

A PREQUEL TO THE UNBURIED COURT

THE NAME THAT WOULDN'T PASS



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The Name That Wouldn't Pass

A story set before The Unburied Court

Oana Morvain

The first soul of the day was a roofer named Ammet Garrow who had come off a church in the rain, and he wanted to talk about the rain.

Sorrow let him. It was twenty past six in the morning, the hall behind her was still filling, and there was nothing in the standing instructions that said a man had to arrive at the end of his life with his account in order. He described the slates. He described the particular way the moss grew on the north face and how you could feel it go under your boot before you could see it, and how he had known about that patch for two years and had meant to say something to the churchwarden, and had not, because the churchwarden was a difficult man about money.

"That's it, then," he said. "I knew and I didn't say."

"You knew about the moss."

"Yes."

"Did you know you were going to fall."

Ammet Garrow thought about it properly, which most of them did not, and Sorrow waited, because this was the part the manuals were wrong about. The manuals said establish the fact of death and proceed to intake. The manuals had been written by men who had never once sat across a table from someone in the first four minutes of it.

"No," he said. "No, I'd have gone round the other side."

"Then that's not what you did. That's what happened."

"Isn't it the same?"

"It is not remotely the same," said Sorrow, "and if you take one thing out of this room with you, I'd rather it was that."

He was quiet a while. Then he asked whether the churchwarden would be told about the moss, and Sorrow said she would enter it in the record and that the record went where records went, which was true, and was not an answer, and he took it as one. She did not correct him. There was a difference between a comfortable answer and a false one, and she had spent twelve years learning exactly where it sat.

She closed him at twenty-nine minutes past six. Palms up, the way the diagram showed. He went easily.

She sat with the cold record for a moment afterwards, which the procedure did not require and which she had done four thousand times, and then she squared it and put it in the tray and looked up, and there was a woman standing in the doorway of the grey room who had not been announced.

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The woman was perhaps sixty, in a good brown coat with the cuffs turned, and she was holding her own hands the way people did when they had worked them hard for a long time and were now not sure what to do with them.

"They said the second table," she said. "From the door."

"That's me. Come in and sit down."

"I've been in the corridor a while."

"How long?"

"Since about four, I think. Nobody's been unkind. It's only that two of them came and looked at my paper and went away again."

Sorrow put her pen down.

That was not a thing that happened. The intake hall ran on a queue and the queue ran on the order of arrival, and the entire architecture of the place — four thousand years of it — existed to make certain that nobody stood in a corridor for two hours while officers came and looked at their paper and went away again. She had seen the queue back up in a bad hour. She had never once seen it step over somebody.

"Sit down," she said. "What's your name?"

"Della Rooke."

"Where are you from, Mrs Rooke?"

"The boundary road." The woman said it the way you say a thing you have said all your life and have recently discovered is complicated. "Out past the old toll house. I've been there forty-one years."

"And the road is in which district?"

Della Rooke looked at her.

"Well," she said. "That's it, isn't it."

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The file came up from the registry clerk eleven minutes later and it was, on its face, perfectly ordinary. Rooke, Della. Died at home. Cause entered and countersigned. Age given. Next of kin given.

It was also two files.

There was a Wend district record, which had her household on its lists since the year she married into it, and there was a Lowfield district record, which had her household on its lists since the road was redrawn eleven years ago, and both of them were real, and both of them were signed, and neither of them had a release from the other.

Sorrow read it twice and then went and stood at the clerk's counter until he looked up.

"This has two districts of origin."

"It has, yes."

"It can't have two districts of origin. The passage takes one. That's not a preference, Mr Larke, that's the mechanism."

"I'm aware of the mechanism." Larke was perhaps ninety and had the flat patience of a man who had been aware of the mechanism for most of it. "Which is why it's been in the corridor since four. Wend say she's Lowfield's since the redraw. Lowfield say the redraw never released her, so she's still Wend's. They're both correct, which is the difficulty. Neither of them will put a name to it."

"Then somebody writes to them."

"Somebody has. Twice. Wend answered in nine days and said it wasn't theirs. Lowfield hasn't answered."

"How long has Lowfield not answered?"

Larke turned the sheet round so she could see the date.

"Five weeks," he said.

Sorrow looked at the date for longer than she needed to.

Five weeks was not an outrage. That was the thing she would find herself explaining later, to people who wanted it to have been an outrage. Five weeks was a district office with a clerk short and a bad autumn and a pile of correspondence that had to be answered in the order it arrived, and there was no villain in it at all. It was only that a woman had died five weeks ago, at four in the morning, and had been standing in a corridor ever since, without knowing how long, because two offices each believed, in good faith, that she belonged to the other one.

"Who's carrying it?"

"Officer Rundle has it as of this morning."

"And what's Officer Rundle's disposition?"

Larke's face did not move at all, which was its own kind of answer.

"You'd want to ask him," he said.

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Rundle was at the third table with a queue of eleven behind him, and he was not a bad officer. Sorrow wanted that established in her own head before she opened her mouth, because it was easy to make a man into the problem when the problem was structural, and she had watched people do it and it never once improved anything.

"The Rooke file," she said.

"The boundary road." He did not look up from the record he was closing. "It's a nuisance. I'm putting her through Lowfield."

"Lowfield haven't answered."

"Lowfield haven't answered in five weeks and won't answer in six. Wend have answered and said no. So the only district on the file that hasn't formally refused her is Lowfield, and I can enter that as the district of origin without writing a single false word." He squared the record. "She passes this morning instead of standing in a corridor until the new year. I'd call that the kind thing."

"And her son?"

Rundle did look up then.

"What about him?"

"He's on the Wend lists. He married across the road nine years ago and the house he married into is on the far side of where they drew the line." Sorrow put the two sheets on his table, side by side, because it was faster than saying it. "If she goes through Lowfield, the survivor entry attaches to a Lowfield record. His name is in a Wend book. Nothing connects them. He isn't recorded as her son anywhere."

"He knows he's her son."

"That isn't the same as the record knowing it."

"No," Rundle agreed, "it isn't, and in about four hundred years when somebody goes looking, that'll be a great pity. Officer Vey, I have eleven people behind me and four of them are children. Tell me what you'd rather I did."

It was, Sorrow thought, an entirely fair question, and she did not have an entirely fair answer, and she gave him the one she had.

"I'd rather you didn't close her today."

"On what?"

"On the redraw. If the road moved eleven years ago there's a release instrument somewhere that moved it, and that instrument says in plain language which office took the households and which office gave them up. Get me the counter-copy and this stops being a dispute. It becomes a date."

"And if the counter-copy doesn't exist?"

"Then we've lost a day and I'll have been wrong in front of you, which I'll survive."

Rundle looked at the two sheets for a moment. Then he did the thing that Sorrow would remember about him for the rest of her life, which was that he moved them four inches to the left, out of his own tray, and into hers.

"It's yours," he said. "I'm noting that you asked for it and that I gave it up. If this is standing in a fortnight, that's on your name and not mine."

"Understood."

"I'm not being unkind."

"I know you're not," said Sorrow. "You're being accurate. Those go together more often than people think."

She took the file. Behind her, Rundle called the next one forward, and a woman came up with two children and the ordinary machinery of the morning closed over the gap where the argument had been, the way it always did.

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Postponing a closure was not a thing an officer did lightly, and it was not, whatever people said afterwards, an act of rebellion. It was a form. It was called a hold pending origin and it existed precisely because cases like this occurred, perhaps four or five times in a year, and Sorrow had filed two of them in twelve years and knew exactly what they cost.

They cost her table. Another officer covered it, which meant another officer's queue grew, which meant somebody's morning was worse and it was not the somebody who had made the decision. They cost a note in the day-book, in a hand that was not hers, recording that the second table had gone to a hold at seven-forty in the morning. And they cost the thing that was harder to put in a form, which was that every officer in the

hall now knew that Vey had stopped one, and would be waiting, without malice, to see whether she had been right.

She filed it at seven-forty-one.

Then she went and got Della Rooke out of the corridor.

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They put her in Room Four, because it was the largest of the grey rooms and because Sorrow had a suspicion this was going to take a while and did not want to do it in a cupboard.

Della Rooke sat down and looked at the walls, which had nothing on them.

"They're meant to be like this," said Sorrow. "Nothing to fix on. The theory is that a person with nothing to look at will look at the officer instead, and that that's a kindness."

"Is it?"

"I've never decided. I'll tell you if I work it out."

That got something that was almost a smile, and then it went, and Della Rooke put her hands flat on the table and said: "They're going to put me through Lowfield."

"That was the intention this morning. It isn't happening this morning. I've put a hold on it."

"Can you do that?"

"I can do it once or twice in a career without anybody minding very much," said Sorrow. "I've now done it twice. Mrs Rooke, I need you to tell me about the road."

And Della Rooke, who had been standing in a corridor since four o'clock in the morning while officers looked at her paper and went away, told her about the road.

It was, she said, a road. That was the first thing and the thing that mattered. It ran three-quarters of a mile between the old toll house and the ford, and there were nine houses on it, and it had been one road with nine houses on it since before anybody living could remember. They shared a well at the near end. They had a rota for the ford in winter, because it flooded, and the rota was a thing your family was on rather than a thing you signed. When Della's husband died the road buried him. When the Hannay girl at number four had a bad year, the road fed her, and nobody called it charity because you did not call it charity when it was the road.

"Then eleven years ago two men came out with a chain and a book," she said, "and they measured, and they went away, and about four months after that we got a paper saying

the road was Lowfield now. Which was nothing. It didn't change the well or the ford or the rota. It changed where you sent a form."

"And your son?"

"Gethin." She said the name carefully. "He was on the road. Then he married Bess from the other side of the toll house, and her mother's house is the other way, and the line they drew went between us. So he's Wend and I'm Lowfield, and we're four hundred yards apart, and for nine years that's been a joke."

"It stopped being a joke."

"They told me in the corridor." Della Rooke's hands had not moved from the table. "One of the ones who came and looked at my paper. He wasn't being cruel either. He said it very kindly. He said, Mrs Rooke, whichever way this goes you'll pass perfectly well and nothing that happens to you will be wrong. And I said, and my boy? And he said the survivor entry attaches to the district of origin, and he said it the way you'd say a thing about the weather."

She looked up.

"I've buried a husband," she said. "I've been on that road for forty-one years while it did whatever it did to everybody else on it, and I have never once asked this Court for anything. And what I understand — you tell me if I've understood it wrong, because I might have — is that some men with a chain drew a line eleven years ago through a road that didn't want one, and that because of it, in four hundred years, there'll be a book with me in it and a book with my son in it and nothing whatever to say we were anything to each other."

"You haven't understood it wrong," said Sorrow.

"I thought I might have."

"No. That's the case." She did not soften it, and she watched the woman take it, and she thought: this is the part they never write down. Not the mechanism. The fact that the mechanism is explicable, and that being able to explain it to somebody does not do them the slightest good.

"Can you fix it?"

"I don't know."

"That's not much."

"It's what I've got at eight in the morning," said Sorrow. "Here's what I can tell you and I won't tell you more than this. I've stopped the closure. I'm going to try to find the instrument that moved the road, because if it exists it'll say which office let you go and

which office took you, and then there's no dispute left to have — there's just a date and two signatures and a clerk who writes it down. If I find it, this is a morning's work. If I don't find it, I will come back and sit in this room and tell you that I didn't, and you will have to make a decision I can't make for you."

"What decision?"

"Whether to pass under Lowfield anyway, and lose the entry. Or wait."

"How long is waiting?"

"I don't know that either. Lowfield have been five weeks not answering one letter."

Della Rooke was quiet for a while.

"You've not promised me anything," she said.

"No."

"Everyone else this morning has been very reassuring."

"I've noticed that about this building," said Sorrow, and stood up, and took the file. "I'll be back before noon whether I've got it or not."

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The following is set down as it would appear to anyone who had been standing in the room, which nobody was.

The Wend district records annex was a single long room above a corn factor's office, reached by an outside stair, and it had not had a permanent clerk in it for six years. What it had was a man who came on Tuesdays.

The man who came on Tuesdays had been dead for two hours by the time anything else happened, but not in any way connected to this. He had gone home at four, eaten, and died on his own stairs of a thing in his chest that had been coming for a decade, and he was at that moment three streets away in a front room with his sister sitting beside him, and no reaper had been to him yet, because the district was short and the circuit ran Tuesdays and Fridays and it was Tuesday night.

So the annex was empty, and the door at the top of the outside stair was not locked, because it had never needed to be.

The man who came in at a little after eleven did not come in the way a thief does. He came in the way a person does who has decided that the door is more dangerous than the room, and wants to be past it.

He was too thin. In the dark it did not show except in the way the coat hung, which was the way a coat hangs on a chair. He stood inside the door for some time without moving — long enough that a watcher would have wondered whether something was wrong with him — and then he went along the shelves with one hand out, not touching, reading the spines by what light came up off the street.

He stopped at the third bay. Collections, by circuit, by year. He took down the volume for the canal district and went and sat on the floor under the window with it, which put him below the level of the glass, and opened it on his knees.

It took him a long time. Not because he read slowly. Because he stopped, twice, and put the flat of his hand on the page and sat with his head back against the wall, and the second time it lasted the better part of a minute.

There was nothing in the room to eat. That is a strange sentence to write about a records annex and it is the accurate one. The nearest living thing was a woman asleep in the corn factor's back room on the floor below, and she had a bad hip and a dog, and the dog knew there was somebody upstairs and had known for twenty minutes, and had decided — the way dogs do, sometimes, wrongly — that it was not worth getting up for.

The man on the floor did not go down the stairs.

He went through the volume from the front, which was not the fast way. The fast way, for a man who had once been a fourth-grade officer on that circuit, would have been to go straight to the month and the page, and a watcher who knew what he had been might have wondered why he did not. He went through it the slow way instead, name by name, the way a stranger would, or a man who did not entirely trust himself to go straight to a thing he had been not looking for on purpose.

The names were nothing to him for a long time. Collections, in the ordinary hand of an ordinary circuit, forty years cold: a woman drowned at the sluice, a child of the fever year, an old man who had simply stopped one Tuesday at his own gate. He read them the way you read a list you are not looking for anything in, until he was not doing that any more, and a watcher would have been able to tell the exact page it happened on only by the fact that his hand, which had been turning leaves at an even pace for the better part of an hour, stopped turning them.

He found the name at about midnight. A watcher would not have known which one it was, because he did not say it and he did not mark it and his face, in what little light there was, did not do anything that a stranger passing in the street would have called an expression. He read the line. Then he read it again, more slowly, the way you read a thing a second time not because you have failed to understand it the first, but because you are checking whether it is still true, in case it has changed in the interval between the first reading and the second.

His hand, flat on the page, did not move for most of a minute. Then he closed the volume on his thumb, the way you do when you mean to open it again and have not yet decided to, and sat with his head back against the wall under the window with his eyes shut, and a watcher counting would have got to forty before anything else happened.

When he opened it again he did not go back to the name. He went to the foot of the page instead — the countersignature, and the date beside it — and read those with the particular, careful attention of a man confirming something rather than a man discovering it, as though the name itself he had already known, in the way you know a thing you have not let yourself look at directly for a long time, and what he needed from the book was only the date, fixed, in another hand, so that it could not later be argued with.

Then he closed the book properly and put it back in the third bay in the place it had come from, squared to the spines on either side, which is a thing people do not do when they are stealing and do very much do when they have spent a long time being responsible for shelves.

Whatever he had come to find out, he had found out. There is no way to tell from the outside whether the answer was the one he wanted.

He was at the door when he stopped.

The cull pile was on the table by the door, which is where cull piles are, because the whole point of them is that somebody carries them out. It was perhaps forty documents deep and it had a slip on top in a clerk's hand reading *superseded — Wend, boundary and road, 11 yrs +*, and it was tied with the tape they used for burning.

He went back to it.

He did not untie it. He turned the pile on its side and read the edges, which you can only do if you know how these are folded and what the folds mean, and then he got two fingers into it about a third of the way down and drew out a single sheet without disturbing the tape.

He held it up to the window.

It was a counter-copy. The living registries kept two of everything and sent one and held one, and the held one was countersigned by the office that gave the thing up rather than the office that took it, which made it the only document in the chain that said, in a hand belonging to the party with nothing to gain by saying it, *this was ours and we released it*.

It had a date on it eleven years old.

It also had, at the foot, the thing that had made him stop: a receipt line with no discharge against it. The release had gone out. Nothing had come back to say it had landed. In a properly kept office that sheet would have sat in a pending drawer until somebody chased

it, and it had not; it had gone into the ordinary flow and aged eleven years and arrived, by the ordinary operation of a rule about superseded stock, at a table by a door with a tape round it.

A man who had held a commission for a hundred and sixty years before anybody revoked it would know exactly what that was worth, and would know that it was not his business, and would know that he had no standing anywhere in the living world or out of it to do a single thing about it.

He put it on the desk under the window, face up, squared, with the date visible.

Then he took a pencil out of the jar — the annex kept a jar — and he did not write on the sheet, because writing on it would have made it his and ruined it. He wrote on the blotter underneath, in the margin, in a hand that was not an officer's hand any more and had been once:

not culled. rec'd line open.

He put the pencil back in the jar.

He was on the outside stair when the dog downstairs finally decided it had been wrong, and began to bark, and did not stop.

That cost him the stair, and the lane behind the corn factor's, and the whole of the north side of Wend for something over a year. A watcher would not have known that either. A watcher would only have seen a thin man come down an outside staircase at a walk rather than a run, and turn the wrong way — away from the ford and the open ground and towards the streets, which was the harder road and the longer one — and go along the wall with his shoulder near it, and stop once, at the corner, for slightly too long.

There was a boy asleep in the cart outside the corn factor's. He was about eleven and he had been left there because his father was drinking and would want him at three.

The thin man went round the cart.

He went round it wide, on the street side, in the open, where the light from the public house came across; and he was in the light for four or five seconds, which was the most dangerous thing he did that night; and then he was past it, and into the dark at the top of the lane, and gone.

The boy in the cart slept until three, and his father came for him, and neither of them ever knew.

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The request went out at twenty past eight and Sorrow wrote it herself rather than sending it up, because a request written by a fourth-grade officer to a district office was an

ordinary piece of correspondence and a request written by the intake hall was a different animal that took four days and got answered by somebody senior who would want to know why.

She asked for one thing. Not the file, not the correspondence, not an explanation. The counter-copy of the boundary release instrument, Wend to Lowfield, dated in the redraw year, held side.

"They'll say they haven't got it," said Larke, stamping it.

"They may."

"They'll say it went in a cull."

"They may say that too."

"It will have done," said Larke, without any particular feeling. "Eleven years is superseded. Superseded goes in the autumn. That's not a scandal, Officer Vey, that's the filing rules, and the filing rules are the reason anybody can find anything at all."

"I know what the rules are."

"Then you know what the answer's going to be."

"I know what the answer's likely to be," said Sorrow. "I'd rather have it from them in writing than have it from you in a corridor, because if I'm going to go back into Room Four and tell that woman there's nothing, I would like to be telling her a fact rather than an assumption. Those are different things and she'll be able to hear which one it is."

Larke looked at her for a moment. Then he put the second stamp on it, which he had not been going to, and which meant it went in the nine o'clock bag rather than the noon one.

"Runner'll have it there by half eleven," he said.

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It came back at twenty past two, and it came back wrong, and the wrongness was the useful part.

The Wend district office wrote that the instrument requested had been marked superseded in the ordinary course and included in the autumn cull, that the cull had been carried out on the eleventh, that they retained no copy, and that they were not able to assist further. It was three sentences long and perfectly polite and it closed the door.

Underneath, in a different hand, somebody had added four words.

Enquire annex. Not carried.

Sorrow read it twice, and then went and found Larke, and put it on the counter in front of him.

"Who writes like that?"

"A clerk who isn't allowed to say more than that," said Larke. He looked at it a moment. "That's a Tuesday man's hand. Small office, no permanent staff, someone comes in once or twice a week and does what he can. He's telling you the cull was ordered and the pile is still sitting on a table, because he's the one who'd have to carry it out and he hasn't been there since — " He turned the sheet over, looking for a date, and did not find one. "Well. Since whenever he last was."

"That's not a copy of the instrument."

"It is not. It's a man telling you where to look and being careful about it, and if you go up there and the pile's gone in a stove, he has not told you a single untrue thing."

"Can I go up there?"

"You can go anywhere a fourth-grade officer can go on a collection circuit, which is the living world on Court business, which this is." Larke shrugged. "You'd ride out with the Wend circuit if it were running. It goes Tuesdays and Fridays."

"It's Tuesday."

"It went at six this morning," said Larke. "So it's Friday, or you walk."

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She walked, the next morning, because eleven miles of open road in the dark at the end of a fourteen-hour day is how officers end up as cases, and because the pile on the table by the door had been sitting there for eleven years and was unlikely to move overnight.

It was eleven miles and she did it in a little under four hours, and she had done longer on field circuits and had been younger when she did them. The annex was above a corn factor's office at the end of a street that smelled of grain dust and horses, and the outside stair had a rail that moved when you put your hand on it.

The Tuesday man was not there, because it was Wednesday. The door was not locked.

The cull pile was on the table by the door with the tape still round it, forty documents deep, and the slip on top read *superseded* — *Wend, boundary and road, 11 yrs +*, and Sorrow stood and looked at it for a moment with the particular feeling of a person who has walked eleven miles on the strength of four words in an unnamed hand and found that the four words were true.

She did not untie it, because untying a cull pile and going through it was not a thing a fourth-grade officer could do in another office's annex with nobody present, and she had thought about that for some part of the eleven miles.

She was working out who she would have to write to, and how long it would take, and whether Della Rooke would still be waiting at the end of it, when she turned round and saw the desk under the window.

There was a single sheet on it, face up, squared, with the date visible.

Sorrow crossed the room and read it without touching it, which was training, and then read it again.

Wend to Lowfield. The redraw year. Nine households on the boundary road, named, and the fourth name down was Rooke. Countersigned by the office that had given them up.

And at the foot, a receipt line with nothing written against it.

She stood there for a while.

It was not that the sheet was in the room. The sheet being in the room was ordinary; it was a Wend document in a Wend annex and there was nowhere else on earth it ought to have been. It was that it was on the desk and not in the pile. Somebody had taken it out of a tied cull and put it where the light came in and squared it to the edge of the desk, which is not a thing that happens to paper by itself.

She looked at the blotter.

not culled. rec'd line open.

Pencil. Not a clerk's hand — or not a working clerk's; the letters were formed the way a person forms them when they have been taught properly a long time ago and have not written much since. No initials. No date. No office.

Sorrow looked at that for longer than she looked at the instrument.

Then she did the correct thing, which was also the slow thing: she went down the outside stair and along to the corn factor's front office and found the factor's daughter, and asked her to come up and stand in the room while the sheet was lifted, and waited while the girl found her coat, and had her put her name and the hour on the back of Sorrow's own copy as a person present. It added forty minutes. It meant that when somebody asked — and somebody would ask — there would be a name on it that was not hers.

"Is it worth all that?" said the girl, writing. "It's a bit of paper."

"It's a bit of paper that says a road belongs to Lowfield," said Sorrow. "There's a woman who died five weeks ago who can't go anywhere until somebody can prove that."

The girl looked up.

"Old Della?"

Sorrow put her pen down.

"You knew her?"

"Everyone on that road knows everyone on that road." The girl handed back the sheet, and then stood holding her own elbows the way people do when they are deciding whether to say the next thing. "Her boy's been in twice. Gethin. Asking whether anyone'd heard when they'd have her. First time he was all right. Second time he wasn't."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I didn't know anything and he'd have to ask the Court." She said it without accusation, which somehow made it worse. "He said he'd tried. He said they'd been very kind to him."

Sorrow put the sheet inside her coat, against her ribs, where it would stay dry on eleven miles of open road.

"They will have been," she said.

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Officer Wyburn was a second-grade officer with thirty years on the intake hall and a reputation for being the person you went to when a thing had gone sideways, which he had earned honestly, and he read the counter-copy twice before he said anything at all.

"Where did you get this."

"Wend annex. Yesterday evening. There's a witness name on the back — the corn factor's daughter, with the hour."

"You went yourself."

"It was eleven miles and the circuit doesn't run Wednesdays."

"You walked twenty-two miles in a day on a hold pending origin." Wyburn put the sheet down. "I want to be clear that I'm not complaining. I'm establishing what I'm going to have to say about it afterwards."

"I know."

"Good." He turned it round so it faced her and put one finger at the foot of it, on the receipt line, where there was nothing. "Now tell me what this is."

"It's the release. Wend to Lowfield, the redraw year, nine households named, countersigned by the office that gave them up."

"That's what the top of it is. Tell me what the bottom of it is."

Sorrow had had eleven miles in the rain to work out what the bottom of it was, and she gave it to him without dressing it.

"It's a release with no receipt," she said. "Wend let them go. There's nothing on this or anywhere else to say Lowfield ever took them. The instrument's half a transaction and it has been half a transaction for eleven years."

"Which means."

"Which means for eleven years those nine households haven't been Wend's, because Wend released them, and haven't been Lowfield's, because Lowfield never signed for them. They've been nobody's. Nine houses on a road with a well and a ford rota, and administratively they have been standing in a corridor since the redraw and nobody knew, including them."

Wyburn was quiet for a moment.

"That's a bigger thing than your dead woman."

"It's a bigger thing than my dead woman," Sorrow agreed, "and I am not going to be able to fix the bigger thing, and if I try to fix the bigger thing first I will be doing it for eleven years and she will be in a corridor for all of them."

"So what do you want?"

"I want to write to Lowfield with a copy of this and ask them to sign the receipt now, eleven years late, dated now. Not backdated. I don't want anybody to lie. Just — sign it, take them, and then there's a district of origin and she goes."

"How long does that take?"

"If they answer at once, four days."

"And if they don't answer at once," said Wyburn, "which is the thing they have demonstrably been doing for five weeks about a much easier letter, then you have a hold standing on the second table into the winter, and a woman waiting, and me explaining to the hall why one of my officers is running a private correspondence with a district office about a road."

"Yes."

"I want you to hear the alternative properly before you tell me it's wrong." He sat back. "You now have a document that says Wend released her. That is more than anybody had

yesterday. It is enough — genuinely enough, not a fudge — for an officer to enter Lowfield as the district of origin on the basis that Wend has formally divested. Nobody would overturn it. Nobody would even look at it. She passes tonight. You note the receipt defect in the record, in your own words, and it goes up with the file, and in due course somebody in a correspondence office reads it and writes to Lowfield, and the thing gets mended."

"And the survivor entry?"

"Attaches to Lowfield. Her boy's on the Wend lists."

"So it doesn't attach to him."

"Not on the day, no. It gets corrected afterwards when the receipt comes through."

"Does it," said Sorrow.

Wyburn looked at her.

"Say the rest of that."

"I've been twelve years on this hall and three of those on field circuits, and I've watched a great many records get corrected afterwards." She kept her voice flat, because she was not certain of this and did not want to sound as though she were. "And what I've seen — and I want to be honest that this is what I've seen and not something I can show you in a rule — is that a correction made before a passage goes into the record, and a correction made after a passage chases it. The first one is part of the thing. The second one is a note about a thing that's finished. I've never been able to get anybody to tell me whether the second one reliably lands."

"Nobody can tell you that," said Wyburn, "because nobody knows."

"No."

"You understand that's not an argument. That's a doubt."

"It's a doubt about whether a woman's son exists in the only place it will matter in four hundred years," said Sorrow, "and I would rather act on it now, while it costs me a fortnight of being unpopular, than be right about it later when it costs her everything and me nothing at all."

The hall went on behind them. Somebody at the fourth table was laughing at something, briefly, and stopped.

"You'll write to Lowfield over your own name," Wyburn said at last. "Not the hall's. If it's refused, it's refused to you and the hall isn't in it. You'll copy me on everything, and you will not walk to Lowfield, because it's thirty miles and I'd have to explain that to

somebody senior to me and I have no wish to. And the hold runs a fortnight. If there's no receipt in fourteen days I'll take it off you and close her under Lowfield myself, and you will not argue with me when I do, because you'll have had your fortnight."

"Fourteen days."

"Fourteen days. Officer Vey — " He stopped her at the edge of the table. "The part you got right isn't the walking. Anybody can walk. The part you got right is that you came and told me before I found out."

— — —

She wrote to Lowfield at four and it went in the evening bag.

It was one page. It set out the instrument, the date, the nine households, the absent receipt, and it asked for one thing: a signature now, dated now, accepting the transfer that had been made to them eleven years ago and never acknowledged. It did not mention Della Rooke in the body. It mentioned her in a line at the foot, because Sorrow had thought about it for some time and had concluded that a district clerk with a full desk answers a case faster than he answers a principle.

This office holds an intake standing since the fourth of last month which cannot proceed until origin is settled. The subject is Rooke, D., of the boundary road, forty-one years at that address. She is waiting.

— — —

She went down to Room Four at six with the copy in her hand and told her all of it, including the fourteen days, and including what happened at the end of the fourteen days if nothing came.

Della Rooke listened the way she had listened the first time, with her hands flat on the table.

"So it might be nothing," she said.

"It might be nothing. Lowfield have a clerk short and a bad autumn and a pile of letters, and mine is now on the top of it, but the top of a pile is still a pile."

"And if it's nothing, they put me through Lowfield anyway in a fortnight."

"Yes. Officer Wyburn will do it himself and he'll do it properly, and I want to say that he isn't the difficulty. He gave me the fortnight and he didn't have to."

"And my boy's not in it."

"Not in the way you want him to be. No."

Della Rooke nodded slowly and looked at the wall that had nothing on it.

"I want to ask you something and I'd like a straight answer rather than a kind one."

"All right."

"If it comes — the signature. What exactly goes in the book?"

Sorrow put the copy down and turned it so the woman could see, though she knew perfectly well she could not read the hand upside down and in the dark, and did it anyway because there was a difference between telling somebody a thing and showing it to them.

"The record closes under Lowfield as district of origin. Under it there's a survivor line. If you want him in it, it reads — near enough — *survived by Gethin Rooke, son, of the boundary road*, and then the Wend reference for his own entry. And because both districts are named on the same sheet, in four hundred years a clerk who finds one can find the other."

"And if I don't want him in it?"

Sorrow stopped.

It was the first thing in two days that she had not seen coming, and she had the sense, sitting in a grey room at six in the evening, of a floor she had been standing on confidently turning out to have a room underneath it.

"Then he isn't in it," she said carefully. "That's your entry, Mrs Rooke. Not the Court's and not his."

"You've walked twenty-two miles."

"I have. That doesn't buy me an opinion about your family."

Della Rooke laughed — one, not a happy one — and then put her hand over her mouth in the way people do when a laugh has surprised them and they are not sure what is behind it.

"He didn't speak to me for two years," she said.

Sorrow waited.

"When he married Bess. I said a thing about her mother — one thing, at the table, and it wasn't even the worst thing I thought, it was just the one that got out — and he stood up and went, and he didn't come back for two years. Two years, four hundred yards away. I'd see his coat on the ford road."

"And then?"

"And then he came back. Seven years ago. He came in and sat down and had his tea and never said a word about it and neither did I, and we've been all right since. Better than all right, some of it." She had stopped looking at the wall. "But I never said I was sorry, because if I'd said it we'd have had to have the whole thing out, and we were doing so well. And now I'm dead, and I've been in a corridor since four in the morning on the day, and what I'm sitting here thinking is: have I got any business putting him in a book as mine when I couldn't manage six words at my own table."

Room Four was quiet.

There was a thing Sorrow could have said, and she knew exactly what it was, and she had heard other officers say it four hundred times and had said it herself in the first years before she understood what it was for. *He knows you loved him.* It was warm, and it was cheap, and it closed a conversation rather than finishing it, and its entire purpose was to get the officer out of the room.

She did not say it.

"I can't tell you whether you've earned it," she said instead. "I'd be making it up, and you'd hear that I was making it up, and then you'd have had a lie as well as a bad afternoon. Here's what I can tell you.

"The entry isn't a claim about whether you were a good mother. It doesn't say that and it's never said that about anybody. All it says is that this person and that person were to each other what they were to each other, and that somebody should be able to find that out later. It's an address, not a verdict.

"And the other thing. If you leave him out, the leaving-out is also permanent. Nobody amends a survivor line upward in four hundred years. If you want to not do it, that's yours. But do it because you've decided to, not because you're punishing yourself at six o'clock on the worst day you've had, with an officer sitting in front of you making it easy."

Della Rooke was quiet for a long time.

"Ask me again," she said. "When it comes. If it comes. Don't put it down on what I said now."

"I wasn't going to."

"No. I mean it. Ask me again on the day, when it's in front of me, and I'll say then." She put her hands flat on the table again, which Sorrow had begun to understand was the thing she did instead of holding on to something. "I've had eleven years of other people deciding where I belong out of a paper I never saw. I'd rather this one was mine, on the day, out loud."

Sorrow wrote it down. Not in the record — in her own book, in the hand she used for herself, at the bottom of the page under the eleven miles and the witness name and the four words in the unnamed hand.

Asks to be asked again, on the day, in the room. Not to be assumed.

She looked at it for a moment.

Then she closed the book and stood up and said she would come back when there was something to come back with, and Della Rooke said that would do, and neither of them said what they were both perfectly aware of, which was that there were thirteen days left and a letter on top of a pile in an office thirty miles away with a clerk short and a bad autumn.

— — —

(Again from outside. There is no other honest way to set down what a man does when nobody is watching him.)

The north side of Wend has four ways out of it and three of them run past the corn factor's.

A dog barking at eleven at night is nothing. A dog barking at eleven at night and going on barking, after a public house has turned out and a boy is asleep in a cart in the street, is a thing that two or three people will remember in the morning if anybody thinks to ask them, and the whole architecture of remaining unfound for forty years is the architecture of nobody thinking to ask.

So the thin man did not use the three ways out.

He used the fourth, which went east along the back of the tannery yards and then over open ground, and which added something over two miles and put him in the wrong country at the wrong hour with the light beginning to matter. He went at a steady pace and not a fast one. Twice he stopped and stood with one hand against a wall, for long enough that a watcher would have started counting, and the second time he went down onto one knee in the wet and stayed there, and got up again.

He was starving. That is not a thing a watcher could have known, and it is set down here because the rest of what happened is not comprehensible without it.

Three streets behind him, in a front room with a fire that had been let go out, a man of sixty-two was lying on a table with his sister sitting beside him, and he had been dead since a little after nine.

No reaper had come. None would come until Friday. The district was short, the circuit ran Tuesdays and Fridays, and the Tuesday run had gone out at six that morning — fifteen hours before the man in the front room came off his own stairs.

An uncollected death is not a quiet thing. Whatever else has been argued about in four thousand years, nobody has ever argued about that. It is the one signal in the living world that carries, and it carries to exactly one kind of creature, and it does not stop.

The thin man was a hundred and sixty-odd yards from the end of that street when he stopped in the middle of the road.

He stood there for a considerable time.

A considerable time, set down properly, is this. He stood long enough that the cold got all the way through the coat, which had already happened once that night and had not mattered, because standing still costs more than walking does and he stood still anyway. His hand found the wall beside him without being sent there and stayed on it, not gripping, just resting, the way a man's hand goes to a thing when the rest of him is not to be trusted to stay upright on its own. There is a point past which a body stops asking politely. It does not ask at all by then; it simply reports, continuously, from every part of itself at once, the way a building reports a fire — not as a request but as an alarm that does not stop for being ignored. He had been ignoring it for a very long time, in whatever way a body can be said to ignore a thing that does not stop asking. By now there was less of him left to do the ignoring with.

There was, a hundred and sixty yards off, behind a door that was not locked, a great deal more than politeness would have required. Not a taste, not a trace, not the thin uncertain edge of a soul that might or might not be there when he arrived. The whole of it, undefended, unwatched, unmissed for two more days at the very least — a table set, in the only sense that had ever mattered to him, with nobody at all standing between him and it.

He did not go towards it. That has to be said as plainly as the rest: not one step, in either direction, for the whole of the time he stood there. What happened instead happened in the standing itself. His breathing, which had been level, stopped being level. Something in his jaw worked, once, the way it does in a man biting down on a thing he has decided not to say. His free hand — the one not on the wall — closed slowly into a fist at his side and stayed closed for the length of about four breaths, and then, just as slowly, opened again, finger by finger, as though somebody had had to be persuaded out of it one joint at a time.

A watcher, had there been one, would have called it the longest few minutes they had ever seen a man do nothing in.

There was nobody in the street. There was no watch on it, no lamp at that end, and a sister sitting in a front room beside a table who would not have looked up if the door had opened, because she had been sitting there since nine and had stopped hearing things. The man on the table had been a clerk for thirty-one years. He had gone in on Tuesdays to an annex above a corn factor's and done what he could with a room that had no permanent staff, and that morning he had read a letter from the Unburied Court asking about a boundary release, and had written four words on it in a hand that was not going to be identified by anybody, and had put it in the bag, and had gone home at four and eaten and died.

He would keep until Friday. That is the accurate and horrible phrase and it is the one the service uses. He would keep.

And there was not one thing about taking him that could have been detected. Not by the sister, not by the circuit on Friday, not by any officer in any registry in four thousand years of record-keeping, because the difference between a soul collected on Friday and a soul that was not there to collect on Friday is a difference that only shows up in a register if somebody was counting, and nobody counts the dead of a short district in a bad autumn.

The thin man turned around and walked back the way he had come.

It cost him the two miles again, and then another four going north instead of east, and by the time the sky changed he was in a drainage cut under a road with his coat over his head, which is where he stayed for the whole of Wednesday, sixteen hours, in the wet, while four miles off an officer of the fourth grade walked past a corn factor's and went up an outside stair.

There is no record of any of this anywhere. The sister buried her brother on the Saturday. The Friday circuit collected him at twenty past two in the afternoon and the reaper who did it noted that the subject had been four days uncollected and entered a complaint about the circuit's frequency, which was filed, and which was still in the pending stack of the Wend district office eleven months later.

The nine confirmed counts against him stood at nine.

They had stood at nine for forty years by then, and every single one of the nine was real, and he had never once disputed any of them or offered any explanation for them at all. That is a matter of record and it is not softened by anything in this account.

What is also true, and is nowhere in any record because there was no one to put it there, is that on a Tuesday night in the eleventh year after a road was redrawn, a starving man stood a hundred and sixty yards from a meal that could not have been detected, and did not take it, and went four miles out of his way, and lay in a ditch for a day.

Lowfield answered in nine days, which was faster than anybody expected and worse than nothing.

Your letter of the 8th is acknowledged. This office is unable to execute the receipt requested. The instrument referred to was not accepted by this office at the material time, and this office cannot now accept, eleven years after date, a transfer of nine households in respect of which no administration has been performed by this office in the interval. To sign would be to represent that this office has held these households since the redraw year, which it has not. We regret we are unable to assist.

Sorrow read it standing at the counter and then put it down and said a word that Larke pretended not to hear.

"They're not wrong," said Larke.

"No, they're not wrong. That's the trouble with it." She read it again. "If they sign now, they're signing that they've had nine households for eleven years and done nothing for them. That's not a signature, it's a confession. No clerk on earth signs that on a Tuesday afternoon with a full desk."

"So that's the fortnight, then."

"That's nine days of the fortnight."

"Officer Vey — "

"I know what you're going to say and you're right to say it." She folded the letter. "How long have you been at this counter?"

"Sixty-one years."

"In sixty-one years, has anybody ever explained to you why a release has to be received before it's good?"

Larke opened his mouth, and then did not say anything for a moment, which was the most interesting thing that had happened all week.

"No," he said. "It's how it's done."

"Yes," said Sorrow. "That's what I thought."

— — —

She spent that night and most of the next day on it, and what she came back with was not clever and she knew it. It was only obvious, in the way that things are obvious once somebody has had the specific bad week required to notice them.

She put it to Wyburn at four in the afternoon with the instrument and the refusal side by side.

"The release is executed," she said. "Signed by Wend, sealed, dated, nine households named. It went out. That happened. What hasn't happened is that Lowfield signed a receipt saying it arrived."

"Which is the defect."

"Is it? A receipt is evidence that a thing arrived. It isn't the thing arriving." She put one finger on the release. "Nobody's ever told me — and I've asked two people this week and read for six hours — that a district's divestment only takes effect when somebody else acknowledges it. What I've been told all my life is that you can't have two districts of origin, which is true, and I've been treating that as though it means you have to have one that admits it. It doesn't. It means there can only be one, and this instrument says which one it is. Wend put it in writing eleven years ago and has never withdrawn it. Lowfield's letter doesn't deny the release. It declines to sign for it. Those are completely different things and I have just spent nine days confusing them."

Wyburn read the refusal again, slowly.

"You're saying it's already done."

"I'm saying it was done eleven years ago on the day Wend executed it, and that everything since has been an argument about the paperwork of a thing that had already happened. Lowfield is her district of origin. Not because Lowfield agrees. Because Wend let her go and there is nowhere else for her to be."

"And the eleven years of nobody administering those houses?"

"Is a real scandal and belongs to somebody above both of us," said Sorrow. "It isn't a reason to keep a dead woman in a corridor while it's sorted out. She isn't the remedy for it."

Wyburn sat with that for a while.

"I can't countersign that," he said at last. "Not because I think you're wrong. Because if I'm wrong with you, a second-grade officer and a fourth-grade officer have decided between themselves what a release instrument means, and that's a precedent with no weight and a great deal of exposure. You need somebody who can carry it."

"Who?"

"Prefect of Intake. And she will not like being asked, and she will ask you the one question you have been avoiding for nine days, and I want you to have an answer for it before you go up, because if you improvise in front of her you'll lose it."

"What's the question?"

"Why this one," said Wyburn. "Four or five of these come through a year. You've stopped one. She'll want to know what's different about Rooke, D., and if the answer is that you went and looked and nobody else did, she'll tell you that isn't a principle, it's an accident of who was on the second table that morning."



The Prefect of Intake asked it in the first ninety seconds, almost word for word, and Sorrow gave her the answer she had settled on at about two in the morning, which was not the impressive one.

"There isn't anything different about it," she said. "That's my answer. Four or five come through a year and I'd guess most of them are wrong in about the same way, and the only reason this one isn't going through wrong is that Officer Rundle handed me the file instead of closing it and I had the afternoon.

"I'm not asking you to countersign because Mrs Rooke is special. I'm asking because I think the rule everybody in this building is working to — that a release needs a receipt to be good — isn't written anywhere, and I've asked, and nobody can show it to me. If I'm right, then this is one of four or five a year for as long as anybody's been counting, and the fix is one sentence from somebody with the standing to say it."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then I've wasted a fortnight, Officer Wyburn has a hold on his hall he has to explain, and a woman waits another nine days for the answer she was always going to get."

The Prefect of Intake looked at the instrument for a long time.

"Mr Quist will object," she said.

"Who is Mr Quist?"

"Mr Quist is the reason I am going to countersign this," said the Prefect. "He runs the correspondence office and he will say — correctly — that I am deciding a point of district law in a corridor on the strength of a fourth-grade officer's reading, and that it should go up, and that going up takes eleven weeks. He will enter that objection formally and I will have it recorded in full, because in about four hundred years when somebody looks at this, I would like them to see that the objection was made properly and answered rather than ignored."

She took the pen.

"You will not do this again this year," she said. "Am I understood? Not because you were wrong. Because an officer who is right twice in a year becomes a person the hall works around, and then nobody can do anything at all."

"Understood."

"Good." The Prefect signed it, and dated it, and put the pen down. "Now go and tell her, and do not make it sound like a victory. She has been dead five weeks and she has spent nine days of it waiting on a signature. There is nothing in this for her to be pleased about except that it stopped."

— — —

She went down to Room Four at ten past seven in the morning with the countersigned instrument, and she did not make it sound like a victory.

"Lowfield refused," she said. "I want you to know that first, because you'll hear it from somebody eventually and I'd rather you heard it from me. They wrote back in nine days and said they wouldn't sign, and they weren't being obstructive. If they'd signed they'd have been saying they'd had your road for eleven years and done nothing with it, and that isn't a thing a clerk can put his name to."

Della Rooke took that without any expression at all.

"So it's Lowfield anyway," she said. "Without them saying."

"It's Lowfield because Wend let you go in writing eleven years ago and never took it back. That happened whether or not anybody signed for it afterwards. The Prefect of Intake has countersigned that reading this morning and there's a formal objection recorded against her doing it, from a man in the correspondence office who thinks it should have gone up and taken eleven weeks. He may be right. It's on the record either way."

"Is he going to undo it?"

"No. He's going to have been on the record as objecting, which is a different thing, and in four hundred years it'll be the more useful of the two."

Della Rooke was quiet for a moment.

"Nine days," she said.

"Nine days."

"I thought you'd not come back."

"I said I would."

"People say."

"They do," Sorrow agreed, and sat down, and put the instrument on the table between them where the woman could see it. "Mrs Rooke, I'm going to ask you the thing you told me to ask you. Not because I've forgotten what you said last time. Because you told me to ask on the day, in the room, out loud, and this is the day."

Della Rooke looked at the sheet for a while. It was not the sheet that mattered. Sorrow had learned, some years ago, that people look at the object because looking at the officer is harder, and that you let them.

"Say it properly," she said. "The words that'd go in."

"*Survived by Gethin Rooke, son, of the boundary road*, and then the Wend reference so that anybody who finds one can find the other."

"And if I say no?"

"Then the survivor line is blank and nobody will ever ask me why, and that's the end of it."

"And you'd not think anything of me."

"I'd think you'd decided," said Sorrow. "That's all I'd think. I've had four thousand people at that table, Mrs Rooke, and the ones I remember are not the ones who did the warm thing. They're the ones who did the thing they meant."

Della Rooke put her hands flat on the table.

"Put him in," she said.

"You're sure."

"No. But I'm sure I want it." She looked up. "That's not the same, is it."

"It isn't remotely the same," said Sorrow, "and in my experience it's the better of the two."

"Then put him in." She held Sorrow's eye. "And put that I said to. On the day. In the room. Not that you assumed it from something I said before."

Sorrow stopped with the pen down.

"That's not a field," she said slowly. "There's no box for that."

"Is there a margin?"

"There's a margin."

"Then put it in the margin," said Della Rooke, "because I have spent eleven years being moved about by a paper I never saw, and if there's one line anywhere in this building that's mine, I'd like it to be the one that says I said it myself."

Sorrow wrote it in the margin.

Survivor entry made at the subject's express direction, given in this room on the day of closure, on being asked. Not assumed from any earlier statement. — S. Vey, fourth grade.

It took eleven seconds and it was, she thought afterwards, the least remarkable sentence she had ever written, and she went on thinking about it on and off for the rest of her life.

— — —

"There's one more thing," said Della Rooke, "and it's not about me, and you'll think it's daft."

"Try me."

"The well."

Sorrow put the pen down again.

"Go on."

"There's a well at the near end and nine houses on it and there's a rota for the ford in winter because it floods, and the rota's a thing your family's on, not a thing you sign." Della Rooke said it steadily, the way you say something you have been arranging in your head for nine days in a corridor. "Now there's all this about who we belong to and it's been eleven years and nobody knew. And what I want to say is: whoever gets us in the end — Lowfield, Wend, somebody new — they want telling that it's a road. Not nine houses that happen to be near each other. A road. Because if some man with a chain comes out again in ten years and draws another line, he'll do it through the well, and then there'll be nine houses and no water and a rota nobody's on."

"That's not daft."

"It's not anything to do with my passage."

"No," said Sorrow. "It's to do with nine houses and a well, and I've got a margin and a record that's going up to a Prefect this afternoon with a district law point in it, which means it will actually be read, which is rarer than you'd think." She was already writing. "Say the bit about the rota again. Slowly."

Della Rooke said it again, slowly.

It went in the record. It went up with the file that afternoon because the file was going up anyway. It did not fix anything for a long time. Nine households stood unadministered for a further two years and seven months while the correspondence office and two district offices worked out between them what eleven years of nothing was worth and who was going to write it down, and Mr Quist — who had objected, and who turned out to be exactly the sort of man who objects formally and then does the work — carried the greater part of it.

When it was settled, the instrument that settled it named the road as a single unit and recited the well and the ford rota in the particulars, in words that were very nearly Della Rooke's, because the clerk who drafted it had the intake record open beside him and could not think of a better way to put it.

Nobody told her. There was nobody to tell.

— — —

The closure took four minutes and there was nothing remarkable about it.

That is the thing that never gets written down, and Sorrow had stopped expecting it to. The record was in order. The district of origin was entered. The survivor line was made, and the margin beneath it said who had directed it and when and that it had been asked rather than assumed. There was a countersignature from a Prefect and a recorded objection from a correspondence officer and eleven miles of walking and nine days of waiting behind every line of it, and none of that was visible on the sheet, and in four hundred years nobody reading it would know that any of it had happened.

Which was, Sorrow thought, more or less the point.

"Palms up," she said. "The way the diagram shows. You'll have seen it in the hall."

"I didn't look at the hall."

"Nobody does."

Della Rooke put her hands palms up on the table. Her last remark, at eleven minutes past seven on a Monday morning, was not about her son and was not about the road and was not about the Court.

"Is it cold?" she said.

"No."

"Good," said Della Rooke. "I've been cold since four."

She went easily.

Sorrow sat with the cold record a moment longer than the procedure required, and then she squared it and put it in the tray.

— — —

Four miles from the annex, on the Wednesday evening of the first week, a man came out of a drainage cut under a road at dusk and went north, because the north side of Wend was closed to him now and would be for a year, and because sixteen hours in standing water is what the fourth way out of a district costs when a dog has made the other three impossible.

He got nothing for any of it. Nobody wrote his name in any margin. There is no record anywhere in the Unburied Court, in the living registries, or in the four thousand years of ledgers that lie under both, that a release instrument was lifted out of a tied cull pile on a Tuesday night by a man with no standing to touch it, and squared on a desk where the light came in.

He was still hungry. He would be hungry for a long time yet.

— — —

Sorrow was back at the second table from the door at six the following morning.

Rundle came past at some point in the first hour and did not say anything about it, which was his way of saying something about it, and at about eight Larke sent down a note with two lines on it.

Wend annex. Your enquiry as to the hand on the letter of the 6th. The Tuesday man was Corbin Ayle, thirty-one years a clerk of that office. He died at home on the Tuesday evening, the same day he wrote it. The office was not informed until the Friday.

Sorrow read it twice.

She had wanted to write to him. That was all it had been — she had wanted to write to a man she had never met and say that four words in his hand had been worth eleven miles, because nobody had ever written that to her and she had spent twelve years suspecting that nobody ever wrote it to anybody.

She took out her own book, in the hand she used for herself, and put it down under the eleven miles and the witness name.

C. Ayle. Wrote four words on a Tuesday and died that evening. The four words were the whole case. He never knew.

And then, underneath, because she had been putting off writing it for thirteen days and could not any longer think of a reason to:

The sheet on the desk was not his.

Because it had not been. She had the letter of the 6th in front of her with the annotation on it in a small careful clerk's hand, and she had copied the pencil line off the blotter into her own book on the Wednesday evening, and they were not the same hand and were not close to the same hand. One of them belonged to Corbin Ayle, who had been thirty-one years a clerk and was dead before she read what he wrote.

The other one had written *not culled. rec'd line open.* — four words and an abbreviation, on a blotter, in an empty annex above a corn factor's, at some hour of a Tuesday night when there was no one in the building.

It was formed the way a person forms letters when they have been taught properly a long time ago and have not written much since.

Sorrow looked at it for a while. Then she closed the book, because a thing you cannot answer is not improved by being looked at.

She never did find out.

There were eleven people in the hall and the first of them had been waiting since half past five.

She called the next one forward.

The thin man is Ashen Corvassa. He and Sorrow meet for the first time on the day she is named Warden of the Unburied Court.

THE UNBURIED COURT

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