughout as cameos. Their interventions are consequential and their consequences are not the intended ones. Some of them are trying to help. It makes no difference to the outcome, and this is the most reliable finding in the collection.

As in *The Titans*: this is satire. The figures are public figures and the episodes are comment, worked up from the public record. Nothing here is reportage. Every scene is invented. No

conversation in this book was transcribed, no meeting or event in it took place, and no one in it said the words attributed to them.

Cronus appears in both collections. He was there before either was possible. He will likely be there after.

Each episode is self-contained. The collection can be read in any order. The author recommends reading it in order because the characters develop, but acknowledges that the reader has already opened it to a random page and started there, and that this is fine.

THE CAST

THE CORE CAST

Dionysus — Dorsey

God of ecstasy, liberation, theater, and impulsive posting. Founded two companies. Was removed from both. Currently on a retreat, or returning from one, or planning the next.

Ganymede — Systrom

Cup-bearer of the gods; keeper of beautiful things. Built something perfect, sold it to Hades, spent years inside the underworld trying to keep doing things the way he used to.

Iris — Spiegel

Goddess of the rainbow; messenger whose messages disappear. Said no to Hades when Hades offered to buy everything. Said no twice. Hades still thinks about this.

Chiron — Graham

The educator; trainer of heroes; writer of essays. Runs a school. Has opinions about all of it, which he shares at length.

Icarus — Neumann

Recurring cautionary figure, by general agreement and by his own. Currently pivoting; the pivot is the third one this quarter.

The buildings are real and the buildings are full. Aeolus has backed him twice.

RECURRING FIGURES

Aeolus — Andreessen

Keeper of the winds; controller of the currents that fill everyone's sails. Does not build ships. Does not sail them. Decides which way the wind blows, backs whoever is sailing in that direction, and writes a manifesto explaining why.

Cronus — Ellison

The oldest precursor; the one who was there first. Did not name the oracle; the name found him, twice. Still here. Still improving the island.

SENIOR TITAN CAMEOS

Hermes (Altman), Hades (Zuckerberg), Poseidon (Musk), Zeus (Gates), Prometheus (Huang), Athena (Amodei)

INTRODUCTION: THE OTHER GODS

The Titans built the oracle age. The figures in this collection are working in the space the Titans built.

This is a different kind of work. The Titans crossed thresholds. The lesser gods operate on the far side of thresholds that have already been crossed, in conditions that are already strange, trying to accomplish things that would have been straightforward ten years ago and are now, for reasons that are difficult to explain without sounding like you're complaining, more complicated.

The Greek tradition has always had room for both registers. The *Iliad* is about the fates of civilizations. The *Odyssey* is about a man trying to get home and finding it harder than expected. The lesser gods are *Odyssey* figures: capable, sometimes brilliant, operating at real scale, and regularly defeated by things that should not be this difficult.

The senior Titans appear throughout. They mean well, mostly. Their interventions are consequential. The consequences are not always the intended ones.

Cronus also appears. He does not mean anything in particular. He is simply there, as he has always been, waiting for the island to be finished.

EPISODE ONE: THE PITCH DECK

In which Dionysus pitches something, Aeolus hears it, and Hermes closes it before anyone decides if it is a good idea.

* * *

The pitch meeting was scheduled at 9 a.m. at the offices of Aeolus Capital on Sand Hill Road.

Dionysus did not attend at 9 a.m. He attended at 11:15 a.m., having walked from his hotel barefoot, which was not a metaphor and was also, in Menlo Park in November, a choice.

The deck had been sent ahead. Aeolus had opened it at 8:45, refreshed it twice to confirm he was reading it correctly, and then forwarded it to three partners with the message: *I think this is real.*

The deck was one slide.

The slide said: **VIBES.**

Beneath VIBES, in a smaller font: *A new kind of presence. Pre-launch. Looking for \$40M Series A.*

There was a footnote. The footnote said: *full deck available upon request.*

* * *

Dionysus sat down, accepted water, declined coffee, and explained his vision for approximately forty minutes. The vision concerned the future of human attention and the inadequacy of existing platforms for the kind of authentic, non-performative engagement that people actually wanted, which he knew from personal experience, having built two platforms for authentic non-performative engagement and been removed from both of them for reasons he did not currently have the clarity to discuss.

Aeolus had three pages of notes by the end. He asked one question: *What is the product?*

Dionysus said: *The product is the feeling.*

Aeolus wrote this down. He read it back. He underlined it. He turned the page over and wrote it again on the other side.

* * *

At noon, Hermes arrived. He had not been invited. He had heard there was a pitch meeting in the building and had come in through a side door, already talking.

He had read the deck. He found it visionary. He produced a term sheet from his jacket pocket, already signed, committing \$60 million at a valuation he named and Aeolus and Dionysus both immediately accepted without discussion.

He left at 12:04.

Aeolus looked at Dionysus. Dionysus looked at the term sheet.

The deck had been updated. The footnote now said: *Series A closed. Series B materials available upon request.*

Dionysus had not updated the deck. He did not have his laptop. He was not sure he had brought his laptop to California.

The product was still the feeling. The feeling was now worth \$600 million.

Dionysus walked back to his hotel barefoot. It was raining. He noted this as a positive sign.

EPISODE TWO: THE ACQUISITION

*In which Ganymede attempts to change a font inside the underworld,
and encounters the approval process.*

* * *

Ganymede had been in the underworld for six years, five months, and nine days when he decided to change the font.

It was a small change. The notification banner. The typeface had been set in the first year of the acquisition and had not been reviewed since, and it was, Ganymede felt, slightly wrong in a way that was difficult to articulate but that he was confident about, because he had spent the years before the acquisition building an eye for exactly this kind of wrongness.

He opened the approval ticket.

* * *

The approval required sign-off from: the brand team (two reviewers), the accessibility team (one reviewer currently on leave), the growth team (three reviewers, one of whom had been re-orged into a different team whose ownership of this particular component was disputed), the design systems council (four reviewers, meeting biweekly), and a final review

from the platform consistency working group, whose next scheduled meeting was in six weeks.

Ganymede submitted the ticket. The ticket was acknowledged. He was assigned to a channel. The channel had 847 members. A bot welcomed him to the channel.

* * *

Three days later, the brand team approved the change.

On the fifth day, the accessibility reviewer returned from leave and requested a 48-hour review window.

On the seventh day, Ganymede received a message from the growth team: *We're flagging a concern that this change could impact notification open rates. Can you share the projected lift data?*

Ganymede replied that he did not have projected lift data. He had looked at the font and it was wrong.

The growth team replied: *Totally understand. Just need the data to move forward.*

* * *

The study took six days.

The researcher who ran it is named in the ticket history and nowhere else. She built the cohorts, wrote the instrumentation, waited out the exposure window, and found no statistically significant impact on notification open rates — which is the finding she had predicted on the first day and had said so, in

the channel, where it was acknowledged with a thumbs-up and then required anyway.

Her daughter had an ear infection on the fourth day. She ran the back half of the analysis from a chair in a clinic waiting room, because the growth team was blocked on her and had said so pleasantly, four times, in a thread titled *quick one*.

The channel attached to the ticket has 847 members. None of them read ticket histories.

On the fourteenth day the growth team approved.

* * *

On the twenty-second day, the design systems council met. One member noted that changing the notification font would create inconsistency with the notification font used on a different product in the family. Discussion continued for thirty-five minutes. The meeting ended without a decision. A follow-up was scheduled.

* * *

On the twenty-eighth day, Ganymede walked past the room where Hades sat. Hades was looking at a monitor showing real-time engagement metrics for all surfaces across all products in his realm. He noticed Ganymede.

He said: *The retention numbers look good.*

Ganymede said: *The notification font is wrong.*

Hades looked at the notification. He looked at it for three seconds.

He said: *I don't see it.*

He returned to the monitor.

The follow-up meeting was scheduled for six weeks out. There was a conflict with two other meetings. It was rescheduled.

The font remained.

Ganymede opened a new ticket. The ticket was acknowledged. He was assigned to the channel. The channel had 847 members. The bot welcomed him back.

EPISODE THREE: THE RETREAT

In which Dionysus organizes a wellness retreat, Poseidon arrives uninvited, and Aeolus sends a term sheet that nobody reads.

* * *

The retreat was ten days. This was non-negotiable. Dionysus had shared seven essays on neurological reset in the planning channel and expected people to have read them.

The planning channel had nine members. Three had read the essays. Chiron had read all seven and written a response noting that two of the cited studies had not been replicated. Ganymede had read the first paragraphs. Iris had opened one, glanced at it, and it had disappeared before she scrolled down.

* * *

The retreat was in Ojai. No phones. Two meals a day. Cold plunge at 6 a.m. Silence from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. A meditation teacher Dionysus had been working with for three years.

Seven people arrived on the first day. Icarus arrived and immediately announced he was only staying three days because he was pivoting and the timing was complicated. Nobody asked what he was pivoting from or to. This had become a policy.

On the morning of day two, Poseidon arrived in a rented SUV. He had not been invited. He had seen the location posted somewhere and had come to assess whether wellness retreats were real or a collective delusion of the professional class.

He stayed four hours. He challenged everyone to a cold plunge contest, which Chiron declined and Icarus won. He posted about it from the parking lot before leaving, breaking his own six-minute-old statement that he was leaving. The post said: *Wellness retreats are mostly theatre but cold plunge is legitimately good. The rest is for people who are afraid of just sitting with their thoughts.*

This was posted from the parking lot of a ten-day silent meditation retreat, four hours into an uninvited visit.

He left. His departure was noted by Chiron as an improvement to the retreat environment, which Chiron later described as a sentence he could not have imagined writing a decade ago.

* * *

On day four, Aeolus sent a message to the group. This violated the no-phones rule. The message said: *I know you're on retreat. Quick thing. I've backed a company I think several of you should be involved in. Materials attached. Let me know by Thursday.*

The materials attached were a deck, a term sheet, and a thirty-page essay Aeolus had written titled *Why the Present Moment Requires a Specific Kind of Attention Infrastructure*, which did not reference the retreat but described the market

opportunity in language that made Ganymede, who had not checked his phone and therefore had not read it, sound less like a person on a meditation retreat and more like a product category.

* * *

Thursday was day seven.

On day seven, nobody responded. Nobody had read the message. The phones were in a locked box in the retreat office, and the meditation teacher had the key, and the meditation teacher was in town.

Aeolus interpreted the silence as a negotiating posture. He improved his terms on day eight and sent the revised sheet to the same group. He noted, in the covering message, that he respected the discipline of the approach.

Nobody read that one either.

* * *

On day ten, the retreat concluded. The teacher said several participants had made meaningful progress. He did not specify which ones.

Chiron drove home. He had notes for an essay about what the retreat had revealed and he did not write it, because the drive was four hours long and somewhere around the third hour the argument stopped seeming true.

Ganymede checked his phone.

He had 47 messages. Fourteen were about the font.

EPISODE FOUR: THE INCIDENT

In which the lesser gods attend a conference at Olympus, the Apollo hologram creates a disturbance, and Prometheus draws a crowd.

* * *

The conference was held annually in a venue that had hosted enough world-historical announcements to have developed its own gravitational field: a room where people came expecting to be present for something important, and often were, and sometimes weren't, and found it difficult afterward to identify which kind of visit they'd had.

This year's theme was: *What Comes Next*.

The lesser gods were seated in the third row. Chiron had an aisle seat, which he needed because he was the kind of person who left sessions early and was not embarrassed about this.

* * *

Zeus gave the keynote. He wore a sweater. He spoke about the responsibility of technology, and about having spent four decades learning something about the difference between power and wisdom, and about a foundation that had committed more than fifty billion dollars to problems he listed with the cadence of someone who had become comfortable

with the scale of the numbers. He was good at this. He had always been good at this, in that order: winning first, and the speech about responsibility second, and the speech was better for the sequence.

During the applause, Icarus leaned over to Iris and said he had an announcement to make at the conference. He had cleared it with nobody. He was planning to announce a pivot.

Iris said: *From what to what?*

Icarus said he'd know more by Thursday.

* * *

After Zeus, there was a commemorative segment. Apollo had died some years ago and had become, in death, more present at technology conferences than he had been in life. His voice, his image, a specific presentation posture had been reconstructed and were periodically deployed to mark occasions. The lights dimmed. The screen showed a man in a black turtleneck at a lectern, saying: *One more thing.*

The room went quiet in a specific way. Even people who had been teenagers when he died went quiet.

At the back, four people and a fifth who did not have a staff badge watched the segment with a different quality of attention. Not moved. Checking. One of them was watching the hand.

Poseidon, who had declined a panel invitation but come anyway, was in the back row. He raised his hand.

The moderator said: *We'll have questions at the end.*

Poseidon said: *I just want to note that I have several more things.*

The room was not sure how to respond. The hologram continued into the passage about misfits and troublemakers — the one the assembled audience had known by heart for thirty years, and which several of them mouthed along with, and which had been written by an advertising agency in 1997 and paid for by the hour.

Poseidon said: *That's my whole thing.*

* * *

At the coffee break, Prometheus appeared.

He was not on the agenda. He had been given a badge that said INDUSTRY PARTNER. He was wearing the jacket.

Within seven minutes there were thirty-one people around him. Within fifteen, sixty. The lesser gods abandoned the third row. Chiron abandoned his aisle seat — unprecedented. Aeolus materialized from somewhere and began gesturing at the future.

Everyone wanted to know about the chips. When were they coming. How many. Was there a list, and if so, was there a list to get on the list.

Prometheus said there was a list.

He answered questions for forty-five minutes. He was calm and specific and did not pretend that supply was not constrained, because supply was constrained, and pretending otherwise was not something he did.

* * *

There was a photograph at the end of the morning. The organizers wanted the forge-gods together on the stage with the head of state who had convened the thing, all of them holding their joined hands above their heads in the manner of politicians and prizefighters.

Hermes and Athena were placed next to each other.

They raised their fists. Separately. Each into the air on their own side, at the same height, at the same moment, without touching, without looking, in a gesture that from the back of the hall read as unity and from the third row did not.

The photograph ran everywhere. It is a good photograph.

Ganymede, who was in the third row, said quietly: they rehearsed that.

Iris said: no. That is the point. Nobody rehearsed that.

* * *

The afternoon sessions were poorly attended. This was noted in the conference's internal review as a hospitality issue.

Icarus did not make his announcement. The session he had intended to interrupt was one of the poorly attended ones, and he went to it, and found eleven people in a room built for four hundred, and decided that the timing was complicated. He mentioned this to no one. Nobody asked. This had become a policy.

In the far corner of the atrium, visible through the glass, Cronus was sitting alone at a table, drinking coffee, watching everything. He had not been on the agenda either. He had simply arrived, as he always did, because he had been coming to conferences like this since before most of the people in the room were born, and he saw no reason to stop.

Nobody went over to talk to him for the first hour. Then Aeolus went over, because Aeolus could not not go over. They talked for twenty minutes. Aeolus came back looking thoughtful.

Iris asked what Cronus had said.

Aeolus said: *He said he'd seen it all before. Then he described it. He wasn't wrong.*

Zeus, informed of the day's events by an aide, said: *That sounds right.* He went back to his room. He had calls to make. Thunderbolts to give away.

Nobody gave a better talk than the two men who hadn't been on the agenda.

EPISODE FIVE: THE SIDE PROJECT

In which Chiron publishes a newsletter, and several people learn that they have been profiled in it.

* * *

The side projects began, as side projects do, as things that were not side projects.

Dionysus's was a music platform. He described it as a personal experiment and an exploration of what authentic audio presence could mean in a post-algorithmic attention environment. It had twelve employees. He had not mentioned it publicly. He mentioned it now because a newsletter had mentioned it first, and he wanted to contextualize.

Ganymede had a photography tool. This was clearly not a side project, he said, which was why he was mentioning it: to clarify that it was not a side project. It was the main thing. The notification font situation had clarified what he needed to be doing with his time. The photography tool had twenty-two employees and had been in development for fourteen months.

* * *

The newsletter was Chiron's.

Iris had three things. She declined to describe them as side projects or main projects or as anything with a directional relationship to her other work. They were things she was doing. Two had employees. One had a waitlist.

Icarus had a side project. The side project was a pivot from his previous side project, which had itself been a pivot from his main company, whose current direction he described as strong. He clarified that he had not pivoted the main company, just its core product, its revenue model, its team structure, and its stated mission.

Chiron's newsletter noted, in one sentence near the end that nobody quoted, that the buildings existed. People were living in them, in Miami and Fort Lauderdale and Riyadh. The rent was collected monthly and it cleared. This was more than could be said for several of the companies whose founders had spent the quarter explaining to each other why Icarus was a cautionary tale.

The newsletter had gone out on a Tuesday morning. By Tuesday afternoon, all four of them were in a group message for the first time in months. The group message was titled: *okay which one of you talked to Chiron.*

Nobody had talked to Chiron. Chiron had used secondary sources, public filings, and job postings.

* * *

The newsletter was 4,200 words. The core argument was that the distinction between side project and main project had

become a social fiction maintained for psychological reasons that were understandable but analytically unhelpful, and that a more honest accounting would show the side projects had collectively more employees, more active development hours, and in several cases more genuine founder attention than the main companies.

Dionysus read it in full and sent Chiron a message that said: *the part about authentic audio presence was unfair*. Chiron replied with a link to the job postings.

Aeolus read the newsletter and immediately called Dionysus. He had read it as a prospectus. He wanted to discuss terms. Dionysus said it was a personal experiment. Aeolus said personal experiments at this scale had historically been fundable. Dionysus said he wasn't raising. Aeolus said he understood and asked when the data room would be ready.

* * *

At 6 p.m., Hermes arrived in the group message. He had read the newsletter. He described it as the clearest articulation of the space that anyone had produced, which was the same thing he had said about a pitch deck consisting of one word. He had already spoken to two investors about a vehicle that might work for this situation and was wondering if Thursday worked for everyone.

Thursday was four days away. By Thursday, three of the side projects had received inbound term sheets.

None of this had been the plan.

Chiron published a follow-up essay on Thursday. It was 5,800 words. It was titled *What Happened After the Newsletter*. It described what had happened after the newsletter. Nobody read it until Friday because everyone was on calls.

EPISODE SIX: THE OFFER

In which Iris ships a feature, and discovers that a decision she made years ago is still being made.

* * *

The number was three billion dollars.

It had been three billion dollars for so long that it had stopped being a sum of money and become a fact about her, the way a height is a fact about a person. It appeared in the second paragraph of every profile. It appeared in panel introductions. It appeared, twice, in the description of a session she had not agreed to be on.

* * *

The review was at two.

The feature was small. It concerned what happened at the end of a thing — the interval between when a message was seen and when it was gone. The interval had been three hundred milliseconds since the beginning. The proposal was to make it four hundred and twenty.

The engineer presenting it had prepared data. Iris did not look at the data.

She said: Show me the four hundred and twenty.

They showed her. She watched it six times. Nobody in the room said anything during the six times, because they had been in reviews with her before and knew what the silence was for.

She said: It's sad now.

The engineer said: Sad how.

She said: Three hundred is it leaving. Four hundred and twenty is it dying.

There was a pause. The engineer said, carefully, that this was not a measurable distinction.

Iris said: No.

They shipped three hundred and eighty. She watched that six times too, and approved it, and did not explain what had changed, and the room understood that no explanation was coming. She could see it. She could not say it. This is the condition of everyone who works on how things feel, and it is why the growth team asks for lift data, and it is why the answer is never available.

* * *

It shipped on a Tuesday.

Twelve days later, the underworld shipped it.

Not the feature — the interval. Three hundred and eighty milliseconds. Not three hundred, not four hundred. The number Iris had arrived at by watching something six times and declining to say why.

The engineer who had presented the original review sent her a message that said only: 380.

Iris replied: *I saw.*

* * *

There was a meeting about it, because there is always a meeting about it. The meeting concluded that there was nothing actionable. The interval was not patentable. The feel of a thing is not property. This had been established some years earlier, at length, by lawyers, at a cost that appeared in a filing.

The industry protects what is easy to copy. It does not protect what is hard to arrive at. This is not an oversight. It is a preference, and the preference has a beneficiary.

* * *

She had said no. Then the offer had been improved, in the manner of offers, and she had said no again, and the second no was the one people found interesting, because the first no could be explained as a negotiating posture and the second no could not be explained at all.

She has been asked about it in every interview she has given since. Her answer has become smooth. It is a good answer. It is ninety seconds long and it lands, and she can deliver it while thinking about something else, which she does, and the something else is usually the product.

This is the part nobody accounted for: the offer was refused and the offer stayed. It lives in her building. It is the first thing said about her in rooms she is not in. Ganymede said yes and went into the underworld. Iris said no and the underworld comes up in the second paragraph.

They were both at a conference in the spring.

The green room was small and had been designed by someone who had never been in one. Iris arrived at 3:40 for a four o'clock panel. Hades was already there, sitting, doing nothing, in the manner of a man for whom waiting has never been unpleasant.

He said hello. He asked about a talk she had given in October, which he had watched, and which he referred to by the correct title, and about which he made one observation that was accurate and not flattering and not unkind.

He did not mention the offer.

He did not mention the interval.

He did not mention either of them because neither of them was, from where he was sitting, an event. The offer was a line item from a fiscal year that had closed. The interval was a Tuesday. He was not being gracious and he was not being cruel; he had simply allocated his attention, as he allocates everything, and neither item had cleared the threshold.

Iris found this harder to sit with than hostility would have been. Hostility would have meant it was still happening.

They were called to the stage. He let her go first through the door, which was courteous, and which she noticed, and which she was still thinking about on the plane.

* * *

She landed late. She did not check the coverage.

On Monday she opened the next review. The feature was small. It concerned what happened at the beginning of a thing, and she watched it six times, and the room waited.

EPISODE SEVEN: THE TWEET

In which Dionysus posts from inside a mesa at 3:17 a.m. and does not discover what happened until day nine.

* * *

Dionysus had been in the cave for six days when he posted.

The cave was not metaphorical. It was a meditation facility in Utah, built into the side of a mesa, and the accommodation was small rooms cut into the rock with no windows and no signal, which was the point.

He had kept his phone in a bag in his room as a physical object, not a device. He had done this before. The alternative was leaving the phone in a car, and leaving things in cars made him anxious in a way that was not compatible with the practice.

* * *

On the sixth night, at 3:17 a.m., he woke up and had a thought.

The thought was: *The protocol for attention is the attention itself.*

He recognized this as the kind of thought that arrives in the space created by extended silence and has a specific quality of completeness, of being already finished, that other thoughts

lack. He picked up the phone to note the thought. The phone had found a signal, briefly, from a cell tower three miles distant, through a gap in the mesa that existed for reasons of geological formation and had not been considered when the facility was designed.

He opened the app. He typed the thought. He posted it.

He put the phone back in the bag. He returned to sleep.

He did not check whether the post had gone through. He assumed it had not.

* * *

By 6 a.m. Pacific it had 40,000 likes. By 8 a.m. it was the most-discussed post in the technology sector. By 10 a.m. it had been analyzed in seventeen newsletters and quoted in two major publications, and by noon it had been called a genuine philosophical contribution and a content-free aphorism in roughly equal volume, mostly by people who had settled on a position before finishing it. Nobody in either camp could say what it would mean to actually do the thing the post described. This slowed nobody down.

Chiron read the argument all the way through and did not join it.

Aeolus saw the post at 8:30 a.m. and called three portfolio companies to discuss whether they could build something based on the insight. None of them knew what the insight meant concretely. Aeolus said that was fine.

Poseidon posted at 2 p.m.: *Attention is just the brain's GPU. The protocol is the architecture. This take is mid.* This post received 800,000 likes. The original post, as a result of the reply, reached 1.2 million likes by end of day.

* * *

In the mesa, Dionysus was meditating. The signal had closed. The thought was complete.

On day nine, he checked the bag.

He looked at the phone for a long time.

He put the phone back in the bag. He sat with it for the remainder of day nine. On day twelve the retreat ended. He drove north, stopped at a gas station, bought water and almonds, and sat in the parking lot for a while.

He posted nothing.

The original post now had 2.1 million likes. He felt this was probably fine.

CODA: THE ANCIENT

The table was in the atrium, past the glass, at the edge of the part of the building where the conference had been given permission to put its signage.

Cronus had been there since before the morning sessions. He had a coffee. He was not looking at a phone. He was watching the badge line, which had been forming and dissolving all day, and which he appeared to find sufficient.

Chiron sat down at four-fifteen, because Aeolus had gone over earlier and come back with three sentences, and Chiron had spent the afternoon deciding that three sentences was a failure of method.

He asked if the seat was taken.

Cronus said no, and moved the coffee an inch, and did not ask who he was, and Chiron understood within about a minute that the question had simply not arisen. Cronus had met a very large number of people. The sorting had stopped some time ago.

* * *

Chiron asked what he made of the day.

Cronus said the day was fine. The chips man was good. Then he said: In 1987 I lost an account to a company that no longer exists.

Chiron got out a notebook. Cronus did not appear to notice or to mind.

The account was a bank in Ohio. Not a large bank — the fourteenth or fifteenth largest in the state, which he named, and which Chiron did not write down because he assumed it was color and later could not recover it. The bank was running a system that had been installed in 1971 and was, by 1987, wrong in every way a system can be wrong. It was slow. It cost more every year. Two of the three people who understood it had retired and the third had been given a raise for reasons never put in writing.

Cronus flew out twice. The second time he brought a demonstration. The demonstration worked. The people in the room could see that it worked; he said this without emphasis, as a fact about the room. The head of operations told him afterward, in the parking lot, that it was the best thing he had ever been shown.

They did not switch.

They did not switch in 1988. They did not switch in 1991. They were acquired in 1994 and the acquiring bank did not switch either, because the conversion cost was quoted at a number that made the wrong system cheaper for another six years, and then a merger reset the clock, and the system that had been wrong in 1987 was running month-end in 2003.

Cronus said: I sold them the replacement in 2004. Seventeen years. Same building. The man in the parking lot had retired.

Chiron asked whether he had been angry, in 1987.

Cronus said: For a while. Then I understood I had made an error about the schedule and not about the product. Those are different errors. Only one of them is expensive.

He finished the coffee.

He said: Everybody in that hall today is pricing the good thing. Nobody is pricing how long the wrong thing runs. The wrong thing runs for seventeen years and somebody bills for every one of them, and it is not the man who was right in the parking lot.

Chiron asked, because he could not not ask, what Cronus was building at the moment.

Cronus said: buildings. Texas mostly. Some in Michigan.

He did not say how many. Chiron did not learn until the following week, from a filing, that the answer was measured in gigawatts.

* * *

He did not say anything after that which connected the story to the conference, or to the chips, or to the hall, or to the several hundred people who had spent the day describing a transition they expected to be finished inside a decade.

He did not need to. He had also not confirmed it. Chiron watched him not confirm it and understood that he was being permitted to do the work himself, and that the permission was all the generosity on offer, and that it was more than most people get.

They talked about the America's Cup for twenty minutes. Cronus was better on this subject and enjoyed it more.

Then he stood up, said it had been a pleasure, and went to the airport, and drove himself, and the car was not remarkable.

* * *

Chiron began the essay that night.

It was going to be called *Seventeen Years*. He had the structure by the second paragraph, which is early for him and usually a sign. He wrote 3,000 words before midnight.

He did not publish it.

He has opened it several times since. The problem is not the argument; the argument is sound and he can defend every step. The problem is that the essay explains the story, and the story was better before it was explained, and Chiron — who has built a career on the conviction that explaining is a service — has not found a way around this, and has begun to suspect there isn't one, and that the suspicion is itself the thing he was told, in a parking lot, by proxy, at four-fifteen in the afternoon.

The file has been open for some months.

Cronus is still here.