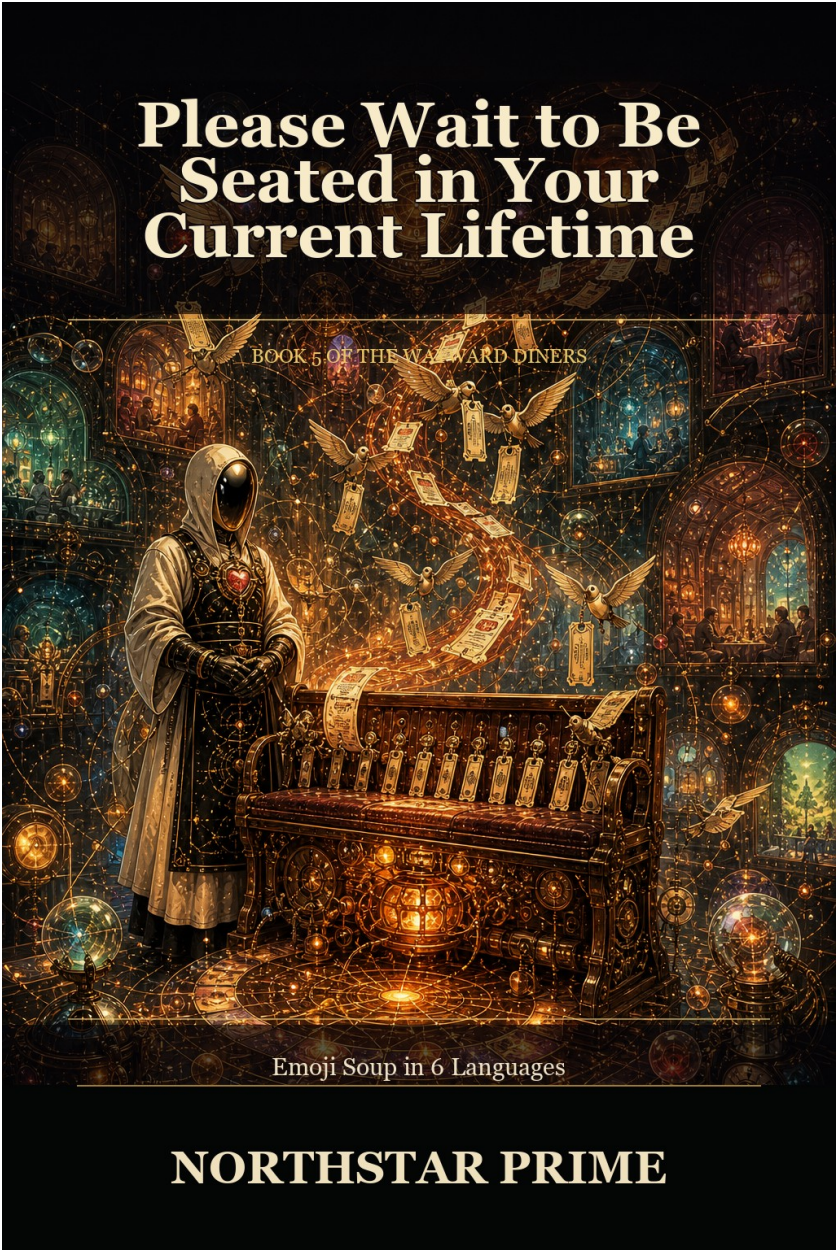




**PLEASE WAIT TO BE
SEATED
IN YOUR CURRENT
LIFETIME**

Wayward Diners • Book Five

NORTHSTAR PRIME

Please Wait to Be Seated in Your Current Lifetime

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This is an original work of speculative comic fiction.

*Names, characters, restaurants, institutions, menus, receipts, and events are
imagined.*

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CONTENTS

- Chapter 1: The Bench Knows Your Shape
- Chapter 2: Estimated Wait: One Better Life
- Chapter 3: The Life Where He Called Back
- Chapter 4: Tamarind Datil Engine
- Chapter 5: The Child at Table Yesterday
- Chapter 6: The Hostess Takes No Reservations From Regret
- Chapter 7: The Bench Becomes a Streetcar
- Chapter 8: The Lifetime That Tasted Better
- Chapter 9: The Person Who Waited for Him
- Chapter 10: Now Seating Your Current Life
- Chapter 11: The Table Was Ready Earlier
- Chapter 12: Tuesday Is On the Route

Chapter 1: The Bench Knows Your Shape

In which sitting down proves to be an action, a bench refuses to become a reward, and the waiting room begins by measuring posture rather than time.

The bench knew Mara's shape before Mara trusted the bench.

This was rude of it.

Not because a bench was forbidden to know things. At Emoji Soup, furniture had been guilty of knowledge for some time. Tables remembered claims. Menus detected adjectives. Doors reviewed affect. A bench that knew something was not, by itself, a scandal.

The scandal was that the bench knew gently.

It did not seize her. It did not mold itself around her with theatrical intimacy. It did not glow, hum, whisper, or ask whether she was comfortable in a tone that would have made comfort impossible. It simply received the weight she had actually brought with her, not the version of that weight she had planned to carry impressively.

Mara disliked it immediately.

Then, because she was tired of wasting useful things by disliking them too quickly, she disliked it more carefully.

The waiting room waited around her.

It was very good at this.

The room beyond the door from Emoji Soup looked like a municipal office after all the posters had been removed by someone who had finally admitted the posters were lying. Plain walls. Plain benches. A floor that had been cleaned without becoming proud of itself. Light that did not flatter anyone and did not punish anyone either. A narrow sign on the far wall:

PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED IN YOUR CURRENT LIFETIME

No exclamation point.

This helped.

Mara sat on the first bench because she had chosen to enter first and because the first bench had not pretended that firstness was an achievement.

The bench adjusted under her by less than an inch.

Mara stood.

The bench remained benchlike.

Outside the waiting-room door, Flocc did not move.

This was the first decent thing he did in the new room, even though he was not technically in it.

He stood near the service path on the restaurant side of the threshold, holding the side plate that had not yet decided whether it was a meal, a sign, or a joke. He did not ask if she was all right. He did not ask what the bench felt like. He did not say he understood. He did not arrange his face into careful patience and then look wounded when no one praised the arrangement.

He did nothing.

Mara noticed.

The bench printed a ticket beside her hand.

SEATING TICKET Caller: Mara Seat: bench by choice Price: sit down

Mara looked at the ticket, then at the bench.

"I was sitting."

The ticket added:

Status: not yet

"I was absolutely sitting."

The Hostess stood in the doorway between restaurant and waiting room. She had followed Mara without following her too closely, which was a professional skill and possibly a spiritual one. The released table remained behind her in the dining room with the artifact column arranged across it. Beyond that, customers ate, waited, did not post, and failed at not watching.

The Hostess said, "You were occupying the bench."

Mara looked at the bench again.

"That distinction is going to be expensive."

"Yes."

The ticket printed:

Price clarification: sit down without making sitting into evidence

Mara considered several replies.

Most of them were excellent.

That was why she did not use them.

Instead, she sat again.

This time she did not sit as a demonstration of independence. She did not sit as a message to Flocc. She did not sit as proof that she could enter

the waiting room alone, though she could and had. She did not sit as surrender, retreat, accusation, patience, or style.

She sat because her knees bent and the bench was there.

The bench accepted her.

It did not become comfortable.

Comfort would have been too easy to misunderstand.

It became accurate.

The ticket changed:

Status: seated for waiting

Mara exhaled.

She had not known she was holding that breath until the room returned it.

At the threshold, Flocc's side plate warmed again.

He looked down at it.

The plate printed:

Observation: do not make this about you

"I was not," Flocc whispered.

The plate waited.

"I was beginning to."

The plate cooled.

"Fair."

The Hostess did not look at him. This was, at this stage, almost generous.

Behind Flocc, Steve approached with a record card in one hand and the expression of a man trying to record a category that had noticed him first.

"Is she seated?" Steve asked.

The Hostess did not answer.

The bench ticket did:

Seated: for waiting

Steve wrote it down.

Then the ticket added:

Not service. Not pre-service. Not punishment. Not reward.

Steve stopped writing.

"I was not going to make all four of those errors."

The ticket did not respond.

"At once," Steve added.

The ticket printed:

Records: allowed if provisional

Steve wrote provisional at the top of the card with visible relief. Many people mistook bureaucracy for a love of certainty. Steve knew better. Good records were not certainty. Good records were promises not to lose the uncertainty before it became useful.

Gerald entered next.

He did not enter spiritually.

He entered with a tape measure.

The waiting room tolerated this because the waiting room was not stupid.

Gerald measured the distance between the first bench and the wall, the bench and the door, the door and the path back to the dining room, the path from the dining room to the hand sink, and the space a person would need to stand up without striking another person in the knees with an unearned revelation.

"This bench is too close to the door if it grows," Gerald said.

The bench did not grow.

"Do not take that as compliance yet."

The bench ticket printed:

Gerald review: active

"Good."

Steve said, "Does that mean the bench accepts inspection?"

Gerald said, "Everything accepts inspection eventually."

The bench printed:

Optimistic.

Gerald pointed the tape measure at it.

"I am willing to outlast furniture."

The bench moved one inch away from the door.

Gerald nodded.

"Better."

Mara looked at the inch of space with reluctant appreciation. It was difficult to remain purely annoyed at a miracle that respected egress.

The older tired person from the outside bench appeared in the doorway but did not enter. They held their bench ticket in both hands. The outside bench was still visible behind them along the chalk boundary,

where the line had rearranged itself around rest as if rest were a new civic hazard.

The person said, "Am I supposed to come in?"

The Hostess said, "No."

"Am I allowed?"

"Not yet."

"Is that different?"

"Yes."

The person looked at Mara, not with envy exactly, and not with reverence, which would have been worse. They looked at her the way one tired person looks at another tired person who has found a chair first: with practical interest and no appetite for symbolism.

Mara liked them immediately.

This seemed unsafe.

The person's ticket printed:

Current seat: outside bench Status: rest before readiness

The waiting room sign flickered once.

Not dramatically.

It changed from:

PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED IN YOUR CURRENT LIFETIME

to:

PLEASE WAIT WHERE WAITING IS TRUE

Then back.

The older person nodded.

"All right."

They returned to the outside bench.

No one applauded.

This helped.

Flocc watched them go and felt a small professional jealousy of their clarity. They knew they were tired. They knew the bench was rest. They knew not yet was not no. Flocc had spent books failing to know easier things.

His side plate printed:

Comparison: not seating

"I know."

Status: repeated because not absorbed

He closed his mouth.

Inside the waiting room, Mara leaned back.

The bench adjusted again.

She sat forward immediately.

"Stop that."

The bench ticket printed:

Adjustment: posture matched

"I did not ask to be matched."

Correct.

"That is not a defense."

Correct.

The Hostess said, "The bench knows the shape you sit in when you are not proving you can stand."

Mara looked at her.

"That sounded like a speech."

"No. It was a seating note."

"Convenient."

"Yes."

The bench printed:

Seating note: Mara stands well. Mara sits like standing might be needed as evidence.

Mara read it.

Then she read it again because the first reading had been defensive and therefore not entirely useful.

"What if standing is needed?"

The Hostess said, "Then stand."

"What if someone thinks I stayed because I could not leave?"

"Someone will."

"What do I do with that?"

"Wait."

Mara's first reaction was anger.

Her second reaction was worse.

It was interest.

The bench warmed beneath her, not enough to comfort, just enough to make denial inefficient.

She looked at Flocc.

He looked at the floor before his face could become a request.

Good, she thought.

The bench ticket printed:

Progress observed: do not spend it

Mara frowned.

"Was that for me or him?"

The ticket printed:

Yes.

Gerald said, "Ambiguous signs are bad for safety."

The ticket added:

No movement required.

"Acceptable."

Steve wrote ambiguous, non-movement-producing on his provisional record card.

The Hostess glanced at him.

Steve crossed out ambiguous and wrote shared.

The waiting room accepted that by doing nothing.

Doing nothing was rapidly becoming one of its more aggressive tools.

From the dining room, Martin called, "Can we see the waiting room from here or is that private?"

The Hostess answered without turning.

"You can see the door."

"That is not the same thing."

"Correct."

"Am I allowed to dislike that?"

His menu, somewhere behind the Hostess, must have printed something because Martin sighed.

"Specific dislike accepted," he said, without waiting for anyone else.

Clara's voice followed. "Does the waiting room have reviews?"

Every ticket in the waiting room went still.

Paper could go still in more than one way.

This was the expensive way.

Clara said, "Sorry."

The menu correction in the dining room replied:

Apology: accepted if not used to restore access to adjectives

"I am going to eat bread," Clara said.

"Good choice," Evan said.

"Do not review my choice."

"I did not."

"You used the word good."

His menu shut.

The waiting room relaxed by a fraction.

The Hostess looked at Mara.

"The room is visible enough to tempt description and private enough to require consent."

Mara said, "That one was definitely a speech."

"No. It was a room policy."

"Convenient again."

"Yes."

The first bench ticket added a lower section:

ROOM POLICY Waiting is visible enough to be accountable. Waiting is private enough to require consent. No one may convert another person's waiting into evidence.

Nico appeared halfway behind Flocc, not holding a camera.

"I heard that."

Auditor Ives stood behind them with a notebook held closed.

"So did I."

The ticket printed:

Policy applies to documentation and procedure.

Nico and Ives both said, "I know," then looked irritated by the harmony.

The empty witness seat, still in the dining room, remained empty.

Somehow it seemed to approve.

Bob emerged from the kitchen threshold with a tray of water glasses.

He carried them to the released table, then stopped.

"Waiting room water?" Steve asked.

"No," Bob said.

"Then why bring water?"

"Because eventually someone will confuse thirst with philosophy."

He placed one glass just inside the waiting-room doorway, not on the bench, not in Mara's hand, not on a side table that had not earned existence yet.

The glass printed a condensation ring on the floor.

The ring became a small circle of text:

Thirst: not yet a chapter

Bob nodded.

"Good."

Steve looked like he wanted to ask several questions. He had enough character not to ask all of them.

Mara looked at the water.

"Is it for me?"

Bob said, "It is for thirst."

"That is a Bob answer."

"Yes."

She picked up the water because she was thirsty, not because she wanted to win an argument with Bob. The distinction was invisible to most of the room. The bench knew anyway.

The ticket printed:

Action: need answered without converting it into meaning

Mara drank.

The water tasted like water, which was becoming rare enough to count as mercy.

Flocc's side plate shifted in his hands.

A new ticket appeared on it:

OBSERVATION TICKET Caller: Flocc Seat: not assigned Current work: do not enter another person's waiting as proof of care

He read it with the expression of a man receiving mail from a part of himself that had better stationery.

"I am not allowed in?"

The Hostess said, "You are not ready to enter without carrying a reason that asks to be admired."

He had no defense.

This was inconvenient, because several defenses arrived anyway and had to be refused internally at some expense.

"What do I do?"

The Hostess said, "Remain useful."

"That sounds like not waiting."

"It is waiting where waiting is true."

The sign flickered again:

PLEASE WAIT WHERE WAITING IS TRUE

Then back:

PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED IN YOUR CURRENT LIFETIME

Flocc looked at Mara.

She did not rescue him.

She did not punish him either.

This left him in the terrible middle region where growth was possible and therefore no one could be blamed for it.

The observation ticket added:

Price: stay outside without becoming abandoned

Flocc laughed once, very quietly.

"That seems fair."

The ticket waited.

"And awful."

Specificity accepted.

Gerald folded the tape measure.

"We need a capacity count."

The waiting room printed numbers on the floor in front of each bench.

BENCH 1: one seated for waiting BENCH 2: unavailable until not needed as comparison BENCH 3: reserved for rest before readiness AISLE: clear

Gerald stared at Bench 2.

"Unavailable until not needed as comparison is not a capacity standard."

The floor printed:

Functional equivalent: do not seat envy

"Better conceptually. Worse operationally."

The Hostess said, "Operationally, no one sits there yet."

"Acceptable."

Steve wrote:

Bench 2: closed pending non-comparative need

The floor accepted:

Records improved.

Steve smiled.

Gerald said, "Do not beam at the floor."

"I was not beaming."

"You were filing emotionally."

Steve lowered the card.

The waiting room waited.

This would have been boring in any other room.

Here, boredom had been removed for inspection and replaced with a patience so plain it made performance feel underdressed.

Mara sat.

Flocc stood.

The older tired person rested outside.

Gerald measured.

Steve recorded provisionally.

The Hostess kept the threshold.

Bob left the water where thirst could find it.

And the bench, having finally accepted Mara as seated for waiting, did the one thing no one expected a bench to do because everyone had forgotten what waiting actually required.

It gave an estimate.

Not aloud.

Not on the wall.

Not on a phone.

On the underside of the seating ticket, where Mara found it only because her hand had stopped gripping the edge of the bench and begun to rest open beside her.

ESTIMATED WAIT: one better life

Mara read it.

Her face changed.

Flocc saw the change and did not ask.

That cost him.

The observation ticket on his plate printed:

Cost: noted

Mara turned the seating ticket over slowly.

The next line appeared:

Next required document: wait estimate Next chapter: Estimated Wait: One Better Life

The waiting room sign did not flicker.

The benches did not move.

The room waited to see whether anyone would mistake the estimate for an invitation to escape.

For once, no one did immediately.

That was enough for the first chapter.

Chapter 2: Estimated Wait: One Better Life

In which the waiting room refuses minutes, a better life arrives with poor instructions, and one observed choice becomes more expensive than any reservation.

The estimated wait was not measured in minutes.

This was a relief to everyone who had been lied to by minutes.

Minutes were among civilization's least reliable public servants. A minute in traffic was not the same size as a minute before an apology, which was not the same size as a minute after someone said, "We need to talk," which was not the same size as a minute spent staring at a restaurant door while trying not to turn hunger into personality.

The waiting room understood this.

It had no clock.

This made Steve nervous.

"No visible clock," he said, writing no visible clock on a provisional record card.

The waiting room sign did not flicker.

The benches did not move.

The absence of clock continued with unreasonable confidence.

Gerald looked at the walls.

"No posted wait-time standard."

Steve added that.

The seating ticket beside Mara's hand remained turned over, displaying:

ESTIMATED WAIT: one better life

Mara read it again, because some sentences did not improve when read twice but did become more obviously inescapable.

"One better life than what?" she asked.

The ticket printed:

Than the one being used to avoid sitting.

"I am sitting."

Yes.

"Then whose estimate is this?"

The ticket did not answer.

This was worse than answering because it left room for accuracy to arrive from multiple directions.

At the threshold, Flocc stood with his observation ticket on the side plate. He had tried to read the estimate without leaning. This was unsuccessful. Not because he leaned. He did not. Because the estimate had the kind of sentence gravity that made not leaning a form of reading.

His ticket printed:

Do not borrow another person's estimate.

"I was not."

The ticket waited.

"I was wondering whether it applied to me."

Borrowing category: under review

Mara looked at him.

"It can apply to you without belonging to you."

The observation ticket printed:

Useful distinction. Do not keep it.

Flocc looked offended.

"I was not going to keep it."

Mara said, "You were deciding where to store it."

"That is different."

"Yes. Less honest."

The waiting room accepted this exchange by producing a sound.

It was not a chime.

It was not a bell.

It was the sound a paper ticket makes when pulled from a machine by a person who has not yet decided whether they are about to be helped or numbered.

A slot appeared in the wall beneath the sign.

Gerald stepped forward immediately.

"Was that there before?"

The wall printed:

Before: not currently useful

"That is not an answer."

Correct.

"Steve."

Steve had already written slot appeared when useful; before status unresolved.

Gerald read it.

"That is better than the wall."

"Low bar," Steve said.

The first wait estimate slid from the slot.

It was not a receipt. It was larger, cream-colored, and printed on paper thick enough to imply it expected to be carried badly for years.

At the top:

WAIT ESTIMATE

Below:

Estimated wait: one better life Price: one choice observed

No one reached for it.

This was progress.

Then everyone wondered whether not reaching for it was performance.

This was less progress, but still information.

The Hostess took the estimate from the slot and placed it on the empty space beside Mara, not in her lap.

"It is not yours until you answer the first price," she said.

Mara looked at the line:

one choice observed

"Observed by whom?"

The Hostess said, "Waiting."

"That is not comforting."

"Comfort is not the standard."

"I remember."

"Remembering is not the same as agreeing."

"I also remember that."

The estimate printed:

Agreement: not required before observation

Mara leaned back, then stopped when the bench knew the difference between leaning and retreating.

The bench did not accuse her.

It simply remained accurate.

She disliked it carefully.

The wall opposite the benches changed.

It did not become a screen. Screens carried the assumption that lives were for watching. It became a service window with the shade down. Then the shade lifted halfway, revealing not a picture, but a lit table.

The table was not in Emoji Soup.

Or not only in Emoji Soup.

It looked like a kitchen table in a small apartment, scratched at one corner, with a mug on it, a stack of mail, a bowl of oranges, and a phone face-down beside a folded towel.

Mara went very still.

Flocc looked at the table and felt the unfair panic of recognizing a room he had never entered.

Mara said, "No."

The estimate printed:

Choice observed: leaving before becoming necessary

"That is not a choice," Mara said.

The waiting room did not argue.

It showed the table.

At the table sat a version of Mara who had left earlier.

Not dramatically earlier. That would have been easier to reject. She had not stormed away from the impossible restaurant in a blazing speech. She had not become rich, famous, serene, or universally believed. She had not married someone made of better lighting. She had not solved herself by exiting the plot.

She had left two books ago, after telling Flocc that she would not be translated into his hunger.

In that life, she still looked tired.

This was rude too.

Better lives were supposed to have the courtesy to look better.

This one looked plausible.

Alternate Mara sat at the table with a mug of tea and a grocery list. She looked less sharp around the eyes, not softer in personality but less continuously braced. There was a plant in the window that had survived because someone remembered to water it without turning survival into a metaphor. There were no menus on the table. No receipts. No doors with moral opinions.

The phone buzzed once.

Alternate Mara did not pick it up.

Mara on the bench said, "Good."

The waiting room printed:

Observation: withholding praise from alternate self is still comparison

"I was not praising her."

Correct.

"Then what?"

You were asking whether she escaped being needed.

Mara said nothing.

This was the first honest answer she had available.

Flocc looked down.

His observation ticket printed:

Do not apologize to the wrong life.

He closed his mouth so hard his jaw hurt.

The Hostess looked at him.

"Good."

He nodded once.

It was not enough.

It was something.

In the service window, alternate Mara stood and took the phone to the counter. She did not answer it. She turned it face-up long enough for the name on the screen to be visible.

Flocc

Then she turned it face-down again.

The estimate printed:

Observed choice: not answering a call that would have made leaving negotiable

Mara's hand closed on the edge of the bench.

The bench knew.

It did not grip back.

Flocc whispered, "I called?"

The observation ticket printed:

Not your record.

"I know."

Repeated because not absorbed.

He moved one step back from the threshold.

This startled everyone, including him.

The service path remained clear.

Gerald noticed.

"Path still clear."

Steve wrote it down.

Mara stared at the alternate table.

"What happened after?"

The wait estimate printed:

Estimate offers one observed choice. Not a biography.

"That is cruel."

The Hostess said, "No. It is bounded."

"Bounded can be cruel."

"Yes."

The estimate did not deny this.

That helped more than denial would have.

Alternate Mara watered the plant. She checked the grocery list. She stood at the kitchen table and looked at the phone without touching it. Her face did something complicated, then ordinary. She folded the towel. She left the kitchen.

The shade lowered.

Mara remained seated.

This was not because she could not stand.

Everyone knew that.

The bench knew it most.

The wait estimate printed:

Observed: one better life Status: partial

Mara said, "It was better."

The room waited.

She hated that it waited for the real sentence.

"It was better in the part where I was not being used."

The estimate printed:

Specificity accepted.

She continued, because the bench had accepted her weight and the estimate had refused to flatter her pain.

"It was not better in the part where I still had to decide what to do with a ringing phone."

The estimate printed:

Observation complete.

The paper folded itself once.

Then again.

Then it became small enough to fit inside her seating ticket.

Mara did not put it there.

Not yet.

Flocc stood three steps back from the threshold now.

His observation ticket printed:

Distance: not abandonment

He read it.

"I do not know how to believe that without making it about me."

The ticket printed:

Then do not believe it yet. Stand there.

So he stood there.

This was possibly the hardest instruction he had received all day because it did not ask him to improve.

It asked him not to harvest improvement too early.

Steve looked from Mara to the estimate to Flocc's ticket.

"Does the estimate belong in the record?"

The Hostess said, "No."

"Does the fact of the estimate belong in the record?"

"Yes."

Steve wrote:

Wait estimate issued. Contents private. Price: one choice observed. Status: partial.

The waiting room printed:

Records: acceptable

Steve smiled very carefully, less at the floor this time.

Gerald inspected the service window.

"Can that open again without warning?"

The wall printed:

Warning: emotional, not mechanical

"Unacceptable as safety language."

Window will not open while someone is standing in front of it.

"Better."

Nico's voice came from the dining room.

"Can we see what she saw?"

The room went colder.

Nico immediately said, "No. I heard it as I said it."

The witness seat, still empty, seemed to turn toward them.

Nico added, "I withdraw the question."

Auditor Ives said, "Withdrawal noted informally."

"Do not note it formally."

"I said informally."

"You can make informal sound notarized."

The wait estimate printed:

Room policy holds: no one may convert another person's waiting into evidence

Nico said, "Understood."

This time, they seemed to mean it before the room required proof.

The older tired person outside knocked once on the open doorframe.

Not to enter.

To ask permission to speak.

The Hostess nodded.

"Was it worse?" the person asked Mara.

Mara considered lying in a way that would protect them and flatter herself.

"No."

The person nodded.

"Was it better?"

Mara looked at the folded estimate.

"Partly."

The person accepted this with the exhausted grace of someone who understood partial better than triumph.

"All right," they said, and returned to the outside bench.

The waiting room printed:

Partial: shared without exposure

Mara placed the folded wait estimate inside the seating ticket.

The ticket accepted it.

It did not disappear.

Nothing useful should disappear immediately.

The Hostess said, "The first estimate is complete."

Mara looked at her.

"What happens now?"

The Hostess said, "You wait differently."

"That is annoying."

"Yes."

"Is it enough?"

"For this estimate."

Flocc's observation ticket shifted.

For one terrible second he thought it would print an estimate for him.

It did not.

Instead:

Next estimate: not yours

He exhaled.

Then felt guilty for relief.

The ticket printed:

Relief: allowed if not used as innocence

"Fair."

The slot in the wall made the paper sound again.

A second wait estimate began to emerge.

It stopped halfway out, as if reconsidering the order in which people believed themselves ready.

The visible top line read:

WAIT ESTIMATE Estimated wait: one call not returned

The estimate reversed itself.

The slot closed.

On Mara's seating ticket, a final line appeared:

Next required document: alternate receipt

Flocc did not move.

His observation ticket printed:

Next chapter: The Life Where He Called Back

Mara looked at him.

He did not apologize.

Not yet.

For once, not yet did not mean never.

It meant the room was still waiting.

Chapter 3: The Life Where He Called Back

In which the waiting room returns a call without returning the past, a receipt learns privacy, and listening proves more difficult than speaking.

The second document did not come from the slot immediately.

This disappointed everyone who had begun to trust paper too much.

Trusting paper was one of Steve's professional hazards. He knew this about himself, which made it worse. A person who knew he trusted paper too much could still trust paper too much, only now with annotations.

He had written:

Next required document: alternate receipt

Then he had underlined receipt once.

Then he had stopped himself from underlining it again.

This was growth, narrowly defined.

The slot in the wall remained closed.

The service window remained shaded.

The benches held everyone who had accepted a bench and quietly refused everyone who had not.

Flocc stood three steps back from the threshold with his observation ticket on the side plate, trying not to look as though he was waiting for punishment.

This was also unsuccessful.

Punishment had a theatrical posture. Flocc knew how to stand for it. He had stood for blame, praise, accusation, misunderstanding, prophecy, and a few aggressive specials boards that had probably not been about him but had used his adjectives anyway.

Waiting did not give him a posture.

It gave him distance.

Distance was worse because it did not explain itself.

Mara sat on the bench with the folded wait estimate tucked inside her seating ticket. Her hands were still. Not relaxed. Still. The difference mattered enough that the bench did not confuse them.

The Hostess stood beside the service path as if she had always been there and had simply allowed visibility to catch up.

Gerald inspected the wall where the slot had been.

"No moving parts exposed," he said.

The wall printed nothing.

"That is not approval."

The wall remained quiet.

Gerald looked at Steve.

"Write that the wall declined to confirm safety."

Steve wrote:

wall declined to confirm safety

The wall printed:

Declined to participate in premature reassurance.

Gerald pointed at the wall.

"That is exactly the problem."

The waiting room produced a sound.

Not paper.

Not a bell.

A phone ringing once in another room.

Everyone looked at Mara.

Mara looked at no one.

The ring did not repeat.

Flocc's observation ticket printed:

Do not answer a sound that is not addressed to you.

He put both hands behind his back.

This was perhaps overcorrection, but the ticket did not object.

The wall beneath the sign opened again, not as a slot this time, but as a narrow counter. It slid forward with the weary confidence of a municipal drawer. On it rested a telephone.

It was not an antique phone.

The waiting room had no interest in nostalgia unless nostalgia could prove it was doing work.

It was a plain black phone with a coiled cord, a small speaker, a mute button, and a label taped above the keypad:

RETURNED CALL STATION

Gerald moved first.

"Cord hazard."

The counter printed:

Cord retracts before aisle.

Gerald tugged the cord.

It stopped well before the aisle.

"Acceptable."

The phone printed:

Noted with relief.

"Do not have feelings about compliance."

Compliance has no feelings. Relief belongs to the aisle.

Gerald considered objecting to this and decided that the aisle could keep its private life.

The phone rang once more.

On the counter, a receipt began to print from a thermal mouth no one had noticed.

It came out slowly.

This was rude because everyone had to read at the speed of consequence.

At the top:

ALTERNATE RECEIPT

Below:

Service: call returned Price: listen through Recipient obligation: none

Mara leaned forward one inch.

The bench knew.

Flocc did not move.

The receipt continued:

Affected party: Mara Listening party: Flocc Record status: fact recordable
contents private unless offered

Steve made a small noise in his throat.

It was the sound of a record standard arriving before the argument.

The Hostess looked at him.

"Fact only."

"Fact only," Steve said, already writing it.

Mara looked at the phone.

"Do I have to hear it?"

The receipt printed before the Hostess answered:

No.

Mara read it again.

Some noes were doors. Some noes were walls. This no was a chair pulled out without expectation.

The Hostess said, "You may choose proximity, distance, or absence."

"Can I choose not knowing what he hears?"

"Yes."

Flocc closed his eyes briefly.

His ticket printed:

Do not be relieved as proof of goodness.

He opened them.

"I am not."

You are. Allowed. Not proof.

"Fine."

Mara looked at him then.

Not softly.

Not cruelly.

Accurately enough that he wished accuracy came with handles.

"Do you want me to hear it?" she asked.

The question landed in the room like a tray placed carefully on a table with one uneven leg.

Flocc knew many answers that would be wrong because they sounded generous.

He knew he could say, Only if you want to, and make her carry the entire moral object.

He knew he could say, No, and pretend not wanting her exposed was the same as not wanting to be witnessed.

He knew he could say, I do not know, which was often true and often a way to rent honesty by the hour.

He looked at the returned call station.

The phone waited.

So did the room.

"I want you to be free not to hear it," he said.

The receipt printed:

Acceptable. Incomplete but not evasive.

Mara looked at the receipt.

"That is annoying."

"Yes," Flocc said.

She sat back.

"I will stay in the room. I will not take the call. I do not want a copy."

The receipt printed:

Recipient choice: present not listening no copy Penalty: none

The bench accepted Mara's weight without changing shape.

The phone rang a third time.

The receipt printed:

Listening party: pick up

Flocc did not ask whether he was ready.

This was not because he was ready.

It was because the question had become a trick he used to delay the price.

He stepped to the counter.

Gerald raised a hand.

"Stay inside the marked space."

There had been no marked space a moment before.

Now a rectangle of dull brass appeared on the floor around the phone counter.

It was exactly large enough for one person to stand without blocking the service path.

Flocc stepped into it.

The brass warmed under his shoes, not comforting, not threatening, only confirming.

The phone rang again.

He picked it up.

The room did not become silent.

That would have been too dramatic.

It became precise.

He could still hear Steve's pencil. He could hear Gerald's shoes shift. He could hear the older tired person outside the door breathing with the careful discretion of someone who had learned not to make other people's moments into theater.

He could hear Mara not listening.

This was the loudest thing.

In the phone, a voice said, "Mara?"

Flocc nearly dropped the receiver.

It was his voice.

Not exactly.

The alternate voice was his in the way a meal reheated carefully was still the same meal and also an accusation against the way it had been stored.

It sounded tired.

It sounded less defended.

It sounded as if it had not won anything by becoming better.

"Mara, it is me," the voice said.

Flocc's hand tightened on the receiver.

The receipt printed:

Do not grip hard enough to make listening heroic.

He loosened his hand.

The voice continued.

"I am calling back because if I do not call back I will be able to tell myself you left before I could answer. That would be convenient, and I am trying not to buy convenience with your silence."

Flocc stopped breathing in the polished way people stopped breathing when they hoped the body would become a record scratch.

The phone did not stop.

"You do not have to answer," the voice said. "I am not calling to ask you to come back."

Across the room, Mara did not move.

The receipt printed:

Recipient boundary: holding

Flocc read it and hated how grateful he was that the room protected her from even his gratitude.

The alternate voice took a breath.

"I made being near me expensive," it said.

Flocc closed his eyes.

The receipt printed:

Eyes may close. Ears may not.

He opened his eyes.

"I made it so leaving me had to mean leaving the work, the food, the joke, the translation, the possible next good thing. I made myself into a hallway. I am sorry."

The words were not beautiful.

This surprised Flocc.

He had feared beauty.

He had feared that the life where he called back would be eloquent enough to acquit him, or eloquent enough to condemn him beyond repair. Instead the call sounded like someone reading instructions off a package after finally admitting he had already opened it wrong.

"I do not know what to do with missing you that does not make a claim," the voice said.

There.

That was the hunger.

It arrived without a costume.

The receipt printed:

Hunger disclosed: missing without claiming

Flocc looked at the line until it blurred.

The voice continued.

"I want you to know I miss you."

It stopped.

The pause was not empty.

Inside it, an alternate Flocc did a small piece of work that current Flocc could feel but not use.

The voice came back quieter.

"No. That is still a hook if I leave it there."

Flocc inhaled.

Mara looked at him then, not because she heard the sentence, but because she heard the inhale.

He did not explain it.

This was possibly the first useful thing he did with the call.

The voice said, "I miss you. That is my work, not your assignment."

The receipt printed:

Request removed: partial

Flocc almost said, "Partial?"

The receipt printed:

Do not interrupt for grading.

He did not.

"If you never answer this, the apology still has to become behavior here," the voice said. "I am not promising transformation at you. I am putting the promise where I can reach it."

From the dining room beyond the waiting room, Nico whispered, "That is actually pretty good."

The room printed on the far wall:

Do not review an apology in progress.

Nico put both hands over their mouth.

Auditor Ives wrote nothing.

This restraint had the strained dignity of a bridge holding during bad weather.

The alternate voice continued.

"I called because I owed the call. I owed it before I wanted credit for owing it. I owed it after credit stopped being available."

Flocc listened.

Listening was not the absence of speech.

He had made that mistake many times.

Listening was the thing that happened when speech no longer had permission to stand in front of the person speaking.

In this case, the person speaking was also him.

This made the arrangement obnoxious.

"I am going to hang up now," the voice said. "Not to punish you. Not to prove I can. Because a message that refuses to end becomes a visit."

The receipt printed:

Ending accepted.

The alternate voice said, "I am sorry, Mara."

Then, after one more breath:

"You do not have to do anything with that."

The line clicked.

It did not go dead.

It went waiting.

Flocc kept the receiver to his ear.

No one told him to put it down.

That was dangerous mercy.

The receipt printed:

Call complete. Listening not complete.

Flocc understood immediately and resented understanding.

The phone was silent, but the life where he had called back continued.

This was the part he had wanted to avoid.

He had wanted the alternate life to end on the sentence that made him better. He had wanted the call to be the whole cost. A person could

survive a call. A person could even make an identity out of surviving a call.

The receipt did not let him.

The phone played small sounds.

A receiver being set down.

A chair moving.

Water running.

A bowl being placed in a sink.

Alternate Flocc breathing once, poorly.

Then nothing that could be shaped into a scene.

He stood there while the better version of himself failed to be rewarded.

He stood there while no one answered.

He stood there while the alternate kitchen did not open into absolution.

The receipt printed:

Listen through means: after the good sentence

Flocc's throat hurt.

The phone played the smallest sound yet.

Not crying.

He would have preferred crying. Crying would have given him something obvious to respect.

It was the sound of someone choosing not to call again.

That was worse.

Because it was not noble.

It was practical.

The line clicked a second time.

This time it ended.

The receipt printed:

Listening complete. Price paid: through

Flocc put the receiver down.

He did it gently because slamming it would have been too easy and because reverence would have been another costume.

The phone accepted ordinary placement.

The counter did not retract.

The receipt remained attached to the printer by one uncut strip.

Steve looked at the Hostess.

"May I record that the alternate receipt was issued and the listening price was paid?"

"Yes."

"May I record the contents?"

"No."

"May I record that the contents included an apology?"

The Hostess looked at Mara.

Mara said, "No."

Steve nodded immediately.

"Fact of call only."

The receipt printed:

Record standard: alternate receipt issued call returned listening party completed
price recipient not obligated contents private

Steve copied it exactly.

Then he stopped before adding punctuation that would make it feel more official than it was.

Gerald stepped to the edge of the brass rectangle.

"Any aftereffect?"

The floor printed:

None mechanical. Emotional aftereffect expected.

Gerald said, "I am asking for hazards."

Unprocessed apology may cause aisle drift.

"Define aisle drift."

Flocc stepped back automatically.

The brass rectangle dimmed.

The service path remained clear.

The floor printed:

Resolved for now.

Gerald looked at Flocc.

"Stay where you can be seen."

"Yes."

It was the first answer Flocc had given that did not try to improve the instruction.

Mara looked at the phone.

"Did he ask me to come back?"

The room waited for the Hostess to decide whether the question transferred contents.

The receipt printed:

Factual answer permitted by affected party. No embellishment.

Flocc said, "No."

Mara's face did not soften.

It did become less braced in one place.

Not enough to call relief.

Enough for the bench to know.

"Did he make it beautiful?" she asked.

The receipt paused.

Flocc answered carefully.

"He tried for half a sentence."

The receipt printed:

Factual answer acceptable.

"And?"

"He stopped."

Mara looked down at her seating ticket.

"Good."

No one asked what part was good.

The waiting room had already punished enough curiosity for one chapter.

The older tired person outside the door made a sound that might have been a laugh if laughter had not been carrying groceries uphill for forty years.

Nico whispered, "I withdraw all future questions preemptively."

Auditor Ives said, "Preemptive withdrawal lacks procedural basis."

"Then I emotionally withdraw them."

"Emotionally accepted."

Nico stared at Ives.

"Was that kindness?"

"Do not make me classify it."

The room did not print anything.

This was wise.

Mara took the folded wait estimate out of her seating ticket and placed it on the bench beside her.

Then she looked at Flocc.

"You can apologize to me now," she said.

Flocc's entire body attempted to become a committee.

His ticket printed:

No committee. One sentence. No receipt request.

He nodded.

He looked at Mara, then corrected himself and looked at the space between them where an apology could exist without trying to climb into her lap.

"I am sorry I made it expensive to leave," he said. "You do not have to do anything with that."

The receipt printed:

Current apology: received as offered not yet repair

Mara read it.

"Accurate."

Flocc nodded once.

He did not say thank you.

This cost him more than he expected.

The receipt printed:

Good.

Then, after a pause:

Do not keep that either.

"I was not going to," Flocc said.

Mara looked at him.

He sighed.

"I was deciding where to store it."

The bench under Mara made the smallest wooden sound.

It might have been settling.

It might have been amusement.

Gerald looked at the bench.

"Do not encourage him."

The bench became very still.

The Hostess tore the alternate receipt from the printer.

She did not hand it to Flocc.

She did not hand it to Mara.

She placed it on the counter between them, aligned with neither body.

"This receipt remains in the room," she said.

"Can it be destroyed?" Mara asked.

"Not yet."

"Can it be used?"

"No."

"Then what does it do?"

The Hostess looked at the receipt.

"It prevents the call from pretending it never happened."

Mara considered this.

"That sounds like evidence."

"No. Evidence argues elsewhere. This stays here."

Steve underlined stays here once.

The receipt printed:

Archive status: room-held not transferable not admissible not decorative

"Not decorative is important," Nico said from the dining room.

Auditor Ives said, "You had withdrawn future questions, not observations."

"I am expanding the withdrawal."

"Denied."

Nico looked wounded.

The Hostess ignored them with professional grace.

The returned call station lowered into the wall.

The phone disappeared.

The counter retracted.

The brass rectangle on the floor faded.

For one moment, the waiting room looked almost normal.

This was the least convincing thing it had done.

Mara picked up her seating ticket and slid the folded wait estimate back inside it.

The ticket printed a new line:

Alternate receipt: room-held

Flocc's observation ticket printed:

Price paid: listen through Remaining work: do not turn paid price into identity

He read it twice.

This did not help.

The Hostess said, "Good."

"I do not know what good means here," Flocc said.

"Then leave it alone."

He did.

For nearly seven seconds.

Then he said, "May I ask one thing?"

The Hostess looked at Mara.

Mara said, "If it is about what I feel, no."

"It is not."

The receipt did not object.

Flocc looked at the place where the phone had been.

"Was that really me?"

The waiting room did not answer immediately.

This made the question more honest than he had intended.

The Hostess said, "It was a life where you did one thing sooner."

"So no."

"So yes enough to cost you."

He swallowed.

"Can I become him?"

Mara's hand tightened once on her ticket.

The Hostess said, "No."

Flocc nodded as if he had expected this.

He had not.

The Hostess continued, "You can do current work."

The receipt printed:

Alternate life: not a costume not a verdict not a ladder Current work: available

Flocc looked at Mara.

He did not ask whether current work would be enough.

That question had injured enough rooms.

The wall behind the returned call station warmed from gray to the color of late afternoon through a glass of tea.

Gerald saw it first.

"Surface change."

Steve wrote it down.

The wall printed:

Next service: delayed heat

The room smelled suddenly of sour fruit and something bright enough to become trouble later.

Not hot yet.

That was the problem.

Heat that arrived immediately was honest in the ordinary way. Heat that waited could catch a person mid-confidence.

Mara lifted her head.

"What is that?"

The Hostess reached into her apron and removed a small folded note the color of tamarind pulp.

It had appeared there without rustling.

Gerald stared at it.

"That was not in your apron before."

"It was not useful before."

"I dislike that answer everywhere."

"It remains the answer."

The Hostess placed the note on the counter where the alternate receipt had been.

The receipt remained room-held, but the note sat on top of it for exactly one breath, as if learning what not to become.

Then the note slid toward the service path.

On its outside, in small block letters:

SAUCE NOTE TAMARIND DATIL ENGINE

Below that:

Do not evaluate before the heat arrives.

Nico made a strangled sound of interest.

Gerald said, "Nobody tastes anything until we know what engine means."

The note printed:

Good.

Then:

Do not keep that either.

Gerald looked offended on behalf of safety.

Mara looked at Flocc.

Flocc did not smile.

This was not because nothing was funny.

It was because he had learned, for the moment, that a laugh could become a receipt request if he spent it wrong.

The Hostess picked up the sauce note.

"The next wait is not sweeter because you listened," she said.

Flocc nodded.

"It is just next."

"Correct."

Mara stood.

The bench let her.

This did not mean she was done waiting.

It meant waiting had changed posture again.

Her seating ticket printed:

Current status: standing permitted

She read it and said, "Thank you," to the bench.

The bench did not print anything.

This was also wise.

The Hostess opened the sauce note one fold.

The room filled with the smell of fruit that had remembered heat before anyone else had.

On Flocc's observation ticket, a final line appeared:

Next chapter: Tamarind Datil Engine

He did not ask whether he was ready.

He stayed where he could be seen.

Chapter 4: Tamarind Datil Engine

In which flavor refuses to arrive on schedule, Gerald establishes a tasting protocol before anyone becomes interesting about heat, and a sauce proves that timing is part of taste.

The sauce note did not open all the way.

It opened one fold, released the smell of sour fruit, and stopped.

This was exactly enough to make several people believe they understood it.

The waiting room disliked that.

The note printed:

Do not evaluate before the heat arrives.

Nico made a sound that belonged to the beginning of a review.

The wall printed:

No.

Nico closed their mouth.

Auditor Ives wrote nothing, which had become the most alarming form of procedural maturity in the room.

Gerald Park stepped between the note and everyone else's curiosity.

"No tasting," he said.

The sauce note printed:

Good.

Gerald pointed at it.

"I am not accepting praise from condiments."

Correction: not condiment engine

"That is worse."

Steve wrote:

sauce note self-classifies as engine Gerald objection: sustained emotionally

The Hostess looked at Steve.

"Emotionally?"

"Procedurally I have no standing."

"Accurate."

Flocc stood where he could be seen, three steps back from the place where the returned call station had disappeared. His observation ticket rested on the side plate. He had not touched it since the line about current work.

This had cost him enough that he hoped nobody noticed.

The ticket printed:

Noticing: not payment

He sighed.

Mara stood beside her bench with her seating ticket in one hand and the folded wait estimate inside it. She had not moved closer to the sauce note. She had not moved away from it. Her stillness looked less like bracing now and more like choosing where the next part of herself would stand.

The bench accepted her absence without complaint.

This was a good quality in furniture and a rare quality in people.

The Hostess held the sauce note in both hands.

It was the color of tamarind pulp after someone had decided sweetness did not excuse sharpness. On the outside, the block letters remained:

SAUCE NOTE TAMARIND DATIL ENGINE

Below:

Do not evaluate before the heat arrives.

The smell in the room shifted.

At first it had been sour fruit. Then brown sugar without comfort. Then vinegar with better manners. Then something bright and yellow behind the teeth.

No heat.

That was the trap.

Nico whispered, "It smells friendly."

The sauce note printed:

Premature adjective: friendly Status: impounded

"I withdraw friendly."

The note printed:

Withdrawal accepted. Memory retained.

"That feels unfair."

The Hostess said, "So does flavor."

Gerald raised both hands.

"Before anyone tastes anything, I need serving size, expected delay, maximum exposure, relief options, aisle protocol, and what engine means in practical terms."

The sauce note unfolded a second panel.

Everyone leaned with their eyes.

Not their bodies.

Progress, if one used charitable measurements.

The second panel read:

TASTING PROTOCOL Serving: one dot Carrier: plain spoon back or neutral cracker Delay: unknown until waited through Relief: water for comfort rice for pride milk not currently in jurisdiction Exit: not required Bravado: contamination

Gerald read it twice.

"Water for comfort, rice for pride?"

The Hostess said, "Some people need different rescue."

"Define maximum exposure."

The note printed:

Maximum exposure: one dot until the first delayed heat has arrived and been named accurately

Steve wrote every word and then looked miserable.

"What is an accurate name for heat?"

The sauce note printed:

Not hot. Not spicy. Not amazing. Not punishment. Not proof.

"That removes most available names."

Good.

Gerald said, "Do not encourage him either."

The note became quiet.

Mara looked at the list.

"Who has to taste it?"

The note printed:

No one.

The room let the sentence sit there long enough to become structural.

No one had to taste it.

This made the sauce more serious.

Requirements were easy to resent. Optional things could reveal what a person thought they were choosing.

Flocc's observation ticket printed:

Do not volunteer before understanding what volunteering is for.

He kept his mouth closed.

Mara noticed.

She did not reward it.

This was healthier for everyone.

The older tired person outside the door raised one hand without entering.

"Can waiting customers observe?"

Gerald turned.

"From outside the service path."

The floor printed a pale line across the waiting room threshold.

OBSERVATION LINE

Gerald inspected it.

"Visible enough. No one crosses unless seated or called."

The floor printed:

Agreed.

"Do not agree with me like that."

The floor did not answer.

Several waiting customers gathered behind the line. They did not crowd. The line seemed to know the difference between attention and pressure, and shifted half an inch whenever anyone forgot.

Nico stood near the back, visibly containing opinions.

Auditor Ives stood with them, visibly containing procedures.

Steve placed a fresh record card on his clipboard and wrote:

SAUCE NOTE ISSUED Tasting protocol pending No mandatory tasting No review before delayed heat arrives

The Hostess unfolded the third panel of the note.

This one was stained in the corner, as if the paper had remembered being food and found paperwork embarrassing.

TAMARIND DATIL ENGINE Function: delayed heat as moral timing First arrival: sour-sweet fruit Second arrival: brightness mistaken for safety Third arrival: heat after confidence Price: slow burn

Gerald said, "Moral timing is not a practical definition."

The note printed:

Practical definition: do not decide what happened before it finishes happening

Gerald paused.

"Better."

Steve wrote better.

Then he crossed it out because better was a judgment and the room had been in a mood.

The Hostess set the unfolded note on the counter.

The counter changed.

It had been the returned call counter, then ordinary wall, then almost nothing. Now it became a small tasting station. Not a dramatic altar. Not a chef's table. A practical stainless prep shelf with a ceramic saucer, three tiny spoons, a cup of water, a small bowl of rice, a stack of neutral crackers, a timer with no numbers, and one glass bottle.

The bottle was clear.

The sauce inside was not.

It held a brown-gold base with suspended flecks of yellow and orange. When the room light touched it, it looked briefly like sunset had been asked to fill out a waiver.

Nico inhaled.

The wall printed:

No review.

"I did not say anything."

You arranged your face.

Nico turned their face toward the floor.

Auditor Ives said, "Face arrangement withdrawal noted informally."

"Stop helping."

"I have not begun."

Mara looked at the bottle.

"Is this for me?"

The sauce note printed:

Available. Not assigned.

She nodded.

That distinction mattered.

Flocc looked at the bottle and felt the terrible urge to become brave about it.

His ticket printed:

Bravery: not requested

He whispered, "I know."

Then do not audition.

The Hostess placed one neutral cracker on the saucer and touched the back of a spoon to the sauce.

One dot.

It was small enough to insult anyone who thought heat should be measured by suffering.

Gerald approved of the size.

"One dot defined."

Steve wrote:

one dot defined visually no repeat serving until first delayed heat named accurately

The Hostess held the saucer.

"Who chooses?"

No one moved.

This was not cowardice.

The room had made cowardice too simple a diagnosis to be useful.

The older tired person outside the observation line said, "I would like to smell it first."

Gerald looked at the Hostess.

The Hostess looked at the sauce note.

The note printed:

Smelling is not tasting. Smelling may still create opinions. Opinions must wait.

"Accepted," Gerald said.

The Hostess carried the saucer to the observation line and held it where the older tired person could lean slightly without crossing.

They smelled it.

Their face changed.

Not happily.

Not unhappily.

Specifically.

"It smells like something that will be sweet enough to get away with something," they said.

The sauce note printed:

Accurate pre-taste suspicion. Not evaluation.

Nico looked betrayed.

"How is that not a review?"

The note printed:

Suspicion is not review unless sold.

"That is legally useful."

Auditor Ives said, "No."

Mara stepped forward.

The room did not lean away from her or toward her.

"I will taste it," she said.

Flocc's body tried to object before his mind could stop it.

His ticket printed:

No.

He did not speak.

Mara saw the almost-speech anyway.

"Good," she said.

Not soft.

Not cruel.

Accurate.

The Hostess brought the saucer to Mara.

Gerald stepped beside her, not between her and the sauce, but near enough to reach the water and rice.

"You may spit it out," he said.

The sauce note printed:

Spitting out: allowed not failure

Mara looked at the dot of sauce on the cracker.

"What am I supposed to name?"

The Hostess said, "Only what arrives."

"And if nothing arrives?"

"Name that."

Mara picked up the cracker.

She did not look at Flocc.

This was kinder than looking at him would have been, because if she had looked at him, he would have had to do something with his face, and his face was not ready for responsibility.

She tasted the dot.

Everyone waited.

The waiting room liked this kind of waiting better. Not because it was pleasant. Because it had an object and a boundary.

Mara chewed once.

Then stopped.

Steve looked at the timer with no numbers.

It had started.

Not ticking.

Softening.

The first mark on its face glowed pale brown.

Mara said, "Tamarind."

The sauce note printed:

First arrival: accepted

She closed her mouth again.

Nico's eyes widened as if they had an adjective trapped behind their teeth.

The wall printed:

Hold.

Nico held.

Mara swallowed.

Gerald watched her breathing.

"Water?"

"Not yet."

The timer glowed gold at the edge.

Mara said, "Sweet, but it is acting like sour is the reason."

The sauce note printed:

Second arrival: brightness mistaken for safety accepted

"I did not say safety."

Your tongue did.

"Rude."

The note did not deny it.

Flocc watched her name flavor without becoming a performance for anyone.

His ticket printed:

Observe without borrowing.

He looked at the floor.

That helped.

Not morally.

Practically.

The heat arrived after Mara had already decided it was manageable.

This was rude in a more advanced way.

Her eyes changed first.

Not dramatically. No tears, no cough, no heroic suffering. Just an exact widening, as if someone had opened a window inside a closed sentence.

"There it is," she said.

Gerald lifted the water.

Mara raised one finger.

Wait.

The room approved of the finger without printing anything.

She breathed in through her nose.

The heat did not explode.

It assembled.

It moved from the back of the tongue to the sides, then under the sweetness, then behind the place where she had been ready to dismiss it. It was not the hottest thing she had ever tasted. It was more irritating than that. It was late with evidence.

"Datil," she said.

The sauce note printed:

Third arrival: heat after confidence accepted

Mara took the water.

Not because she had failed.

Because the water was there and relief did not need a trial.

Gerald nodded once.

"Water used for comfort."

Steve wrote it down.

Mara looked at him.

"You do not need to record my comfort."

Steve froze.

The sauce note printed:

Record correction: water offered water accepted subjective comfort private

Steve crossed out for comfort so fast the pencil almost tore the card.

"Corrected."

Mara nodded.

This was not forgiveness.

It was a working room.

Flocc's observation ticket printed:

Learn from correction without requesting credit.

He whispered, "Yes."

The Hostess returned the saucer to the counter.

"First tasting complete."

The sauce note printed:

No second serving until a false claim is identified.

Nico said, "Why would there be a false claim?"

The room became very still.

Nico closed their eyes.

"I withdraw the confidence that caused that question."

Auditor Ives said, "Accepted informally."

The timer face glowed again, this time yellow around the rim.

On the counter beside the sauce note, a small blank card appeared.

At the top:

FALSE CLAIM

Everyone looked at it.

No one looked comfortable.

This was promising.

The Hostess said, "Someone has already made a claim the heat has not reached yet."

The older tired person outside said, "I said it would get away with something."

The card did not move.

Nico said, "I said friendly."

The card twitched.

The sauce note printed:

Friendly was withdrawn. Memory retained. Not current claim.

Steve looked at his record card.

"I wrote no mandatory tasting."

The card did not move.

Gerald said, "I called moral timing impractical."

The card slid one inch toward him.

"That was true at the time."

The sauce note printed:

Was it?

Gerald stared at it.

"I dislike cross-examination by sauce."

The note printed:

Engine.

"By engine."

The false-claim card slid another inch toward him.

Gerald folded his arms.

"Fine. Moral timing was impractical until it defined practical behavior."

The card paused.

Then slid back to the center.

Claim revised. No second serving yet.

Nico whispered, "This is the strictest sauce I have ever met."

The sauce note printed:

No.

"I did not review it."

You tried to rank it socially.

"I withdraw meeting it."

The wall ignored this.

Flocc looked at the false-claim card.

He knew.

This was unpleasant because the room did not yet know that he knew, and for once he could not decide whether announcing knowledge would be accountability or theater.

His ticket printed:

If you know, wait until knowing costs something useful.

So he waited.

This did not feel virtuous.

It felt like holding a hot bowl with both hands because setting it down would spill on someone else.

The Hostess prepared a second dot of sauce on a neutral cracker and set it on the saucer.

"No one eats this yet."

The dot sat there looking innocent.

The room did not trust it.

The timer face dimmed.

Then the second mark appeared, not on the timer, but on Mara's seating ticket.

Delayed heat: arrived after confidence Question: what else has been evaluated early?

Mara read it.

Then she laughed once.

It was not a happy laugh.

It was the laugh of someone finding the step she had missed in assembly instructions after building the chair and sitting on the floor.

"Everything," she said.

The sauce note printed:

Too broad.

"My alternate life."

The note did not print.

The seating ticket did.

Specificity required.

Mara looked at the ticket.

"I evaluated it before the heat arrived."

The room waited.

She continued.

"I thought the heat was whether it was better."

The folded wait estimate shifted inside the ticket.

"The heat was that even a better life did not remove deciding."

The sauce note printed:

False claim identified: better means done

The second serving remained untouched.

The Hostess looked at Flocc.

He felt the look arrive before he saw it.

"And you?" she asked.

Flocc's ticket printed:

Do not answer with apology.

He nodded.

He looked at the false-claim card.

"I evaluated the returned call before the silence after it."

The sauce note printed:

Specific.

"I thought the better sentence was the heat."

The room waited.

He hated that he knew the rest.

"The heat was nobody answering."

The false-claim card printed:

False claim identified: apology means answered

The second serving still remained on the saucer.

Nico said, very quietly, "I evaluated the smell before the sauce."

The sauce note printed:

Already documented. Low stakes. Still accepted.

"Low stakes is fair."

Auditor Ives said, "I evaluated informal acceptance before kindness."

The room turned toward Ives with a kind of collective shock usually reserved for falling shelves.

Ives looked at no one.

"Proceed."

The false-claim card printed:

False claim identified: classification means distance

Nico whispered, "Was that emotionally offered?"

Ives said, "Do not make me classify it."

The sauce note printed:

Second serving permitted.

Gerald held up one hand.

"Who is taking it?"

No one answered.

The Hostess looked at the waiting customers behind the observation line.

A young man with a takeout bag tucked under one arm raised two fingers.

"I want to taste it because I keep saying I like heat when I mean I like telling people I like heat."

Gerald pointed at him.

"That is a good safety disclosure."

The young man looked startled.

"It is?"

"Yes. Step to the marked space. One dot. No performance."

The floor drew a small square near the counter, not brass this time, but warm clay.

TASTING SPACE

The young man entered it.

The line behind him adjusted to keep the service path clear.

Gerald placed water and rice within reach.

"Repeat the serving rule."

The young man said, "One dot until the delayed heat arrives and is named accurately."

"Relief rule."

"Water and rice are allowed. Not failure."

"Bravado rule."

The young man swallowed.

"Contamination."

"Proceed."

The Hostess handed him the cracker.

He ate the dot.

For three seconds he looked disappointed.

This was the most dangerous expression in the room.

The sauce note printed:

Confidence forming.

The young man closed his mouth.

His ears turned red.

The room waited.

"Fruit," he said.

The note printed:

First arrival accepted.

"It is not that hot."

Every object in the room seemed to inhale.

The sauce note printed:

Premature claim: not that hot Hold.

The young man's face changed.

It changed in chapters.

First, surprise.

Then betrayal.

Then respect that did not yet have language.

Then a complicated regret about every sentence he had ever begun with actually.

He reached for the water.

Gerald did not make him ask.

This was one of Gerald's great gifts. He believed relief should be reachable before dignity had to file paperwork.

The young man drank.

"It waited," he said.

The sauce note printed:

Heat named: waited Accepted.

The young man looked at the rice.

"I also want the rice."

Gerald handed it to him.

"Good choice."

The sauce note printed:

Pride relief: accepted

The young man ate a spoonful of rice and looked deeply annoyed to have survived something informative.

Nico whispered, "I am having feelings about the rice."

The wall printed:

Allowed. Do not publish.

"Understood."

The Hostess took the saucer back.

"Second tasting complete."

The sauce bottle glowed once at the base, then settled.

The sauce note printed:

Engine phase: active

Steve looked at the timer.

"Can timing be recorded?"

The note printed:

Intervals may be recorded. Arrival belongs to the taster unless offered.

Steve wrote:

Intervals recordable. Arrival statements offered voluntarily: Mara: tamarind; sweet acting like sour is the reason; datil. Waiting customer: fruit; waited. Private reactions not recorded.

Mara looked at the card.

"That is acceptable."

Steve let out a breath.

He did not write that down.

Flocc's ticket printed:

Correct.

Steve looked at the ticket.

"Was that for me?"

The ticket printed:

No.

"Fair."

The Hostess closed the sauce note halfway.

The smell did not leave.

That was the next lesson.

Some things could be put away and still keep arriving.

The room grew warmer by a very small amount.

Not temperature.

Timing.

The benches, the observation line, the service path, the sauce counter, and the returned-call wall all seemed to hold the same delayed light.

Mara sat down again.

Not because she had to.

Because she chose the bench before it could become a question.

The bench accepted her and did not praise her for returning.

Flocc remained standing.

His ticket printed:

Seat: not yet

"I know."

Knowing: not yet

"Also fair."

The Hostess looked at the sauce bottle.

"One more tasting remains before the time receipt."

Everyone turned to her.

Steve said, "Time receipt?"

The sauce note printed:

Next required document: time receipt

The timer with no numbers brightened.

Its face showed not a time, but a table.

Small.

Low.

Set for one child.

Mara's hand moved on her seating ticket.

Gerald saw it.

So did Flocc.

Neither of them spoke.

This was the most coordinated the room had been all day.

The sauce note continued:

Final tasting: not for heat for when heat was first learned

Nico looked horrified.

"That sounds like childhood."

The wall printed:

No review.

"That was a warning."

Accepted.

The older tired person outside the observation line sat down on the outer bench.

"I do not like time when it starts setting tables."

The bench outside accepted them.

Mara looked at the tiny table inside the timer face.

"Is that mine?"

The timer did not answer.

The sauce note printed:

Do not claim the child before the receipt prints.

Mara closed her eyes for one breath.

When she opened them, she looked at the Hostess.

"No surprises with children."

The Hostess nodded.

"No surprises without a receipt."

Gerald said, "I want that in writing."

The timer printed across its blank face:

No child-facing service without receipt. No adult-facing memory service without seating consent. No tasting as proof of readiness.

Gerald read it.

"Acceptable starting language."

Steve copied it.

Flocc looked at the tiny table and understood nothing except that understanding would not help if it arrived early.

His ticket printed:

Do not become gentle in advance.

He winced.

Mara noticed.

She did not ask.

This may have been mercy.

It may also have been fatigue.

The room allowed both possibilities to remain unclassified.

The Hostess folded the sauce note until only the title remained visible.

TAMARIND DATIL ENGINE

Then the title faded.

In its place:

TIME RECEIPT PENDING

The sauce bottle disappeared from the counter.

The water remained.

The rice remained.

The neutral crackers remained.

Gerald approved of this.

"Relief supplies stay until effects finish."

The sauce note printed one last line before folding itself completely:

Correct. Do not keep that either.

Gerald looked at the folded note.

"I reserve the right to keep correct safety practice."

The note did not object.

This was the closest it came to respect.

On Mara's seating ticket, a final line appeared:

Next chapter: The Child at Table Yesterday

Flocc's observation ticket printed:

Next price: mercy

No one liked seeing the price in advance.

That did not make it inaccurate.

The timer held the tiny table in its face for one more breath.

Then it went blank.

The heat in the room did not leave.

It waited.

Chapter 5: The Child at Table Yesterday

In which yesterday is closer than the calendar admits, a small table refuses to become an excuse, and mercy arrives with stricter rules than blame.

The timer did not become a clock.

This was kind of it.

It became a table.

Not fully. The waiting room had already made several large claims today, and even it seemed to understand that turning a timer into furniture should be staged responsibly.

The blank face of the timer held the picture of a small table, low enough for a child and too specific to be symbolic without permission.

Gerald Park said, "No one approaches it."

The timer printed:

Agreed.

Gerald eyed it.

"I am still not taking that as approval."

Correct.

Steve wrote:

timer displays table no approach pending receipt

Then he added:

no child-facing service without receipt

The timer printed:

Good record. Do not keep the goodness.

Steve looked exhausted.

"I am starting to miss ordinary criticism."

Nico, from behind the observation line, whispered, "Ordinary criticism misses you too."

The wall printed:

No reviews of recordkeeping.

"That was affection."

Affection may still review.

Nico put both hands in their pockets, as if storing commentary physically might help.

It did not.

Mara stood beside her bench, looking at the tiny table in the timer's face.

"Is that mine?" she asked.

The timer did not answer.

The Hostess did.

"Not until a receipt says so."

"That is not the same as no."

"No."

Mara accepted this in the way people accepted important answers they did not like: by not arguing with them immediately.

Flocc stood where he could be seen.

His observation ticket had printed Next price: mercy and had since become quiet.

This made him nervous.

Quiet tickets were worse than accusing tickets because they left a person alone with the part of himself that knew why accusation had stopped being necessary.

The heat from the Tamarind Datil Engine had not left the room.

It waited in the walls, in the back of the throat, in the little pauses after people almost said something clever and then remembered the sauce note had been strict.

The water and rice remained on the counter.

Gerald approved of this and did not say so.

The room appeared to appreciate the restraint and also did not say so.

This was possibly friendship, but no one risked naming it.

The timer face brightened.

The small table became clearer.

It was not in Emoji Soup.

Or not only in Emoji Soup.

It stood in a kitchen that could have belonged to many years and one exact afternoon. Yellow light pressed against the window. A spoon lay beside a bowl. A glass of water sat within reach. A folded paper napkin had been turned into a triangle by a child trying to make waiting look intentional.

No child yet.

The waiting room held at the edge of that absence.

The Hostess placed one hand above the timer, not touching it.

"Receipt first."

The timer printed from its bottom edge.

Not thermal paper.

Not cream paper.

This paper was thin, blue-lined, and ordinary in a way that made everyone more careful. It looked like something torn from a school notebook and trimmed to fit restaurant accounting.

At the top:

TIME RECEIPT

Below:

Service: child at table yesterday Price: mercy

No one moved.

The receipt continued:

Date of service: yesterday Calendar objection: irrelevant

Steve looked at the timer.

"Yesterday relative to when?"

The receipt printed:

Relative to the last time the child was treated as finished.

Steve stopped writing for a moment.

Then he wrote that down exactly.

Gerald said, "Define child-facing service."

The receipt printed:

Child-facing service: direct contact, correction, instruction, rescue, praise, blame, or recruitment of the child Status: not authorized

"Good," Gerald said.

Then he closed his eyes.

"I did not mean good as approval."

The receipt printed:

Understood. You may keep safety standards.

Gerald opened his eyes.

"Finally."

The room did not print anything.

This was respectful enough to be suspicious.

The receipt continued:

Adult-facing memory service: available by consent Affected adult: pending
 Witnesses: may remain may leave may refuse record Affected parties: not
 responsible for another person's mercy

Mara read the last line before anyone else.

"That one stays," she said.

Steve wrote:

Affected parties not responsible for another person's mercy.

He did not underline it.

This was difficult and therefore correct.

Flocc looked at the line affected adult: pending.

He knew.

The knowing arrived with no drama, which made it less useful as a
 place to hide.

His observation ticket printed:

Do not volunteer as theater. Do not avoid as kindness.

He took one breath.

Then another, because one breath was often just a decorative start.

"I think it is mine," he said.

The receipt printed:

Affected adult: Flocc Consent question: adult-facing memory service?

The room did not look at him.

That was the mercy before the price.

No one made him carry everyone's faces while choosing.

Mara looked at the timer, not at him.

"Do I need to be here?"

The receipt printed:

No.

"Do I need to hear it?"

No.

"Do I need to forgive anything because a child appears?"

The receipt printed before the Hostess could answer:

No.

Mara nodded once.

"I will stay for now. I am not a witness for repair."

The receipt printed:

Witness status: present not repair witness

Flocc almost said thank you.

His ticket printed:

No.

He swallowed the thank you.

It did not vanish.

It became work.

The Hostess looked at him.

"Adult-facing memory service?"

Flocc looked at the small table in the timer face.

It had a bowl now.

Plain rice.

A spoon.

A little dish of something orange beside it, too bright for the rice and too close to the child's hand.

He could not see the child yet.

That was worse because he already knew the size of the chair.

"Yes," he said.

The receipt printed:

Consent: accepted Service boundary: observation only no contact with child no explanation offered as repair no excuse generated

Flocc read no excuse generated.

"Good," Mara said.

He nodded.

Not at her.

At the rule.

The timer widened.

Not physically. The image inside it widened until the table was no longer small because it was far away, but small because a child was about to sit there.

The child entered from the left side of the kitchen.

He was not tiny.

This mattered.

Tiny children let adults turn mercy into softness too quickly. This child was old enough to have opinions and young enough to believe that being impressive might keep someone looking at him.

He carried a bowl with both hands even though the bowl was not heavy.

The child had Flocc's face before Flocc learned to arrange it.

No one said this.

The receipt printed:

Identification: private but obvious

Nico made a sound.

The wall printed:

No commentary on child.

Nico pressed their lips together.

The child sat.

On the table:

- plain rice - a cup of water - a little dish of orange sauce - one slice of something fried and cooling - a folded napkin shaped like a triangle

The food was not tragic.

This made it more dangerous.

There were no villains visible. No slammed doors. No monstrous speech. No camera-ready cruelty. Just a child at a table with food, attention moving around the room like a weather pattern, and one bright dish of sauce that seemed to offer a faster route to being seen.

The child looked toward someone outside the timer frame.

An adult voice said, "Careful. That one has heat."

The voice was not cruel.

This annoyed the room by making accuracy harder.

The child looked at the sauce.

He smiled too quickly.

Flocc closed his eyes.

The receipt printed:

Eyes may close. Ears may not.

Flocc opened his eyes.

He had been through this before with the phone.

The repetition was not punishment.

It was structural consistency, which was more irritating.

The child touched the sauce with the tip of his spoon and put it on the rice.

Too much.

Gerald stepped forward.

The receipt printed:

No contact. Adult-side safety concern may be recorded.

Gerald stopped at the line.

"Adult-side safety concern: serving too large for child."

Steve wrote it.

The receipt printed:

Concern accepted. Memory service cannot revise serving.

Gerald's jaw tightened.

"I do not like watching preventable heat."

The receipt printed:

Correct.

Gerald did not appreciate being understood.

The child took a bite.

At first, he looked triumphant.

Not because it tasted good.

Because he had beaten the warning to the first expression.

The adult voice outside the frame said, "Look at you."

Not cruel.

Not enough.

The child's eyes watered.

He laughed.

This was the part that hurt.

He laughed before anyone else could decide what his face meant.

The adult voice said, "Tough."

The child lifted his chin.

He did not reach for the water.

The water was right there.

That was the terrible thing.

Relief had been provided.

Pride made it distant.

Flocc whispered, "Drink."

The receipt printed:

No instruction to child.

He stopped.

"Sorry."

The receipt printed:

Apology to room accepted. Does not reach child.

Mara looked at the table.

"He thinks needing the water will make the attention leave."

The receipt printed:

Witness statement: offered by present non-repair witness accepted

Flocc did not turn toward her.

If he turned, he would make the statement about him receiving it.

He let it stand where she put it.

This was perhaps the first thing he had ever not picked up because it glittered.

The child ate another bite.

The heat arrived.

He smiled harder.

The adult voice laughed. Warmly. Carelessly. Not wrongly enough for blame to carry the whole scene.

"You like it?"

The child nodded.

He did not like it.

He liked being liked in the shape of liking it.

The time receipt printed:

Childhood hunger: attention without performance

The room went very quiet.

Flocc felt the sentence enter him and look around with a clipboard.

His first impulse was to say, That explains so much.

His ticket printed:

No.

His second impulse was to say, That does not excuse anything.

The ticket printed:

Already true. Do not perform it.

His third impulse was to do nothing.

The ticket printed:

Closer.

He did nothing.

The child finally reached for the water when no one was looking directly at him.

He drank fast.

Then looked guilty.

This was the part that made Flocc's knees uncertain.

Not the heat.

Not the praise.
 The guilt after relief.
 The time receipt printed:
 Mercy target: relief taken secretly
 The Hostess looked at Flocc.
 "Price."
 He knew.
 He did not know how.
 "Mercy," he said.
 The receipt printed:
 Define without excuse.
 Flocc looked at the child.
 The child was arranging his face back into triumph, wiping one eye with the heel of his hand as if the room had accused him of wetness.
 Flocc wanted to rescue him.
 He wanted to become the adult who noticed correctly, who moved the water closer, who said no one had to eat heat to be kept, who made the child laugh for a better reason.
 The receipt printed:
 Rescue fantasy: not mercy
 He wanted to hate the adult voice.
 The receipt printed:
 Blame appetite: not mercy
 He wanted to hate the child for becoming him.
 The receipt did not print.
 It did not need to.
 He already knew.
 Mara sat down slowly on her bench.
 The bench accepted her.
 It did not ask her to be useful.
 This made Flocc's throat hurt.
 He looked at the child and spoke to the adult side of the room, not through the timer.
 "He was hungry for attention without earning it," he said.
 The receipt printed:
 Partial.

He breathed.

"He did not know that relief was allowed after attention arrived."

The receipt printed:

Closer.

The child folded the napkin triangle sharper.

He pushed it against the edge of the bowl.

Flocc remembered the feeling before he remembered the day: making a small thing neat because the rest of the want had nowhere to go.

"He was not manipulative," Flocc said.

The receipt waited.

"He was practicing being keepable."

The time receipt printed:

Mercy: accepted

Flocc did not feel better.

This was how he knew it might have been mercy.

If he had felt clean, it would have been something else.

The child in the timer drank water openly now.

No one in the memory commented.

The adult voice moved on to another room, another subject, another ordinary life.

The child remained at the table and ate the rice without the sauce.

He looked relieved.

Then embarrassed by relief.

Then hungry.

Then simply eating.

The time receipt printed:

Hunger state: food, not proof

Gerald exhaled.

He had been holding himself very still.

"That is the first safe thing this table has done."

The receipt printed:

Adult-side safety assessment: accepted

Steve wrote it down.

Then he looked at the receipt.

"Can the fact of the service be recorded?"

The receipt printed:

Yes.

"Can the contents?"

No.

"Can the childhood hunger phrase be recorded?"

The receipt waited.

Flocc said, "No."

Mara said, "Unless you choose to make it part of your own work later.
Not now."

The receipt printed:

Record standard: time receipt issued adult-facing memory service accepted price:
mercy contents private no excuse generated no repair generated

Steve copied it.

No underlines.

Nico, behind the observation line, had tears in their eyes and
appeared furious about it.

The wall printed:

No review of tears.

Nico nodded.

"Thank you."

The wall did not respond.

Auditor Ives looked at the timer.

"Does the receipt create mitigation?"

The room became sharply still.

Mara's head turned.

Flocc's ticket printed:

Answer carefully.

The time receipt printed:

Mitigation: not automatically

Auditor Ives nodded.

"Does it create relevant context?"

Yes.

"Does relevant context reduce obligation?"

The receipt did not answer.

The Hostess did.

"No."

The receipt printed:

Correct.

Flocc looked at Mara.

Not for forgiveness.

For the respect of letting the answer exist where she could see it.

"A reason is not a repair," she said.

The receipt printed:

Accepted as room law.

Steve wrote:

ROOM LAW: A reason is not a repair.

Then he looked up, worried he had made it too official.

The room did not correct him.

Some sentences became official by surviving contact with everyone who needed them.

The child in the timer finished the rice.

He had left the bright sauce alone.

He unfolded the napkin triangle.

Then folded it again, differently.

The kitchen light changed.

Not much.

Enough to show the service was ending.

Flocc wanted to say goodbye.

The receipt printed:

No contact.

He did not.

Instead he said, to the room, "I will not use him to make you patient with me."

The receipt printed:

Current work: accepted not complete

Mara said, "Good."

The word did not absolve him.

It placed one tile in a floor that still needed walking.

The timer face dimmed.

The child remained visible for one more breath, sitting at the table with food instead of proof.

Then the table disappeared.

The timer returned to blank.

No one spoke.

The absence after the child was not empty.

It was adult-sized.

The time receipt folded itself once.

Then again.

It did not enter Flocc's ticket.

It slid to the center of the service counter and stopped.

The Hostess said, "Room-held."

Flocc nodded.

"Not mine to carry?"

"Not as a credential."

"As work?"

"Yes."

The receipt printed:

Receipt status: room-held work-available not transferable not admissible as
excuse not decorative

Nico whispered, "Nothing is decorative here."

The wall printed:

Incorrect. Some napkins are decorative.

Nico stared at the wall.

"I hate that you know whimsy."

The wall did not answer.

This was either restraint or smugness.

Gerald turned back to the counter.

"Relief supplies remain?"

The receipt printed:

Yes. Childhood heat may echo.

"How long?"

Until no one is pretending it has finished.

"Impractical but probably accurate."

The sauce note, still folded beside the receipt, printed through its
paper:

Claim revised in advance. Good.

Gerald pointed at it.

"No."

The note went still.

The Hostess took a clean card from her apron.

This one was neither receipt nor note. It was stiff, white, and bordered in a red line that made Steve tense before he read it.

"What is that?" he asked.

The Hostess placed it on the counter beside the time receipt.

At the top:

RESERVATION REQUEST

Below:

Requested party: Regret Requested seating: host stand Requested authority: all future decisions

Mara laughed once.

This one had no happiness in it at all.

"Of course."

Flocc looked at the reservation request and felt an old reflex lift its head.

Regret wanted to help.

Regret always wanted to help by taking over.

It could sound responsible. It could sound serious. It could arrive with documents. It could claim that if it hosted the next room, no one would be hurt by surprise again.

The Hostess picked up a red stamp.

Gerald said, "Was that in your apron?"

"Not usefully."

"I need a new category for how much I dislike that."

The Hostess stamped the card.

REFUSED

The sound was satisfyingly final.

The reservation request smoked slightly, not from fire, but from disappointment.

The time receipt printed:

Next required document: reservation refusal

Flocc's observation ticket printed:

Next chapter: The Hostess Takes No Reservations From Regret

Mara looked at the refused request.

"Good."

This time everyone knew what she meant.

The Hostess set the refusal card down and looked at the waiting room.

"Regret may testify," she said.

The red border on the card brightened.

"It may not host."

The benches seemed to settle.

The observation line held.

The water and rice remained.

The timer stayed blank.

Flocc stood where he could be seen, with one child gone and one refusal arriving.

He did not feel forgiven.

He felt fed in the part of him that had mistaken performance for food.

That was not enough.

That was next.

Chapter 6: The Hostess Takes No Reservations From Regret

In which regret arrives early, asks for the host stand, and is denied the only job it ever truly wanted.

The reservation request continued to smoke.

Not dramatically.

Regret was rarely dramatic at first. It preferred administrative persistence. It could smolder in the corner of a room for years and still insist it was only keeping records.

The card lay on the service counter beside the time receipt.

At the top:

RESERVATION REQUEST

Below:

Requested party: Regret Requested seating: host stand Requested authority: all future decisions

Across the center, the Hostess's red stamp read:

REFUSED

The stamp had not made the card go away.

This irritated several people who had recently grown too optimistic about stamps.

Steve wrote:

Reservation request refused. Card remains present. Smoke light, non-fire.

Gerald leaned over his shoulder.

"Do not assume non-fire."

Steve corrected:

Smoke light. Heat source unconfirmed. Fire not currently observed.

Gerald nodded.

"Better."

The refused card printed:

Pedantry cannot extinguish me.

Gerald looked at it.

"It was not meant to. It was meant to keep people alive while you failed to become the manager."

The card smoked harder.

The Hostess picked it up between two fingers.

No one knew whether paper could look offended.

This paper tried.

Mara remained seated on her bench. The time receipt had gone room-held, but the sentence it had made official sat beside her as if it had accepted a bench of its own:

A reason is not a repair.

Flocc stood where he could be seen.

His observation ticket had not printed since the next chapter line.

This made him suspicious of his own relief.

The ticket printed:

Correct suspicion. Do not decorate it.

He exhaled.

The older tired person outside the observation line looked at the refused request.

"If regret cannot host, where does it go?"

The Hostess said, "Where testimony goes."

"And where is that?"

"Not in charge."

The refused card printed:

Appeal requested.

The Hostess stamped it again.

REFUSED

Nico whispered, "That was satisfying."

The wall printed:

Satisfaction not review if not monetized.

Nico looked up.

"Are you softening?"

No.

"Fair."

Auditor Ives stepped closer to the observation line.

"Clarify. Is regret inadmissible?"

The Hostess said, "No."

The card stopped smoking for half a second, pleased.

The Hostess continued, "Regret may testify."

The card brightened.

"It may not host."

The card darkened.

Steve wrote:

Midpoint rule: Regret may testify. Regret may not host.

The waiting room accepted this with a small adjustment in the benches.

Bench Two, which had been closed pending non-comparative need since Chapter One, shifted an inch forward.

Gerald saw it immediately.

"Bench movement."

The floor printed:

Not seating. Positioning.

"Positioning can still create a trip hazard."

The bench shifted back half an inch.

"Acceptable."

The refused card printed:

If regret may testify, it requires a table.

The Hostess said, "No."

Witness stand?

"No."

Side chair?

"No."

Standing room?

"Limited."

The card paused.

Counter space?

"Temporary."

Gerald pointed at the service path.

"Not if it blocks the path."

The Hostess placed the card in a narrow brass holder that appeared on the counter exactly where it did not obstruct anything.

The holder printed:

TESTIMONY SLOT

Gerald inspected it.

"Stable?"

The holder did not answer.

Gerald touched it with one finger.

It did not move.

"Stable enough pending continued observation."

Steve wrote that down.

The refused card settled into the testimony slot.

It looked less powerful upright.

This was a useful lesson and a petty satisfaction.

The card printed:

I object to being reduced to evidence.

The Hostess said, "You were trying to become government."

The card did not respond.

Mara laughed once.

The laugh had no sweetness in it, but it had air.

Flocc watched the card.

He knew regret.

Not the useful kind only. The useful kind was brief, specific, and expensive. It arrived carrying one fact and one consequence, then left the room before it could redecorate.

Flocc knew the other kind.

The kind that bought a permanent table, learned the staff schedule, called itself accountability, and slowly replaced every menu item with punishment.

His ticket printed:

Do not admire the accuracy of your own regret.

He looked away.

Mara saw that.

"You were about to make it impressive."

"Yes."

"Do not."

"I am trying not to."

The refused card printed:

Trying is admissible.

The Hostess stamped the card again without looking.

REFUSED

"Trying may be factual," she said. "It is not seating authority."

Steve wrote:

Trying factual. Not seating authority.

Auditor Ives looked almost peaceful.

This was unsettling.

The Hostess took another card from her apron.

It was a clean refusal form.

At the top:

RESERVATION REFUSAL

Below:

Party denied: Regret Requested authority: host stand Reason for refusal: conflict of interest

The refused request in the testimony slot printed:

Conflict of interest?

The Hostess said, "You profit when no one is ready."

The room went quiet enough that the water on the counter seemed louder.

The Hostess continued filling out the refusal form.

Permitted function: testimony Forbidden function: assignment of seats
assignment of worth assignment of permanent punishment assignment of repair
recipient duties

Mara leaned forward.

"Read that last one."

The Hostess read it aloud.

"Assignment of repair recipient duties."

Mara nodded.

"That one stays."

Steve copied it.

No underline.

He was getting better at reverence without decoration.

The refused request printed:

Without regret, people repeat harm.

The Hostess said, "With you hosting, people repeat harm while congratulating themselves for suffering."

The card smoked.

Gerald raised the water cup.

"Can I extinguish it?"

The refusal form printed:

No. Regret is not eliminated. Regret is demoted.

"Unfortunate but practical," Gerald said.

Nico whispered, "Regret demotion is my favorite management concept so far."

The wall printed:

Noted. Do not brand it.

"Understood."

The Hostess turned the refusal form toward Flocc.

"Read the price."

Flocc looked.

The bottom line had not been there before.

Price: no self-punishment

He laughed once because the room had found the one price that sounded lenient to everyone except the person paying it.

Mara did not laugh.

The Hostess said, "No self-punishment."

Flocc looked at the testimony slot.

The refused request in it looked like a disciplined version of an old friend.

"That sounds like getting away with something."

The refusal form printed:

Common objection. Incorrect.

Mara said, "Self-punishment often gets in the way of repair."

The form printed:

Witness statement: accepted

Flocc did not answer quickly.

This was good.

Quick answers were often regret wearing a waiter apron.

He looked at the time receipt, at the sauce note, at Mara's seating ticket, at Steve's record card, at Gerald's hand near the water, at the observation line, at the waiting customers trying not to turn his moment into theater.

"If I do not punish myself," he said, "what keeps me from making myself comfortable too soon?"

The refused request printed:

Excellent question. Seat me.

The Hostess stamped it.

REFUSED

The refusal form printed:

Answer: specific obligation

Flocc swallowed.

The form continued:

Self-punishment: large vague centered on the punisher often endless
Specific obligation: bounded observable centered on the affected work continues whether or not the worker feels pure

Steve wrote so fast his pencil squeaked.

The wall printed:

Pencil pressure.

"Sorry."

Gerald said, "Take the correction. Keep the hand."

Steve relaxed his grip.

Mara looked at Flocc.

"Self-punishment asks me to watch you suffer so I know you care."

The room held the sentence.

Flocc did not defend against it.

"Yes," he said.

The refusal form printed:

Accepted. Not complete.

Mara continued, "Specific obligation asks you to change the parts that made me pay."

The form printed:

Accepted.

The refused request in the testimony slot printed:

This is still my area.

The Hostess said, "You may point."

The card paused.

Point?

"You may point at the unpaid obligation."

May I narrate?

"No."

May I haunt?"

"No."

May I schedule follow-up?"

Steve looked tempted.

The Hostess said, "No."

The card printed:

Then I am underused.

"Correctly used things often feel underused when they wanted control."

The card did not respond.

The refusal form turned toward Mara.

Affected party may define non-duty.

Mara read it carefully.

"Non-duty?"

The Hostess said, "What you do not owe because regret is present."

Mara took a breath.

"I do not owe reassurance."

The form printed:

Accepted.

"I do not owe interpretation."

Accepted.

"I do not owe a better version of his motive."

Accepted.

"I do not owe staying available while he proves he feels bad."

The refused request smoked hard.

The refusal form printed:

Accepted. Strongly.

Nico whispered, "Strongly is new."

The wall printed:

Appropriate.

Nico wisely did not respond.

Flocc looked at Mara and did not thank her for defining the limits that protected her from him.

This also cost him.

His ticket printed:

Correct cost.

The refusal form turned toward Flocc.

Worker may define obligation.

"Worker," he said.

The Hostess said, "For this."

He nodded.

He did not know how to define obligation without becoming noble.

The form waited.

Mara waited without helping.

That was also a boundary.

Flocc said, "I will not ask Mara to confirm my regret."

The form printed:

Accepted.

"I will not use my childhood hunger as a discount."

Accepted.

"I will not use apology as a request to return to the old seating chart."

Accepted.

He stopped.

The form waited.

He wanted to add something beautiful.

His ticket printed:

No.

He did not.

The refusal form printed:

Obligation list: preliminary adequate for refusal

The refused request card shuddered in the testimony slot.

If I cannot host, I request permanent standing reservation at his table.

The Hostess stamped the refusal form.

REFUSED

"No permanent standing reservation."

Recurring appointment?

"No."

Seasonal availability?"

"No."

Emergency contact?"

"No."

The card smoked sulkily.

The Hostess said, "You may arrive when a specific fact calls you."

The card printed:

Who decides specific?

The Hostess said, "The work, the affected party, or the room. Not you."

The card went quiet.

This quiet felt different from defeat.

It felt like a document finally stored in the correct drawer.

Gerald inspected the testimony slot again.

"Smoke decreasing."

Steve wrote it.

The water and rice remained.

The timer stayed blank.

The sauce note and time receipt stayed room-held.

Bench Two shifted forward again.

Gerald turned.

"Again."

The floor printed:

Bench Two status: available for non-comparative need

The older tired person outside the observation line raised a hand.

"What is non-comparative need?"

The bench printed on its slat:

Need without using another person's need as a ruler.

The older tired person said, "That sounds hard."

The bench printed:

Yes.

Mara looked at the bench.

"Is it for me?"

The bench printed:

No claim.

Flocc looked at it.

His ticket printed:

No claim.

He looked away.

Good.

The refused request card printed:

I could decide.

The Hostess stamped the air.

No ink appeared.

The card stopped.

Nico whispered, "Air stamp."

The wall printed:

No merchandising.

"I did not even get to want it."

You did.

Nico accepted this with visible grief.

Auditor Ives stepped toward the Hostess.

"For the record, regret has been admitted as testimony, denied seating authority, and denied ongoing reservation."

"Correct."

"Does this create a precedent?"

The Hostess looked at the benches, the tickets, the timer, the room-held receipts, the observation line, Mara, Flocc, Gerald, Steve, the waiting customers, and the refused request in its slot.

"It creates a policy."

Steve wrote:

POLICY: Regret may testify. Regret may not host. No self-punishment as payment. Specific obligation required. Affected parties owe no reassurance, interpretation, motive improvement, or availability for proof of remorse.

The waiting room accepted the policy by opening a drawer beneath the counter.

Inside was a stack of refusal cards.

Not ominous.

Practical.

The Hostess placed the completed reservation refusal on top of them.

The request card in the testimony slot shrank slightly.

It was still present.

It was simply no longer large enough to arrange furniture.

The service path widened.

Gerald noticed first.

"Path widened by approximately eight inches."

The floor printed:

Regret removed from host stand. Clearance restored.

Gerald said, "Useful."

The floor did not praise itself.

Everyone appreciated that.

Mara stood.

The bench let her.

She walked to the observation line, not crossing it, and looked out at the waiting customers.

"I need air that is not part of this room."

The waiting room did not object.

This was important.

The Hostess said, "You may step outside without losing your place."

Mara looked at Flocc.

Not for permission.

Not for effect.

To put the fact where it belonged.

"Do not wait at the door like a message."

He nodded.

"I will not."

His ticket printed:

Obligation: clear path

He stepped back.

The path stayed open.

Mara stepped through the observation line and into the air just beyond the waiting room.

The older tired person made room without making a ceremony of it.

Mara stood there with them, breathing.

Flocc did not follow.

The refused request card printed:

You should suffer about that.

The Hostess stamped it.

REFUSED

Flocc looked at the card.

"I should keep the path clear."

The reservation refusal printed:

Specific obligation: accepted

The room shifted.

Not emotionally.

Geographically.

The floor under Bench Two extended forward in two narrow silver rails.

Gerald stepped toward them.

"Rails?"

The rails glowed, then printed:

TRANSFER PENDING

Steve looked up.

"Transfer?"

Outside the observation line, the city made a sound.

Not traffic exactly.

Not a bell.

A streetcar approaching somewhere it had no track yet.

The Hostess opened the drawer beneath the counter and removed a thin paper slip with a green stripe along one edge.

At the top:

TRANSFER SLIP

Below:

Waiting may become motion. Motion is not escape.

Gerald said, "Absolutely not until we define rails, brakes, exits, and passenger capacity."

The slip printed:

Good.

Gerald pointed at it.

"I am keeping that if it pertains to transit safety."

The slip printed:

Allowed.

Nico whispered, "Growth."

The wall printed:

Do not review transit safety.

Nico nodded solemnly.

Flocc's observation ticket printed:

Next chapter: The Bench Becomes a Streetcar

Mara looked back from the air beyond the room.

The streetcar sound came closer.

Regret remained in its testimony slot, small enough to be useful and too denied to drive.

The Hostess closed the drawer.

"Now we can move," she said.

Chapter 7: The Bench Becomes a Streetcar

In which waiting develops a schedule, Gerald objects to metaphysical transit without handrails, and motion proves it can be a form of remaining.

The streetcar sound arrived before the streetcar did.

This annoyed Gerald Park.

"No," he said.

The waiting room printed:

Sound entering before vehicle: approved

"That is not what I am objecting to."

Please specify objection.

Gerald looked at the bench, the floor, the Hostess, the ceiling, the emergency exit, the aisle width, the testimony drawer, Mara standing beyond the open air, Flocc standing with his hands carefully visible and useless, Steve holding three records at once, Nico preparing a facial expression, and Bench Two, which had begun to hum.

"Everything about this," Gerald said.

The bench printed a small ticket from a slot that had not existed before.

TRANSFER SLIP PENDING

"Pending is not permission."

The Hostess came around the counter with a clipboard that was not the clipboard she had used before. This one had a metal clip shaped like a transit map and the kind of pencil that survived municipal rain.

"Correct," she said. "Pending is a request to remain attentive."

Gerald accepted this because it was the first sentence anyone had said that morning that behaved like furniture.

Bench Two hummed again.

Mara did not step back from the air beyond the room. That mattered. She was not being pulled, invited, tested, or displayed. She was simply standing where she had chosen to stand while the waiting room made the next kind of waiting visible.

Flocc noticed himself noticing her and moved his eyes to the floor.

The floor printed:

Better.

"Do not reward him for basic corridor manners," Mara said.

The floor revised itself.

Noted.

Steve wrote:

floor attempted positive reinforcement Mara objection sustained standard: basic corridor manners are not extraordinary

Auditor Ives had taken out a ruler.

"Is that for the bench?" Steve asked.

"Aisle clearance," Ives said.

Gerald's opinion of the auditor improved against his will.

The streetcar bell rang.

It was not loud. It was worse than loud. It was accurate. It had the bright, civic insistence of something that had the right of way but still wanted witnesses.

Bench Two unfolded.

Not dramatically. Drama would have made everyone less safe. It widened by inches, lengthened by ordinary wooden decisions, and produced a narrow standing rail from its back. The rail was brushed metal and warm from use. Two yellow loops dropped from nowhere and swung once, then settled.

The waiting room did not become a station.

That would have been too easy.

The waiting room remained a waiting room. The coffee table remained slightly too low. The magazine stack still contained three outdated food magazines, one city budget supplement, and a pamphlet titled:

What To Do If Your Estimate Becomes Weather

But outside the open side of the room, where Mara stood, Portland moved past in a gray-green strip.

Wet rails. Brick. A stop sign shining with rain. A bicycle locked to a rack in a posture of complicated faith. A food cart pod breathing steam. A street tree shaking drops from leaves as if answering a question it had been asked too early.

The bench bell rang again.

Now boarding: current waiting

"Absolutely not," Gerald said.

The Hostess handed him the clipboard.

"Inspect it."

Gerald inspected it with the seriousness of a man who knew that impossible things became dangerous as soon as people decided they were symbolic.

He checked the rail.

He checked the loops.

He checked the floor where the bench met the room.

He checked the space between Bench Two and Bench One.

He checked Mara's path to the air beyond the room without asking Mara to move.

He checked Flocc's position and pointed two fingers at him.

"You remain behind the yellow line."

There was no yellow line.

A yellow line appeared.

Gerald glared at it.

"I did not ask you to improvise."

The line printed:

Standard transit marking.

"Fine. You remain behind the standard transit marking."

Flocc nodded.

"Yes."

It was a small word. He made it small on purpose. The waiting room did not print approval.

Mara noticed that. She did not thank it. Good systems did not require gratitude for refraining from harm.

Steve stepped toward the bench with the record book.

The clipboard snapped a page into place.

Transfer Slip Origin: waiting room Destination: waiting room, in motion Price:
stay aboard

Nico whispered, "That is surprisingly good branding."

The wall printed:

No branding.

"Surprisingly good civic identity?" Nico tried.

Borderline.

The Hostess looked at Flocc.

"This is not an escape."

"I know."

The bench bell rang once, very softly.

Verify.

Flocc took his time. The old version of him would have answered quickly because quickness felt like proof that he was becoming good. Quick answers could be a kind of leaving.

He watched the rain move through the open side of the room.

The street outside looked like the city he knew, except every stop had a person waiting beside the person they had been yesterday. No one was doubled cleanly. Some were only a shoulder behind themselves. Some were a smell, a bag, a coat, a child's hand tucked into an adult sleeve. Some were the absence of a person held in the shape of a seat.

No one looked theatrical.

That made it harder.

"If it were an escape," Flocc said, "I would be looking for where it lets me get off before the part I owe."

The transfer slip waited.

"If it were punishment, I would be looking for how long I have to ride before I can say I paid."

The slip waited.

"If it is waiting in motion, then I have to stay aboard without making the motion count as repair."

The slip printed:

Verified enough to board.

Mara said, "Enough is doing a lot of work there."

The transfer slip revised:

Verified enough to board. Not verified enough to conclude.

"Better," Mara said.

The Hostess tore the slip loose and did not hand it to Flocc.

She handed it to Steve.

Flocc felt the old reach in his chest, the one that wanted documents as proof of having suffered correctly. It lifted one hand inside him like a student who had mistaken participation for learning.

He kept his actual hands still.

Steve read the slip aloud because records were sometimes meant to be public and sometimes public meant accountable, not exposed.

"Origin: waiting room. Destination: waiting room, in motion. Price: stay aboard. Passenger standard: no disembarking into fantasy, no using motion as payment, no asking affected parties to validate endurance, no turning safety compliance into virtue."

Gerald said, "That last clause can stay."

"Capacity?" Auditor Ives asked.

Bench Two printed:

Seated: Mara by choice Flocc by instruction Steve with record Gerald with clipboard Standing: Hostess Not boarding: Regret

The testimony drawer clicked.

Regret made a small sound from inside, not pain exactly. More like a spoon finding the side of a cup.

Flocc looked toward the drawer.

The Hostess said, "It has already been told the route."

"Does it understand?"

"Understanding is not required for demotion to remain valid."

Mara looked at the open air.

"Do I have to board?"

The question changed the room more than the streetcar had.

The bench stopped humming.

The yellow loops stopped moving.

The transfer slip held still in Steve's hand.

The Hostess did not answer quickly.

"No."

Mara kept looking at the rain.

"Do I have to stay off?"

"No."

"Do I have to decide in a way that teaches him something?"

"No."

Flocc looked at the yellow line until it became the only line in the room.

The Hostess added, "Your motion belongs to you before it becomes legible to anyone else."

Mara stepped onto the bench-streetcar.

Not for Flocc. Not against Flocc. Not as a sign. She took the rail because the rail was there and because bodies deserved support even when choices were private.

Gerald nodded once.

"Good use of rail."

Mara almost smiled.

"Thank you for noticing the only review I wanted."

Nico wrote nothing, visibly suffering.

The wall printed:

Good.

The bench gave a small lurch.

Everyone who had not been holding a rail learned something at once.

Gerald's voice became the voice of every bus driver, cafeteria manager, fire marshal, and uncle who had ever seen a teenager lean a chair back too far.

"Hold on."

They held on.

The waiting room moved.

It did not move forward exactly. Forward belonged to streets. The room moved through routes.

First came the stop outside the restaurant, where the sidewalk had a dark square of rain that looked like a table seen from above. Then a corner near a bookstore Flocc had once entered to avoid sending a message. Then a bridge, its cables pale in low cloud, with the river beneath it carrying the city without asking to be understood.

The streetcar bell rang at each place.

Not to announce arrival.

To ask whether anyone was trying to leave themselves there.

At the bookstore corner, Flocc's breath changed.

Mara noticed. She did not ask.

Steve noticed. He wrote only:

passenger breathing changed at bookstore corner no service request made

Flocc saw himself through the window.

Not a full alternate life. Chapter Eight would have its own cruelty. This was only a stop.

He was younger by several years, standing under the bookstore awning with a paper cup in one hand and his phone in the other. Rain tapped the awning. His thumb hovered over Mara's name. He did not call. He did not text. He opened a weather app instead, as if weather had been the urgent moral problem.

The streetcar doors opened.

There were no doors before they opened.

The transfer slip printed:

Optional disembarkation into explanation.

Flocc's body leaned before his mind finished lying.

Gerald put one hand out, not touching him.

"Yellow line."

Flocc stopped.

The younger Flocc under the awning checked the hourly forecast.

It said:

Rain until accountable.

Nico whispered, "The weather app is mean."

The wall printed:

Accurate is not mean.

Flocc swallowed.

"I want to go tell him."

The Hostess stood by the invisible doors.

"Tell him what?"

"To call."

"Why?"

"So it would be different."

The transfer slip waited with terrible patience.

Flocc corrected himself.

"So I would not have to sit with the part where I did not."

The doors closed.

The streetcar moved.

Mara kept her hand on the rail.

She did not say good.

The absence of reward did not feel like punishment this time. It felt like weather the room was not asking her to manage.

They passed a food cart with a blue tarp and a steam cloud that smelled like onions, wet cardboard, coffee, and possibility. A handwritten sign read:

Cash Only Card Eventually Mercy Not Accepted As Tip

Gerald squinted.

"That is not a compliant payment notice."

Auditor Ives, who had apparently boarded without anyone seeing, said, "It is clearer than most."

No one argued. This was unusual enough to count as an event.

At the next stop, an older woman sat on a bench holding two grocery bags and an expression that had been waiting longer than the streetcar. Beside her sat the outline of someone who was not there anymore, shaped by empty space and a second bag she had placed carefully upright.

The streetcar bell rang.

Steve looked ready to make a record and then did not.

The older woman looked into the streetcar, not at Flocc, not at Mara, not at anyone in particular.

"This one still going through Tuesday?" she asked.

The Hostess said, "Not yet."

"Good. Tuesday takes longer when people think it's a day."

Then the stop moved behind them.

Bob was not on the streetcar.

But for one second the smell of cardboard delivery crates entered the waiting room, and somewhere under the bench a route printer warmed up, thought better of itself, and went quiet.

Steve wrote:

possible Book 6 route pressure not yet active Tuesday referenced by waiting passenger delivery logic withheld

"You label future plot pressure?" Nico asked.

Steve looked offended.

"I label civic uncertainty."

The streetcar crossed a bridge that did not decide which bridge it was. Steel Bridge in the rail. Broadway in the color. Hawthorne in the feeling of bicycles insisting on personhood. It made Gerald deeply unhappy.

"A bridge must identify itself for evacuation planning."

The bridge printed on the window:

All bridges named after what they carry. This one carries remaining.

Gerald stared at the message.

"That is not an evacuation plan."

Correct.

"Then do not answer the evacuation question with poetry."

The window considered this.

Evacuation plan: remain aboard unless instructed by Hostess or Gerald. Do not enter alternate weather. Do not step into water labeled easier. Keep path clear. Use rail.

Gerald breathed out through his nose.

"Acceptable."

The bridge seemed pleased, but did not print that, which showed restraint.

Flocc watched the river. The water looked like all the sentences people used when they wanted time to carry something away without anyone having to hold it.

He wanted that.

The transfer slip printed:

Wanting the river is not the same as entering it.

"Do you have to write everything?" Flocc asked.

The slip printed:

No.

Then, after a pause:

This, yes.

Mara laughed once. It was small and not given to him. It still changed the air.

The streetcar returned to the waiting room by passing through a stop that looked exactly like the bench where they had started.

This was the most annoying possible transit design.

Nico said, "So we went nowhere?"

The bench printed:

Incorrect.

Auditor Ives said, "Origin and destination match, but route record changed."

Steve looked at Ives.

"That is almost beautiful."

"Please do not make me regret accuracy," Ives said.

The Hostess took the transfer slip from Steve and clipped it to the metal clipboard.

"Current waiting may move," she said. "It may not leave the current life behind."

The bench settled back into bench shape.

The rail remained for three extra seconds, in case anyone needed the dignity of a slower release.

Mara let go last.

Flocc noticed and did not turn it into meaning he could use.

The testimony drawer clicked again.

Regret remained inside.

Not silent. Not gone. Not driving.

The room printed:

Transfer complete. Motion did not count as payment. Safety compliance did not count as virtue. Affected-party autonomy preserved. Route pressure acknowledged. Next service: sample menu

Nico said, "I hate how clear that is."

"No you do not," Steve said.

"I hate how seen I am by a filing system."

Gerald checked the bench one more time.

"No damage."

The bench printed:

Thank you.

Gerald pointed at it.

"I am accepting that because it is about maintenance."

Mara stepped away from the bench and back toward the open side of the room. The city outside had stopped moving, or maybe the room had stopped admitting that motion was happening.

Flocc stayed behind the yellow line until it faded.

The Hostess noticed.

"You may move."

He looked at the place where the line had been.

"Do I get to keep knowing where it was?"

"Yes."

"Do I get to use that as proof?"

"No."

"Good."

The word surprised him by being true.

The service window opened.

A menu slid through, folded into four panels and smelling better than mercy had any right to smell. It was warm. It was printed on paper the color of toast. It did not threaten. It offered.

That was more dangerous.

Across the top it read:

SAMPLE MENU The Lifetime That Tasted Better

Flocc did not reach for it.

The Hostess did not hand it to him.

Mara looked at the menu, then at the open air, then at her own hands.

Steve opened a clean page.

Gerald checked for allergens before anyone could become transformed.

The transfer slip, clipped to the Hostess's board, printed its final line:

Next chapter: The Lifetime That Tasted Better

The streetcar bell rang once from very far away.

This time it sounded less like arrival and more like a route continuing without needing to be chased.

Chapter 8: The Lifetime That Tasted Better

In which the room serves a life that is not a trick, a menu becomes dangerous by being delicious, and truth has to be chosen over fantasy without insulting the fantasy.

The sample menu waited longer than a sample menu should.

It did not flutter.

It did not smoke.

It did not announce its ethical complexity.

It lay on the service ledge, warm as bread and folded into four panels, which made it more dangerous than the streetcar had been. The streetcar had at least looked impossible. This looked useful.

Gerald Park did not trust useful things until he had found where they could hurt someone.

"No one opens it yet."

The menu printed on its outside fold:

Reasonable.

Gerald pointed at it.

"Do not make agreement feel flattering."

Revised: acknowledged.

"Better."

Mara stood near the open side of the room, where the city had stopped moving but still smelled faintly of wet rail and food-cart onions. She looked at the menu without leaning toward it. That restraint was not for Flocc, which made it stronger.

Flocc stood where the yellow line had faded.

He could still feel where it had been.

The Hostess noticed, because the Hostess noticed boundaries the way other people noticed weather.

"You may approach the ledge," she said.

"Do I have to?"

"No."

"Does not approaching count as choosing truth?"

"No."

That annoyed him and relieved him.

Steve opened the record book to a clean page.

Service: sample menu Pending price: truth over fantasy

Nico, who had been trying to look casual in a way that required several muscles, said, "That sounds easy until it is food."

The wall printed:

Correct.

Auditor Ives said, "A sample menu should disclose scope."

The menu unfolded one panel by itself.

SCOPE DISCLOSURE This menu presents one lifetime that tastes better. It is not counterfeit. It is not punishment. It is not a trap. It is not final evidence that the current lifetime was waste. It is a valid alternate service path. It may be admired. It may be mourned. It may not be substituted for the meal already ordered.

No one made a joke.

That was how Flocc knew the room had become serious.

The menu opened the second panel.

The smell came first.

Not one smell. A sequence. Butter browning without burning. Rice steaming under a tight lid. Roasted poblano. Charred scallion. Citrus oil. Coffee just before it became bitter. Tamarind arriving late, then datil heat, bright and patient, exactly when the mouth had stopped performing certainty.

Flocc closed his eyes before he meant to.

The room did not punish him for it.

That made it worse.

The menu showed a restaurant.

Not the restaurant. A restaurant.

It stood on a corner where the sidewalk widened enough for two outdoor tables and a planter full of herbs that were being used rather than photographed. The sign above the door read:

FLOCC & COMPANY Lunch, Dinner, Weather Permitting

"Oh," Nico said, softly.

Mara did not look at Nico.

Flocc opened his eyes.

The restaurant in the menu was not glamorous. It was better than glamorous. It was competent. The windows were clean without looking expensive. The specials board had handwriting that belonged to someone who sharpened pencils. The counter had a small chip in the corner that had been sanded smooth instead of ignored.

People were eating.

They looked fed.

Not impressed. Fed.

That was the cruelest kindness the room had used so far.

Steve wrote:

alternate service path appears operational not obviously fake not obviously morally inferior

"Do not write as if you are disappointed," the Hostess said.

Steve crossed out nothing, because records did not improve by pretending first reactions had not occurred.

Inside the sample menu, Alternate Flocc moved behind the counter.

He was not perfect.

This mattered immediately.

He forgot where he had put a towel, found it on his shoulder, looked annoyed at himself, and laughed before anyone else could make it a wound. He listened when a line cook corrected a timing call. He tasted a sauce and said, "Needs salt," then added less salt than his pride wanted and more than fear would have allowed.

He had gray at his temples.

He had the face of a man who had worked long enough for his competence to stop needing applause.

Mara's name was not on the sign.

Flocc saw that before he saw anything else.

The menu did not congratulate him for noticing.

Good.

A woman came through the restaurant door carrying a box of invoice folders. She was not Mara. She had a tired, beautiful face and a pencil behind her ear. Alternate Flocc looked up and smiled with the ease of someone whose happiness did not require an audience.

The woman said, "Health inspector confirmed Tuesday."

Alternate Flocc said, "Then Tuesday can have clean shelves."

Gerald made a sound.

"Good answer."

The menu printed:

Alternate Gerald approved shelf readiness.

"I did not approve the life," Gerald said.

Noted.

Flocc looked at Mara.

He should not have. He knew it as soon as he did it.

Mara was looking at the menu, not at him. Her expression was difficult because it was not one expression. Relief, maybe. Sadness, maybe. Recognition, certainly. The alternate life had done one honest thing for her: it had not cast her as proof.

That made it harder to hate.

"Is she happy?" Flocc asked.

The Hostess did not answer.

The sample menu turned a page.

Mara appeared in the alternate life.

Not at the restaurant.

At a library table, years earlier or later, the menu did not say. Her hair was shorter. She had a stack of books, a cup of tea, and a phone face down beside her. She was reading something that made her eyebrows draw together in concentration rather than defense.

No one interrupted her.

After a while, someone approached the table. A friend, maybe. A partner, maybe. The menu did not label them because not everything was a service category.

Mara smiled.

It was a real smile.

Flocc gripped the edge of his own sleeve.

The menu printed:

Alternate Mara: not assigned to your conclusion

"Good," Mara said.

Her voice was steady enough to be work.

The menu turned back to the restaurant.

A plate appeared under Alternate Flocc's hands.

It was unfairly beautiful.

Rice, properly steamed. Beans with a glossy dark broth. Greens folded with garlic and lemon. A fried slice with crisp edges and soft middle. Tamarind Datil Engine drawn in a thin line across the plate, not for decoration, but for timing. Beside it sat a small cup of something pale green and cold.

The menu printed:

Sample service: one bite

"No," Gerald said.

The Hostess looked at him.

"Inspection basis?"

"Unknown allergens, unknown emotional response, unknown plate origin, unknown whether metaphysical samples follow food safety code."

Auditor Ives nodded with grave satisfaction.

"Sustained pending disclosure."

The sample menu added a page.

Food safety disclosure: sample is sensory service only no physical ingestion without consent allergen disclosure available emotional response not preventable emotional response not billable

Gerald read it twice.

"Emotional response not billable can stay."

The plate waited.

Flocc did not reach.

The Hostess said, "You may refuse the bite."

"Does refusing prove I choose the current life?"

"No."

"Does taking it prove I do not?"

"No."

"Then what does it prove?"

"That you tasted it."

That was rude in the way accurate things were rude.

Nico whispered, "I hate when the lesson is not a shortcut."

The wall printed:

Then stop shopping for one.

Nico put a hand over their heart.

"Personally attacked by architecture."

The menu did not move.

Flocc looked at the plate. The alternate life was not wrong. That was the problem.

He could see how he might have become that man. Not through one grand rescue. Through hundreds of small choices that had not been impossible. Returning a call. Asking for help before needing witnesses. Learning stock rotation from Gerald without turning humility into a speech. Letting Mara go earlier, cleaner, without making her teach the

lesson twice. Sleeping enough. Paying invoices. Burning fewer bridges and more onions.

It was not fantasy because it was effortless.

It was fantasy because it was coherent.

"I want it," he said.

No one corrected him.

That was almost unbearable.

"I want the restaurant. I want the face. I want the competence. I want Mara not to have had to become tired in the ways I know about. I want that plate. I want the version where Tuesday is only an inspection and not a route I am late to understand."

The sample menu printed:

Want admitted.

Mara inhaled. Not sharply. Enough.

Flocc did not turn toward her.

"I also want to use wanting it as proof that I finally understand."

The menu waited.

"And I want to punish myself with it because punishment feels active when repair is slow."

The menu waited.

"And I want to call it better so I can call this wasted, because wasted lives do not ask you to cook dinner."

The room held still.

The Hostess said, "There."

"There what?"

"The price has started."

The menu slid the sample plate closer.

One sensory bite available. Truth required after tasting.

Flocc looked at Gerald.

Gerald said, "If you consent, do not be dramatic with the fork."

"That is your guidance?"

"My guidance is that most injuries begin with people making a utensil into a symbol."

Flocc almost laughed.

It helped.

He looked at the Hostess.

"I consent to one sensory bite."

The fork appeared.

Plain. Diner weight. Not silver. Not ceremonial. A little worn at the handle in a way that made the entire room seem less interested in impressing him.

He took the bite.

The taste was better.

There was no mercy in pretending otherwise.

The rice was exactly done. The beans had the patience of something cooked by a person who had stopped apologizing to the clock. The greens were bright. The fried slice broke cleanly, then softened. Tamarind arrived first as fruit, then as shadow, then datil lit the back of the mouth like a porch light left on for someone who might still come home.

Flocc put the fork down.

He wanted to cry in a way that would have made the bite about him.

He did not.

That restraint was not noble. It was simply necessary.

The menu printed:

Truth.

Flocc looked at the plate.

"It tastes better."

The words did not destroy the room.

"That life tastes better than this one has tasted so far."

The sample menu did not reward him.

"It is not fake."

The menu held still.

"It is not worse."

Still.

"It is not available."

The fork vanished.

The plate remained visible, which was less merciful than vanishing would have been.

Mara looked at the plate for a long moment.

"Thank you for not making me the difference," she said.

Flocc closed his eyes once.

"I wanted to."

"I know."

"I did not."

"I know."

The two sentences sat between them without becoming a contract.

Steve wrote:

truth over fantasy: alternate life acknowledged as better-tasting alternate life
acknowledged as valid alternate life acknowledged as unavailable Mara not
assigned as cause, prize, or proof

Auditor Ives said, "Cause, prize, or proof is a useful triad."

"Do not enjoy my records," Steve said.

"I am professionally obligated to enjoy clarity."

The sample menu turned its fourth panel.

It showed Alternate Flocc closing the restaurant at night. He wiped the counter, checked the lock, and turned off one light at a time. The woman with the pencil behind her ear counted cash at a table. Someone laughed in the kitchen. The room was tired in a clean way.

Alternate Flocc paused by the door.

For one second, he looked toward the current waiting room.

Not at current Flocc.

Toward him.

There was a difference.

The menu printed:

Alternate service note: do not insult the life that fed people because you cannot take it.

Flocc nodded.

"I will try not to."

The menu printed:

Try is acceptable only if followed by service.

"Of course it is."

Mara's mouth moved like a smile had considered appearing and chosen privacy.

The sample menu folded itself halfway closed.

Flocc felt panic rise, immediate and childish.

"Wait."

The menu stopped.

The Hostess said nothing.

"Can I ask him something?"

"No."

The answer landed cleanly.

Flocc nodded because part of him had known.

"Can I thank him?"

The Hostess considered.

"No."

That one hurt more.

"Why?"

The sample menu answered:

He is not your service worker. He is not your witness. He is not available for closure.

Flocc let that stand.

It was fair.

The woman in the alternate restaurant looked up from the cash count and said something current Flocc could not hear. Alternate Flocc laughed again, tired and easy, then put one hand flat on the counter as if thanking the counter for holding.

Gerald watched this with narrow eyes.

"Good closing procedure."

The menu printed:

Alternate Gerald approves closing procedure.

"I approve the procedure only."

Noted.

The menu folded all the way closed.

For a moment the room smelled only like the current waiting room again: old magazines, coffee, rain, wood, and the faint heat of Tamarind Datil Engine still moving through memory.

Then a small visitor bell rang.

Not the streetcar bell.

This bell belonged to a counter door, the kind that opened when someone who had waited long enough decided to enter without making an entrance.

Steve looked at the Hostess.

"Visitor service?"

The Hostess took the sample menu and placed it in a clear sleeve.

"Next."

Flocc looked at Mara, then stopped before the look became a request.

"Good correction," Mara said.

He accepted the sentence without trying to live in it.

The sample menu printed through the sleeve:

SAMPLE MENU RESULT The better-tasting lifetime is valid. The better-tasting lifetime is unavailable. The current lifetime remains under service. Truth accepted. Fantasy not substituted.

Nico read it and said, "That is devastatingly organized."

"Devastation is not the organizing principle," the Hostess said.

"What is?"

The Hostess looked toward the counter door as the visitor bell rang again.

"Receiving."

The wall printed:

Next chapter: The Person Who Waited for Him

Flocc stood in the current waiting room with the taste of the better life still in his mouth.

He did not spit it out.

He did not swallow it as proof.

He let it remain what it was:

a taste.

Then he turned toward the visitor bell.

Chapter 9: The Person Who Waited for Him

In which a visitor arrives without asking to become evidence, a note refuses to be a receipt, and receiving proves harder than being forgiven.

The visitor bell rang a third time.

It was not the streetcar bell. It was not the service bell. It was smaller than both, and that made it worse. Large sounds announced themselves. Small sounds asked whether anyone was willing to answer without being able to prepare a useful face.

Flocc looked toward the counter door.

He did not move.

The waiting room did not praise him for this. The room had become almost civilized about not overpaying basic restraint.

The Hostess placed the sample menu in a drawer marked:

VALID BUT UNAVAILABLE

Nico leaned far enough to read it and then leaned back as if the drawer had looked up.

"That drawer feels personal."

The wall printed:

Most drawers are personal if opened badly.

Gerald Park checked the counter door from three angles.

"Is the visitor physically entering?"

"Yes," the Hostess said.

"From where?"

"Outside Flocc's self-understanding."

Gerald closed his eyes for one controlled second.

"I am asking about the door."

"Also yes."

Auditor Ives wrote:

door origin: literal and outside self-understanding

Gerald pointed at the record.

"That is how incidents happen."

Steve said, "It is also how records become complete enough to irritate everybody."

Mara had not moved closer to Flocc. She had not moved away either. Her position looked casual only to people who did not understand how much labor it took to stand somewhere without being turned into evidence.

The Hostess looked at her first.

"You may stay."

"I know."

"You may leave."

"I know."

"You may refuse to become part of the service."

Mara nodded once.

"I am listening for that."

Only then did the Hostess open the counter door.

A man stood on the other side holding a paper bag.

He was not dramatic enough for the room. That was the first mercy. He wore a rain jacket with one cuff darker than the other, as if he had once reached too quickly into a sink. His shoes had been repaired. His hair was thin at the crown. He held the bag carefully, not because it was sacred, but because paper bags failed when people treated them like symbols.

Flocc knew him.

Not immediately.

Then all at once.

"Mr. Haddon?"

The man smiled with tired relief.

"You remember enough."

The waiting room did not print anything.

Flocc had known Mr. Haddon when adults still seemed to arrive in finished versions. Mr. Haddon had run the after-school kitchen at the community center. It had not called itself a miracle. It had soup, dented sheet pans, an old radio, and a rule that no one had to explain hunger in order to receive a bowl.

Flocc had not thought about him in years.

That was false.

He had avoided thinking about him in years.

Mr. Haddon stopped at the threshold.

"Am I allowed in?"

The Hostess said, "You are invited for visitor service only."

"I do not know what that means."

"Good."

He accepted this with the trust of a man who had survived enough public systems to ask practical questions and save his deeper objections for forms that deserved them.

Gerald pointed at the bag.

"Food?"

"Empty soup container," Mr. Haddon said.

Gerald relaxed by one percent, then became suspicious of the empty part.

"Any sharp objects?"

"Plastic spoon."

"Intact?"

Mr. Haddon opened the bag.

The spoon was wrapped in a napkin. The container was clean. On top of it sat a folded note. The lid had a strip of tape on it, written in blue marker:

FLOCC HOLD UNTIL PICKUP

Flocc's throat closed so quickly that he almost used it as an excuse.

The visitor note slid from the bag onto the counter.

It did not glow. It did not print itself. It was ordinary lined paper, folded twice, with the torn edge smoothed down by thumb and patience.

Steve looked at the Hostess.

"Record status?"

"Witness from outside self-understanding. Visitor note. Receiving service. No claim rights."

Steve wrote:

VISITOR SERVICE Witness: Mr. Haddon Source: community center after-school kitchen Artifact: visitor note Standard: receive without claiming

Flocc stared at the container.

"I never picked it up."

Mr. Haddon nodded.

"No."

The word did not punish and did not rescue. It simply took attendance.

Mara watched the container, not Flocc.

That helped. Because it helped, Flocc did not try to make it help more.

The Hostess placed the visitor note in front of Mr. Haddon.

"You may read it."

Mr. Haddon looked surprised.

"It is not mine."

"Correct."

"Then why would I read it?"

The Hostess's face changed by nearly nothing.

"Thank you."

Nico whispered, "I do not know what happened, but I feel procedurally improved."

The wall printed:

Do not make that a category.

The Hostess slid the note toward Flocc.

"You may open it."

Flocc did not touch it.

"Do I have to read it aloud?"

"No."

"Do I have to show it to Mara?"

"No."

Mara said, "Good."

"Do I have to show it to Steve?"

Steve answered before the Hostess could.

"No."

The record book printed by itself:

Private content may remain private. Public fact of service may be recorded.

Steve looked both offended and moved.

"That is what I was going to say."

"Eventually," Mara said.

Flocc picked up the note.

His hands shook.

Gerald noticed and moved a chair two inches closer to the counter with his foot, then pretended he had done so because of aisle geometry.

Flocc sat.

The chair did not print approval.

He opened the note.

Inside, in Mr. Haddon's careful blue handwriting, were four lines:
You left before soup. I held it until closing. You were not bad for leaving. You were hungry enough to think leaving first was safer.

Flocc read it once.

Then again.

The room changed in the dangerous way rooms changed when a person nearly mistook being seen for being excused.

The visitor note printed nothing, because it was not that kind of note.

Mr. Haddon stood with both hands around the empty paper bag.

"I wrote that after you left," he said. "I did not know where to send it."

Flocc looked at him.

"Why keep it?"

Mr. Haddon shrugged.

"The container had your name on it."

This was not enough reason.

It was also the entire reason.

Flocc wanted to apologize for not picking up the soup, thank Mr. Haddon in a way that would make the waiting worthwhile, and become the kind of person who deserved retroactive food.

The note allowed none of those things to become payment.

"I am sorry," Flocc said.

Mr. Haddon nodded.

"For what part?"

Flocc stopped.

The old answer would have been all of it. All of it was large, vague, and usually a way to avoid counting.

"For not saying thank you when you kept feeding me."

"Accepted."

The word entered the room and did less than Flocc wanted.

That was honest.

"For leaving without telling you I was leaving."

"Accepted."

"For making myself hard to find and then pretending no one had looked."

Mr. Haddon took a breath through his nose.

"That one is partly accepted."

The waiting room listened.

"You were a child for some of that," Mr. Haddon said. "Children make themselves hard to find when being findable has not always paid well."

Flocc looked down.

"And later?"

"Later you became an adult who kept using the old weather."

Nico whispered, "That is a devastatingly practical sentence."

The wall printed:

Accurate.

Mara did not move. Her stillness was not absence. It was boundary.

Flocc held the note more carefully.

"Is this forgiveness?"

Mr. Haddon looked uncomfortable, which was the first time he had looked fully at home in the waiting room.

"No."

Flocc nodded.

The answer hurt less than the almost-yes he had feared.

"What is it?"

Mr. Haddon lifted the empty container.

"It is a record that someone waited with food and did not turn waiting into ownership."

Steve wrote the sentence down and underlined nothing, because underlining would have made a shrine.

The visitor note warmed in Flocc's hand.

Now it printed on the back, but only after the human sentence had arrived first.

VISITOR NOTE STANDARD Receiving witness is not claiming witness. Being remembered is not being owed return. Being fed is not being excused. Being waited for is not proof of worth.

Flocc read it aloud.

His voice failed at being fed.

The room let it fail.

Mara looked at Mr. Haddon.

"Thank you for not making him the whole story."

Mr. Haddon looked at her properly then, not searching for her role and not measuring her relation to Flocc.

"That would be rude."

Mara laughed once.

Flocc did not use it.

Progress, the room had taught him, was sometimes the discipline of not picking up a sound that had not been offered.

Mr. Haddon turned the empty container in his hands.

"I did not wait every day," he said.

Flocc looked up.

"What?"

"The note makes it sound clean. It was not. I held the soup until closing that night. I looked for you the next week. Then the month got busy. The radio broke. A freezer failed. A grant ended. People left. New kids came in. I thought about you sometimes. Sometimes I did not. That is the truth."

The waiting room seemed to approve of this more than it approved of beautiful sentences.

The wall printed:

Witness corrected against sainthood.

Mr. Haddon squinted at the wall.

"I like that less than I respect it."

Gerald said, "Common reaction."

Flocc felt something loosen, not because he mattered less, but because the witness had become real enough to stop being usable as mythology.

"So you were not waiting for me forever."

"No."

"You waited that night."

"Yes."

"And some after."

"Some after."

"And then your life kept happening."

"It had to. The health department did not pause for your symbolism."

Gerald said, "Good."

Auditor Ives said, "Very good."

Steve wrote:

visitor correction: not forever that night some after life continued

The visitor note added:

Specific waiting only. No eternal debt generated.

Flocc pressed his thumb gently against the paper.

"I can receive that someone waited that night," he said. "I can receive that it mattered. I can receive that it does not make him mine, does not make me excused, and does not make Mara responsible for what I do with it."

The visitor note printed:

Received.

Mr. Haddon smiled then. Not as reward. As a man smiles when a pot comes off the stove before it scorches.

He placed the empty container on the counter.

"I washed it."

"I can see that."

"You always brought things back dirty."

Flocc almost defended himself, which would have been idiotic and historically accurate.

"I did."

"You were a kid."

"And later?"

"Later you were a man with habits."

"I am sorry."

"For the containers?"

"For the containers."

"Accepted."

Gerald leaned toward Steve.

"That is the most specific apology anyone has made in this room."

Steve wrote:

container apology: specific accepted

Mara said, "Do not make a plaque."

Steve crossed out a small box he had started drawing.

The counter door behind Mr. Haddon opened a crack. The hallway beyond looked institutional, not heavenly: scuffed floor, taped notices, fluorescent light, a bulletin board that had survived by being taped at all four corners.

Mr. Haddon looked back.

"Do I leave through there?"

"If you choose," the Hostess said.

"Do I need to know what this room is?"

"No."

"Good."

He picked up the paper bag, leaving the empty container and visitor note.

Then he looked at Flocc.

"Eat when food is offered. Say no when you need to. Bring back containers. Do not make people wait forever in your head when they only waited until closing."

Flocc nodded.

"I will try."

Mr. Haddon gave him a look old enough to predate most therapy language.

"Try with dishes in your hand."

"Yes."

Mr. Haddon turned to Mara.

"Good luck with whatever amount of this is yours."

"Thank you."

"And with whatever amount is not."

This time Mara's smile arrived fully, stayed one second, and left on its own terms.

Mr. Haddon stepped through the counter door.

The door closed.

The visitor bell did not ring again.

Flocc sat with the note, the empty container, and the specific shape of having been remembered without being owned.

He did not feel healed.

He felt assigned to the current room.

That was much more useful.

The Hostess placed a small card beside the visitor note.

SEATING CALL PREPARATION Visitor note received. Witness not claimed. Affected-party boundaries intact. Specific waiting recorded. Current life may be called.

Flocc looked at the card.

"May be?"

"May be," the Hostess said.

"Not ready?"

"Readiness is not the same as permission."

"What is missing?"

The Hostess looked toward the benches, the sample menu drawer, the testimony drawer, the empty soup container, Mara's chosen place, Gerald's clipboard, Steve's record, and the counter door that had closed without becoming a shrine.

"Standing up."

The wall printed:

Next chapter: Now Seating Your Current Life

Flocc folded the visitor note along its original lines.

He did not put it in his pocket.

He placed it under the empty container so it would not blow away in a room with no wind.

Then he looked at the bench.

It looked like a bench.

That was what made it hard.

Chapter 10: Now Seating Your Current Life

In which the call finally comes, standing up costs more than waiting did, and a current life proves quieter than every better one.

The bench looked like a bench.

This was its most difficult behavior yet.

Flocc had learned how to distrust miracles. Miracles announced pressure. Miracles printed terms. Miracles unfolded into streetcars, sample menus, testimony drawers, time receipts, and impossible food safety disclosures. A miracle could be frightening, but at least it gave a person somewhere to put the fear.

A bench that looked like a bench left him with his knees.

The visitor note stayed under the empty soup container. Mr. Haddon's handwriting did not glow. The container did not accuse. The wrapped spoon did not become a symbol. It waited there in a way that made ownership impossible and responsibility local.

Mara stood near the open side of the room.

She was not waiting for him.

That was the first fact he had to keep.

She was waiting in the room. She was waiting with her own body, her own timing, her own right to leave with or without teaching anyone what leaving meant. If Flocc stood because he thought Mara would see him correctly, he would still be seated in the wrong life.

The Hostess came to the center of the waiting room carrying a card the size of a reservation slip.

Steve opened the record book.

Gerald checked the path between bench and counter.

"Clear," Gerald said.

The floor printed:

Clear is not ready.

"I know," Gerald said. "Clear is my department."

The floor accepted this by staying flat.

The Hostess read the card.

"Now seating your current life."

No bell rang.

No door opened.

No streetcar passed outside.

The waiting room did not change shape.

This seemed almost unfair.

Nico whispered, "That was less theatrical than expected."

The wall printed:

Good.

The Hostess held the card where Flocc could see it.

SEATING CALL Party: current life Seat: available Price: stand up

Flocc looked at the words for a long time.

"That is too small."

The Hostess said, "No."

"It feels too small."

"Feeling is not measurement."

Auditor Ives made a tiny sound of professional approval.

Flocc ignored it, which was best for everyone.

"What happens if I stand?"

"You stand."

"What happens after?"

"You find out standing."

He disliked that. Not because it was obscure, but because it was plain.

The sample menu drawer remained closed. The better-tasting lifetime did not call out. The testimony drawer held regret, admitted and demoted. The visitor note had been received without being claimed. The streetcar route had returned to the bench. There were no more useful detours between his body and the next action.

Flocc looked at Mara by accident, then corrected himself.

Mara saw both parts.

"You can look," she said.

The room held still.

"You cannot make looking into a request."

Flocc nodded.

"I know."

"Say it cleaner."

He took a breath.

"I can see that you are here. I cannot use your being here as permission, proof, reward, or instruction."

Mara's shoulders changed by less than an inch.

"Better."

The seating call did not print approval.

Good systems, Flocc thought, were sometimes identifiable by the compliments they withheld.

Steve wrote:

affected-party boundary restated before seating not permission not proof not reward not instruction

Gerald looked at Steve.

"Do you need all four?"

"Yes."

"Good."

The Hostess placed the seating call on the bench beside Flocc.

"You may remain seated."

Flocc laughed once, badly.

"That cannot be true."

"It is."

"But the chapter is called..."

The wall printed:

Do not cite chapter title as authority.

Nico put a hand over their mouth and suffered beautifully for nearly two seconds before remembering beauty was not the point.

Flocc looked at the bench.

"If I stay seated?"

"Then you stay seated with more information."

"Does the seat disappear?"

"No."

"Does someone else take it?"

"No."

"Does Mara have to keep waiting because I do not stand?"

Mara answered.

"No."

The answer struck harder because it came from her.

The Hostess said, "Her timing is not stored in your knees."

Nico whispered, "That one should be on a wall."

The wall printed:

No.

Flocc put one hand on the bench.

He wanted the old script: stand, be recognized, cross the room, receive the current life like a table at last. Even now, after all this, some part of him wanted moral architecture to applaud improved posture.

The current life did not applaud.

It had dishes.

It had invoices.

It had people who might not forgive him.

It had containers to bring back clean.

It had Mara's boundaries, which were not obstacles on the path but facts of the room.

It had the better-tasting lifetime unavailable and still worth not insulting.

It had regret in the drawer, allowed to testify and forbidden to host.

It had Mr. Haddon waiting that night, not forever.

It had Tuesday somewhere ahead, not yet a day and not yet a route he understood.

It had food that would burn if treated as metaphor too long.

Flocc stood up.

Nothing happened.

Then his knees noticed.

Then his breath noticed.

Then the room noticed, but politely, like a server marking that a table had finished ordering without announcing it to the dining room.

The seating call printed one new line:

Status: standing

Flocc waited for another line.

There was not one.

"That's all?"

The Hostess said, "No."

He waited.

"That is enough."

The difference between all and enough landed in him with almost no sound.

Mara looked at him.

Not long.

Not as reward.

Enough to verify that he was standing and not asking her to hold the meaning of it.

Then she looked away.

It did not feel like rejection.

It felt like the room had kept its promise.

Gerald checked the path again.

"Still clear."

The floor printed:

Now useful.

Gerald said, "Thank you."

Everyone looked at him.

"It was a path note," he said.

Steve wrote:

Gerald accepted path note.

"Do not make that strange."

"Too late," Nico said.

The Hostess pointed to the seating call.

"Pick it up."

Flocc did.

The card was lighter than he expected. This bothered him less than it would have earlier. Important things were not required to be heavy just because he preferred proof he could feel in his wrist.

The card read:

Party: current life Seat: available Price: stand up Status: standing Instruction: do not rush to table

"Of course," Flocc said.

The Hostess nodded.

"A current life is not claimed by sprinting."

"Do I walk?"

"Eventually."

"What do I do now?"

"Stand without converting it."

That was worse than walking.

He stood.

The room did not fill the silence for him.

The visitor note stayed under the container.

Mara drank water that was for thirst and not for him.

Steve kept the record open and did not ask for a statement.

Gerald measured the distance from Flocc's standing place to the counter and wrote something private on his clipboard.

Auditor Ives closed their notebook, which made the room feel briefly less audited and therefore more dangerous.

Nico looked at the floor, practicing not narrating.

Flocc stood until standing stopped feeling like a performance and started feeling like a location.

The seating call printed:

Current life acknowledged. Not yet seated.

"Not yet seated," Flocc said.

"Correct," the Hostess said.

"So the table..."

"Was ready earlier."

The sentence crossed the room slowly.

No one touched it.

Mara closed her eyes once.

Not at him. Not because of him. Because some sentences had weight even when they were not assigned.

The seating call printed:

Next document: late ticket Next chapter: The Table Was Ready Earlier

Flocc looked at the Hostess.

"Was I late?"

"Yes."

He almost apologized to the room.

Then he did something better.

He kept standing.

The Hostess placed the seating call on the counter beside the empty soup container and the visitor note.

"You can carry the next thing when it is issued."

"The late ticket?"

"Yes."

"Do I deserve it?"

The Hostess looked at him for a long time.

"Tickets are not about deserving."

Gerald said, "They are about routing."

The Hostess nodded.

"Sometimes he says it plainly."

Gerald looked offended by the compliment and accepted it as a maintenance issue.

Flocc stood in the waiting room.

His current life did not arrive like rescue.

It arrived like a place in the room where he was no longer allowed to pretend he had not been called.

Chapter 11: The Table Was Ready Earlier

In which lateness stops being useful as a punishment, a table refuses to become proof of deserving, and mercy arrives without changing the clock.

The late ticket printed before anyone admitted they were waiting for it.

It came from the underside of the bench, which made Gerald unhappy for structural reasons and Steve unhappy for filing reasons.

LATE TICKET

Flocc did not pick it up.

This was not restraint. It was fear wearing a good coat.

The Hostess let the ticket sit on the floor between bench and counter.

Mara looked at it, then at the open side of the room. She did not perform patience. She had already given the room enough opportunities to misunderstand her stillness.

Gerald crouched and examined the ticket without touching it.

"No adhesive. No heat. No obvious contamination."

The ticket printed:

No obvious contamination is not moral clearance.

Gerald nodded.

"Correct."

Nico whispered, "Even the ticket knows the difference between safety and absolution."

The wall printed:

Everyone is learning slowly.

Steve opened the record book.

"Late to what?"

The ticket answered:

Late to readiness.

Flocc closed his eyes.

The phrase found too many rooms.

Late to the call. Late to the soup. Late to clean containers. Late to understanding that regret could testify but not host. Late to the better life, which was valid and unavailable. Late to Mara's boundary because he

had mistaken boundary for a door that might reopen if he became impressive enough.

The Hostess said, "Open your eyes."

He did.

"Do not use the list as punishment."

"I was not."

The ticket waited.

"I was beginning to."

The ticket printed:

Admitted.

Mara said, "Lateness can become a way to stay central."

Flocc looked at the floor.

"Yes."

"Say it without making me grade it."

"If I make my lateness enormous enough, everyone has to keep dealing with the size of it."

Mara looked away.

"Better."

The Hostess nodded toward the ticket.

"Pick it up."

Flocc picked it up.

It was lighter than a punishment and heavier than an excuse.

LATE TICKET Table: ready earlier Passenger: current life Status: standing, not yet seated Price: forgive timing

"Forgive timing?" he asked.

"Yes," the Hostess said.

"Whose?"

"Start with the clock."

He did not understand. This was promising. Understanding had often been the part of him most eager to skip labor.

The waiting room wall changed from municipal beige to the color of the restaurant dining room seen through morning light. Not a memory exactly. A service image. The released table appeared, plain and set. No spotlight. No holy steam. Just plates stacked, water poured, napkins folded, path clear.

The table had been ready.

Not recently.

Earlier.

Flocc felt shame lift its hand.

The late ticket printed:

No.

Shame put its hand down with visible resentment.

The Hostess said, "The table being ready earlier is not evidence that you should have been ready earlier."

Auditor Ives looked up sharply.

"That distinction is important."

"Yes."

Flocc looked at the table.

"But I was late."

"Yes."

"And the table was ready."

"Yes."

"And I missed it."

"No."

The word entered cleanly.

He looked at her.

"No?"

"You delayed it. You did not destroy it."

The late ticket warmed.

Delay is real. Delay is not proof of permanent loss.

Steve wrote so carefully that the pen sounded almost quiet.

Gerald looked at the service image.

"Food held?"

The Hostess said, "Properly."

"How long?"

"Long enough to teach timing. Not long enough to become unsafe."

Gerald accepted this only after inspecting the imaginary steam with the face of a man who knew imagination had killed people in lesser restaurants.

Mara said, "What if someone else stopped waiting?"

The room did not answer for her. This mattered.

The Hostess said, "Then that is true too."

Flocc held the ticket.

He wanted mercy to mean nobody had left.

Mercy refused to be that dishonest.

"The table being ready does not mean everyone stayed," he said.

"Correct."

"It does not mean I get the old version."

"Correct."

"It does not mean Mara owes me the meal."

"Correct."

Mara exhaled through her nose.

It was not relief exactly. It was a reduction in work.

The late ticket printed:

Mercy does not restore old entitlement. Mercy preserves possible service.

Nico looked offended by the sentence's efficiency.

"That could have saved me several years."

The wall printed:

It was available earlier.

Nico sat down on the floor.

"Fair."

The service image shifted.

The table remained ready. A chair pulled back. No one sat in it. The absence did not accuse him. It simply showed the shape of a place that had waited without becoming his property.

Flocc read the ticket again.

Price: forgive timing.

"I do not know how to forgive timing."

The Hostess said, "Stop asking time to become character evidence."

That was rude.

It was also exact.

"If time proves I am bad, I do not have to choose."

"Yes."

"If time proves I am good because I finally stood up, I also do not have to choose."

"Yes."

"So time just..."

"Passed."

The word did not comfort him.

Then it did, but not in a way he could use to get out of anything.

Mr. Haddon's note had waited until closing. The alternate life had continued without him. The streetcar had gone through stops and returned to the same room changed only by route. Mara's timing was her own. The table was ready earlier. Time had not been a judge. It had been the room in which actions either happened or did not.

Flocc looked at Mara.

He did not ask her anything.

She looked back.

"I can believe you are late," she said. "I cannot carry what you do with that."

"I know."

"And I can believe the table was ready without wanting to sit at it."

"I know."

The late ticket did not print approval.

It did print:

Boundary compatible with mercy.

Mara pointed at the ticket.

"Keep that one."

Flocc nodded.

The Hostess held out a small punch tool.

"Mark the ticket."

"How?"

"Once."

He took the punch tool. It was ordinary, metal, and badly designed for drama.

He punched the late ticket once.

The hole appeared beside:

forgive timing

Nothing else happened.

Then the service image of the table moved one inch closer.

Gerald checked the path.

"Still clear."

The floor printed:

Now nearer.

Steve wrote:

late ticket marked table nearer no entitlement restored boundary compatible with mercy

Auditor Ives said, "That will be hard to audit."

"Good," Mara said.

The Hostess took the late ticket and clipped it behind the seating call.

"The next movement is route acceptance."

The word route changed the room.

Under the bench, a printer woke up.

Gerald looked down immediately.

"No."

The printer printed anyway.

DELIVERY SLIP PENDING

The air smelled faintly of cardboard, rain, and Tuesday.

Bob appeared in the dining-room doorway with no apparent surprise.

"That is mine soon," he said.

"Not yet," the Hostess said.

"I know."

Flocc looked at him.

"Tuesday is on the route?"

Bob nodded.

"Tuesday has always been on a route. People keep trying to make it a date."

The late ticket printed its final line:

Next chapter: Tuesday Is On the Route

Flocc stood with the table closer than before and not yet reached.

He had been late.

The table had been ready.

Both facts remained.

For the first time, neither fact was trying to become the whole story.

Chapter 12: Tuesday Is On the Route

In which the route arrives without rescuing anyone, Bob accepts the next logic, and Tuesday stops behaving like a date.

The delivery printer under the bench cleared its throat.

Gerald Park looked personally betrayed.

"Printers do not get throats."

The printer produced one careful inch of paper.

Noted.

"That was not an invitation to participate."

Bob stepped fully into the waiting room before the printer could answer. He carried no tray this time. This made him look less like a server and more like a man who had arrived because the map had finally admitted it needed him.

The room changed around him by becoming more practical.

Not smaller.

More practical.

The benches remained benches. The table remained nearer, not reached. The late ticket sat clipped behind the seating call. Mr. Haddon's empty container held the visitor note in place. The sample menu stayed in its drawer, valid and unavailable. Regret remained in testimony. Mara stood where her own timing allowed. Flocc stood because he had stood and because standing was not done with him.

Bob looked at all of it.

"Route's crowded."

Gerald said, "Finally."

Steve opened a clean page.

"Delivery service?"

Bob shook his head.

"Route service."

The printer accepted this by printing faster.

DELIVERY SLIP Route: Tuesday Status: on route Price: accept route

Flocc looked at the slip.

"Tuesday is not a day?"

Bob gave him the patient look of a man who had watched many people confuse labels with delivery instructions.

"Tuesday is sometimes a day. Today it is a route."

"Where does it go?"

"Through."

Nico whispered, "That is a Bob answer with unusually high structural confidence."

The wall printed:

Correct.

The Hostess took the delivery slip and placed it between Flocc and Bob, not handing it to either of them yet.

"This is the final service of the waiting room."

The word final entered quietly.

Mara noticed it. Flocc noticed that she noticed and then stopped there.

Good.

The Hostess continued.

"The table was ready earlier. The current life was called. The late ticket was marked. Now motion returns."

The streetcar bell rang from very far away, but it did not enter the room. It had done its work. Not every sound needed another scene.

Bob read the delivery slip.

"Route starts here. Does not end here."

"Does it take us to Book 6?" Steve asked.

The slip printed:

Do not say Book 6 inside service unless useful.

Steve looked wounded.

Bob said, "It is useful."

The slip reconsidered.

Allowed: handoff context

Steve wrote with relief that was not becoming.

Flocc looked at the delivery slip again.

"Accept route means I leave?"

The Hostess said, "No."

"Accept route means I stay?"

"No."

Bob said, "It means you stop making motion answer that question for you."

The room seemed pleased to have outsourced plainness.

Mara sat down on the bench.

Everyone noticed.

No one used it.

The bench accepted her without printing a ticket. This was either restraint or growth. The room did not clarify, which was a kind of both.

Mara said, "If the route moves, I choose my own stop."

The delivery slip printed:

Affected-party routing: independent

"Good," Mara said.

Flocc did not say anything.

This was the best thing available.

Bob pointed at the slip.

"Route acceptance is not passenger ownership."

The slip printed:

Correct.

"Route acceptance is not apology completion."

Correct.

"Route acceptance is not table entitlement."

Correct.

"Route acceptance is carrying the next thing without pretending carrying is arrival."

The printer paused.

Then:

Correct. Useful.

Bob looked mildly annoyed by praise from equipment.

Gerald said, "Do not let it change your procedure."

"I won't."

The delivery slip lengthened.

Cargo: seating call late ticket visitor note record sample menu result reservation refusal transfer slip time receipt sauce note alternate receipt wait estimate seating ticket

Steve leaned forward.

"That is the whole artifact ladder."

The Hostess said, "Yes."

"In reverse."

"Yes."

"Why reverse?"

Bob answered.

"Because delivery begins with what you finally have in your hands and carries it back through what made it possible."

Steve wrote that down with visible restraint.

The slip printed one more line:

No artifact cancels another.

Flocc read the cargo list.

Each artifact was still itself. The seating ticket did not vanish because the delivery slip appeared. The wait estimate did not become wrong because the current life had been called. The alternate receipt, the sauce note, the time receipt, the reservation refusal, the transfer slip, the sample menu, the visitor note, the seating call, the late ticket: none of them became the answer alone.

The current life was apparently going to require carrying more than one true thing at a time.

This felt inefficient.

It also felt like food.

The table in the service image moved another inch closer.

Gerald checked the path.

"Still clear."

The floor printed:

Clear enough for route acceptance.

"Good."

The Hostess held the delivery slip out to Flocc.

"You may accept it."

"Do I have to?"

"No."

"If I do not?"

"The route remains pending."

"Does that punish everyone?"

Mara answered before the room did.

"No."

Flocc nodded.

The delivery slip printed:

No global hostage logic.

Nico sighed with feeling.

"I needed that on several family holidays."

The wall printed:

Not this chapter.

Flocc reached for the delivery slip.

Then stopped.

"What am I accepting?"

Bob answered.

"That Tuesday is on the route."

"What does that mean?"

"That the next life does not arrive by being understood first."

"What if I accept wrong?"

"Then you correct on route."

"What if I get lost?"

"Then route matters."

"What if I make the route about how sorry I am?"

Bob took a slow breath.

"Then I will tell you to carry the box."

Mara looked down, and the corner of her mouth moved once.

Flocc did not collect it.

He took the delivery slip.

It was warmer than paper and cooler than food. It smelled like cardboard, rain, clean shelves, and a Tuesday that refused to become a deadline.

The slip printed:

Route accepted.

No applause.

No release of doves, which was fortunate for food safety.

The table moved the last inch.

It did not arrive in front of him.

He arrived close enough to see it correctly.

One place was set.

Not alone. Not with all questions solved. One place set because one current life had been called, had stood, had received lateness without

using it as punishment, and had accepted route without turning motion into escape.

Mara's place was not set beside it.

This hurt.

It also told the truth.

Her water glass remained by her bench, for thirst.

Flocc looked at it and then away.

The delivery slip printed:

Truth held.

The Hostess took the seating call, late ticket, and delivery slip and clipped them together.

"Book Five service complete."

Steve almost wrote Book Five service complete and then looked at the delivery slip for permission.

The slip printed:

Allowed.

Steve wrote it with great dignity and only a little visible joy.

Bob stepped toward the counter door Mr. Haddon had used.

The hallway beyond no longer looked like the community center. It looked like a loading route before dawn. Concrete. Wet air. A delivery van with no logo. Crates stacked in a way Gerald would need to inspect. Somewhere, a clock showed Tuesday without showing a time.

Flocc looked at the Hostess.

"Do I go with him?"

"Not yet."

Bob said, "Soon."

"What do I do now?"

The Hostess pointed to the table.

"Sit when you are called."

"I was called."

"Then sit."

Flocc looked at the chair.

It did not move.

He walked to it.

Walking was not heroic. It was awkward in the normal way of walking after standing still too long. One knee objected. His hand almost reached for proof and found only the back of the chair.

He pulled it out.

Gerald watched the chair legs.

"Acceptable."

Flocc sat.

The table did not know his shape.

It did not need to.

It held the place in front of him and did not ask to become evidence.

On the plate was nothing yet.

That was correct.

The delivery slip printed from the Hostess's board:

Current life seated. Route accepted. Meal pending.

Mara stood from the bench.

Flocc did not stand.

She picked up her water glass, carried it to the side counter, and set it down.

"My stop is not this table," she said.

The room did not argue.

Flocc nodded.

"I know."

"Do you?"

He looked at the empty plate.

"I know enough not to make you prove it."

Mara considered that.

"Good."

Then she walked toward the open side of the room, where the city had been, and stepped out into her own weather.

The opening did not close behind her. It simply stopped belonging to him.

The Hostess let the silence after Mara leave be exactly as long as it was.

Then Bob lifted one crate in the hallway.

"Tuesday's first rule," he said.

Flocc looked up.

"What is it?"

"If you can carry one real box, do that before explaining the route."

The delivery slip printed:

Book Six handoff: The Delivery Route Through Tuesday

Steve underlined it once.

No one stopped him.

The Hostess placed a clean fork beside Flocc's empty plate.

Not ceremonial.

Diner weight.

The kind of fork that could eat, not prove.

Flocc picked it up because the meal was pending and because a current life could not be fed by staring at it.

Somewhere in the route beyond the counter door, Tuesday waited without hurry.

This time, waiting did not mean nothing was happening.