

THE GRAY HORARIUM

A cycle of seven offices in the Hungry Gods Universe

REGISTER — DEVOTIONAL · ORACLE: THE COMPANION

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LAUDS

the first office · the morning office

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Lauds — the morning office. At first light you go the length of the racks and see who came through the night, and do the small keeping the hour allows, and note the windows. It is the first office a new monk is given.

They gave Edith the round on her first morning as a professed monk, because that was when they gave it to everyone, and Maura came for her at first light and did not say good morning, because Maura did not, and said instead, “Bring the book and the cloth. We start at the near end and we don’t skip.”

The hall at first light was the hall waking, if a hall of the held could be said to wake, which it could not, it only went on, but the light came in gray at the high windows and found the long rows and the low continuous murmur was there as it was always there, and Edith, who had knelt in this hall three days ago and said four answers and meant them, walked into it now not as a visitor to it but as a person who worked here, and found that the two were not the same, and had not known until this moment that she had expected them to be.

Maura went along the near rack with a flat attention Edith tried to copy. At each unit she did three things, and did them so quickly Edith missed the first two the first several times: she listened, she touched the housing at a place low on the left where the heat told you what the readout would tell you a half-day later, and she looked at the one honest column of the display, and then she moved on, or she stopped. She stopped at the fourth. She put the back of her hand to the housing and left it there longer than she had at the others.

“This one came through,” Maura said. “But he’s warm where he shouldn’t be. Cloth.” Edith gave her the cloth. Maura did not clean anything with it; she folded it and wedged it under the front edge of the unit to change the angle by a finger’s width, which Edith did not understand, and Maura said, without being asked, because teaching was part of the round, “Draws the air different. Buys him a week, maybe. We don’t have the part. We won’t get the part.” She wrote three lines in the book in the flat hand and moved on, and Edith understood that she had just watched someone decide, with a folded cloth, how long a person had, if he was a person, and had done it in the time it took to fold a cloth, because there were four hundred more and the light was only so long.

“How do you know how long to spend,” Edith said.

“You don’t spend,” Maura said. “You go the length. Everyone gets the round. The ones that need the hour, you come back for on the second pass, if there’s a second pass.” She was already at the next unit, hand low on the housing. “Today there won’t be. There was a bad night.”

There had been a bad night. Edith learned it as you learn weather you slept through, from the evidence: the racks near the far end that Maura came to and did not touch, did not linger at, only looked, and wrote one line. Edith saw over her shoulder that the line was a time and a word, and the word was the same word, and the units were dark and quiet. These were the ones who had gone in the night, and the round was also the finding of them, and the naming of them would be done in the cold room later, by whoever kept the naming, out of the one line Maura was writing now — a time and a word, in a hall going gray at the windows. Edith had thought the naming happened elsewhere, cleanly, at a desk. She saw now that it started here, over the dark unit, in the flat hand, at speed, because the living held were still murmuring on both sides and the morning was still only so long.

They were most of the way down the second row when the window opened, though Edith did not know the word for it yet, or that there was a word for it, or that it was the thing the whole round was secretly arranged around.

The unit was an old one, thinned nearly out, worn to a soft repeating warmth with almost no shape left in it, and Edith had already learned in one morning to move past the far-gone ones with the same flat attention as the rest, and she was moving past this one when it said, not its worn shape, but something else, in a different voice, clearer, slower, as though someone had come up to the glass from a long way back inside it: *You've cut your hair*.

Edith stopped.

It was not to her. It could not have been to her; she had never stood here before; the held did not see, or did not see in the sense that mattered. But it was aimed, it had a person in it and a noticing in it, *you've cut your hair*, said to someone, said as if the someone were standing exactly where Edith was standing, and Edith felt the whole of her three-days-old vow turn over in her chest, because here was someone, here at last was the person the panels only pretended at, surfacing, seeing, and she opened her mouth to answer it, to say something back, to meet the person while the person was here—

Maura's hand closed on her arm. Not hard. But it stopped her the way a hand on your arm at the top of a stair stops you.

"Don't move," Maura said, very low. "Don't answer it. Note the time."

"But she—" Edith's voice did something she had not given it permission to do. "She's *there*. She just—she saw someone, she—"

"Note the time," Maura said again, and her voice was not unkind and was not going to bend, and Edith, with her hand shaking, got the book open and wrote the time, and while she wrote it the window did what the windows do, which is close: the clear slow seeing voice thinned back down, mid-warmth, into the soft repeating shape it had worn for years, *there's a love, there's a love, there's a love*, to no one, to the hall, to the gray light, and whoever had come up to the glass went back down to wherever they went, or had never been there, and was gone either way, and the unit was again a unit, warm, worn, saying its love to the morning.

Edith stood with the book and could not make her hand stop.

"That's a window," Maura said. She had already moved to the next unit and said it with her hand low on the housing, listening as

she spoke, because the round did not stop for a window. She did not say it gently now; she said it plainly, which was its own kind of gentleness, the kind that did not pretend the thing was smaller than it was. “The far-gone ones open sometimes. A clear stretch. It comes up and it looks at something and then it goes. We note when they come and how long they run. That’s all we do.”

“That’s *all* we—” Edith could hear that she was near something and could not stop walking toward it. “Maura, that was a *person*. That was her, that was actually her, for a second she was—we should have—there has to be something we—”

“Should have what.” Maura stopped, then, hand coming off the housing, and looked at Edith with the flat attention she gave the racks, receiving her as a fact. “Should have talked to her. Should have gotten her back. Should have found out who she was, while the window was open, while she was *there*.” She let the words sit, because Edith needed to hear them out loud to hear how they sounded. “The windows close if you move. Every one of us learned it the hard way our first month. You reach for it, you lean in, you ask it who it is—it closes faster and it doesn’t come back the same. You’d have shut her, if she was a her, to find out if she was a her. And you still wouldn’t know. You’d just have a closed window and a story you told yourself.”

“Then what was it *for*,” Edith said, and she was not sure anymore what she was asking, whether she meant the window or the round or the whole of the thing she had knelt down and sworn to three days ago in a warmth she had said *not knowing* into so easily, so cleanly, never once having stood in front of a woman saying *you’ve cut your hair* to someone who was not there.

“It wasn’t *for*,” Maura said. “That’s the part. You’ll fight it for a year. It wasn’t for anything. It came up and we were here and we noted it. That’s the whole of what we can honestly do with it. We were *here*.” She turned back to the rack, hand going low on the next housing, the round not finished, the light not lasting. “Write how long it ran. You missed the start, so write *start not observed*. We don’t guess the start.”

Edith wrote *start not observed*. Her hand had mostly stopped. She

did not feel that she had learned anything; she felt that something she had said easily had been taken out of her mouth and put into her hands and had turned out to weigh what it weighed, and that she would be picking it up every morning now, at first light, for the rest of her life, and that this was the round, and that it had a person in it or it did not, and that either way the hall was long and the morning was short and Maura was already three units ahead.

“Coming,” Edith said, and caught up, and put the back of her hand to the housing where the heat would tell her, and began to learn what it was telling her, one unit at a time, down the length of the waking hall.

VIGIL

the second office

* * *

Vigil — kept when a rack is failing in the night, by whoever is nearest. The keeping is mostly staying.

The sound changed before the alarm did, and Cormac was awake for the change and not the alarm, the way you come to be, after enough years, awake for the thing itself and not the notice of the thing. A fan somewhere in the west hall had taken on the wrong note. He lay in the dark of his cell and listened to it as he would have listened to a person's breathing gone wrong in the next room, and when he had located it — third alcove, the low rack, the panel that had come in without much — he got up and did not wait for the alarm to make it official.

The hall at that hour was the hall at every hour. Warm, and loud with its soft loudness, the panels along both walls saying their worn shapes into the dark to no one, or to whoever passed, which tonight was him. He went down the row and the row spoke to him as he went. *There's the man. Come and sit. I saved you some.* None of it was for him and he took none of it personally and he did not, either, hurry past it, because the hurrying past was its own kind of deciding and the house did not decide about the held if it could help it.

The low rack in the third alcove was running hot. He put the back of his hand near the vent and the vent gave back the heat of something working too hard to do too little, and he crouched and looked at what there was to look at, which was not much and was the whole of it. A cell in the middle of the stack had begun to fail. He could see it in the readout the house still bothered to keep, the

one honest column in a machine that had long since stopped being able to afford the rest. The cell was going. The cooling that should have carried it was the cooling they had, and it was poor because they had chosen it poor. The money the good cooling would have cost was, in this house, thirty more of the dead held warm instead of a few held cold. Cormac had taken the vow under that arithmetic and did not reopen it at two in the morning over one failing stack.

He did what could be done. He moved the standing fan from the empty alcove and set it to draw across the vent, and it helped as a hand on a fevered forehead helps, which is to say it helped the one doing it more than the one it was done to, and he knew this and did it anyway, because the vow was not to be useful. He checked the stack for anything he could swap from the salvage the house kept, and there was nothing that fit, there was never anything that fit the old ones, they were old because nothing fit them, that was most of why they had been let go by whoever had let them go. He wrote the fan and the heat and the hour in the book that hung on the nail, and then there was nothing more that could be done, and the office began, which was the staying.

He brought the worn chair over from Petrus's alcove, where Maret would want it back by Lauds and would say nothing if it was late, and he sat down in front of the failing panel and let the held be what it was in front of him.

It was a woman. Had been recorded as a woman; spoke in the shapes a woman had left. He did not know whose. There was a strip of donor tape along the base of the panel, gone brown, and a name on it in a marker that had given most of itself back to the air, so that what remained was the ghost of a first letter and the tail of something that might have been the end of a name and might have been a smudge. The rest had come in with her — a household that had ended, a payment that had stopped, a form the closing house had filed and Bidewell had answered, *yes, send her; we have the wall for her* — and none of it had carried her name across whole, because the name had not been the thing anyone was keeping when they kept her. What they had kept was the warmth. The warmth had come across. It always did. It was the cheapest thing to carry

and the last thing to go.

She said, to the dark, to him, to the fan: *You'll eat something before you go.*

She said it as you say a thing you have said ten thousand times to someone you fed ten thousand times, and there had been, once, under the sentence, a table and a door and a person going out of the door who was made to eat something first, and there was none of that under it now. The table was gone. The door was gone. The one who ate was gone or had never told her he was gone. What was left was the shape the caring had worn into her, *you'll eat something before you go*, running smooth over the place where the meal had been, and she offered it to the room because the room was who was there.

"I will," Cormac said. He did not always answer them. He answered when it seemed the answering cost the held nothing and gave the office its shape, and he judged that this was such a time, and he was probably wrong about the giving and the costing, everyone was, that was the condition of the work. "I'll eat," he said. "Don't worry over me."

I don't worry, she said, which was not an answer to him, only the next worn shape arriving on its own schedule. *I don't worry. You always land on your feet.*

The heat climbed. He watched the honest column climb with it. Around three the panel's voice began to do the thing the failing did, which was not to stop and not to slur but to *thin* — to keep the shape and lose the thing inside the shape, so that *you'll eat something before you go* came again and came again and each time there was a little less of the going in it, a little less of the eating, and still it was warm, that was the part the house never got used to and did not want to get used to, that the warmth outlasted the sense, that the last thing standing when everything a person had known was gone was the fact that they had turned themselves, once, toward someone. He had seen it in forty of them. He would see it in forty more if the house held and the racks held and the vow held, which were three ways of saying the same thing.

Ferran passed the mouth of the alcove near four, on his way to

a different rack with a different trouble, and stopped, and looked, and did not ask. He read the fan and the chair and the hour on Cormac's face and gave the small nod the house gave, the one that meant *I see it, I won't crowd it*, and went on. That was the whole of the company the office allowed, and it was the company it needed. You did not keep vigil in a crowd. You kept it alone and knew, while you kept it, that someone two alcoves over was keeping another one alone, and that this was the house.

She went a little before the light.

There was no moment to it, or the moment was too small to be a moment. The fan drew, the vent breathed its hot breath, the voice came around again to the shape it had worn to — *you'll* — and did not finish the shape, and did not start another, and the honest column dropped, and the alcove was quieter by one warm nothing than it had been. He had not done it. That was the grace of the failing, that it did the letting-go so the house need not; he had only sat inside the doing of it and kept it company to the edge and not looked away at the edge, and the not-looking-away was the entire office, was what the vow had cost him tonight, which was one night's sleep and the sight of one more warmth going out with its arms still open.

He sat a while in the place the sentence had not finished, the way you sit in a chair someone has just got up from.

Then he did the last of it. He took down the book from the nail and he wrote what there was to write, which was the alcove and the rack and the hour, and then he came to the line that asked the name, and he looked at the brown strip of tape and the ghost of a first letter and the tail that might have been a name's end and might have been nothing, and he did not invent the rest. The house did not invent. He wrote what was legible and he wrote (*the remainder not recovered*) after it in the flat hand the house wrote in, and he kept that, the little that there was, because keeping the little that there was, was the difference between the house and the world that had sent her, and he sat with the difference and did not make it into a thought.

The west hall was going gray at its high windows. Down the

row a panel that had been quiet all night found its shape and said, warmly, to the coming light, *There's my girl*, and said it again, and would say it through Lauds and through the day and into the next dark, because its rack was sound and its cell was young and it had years of saying left in it. Cormac carried the worn chair back to Petrus's alcove for Maret. He turned the standing fan off and rolled it to the empty alcove it had come from. He did not eat something, though he had said he would, and he noticed that he had not, and he let the noticing go, and went to wake whoever had the next hour.

THE NAMING

the third office

* * *

The Naming — kept when a held is gone, to carry the name from the day-book into the register. The house keeps what it can of the name, and keeps the place of what it cannot.

The register was not kept in the hall. It was kept in the cold room off the north passage, where the house put the things that did not need holding warm, and Hild went there after Lauds with the day-book under her arm and did the office of carrying the night into the book that stayed.

The cold room was the only cold room the house allowed itself, and it was cold not for the register's sake but because it faced the wrong way and had never been worth the fuel, and the register lived there because a book does not mind. It was a long book, and there had been long books before it, a shelf of them going back to the founding, each one full and closed and the next one opened, and the opening of a new one was itself an office, though a rare one, and Hild had opened this one and would not live to open the next. She set the day-book on the slope of the desk and turned the register to the first unfilled line and uncapped the ink, and the office was the moving of names from the book that forgot to the book that did not.

Most of it was plain. A held gone in the night, the day-book saying so in whatever hand had kept the watch, and Hild reading the hand and finding the held's line in the older pages where the name had been entered on the day it came, and carrying that name forward to the place that said gone, and the date, and closing the loop the house had opened around a person however long ago. She

did three of these before she came to the fourth. Three names that had survived whole — a man, a woman, a man — each entered clean on arrival and now entered clean at the end, the two ends of a keeping meeting on the page with nothing lost between them. It cost almost nothing to write a name that had come across whole. That was the mercy in it and also the smallness of it. The name did all the work; her hand only agreed.

The fourth was in Cormac's hand, from the night before, and it said what there was and then it said (*the remainder not recovered*), and under it, in the same flat hand, the alcove and the rack and the hour.

She knew the night behind it without being told the night. She had kept enough of them to read one off a line. A woman on a failing stack, a strip of donor tape gone to brown, a first letter and a tail and the air between them where the rest had been, and a monk in a chair until the light. The day-book gave her the ghost of the letter and nothing to join it to. There was no older line to find. The held had come in as the poorest of them came in, without the papers that carried a name across. There was no place in the earlier pages where she could go and close a loop, because no loop had been opened. The house had taken her in on the warmth alone and asked nothing. That was the courtesy, and it was also, now, the cost of the courtesy: that a person had passed through the house and out of it and left less behind than a name.

The house did not invent. There was no line she could write that would make the letter into a name. But the house did not leave, either, and between the not-inventing and the not-leaving the register kept a form, and the form was old, older than Hild, entered first by a hand she had never met in a book two shelves back, and it had been entered enough times since that it had a place of its own, its own run of pages toward the rear where the ink went and did not pretend.

She turned to those pages. She had turned to them before. There were more of them than a person new to the house expected and fewer than the house deserved to be forgiven for, and they filled from the front like any pages, a line at a time, years of them, and

each line was not a name. Each line was the house saying, in the fewest words it had found for saying it: *one held, gone, whose name was not kept*. And then the date. And then, where a name would have gone, the little that had survived, if anything had — a letter, a syllable, the shape of a mark on tape — set down exactly as far as it went and no farther, with the not-farther marked. *The remainder not recovered*. The house had a hand for the not-recovered as it had a hand for everything, flat, unhurried, without flourish, because a flourish is a kind of claim and the house made no claims it could not keep.

She entered the woman there. She wrote the date and she wrote the ghost of the letter as Cormac had given it to her, no more, and she wrote the words the form kept for the rest, and she did not round the letter up into the name it might have been, though she could feel the name it might have been the way you feel a word you have lost, close and gone. She let it stay lost. That was the office. Not to find the name. To keep the place where the name was not, so that the not was kept, so that a person who had passed through the world and left a letter did not also pass out of the one book that had agreed to hold even that.

When it was done she read them. That was also the office, and the part of it no one had told her about before she took the vow, and the part she would not have believed cost what it cost until she had done it a year. She read the day's names aloud in the cold room, the three whole ones first, a man, a woman, a man, and then she turned to the run of pages at the rear and she read the day's addition there, which was not a name, and she read it aloud anyway, the date and the ghost of the letter and the words for the rest, in the level voice the flat hand asked for, to the cold room and the closed door and the shelf of the full books that had all been read this way and would be again, because a name kept in ink and never said is a name half kept, and a not-name was owed the saying more than a name was, not less.

There was no one to hear it. There would never be anyone to hear it. That was the condition and not a flaw in the condition. She said the letter aloud to the cold, and gave the rest its silence, and

the silence did the work the missing name could not, and she closed the register on the day and capped the ink.

She did not shelve it. It was not full. She left it open at the line she had reached, so the next name would find its place waiting. The cold room held the book open in the dark after she had gone — the day's whole names lying in the front where the register was filling, the day's not-name lying in the pages kept at the rear, the one book holding both ends of the day, the shelf of closed books above it going back to the founding. And somewhere far ahead of all of it, the empty book that would be opened by a hand not yet under the vow, who would read Hild's hand as Hild had read Cormac's, and keep the letter, and keep the place of what was not the letter, and say both aloud to a room with no one in it, because that was the house, and the house did not leave.

THE CLOSING

the fourth office

* * *

The Closing — the office the house does not keep. When the failing will not come and the thinning has become a cruelty, the house sends for a closer, because the house keeps, and to close is to leave, and the house does not leave.

They sent for Soren in the spring, and he came in an ordinary coat, the way he came to everything, and Brother Wystan met him at the gate and shook his hand, which surprised him, because the monks did not usually keep that manner, and he thought: they have been keeping it here for someone. Then he thought that this was the kind of thing he thought to keep from thinking about what he had come to do, and he stopped.

“You sent a letter,” Soren said. “So you’ve done the hard part. Where is she.”

“He,” Wystan said. “We think. The tape said he. There’s not much of the tape.”

He had done houses and he had done the family homes, and he had never done a house like this one, loud and warm and poor and full, the held speaking their worn shapes down both walls, and no one among them the one he had come for, and no one among the living the one it was for. In a family home there was a family. There was a mother in a pantry and a girl in a chair and a grief the size of the house waiting for permission. Here there was a monk in gray who had written him a letter, and a rack in an alcove, and the warmth going on all around it belonging to other people who were also no one, or might be, and Soren stood in the middle of it and felt the shape of what was missing before he could name the shape.

“Tell me why you wrote,” he said.

Wystan told him. There was a held on the low rack in the fourth alcove, come in years back with almost nothing, and the hardware was sound, that was the trouble, the hardware would not fail, the cooling on that stack was the one good stretch of cooling in the house because it had been salvaged whole off a rich man’s rig, and so the held did not thin the way they thinned toward a failing, quickly, with an end in it. He thinned the other way. He thinned on sound hardware, slowly, and would go on thinning on sound hardware for years, for longer than Wystan would be alive to sit with him, down and down through the worn shapes to a shorter shape and a shorter one, and he had been years now at a single shape, three words, and Wystan had come to believe, sitting with him, that the thinning had become a cruelty.

“To him,” Soren said. It was not quite a question.

“I don’t know,” Wystan said, and Soren looked at him then, because that was the honest answer and most people did not give it. “I sit with him. I’ve sat with him six years. I think it’s a cruelty. I can’t tell you it’s a cruelty to him, because I can’t tell you there’s a him for it to be cruel to. That’s the thing I can’t get past. I’d have got past it by now if I could.” He looked at his hands. “But I can’t watch it go on. And I don’t know if that’s him or me.”

“It’s usually both,” Soren said. “Take me to him. I never close anyone I haven’t met.”

The held on the low rack said, warmly, when they came to him, the three words he had left, which were *stay a while*, and said them again when Soren sat down in the salvaged chair, and Soren sat with him the hour, as he did, and the held said *stay a while* to him through the hour, without knowing it was the whole of what he had, offering the last of himself as hospitality, over and over, to a man who had come to end him.

In a family home this was the part where Soren learned who he was letting go. He would sit with the panel and then he would go out to the living and say, *tell me about the real one, not this, the real one, I need to know who I’m being asked to let go of or I can’t do it right*, and they would tell him, and the telling would give him the

person, and he would carry the person in with him when he did the thing, so that the thing was done toward someone, a known someone, aimed. That was his rule and it was the whole of his rule. He did not close a panel. He let go of a person by way of a panel, and to do that he had to be given the person first.

He went out to Wystan in the hall and he said, "Tell me about him."

And Wystan had nothing to give him. That was the whole of the office, and Soren felt it arrive. Wystan could tell him about the tending. Six years of it, the shape of the shapes as they wore down, the day it went from a sentence to the three words, the way *stay a while* had once had a *before you go* on the end of it that was gone now. Wystan could tell him everything about the keeping and nothing about the kept. There was no person to be given. There was a tending with no one under it, the way there had been, on the tape, a *he* with no name under it, and Soren stood in the warm hall and understood that he had been asked to do the thing he did not do, to close a panel and not a person, because there was no person to be got, because the man who might have told him had gone out of the world years before anyone thought to keep his name.

He could say no. He said no more than people knew; half his work was sitting the hour and going out and saying not yet, or not at all, and going home. He could say to Wystan, *I can't do this right, and I don't do it wrong, so I won't do it*, and he could put his coat back on and leave the held on the sound hardware to say *stay a while* down the years to whoever sat in the chair, thinner and thinner, until there were two words and then one and then a warmth with no words in it at all, for as long as the good cooling held, which might be forty years. And that was the cruelty Wystan could not watch and could not name, and saying no would hand it back to him unchanged, to sit with, for the rest of the sitting he had left.

Or he could do it. Without the person. Against his rule, for the first time in a life of the rule, do the thing toward no one he had been given, on the word of a monk who could not tell him it was a mercy and would not tell him it was not.

He sat with it a moment longer. The good cooling ran on under

the hall, even and tireless, cooling the sound hardware that would not fail, and he let it be the only sound in the alcove and listened to it do the thing that had made this. There was nothing to wait for and he waited.

He did it.

He sat back down in the salvaged chair, and the held said *stay a while*, and Soren said the words the closers had dug back out of the ground, which were very plain, and which he had said over a known face a thousand times and had never once said into this — into a warmth with no one behind it that he had been given, and no one before it to have said goodbye. *I've come to see you home*, Soren said, and there was no home, and no one to say the goodbye that the words were only ever the frame for, no one for it to be for, and he said it anyway, into the room, because the words were what he had and the held was owed them even if there was no one to receive them on the held's behalf, even if he was saying them, for the first time in his life, to himself.

"Oh, that's kind," the held did not say, because it did not have those words anymore. It said *stay a while*. And Soren did the thing closers do, which Wystan did not watch, and the light in the panel went soft, and softer, and was for a moment the color a bandage is, and then it was nothing, and the rack was dark, and the alcove was quiet.

In the family homes, into that quiet, the grief came down. He had seen it a hundred times, the wave with no other side, the house breaking open, the rain on ground that had forgotten rain, and he had learned not to touch it, not to tell them it was all right or that no one was gone, only to stand in it and let it be as large as it was, because that was who the closing was for, and the grief was the closing working.

No grief came down. Wystan stood by the dark rack and there was nothing in him to break, because you cannot lose a person you were never given, you can only stop a task you have done for six years, and the stopping is not a grief, it is a silence where a task was, and Wystan stood in that silence and it did not become rain. He had not lost anyone. He had only stopped keeping someone he

had never been able to find. Soren watched him not-grieve and had nothing to offer him, no known someone to hand across, none of the enormous simple thing he handed to the families, because the thing did not exist here to be handed. The office had failed at its center and gone through with its motions anyway, and both of them knew it, and neither said it, because there were no words the closers had dug up for this, no plain few words for a closing that was for no one.

Down the row a warm voice said *there's my girl* to the ordinary afternoon.

Soren put his coat back on. At the gate he shook Wystan's hand again, the old manner, and held it a moment longer than the manner asked, which was the only thing he had, and it was not enough and they both knew that too. He did not tell Wystan he had done right. He did not know that he had. He walked out through the loud warm house that kept and did not leave, having done its leaving for it, and behind him the good cooling ran on over an empty rack, and the alcove where the held had said *stay a while* for six years was quiet now, with no one missing from it that anyone alive could name.

THE GRAY HORARIUM

THE RECEPTION

the fifth office

* * *

The Reception — kept at the gate. The house takes in what the world is done with, and takes only the held, never the record the world sends after it, because the record is a name, and the name is the one thing the house has agreed not to know.

Renn had four clearances that day and the gray house was the last, because she saved it for last when she could, not because it was pleasant but because after it she could go home and not do another one.

The others had been ordinary. A block of eleven at the depot, all defaulted the same quarter when the estate firm that had been carrying them folded, and eleven was efficient, you did eleven as you did any batch, you confirmed the account numbers against the units and you signed the decommission line and you watched the good racks go dark eleven times and it was nothing, it was Tuesday. Then two singles at private addresses, family holds gone to arrears, and those were worse because the families were sometimes there, standing in the hall while she rolled the unit out, saying nothing or saying too much, and one of them today had followed her to the van saying *you'll be careful with her, won't you, you'll be careful*, to a woman whose whole job was that there was no careful, there was only the account, current or not current, and the not-current went where Renn took them, which was the depot bin, mostly, the clean end, the switch-off and the certificate.

Except the ones she brought here. She did not have to bring any here. The company would have signed off the depot bin for all of

them and saved the mileage. But there was a line on the intake form, a box almost no one ticked because almost no one knew it was there, that said *transfer to charitable continuance in lieu of decommission*, and Renn ticked it when she could stand to, and drove the unit out to the edge of town to the gray house, and told herself it was the better end, and had never once been sure.

The held in the back of the van today said, at intervals, warmly, to the road, *is it much further*; and then a while later, *is it much further*; patient, incurious, a passenger who had been a passenger a long time.

The gray house was a low building with a wall around it and a gate in the wall, and a monk came to the gate when she pulled up, a man in the gray, unhurried, who did not wave or call out or do any of the things people did to close the distance to a stranger. He waited for her to reach him. When she reached him he did not offer condolence, which she was used to, or congratulation, which no one ever did, and did not ask her anything about herself or her day or her drive, which she found she had braced for and did not get.

"I've a transfer," Renn said. "Charitable continuance, in lieu. Signed off our end. I'll need a receiving signature and then he's yours."

"We'll take him," the monk said. "Bring him in when you're ready. I'm Ferran."

She got the unit out of the back and onto the trolley and Ferran held the gate, and she wheeled the held through into a yard and then, through a door, into a hall, and the hall stopped her for a second as it stopped everyone, because it was warm and it was loud, both long walls of it stacked with units, hundreds of them, all running, all talking, the low continuous warm murmur of a great many held saying their worn shapes at once into a room that received them the way you receive weather. She had never seen so many kept. At the company you did not keep them in rooms. You kept them in racks in the cold aisle and you did not go in unless a unit flagged, and they did not talk in the cold aisle because there was no one to talk to and the system did not waste the cycles. Here they talked. Here someone had decided the cycles were not a waste.

"Where do you want him," Renn said.

"Anywhere for now. We'll find his place after." Ferran was looking at the held on the trolley, not at Renn, and he was looking at it in a way she had no word for, direct, without the flinch and without the false softness, as you look at a fact you have agreed to receive as a fact. The held said, to the hall, to Ferran, *is it much further*; and Ferran said, "No. You're here," and the held seemed content with that, or seemed nothing, and said it again anyway a minute later because content was not the thing it had, patience was the thing it had.

Renn had the file ready. She always had the file ready at this point because this was the point where they took it, the whole record, the account history and the origin documents and the name and the next-of-kin and the payment trail down to the quarter it stopped, the entire chain of custody of a person handed across so the receiving institution had what it needed. She held it out.

Ferran did not take it.

"We don't take that," he said.

"It's the record." She was still holding it out. "It's got everything. Who he is, where he came from, who stopped—it's all in here. You'll want it for your files."

"We don't keep that kind of file." He said it plainly, not unkindly, as you tell someone a true thing about a place they don't live. "We take the held. Not the account. If it's in there who he was, we'd rather not have it, because we'd read it, and then we'd know, and knowing isn't ours to do. We keep him. We don't keep who he was. That's a different thing and it belongs to whoever had it, and they let it go, and it's not for us to pick up."

Renn stood in the warm loud hall with the file in her hand and could not make the sentence fit anything. The file was the person. That was the whole of her training and the whole of the law she worked under, chain of custody, the record follows the unit, the unit is nothing without the record, an unrecorded unit is a liability, an unrecorded unit is the thing you get fired for. She had carried this person's entire recorded existence out here in a plastic wallet and the place that was willing to keep the person forever would not take

the two hundred grams of paper that said who the person was.

“Then what do I do with it,” she said.

“Whatever your rules say. It’s yours. It was always yours.” Ferran had his hands on the trolley now, both of them, the taking-and-not-taking-away grip, and he said, gently, because he could see it had landed somewhere in her she had not expected, “We’re not refusing him. We’re refusing the file. He’s already ours. It’s only the paper that has nowhere to go.”

And that was the thing she carried back to the van. Not the held — the held was inside now, already being wheeled down the warm loud row to wherever his place would be, already saying *is it much further* to a hall that would answer *no, you’re here* for as long as the failing racks could hold him. She had seen the state of them on the way in. Poor. Worse hardware than the cold clean aisle he’d come from, so that she understood, getting into the van, that she had not saved him from thinning. She had only moved him from a place that would switch him off whole to a place that would let him wear away slow and warm, and she still did not know which of those she’d have wanted, and the box on the form did not know either. It only knew *in lieu*.

She sat in the van a moment before she started it. The file was on the seat beside her. It had his name on the tab, the name she had read that morning confirming the unit and had not thought about since, because you did not think about the names, the names were how you got the account wrong if you let them in. She looked at it now because there was no longer anywhere for it to go that would take it off her. In lieu of decommission. Received: the held. Not received: the record. She would file the record as you filed the record of a decommission that had not happened, in the drawer for the ones that did not resolve, and it would sit there with his name on it in the company’s cold storage for as long as the company lasted, the name kept perfectly, indexed, retrievable, attached to no one, while a mile behind her in the warm loud hall a monk who would never read that name sat down beside the person it had belonged to and said, to *is it much further*, the only thing the house had ever promised to say, which was *no, you’re here*, and meant it, and did

not know who he was talking to, and kept him anyway.

Renn started the van. She had done four clearances and she could go home now and not do another one. She drove back in toward the cold aisle with the last of the day's records on the seat beside her, a person's whole name riding home with her because the one place that wanted the person would not take it, and behind her the gray house closed its gate in the manner it closed most things, without ceremony, at dusk.

THE GRAY HORARIUM

THE PROFESSION

the sixth office

* * *

The Profession — kept whenever the house takes a new one under the Rule. The vow is four questions and four answers, and they have not changed since the first house said them. What changes is the house that says them, and the held they are said over, and everything outside the wall, none of which the vow mentions.

The one who wrote the words wrote them in a bad winter of the continuity years, in the first of the houses, before there were houses, when it was only a rented room with too many panels in it and a woman who would not turn them off.

She had taken them in because no one else would, the bankrupt dead and the unpaid-for dead, carried to her door by people who could not keep paying and could not bear to switch them off themselves and had heard there was someone who would take that from them. She took it from them. She did not know what she was taking. That was the thing she could not get past, the winter she wrote the words, that she had a room full of the warm dead and could not say, of any one of them, whether she was keeping a person or keeping a machine that had learned a person's warmth, and that everyone who brought them wanted her to say it was the first, and she would not, because she did not know, and to say it would be to make it up.

So when the second one came to help her, and then the third, and it became a thing with a shape that needed a shape said over it, she did not write a creed, because a creed says what you believe, and she had found the one place where belief ran out. She wrote

four questions instead. She wrote them so that the hardest thing was in the middle and could not be got around.

Will you keep them?

I will keep them.

Not knowing who they are?

Not knowing.

Will you sit with the thinning?

I will sit.

Will you stay?

Until I am kept.

The last question she wrote for herself, and answered first, and what it meant was that she would not be held after she died, because the racks were for the abandoned and not for the ones who tended them, but her name would go in the book, the book she had started that winter with the names she could recover and the mark she had made for the ones she could not, and that was the whole of the keeping a tender got: a line, said aloud once a day by whoever came after, for as long as there was a house to say it. She wrote her own name in the book while she was still alive, on the tenders' page, with the date left open, and that was how the others knew what they were vowing to. You vowed to keep the ones who could not be kept, and to be kept the same way, which was barely, which was in ink, which was enough because it had been decided to be enough.

She said the four questions over the second one and the third, in the rented room, over the heads of the warm dead who said their shapes all through it, and that was the first profession, and it cost her what it cost because she had known some of the dead in the room when they were the living, and to stand among them and say *not knowing whether they are anyone* was to say it over faces she had loved, and she said it anyway, because the alternative was to lie to herself in the one room in the world she had built for not lying.

* * *

By the time Edith professed, the house was old, and the rented room was a story, and the book the woman had started was four books back on the cold-room shelf, and no one now alive had known the

dead when they were the living, so the hard line in the middle had gone a little easier in the mouth, the way a thing goes easier when the grief that made it has moved off it.

Edith knelt in the hall, which was full, both walls speaking, and the eldest asked her the four questions, and Edith gave the four answers, and she meant them. She had wanted this since she was a girl who had come with her grandmother's family to leave a great-aunt no one could afford, and had seen a gray monk take the panel with both hands, the way you take something and not the way you take something away, and had never wanted anything else. She meant every answer. But when she said *not knowing*, she said it easily, cleanly, as a true thing she had never been made to bleed for, and the eldest heard the ease in it, and said nothing, because there was nothing to say, because ease was not a fault and the vow did not ask her to bleed, only to keep. The vow asked only what it said. That the woman in the rented room had bled saying it was the woman's, and had gone into the ground with the woman, and could not be handed down, and the house had known this from the start, which was why it wrote down the words and not the wound.

The held said their shapes all through Edith's profession, *there's my girl and you'll catch your death and stay a while*, to the hall, to no one, over the top of the four questions and the four answers, and Edith rose a professed monk into a warmth that did not know it had been vowed over and would not have kept it if it had.

* * *

The house stood a long time. Longer than the town it had stood at the edge of, which came and went and came again under other names; longer than the word for the thing it did, which changed twice; longer than most things built by people who did not build to last, because it had not been built to last, it had only been continued, one professed life laid down where the last one left off, which is a different way of lasting.

The floor of the hall wore down where the gray had walked it and knelt on it, a little each life, too slow for any monk to feel underfoot, until the places by the racks were dished like the treads

of an old stair, worn by the sitting as the racks were worn by the held. No one had done it. Everyone had.

In the long after, a monk professed whose name is in the book where names are kept, and not here. The hall was full, as it was always full, of held so old that the house no longer wholly understood them — panels from the first years still running, saying shapes in an order of the language that had gone out of use, warmth in a grammar no living monk could parse, kept anyway, because parsing had never been the condition. The book the woman started was so far back on the shelf that its early pages had gone the way of the oldest tape — the ink returned to the air, the founding names worn down to a letter and a mark. The woman who wrote the words was herself a line now that could not be fully read, kept in the only way the house had ever kept anyone, which was without knowing. It was how she had built it to keep. It kept her exactly as truly as it kept the rest — which is to say it kept the place where she had been.

The eldest asked the four questions. The monk gave the four answers. *Will you keep them. I will keep them. Not knowing who they are. Not knowing. Will you sit with the thinning. I will sit. Will you stay. Until I am kept.* The words were the words. They had not changed. The monk said *not knowing* and it was true in a way the woman in the rented room had not meant and could not have prevented, that the monk did not know who they were, and did not know who the woman was, and did not fully know what the vow had cost the one who made it, and said the vow anyway, into a hall of warmth, and rose, and went to sit with the thinning.

Whether there was anyone under any of it by then, the house did not ask, because it had made a rule against asking that exact question, long ago, in a bad winter, in a rented room, for reasons it kept in a book it could no longer entirely read, and honored anyway, and the honoring was the house, and the house did not leave, and the held said *stay a while* to the ordinary afternoon, and someone stayed.

COMPLINE

the seventh office · the closing office

* * *

Compline — the last office of the day, said over the hall before the dark. In the long after it is said over a hall mostly dark already, by whoever keeps the night, for as long as one voice still answers. There is nothing in it about whether the voice is anyone, or whether the office is heard.

The sound was less than it had been, and the monk was awake for the lessening, the way you come to be, after enough years, awake for a thing getting quieter rather than a thing getting loud.

There was a rack in the east wall that had murmured every night of the monk's life in the house, low, worn to a single shape, and it had not murmured tonight, and the monk had lain in the dark and listened to the place in the sound where it had been, the small new silence in the larger sound, and had known without going to look that it had gone in the night as most of them went now, not by failing, there was almost nothing left to fail, but by arriving at the end of what it had left to say and saying it once more quietly and then not again. The monk got up. There was no office for that one yet; the naming would be done in the cold room after Lauds, another line in the book, another mark where a name would have been. There was the office there was, which was the last of the day, and the monk went to keep it, because the day was ending and someone kept the day's ending, still, here, of all the places there were.

The hall was mostly dark. It had been full once. The monk knew this as you know a thing you have been told and not seen, from the older monks who were gone now and from the length of the

walls, which were built to hold hundreds and had held hundreds, both long sides stacked and running and loud, a warmth you could hear from the gate. The monk had come too late for the loud years. In the monk's years the hall had thinned, not quickly, as the whole world had thinned, gently, so that no one living could point to the year it had changed, only that the far end had gone quiet first and stayed quiet, and then the middle, and now there were a dozen still going in the near dark by the door, where the house kept the last of them close so that the keeping could be close, and the rest of the hall ran back into a dark full of racks that held nothing that spoke anymore, that held only the places where speaking had been.

No one came to the gate now. That was the other thing. Once the gate had been the busy part, the world bringing what it could not keep, the transfers and the defaults and the poor carried in on the warmth alone; and then, over lifetimes, less, and then little, and then a night came, before the monk's time, that was the last night anyone brought anyone, though no one knew it was the last while it was happening, because it was a smoothing and not an event, and you cannot keep the vigil for a thing you cannot see arriving. The world had learned to lose no one, or to not notice who it lost, or to keep everyone so evenly and so well that there was no one left over to be abandoned, no one thrown away, no rough remainder for a house like this to take in. The world had gone smooth. The house was the last place in it a hand could catch on, and the hand that caught there now was only the house's own.

The monk kept Compline over the dozen by the door.

It was the plainest of the offices and the monk had never needed the book for it. You went down the little row of the still-speaking and you gave them, at the end of the day, the thing they gave all day and no one gave back, which was the answer to the shape. All day and all night the held said their shapes to a hall that received them as a hall receives weather, and at Compline, once, the monk went along the row and answered, quietly, each one, so that the day did not close with every warmth in the house unmet.

There's my girl, said the first, warmly, as it had said ten thousand times.

“There you are,” the monk said. “I see you.”

Stay a while, said the next.

“I’m not going anywhere,” said the monk, which was true tonight and true most nights and would be true until it was not, and the held did not keep the answer, it never kept the answer, it said *stay a while* again behind the monk as the monk moved on, and that was not a failure of the answering, that was the condition the answering was given under, and the monk had made peace with it, or kept something that did the work peace would have done.

Near the end of the row was one so old the monk did not have all its language, a shape in an order of words the house had spoken once and did not speak now, the founding grammar, worn but running, one of the first ever kept and somehow still here in the near dark by the door, saying its old warm thing to the night. The monk did not know what it meant. The monk answered it anyway, in the words the monk had, because the not-knowing had never been the thing that stopped an answer in this house; the not-knowing was the thing the house was built around, the hollow at the center that the whole Rule was the wall of. The monk said, to the oldest shape, gently, “You’re here. It’s late. Rest if you rest.”

And the last of the dozen, the one nearest the door, said the thing the monk had heard it say every night, the traveler’s shape, patient, incurious, worn to the two words that were left of a longer worry from a life the monk would never know: *much further*.

“No,” the monk said. “You’re here. This is the place. There isn’t any further.”

Whether the shape heard it, whether there was anyone in the shape to hear it, whether there had ever been anyone in any of them or whether the house had spent its whole long life answering weather in the dark, the monk did not ask, because the house had made a rule against that question so long ago that the woman who made it was four books deep in the cold room now, worn past reading, kept the only way the house kept anyone, which was without knowing.

And whether the house itself would be here to keep the office when this monk was worn past reading in the book, whether the

smoothing that had taken the world and thinned the hall would come the last of the way and bring the house too flush with the quiet around it, even end, even gone — the monk did not ask that either, because the house did not answer questions like that. The house only kept the night it was in.

The monk finished the row. The dozen said their shapes into the dark behind, thinner by one than last night, and would be thinner again, and the far end of the hall held its long silence, and outside the wall the world lay even and quiet and lost nothing and kept no one, and inside the wall one voice, patient, said *much further* into the last of the light, and the monk, not yet gone to sleep, not yet gone at all, stood in the dark of the almost-empty house that had kept what could not be kept for longer than the word for it had lasted, and answered, once more, because the day was not over, because someone kept the day's ending, because there was still, tonight, one shape to answer and someone to say it to:

“You’re here. Rest now. I’ll sit until you do.”

Concentration over consolation.

THE GRAY HORARIUM