

bandages & banshees

A Cozy Fantasy

Tales from the Broken Claw

Book Ten

donjones

donjones.com

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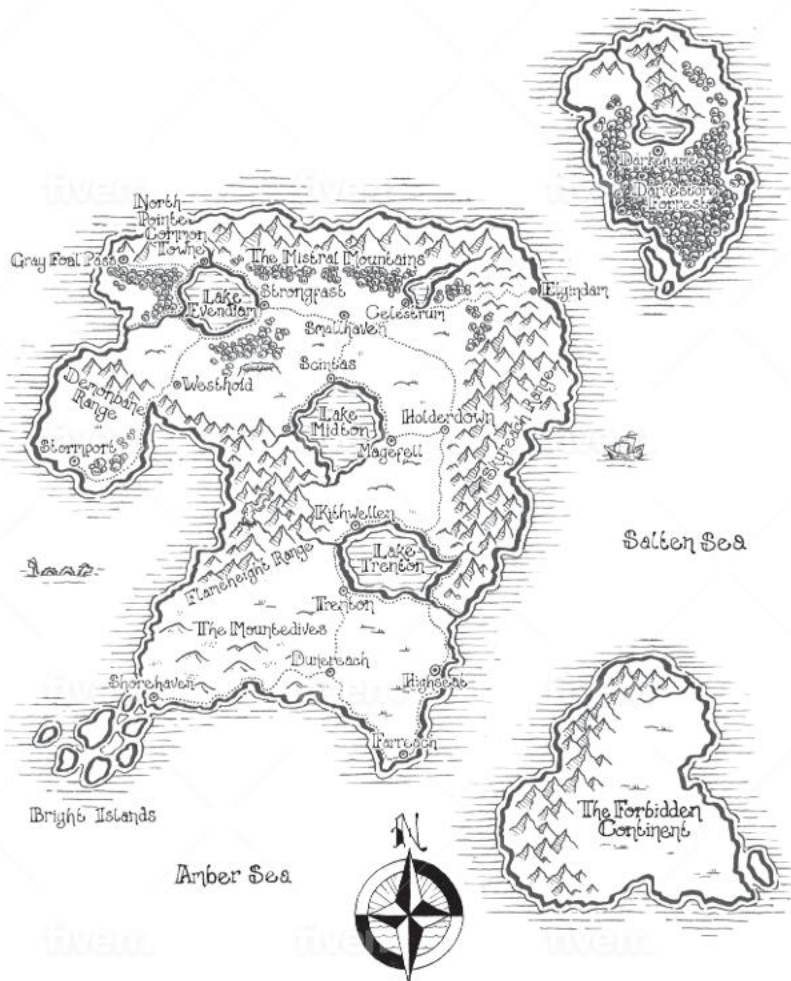
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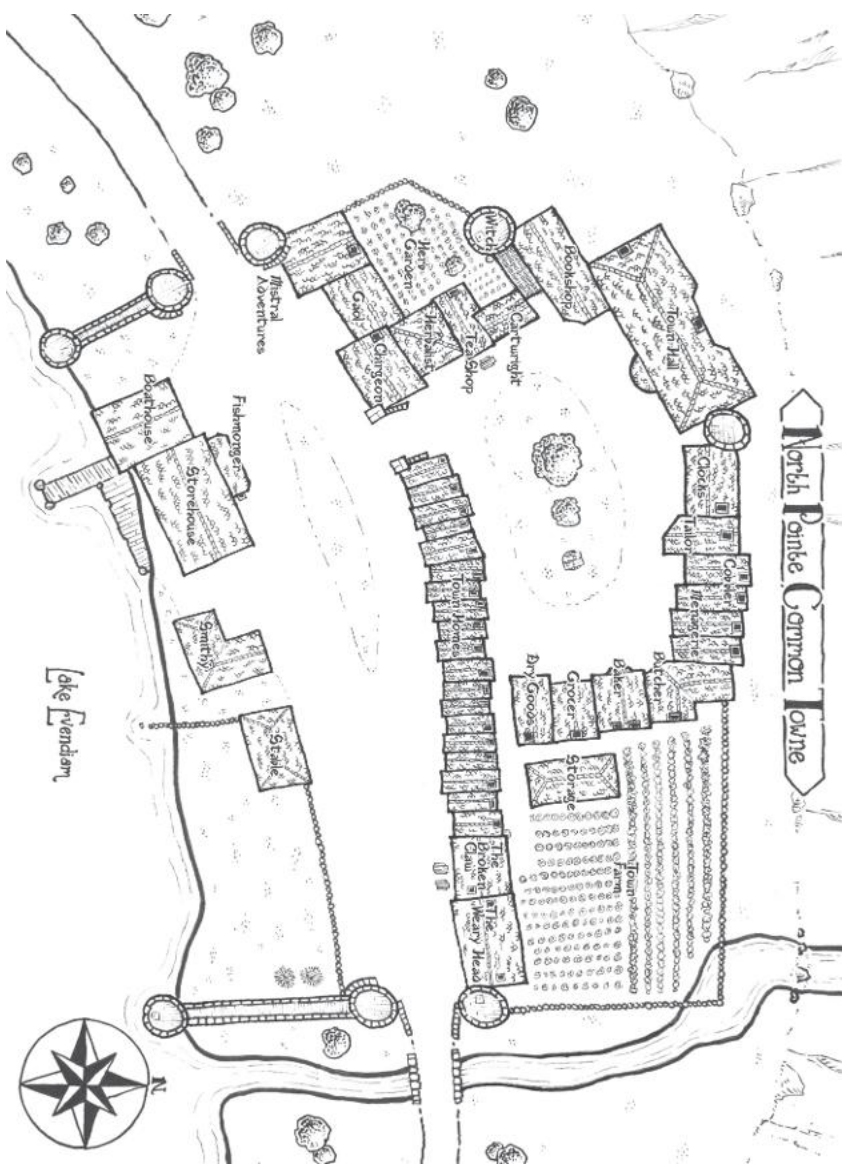
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Urwald



North Pointe Common Town



foreword

This is the tenth volume in *Tales from the Broken Claw*, and I can scarcely believe it.

The first volume, *Pubs & Pegasi*, originated from a joke. We once rented a townhouse in Exton, PA (where I met my spouse), and we had a decent stretch of grass in the back, which led to a stream-slash-drainage-ditch. One summer, we were *inundated* by Canada Geese. Like, bad. Beautiful creatures, but deeply unsanitary. It got so bad that our development had to hire specialists to harass the birds (using specially trained dogs) and to “turn” their eggs, causing the mama goose to abandon the egg before it matured.

One local news station suggested buying a specific “goose deterrent” made from, basically, peppers. You’re meant to spray it on your grass, and the geese don’t like it, so they move elsewhere.

Well.

We did this, and were grilling out back one afternoon, and here came a whole flock of the things, waddling along probably twenty abreast. They hit the line where we’d sprayed...

...and kept going.

Seriously, it was like they’d discovered a Mexican buffet.

One of them came over and tried to grab a chicken drumstick off

the grill, which is basically cannibalism, which tells you everything you need to know about Canada geese.

So you can see where *Pubs & Pegasi* got its main plot point.

Anyway, the reception to the series has been fantastic, which delights me to no end. I'm incredibly appreciative to everyone who's bought the book or read it on Kindle Unlimited.

(Pro tip: There's a Kindle Unlimited omnibus edition with books 1-5, and now one for books 6-10; that lets you get five novels into one "slot" on your Kindle Unlimited borrowing shelf!)

This represents the last novel I've outlined—although we've only covered half the shops and shopkeepers in North Pointe Common Towne. I'll likely take a bit of a break from the world of Urwald—I've got several other novels I'd like to work on, including a sci-fi epic. But I *would* like to hear from you, specially if you've got opinions on which shops should be featured first when I return to this cozy little town. You're welcome to contact me via the "HMu" page on my website, DonJones.com, and I do hope you'll do so. I always reply, and I truly appreciate you taking the time to say "hi."

Ok—with that out of the way, and with an additional thanks for coming back to North Pointe for a *tenth time*, let's see what Dexter is up to.

one

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THE INTERIOR of the chirurgery was neither cottage nor castle, but something in between. Stone walls so clean they nearly glinted, black planks underfoot, and rows of tin-paned windows that filled the space with cold daylight. The scent was nothing like the must and rot: Instead, the air hummed with the herbal sting of rosemary and some floral sweetness she couldn't name—plus a faint, fresh nip of ozone, as if there'd just been a thunderstorm in the next room. The warmth came from a squat iron stove in the corner, which Dexter, of course, had positioned directly beneath a clever system of pipes and copper kettles. Everything in the room had a purpose.

Dexter himself was already waiting, perched on a rolling stool at the examination bench. He wore a coat of midnight wool, high at the collar and long in the sleeve, with a stitched badge of town colors at the breast. His hands were sheathed in fine black gloves, fingers steepled, as though praying to the god of clean incisions. Dexter's skin was so pale it seemed to reflect the snowy sunlight, and the effect was, frankly, unsettling. His eyes were darker still, near-black and sharp, but not cruel.

"Hello," the woman said, shifting her weight heavily to one leg. "My name is Elara. I—"

"Mistress Elara." Dexter nodded once—no smile, but not unfriendly. "Please sit. I see it is the left ankle."

She hobbled to the bench. The bench had a thick cushion covered in oilcloth and a little step to help the infirm up. Dexter waited until she had arranged herself, her booted foot out before her, and then knelt to examine the injury.

He did not ask for permission before unlacing her boot, but there was nothing improper in his manner. He moved briskly, with the sort of respect you showed to livestock or expensive furniture. Elara braced herself for a jolt of pain as he slid the boot off. Instead, the sensation was a strange, tingling relief. Dexter set the boot aside and gently pressed the ankle, working his way along the bones and up into the calf. He paused for a moment, then looked up.

"It is a bad sprain, not a break." His voice was soft, not much louder than the crackle of the stove, but it left no room for debate. "You will not walk on it unaided for two weeks. Three, if you do not let it heal."

"What about my journey?" Elara asked, more sharply than intended. She regretted it instantly; Dexter did not look the sort to abide whining.

He surprised her. "You will find a cart heading your direction. There are carts every day. We will ensure someone takes you for a fair price."

Elara blinked. It was not a request, or even a threat. Just a plan, delivered as coldly and correctly as a weatherman announcing the coming rain.

"Fine," she muttered, though a smile crept in at the edge of her mouth. "You know too much for a man so young."

Dexter's face did not change. He took from the wall a small glass jar filled with pale yellow ointment, opened it, and smoothed a generous dab along her swollen joint. The cream was shockingly cold; Elara nearly yelped, but then the pain faded, replaced by a sensation of weightless warmth. It radiated up her leg like a slow tide.

As Dexter applied the salve, the air around him seemed to shimmer slightly, as though a heat haze was gathering from his fingertips. Elara saw, or thought she saw, faint veins of blue light dancing

through the shadows, sinking into her flesh. She shivered despite herself.

Dexter looked up. "You are sensitive to the effect."

"I've never seen—what is it, exactly?"

He considered her ankle, then the jar, and finally her face, as if weighing how much truth she could carry. "The room. The building. It is gifted, like some of the other shops in North Pointe. When a wound enters, the pain is lessened. The body is encouraged to knit itself. My tinctures and bandages help, of course. The gift does the rest." He cleaned his gloves on a cloth. "It also leaves the patient hungry, and sometimes sleepy. You will eat and rest before leaving."

The sensation in her ankle was already so diminished it felt like a memory. "It's a marvel," she said. "Why do you hide in here, when you could work magic for the whole world?"

Dexter regarded her for a long moment, his eyes gone strangely flat. "I do not care for the world," he said. "I care for North Pointe Common Towne."

Elara laughed, but he wasn't joking.

He wrapped her ankle in a cunning bandage that hardened as it set, and produced a cane for her from a cupboard lined with at least a dozen. "This one is yours now," he said, and offered it to her like a ceremonial baton. "Return it if you heal ahead of schedule."

She took the cane, tried a little weight on the ankle, and found it tolerable—almost pleasant. "Thank you, Master Dexter."

He inclined his head. "Mistress."

She signed the ledger, and as she did, Dexter remained by the window, hands clasped, waiting for her to go. For the first time, she saw a tremor at the edge of his composure: his left hand shook, ever so slightly, and his posture slackened. It was there and gone, like a skip in a record.

Elara frowned. "Are you well, sir?"

Dexter's voice was airy. "It is the price for what I do. Good day."

She opened her mouth to protest—perhaps to ask more, or simply to insist he not do that on her behalf—but the door was already closing behind her.

Inside, Dexter counted her steps with his ears, and when she was

gone, he exhaled. The pain lived in his body for a moment, a sharp recollection of the woman's sprain and all the years that came before. It threatened to settle in, to become part of him, but Dexter would not allow it. He drew in the clean, cold air, let the ache fill his chest, and then slowly exhaled. The room's gift took the remainder, dispersing the pain as a breath on a winter morning.

He rubbed his hand where it had trembled, then straightened the jars and tidied the bench for the next patient. He found, in the end, that the work was all the comfort he required.

Dexter set a broom to the tiled floor and watched it sweep in silent, patient arcs, stirring up nothing but the faintest motes of sunlight. The room always felt emptier after a patient departed, as if the absence itself pressed in on him. In the quiet, the air hummed with leftover pain, and with it, a sense of unfinished business.

He restocked the ointment shelf and was aligning the labels just so when the bell above the door trilled. Not the hesitant jangle of a patient; this was a decisive ring, three quick chimes. Dexter straightened, his posture precise.

Constable Jen Darne entered with her hands in her pockets and a report book tucked under one arm. Her boots marked a direct line from the threshold to the counter, and she wore her gray-streaked hair in a tail so tight it looked ready to slice through the air. Jen was taller than most men in the town, but her presence was larger still. She took in the entire room, the corners and alcoves, in a single glance.

"Morning, Dex," Jen said. Her tone, as ever, was just short of casual. "Saw Mistress Elara leaving. You fix her up?"

"Sprain," Dexter replied. "She will need rest. And a cane."

Jen nodded, scanning the row of walking sticks arrayed beside the door. "She'll like that. Makes her look distinguished. I brought you something." She tapped the report book on the counter.

Dexter blinked, waiting.

Jen grinned, though her eyes were all business. "Nothing urgent. Just checking the travelers' log. Two new faces in from Ironbluff. I

expect they'll visit you before the week's end. One's a carpenter, other a 'merchant,' but the kind with three names and seven stories. You want me to get their backgrounds?"

Dexter considered. "Not necessary. If there is trouble, I will know."

She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. "You look like hell," she observed, her voice low enough it did not travel to the street. "Long night?"

Dexter hesitated. "A few came in late. Someone cracked their head on the millstone again. I stitched, they healed." *And I absorbed their pain*, he added silently.

Jen's face softened. "Late nights are hard."

"Yes," he said quietly. "But it is bearable."

She leaned in, elbows on the counter, body language open and relaxed—a pose she used only with people she trusted. "I can get you some time off, if you need it. There's no shame in it."

He shook his head, a single deliberate motion. "The work is good. It helps."

Jen's eyes lingered on his face a moment longer than necessary, noting the sunken sockets, the way his cheekbones cast shadows even in morning light. "Okay. Just say if you change your mind."

She pulled out a pencil stub and scribbled in her report book. The faint scratching sounded comforting in the otherwise silent room.

Dexter watched her. Jen was the only person in North Pointe who had ever made him feel both seen and safe. He supposed that was her own kind of gift—though not the supernatural sort.

She finished her notes and snapped the book shut. "We'll have extra hands on the square tonight. Some festival or other—'First Freeze' or 'Last Moon,' I never remember which. Let me know if anyone acts odd." She smiled, and the effect was less intimidating than usual. "You don't have to patrol, Dexter. I'd just as soon have you watching from the window."

He almost smiled in return. "I am not a threat to the peace, Constable."

Jen's gaze turned serious. "No, Dex. You're one of the reasons we have peace. Never forget that." She straightened, holstered her pencil, and made for the door.

She paused at the threshold, one hand on the knob. "Eat something," she called, over her shoulder.

Dexter nodded, though he knew he would not. Could not. The door shut gently behind her, and the room's silence settled in again.

He moved to the window and looked out onto the street, watching Jen as she crossed the square with her broad, powerful stride. The townsfolk parted before her as if she were a river through stone. She did not look back.

Dexter, for reasons he did not fully understand, hoped that she would.



Dusk descended on North Pointe Common Towne with the tidy efficiency of a practiced housekeeper. Light retreated from the cobblestones, replaced by the liquid shimmer of lanterns hung from doorways and posts. Windows glowed like the eyes of a thousand contented animals; the air, finally surrendered by the wind, pressed close and cold.

Inside the chirurgery, Dexter ran through his end-of-day ritual: recapping tinctures, realigning the bottles, setting the night lock on the medicine cupboard. He closed the ledgers with the snap of precision, then inspected the room one last time, seeking disorder. There was none. The space was orderly, quiet, the only movement the flickering of his own shadow cast by the stove.

He unbuttoned his coat and let it hang on the wall hook, revealing a shirt so white it bordered on luminous. It was a rare, private indulgence—no one to judge the color against his skin, or to ask how it remained so spotless. Dexter crossed to the window and watched the town slow to a hush. Here and there, feet padded over stone, or a shutter creaked, or a dog barked half-heartedly. All safe, all accounted for.

A tap at the door startled him—not a knock, just a gentle, deliberate tap. Dexter moved to the threshold, but the street was empty.

He looked down.

A slender twig lay across the seam of the door and the stoop. It had

been whittled smooth, with a curling spiral carved from one end to the other. Near the tip was a single character, incised in expert, minute lines—a protective rune, meant to keep what was inside from leaking out.

Dexter stared for only a second. Then, he swept the twig into his hand, and—without thinking—bit down on the carved rune with his back teeth. The taste was sappy, bitter, and slightly metallic.

He locked the front door, dropped the deadbolt, and, with a speed that would have startled any observer, began assembling a satchel. Dexter moved in angles now, all efficiency and intent. He swept up three jars—two unguents, one neutralizer—and a cloth-wrapped set of hand tools: tiny blades, tweezers, shears. He added a coil of bandage and a half-used roll of linen tape. For himself, he donned a thin wool scarf and a soft cap, then threw his coat back over it all.

He paused once, in the center of the room. There was no sound but his own breath. The gift of the building stirred, a low, static hum in his teeth. Dexter held the satchel close, and the air seemed to contract around him, sharpening his edges. If the day belonged to the town, this hour belonged to Dexter.

He made for the back door, moving fast and light.

He stopped—at the last moment—when a voice, barely audible, called his name. Not a shout, not a warning. Just “Dexter.”

He froze, every sense reaching outward. The voice had not been an echo. It had been a summons.

two

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THE WAY Dexter moved across town, no one ever seemed to notice. You could set a clock to it: a summons, and then—nothing but the faintest blur, the whisper of fabric, a momentary displacement of air that felt like the hush before a sneeze. He'd wondered why the townsfolk didn't comment, why no one looked up with alarm when he materialized on the far side of the street in the time it took to blink. Later, he'd come to understand that it was the nature of his kind to be unseen—and perhaps part of the town's nature to help him remain so.

This time, when he reached the Broken Claw, his arrival went so unnoticed that the regulars at the trestle tables didn't even pause their dice game. Dexter's entry was reduced to a slipstream of cool air, a mild surprise that the outer door could move so quietly. Sam barely looked up from polishing a tankard; it was as though she'd expected him already. Which, in a sense, she had.

The pub's interior, despite its battered sign and squat profile, was inviting in a way that eluded fancier establishments. The floors were cobbled together from a dozen woods, each with its own story, and the bar along the back wall bore the deep scars and nicks of a thousand retellings. There was a warmth that came less from the brick hearth and more from the condensation of every hope, confession, and dare

ever uttered inside. Dexter had read that some buildings retained the psychic imprint of their occupants—if so, the Claw was soaked to its rafters.

He moved, unhurried but direct, to the bar. The air tasted of roasted barley, spiced sausage, and something faintly electrical—ozone, or the way iron coins shocked your tongue when you bit them as a child. Sam, in her customary place behind the bar, towered over most mortals, yet her presence was less a threat than a promise: that nothing bad would happen here unless she allowed it.

She was older, though whether she'd admit it was doubtful, and her white hair was always tied in a knot that looked ready to punch its way through a wall. The scar across her face had faded to the color of river clay, but it split her smile in a way that made her seem perpetually on the verge of a joke.

He liked her, though he'd never said so. Sam's was a temperament made for triage, all hard boundaries and no wasted motion. The bar was her surgical table, her customers a parade of minor emergencies and bar-top autopsies. Dexter found the dynamic comforting. They each knew the other's type.

He perched on a barstool, shucked off his black gloves, and folded his hands on the counter. "Who is sick?"

Sam jerked a thumb over her shoulder, not bothering to look. "Traveler at the end. Says it's just the road, but he's been sweating into my best cup for an hour. Didn't want the town doc. Doesn't know *you* are the town doc."

Dexter followed her gaze to a lanky man with the complexion of candle tallow. The traveler hunched over his mug, fingers splayed wide for warmth. His pupils were enormous, as if he'd swallowed a handful of night and couldn't get it down. Dexter sized him up in a glance: fever, tremor, probable dehydration. And under that, an edge of something he didn't care to name.

He approached, soft-heeled. The traveler startled, then tried to recover, but the hand around the mug gave him away—it trembled, the nails bitten down and blackened at the quick.

Dexter didn't bother with small talk. He set two fingers to the man's wrist, counting the pulse. "You were in Ironbluff," he said.

The traveler blinked, wary. "Three nights ago."

"You walked from there."

"Needed to."

Dexter nodded. He touched the traveler's brow, watched the eyes for sign of photophobia. "Any bites? Coughing?"

The man shook his head. "Just the fever. The roads are bad."

Dexter could feel the eyes of every local in the bar boring into his back; they always got like this when outsiders showed symptoms. He pressed the base of the man's skull, finding a bead of sweat already collecting there. Dexter's inner monologue ran faster than his hands: No rash. No glandular swelling. Pupils dilated but reactive. The tongue was clear, no ulceration. This was no fever plague. Just the road, then.

He took a step back. "Sam, willowbark and honey, in a cup. Add salt."

Sam grunted her approval. "You heard the man." She poured a careful measure of near-boiling water, then scooped in bark shavings from a jar behind the bar. The honey came from a thick brown jug; the salt she pinched, with a precision that bespoke long habit.

Dexter turned back to the traveler. "Drink all of it. If you keep food down, you will be well by morning. If not, go to the chirurgery."

The traveler nodded, relief and suspicion warring on his face. "That's it?"

"That's it." Dexter's tone left no room for further questions. He returned to his stool, pulled on his gloves, and stared at the space behind the bar as though reading Sam's mind through the wood.

The traveler finished the drink and slouched to a side table, where he fell into a doze. Sam wiped down the bar, eyes never leaving Dexter's face.

"You don't say much, do you?" she said.

Dexter shrugged. "I say what is needed."

"Fair." She leaned in, elbows on the counter, her voice pitched so low it could have been mistaken for a growl. "I called you for more than a sick traveler."

He waited, senses sharpened by the underlying charge in her words.

Sam glanced left, then right, ensuring no eavesdroppers, though Dexter knew she didn't care all that much if they heard. "Been hearing something. Not a sound, exactly. More like a high whine, at the edge of hearing. Some nights it makes my teeth itch. Thought it was the stove pipe, but I had Dardrad come look. He said it wasn't mechanical." Sam rubbed her shoulder, kneading the muscle with fingers meant for breaking bread or breaking noses. "Started a week back. Sometimes it's so bad I can't sleep."

Dexter watched her as she spoke. The scar on her cheek puckered when she frowned; her left hand flexed open and closed, a nervous tic that suggested pain not yet confessed. He considered the various causes—a neurological tremor, an early infection, some odd environmental factor. All plausible. But the truth was more specific, and less palatable.

He knew the sound. He'd heard it before, though not here, and not in his own ears. It was a banshee note, an elemental wail of pain and longing, a side effect of his own presence in this town. It was the cost of the work, and Sam was close enough to feel it.

He remembered, briefly, the first time he'd heard that keening on a windless night. His own mother, face buried in her hands, the air around her vibrating with a frequency that seemed to pull at the bones. Dexter had learned then to ignore it, to let it ride in the background, like the ache of a healing wound. He hadn't realized the noise might carry.

He kept his face unreadable. "Describe it."

Sam tilted her head, considering. "Sharp, then gone. Comes when I'm tired, or when the room's real quiet. Almost like it's coming from the rafters."

"Does it hurt?" He already knew the answer.

"No," Sam lied. "It's just annoying." She rolled her neck, which gave a distinct, wet crack. "Keeps me up, though."

Dexter made a show of thinking it over. He tapped the bartop three times—habit, not superstition—then leaned closer. "It will pass. You must rest."

Sam stared at him, unimpressed. "That's it?"

"Rest. Hydration. If it gets worse, let me know."

The look she gave him was the one she reserved for travelers who tried to haggle down the price of ale. "You're not telling me something, Dexter."

He flinched, but only a fraction. "It is nothing dangerous."

Sam barked a laugh. "Good enough for me." She straightened, rolling her shoulder again, and this time he saw the grimace she tried to hide. "Guess I'll try resting, then. Though not sure that's an option around here."

Dexter wondered what else he could offer. There were charms he could make, herbal teas that numbed the senses. But all of them would be a lie, a mask for the real problem.

He settled for honesty, of a sort. "If it does not go away, I will investigate."

She seemed to accept that, at least for now. "You do that, doc."

He left a coin on the bar—it was a pointless gesture, Sam never charged him for anything, but it felt right—and turned to leave. As he did, he caught her reflection in the glass behind the bar, watching him go, her mouth set in a line of stubborn resolve.

Outside, the night was brisk and clear, and the streetlamp by the door flickered with a rhythm that almost matched the sound in his own head. Dexter moved toward the shadowed alleys, his mind already racing through possible solutions. He needed more data. He needed time.

Above all, he needed Sam to keep trusting him.

He vanished into the darkness, leaving only the faintest ripple in the air, and the unfinished echo of a high, lonesome wail.

There were memories so old they didn't belong to Dexter at all, but to the collective mind of his people. Sometimes, when his guard was down, they came rushing back with the cold efficiency of blood through a vein. He walked the dark road now, only blocks from the Broken Claw, but in his mind he was centuries away, in a world that no longer existed.

It was a laboratory, or its ancient equivalent: a circular stone

chamber packed with polished glass, copper tubes, and arrays of humming crystals. There was no daylight, only the faint blue glow of the arcane apparatus. The room reeked of antiseptic and ozone, the same sting that haunted the corners of Dexter's own chirurgery. The voices around him spoke in clicks and sibilant vowels, words designed not for music but for accuracy. He remembered hands—his own, but not his own—gloved in silver, adjusting a writhing mass of nerves and light on a slab.

Banshees were not born, but manufactured. That was the secret at the center of his people, one he could never share with anyone in North Pointe. The wail was never meant to be a warning or a curse; it was a side effect, a vapor trail of centuries of tinkering with what made pain real.

He surfaced from the memory with a jolt, nearly colliding with a lamppost. Dexter steadied himself, gloved hand gripping cold iron, until the echo in his head faded. In the silence that followed, the persistent whine returned—thin, plaintive, almost desperate. He wondered how Sam had endured it at all.

He pictured her face as he'd left: stoic, but with the hard glint of someone who'd been disappointed by the world enough times to expect it. She deserved better than the brittle reassurance he'd given her. But the truth would not help her; it would only compound the pain. Best to keep things clinical, simple, fixable. That was what people wanted from a surgeon. Mend the bone, stitch the flesh, apply salve, say nothing of the ghosts in the blood.

Still, her disappointment clung to him like a film. He'd seen it in her eyes, the way she waited for something real, something honest, and found only the evasions of a man more comfortable with wounds than words.

The temptation was strong to seek Leota. The witch had a mind sharp enough to cut diamonds, and her home was a fortress of forgotten lore. But Dexter had learned long ago that involving witches only made things more complicated. If he failed, he would go to her. But not yet. And Knodalon—Dexter had never quite decided if the old man was simply eccentric or genuinely inhuman. Either way, the last

thing Dexter wanted was to involve a being for whom time was a playground.

He walked, letting the rhythm of his steps push aside the fragments of memory. He cataloged the sensations—the way the cold bit at his cheeks, the way his breath came in regular clouds, the way the pain in his head pulsed in time with his heart. Every sense was data. Every moment was a chance to analyze, to fix, to control.

That was the lie at the core of his life: that everything could be made orderly, if you just tried hard enough.

He turned the corner, eyes narrowing at the shimmer of moonlight on snow. It was beautiful, in a way, the kind of stark beauty Sam would have enjoyed if she weren't inside fighting the scream only she could hear. Dexter vowed to end it for her, and for himself.

He walked until the wail faded, until the world was quiet, until the only thing left was his own resolve.

There was a cure. There was always a cure. He just had to find it.

He would go home, and he would prepare. He would not sleep until the problem was solved. That was the gift, and the curse, of being what he was.

And if the pain became too much, he would bear it.

He had never done otherwise.

three

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DEXTER MOVED through the woods like a rumor, nearly frictionless, the snow giving way in silent compacts beneath his feet. Fading moonlight lent the forest a skeletal geometry: branches cast narrow bones over the ground, trunks stood as dark columns, and every surface seemed sugared with hoarfrost. He kept his eyes low, picking out the minute disturbances that charted his course—prints of clawed feet, smudges of fur against the trunks, the faint acid scent of fear that overpowered even the humus and green rot.

The summons itself had been wordless: just the token, left as always, on the step of his shop. Dexter did not need to examine it to understand the contents, or the urgency. They only came to him when the alternatives were worse.

He pressed on, gloved hands tucked under his arms, the satchel knocking soft against his hip. With each step, he felt the world condense—sound dropped away, light became a mere hint, and even the persistent ache in his head shrank to a manageable tingle. There was comfort in the task; it was an algorithm to solve, and therefore, a thing he could control.

He cleared the ridge and found the den exactly as anticipated: a collapse of deadfall and root, packed with moss and covered in a crisp

crust of ice. The entrance was narrow, but the space beyond widened into a shallow bowl, a perfect amphitheater for the display awaiting him. The Shadow Wolf pack, in full assembly, watched his approach with an orchestral stillness. Their bodies blended with the dusk, fur so dark that only the gloss of their coats and the liquid red of their eyes marked their shapes. Six adults, arranged in a semi-circle. The mother in the center, hunched protectively over the wounded.

Dexter slowed, then stopped, making no effort to disguise himself. Wolves valued directness; any subterfuge only antagonized. He inhaled the air, let it filter through his mouth and nose, cataloging the scents: blood (fresh, metallic), lymph (punctured), infection (possible, but not yet septic), fear (from the cub, not the adults). He advanced a single step and knelt.

The patient—barely three months old, by his estimate—lay on its side, shuddering in an irregular cadence. Its foreleg was caught in a crude iron trap, the serrated jaws buried just below the carpal pad. Blood wept down the limb and pooled beneath, black in the moonlight. The pup made a high, keening note, then lapsed into panting, its breath visible in short, desperate bursts.

The adults regarded Dexter with a scrutiny that bordered on reverence. They did not growl, or even raise hackles. Instead, they hummed—a subsonic vibration he could feel in his ribs, meant to comfort the injured but also, in its way, to signal to Dexter: We are watching. We are trusting you. Do not fail.

He felt the weight of that trust. Shadow Wolves had a reputation in the Mistrals that alternated between dread and myth; most townsfolk would rather walk a mile around their territory than risk an encounter. But Dexter was not most townsfolk. He understood the logic of packs, the calculus of risk and reward, the cold-blooded efficiency of a mother willing to trade anything for the survival of her young.

He set his satchel down and carefully unrolled a waxed cloth onto the ground. The tools gleamed: bone saw, curved needles, a line of probes, each nested in its place. He did not reach for the instruments, not yet. Instead, he locked eyes with the mother and gave a slow, deliberate nod—a pantomime of the wolf greeting, one he'd practiced

since childhood. She returned the gesture, then lowered her head, exposing the pup's shoulder and neck.

Dexter reached forward, pausing when his hand was only inches from the cub's muzzle. The pup snapped at him—reflex, not malice—then, recognizing the absence of pain in Dexter's presence, went limp. He cradled the wounded limb, mindful of pressure, and examined the extent of the injury. Two bones snapped, tendon shredded, but the vasculature was intact. The trap had missed the artery by a single millimeter. The kind of luck only a desperate mother could conjure.

He took from his satchel a jar of clear, viscous salve and smeared it over the exposed flesh. The wound hissed, a chemical exhalation, and the pup went rigid, then eerily calm. The other wolves shifted, mirroring the sensation. The mother's hackles rose, but she did not intervene.

Dexter focused on the task. He flexed the leg gently, feeling for splinters, then pressed the jaws of the trap apart with a small pry-bar. The mechanism released with a wet, sucking sound, and the limb slumped free. Blood followed, but less than he'd predicted. He packed the wound with powdered oak moss, then wrapped the leg in a bandage laced with numbing tincture.

This will need stitches.

He sensed, rather than saw, the moment when the pain migrated from the cub to himself. It came as a sharp, bright spike up his arm, followed by a bloom of heat in his chest. He closed his eyes, breathed in, and metabolized it, the way his kind were meant to. The process was not unpleasant. It felt like waking from a deep sleep—there was discomfort, but also clarity, and a strange, fleeting joy.

When he opened his eyes again, the cub was sitting upright, blinking in dazed disbelief at its newly liberated paw. The adults began to hum in a higher register, a melodic thread that wound around Dexter and held him in a net of gratitude. The mother advanced, lowering her head in a gesture of submission, then licked his gloved hand, once.

He smiled, a rare expression, and reached into his satchel for a dried strip of venison, which he tossed to the pup. It caught the treat

and, after a moment's confusion, devoured it with single-minded abandon.

Dexter rose to his feet, leaving the tools where they lay. He did not bow or gesture. He simply stepped away from the den, the pain still warm in his chest, and made for the tree line. The wolves parted to let him pass. He made brief eye contact with the mother: *I will return in a moment*. She nodded understanding.

As he moved back into the darkness, Dexter considered the interaction. It had gone well. The animal side of him—the part that remembered what it meant to be hunted—was satisfied. The clinical side tallied the results: wound stabilized, infection risk minimal, pack hierarchy maintained. No threats, but further intervention was still needed.

The world beyond the den was cold and silent, save for the echo of the wolves' song, still vibrating somewhere in the marrow of his bones.

He returned to town by a different route, careful to leave no trace.

He returned to the den before the frost had even left the grass. The wolves expected him; he could see it in the way they held themselves, neither as threat nor as welcome, but as the inevitability of weather. The cub lay where he'd left it, splayed on the moss and blinking at the canopy with a glassy dullness. That was the anesthetic at work. He'd packed it strong, both to minimize movement and—if he was being honest—to ease the last vestige of guilt.

Dexter crouched, unrolled his tools once again, and set to work. With his left hand he stabilized the limb, thumb and forefinger encircling the hock, while his right thumb pressed along the fracture, searching for resistance. He rotated the bone gently. It shifted, then snapped back into alignment with a subdued crunch. The pup's eyes widened, but it did not cry out. He'd timed it well: the momentary agony was already in his bloodstream, a metallic jolt that roused every nerve before dissolving into a generalized warmth.

He'd read, somewhere, that ordinary surgeons learned to ignore the suffering of their patients. His approach was the opposite—he found the suffering, drew it in, metabolized it like food. The principle

was not so different from the wolves themselves: eat what you must, leave the world better fed than you found it.

He worked swiftly, each motion practiced and perfect. In five heartbeats he had cleaned the puncture, scraped away the dead tissue, and dusted the raw edges with powdered resin to staunch the bleeding. In the next five he threaded a catgut suture through the torn skin, drawing the edges together with a deft flick of his wrist. The needle flashed, vanished, and flashed again—his movements so fast they blurred, but never once did he lose the thread, or mar the flesh.

The wound closed, the bleeding stopped. He dabbed the site with a tincture that burned blue and cold. The pup's leg twitched, but only a little. The pain was already fading.

He paused, waiting for the next wave of agony to crest and break within him. It came—not as a scream, but a ripple, thin and high, that pressed at his eardrums and made his jaw ache. He swallowed, blinked, and exhaled. The pain settled into him, then became something else—a kind of ache for the world, or for all the creatures in it who would never know relief. Dexter let it expand, then shrink, then disappear. The cycle always ended the same way: with a clarity that bordered on grace.

He cleaned the instruments, lined them up, and tucked them away. The final step was the bandage, a strip of linen coated with a compound of willow and honey. He wound it in three precise loops, not one more, not one less. He tied it off, then smoothed the fur back over the pup's limb.

The cub whimpered, a soft and slightly off-key note, then settled. Its breathing slowed, fell into the rhythm of sleep.

The mother edged closer, nose twitching. She sniffed at Dexter's glove, then at the pup's bandaged leg. The tension in her body unwound, just a fraction, and she lay down beside her child, their fur mingling into a single patchwork of dark and darker.

Dexter watched this, feeling the tail end of pain drifting from the den into the clearing and then up into the canopy. He thought about the last time he'd tried to fix something bigger than this, the last time he'd tried to save an entire world with a single intervention. The result had been less than optimal. Complications, side effects, unintended

outcomes. He had sworn, after that, to keep his practice small and his solutions smaller.

And yet, even now, he could not help but see every simple fix as a rehearsal for the grand experiment he might never finish. The feeling stung him, but in a way that felt honest.

The den was quiet. The mother dozed, the other wolves scattered to their lookout posts, the air empty of song or challenge. The work was done.

Dexter wiped down his hands, repacked his satchel, and stood. The cub slept, and the pain in the den was gone.

This was how he measured success: not by the absence of wounds, but by the silence that followed.

The den, in the still hour before dawn, was a world remade. The cub slept, breath slow and sure, the pained trembling gone from its limbs. Frost crept across the moss in delicate filaments, and the quiet was so complete that Dexter could have counted the mother's heartbeats from across the clearing.

He waited, as always, to ensure there was no complication—a hidden bleed, a sudden fever. But there was only the gentle sound of paws against earth as the mother stirred, nudged the cub, and then approached him directly.

She was massive, nearly to his sternum on all fours, the fur along her shoulders stippled with gray. She walked with the measured steps of a being who had never been prey. When she stopped before him, Dexter remained kneeling. It was a gesture, equal parts humility and practicality.

She regarded him with eyes the color of deep river ice, the pupils wide in the darkness, and for a long moment, neither of them moved. In those eyes, Dexter read an intelligence and a recognition—not the mind of a human, but of something older, more precise. She leaned forward, her muzzle inches from his gloved hand, and inhaled, then nudged his palm with her nose.

The message was unambiguous: *You are one of us, for now.*

He acknowledged her with a slow, deliberate blink, then turned his attention back to the patient. The cub's leg, though still bandaged, had already lost much of its swelling; the tissue was knitting, and the color returning to normal. Dexter inspected the dressing, adjusted the edge, and with his other hand uncorked a small tin of blue-green ointment. He dabbed the smallest portion over the healing seam, massaging it gently into the fur. The mother watched each movement, tense but not anxious, as if she could tell he was performing the correct ritual.

He finished the application, then withdrew, careful to leave nothing behind. The pack began to gather closer, no longer wary but curious, the alpha female holding her place at the apex. Dexter stood, dusted the frost from his knees, and made eye contact with each adult in turn.

The gratitude in the air was not a sentimental warmth, but a practical acknowledgment—a transfer of obligation from the injured to the healer. It was not something that would ever be spoken of, but it would linger, a small shift in the local topology of trust.

He turned from the den, feeling the mother's gaze at his back. He didn't run, though it was in his nature to do so. Instead, he walked, letting the cold cut through him, the pain of the evening gone except for a faint, humming echo in his chest.

The walk back to town was longer, though whether by time or by mood he couldn't have said. The forest was full of its own machinery, branches grinding in the wind, leaf litter shifting beneath the thin crust of snow. Dexter let the rhythm of it sync with his stride; for the first time in weeks, his mind was quiet.

He arrived at the edge of the town before the bells had sounded. There, in the thinning trees, he paused, looking back. The den was a hidden thing, invisible even to the practiced eye, but he could still sense its presence—a pocket of warmth and breath and simple life. He hoped the feeling would last, even as he knew that, by dusk, there would be some new crisis. Some new wound.

He entered North Pointe Common Towne with the same silence he'd left, slipping past the outfitter's, the gaol, the first lanterns in the square. If any of the townsfolk noticed the new scratches on his boots or the faint scent of fur on his gloves, they would never say.

He let himself back into the surgery, replaced his tools in their assigned places, and washed his hands in a basin of cool, scented water. The pain, distilled and quiet now, lingered in his bones like a memory. It would nourish him for days.

He sat on the bench in the corner, let the silence settle around him, and felt—if only for a brief, perfect moment—that the world was in balance.

Then he closed his eyes, and waited for the next summons.

four

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THE FIRST HOUR before dawn belonged to the constable. Not the Mayor—there wasn't one—and not to whatever watchful gods claimed dominion over the Mistrals. In North Pointe Common Towne, the best defense was always a half-frozen, sleep-deprived woman with battered joints and a steel will.

Jen Darne drew the laces on her boots tight, even though the right one pinched at her bunion and the left one had lost half its grommets. She added a layer under her coat, then reconsidered and added a scarf as well. When she stepped outside, the wind slapped her so thoroughly across the cheeks she muttered a curse that steamed in the air like fresh bread.

"That's a good start, Jen," she whispered. "Nothing like pain to get the blood moving." She took the phrase from her old sergeant—rest his blackened soul—who used to say it on mornings like this, before sending them out into weather that killed in hours instead of seasons.

She crossed the inner green in wide, direct strides, the grass glazed in white and crunchy underfoot. Each step jarred her left knee, which had never fully healed from the timber-wolf incident, and the familiar ache threaded up her thigh until it met the duller, older ache in her hip. She let out a slow breath, watching it curl away toward the eaves

of the butcher's shop. The scent from there was faint but real—rendered tallow, fresh offal, the slightly sweet burn of lantern grease.

Jen grunted. "If only we could pack that in jars," she said, "we'd have a siege supply good through next spring." No one heard her except the crows, but that was fine. Company made her antsy at this hour.

The first part of her circuit took her behind the bakery. Already there was a flicker in the window, and Jen could picture Makota up to her wrists in starter, singing off-key and cursing her ancestors by name. The smell was so good it made her stomach betray her with a low growl.

"No distractions," she said, tapping her badge for emphasis. "Just the wall, just the woods, and then you can have a treat if you don't find any murderers." The badge itself was a ridiculous affectation—a town tradition, etched with a rampant squirrel and the motto BE YE GOOD—which, as far as she could tell, meant "don't screw it up." She wore it all the same.

The wall ran the length of the western quarter, its stones set deep and topped with a lichen that always looked wet. It wasn't much in the way of fortification, but the height gave her a vantage over the trees. She took the steps two at a time, ignoring the creak in her ankle, and paused at the top to scan the treeline.

A shudder ran down her back, not from cold. There were footprints at the edge of the woods, and not the neat, predictable ovals of a deer or a desperate raccoon. These were clawed, deep, and widely spaced. A long stride. Maybe a wolf, or maybe something worse.

Jen frowned. "Well, that's a story for the tavern," she whispered. She raised her lantern, letting the light fall across the snow. No sign of blood, no sign of a drag—just the imprints, as if the beast had landed from a height, then bounded off in the direction of the river.

She lowered the lantern. "Hope you're hungry, friend," she said. "The river's frozen over, but the fishmonger still owes me a favor." The thought of Pavati, the only woman who could out-swear her, brightened Jen's mood. She made a mental note to stop by the lakeside for a slab of salted trout after her patrol.

She moved along the wall, the cold now so aggressive it found

every gap in her coat. At the bend near the old tower, she stopped, not because she needed a rest but because her shoulder had begun its usual low complaint. She rotated the arm slowly, wincing at the click in the joint.

"One of these days," she said, "I'll get you looked at. If I live that long." The thought was a joke, but the edge in her voice told her it was only half of one.

As she massaged the joint, she caught a flicker at the corner of her vision. Not a trick of moonlight—something moving, fast, just beneath the rampart's shadow. She squinted and waited, letting her eyes adjust.

There it was again. A black blur, moving along the perimeter, skirting the wall with the silent grace of a weasel, but faster. Much faster.

Jen set her jaw. "No one's that fast," she said. "Not unless they're running from something, or toward it." She watched, following the blur as it ducked and rolled, then disappeared behind the smithy outbuilding. It was gone in less than a breath.

She considered pursuit, but didn't bother. Only one thing moved like that in North Pointe, and he wasn't a threat to anyone on this side of the stone. "Go get 'em, doc," she whispered. There was a lilt of pride in it, but also pity. She couldn't imagine moving that fast through a world so slow, a world where every doorway, every lantern, every eye was fixed on you.

She resumed her patrol, slower now, and let her mind wander. The wall ended at the main gate, which was locked with a chain as thick as her wrist. She ran her fingers along the links, feeling for tampering. None. She looked down the trade road, all the way to the bend where the first rays of sunrise would eventually show. Not today, though. Too much cloud. Too much wind.

She leaned against the parapet, took a deep breath, and tried to remember what it was like to sleep through a night without worry. It had been years. Maybe longer.

"You ever just want to let the next shift take over?" she asked the empty air. "Just roll up in the hay and let somebody else count the

shadows?" The wind didn't answer, but she caught the scent of cedar and smoke, and it made her feel just a little less alone.

She pushed off the wall, scanned the streets one last time, and then started her way down. In the square, the first windows glowed orange. A few merchants had started their day; she could see a lamp moving behind the frosted glass at the general store, and a pair of children trailed after each other with sleds, giggling too loud for the hour.

Jen walked toward the sound, letting it fill the spaces in her mind that worry usually occupied. The cold wasn't so sharp now. She felt the heat returning to her hands, and a kind of steadiness settling into her step.

When she passed the bookshop, she knocked twice on the door, then once more for good measure. She didn't expect Vamir to answer, but she liked the rhythm of it—another small ritual, a way to say the world was still as it should be.

She rounded the last corner and found herself in front of the inn. The sign for the Weary Head swung in the wind, the paint chipped but the letters proud. She smiled, remembering the time she'd nearly lost a bet to Sam over whether the sign would fall before the bell tower was rebuilt. So far, the sign was winning.

Jen paused, looking up at the sky. The clouds had thinned, and through them she could just make out the promise of a sunrise. A pale one, but real.

She shrugged her bad shoulder, rolled her neck, and felt every year of her age. "That's another one, Jen," she said softly. "Chalk it up and keep moving."

She looked once more toward the woods, where the prints had been. They were already filling with wind-blown snow, erasing the only evidence that something strange had passed that way.

She let out a sigh. "Keep your secrets," she said, though this time it was more for herself than for the shadow in the woods.

She turned back to the town, to the warming glow of windows and the slow, sure rhythm of waking life, and began her next circuit.

Somebody had to watch the wall. And for now, that somebody was her.

When Jen made her way to Dexter's clinic, the sun was barely up, but already the streets buzzed with a low, steady purpose. She counted seven children bundled into the green, a milk cart caught in the rut outside the smithy, and a merchant with a bandaged thumb nursing a tea at the inn's porch. All as expected, all accounted for.

The chirurgery squatted next to the gaol, its facade plain as porridge except for the bright blue paint around the windowpanes—Dexter's only concession to whimsy. Inside, the place thrummed with a flavor of clean that was more than just soap and bleach. It was a kind of medicine in the air: rosemary, lavender, and a sharp note of ozone that made your nose itch even as it opened your lungs.

Dexter stood behind the counter, motionless as a waxwork, eyes on a point just above Jen's head. He wore the same black coat as always, only today it was dotted with the tiniest, most stubborn bits of pine needle, and a thin slice of mud arched along his left heel. Not the sort of detail most would clock, but Jen was not most.

She pulled her notebook from her pocket, rapped it on the counter, and cleared her throat. "Got two incidents overnight," she said, keeping her voice as businesslike as possible. "First: someone filched three lengths of rope and a jar of pickles from Calder's boathouse. Second: I found tracks at the west wall. Large. Not human. Probably the same beast we've seen before. You want a look before I scuff 'em up?"

Dexter blinked, then returned to focus. He looked paler than usual, which, for him, was saying a lot. His lips pressed tight for a half-second, then released. "Yes," he said. "But not today."

Jen pretended to write this down. "You feeling off, Doc?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "I worked late."

She eyed the rings under his eyes, the way his hands seemed a shade less steady than usual. "If you say so. Just making sure you aren't brewing the plague in here."

He offered the barest hint of a smile. "Not intentionally."

She liked that. A little gallows humor went a long way in North Pointe. She flipped her notes closed and tucked them away, then

leaned on the counter, shoulders squared. "I know you don't like small talk, Dexter, but the kids are starting to whisper." She glanced around, as if checking for eavesdroppers. "Some of them think you're a vampire."

He tilted his head, curious. "Is that a problem?"

"Not unless you start draining livestock or seducing our wives. Just—" She paused, searching for the right phrase. "—don't let them catch you in the woods at night, and maybe look less like death warmed over."

He absorbed this with all the reaction of a sponge absorbing ink. "Noted."

She wanted to laugh, but she didn't. Instead, she reached over and plucked a pine needle from his sleeve, holding it up for him to see. "You must've had some business with the wolves again."

He said nothing, but the twitch in his jaw gave him away.

Jen dropped her voice low, barely above a whisper. "They trust you, don't they?"

Dexter's answer was careful, as if the truth itself might tear. "They have no one else."

She nodded, then let silence fill the space. It was the kind of pause that could have turned into awkwardness, but neither of them minded. "Well," she said finally, "if you need an escort out that way, you know where I am. I'm slower than a shadow, but a lot meaner."

"Thank you," he said. And it sounded like he meant it.

Jen straightened, rolling her shoulder to loosen the tension. She watched Dexter's eyes follow the movement, and she caught the instant he realized she was in pain.

"Does it still bother you?" he asked.

"Only when it's cold. Or when I breathe. Or when I think about my own mortality." She grinned, then softened. "You did good work, last time."

He nodded, but the compliment seemed to make him more uncomfortable than the accusation of vampirism. Jen let it slide.

She prepared to leave, but thought better of it. "You ever sleep, Dex?"

He blinked, surprised. "Not often."

She considered telling him to try, but he wasn't a child and she wasn't his mother. Instead, she said, "A constable can't protect the town if she's too tired to see the shadows." She rapped the counter again, softer this time, and said, "Same goes for doctors."

There was something in his eyes then—a recognition, maybe, or an old wound laid bare for just a breath. He nodded once, slow. "I'll remember."

She gave him a two-fingered salute and turned for the door. At the threshold she paused, glanced back. "If you start glowing in the dark, let me know. I'll order you a cape."

He almost smiled. Almost. "Noted."

Jen stepped out into the street, the cold stinging her cheeks, and took a moment to watch the children race sleds across the green. The world spun on, and with every step, every word, every kindness or curse, it became a little safer, a little more itself.

She kept her hands deep in her pockets, whistling a song she didn't know the words to, and patrolled the next problem waiting to be solved.

Behind her, in the clinic, Dexter watched the door for a while after she was gone. Then he went back to his jars and books, and the ozone-smell, and the silence.

It was enough.

five

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WARREN THICKARM'S forge was already awake before the sun had truly cleared the treeline, and so was he. The town's morning air, bitingly cold and a little sour from the brewery's first venting, never really managed to find its way into the smithy. The coals saw to that. Even before the bell tower dared its first ring, the blacksmith shop glowed with a pulse so steady it seemed to beat in time with Warren's heart.

A horseshoe, cherry red, rested on the anvil. Warren's left hand—three times the size of most men's, with knuckles like river stones—clamped it gently in place. His right hand wielded the hammer, a curious contradiction: thick, almost cartoonishly blunt, but it rose and fell with a delicacy you wouldn't have credited unless you'd seen it yourself. The rhythm was a lullaby of violence, interrupted only by the hiss of steel meeting water or the low, thoughtful growl Warren made when the curve of the metal didn't quite satisfy.

He worked in a short-sleeved shirt, which on him looked a bit like the sailcloth of a galleon torn down and repurposed. The cuffs were rolled back, exposing skin the color of ripe moss, furred with the finest white hair—like hoarfrost on a late-September pumpkin. The same

white crowned his head, kept in a tight tail down his back, though stray locks shot loose whenever he ducked beneath the lintel. He'd made that door, too, and it was still too small. Every morning, a new dent appeared in the header, and every morning, Warren scowled at it, and every morning, he decided it was not worth fixing.

The shop itself was tidy in a way that bordered on ceremonial. Hammers and tongs of every description hung on pegs, sorted by weight and function. The hearth was swept clean except for the precise arrangement of burning coal and the smaller, sacrificial logs that kept the heat constant. On a shelf above the quench tank, a row of finished pieces—horseshoes, of course, but also hinges, nails, and a trio of spearheads awaiting the town constable's inspection—caught the orange light and returned it as muted glints.

The air was thick with smells: woodsmoke, yes, but also something sweeter, a tang from the brine in the quench bucket, and, just at the edge, the ghost of yesterday's sourdough from the bakery next door. When Warren inhaled, he sorted the scents unconsciously, like a sommelier parsing a flight of wines. He prided himself on that, though no one ever asked.

What no one could miss—what filled the room more than the heat or the light—was the emptiness where his son Darby should have been. The boy's tools sat idle at the corner bench, a row of punches and files cleaned and arranged by some personal logic Warren still didn't understand. Darby was out on errands, running deliveries for the mill or fetching a barrel of nails to the boathouse. It was honest work, but the shop was quieter for it.

Warren finished the last curve on the horseshoe, turning it with a practiced flick and sighting down the edge. Satisfied, he set the hammer aside, pinched the shoe between thumb and forefinger, and dipped it in the quench. The hiss was volcanic, and for a moment, the room filled with steam and the smell of new iron. Warren watched the steam rise and curl, always half-expecting it to form a shape or a face or some omen. It never did. He set the horseshoe on the rack, wiped his hands on a rag, and surveyed the day's work.

He moved to the bench, where the next project—a barrel hoop, in need of straightening—awaited. As he did, the morning light found

him through the shop's one good window, which he'd stained blue for no other reason than it made the room look cool even when it was not. The glass cast stripes across the floor, and as Warren stepped through them, his green skin shifted in hue, now shadowed, now seafoam, now the color of pond lilies.

A knock sounded on the outer door, two heavy thumps followed by a pause. The rhythm was familiar—his wife Susan, probably with a breakfast roll or a reminder about Darby's schoolwork. Warren ducked the lintel, braced for the cold, and opened the door.

But there was no one on the stoop, just a small, lidded basket and the faintest whiff of sweet dough. Warren smiled, lifted the basket, and carried it inside. The bench groaned under his weight as he sat, and for a few minutes, the only sound was the careful dismantling of a cinnamon roll and the low hum of approval as he ate.

After breakfast, he swept the ashes from the hearth, reset the coals, and examined the repair list on the wall. There was an order from the inn—a cracked skillet handle—and a replacement latch for the dry goods store. The memory of Darby's absence poked at him again, but Warren ignored it. He set the skillet in the vice, adjusted it with a surgeon's gentleness, and selected a slender punch from the rack.

He worked in silence. When the repair was done, he rotated the handle, testing for play. Perfect. The world, in this moment, was as it should be.

He heard, faint and distant, the laughter of children in the green outside, and a pang of longing or regret or something unnamed flickered across his mind. He tamped it down, focusing instead on the neatness of his rows, the glow of the coals, the memory of the cinnamon roll still lingering on his tongue.

Warren reached for the next job, and the next, and the next. The day would fill itself, and eventually, so would the shop.

He was halfway through straightening the barrel hoop when he heard the inner door open—a different knock than the one she used on the outer stoop. This one was a polite warning, a heads-up that someone who belonged was coming in.

Susan. She moved with a certainty that made the boards creak just a little, but unlike Warren, she never ducked the lintel. If anything, she

seemed to glide through spaces, never in a hurry, never rushed by the furnace heat or the urgency of the work. Her hair—today a stormcloud of brown, braided back and tied with a sliver of copper—framed a face Warren still thought of as delicate, though most who met her knew otherwise.

She held a basket in both hands, the lid already askew. “I brought you lunch.”

Warren grunted. “Had a roll for breakfast.”

“From yesterday.” She set the basket on his workbench and nudged aside a pair of tongs with her elbow. The motion was practiced, not careless; she’d been in this shop a thousand times. “You want anything hot, you’ll have to eat it while it still is.”

Warren wiped his hands, a sheepish smile threatening to split his face. He opened the basket. Meat pie, still warm; a wedge of cheese; a half-apple. “Spoiling me,” he said.

“It’s cheaper than hiring another apprentice.” She perched on the second stool, bracing her back against a shelf. “Darby says he’ll be back before noon. He’s been to the stable already, but Calder asked him to help load a crate.”

Warren’s face brightened at that. “Good for him. He could use the muscle.”

They sat in companionable silence for a bit. The pie was a miracle—Warren devoured it in two bites, then slowed for the cheese and apple. The only sounds were the faint settling of the fire and the whirr of the sharpening wheel as it spun down, a leftover from the last job.

It was Susan who broke the spell. “You’re working hard today. Forge Dream, or something else?”

Warren chewed, swallowed, then stared at his hands for a moment. “Not a dream.” He wiped his mouth, then set the napkin aside. “It’s a memory.”

Susan’s brow creased, just a hair. “Anniversary?”

He nodded. “The day your folks chased us out.”

“They weren’t my folks, Warren. They were yours.” Her voice was soft, but not unsure. “And they didn’t chase us. They tried, but they failed. Look where we are.”

He looked. Really looked. The shop, the gleam on the anvil, the

shadow of his own hand on the wall. The signs of their life together, everywhere. Still, the memory stuck to him, like cinders that wouldn't wash off.

"It's just..." He shook his head, searching for the words. "They didn't even come to the bridge. Didn't look back. Just closed the shutters and waited for us to go." He exhaled. "I keep thinking, if I'd tried harder—"

"—You did more than anyone ever could." Now there was a bit of steel in Susan's tone, but not directed at him. "We tried to stay, Warren. And they tried to let us, at first. But it wasn't our place." She reached across the bench, laying her hand over his. Her fingers were small, but strong. "This is."

He stared at her hand, the perfect pink of her nails against his green. He'd never said it, not really, but he loved that contrast. Loved it so much it sometimes hurt.

"They lost more than we did that day," Susan said, as if reading his mind. "We got to start again. They're still there, Warren. Still looking out through those shutters, afraid to see what they're missing."

For a while, the only sound was the rattle of a coal settling deeper into the fire. Then Warren asked, "You ever regret it?"

Susan snorted, the way she always did when something was so obvious it didn't bear the asking. "You think I'd rather be back there? Married to a barrel-chested, pig-brained miller, darning socks and minding my tongue? I got you. I got Darby. I got..." She waved a hand, taking in the town, the forge, the future. "This. I'm exactly where I want to be."

He could only nod. Some answers were too big for words.

Susan squeezed his hand, then let go and stood, stretching her arms. "You ever figure out what you'll make for tonight?"

Warren blinked. "Tonight?"

"It's your turn to bring something for the town supper. Last time you did those little bread knives with the twist at the end. People still talk about them."

He felt a surge of panic—he'd forgotten entirely—but covered it with a shrug. "I'll come up with something."

Susan smiled, but her eyes lingered on him. "You always do." She

took up the empty basket and paused at the door. "You should eat more. You're getting too thin."

He snorted. "I weigh three times what you do."

"And I could break you over my knee." She winked, then ducked through the lintel, vanishing into the blue-stained light beyond.

When the door closed, Warren sat for a long minute, looking at the lines on his palm where her hand had been. He turned it over, then back, then reached for another piece of cheese.

He had work to do, but for once, he let it wait.



Susan hadn't even made it to the square when the ringing began.

It started as a faint whine, just at the threshold of hearing, a sound Warren might have ignored on another day. But this was no echo of the sharpening wheel or hiss of steel in water. The note was so pure and so thin, it might have been the scream of a gnat. He blinked, shook his head, and tried to will it away.

It clung to him, skittering up and down the insides of his ears, a filament pulled tighter and tighter.

He put it out of his mind—he had work to do. The new project was a hinge, oversized for the door to the storeroom at the inn. He set the bar stock on the anvil and lined up his first strike. The ringing persisted. He swung anyway, letting the hammer rise and fall, confident the rhythm would out-shout any lesser noise.

It did not.

Three strokes in, the whine leaped from the background to the front of his brain, so sharp he lost control of his grip and the hammer bounced sideways off the anvil, gouging a chip in the surface. He cursed softly, more surprised than angry. The ringing faded for a heartbeat, then returned, doubled, until he swore he could feel it in his teeth.

He set the hammer down and pressed two fingers to the side of his head, as if plugging a leak. The world swam, just for a second. Warren braced himself against the anvil, breathing slow and deep until his heartbeat caught up with him.

The door opened behind him. "Forgot the basket," Susan said, and stopped short when she saw his face. "Warren?"

He straightened, wiped his brow with a trembling hand, and forced a smile. "Just hot in here. Must be a pressure change—the bellows are acting odd."

She eyed him with a look he knew too well: a mix of concern and the readiness to call out his every lie. "Want me to fetch Dexter? Or Leota?"

He scoffed, maybe too quickly. "Not unless you want the whole town knowing I can't handle my own furnace." He meant it as a joke, but his tone soured it.

Susan crossed the room, stopped within arm's reach, and studied him a long moment. "You're sure?"

He nodded, then wished he hadn't, as the movement sent the sound burrowing deeper. "I'm sure." He meant it less every time he said it.

She set the empty basket on the bench. "I'll leave you be, then. Holler if it gets worse, all right?"

He managed a grunt. She left, and the blue-stained light vanished with her.

Alone, Warren allowed himself a moment of fear. What if it was the start of something permanent? He'd heard stories of humans whose hearing gave out, or who couldn't silence the phantom noises that dogged them to the grave. Ogres were supposed to be hardier, less susceptible to these little malfunctions. He'd always counted on his body to do what he told it, but today it was not cooperating.

He tried to pinpoint the feeling—where it started, how it spread. The ringing didn't seem to come from his ears at all, but from some core inside his skull, vibrating along the line of his jaw. A memory flashed: the day he'd broken a tooth in a fight, the raw pain as the nerves sang out, unstoppable. This was like that, but with no injury, no explanation.

He flexed his hand, picked up the hammer, and inspected it for chips. The handle was smooth, worn to the shape of his palm. Warren gave it a squeeze. It was the one tool in the shop that never let him

down. He would not let this new affliction get the better of him. Not on this day.

He set the bar stock again, aligned it, and brought the hammer down. The ringing responded, flaring with each impact, but he pressed on, determined to finish the hinge before Darby came back and saw his father falter.

The heat built, in the forge and in his body. Sweat ran down his spine, and his knuckles took on a glossy sheen, but Warren didn't slow. He set the metal, turned it, struck again. The pain was a challenge. If the ringing wanted a fight, he would give it one.

As he hammered, his mind drifted to Darby—his boy, born small but growing larger and stranger every year. Darby's ears had started to point, the same as Warren's. The tips curled just so, a sign of the bloodline reasserting itself. Darby's skin, once the color of old cream, was deepening to olive, then green. The change had not escaped the notice of the townsfolk, but here in North Pointe, such things were less remarkable. Or at least, less remarked upon.

He wondered if Darby would face this same buzzing, this same sense of being unmoored from his own body. Or if Darby would, in his own way, simply take it and turn it into another piece of the world to be fitted and shaped.

The ringing peaked as Warren finished the hinge, two perfect bends and a smooth, silent swing. He held it in his tongs, letting it cool, and studied the metal as if the answer to his affliction was written in the grain.

Maybe it was. Maybe the pain was a sign, an omen, a reminder of the price he'd paid for starting a new life with Susan and Darby. The old world didn't want them. The new one, though fragile, was theirs to shape.

He set the finished hinge on the shelf, and the sound receded, if only a little. Warren reached for the next project, knowing the work would never end, but also knowing he was the only one who could do it.

The day pressed on. The light in the forge shifted, moving from orange to a pale, promising gold. Warren ducked his head to avoid the lintel, and as he did, he smiled—a small, private thing, but real.

He would tell Susan about the sound, eventually. Or maybe Darby, when the time was right. For now, it was enough to know that the world, for all its noise and pain, was still his to forge.

And as the hammer fell, again and again, the ringing became just another song in the shop—a new note in the long, patient music of home.

SIX

. . .

WHEN THE DAY'S last patient had left and the constable's boots no longer echoed on the frozen stones outside, the clinic became a still-life. Every jar labeled, every curtain drawn, every candle snuffed except the one in the corner that Dexter allowed for its polite, unassuming glow. The air inside was neither cold nor warm, just perfectly neutral—an environment that offered the least possible resistance to whatever business was yet to come.

Dexter sat behind the counter, a stack of ledger pages before him. The ledgers were always in order, so the real purpose of sitting with them was to wait. He kept his hands folded, motionless, until exactly two marks past midnight, when the lantern's flame dipped, fluttered, and then returned to steady.

That was the signal.

Dexter stood, and with a practiced stretch of his arm reached beneath the counter for the deadbolt. He twisted it open with a soft clunk, then moved, fluid as an afterthought, to the back room.

There was a door set into the rear wall, disguised as an ordinary shelf. Most would never notice the hairline seam or the extra weight in the frame. Dexter disengaged the catch—three quick flicks of the thumb, a left, a right, then a press inward. The door opened sound-

lessly, revealing not the alley behind the building, but a narrow, lampless passage between the walls. It was pitch-dark, except for the glimmer of scales where the passage met the hidden alcove.

She emerged with a wariness that was less about fear than about not wanting to track snow inside. The woman moved with a predatory grace, and even hunched for stealth, she'd have topped him by a hand if she stood fully upright. Her hood was up, but the lantern caught her face: skin as smooth and pale as glass, marked at the jawline and along the bridge of the nose with a faint blue iridescence. The left side of her neck, and the visible length of her forearms, were scaled—gently, not in slabs or ridges, but as if she'd been dusted with the world's finest glitter and then covered with the thinnest possible film of skin.

She watched him with eyes the color of riverstone.

Dexter closed the door behind her, resetting the catch, and held out a hand in greeting. "You shouldn't risk coming into town," he said. The words were measured, quiet, but not unkind.

Her lips twitched. "You say that every time. But here I am."

She drew back her hood, shaking out a mane of colorless hair. "And you're here, too."

He gestured to the main room, and she followed him through. She left no footprints, even though her boots were crusted with ice. On the bench, she sat not with the slow care of the injured, but with the controlled descent of someone whose body could betray her at any moment. The muscles in her arms bunched, then quivered; her jaw was clenched, and her left hand kept massaging her right as if trying to knead out some deep, buried hurt.

Dexter took a seat across from her, setting his own hands palm-up on the table between them. He let her watch him for a moment before asking, "Where?"

She pointed to the inside of her elbow, then followed the trace with a sharp tap. "It started there, but now it's here, and sometimes it's..." She waved vaguely at her chest. "It comes and goes. But it's worse tonight."

He nodded, then reached for her wrist, moving so quickly she almost missed it. He wrapped two fingers around her radial pulse, holding for a count of five. Then, with the gentlest pressure, he

pressed his thumb along the blue-tinged vein that ran beneath the scales. The woman's pupils flickered, then dilated.

He said, "You fed tonight." Not a question.

She flexed the fingers of her left hand, knuckles audibly popping. "A rabbit. Just the one. And some of a trout, after." There was apology in her tone, but only the smallest amount.

Dexter retrieved a slender probe from the tray, and with the precision of a jeweler, traced the outline of the swelling along her forearm. At the center of the discoloration, he pressed down, and the skin gave way beneath his touch—a hard nodule beneath, shifting and then settling as if it were alive.

She shuddered. "That's new," she said.

He glanced at the clock, then at her. "It's growing fast. Last time, it took three weeks to reach this point."

The woman sighed. "Will it spread?"

"Not if we treat it now," he replied. "It's a clot. But not of blood."

He reached for a cotton pad and saturated it with a deep green tincture. "This will hurt."

She nodded, bracing her feet against the floor.

Dexter applied the pad and, with his other hand, squeezed the limb above the nodule. The blue and silver scales along her forearm seemed to ripple, and the nodule bulged upward, forming a hard dome. Then, with a quick movement, Dexter used a needle to lance the center. A single, glistening drop of fluid emerged—thick, with the nacreous sheen of mother-of-pearl.

He caught the droplet in a glass vial, then pressed down with the pad. The woman hissed, but did not otherwise flinch. When the wound closed, the flesh beneath relaxed, and the scales lost some of their brightness.

Dexter examined the vial, swirling the iridescent fluid until it formed a spiral. He nodded, then wrote a brief note in his ledger: "Clot removed. No secondary effect. Origin: unknown."

He stood, returned the pad and needle to the tray, and fetched a small, locked box from the shelf behind him. The key was on a chain around his neck, and it took only a moment to unlock it. From inside, he produced a tiny, stoppered bottle of something that looked like oil,

but which shifted in hue every time the candle flickered. He weighed it in his palm, then handed it over.

"You'll need three drops," he said. "Twice a day. In water, not milk. No more than that."

She took the bottle, studied it, and grinned. "If I grow a third eye, you're responsible."

"It will not come to that," he replied, but she heard the hint of uncertainty in his tone.

She tucked the bottle into her belt, then flexed her arm. Already the skin was less rigid. The color was fading to a mottled blue.

Dexter regarded her with his surgeon's stare. "You must not hunt for three days."

Her lip curled. "Will you come to me, then?"

"Yes," he said, "if you call."

The woman stood, tested her balance, and seemed satisfied. She paused at the door, then turned back. In the dimness, her scales caught the light and refracted it across the floor in a pattern of tiny stars. "You're good at this, you know."

"I practice," he said, and she smiled, a genuine one this time.

She left the way she'd come, a shadow among shadows.

Dexter closed the secret door behind her, reset the catch, and stood alone in the corridor for a moment. The space was still, the air humming faintly with the resonance of the clinic's gift. He could smell the ghost of her pain—ozone and frost, a lingering note of wildness—and it left a tingle at the back of his throat.

He returned to his ledgers, noted the time and the dosage, then wiped down the bench and set the tools to soak. The world outside was still and black, the clinic itself a single point of order in the chaos of night.

He sat, just for a moment, and let the silence collect around him like snow.

In the absence of patients or visitors, the clinic became a memory palace: a place where every smell, sound, and shadow was filed in its exact place. Dexter did not linger over the details—he never did—but he noticed them all the same. The flick of the lantern's flame, the way the dried herbs on the wall absorbed light instead of reflecting it, the

faint hiss of snow falling from the eaves. These were the things he trusted; they kept the world in order.

The woman's scent had barely faded before Dexter began his ritual. He moved through the room with the efficiency of a spider resetting its web, coiling up the used bandages, soaking the needles, and wiping every exposed surface with a vinegar wash. The process should have taken the better part of an hour, but Dexter moved at a velocity few could follow, a blur of sleeve and pale hand, every motion as crisp as a snapped icicle. Within five minutes, the clinic was immaculate.

He returned the locked box to its hidden alcove, replaced the key, and—after a moment's hesitation—set the glass vial containing the blue-white droplet on a shelf in the back room. He would analyze it later, perhaps. Or not. There was always a chance that looking too closely would reveal something best left in shadow.

When the last tool was cleaned and the benches restored to perfect symmetry, Dexter allowed himself a single deep breath. The air in the room vibrated faintly, not with noise but with a static that prickled along the base of his skull. The clinic's gift was always strongest at night, when the other shops and homes slept. He could sense it: the slow pulse of power in the stone walls, the way the floorboards creaked in the same sequence every night, the certainty that, for this brief interval, he was the only living thing in the building.

He walked the room once, circling the perimeter, checking every latch and catch. In the front window, the ice had formed a lace of frost. Through it, Dexter could see the street, still and moonlit, every shadow cast precisely where he expected it to be. The inn across the green was dark; the pub's lanterns had been extinguished for hours. Even the bakery next door, normally the first to rise, was asleep.

There would be no more calls tonight.

Dexter returned to the inner room and knelt on a narrow mat beside the woodstove. He did not remove his coat or boots, nor did he relax his posture. He sat, cross-legged, hands folded in his lap, back as straight as the steel rods that lined the surgery table. His eyes closed, but the rest of him was alert—every muscle and tendon held in quiet reserve, every sense tuned to the tiniest fluctuation in the clinic's hum.

This was what passed for sleep, in his case. A half-waking, half-waiting state where time contracted and thoughts drifted, but never fully broke loose. The world outside could do what it liked; inside the walls, the only thing that mattered was the slow replenishment of energy, the careful cataloguing of wounds and cures, the mental replay of every procedure, every word spoken or withheld.

Dexter let himself drift, but not far. In the darkness behind his eyes, he reviewed the woman's visit: her pain, the shape and color of the clot, the way her scales seemed to refract even the weakest light. He tallied her symptoms, compared them to other cases, and wondered—just briefly—if this was the beginning of something new, or simply another artifact of their shared, secret biology.

He did this for every patient, whether wolf or constable or stranger from the trade road. He would remember their faces for years, maybe forever. In the absence of ordinary dreams, this was as close as he came.

Somewhere in the town, a bell tolled the third mark. Dexter did not move, but counted the chimes. The gift of the clinic, the aura that dampened pain and encouraged healing, was at its peak. He felt it swirl around him, a gentle, invisible wind, threading through his bones and nerves.

He wondered, for a moment, what it would feel like to truly sleep. He'd read descriptions in books, watched the way ordinary people seemed to melt into their beds at night, how their breathing shifted, how they awoke with a softness in their eyes that never quite reached his. It was not envy, exactly. But it was something close.

Outside, the snow resumed its slow descent, thickening the hush over the world. Inside, the only movement was the pulse at Dexter's throat and the steady rise and fall of his breath.

He stayed like this until just before dawn, when the bakery's first light flickered next door and the world hinted at motion again. Only then did he rise, silent and uncreased, and prepare for the next patient, the next wound, the next debt to be paid.

It would be a busy day. It always was.

But for now, the clinic was perfect, and so was the silence inside it.

seven

. . .

IT WAS the hour when sunlight turned the town square into a golden bowl, and Prudence Simonsdotter's tailor shop caught every last drop. Her worktable, big enough to sleep a family of four, was swept clean except for two things: a basket of precisely folded fabric scraps, and the heavy steel scissors she used for everything, even opening letters. Each shelf along the wall groaned under the weight of wool, muslin, and satin, all sorted and stacked with a mathematician's logic. Above it all, the air shimmered with the lavender-and-lemon scent Prudence always claimed was accidental, but which every visitor attributed to her shop's "gift."

She leaned over a bodice-in-progress, her needle flicking so fast that, to the untrained eye, the stitches seemed to appear out of nowhere. Each draw of the thread was followed by a tiny, satisfied exhale. That's how she kept time—a sigh, a stitch; a sigh, a stitch.

On this particular morning, the air inside the shop was thick with the magic of routine. The magic was not the kind that lit candles or summoned rainclouds, but the kind that made difficult tasks seem suddenly possible, the kind that whispered to old hands and aching backs, "Yes, you can finish this before breakfast." Prudence had long since stopped trying to figure out how it worked. She only knew that,

when she was behind her table with fabric in her hands, the whole world made a little more sense.

It wasn't even half a candlemark past opening when the shop bell clacked twice, not in the nervous way of a local but the measured, expectant way of travelers. Prudence didn't bother to look up at first; she finished her current line of stitches and set the bodice aside. When she did finally glance at the door, she saw what she had expected: three women in woolen cloaks, dusted with the finest road salt and a faint aroma of tallow soap.

They entered together, but not in step. The oldest—late forties, with a face shaped by years of pinched expressions—led the way, chin raised and eyes taking the measure of every seam, every bolt, every possible source of offense. The other two kept their hands folded neatly, shoulders barely touching, as though they'd been drilled in etiquette since the cradle.

Prudence took the opening, and her cue. "Good morning, travelers. Welcome to North Pointe Common Towne." She did not add, as she sometimes did for the locals, that the tea shop next door was still running a discount on winter spice blends, or that the bakery's honey rolls were at their peak just now. She'd read the type. They were not here for distraction.

The matron approached the counter, a careful smile stitched onto her lips. "Mistress Simonsdotter?"

"You're in the right place," Prudence replied, bobbing a small curtsy. She'd practiced the movement until it could pass for effortless, and she liked the way it set her brightly patterned skirts into a slow, swirling motion. Today's dress was pale green, with a flurry of blue thistles embroidered along the hem and sleeves—a touch she'd once have considered sinful for its boldness, but now found almost modest.

The woman's eyes lingered on the embroidery, then snapped back to Prudence's face. "We are in need of traveling attire. Sturdy. Warm. No adornments, please."

"Of course," Prudence said, the phrase so deeply ingrained it came out as a purr. "Three sets, for immediate wear?" She cast a glance at the younger two, who nodded in unison.

The woman hesitated, as if expecting an upcharge for short notice.

When Prudence only smiled, she seemed almost disappointed. "Yes. That will suffice. We can wait if necessary."

"It won't be," Prudence said. She glided out from behind the counter and gestured to the front table, which displayed a careful array of her simplest offerings. "You'll want the hard-wool. It's lined, so you won't feel the itch." She lifted a bolt and let the fabric fall in a satisfying thunk. "This brown is the most forgiving with mud and road stains, but I have gray, too, if you prefer."

The woman took a swatch between two fingers and tested it, the way someone might test the skin of an unfamiliar fruit. "This will do," she decided.

The others murmured polite agreement. Their accents were familiar to Prudence, if not exactly her own—closer to the villages across the northern pass, where every word was filtered through a screen of suspicion.

Prudence set to work measuring them in turn. She used a strip of checked ribbon, fast and impersonal, calling out numbers as she wrote them in the order book. The matron's name was Mrs. Orble, or possibly Orvell; the two younger were her daughters, or at least she'd claimed them that way. Their names were so plainly given—Sara and Ruth—that Prudence couldn't decide if they were real or assigned for convenience.

Sara was the taller of the two, with hair the color of bread crust and the complexion of someone who'd spent a life indoors. She seemed tense, her gaze never straying more than a pace from her mother's shoulder. Ruth, smaller and softer at the edge, actually smiled once or twice—small, shy efforts, but real.

As Prudence measured Ruth's sleeve length, the girl whispered, "Your dress is beautiful."

Prudence's heart did a small flip. "Thank you," she replied, so quietly that only Ruth could hear. "If you like, I have a few ribbons—"

Before she could finish, the matron's gaze flicked over. "No ribbons, please," she said. "We prefer our garments as the god intended them."

Ruth's cheeks turned red, but Prudence did not drop the subject so easily. She finished the measurements and said, "If you change your

mind, it's no trouble at all. Sometimes a little color makes the day warmer."

Sara sniffed. "We are used to the cold."

Prudence allowed herself a single blink before returning to the order. "Right, then. I can have these ready in three candlemarks, if you'd like to return after lunch." She wrote the details in her ledger—plain, plain, plain—and underlined the word twice, as if daring herself to forget.

The matron nodded, and the three of them retreated to the entry-way, where they conferred in low voices. Prudence caught only a few words: "modesty," "temptation," and "dangerous." She wondered, not for the first time, how far people were willing to go to convince themselves that the world was trying to seduce them.

Once the door shut, Prudence exhaled. She ran a hand along her worktable, letting her fingers trail the length of a peacock-blue velvet that she'd meant for a festival commission. The fabric made her fingertips tingle, and for a moment, she considered adding a hidden splash of it to the travelers' garments—a bit of lining, a secret panel—but dismissed the thought. They'd feel it right away and probably come storming back in, indignant as drowned hens.

Instead, she started cutting the wool. She worked quickly, her scissors slicing the fabric with an aggression she usually reserved for mending breaches in trousers left too long at the knees. The silence of the shop was comfortable, but not absolute; every so often, Prudence caught the faintest echo of laughter from the town square, or the dry scratch of boots on the walkway outside. Inside, though, it was all her.

As she pieced the sleeves, she found her mind drifting. She pictured her sisters, back in the tight little enclave where she'd grown up. Two of them: Mercy, with her owl-wide eyes, and Content, who never really matched her name. She wondered if they'd made it out, or if they were still there, dressing in mud brown and listening to the endless sermons about the dangers of color, of joy, of anything that didn't fit the established pattern.

She tried to imagine Mercy in a dress like the one Prudence wore now—silk, maybe, with a frosting of embroidered wildflowers. The

image would not stick. It was easier to see her in the same drab as these travelers, shoulders hunched, eyes cast down.

For a moment, the memory ached. Prudence flexed her hand, wiped a phantom tear from her cheek, and told herself she was being foolish. That was a lifetime ago. In the shop, she was not Prudence the Dissenter, or the Exile, or the Girl Who Ran. Here, she was simply the tailor. That would have to be enough.

She was finishing the last row of stitches when the bell rang again. The travelers were early. Prudence forced herself to smile, then set the almost-completed tunics on the table and dusted her hands.

This time, Mrs. Orble brought a new companion—a man in a fine wool suit, with a face so unyielding it looked carved. He wore a hat, which he did not remove, and surveyed the room with a single, looping glance.

“Ah, you’re back,” Prudence said, her voice bright and practiced. “I was just finishing the hems. Would you care to try them on?”

The matron nodded, and the man stood at the door, arms folded.

Prudence had never seen a man so determined to not touch anything. He stood in a way that said: this is not my place, this is not for me. She found it both funny and sad.

Sara and Ruth slipped behind the curtain to try on their tunics. Prudence heard them whispering, not in conspiracy but in shared nervousness. The rustling of cloth, the soft giggle—she heard it all and felt a pang of something almost maternal. She was, after all, barely ten years older than them.

When they emerged, the fit was perfect. Prudence made a few last adjustments, pinning here, tucking there. She showed them how the buttons worked, how the lining would keep out the wind without bulking the silhouette. She could tell that, even though the garments were plain, the girls were pleased. Ruth, especially, seemed unwilling to take hers off.

The matron checked every seam, every stitch, then nodded. “We’ll take them. Thank you.”

Prudence began wrapping the extras in paper, working quickly but with care. As she did, she slid a single strip of indigo ribbon inside,

hidden between the folds. If Ruth ever wanted it, it would be there, waiting.

The tunics lay folded in a perfect stack, ready for their plain brown paper and the length of jute twine that would keep everything safe for the road. Prudence set the paper roll on her worktable and pulled it taut with practiced efficiency, measuring twice by eye and slicing through with the weighty scissors. The blades cut clean, but just as she reached the end, a sound—high, sharp, and unmistakable—split the air.

It was so sudden and so pure that, for a moment, she thought she'd cut through her own finger. The shock of it made her drop the scissors, which landed with a clatter and skittered a full arm's length down the table. She checked her hand—no blood, not even a nick—and then looked up, half-expecting the room to have changed in some visible way.

The noise came again: a keen, thin as a violin string, vibrating just at the edge of hearing but strong enough to make the thread spools on the shelf quiver in their glass jars. Prudence braced both hands against the table and pressed down, as if trying to force the sound back into silence through sheer will. Her jaw tightened, and she let her teeth come together until the pressure blunted the worst of it.

From the front of the shop came the polite, murmuring voices of Mrs. Orble and her flock. They seemed entirely unaffected—no wince, no flinch, not even a change in volume. The matron was thanking Prudence for her "unusual promptness." Sara and Ruth stood behind her, faces blank, arms full of their new clothes.

Prudence forced herself to smile as she approached the counter. She reached for the scissors, but her hand trembled, and she knocked over a pin cushion. The pins scattered like metallic rain, some of them rolling right off the edge and onto the floor.

"Oh, heavens," said Prudence, voice a little too loud. "Slippery fingers today."

Mrs. Orble made a polite tut-tut sound. "You should not work so hard, Mistress Simonsdotter. It's not right for a woman to be forever at the needle."

Prudence wanted to say that it was better than being forever at the

tongue, but she bit back the retort. Instead, she offered the wrapped package, finished with an untidy bow of twine. "There you are, ladies. May it serve you well, wherever you're going."

The matron inspected the bundle, then nodded. "We're expected in Broom's Hollow by the sennight. I hope the weather holds. Sara, say thank you."

Sara muttered, "Thank you."

Ruth, behind her mother's back, managed a real smile. "Thank you, Mistress," she said, and the words carried just enough brightness to cut through the lingering pain in Prudence's ears.

Once the door closed behind them, the noise came again—stronger, and this time accompanied by a vibration through the soles of her feet. Prudence steadied herself against the counter and closed her eyes, trying to remember if she'd ever heard anything quite like it. Maybe the old church bells, back in her childhood village, when the wind was right. Or perhaps a pipe blown by a truly desperate street performer.

She shook out her hands, one at a time, then bent to gather the spilled pins. As she dropped each into the cushion, the fabric seemed to hum with the memory of the noise. Even the air felt thickened, like the moments before a summer storm.

Behind the counter, Prudence kept a little jar of barley candies—a secret she sometimes shared with Bryant when he visited after lunch. She fished out a piece and tucked it into her cheek, letting the slow sugar dissolve and distract her from the keening. It helped, a little.

Once the shop was empty and her pulse had steadied, Prudence returned to her own commission: a dress the color of robin's eggs, with embroidery so bright it looked gilded even in the pale winter light. She had promised it for a customer who liked "everything bold and nothing matching." It was the sort of project that used to scare Prudence, back when she'd first opened the shop and worried every new thing would be her undoing.

The dress waited for her on the mannequin, half-hemmed and elegant even in its unfinished state. Prudence set the bodice on her lap and threaded a needle with gold silk, but the keening hovered at the edge of her concentration, thinning the world to a narrow, urgent wire.

She tried to ignore it. She tried harder to ignore the memory that

came with it: her mother, in the old home, sitting by the window with hands folded and a mouth pressed tight as a drawstring. In that memory, the world was always silent except for the wind and the quiet disapproval in every corner. That was why Prudence had run, and why she'd never gone back.

But the noise in her shop was real, and it did not care about old wounds. Her hands shook as she began the first stitches, and the gold thread went crooked twice before she finally managed a neat seam. She set her jaw, exhaled through her nose, and worked each stitch with slow, deliberate care. It was the only thing that made sense: the tactile, the tangible, the forward momentum of needle through cloth.

As she worked, she felt the tension in her shoulders start to ease, even if the keening continued overhead. She let herself imagine telling someone about it—perhaps the woman at the tea shop, who always listened as if every word was a recipe, or Dexter, who would surely know if it meant sickness or something worse. But she didn't want to bother anyone. Not yet.

She finished the hem, tied off the thread, and ran her fingers along the edge to check for snags. It was perfect—impossibly so, considering how her hands had trembled. Prudence let herself be proud, if only for a breath.

She looked up at the shelves, at the rows of color and texture, and wondered what her sisters would think if they could see her now. Maybe they'd laugh at the extravagance, or maybe—just maybe—they'd ask for a dress of their own.

The thought made her smile, despite the pressure still ringing in her ears.

She reached for another bolt of fabric, folded it into her lap, and began again. The keening did not let up, but with every stitch, she felt a little stronger, a little more herself.

If the noise was a sign of trouble, Prudence decided she would face it like she faced everything else: with bright colors, straight seams, and a refusal to let the world tell her what was allowed.

And so, with the sun angling through her windows and the air humming with magic and pain and possibility, she bent to her work and let the needle carry her forward.

eight

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BY MID-DAY, the pale sun had climbed high enough to fill the chirurgery with a white, pulseless light. Inside, Dexter moved through the silence like an anchor, the weight of the world compressed in each step. He counted his breaths, matching the rhythm to the clicks and soft hisses of the heating kettles, the only other movement in the room.

The air was thick with the smell that never left: sharp rosemary, sweet echo of drying lavender, and a nip of ozone that stung the soft parts of your nose. If you stayed too long, it filled your clothes and your hair and, eventually, your memory of the place. Dexter had come to think of it as his second skin.

He had just finished setting a fracture for a miller's boy from the next town down the road—a neat splint, wrapped tight enough to last but gentle enough not to pinch—when the door opened. The bell above it was intentionally muted, but the sound still rang too loud in the hush.

A man stepped through, taller than average, hunched as if shrinking away from the brightness outside. His hair was the color of slate, and his clothes, though fine in cut, had gone to seed—cuffs worn to threads, knees shiny from time spent crouched by fire or lamplight. He carried a satchel, the battered kind that suggested long roads and

too many missed meals. When he moved, it was with a stiffness that betrayed pain somewhere, but not in any obvious limb.

"Good day," Dexter said, not rising from the bench.

The man nodded, pausing just inside the threshold. His eyes darted around the room, cataloguing everything in a single sweep—windows, stove, shelves, the line of clean knives by the far wall, and finally, Dexter himself.

"Corvin," the man said. "You are the surgeon."

"I am."

Corvin stepped forward, revealing his right hand. The skin along the back of it was angry and swollen, a welted patch with a constellation of small blisters, as if he'd lost a contest with a steaming kettle.

"Burn?" Dexter asked.

Corvin nodded. "From a tea kettle. Fault was mine, not the water's."

Dexter gestured to the bench, and Corvin sat, cradling the hand in his lap.

He examined the wound without touching it first. The burn ran from the knuckle of the index finger almost to the wrist, raised and cherry-red at the edges but paling in the center—a classic scald, likely only hours old.

"You are lucky," Dexter said. "No infection. No searing."

Corvin's lips twitched, the ghost of a smile. "Luck isn't usually so interested in me."

Dexter turned to the cabinet, retrieved a small jar, and scooped out a portion of pale green gel. The consistency was like cold grease, and the scent, when exposed to air, was so sharp it made Corvin blink.

"This will cool it," Dexter said. "You may feel—" He paused, searching for the right word. "Relief."

Corvin bared his teeth in a dry, academic grin. "Anything's better than the current sensation."

Dexter applied the balm with two gloved fingers, moving in slow, even circles. Corvin's hand tensed, the skin blanching further, but he did not flinch or pull away. The gel foamed slightly where it touched open blister, then faded into a sheen.

Dexter wound the hand in a clean strip of linen, binding it so that

every finger could still move. The bandage was a single, spiraling loop, precise as a thread on a bobbin.

For a moment, the world held its breath.

Corvin flexed his fingers, testing the dressing, and then stared at his palm. "I can barely feel it," he said, more to himself than to Dexter. "That's remarkable."

"Will not last," Dexter said. "But it will heal well. If you keep it dry, you'll have use of your hand by tomorrow."

Corvin nodded. He did not stand. Instead, he set the hand on his knee and gazed into the near distance, lips pursed as if listening for something only he could hear.

Dexter felt the hum in the room shift—barely, but enough to notice. He waited, letting the silence stretch.

At last, Corvin said, "I heard about your place from the innkeep. They say you have a gift for pain."

Dexter's eyes flickered once, but he said nothing.

Corvin smiled without looking up. "Not that you cause it. That you... draw it out. Make it disappear. Like water off a roof." He flexed the fingers of his injured hand, as if in proof.

"There is something in the walls," Dexter allowed. "It helps."

Corvin lifted his head, meeting Dexter's gaze fully for the first time. His eyes were gray, but flecked with darker threads, like cracks in old porcelain. "I'm not here for stories," he said. "But I've been a scholar of the uncanny for most of my life, and I can feel it—right now. It's in my head. Like a pressure, or a noise you can't quite find the source of."

Dexter tensed, the motion so slight only a fellow obsessive would notice. "Is it unpleasant?"

"Not unpleasant." Corvin cocked his head, listening. "More like... an itch, but a good one." He smiled, softer now. "I wonder if it feels the same for you as it does for everyone else."

Dexter did not answer. He finished packing away the gel, wiped his gloves, and closed the cabinet with a faint snick. The movement was deliberate, almost slow-motion.

Corvin remained seated, lost in the sensation. After a minute, he said, "Does it ever get loud for you?"

This time, Dexter's fingers tightened visibly on the edge of the counter. "Sometimes."

Corvin nodded, satisfied. "You know, I've been all over. Even spent a year in the Grand Archive at Second Mount. In every place, I ask about the things people hear in the walls—footsteps, singing, bells that ring on no schedule." He paused, then laughed, soft and dry. "In Second Mount, the archives themselves moan at night. Most think it's the pipes. I didn't."

Dexter studied him, weighing whether this was small talk, or something more dangerous.

"Here, though," Corvin continued, "the sound isn't in the building. It's outside. It started three days ago—first as a whisper, now as a kind of high, continuous tone. I thought I'd gone mad, but then I saw the others. Covering their ears. Complaining of the same headache."

Dexter exhaled, very slowly.

"You know what it is," Corvin said.

It was not a question.

Dexter sat across from him, folding his hands. "You have a theory."

Corvin chuckled, the lines around his eyes deepening. "A few. You want the interesting one, or the safe one?"

"Interesting."

The scholar leaned back, keeping the bandaged hand outstretched as if showing it off. "Banshee," he said. "Or, more precisely, Grief Echoes."

Dexter blinked. "Those are fairy stories."

Corvin shook his head. "That's what most say, yes. The truth is different. My work—what I really do—is trace the origins of folklore. I follow the trail backward, through every translation and every frightened child's account, until I find the original thing." He tapped his chest, just above the heart. "The banshee, as you call it, isn't a woman, or even a spirit. It's the sound of suffering that hasn't finished itself."

He fixed Dexter with a look that, for all its warmth, was unblinking. "It collects, you see. In towns. In families. In the walls of places that promise healing, or change, or absolution." He spread his arms. "It sings, and the song is pain looking for a way out."

The words hung between them like a filament, vibrating.

Dexter said nothing.

Corvin flexed his hand, then clenched it, and for a moment, the tips of his fingers went white. "I felt it in your touch, surgeon. The pain leaving me, but not vanishing—being pulled into you. You drink it, don't you?"

Dexter flinched, just a fraction.

Corvin only smiled, and his eyes went soft. "No judgment. Only curiosity."

They sat in silence, breathing in the scent of rosemary and electric ozone, each caught in their own circuit of memory.

Outside, the bells on the square tolled the hour. Corvin stood, rolling the sleeve down to cover the fresh bandage.

"I thank you," he said, and offered his left hand, the unburned one. Dexter shook it, his grip feather-light.

Corvin lingered at the door, then turned. "If you ever want to know what the banshee is really after, come find me. I'll be at the inn, most nights."

The door shut behind him, a sound so soft it barely registered.

Dexter sat for a long time, hands clasped so tight the knuckles threatened to burst. He could feel the noise in the air now—the thin, urgent wail that only the broken, or the listening, could hear.

He had a theory, too. But he didn't have the language for it. Not yet.

He went to the window, watched Corvin's form dissolve into the afternoon glare, and wondered what the banshee would want from a creature made only of wounds.

The wail returned at dusk.

It started as a thin, metallic taste on the tongue, not quite a sound and not quite a pressure, but something in between. Dexter tried to ignore it as he finished with his evening ledgers, but it crept in anyway, wrapping itself around the edges of his thoughts like a creeping mold. He could feel the town straining against it, a collective muscle tensed in anticipation of something terrible or transcendent.

He was shelving a bottle of bitter tincture when the front door creaked open. Corvin, again—this time with his hair combed back and a notebook tucked under one arm. He did not knock, nor did he announce himself, but Dexter had been expecting him since the moment he left.

“Evening,” Corvin said. He did not wait for a reply, but sat in the chair by the window, the same place where he’d received treatment that morning.

Dexter stood behind the counter, silent.

Corvin unscrewed the cap from his fountain pen, then scribbled a note in his book. “The sound has changed,” he said.

Dexter cocked his head, listening. It was true. The wail had become a chord, three or four notes weaving in and out of phase, a harmony both beautiful and horrifying.

“It gets worse as the day dies,” Corvin continued. “And it’s strongest in the center of town. My own theory,” he said, “is that it’s following a pattern.”

Dexter found his voice. “A pattern?”

Corvin nodded, excited, the scholar coming to life in him. “Like a pulse. At regular intervals, the volume spikes, then subsides. I mapped it.” He held up his notebook, revealing a page of jagged lines and careful annotations. “See here? Every forty-three minutes, the sound reaches a crescendo, then drops away. But each cycle, the base-line climbs a little higher.”

Dexter studied the chart. It reminded him, uncomfortably, of the diagrams in the medical texts he’d read as a child—spikes of fever, the rise and fall of heartbeats on a sickbed.

Corvin flipped the page. “I also catalogued the people most affected. Not everyone hears it, you know. Some are oblivious. But others—the ones who’ve suffered, who’ve buried children or lost a limb or just never fit into the world—those are the ones who feel it in their teeth, in their bones.” He gave Dexter a meaningful look. “I suspect you’re one of them.”

Dexter looked away, running his fingers along the edge of the counter. “Perhaps.”

Corvin closed his notebook. “My point is, the sound is not a warn-

ing. Not in the old sense. It's a release valve. It builds until it must be let out."

Dexter felt his chest tighten. "And if it is not?"

Corvin shrugged. "That's when you get the legends. The hauntings, the mass hysteria, the stories of towns that vanish overnight. You ever heard of the Sobbing Road in the lowlands? Or the Screaming Wood near Carrowick? Same phenomenon. I've read hundreds of accounts. Always the same: some place with too much pain, and eventually, it leaks."

He sat back, folding his arms. "You want my honest opinion? North Pointe is overdue."

Dexter managed a smile, brittle as old glass. "And what does one do about it?"

Corvin hesitated, the first crack in his certainty. "I don't know. No one does. Sometimes a priest or a witch can thin the noise. Sometimes a new tragedy replaces the old one, and the cycle resets. I suppose the best you can do is give people a place to bring their pain. Or someone to carry it for them." He said this last part with a soft, almost embarrassed tone, as if confessing a foolish hope.

Dexter could not stop his hands from trembling, so he placed them in his pockets.

Corvin stood, slipping his notebook away. "You're a healer, Dexter. Maybe that's why it chose you."

Dexter nearly laughed, but the sound would have come out wrong.

At the door, Corvin paused. "Thank you for the bandage. It barely even scars."

Dexter inclined his head. "I'm glad."

Corvin lingered, as if wanting to say more. "You remind me of someone I knew," he said at last. "A man who was always too gentle for the world, but who never learned to let himself rest." He looked down, then back up, eyes wet and shining in the candlelight. "Take care."

He left, and the room was emptier than before.

Dexter crossed to the window and stared into the dark. The square outside was deserted, but he could see the lights in the pub, the bakery, the inn—tiny islands of refuge against the encroaching noise.

He pressed his hand to the glass, feeling the faint tremor in his own bones. He had tried, his whole life, to be the repository for pain, to contain it so others would not have to. But the banshee—this thing of his people's making—had finally learned how to sing.

The truth, unvarnished: he had brought it here.

He was the clog in the drain. The unfinished wound.

Dexter slumped against the window, letting the sound wash over him, every note a needle threading straight to the heart.

If there was a solution, he would find it. But for now, all he could do was listen, and hurt, and remember.

The noise was almost comforting, in the end. It meant he was still needed.

He closed the curtain and prepared the room for the night, every movement careful, measured, final. The hum lingered in the air long after he'd snuffed the candle.

He wondered, as he always did, whether this was the night he'd stop hearing it.

He doubted it would be.

After Corvin departed, Dexter stood perfectly still in the middle of his clinic, hands flat on the countertop, waiting for the next thing to break.

It did not take long. The wail, no longer subtle, cut through the closed shutters with the icy directness of a chisel. It found him, no matter where he stood, no matter how hard he tried to anchor himself in the ordinary. He could hear it in the pipes, in the slow tick of the clock, in the distant tread of boots on the cobblestones outside. The world had become an instrument, and the banshee played it with increasing confidence.

He put away his tools, one at a time, each movement rigid and exact. The bonesaw. The shears. The vials of bright liquid. His hands trembled, just enough to make the glass rattle against the wood. It was not fatigue. It was the sound, or what the sound meant, vibrating through every cell.

The jars on the shelf seemed to pulse in the half-light. The rows of linen and bandage swelled and contracted, as if the whole room had become an extension of his own lungs.

He tried to focus on the routine: check the night lock, wipe the counters, lay out the charts for tomorrow's patients. But the repetition only gave the wail more space to grow. It pressed against the soft tissue behind his eyes, itched along his jaw, pooled at the base of his throat. Each time he swallowed, the pressure increased.

He looked at his hands. They were beautiful, in the way a set of knives can be beautiful: thin, deliberate, sculpted by purpose. But now they shook, and he did not know how to stop it.

A memory surfaced, as sudden and unbidden as a sneeze.

A room not so different from this one, but in another world, another life. White stone walls, a bench too tall for a child, the cold smell of snow and distilled spirits. There had been others, so many others, all of them with faces smoothed out by time or guilt. But he remembered the sound—the original sound, the root of all the rest. Not a wail, but a chord, harmonics stacked on harmonics, a logic so intricate it could have been mistaken for music.

They called it the Siphon. An experiment in mercy. The idea was simple: take the pain from the world, bottle it, make it manageable. But pain is never simple, and it is never satisfied. The Siphon did not cleanse. It created a vacuum, and nature does not abide a vacuum.

He remembered the first test subject—a creature with no name, a vessel for pain. The Siphon drained it, yes, but then the sound began. The sound called out to the others, and they came. Not for vengeance, but for completion. For the satisfaction of unfinished suffering.

That was when the banshees started. And the stories, after that—the legends that creatures like Dexter were vampires, monsters who fed on human agony. The world always gets the details wrong, but the gist was accurate enough.

He shook off the memory, but it clung to him. He finished cleaning, then circled the perimeter, testing every latch and catch. When he reached the window, he peered through the frost-patterned glass into the street.

Three townsfolk walked the square: a girl in a shawl, a boy with a basket, an old woman moving slower than the rest. As each passed the center of the green, they paused—sometimes for a second, sometimes longer—then shook their heads and hurried on. The girl pressed her

palms to her ears, the boy stumbled and nearly dropped his basket, the old woman just frowned and kept moving.

They would all feel it tonight.

He shouldered the blame, the way he always did. The banshee was his doing, his legacy, his curse. But this time, for the first time, he wondered if there was a way out that did not require another tragedy, another erasure.

He returned to his bench and sat, folding his hands together so tightly the knuckles went white. He stared at the flame in the single lamp. It sputtered, guttered, and, for a moment, went out entirely. In the brief darkness, the wail was absolute.

He relit the lamp, and the sound receded.

He would find the answer, or at least the next step. That was the work, and the only comfort he allowed himself.

But as he sat there, in the hush between one moment and the next, he felt the room's gift fade a little—the sense of safety, the pain-dampening aura. The air grew colder, less hospitable. The magic did not leave, but it began to question its own purpose, the way a river questions its banks when the spring thaw comes.

Dexter placed his head in his hands and breathed.

He did not weep.

He listened, as he always had, and let the banshee sing.

nine

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NIGHT at the Broken Claw came on slow, which was the only way Sam tolerated it. The regulars gathered like barnacles on the trestle tables: a pack of lumberhands arguing about axes, a merchant with the world's worst poker face, and two children who were not supposed to be in a tavern but who belonged to the stablemaster, so nobody said a thing. Even the air behaved itself—warm, dense with the smell of roasted barley, but never quite enough to cut the chill that seeped from the stone floor. Sam ran the bar the way an old commander runs a post: eyes always moving, nothing missed, every irregularity marked and filed for later.

So she noticed first, before anyone else, when the wail shifted. At dusk it had been an annoyance, easy to ignore if you kept your mind on inventory or the slow drip of the beer engine. But now it sharpened, like a wire tightened beyond reason, slicing into her skull every time she drew a breath. Sam set her jaw and told herself she was being dramatic. Then a glass rattled on the shelf—just a tick, just enough that she caught it in the periphery—and she set her jaw harder.

A pair of travelers, new to the town but already three drinks in, laughed too loud at something. Sam poured their next round without looking directly at them. Her hands were steady, but her teeth ached

from how tight she was clenching. The pain in her back, old as the war and twice as bitter, crawled up from her lumbar vertebrae and parked itself between her shoulder blades. Every time she twisted to reach a bottle, it pulsed like a tooth in need of extraction.

It made the noise worse.

She tried the usual distractions: counting coin, rearranging the rack of kegs, fixing her gaze on the wall behind the bar where, according to the builder, you could sometimes see the grain of the wood shift if you watched long enough. But tonight the wall refused to play along. Instead, the line of mugs above her head trembled in time with the sound—first a subtle resonance, then a visible quiver as if the entire shelf had caught a chill.

“Is it me, or is there a draft in here?” asked the merchant, half a room away.

“Open your purse, you’ll be warmer,” Sam shot back. The banter landed, just, but her voice came out rougher than she intended.

The other bartender—a boy barely out of his apprenticeship—ducked in from the connector to the inn. “You hear that?” he muttered, eyes wide as he unloaded a crate of clean glasses. “Like, not just hear, but feel it?”

Sam gave him a look she’d perfected over decades. “It’s the wind, Elric. If it bothers you, stoke the fire and shut up.”

He shrugged, but she saw the relief on his face. It was always like this: people wanted to be told the world was simple. She’d built a career on it.

The pub’s magic, when it worked right, helped her with these little lies. It wasn’t a visible thing, not unless you knew what to look for. The Icosagon, someone had called it once—a twenty-sided bond that hummed behind every cup and table, nudging events the right direction. It made sure the brawlers got tired before they broke anything, that the drinks always ran out just as someone was about to confess a murder or a forbidden crush. More than once, Sam had seen the magic nudge a stranger to the correct seat, just so a destiny could be set in motion.

Tonight, though, the magic felt slippery. The clues—those little hints the pub sent her—were scrambled, like the Icosagon was spin-

ning out of control. The man at table five who was supposed to meet his long-lost sister? He walked out in a huff after a single drink, muttering about sour beer. The children, who usually scampered out before the grownups got loud, sat in the corner longer than they should, their faces scrunched in pain from the noise. Sam tried to nudge the merchant toward the traveling tinker, who absolutely needed to buy her rare tools, but the words came out wrong, and the two ended up in a shouting match over the value of tinware.

Sam's hands, so reliable until now, started to shake. Not from fear—she'd known worse fear than this, and in better company—but from the certainty that something in the world had slipped. The next time she reached for a tray of mugs, her left hand didn't quite clear the counter. Half the tray went down, the crash a firecracker in the dense air. Every head turned, including Elric's, and for a breath, the only sound in the pub was the echo of the shattering.

Sam stood over the mess, face blank, and waited for the pain to ebb from her back before crouching to pick up the shards.

"Let me—" Elric started, reaching for a broom.

She cut him off, louder than she meant: "Stay at the bar."

He jerked back, chastened. The room watched in silence as she swept the glass, then dumped it into the bin with a violence that did not match the actual force used. Her scar itched—always did when people stared—but she refused to let them see a wince.

Once the cleanup was done, Sam pressed both hands flat on the countertop and looked at the rows of spirits, the gleaming glass, the tap handles carved by three generations of woodworkers. The world swam for a second. It was as if the wail had stopped her in time, held her there to make a point about the futility of effort.

A voice cut through, soft but insistent: "You alright, Sam?" It was one of the regulars, a big-shouldered woman from the foundry, who had never been afraid to call Sam by her first name.

"I'm fine," Sam said, but the lie was see-through. She could feel the question hanging in the air—would she let it drop, or make a scene? She chose neither, returning to the job with a precision that bordered on the mechanical.

The wail escalated. Every time she bent to retrieve a glass or

twisted to fill a pitcher, the pressure ratcheted higher, until the sound filled her teeth and drilled into the backs of her eyes. She tried not to let it show, but the next tray of mugs trembled in her grip, and two of them clinked so hard they chipped on the rim.

She lined up the drinks anyway, sliding them down the bar to waiting hands. The world did not end. She wanted to laugh, or maybe scream, but instead she topped up a bowl of nuts and calculated how long until she could close without raising suspicion.

Someone called out for food, and Elric moved to the kitchen hatch. When he returned, he carried a plate of cheese and a face gone white as curd. He set the plate in front of the customer, then whispered to Sam, "It's worse in there. The noise. You can hear it in the plates."

Sam almost patted his arm, but thought better of it. "It's nothing we can't handle," she said. The words felt strange in her mouth.

The regulars tried to keep up the illusion of normal. The arguments grew a little louder, a little more desperate, as if everyone in the room was fighting the same battle against the invisible. Even the children, now huddled with their heads down, seemed to sense that tonight was not safe.

Sam's pain shifted. It was no longer just in her back—it burned up her shoulders and into her scalp, where it met the wail in a kind of resonance that left her dizzy. She steadied herself on the brass rail, knuckles whitening, and took three deep breaths.

A young woman—one of the travelers, by the look of her—caught Sam's attention. "Excuse me," she said. "Could I get a room for the night? The inn seems full."

Sam knew, without being told, that this was one of the moments the pub was supposed to handle for her. A gentle push, a suggestion, and the woman would be paired with another traveler, or sent to the right place at the right time. But the magic was dead silent. The Icosagon had nothing for her.

"You'll want to try the Weary Head again," Sam said, but the words came out uncertain, half-question. "Or the shopkeep has a spare cot in the back, if you don't mind the smell of mothballs."

The woman nodded, but not before shooting Sam a look of pity. Sam hated pity.

The ache in her body reached a breaking point. She glanced at the clock. Still an hour until last call, but she was done. She wiped her hands, let the towel fall onto the bar, and announced, "We're closing early."

No one moved at first. Then, slowly, the mood shifted. Some grumbled, others just gathered their coats and hats, eager for any excuse to escape the noise. Elric stood rooted, unsure what to do.

"Out," she said, voice flat. "All of you. That includes you, Elric."

He hesitated. "Should I—?"

"Go home," she repeated.

When the last guest cleared the door, Sam pulled the iron latch, twisted it, and flipped the wooden "Closed" sign with a little more force than necessary. The room was instantly colder. The silence was a lie—the banshee wail pressed in harder, now that she was the only target. She leaned against the bar and let her head fall forward, letting her hair curtain her face.

Her hands shook so bad she had to fold them together to make them stop. For the first time since her mercenary days, she wondered if this was what failure felt like: to be routed by a force you could not see, could not punch, could not even curse with effect. She had always prided herself on her tolerance for pain, her stubbornness. But tonight, it was not enough.

Sam moved through the closing routine with soldierly efficiency, cleaning and stacking and locking down every item. She did not cry, or even snarl. She just did the work, letting her muscles memorize the steps so her mind could drift.

The last thing she did was sweep the floor. The broom vibrated in her hands as she ran it across the flagstones, the noise of bristles on stone merging with the wail until it was all she could hear. She let it happen, let it fill her up, because to resist was worse.

When she finished, she set the broom aside and looked around the empty pub. The tables, the bar, the bottles—everything in its place, but the sense of order now made her sick. She thought of the old nights, the ones after a lost battle, when the only thing to do was count the dead and move on.

Sam straightened her back—slowly, because the pain now lanced

down her leg—and made for the door. She did not turn off the lamps. She left them burning, in case the darkness had more to say to her.

At the threshold, she hesitated. It was not like her to second-guess, but tonight, every step felt loaded. She considered going upstairs, throwing herself on the bed, and letting sleep take her. But she knew it would not come.

She turned instead toward the clinic, three doors down, where Dexter would be hunched over his jars and ledgers, trying to outthink the banshee.

The cold hit her like a slap, and for a moment, she welcomed it.

She squared her shoulders, set her jaw, and walked, step after step, refusing to let the pain slow her.

She had a job to do, and if the world wanted to stop her, it would have to try a lot harder than this.



Dexter's clinic was down the trade road from the Broken Claw, but the change in temperature and smell could have been a thousand miles. The pub's heat and barley stink clung to Sam's hair and shirt as she stepped into the antiseptic hush of the clinic, where the only warmth came from the low, sullen glow of a soapstone stove. The rest was cold, crisp as a sword blade—rows of glass jars, the powder-blue of clean tile, and a wall of tinctures that caught the light like little bottles of frozen spring.

She let the door slam behind her. The sound ricocheted around the room before getting swallowed by the thick walls. Dexter, perched behind his counter with a notebook open and a pen twirling between two fingers, looked up with the kind of focus that always unsettled her. Not judgment—she'd have preferred that—but the clinical, unblinking attention of someone mapping out the bones beneath her skin.

"You're open," Sam said, then realized she'd forgotten to modulate her volume. The wail was softer in here, less a scream than a tight thread humming through her skull, but it was still there.

"I am always open," Dexter replied, and set the pen down with a gentle click. "Sit."

Sam didn't want to sit. She wanted to punch something, or run until her lungs forced her to stop. She compromised by perching on the edge of a stool, arms crossed over her chest. "Explain this," she said, gesturing vaguely to her temples and then, more specifically, to the space above her right ear. "Is it just me, or is half the town stuck inside a broken violin?"

Dexter stood, his movement so smooth it could have been animated by clockwork. He circled to her side of the counter, expression unreadable. Sam noticed for the first time that his coat was unbuttoned, exposing a shirt so white it practically glowed in the shadowy room.

"It is not just you," Dexter said. "But it is mostly you."

Sam snorted. "Oh, good. For a second I worried it might be personal." She set her jaw and waited for the punchline.

Dexter reached for the jar nearest her, popped the lid, and let the smell of dried lavender and camphor hit the air. "May I?"

She rolled her eyes but nodded, and Dexter moved behind her. His hands, when they settled on her shoulders, were cold enough to make her jump. He didn't apologize, just started kneading at the muscle along her scapula.

Sam gritted her teeth and tried not to react, but the pain was immediate and clarifying. Each time he dug his thumb in, the noise ramped up, then faded, then ramped again, like someone tuning a siren by trial and error.

"Your traps are solid stone," Dexter said, in the same tone he might use to describe a stubborn knot in a rope.

"Must be all the good posture," Sam said. She was aware, with a dull sense of betrayal, that her voice had started to waver.

"The noise," Dexter said, pausing to trace a line from her neck to her shoulder blade, "is a banshee wail. Not literal, but close. It is responding to unresolved pain in the town."

Sam tensed at the word "banshee." She'd seen one, once, years ago on a nighttime crossing in the Mistrals. It had shredded two of her squad before it was banished, and the sound had never left her

dreams. "So what," she said, voice gone hard again, "it's haunting me for bad posture?"

Dexter's fingers dug in a little deeper, then let go. "You absorb more pain than most," he said. "That is your function here. Your job, and your curse."

She didn't like the word curse. It reeked of superstition, of problems that couldn't be solved with hard work or a fist.

"I'm not a—" Sam stopped herself before she could say "martyr." The word was another ghost from the war, and she didn't need to add more ghosts to the room. "I'm not the only one in town with a limp or a story."

Dexter moved to face her. He leaned on the counter, hands splayed on the tile, and looked her over with the patience of a carpenter considering a cracked beam.

"It is not the limp or the story. It is the refusal to rest." He tilted his head. "You are always on your feet. Even now."

Sam forced herself to relax, but the muscles wouldn't obey. "Can you fix it or not?"

Dexter reached for a jar of thin, sharp-smelling liniment, and poured a drop onto his palm. "I can mute it. Temporarily. But if you do not rest, or let someone help, it will return. Louder."

Sam stood, pacing the width of the room. She didn't know why she was so angry. Maybe it was the helplessness, maybe the feeling that the banshee had her number and was just waiting for her to fall asleep. She looked at the neat rows of bottles, the labels written in the same precise hand, the world reduced to systems and solutions. It should have made her feel safe, but instead it left her adrift.

She turned back to Dexter, who had stepped back to give her space. "I can handle it," she said. "Handled worse, if you believe half the stories they tell about me." She reached for her coat, then paused, the defiance in her face softened by something like regret. "But I need to keep the Claw open. If I'm not there, the town goes to hell."

Dexter nodded, as if conceding a point in a debate he had never wanted to have. "Very well. But take this." He set the jar of liniment on the counter and slid it toward her.

She picked it up, weighing the small bottle in her hand. It was heavier than it looked. "What's in it?"

"Nightshade. Willowbark. Some blue moss from the old world," he said. "Rub it on the base of your neck. It will buy you a few hours, at most."

Sam slipped the jar into her vest, ignoring the way her fingers trembled. "Thanks," she said, and meant it, but also resented that she had to mean it.

At the door, she paused. The banshee wail was already rising again, a dog whistle that only got louder when she tried to ignore it. She looked back at Dexter, who was already wiping down the counter, his movements slow and methodical.

"Why does it target me?" she asked, softer than before.

Dexter didn't look up. "Because you do not let anyone else carry it. The pain, I mean."

Sam nodded, though she didn't understand it, not really. She opened the door, letting in the cold, and stood for a second in the threshold. "You ever get tired?" she asked.

He glanced up, and for the first time she saw the tired in his eyes. "Always," he said.

She closed the door behind her, and stepped out into the night.

The banshee noise was waiting, coiled and patient, but this time it sounded less like a threat and more like a challenge. Sam walked toward the pub, one step at a time, the pain in her back sharp as ever but the rest of her—if not lighter, then at least ready for whatever came next.

At the Claw, she paused at the door. Her hand hovered over the latch, and for a heartbeat she considered turning around, heading back to the clinic, and letting Dexter work his magic. But the thought passed.

She had a job to do. And the world, as always, needed someone to keep it from falling apart.

So she pushed through the pain, and opened the door.

ten

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SCENE 1 - from Dexter's point of view

The clinic was never truly quiet, but in the early sennight hours it pretended. That was the best time to work alone: no knock at the door, no children with split chins or carpenters with splinters so deep they became a part of the soul. Just the long benches, the glass-fronted cabinets, and the hush that came when all the fresh wounds of the world decided to give up for a mark or two.

Dexter took advantage. He moved through his domain with a meticulous efficiency, arms bare to the elbow and hands sheathed in the thinnest gloves. The room thrummed with its own magic, a steady, low-pitched resonance that made your eardrums tickle if you stood still long enough. It was an old friend to him. The rest of the world found the sensation unsettling; Dexter found it necessary.

He set out the day's work on a cloth the color of river fog: three bundles of dried root, a clutch of willow bark, a coin-purse of poppy dust, and a pair of glass ampules filled with a blue so vivid it almost ached. In the center sat a mortar and pestle, the bowl marble and the pestle smooth as soapstone. The arrangement was deliberate—every ingredient positioned according to an order that Dexter never wrote down, but followed as faithfully as a dog to its master.

He began with the willow. The bark was from Galhani, of course. He could always tell her stock by the gnomish script on the bundle, the label festooned with tiny, unnecessary flourishes—stars, hearts, sometimes a cartoon of a smiling leaf. He read the note tucked under the twine: "Best batch, extra dry. Don't add water until it's gone to powder!"

Candlemarks later, in the back room, away from the public eye and even the half-light of the clinic's workbench, Dexter uncorked the last of the poppy tincture and set about mixing a more complicated dose. This was no ordinary poultice—this was for someone who needed more than the standard analgesic, whose pain was not the kind you could point to and name. He measured the poppy dust by the quarter grain, the valerian extract by the tear, and then the willow-bark, measured not by volume but by the resonance it gave when ground. The recipe was not from any book; it was memory, pure and unpolluted by the centuries that had worn most knowledge down to clichés.

As he worked, the banshee's wail persisted, growing sharper and less periodic. Instead of a wave, it became a scattershot, a flock of needles thrown at the world's softest places. He felt it in the roots of his teeth and the fine, glassy bones of his inner ear. That should have been alarming, but it was not.

Dexter recognized the pattern because he had heard it before.

The memory was as clear as any ledger. A place: high in the Mistral spine, where the snow never fully receded and the wind sang the same two notes until the end of summer. A community, if that's what you called a collection of Pain-Eaters, had clustered here for as long as there had been pain to draw. The buildings were round, low to the ground, and covered in a mat of reeds and snowmelt. The air was always sharp, thin enough that breathing felt like drinking knives. That suited his people—they never minded discomfort.

He was not called Dexter then; his first name was a pattern, not a word, but for the sake of memory, he allowed the substitution. Dexter's kin all looked alike, at least to outsiders: skin so white it sometimes reflected the moon, hair jet or obsidian, eyes like the inside of a storm. All moved with the same speed and precision—no hesita-

tion, no wasted energy. If you watched them gather, it was like seeing the flick of a school of fish, but without the water to slow them down.

The day of the Siphon's first activation was a holy day, but not a festive one. The community had prepared for years, amassing the metals and rare crystals and arcane diagrams required to build the device. The Siphon sat in the center of the great roundhouse, a thing of beauty and terror: coils of copper interleaved with lines of quartz, at the heart a lens the size of a child's head, cut and faceted so precisely that even the faintest starlight found its way inside and got trapped there. The builders—none older than Dexter was now, but all ancient in their patience—checked every connection and every rivet for the hundredth time.

They assembled in concentric rings around the Siphon, the old in the innermost circle, the young at the edges. All were silent, save for the soft hiss of wool and silk as bodies settled into place. The only sound was the wind, which snaked in through the smoke holes and set the Siphon's long glass tubes to trembling.

The Siphon was meant to do what his people did, but at scale: draw out the suffering of a region, process it, and then release it as nothing, as heat or wind or a faint, harmless sound. It was a gift to the world—painless pain, sorrow with a siphon attached. The logic was flawless. The execution was something else.

Dexter, young and unremarkable, sat in the third row. His hands rested on his knees, his heart was as slow and cold as the water in the spring outside. He watched as the oldest of the Pain-Eaters, a woman whose name had been reduced to a single note, approached the Siphon with a bundle of cloth. She set it on the dais, unwrapped it, and revealed a shard of bone—human, possibly, or maybe not. It didn't matter. What mattered was that it was saturated with history, with suffering, with all the unfinished business of the one who'd owned it.

She placed the bone inside the lens. The room tensed, not in fear but in expectation.

A second later, the air changed. The Siphon began to glow, not with light but with a kind of colorless brightness, a pressure that made your eyes water and your ears ring. The first sound it made was like the pop of

distant fireworks. The second was a low, constant moan, which built and built until it seemed impossible that the roundhouse could contain it.

The pain—centuries of it, perhaps—was drawn from the bone, then from the people nearest to the Siphon, then from the community itself. Dexter felt it as a wave that passed through him: sharp, then gone; heavy, then light as steam. It was not pleasant, but it was not agony, either. It was cleansing, or so they believed.

The Siphon pulsed again, this time with enough force that every eye in the room narrowed in reflex. The moan turned to a shriek, and in the same instant, a line of blue-white fire shot from the core of the Siphon and etched itself onto the air.

That should have been the end. The logic of the machine was perfect, but the world's logic was not. Instead of dispersing, the pain began to swirl, to coalesce. Dexter watched it—everyone did—as the blue-white fire found seams in the stone walls and the tightly woven roof, and then, instead of fading, it thickened.

The air was full of new shapes. Some were angular, all joints and edges; others flickered with a suggestion of faces, mouths open in unending howl. The first banshees, though no one yet called them that, erupted from the Siphon with a force that threw the elders to the floor. The sound was absolute, so loud that it tore the breath from lungs and forced every body in the room into a posture of grief.

Dexter remembered watching, unable to move, as the energy ricocheted around the roundhouse. The pain was not gone—it had become self-aware, or something close. The banshees found the smoke holes, then the chinks in the thatch, then the cracks in the hearts of everyone present. One by one, they exited the room, each with a scream that was both unique and utterly inhuman.

The Siphon did not explode, exactly. It unwound. The coils of copper went soft and melted, the glass tubes liquefied and ran down the dais like tears. At the heart, the lens remained, now black as ink and humming with a sound so low Dexter felt it in his feet.

When it was over, no one spoke. The oldest Pain-Eater stood first, then the rest followed, one by one. Some were bleeding from the nose or ears. All were changed.

They left the roundhouse together. The elders buried the Siphon's heart in a cairn outside the village and marked the place with no stone, no name. The banshees were never spoken of, but every child in the region knew their sound by the next winter. They became a story, then a warning, then a curse.

Dexter remembered the shame, more than the fear or the loss. The Siphon had worked, but only for a moment. Its gift was permanent: wherever pain accumulated, the banshees would come to harvest it, to refine it into a new kind of suffering. The Pain-Eaters were no longer welcome, even among their own. They scattered, taking new names, inventing new rituals to erase the past.

In the present, Dexter felt the weight of the memory like a fresh bandage on a still-bleeding wound. He finished the tincture with an extra twist of the pestle, a motion so fast it nearly liquefied the mixture, and then poured the finished product into a phial no larger than a thumb. The tremor in his hand was barely noticeable; by the time the bottle hit the shelf, it was gone.

He blinked. The banshee wail outside had not abated; if anything, it had harmonized, as though something in the world had recognized his recollection and decided to join in. He watched the air over the hot lamp for any sign of the blue-white shimmer, but there was only the steady rise and fall of heat.

Dexter wrote a single note in his ledger: "Mistakes echo longer than pain."

He set the book aside, wiped the bench clean, and allowed himself one, brief exhalation.

He would solve the banshee problem. That was not hubris—it was simply a debt, and he had always been good at repaying debts, one vial at a time.

Dexter wiped his hands on a fresh towel and turned to the thick stack of blank parchment waiting on the far side of his desk. His fingers, still dusted with the remains of willow and poppy, barely made a sound as

he sorted the sheets. He always kept them ready; it was better to prepare for new wounds than dwell on the old ones.

He reached for the brass compass, the kind with arms so delicately balanced that even a breath could send them spinning. He adjusted the hinge with his thumbnail and pressed the needle into the page. Around it, he drew a perfect circle, then a second, and a third, each just a shade wider than the last. The center was a bowl, glass blown to a specific curve, no more than three fingers deep but with a lip that flared outward like the petals of a moonflower.

Dexter made a list in the margin: "copper (99.8% pure)," "crystal, optical grade," "conductive paste (ask Galhani?)," and, finally, "Moon-Stone, cut to 22mm." The writing was so tight that a layperson might have missed the difference between the dashes and the decimal points. To Dexter, every mark mattered.

He set down the compass and reached for his straightedge. The next lines described the supporting arms: copper, annealed and hand-twisted for maximum resonance. He diagrammed the anchoring points, each measured twice and marked in ink that dried almost instantly. At the base of the device, he drew a reservoir—just big enough for a thimbleful of water, which would help cool the stone when the energy was focused.

As he worked, the banshee wail outside grew less sporadic and more regular, each new pulse harmonizing with the last. It was not cacophony. It was a call-and-response, and if you listened closely enough, there was almost a pattern to it.

Dexter stopped. He set his pen down and placed both hands on the desk, letting his palms absorb the vibrations that passed through the wood. The banshees weren't screaming at random. They were calling for help—no, not help. For a process, a system, something to make sense of the pain they gathered so indiscriminately. The Siphon had failed because it tried to erase pain outright. But pain couldn't be erased. It could only be transformed.

Dexter's jaw tightened. He picked up the pen again and sketched the next iteration: a set of copper threads suspended from the rim of the bowl, each terminating in a tiny glass bead. When the device was struck—by voice, or a drop of liquid, or a whispered name—the

threads would vibrate, creating a standing wave that resonated with the suffering in the air. The Moon-Stone, set dead center, would anchor the resonance, absorbing it and refracting it into something less sharp, less unfinished. Something survivable.

He labeled the new features with care. "Sympathetic dampers." "Phase correction beads." "Stone mount (frictionless)." He added a final note at the top of the page: "Harmonic Capacitor. To focus and stabilize."

He stared at the drawing, then at the materials list, then at the copper bowl he kept on the shelf above the sink. He'd been saving it for years, not because it was rare, but because it was perfect—no dings, no warps, the surface polished to a mirror.

He considered his options. This was not a problem to be solved by medicine, or by argument. This was a machine's problem, and he was the only one in town with the hands—and the memory—to build it.

He thought, briefly, of writing to Knodalon. The old man would know if the math worked, or if the device would do what Dexter hoped. He reached for a slip of paper and wrote, "To stabilize the pain of the banshee, must the frequency match the source or the absorber?" He signed it D. Then he folded the note, sealed it with wax, and stared at it for a long moment.

He did not send it. Instead, he burned the note in the flame of the work lamp, watching the letters turn to curls of smoke and then to nothing. This was his problem. His debt.

Dexter pulled the copper bowl from the shelf, set it on the workbench, and assembled the tools he would need: fine files, a set of micro-drills, a spool of wire so thin it could double as spider's silk. He laid everything out in order—no improvisation, no shortcuts. If the device worked, it might calm the banshees, or even give them something to do besides scream at the world. If it failed, it would be as though he'd never tried.

He soldered the first ring of copper into place, eyes flicking from the diagram to the bowl and back again. Each joint was perfect; each bead exactly where the blueprint dictated. He worked so quickly that the solder had barely cooled before he was on to the next step.

As the device took shape, the banshee wail outside grew louder—

not desperate, not menacing, but insistent. As if the creatures outside the walls could sense that something was being built for them, something that might finally make sense of their existence.

He finished the frame, mounted the Moon-Stone, and tested the action of the dampers. The entire assembly hummed under his fingertips, a high, steady note that harmonized with the banshee sound outside. It was working. Or at least, it was doing something.

Dexter set the Harmonic Capacitor in the center of the workbench. He stared at it, the way a parent might stare at a newborn: part pride, part dread. He would need to test it in the field, but for now, he listened to the way its resonance filled the room. The banshee wail outside seemed to respond, sharpening, then softening, then matching pitch before fading to almost nothing.

He allowed himself a single, satisfied nod.

In the silence that followed, Dexter felt a change—not in himself, but in the world outside. The pain was still there, but for the first time in memory, it felt manageable. Not erased. Not denied. Just given a place to go.

He sat back, closed his eyes, and let the resonance settle in his bones. He had never needed rest, not like ordinary men, but he allowed himself a moment of stillness before the next step.

There was work to be done, and a debt to be paid. But for now, the banshees were quiet, and the clinic was perfect.

eleven

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DEXTER LEFT the village well after midnight, taking a path through the pines that only he seemed to know. The cold had gone from disagreeable to dangerous; brittle crystals furred every exposed surface, and the full moon turned the white into a lit road for those with eyes that worked in shadow. For him, the dark was nothing.

He moved at a pace that would have frightened the neighbors—stride long, arms close, face never betraying the speed his body tolerated. The trees bent back for him, or so it seemed, and even the air pressed aside to let him pass. It was not running, not leaping, but a state of near-weightlessness, as though the world itself had decided to stop resisting his movement. When he reached the old stone marker where the path bent toward the river, he hesitated only long enough to count the heartbeats in the night—three, four, five—then continued on, slower now, more deliberate.

There was a moss-shelter half a mark into the wood, roof collapsed in places, but enough still standing to serve as home to those who needed one. He found the pack waiting: eight shapes huddled in the lee of the wall, their bodies so well intertwined that only the occasional blink or twitch of an ear gave them away as anything but a heap

of pelts. Dexter stopped five paces from the circle and knelt, keeping his own hands visible and still.

The Shadow Wolves had always recognized him, even from the first. They did not flinch or bristle at his approach. Instead, the oldest—a matron with a patch of silver fur on her right shoulder and a left eye milky from old battles—unwound herself from the mass and regarded him with a silent, regal nod.

The smallest, her pup, was not sleeping. It cradled its injured leg against its belly, but the rest of it vibrated with energy, as if the pain was a thing to be outmaneuvered rather than endured. Dexter watched as it sniffed the air, then rose to a sitting position with the careful, deliberate motion of one who remembered how bad it had felt the first time. The pup locked eyes with Dexter, and in the language of the pack—a mixture of posture, ear flicks, and the tiniest of huffs—gave permission to approach.

He went forward, slow and upright, hands empty. When he reached the pup, he sat cross-legged, placing himself on the same level as his patient. The den was colder than outside, all the heat stolen by the moss and the stone, but Dexter did not feel it. He was focused entirely on the animal before him.

A few days before, the leg had been caught in a rusted snare. The break was clean, but the skin was angry and hot around the set. Dexter had done what he could with splints and paste, but the real work was in keeping infection from setting in—and convincing the pack not to gnaw the bandage off at the first whiff of foreign medicine.

Tonight, the pup was crooning. It started in the chest, a low resonance that barely carried past the throat, but as Dexter settled into position, the sound modulated upward, smoothing out the roughness. It was a song for pain, not an expression of it but a way to coax it into something smaller. The older wolves joined in, their voices soft, never overwhelming the soloist. Even the matron hummed, a note so deep it made the stones under Dexter's knees vibrate.

He watched the pup's breathing, counted the intervals between each phrase, then reached for the leg. His hands hovered first, letting the air exchange warmth, and only when the pup pressed forward did he make contact. The bandage had held, but the limb was swollen at

the joint, and the fur around the break was matted with blood from a reopened scrape.

Dexter worked quickly, but not carelessly. He peeled back the binding, revealing the healing seam. The pup whimpered, but the noise had more indignation than fear in it. With thumb and forefinger, Dexter checked the line of the bone—he could feel the smallest shift if he pressed just so, and it told him all he needed to know about how the night would go. He squeezed once, feeling the end knit against the splint. The pain spike was visible in the way the pup's tail twitched, but it made no attempt to snap at him. Instead, it fell silent for a moment, then resumed the croon, louder now, almost a challenge.

He liked that. It meant the healing was working.

The clinic's gift—its aura, its comfort, whatever you called the thing that made wounds less dangerous in his hands—radiated out in a radius that reached even here, a league from the nearest lamp. He could feel it in his fingers, a faint tingle that sharpened his sense of pressure and temperature, made the process more tactile and precise. When he rewrapped the leg, he did so with a new bandage from his satchel, the fabric warm against his palm as it settled into place.

The matron wolf inched closer. There was a hierarchy to these things, and even a human was expected to observe it. Dexter paused, met her eyes, and waited for the subtle change in her posture that meant she approved. Only then did he finish the wrap, tucking the end so the pup would not worry it loose before morning.

He let his hand rest on the pup's shoulder, not in dominance but in solidarity. The wolf shivered once, then stilled. Its voice, having run the full scale from whimper to a bold, defiant note, now modulated to match the low hum of its kin. The den filled with the vibration, a resonance that felt physical, as if it could stitch the earth together if only they sang long enough.

He stayed that way for five or ten breaths, then released the pup. It did not flinch or limp away, but instead turned to face him, ears forward, tongue just visible at the edge of its teeth. The song, if you could call it that, faded to a satisfied sigh.

Dexter drew a final measure of balm from his kit and smeared it on the exposed patch of skin. The concoction was mostly willow and

honey, but there was a secret ingredient: a drop of his own blood, drawn fresh for every patient. The wolves did not know the meaning of that, but they seemed to respect it. The matron sniffed the air, then closed her eyes, content.

He wiped his hands on his sleeve. The night, which had felt so sharp and busy on the approach, was now soft, padded with the satisfaction of a job done right. Even the wind through the pine needles above seemed to change key, shifting from shrill to something like a lullaby.

Dexter did not speak—not to the pack, not to the night, not even to himself—but in the space between his heartbeat and theirs, there was an understanding. The pup would heal, the pack would move on, and the world would remain unfinished but slightly less wounded.

He stood, careful not to break the mood. The mother wolf looked at him, her expression inscrutable, but there was a quality to it that reminded him of a farewell, or a blessing.

He nodded, turned, and began the long walk home. The forest closed behind him, erasing every sign that he had ever been there except for the memory of the music, still echoing in the hollow of the old moss-shelter.

By the time he reached the edge of the wood, the sun had begun to draw a blue line above the horizon. He paused, looked back once, and listened.

The banshee's wail, which had haunted the town for days, was gone. In its place was the memory of a song—a low, steady hum, too faint for anyone but him to hear.

He tucked the moment away, and headed for home.

He had not taken ten steps before a soft scuffling behind him made Dexter pause. He did not turn, but instead slowed, letting the sound catch up, listening as the padded steps of the matron wolf drew even with his own.

She walked at his side for a ways, the two of them companions on a path that neither owned. The trees thickened, the undergrowth caught the edges of his coat, and overhead the moon hung low, indifferent but present. The silence between man and wolf was more companionable than most conversations he had with people.

A break in the trees formed a natural clearing—a bowl of pine needles and brittle grass, surrounded by old stumps. The matron stopped here. She lowered her body, chest to earth, then, with a motion that was at once deliberate and dignified, she nosed a small object toward him across the frost.

It was a figure, whittled from a piece of willow branch. The carving was rough but alive: a bipedal shape in a long coat, arms angled just so, hands reaching in a gesture of aid. The head was a wedge, sharp at the chin, the eyes a pair of dots set deep and bright. The carver had worked a surprising amount of detail into the thing—creased lines in the coat, the tension in the pose, even the sense of motion as the figure seemed to lean forward, ready to run.

Dexter crouched and picked it up, turning it in his hand. The surface was sanded smooth at the contact points, but the furrows and knife-marks were left unpolished, evidence of labor rather than accident. The legs and arms were in perfect proportion; the hands, large for the body, suggested either a wolf's memory or a human's empathy.

He looked at the matron wolf. She had settled back on her haunches, head tilted, eyes fixed on the figure in his palm. Her tail swept once, then again, leaving a quiet mark in the frost. It was a test, or an offering, or maybe both.

He weighed the figure in his hand, then tucked it into the inner pocket of his coat, careful not to break the delicate limbs. "Thank you," he said, though he knew the words were for him alone.

The matron rumbled in her chest, a low, almost musical growl. Then she rose and made her way back through the trees, the world folding behind her as she went.

Dexter stood alone in the clearing for a long moment. He listened to the wind, the sough of needles, the slow, far-off bark of a fox somewhere beyond the next ridge. The gift warmed the inside of his coat, though it was not near his skin.

The return trip was slower, the sense of urgency gone. The town would be waking soon, and he had patients scheduled from first light. He would tell no one about the wolves, or the carving, or the song that still vibrated in the center of his chest. That was how debts got repaid—quietly, thoroughly, without expectation of acknowledgment.

By the time Dexter made it back to the edge of the village, the snow had started to fall again, soft and heavy. He passed between the first houses without drawing notice, a dark line between worlds. The smell of bread baking reached him from the east, and from the square, the faint, comforting rumble of a bell—time's old anchor, ringing true.

He let himself into the clinic, replaced the satchel on its hook, and washed his hands in a basin of cold water. The wolf-figure, still in his coat pocket, caught the light as he hung the garment by the stove. He set it upright on the high shelf by the window, where the morning sun would find it.

He watched the figurine a moment, letting the silence fill the room. Then he drew the curtains, straightened the bench, and prepared for the day's first wound.

The world had not changed. But somewhere outside, in a den hidden by moss and stone, a healed pup would run, and a pack would sing a new song for a night without pain.

It was enough.

He shouldered his satchel and drew the laces tight, checking the weight and the evenness, as if the next step required perfect balance. Before leaving, Dexter turned back to the shelf and looked again at the carved figure. There was something about its posture that suggested readiness, an anticipation of motion, as though even stillness could become a kind of speed.

He reached for it—then paused, his fingers curling, not quite touching the wood. For a long moment, Dexter stood perfectly motionless, the way only his kind could, and let the night outside press against the windows. A faint memory surfaced: the sound of the mother wolf's deep growl, its vibration along the bone, the way it had spoken to him without language.

He could have asked. The solution to the banshee was a song, after all, and the wolves knew songs better than anyone. It would have been easy—one gesture, one fragment of melody, and the matron would have understood. But the words caught in his throat, stuck there by old habits, or pride, or maybe a fear that asking for help would change the nature of the debt he owed.

His thumb rubbed a groove in the wood, feeling the ridges and

valleys where the carver's knife had gone. Dexter drew a breath, the first in several seconds, and for the briefest time his mouth opened.

He closed it again, the sentence lost before it was ever formed.

He replaced the carving on the shelf, adjusted its feet so it stood just so, and nodded to the empty room. Then he stepped out into the dawn, the door closing with a gentle click behind him.

In the clearing, a light snow had started, covering the old footprints, softening the world's edges. The forest waited, and somewhere in its depths, the healed pup and its family prepared for another day.

Dexter vanished into the trees, a black flash between two pillars of white, leaving only the faintest impression that he had ever been there at all.

Behind him, on the shelf, the figure watched the rising sun, its face turned to the light, silent and certain.

twelve

. . .

JEN COUNTED her steps not in paces but in complaints. By mid-morning, she'd logged two blisters, one shouting match (the milk pail vs. the goat), and at least thirty "Gods preserve us, what is that noise?"—which put the town on track for a record. The banshee wail, as the surgeon called it, had started last week as a background whine, easy enough to blame on wind or nerves or an ill-tuned bell. Today it was a wire, stretched through every stone, every joint, and every argument, and it vibrated in her head like a warning.

Jen squared her shoulders and lengthened her stride. She'd done two circuits around the green already, but there was no substitute for visible law when things were getting weird. Her shoulder, the left, pulsed with every footfall. That was the price of getting stabbed somewhere you didn't want to get stabbed, and then refusing to take a single day off because you didn't want the town to see you as weak. She called it her "tuning fork," on days she felt funny, and her "undoing" on days like this.

She passed the bakery, where Makota and Masaaki stood on either side of a tray of perfect rolls, staring at each other like chessmasters at a stalemate. Makota, pressed both palms to her ears, and Masaaki

mouthed a silent curse when the next pulse shivered the glass in the front window. "Still at it?" Jen asked, leaning in.

"We're going deaf," Makota replied, loud enough to be heard in the next town. She had flour on his face, which made the frown even more dramatic.

"Try growing up in a house with six sisters," Jen shot back, but even she heard the strain in her own voice.

Masaaki offered a half-bow. "If you see Dexter, tell him we are ready for that remedy. Or a clean death."

Jen accepted the invitation for humor but kept her eyes moving. This was how trouble started: a town accustomed to comfort, then one little thing out of place, then another, until the thin shell of "civilization" cracked and everyone remembered why walls were invented.

The banshee noise didn't seem to care for walls, though. It got in through shutters, through the gaps around windowpanes, even through the seams of a wool hat if you pulled it down hard enough. Jen saw it in the way people squinted and blinked, the way hands fidgeted at shirt collars and jacket buttons as if straightening them might restore a sense of control. She saw it in herself, too, in the way her jaw ached from constant clenching and how the urge to bark at someone—anyone—kept rising just beneath her ribs.

She stopped to let a party of travelers pass. Three of them: two tired-looking parents and a child whose ears had turned bright red from constant pulling. The child pointed at Jen and said, "Why does it sound like a dying mouse in my head?"

"Must be the altitude," Jen replied, trying for a smile. The parents offered apologetic shrugs, the way all parents did when their kids said something too honest in public.

Across the square, the grocer's was already open, but the bell above the door had been tied down with twine, and even so, each entry or exit caused a wince from the owner. At the next corner, Bryant the blacksmith leaned against his doorframe, a tankard in hand, eyes squeezed shut. He was not the type to show pain. Jen made a note to check on him later.

There was a rhythm to these patrols—old soldier, old habits—but today even the familiar patterns were off. She reached the center of the

square, where the flagstone ring had been swept clean by last night's wind, and listened. The sound was strongest here: a single high note, always a half-step above comfort, that dipped and rose just enough to keep you from tuning it out. She set her feet wide and rolled her neck, feeling every pop and stretch. For a second, she let herself imagine picking up the whole town and shaking it, just to see if the noise would drop out like a loose nail from a crate.

She heard the approach before she saw it. The regulars at the Broken Claw made noise even when they tried not to—especially the proprietor, who walked like a landslide given just enough warning to move out of the way. Samantha Godsdotter came up the street with a gait equal parts dignity and exhaustion, her white hair caught in a bandana that had seen better days. She wore the pub's apron like it was a suit of armor and carried a battered wooden crate on one hip. Inside the crate, four bottles clinked with every stride, making their own little counterpoint to the banshee noise.

Sam caught Jen's eye and tipped her head toward the green. "Morning, Constable."

"Barely," Jen replied. She gestured at the crate. "That for the pain, or the source of it?"

Sam let out a huff. "Both. Delivering to the tea shop—Galhani says she can infuse it, cut the edge a bit." She adjusted the crate with her free hand. "You want the truth? It's not helping. If anything, people drink until the sound gets louder, just to make sure they still have ears."

Jen grunted. "I liked the old problems better. Drunks are easier than banshees."

Sam set the crate down, flexed her fingers, and looked up at the sky. "You tried sleeping? I wake up thinking it stopped, but it's just my own head ringing."

"I've had worse," Jen lied.

Sam leaned against the low stone wall that ringed the square. "Even the Claw's magic can't tune this out. I asked the walls for advice, they told me to take up gardening."

"They'd have a point," Jen said. She found herself smiling, just a bit. "You hear from Dexter? He promised a fix."

"He's working on it. Maybe he'll bottle the wail and sell it as a novelty."

The two stood in silence for a beat, watching the green. Jen saw a pair of children try to play a game of tag, but the sharpest among them kept stopping to clap hands over ears. The dogs were howling, but on a schedule, as if they'd agreed to intervals in advance.

Sam squinted at Jen. "You get headaches?"

"Nope," Jen said, but her hand drifted to her shoulder, massaging the spot where the pain always found her.

Sam eyed the gesture. "You should ask Dexter for something. Or Leota."

Jen made a face. "The witch? No offense, but if this is a magical problem, I'd rather tough it out."

Sam grinned, but there was sympathy in it. "You're the only one who'd call Leota's magic 'nonsense' to her face."

"She knows it's a compliment," Jen said, and for the first time in days, she almost meant it.

Sam wiped a hand on her apron, then pushed herself upright. "I'm serious. It's not just the noise. The town's off—everyone feels it. People want a reason, or at least someone to blame."

Jen rolled her eyes. "Let me guess, someone wants a meeting."

"They want a miracle. Failing that, a distraction." Sam picked up the crate again. "If you don't mind, I'll walk you as far as the tea shop. Maybe we can pretend to be productive."

The two fell in step. Jen liked Sam's company—there was a weight to it, a certainty, like leaning against a pillar that never failed. They traded a few more complaints as they walked, the kind of harmless venting that kept the blood pressure down.

When they reached the shop, Galhani opened the door before they knocked, her nose twitching. "You brought the right stuff?" she asked, eyeing the crate like it was a sacred relic.

"Don't get your hopes up," Sam warned, but handed it over anyway.

Inside, the air was thick with herbs, but even that didn't mask the undercurrent of static, the way the sound seemed to vibrate in the

glass jars. Galhani grumbled as she poured a measure of spirit into a teapot, then looked at Jen. "You want anything for the pain?"

Jen shook her head. "I'm here for the show."

Sam and Galhani exchanged a glance, and the gnome set about her work, muttering to herself. Jen watched as Sam leaned on the counter, fatigue written in the sag of her shoulders.

Jen let the moment stretch, then said, "You really think Leota could help?"

Sam's eyes crinkled. "If it's a magical problem, who else? If it's not, at least you'll have tried. Worst case, she'll brew you a potion that tastes like feet."

Jen considered this. "All right. After I finish rounds, we'll go see her."

Sam clapped her on the uninjured shoulder, which almost made Jen laugh out loud. "That's the spirit."

Galhani finished her infusion, and as she poured it, the wail seemed to recede—just a hair, just enough that Jen doubted herself. "It's working," Sam said, more hopeful than the words deserved.

Jen took the cup, sipped, and grimaced. "Tastes like feet."

Sam beamed. "See? Witchcraft."

For the next hour, Jen finished her patrol, checking in on the smithy, the weaver, even the edge of the lake where the storehouses stood. At every stop, she made a point of listening to the complaints, noting which ones were new and which ones were just the old ones in louder voices.

By the time she circled back to the square, Sam was waiting, a cup of Galhani's finest in each hand. "Ready?" she asked.

Jen shrugged. "Only if you're coming, too."

"Wouldn't miss it," Sam replied, and together, they walked toward the witch's house, the banshee wail pulsing behind them like a town-sized heartbeat.

For the first time all week, Jen felt almost optimistic. She would never admit that, even under threat of torture, but the truth lingered, as stubborn as the pain in her shoulder.

"Magical nonsense," she muttered, but this time, it sounded like hope.

Jen had never felt entirely comfortable around Leota's small house, or at least not with what it implied. She preferred her mysteries solved with steel and stamina, not strange herbs or whispers from the other side of the wall. Still, she knocked—three hard raps—and waited.

Leota answered almost before Jen finished the last knock, as if she'd been standing just inside, waiting for the signal. She was all in black as usual, but not the dramatic, stage-witch kind. More like someone who wanted to hide in plain sight and thought the color would do most of the work. Her skin was pale enough to stand out even against her own doorframe, and her hair, long and night-dark, caught the light in a way that reminded Jen of a crow's feather in the morning frost.

"Constable," Leota said, with a crisp nod. Her gaze flicked to Sam, then back to Jen. "Sam. Come in."

The inside of the house was both what Jen expected and not at all what she expected. The walls were covered in books, floor to ceiling, some stacked two and three layers deep, so the effect was less a library than a sort of paper insulation. Between the book stacks were oddments: bundles of dried plants, little glass vials of what looked like dried tears, a handful of stones so black they shone blue in the window light. The air was thick with the smell of crushed sage and something electrical, a sharp note that cut through even the herbal smog.

Leota glided ahead of them, her step light but her presence heavy. She motioned to two overstuffed armchairs that seemed to have grown, fungus-like, from the book stacks. "Sit, please. Tea?"

Jen considered refusing, but Sam said, "Wouldn't turn it down," and so they both sat, perching on the edge of the armchairs as if expecting a trap.

Leota vanished into a back room, then reappeared a minute later carrying a tiny black teapot and three mismatched cups. She poured without asking what they liked; the liquid came out the color of peat, and the steam smelled faintly of licorice and lemon peel.

They sipped in silence. Jen tried not to cough, but the first swallow hit her like a challenge. It wasn't bad, just... strong.

Leota set her cup aside, folded her hands in her lap, and fixed them both with a gaze that felt like it could peel wallpaper. "The banshee noise," she said. "It's louder this morning."

Sam nodded. "You hear it, too?"

Leota's mouth twitched, just at the edge. "I hear everything." She paused, studying them. "Describe what you've noticed, please."

Jen gave the report as she would for any incident: duration, frequency, impact on the town. She left out the personal details, like the ache in her own shoulder, or the way her hands had started to tremble if she sat still too long.

Leota listened without blinking. She let the silence settle before responding. "I've gone over all the usual causes," she said, eyes narrowing. "It's not weather, not the river or the lake. There's no sign of ritual magic—nothing that suggests a curse, or even mischief from across the hills." She turned to Sam. "No chance the pub's run afoul of a djinn or a song sprite?"

"Not unless they're after our beer," Sam replied.

"Beer is a common target," Leota deadpanned, but her gaze was still searching.

Jen shifted in her seat. "So what is it?"

Leota leaned back, fingertips pressed together. "Banshees in mythology are not so much creatures as warnings. Harbingers—sometimes of death, sometimes of change, but always of pain, of some kind. Physical, mental, emotional. They announce things that must be heard, even when no one wants to hear them."

Jen rolled the thought around in her head. "So this is a warning? Of what?"

Leota shrugged, delicate and precise. "That's the part that confuses me. Usually, the warning is for a single house, a single family, a single soul. This is... different. The whole town can hear it, even those without any open wounds." She paused, as if tasting the next words. "Even those who don't want to hear anything at all."

Sam drained her cup, set it on a stack of books. "If you're stumped, then we're really in trouble."

For the first time, Leota looked genuinely puzzled. "I've tried every test I know. I even asked the house for advice."

"Let me guess," Jen said. "It told you to take up gardening."

Leota cracked a thin smile. "It suggested I move to a quieter neighborhood." The smile faded, replaced by a tightness around the eyes. "There's one more person I'd consult, if I dared."

Jen raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

Leota stood and began pacing along the bookshelf, her fingers trailing over the spines of the books as if drawing out comfort. "Knodalon. He's seen more of the town's history than anyone, maybe even more than the stones themselves. He's not easy to approach, but—"

Sam cut in. "But if anyone knows what's going on, it's him."

Leota nodded. "He understands the deeper working of our town's magic. Sometimes I think he is part of it."

Jen considered this. The old man had a way of answering questions by making you wish you'd never asked, but he'd always been straight with her when it mattered.

Sam seemed to read her mind. "I'll go with you. Even if he doesn't talk, I bet he'll listen."

Leota crossed her arms, hugging herself. "I wish I could offer more. If it were a simple curse, or a spell gone wrong, I'd know what to do." She looked suddenly smaller, her face framed by that curtain of black hair. "You're sure you won't take something for the pain?"

Jen shook her head. "Not until I know what's causing it." She looked at the tea, then at Leota. "But thanks for the brew."

They stood, thanked Leota, and made for the door. As Jen stepped into the cold, the wail returned—louder, but somehow less ominous. She wondered if it was just habit now, or if the banshee had started to feel like part of the scenery.

At the edge of the square, she glanced back. Leota watched them from the window, her hands pressed to the glass, eyes unblinking. The house, too, seemed to lean just a bit further forward, as if eager to hear what happened next.

Jen shivered and started toward the lake, where the storehouse squatted like a beast at the water's edge.

She didn't believe in fate, or prophecies, or any of that mess. But if she had to face a warning, she'd rather do it head-on.

"Let's go," she said, and Sam fell in at her side.

The two walked in step, boots crunching on the frost, the banshee wail fading for a moment behind the promise of answers.

The lakeside storehouse looked twice as big at dusk. Maybe it was the way the last of the light smeared itself across the roof, or the reflection that doubled it in the glassy water of Evendiam, but to Jen it always seemed like a place out of scale. Everything about it suggested endurance: stone walls thick as her arm, iron hinges wide as dinner plates, a wooden double door that, rumor claimed, no one had ever seen open all the way.

Knodalon sat outside, as always, on his bench. Jen sometimes wondered if he left it at all, or if he just transferred consciousness from bench to storehouse and back, using the old body like a scarecrow when necessary. The rest of the world moved around him, never through him. She'd never seen him eat, or smile, or lose track of the world even for a second.

Tonight, his beard caught the lake breeze, and his hair—white and wild as a dandelion in seed—moved only when the wind was strong enough to warrant it. His eyes, caved-in and ancient but sharp as a frostbit morning, watched the road with a patience that bordered on the inhuman.

Sam hung back a pace as Jen approached, maybe out of respect, maybe to avoid being first into the line of sight. The banshee wail was softer here, or maybe just deeper—a background hum that, if you let it, could almost be mistaken for the sound of wind in the reeds.

Jen walked up to the bench and stood her ground, letting the seconds stack up. Knodalon waited, his hands folded on his lap. For a while, they just looked at each other, neither inclined to break the stand-off. Jen could feel Sam's presence behind her, silent and solid.

Finally, Knodalon spoke. "You're here about the noise."

It was not a question, and his voice was so soft that Jen felt it more than heard it.

"Yes," she said, and waited.

Knodalon turned his gaze from her to the water, then back again. "People always want to know if it's a curse."

Jen snorted. "Is it?"

He shook his head, a slow, deliberate movement. "It's a warning. Curses are simple. Warnings are more complicated."

She crossed her arms, wincing at the protest from her shoulder. "A warning of what?"

He let the question drift for a while before answering. "Of what is owed. Of what is left unfinished." He turned his head to Sam, then back to Jen. "The magic in this place is not a faucet. It is a river. It will find its way, even if you dam it up for a time."

Jen's skepticism was a reflex, but something in Knodalon's words unsettled her. "And what, exactly, is dammed up?"

The old man's eyes sharpened. "Pain," he said. "Hurt unspoken. Debts unclaimed. There's more of it here than the town wants to admit."

Sam moved forward, her voice gentler than Jen expected. "But why now? Why so loud?"

Knodalon shrugged. "Perhaps someone tried to fix what should have been healed." His gaze lingered on Jen's face, then dropped to her shoulder. "Or perhaps too many ignored their wounds, believing that time alone would take care of it."

The implication was clear. Jen could feel the heat rising to her cheeks. "You telling me I caused this?"

"No," said Knodalon, "but you are the shape it takes." He gestured at the storehouse, then at the lake. "This place preserves everything. Wheat. Apples. Memories. Even pain, if you're not careful."

Jen looked down at the gravel under her boots. She could feel the ache in her shoulder, old and deep, but there was a new ache now, too: the ache of knowing she'd become part of the problem.

Sam cleared her throat. "What should we do?"

Knodalon's beard moved in the wind. "Let the pain be known. Share it. Process it, together. If you only silence it, it finds other ways to speak."

He pushed himself up from the bench, moving with a stiffness that made Jen's own aches feel minor. He looked at her, and for the first

time there was something almost kind in his eyes. "You can start with yourself."

Jen reached for her shoulder, massaging the muscle. "If I do, does the wail stop?"

"No," said Knodalon, "but it gets easier to bear."

He started toward the storehouse door, then paused. "Pain shared is pain halved. But only if you let it."

Then he was gone, swallowed by the shadows, and Jen was left staring at the empty bench, unsure if she felt better or worse.

Sam placed a hand on her good arm. "That wasn't what I expected."

Jen shook her head. "Me neither."

They stood together, listening to the lake and the lingering hum of the banshee's song. The world did not end. It just waited, as always, for someone to do something about it.

"Let's get a drink," Sam said.

Jen smiled, for real this time. "Best idea I've heard all day."

They turned back toward the town, walking side by side. The pain in Jen's shoulder did not vanish, but it no longer felt like the only thing in the world. She could feel the day's weight still pressing on her, but now there was a counterweight: the sense that, maybe, if she let someone else carry some of it, the town would heal with her.

It wasn't magic, but it was close enough.

They walked until the banshee wail faded into the soft hush of evening. When they reached the square, the lamps were already lit, and the green was empty except for the memory of children's voices. Jen paused, looked back once at the lake, and then let it go.

She had a job to do, and a town that needed her. But tonight, she'd start by helping herself.

Together, they disappeared into the light and warmth of the Claw, and the world, for a few hours, was almost silent.

thirteen

. . .

DEXTER RETURNED to the town square well after even the worst sleepers had given up and gone to bed. The night was cold, sharp enough to clarify any stray thought left over from the day, and the square itself was deserted but for the bench under the frost-painted lantern. Even from the edge of the green, Dexter saw the figure seated there, shoulders hunched forward in a way that put him instantly at ease: not an intruder, not a threat. Just tired.

He walked the perimeter, as he always did. One circuit to be sure, then he approached the clinic door. He moved at his usual pace—fast enough to blur if you weren't watching, silent enough to leave the snow undisturbed—but as he reached the steps, the figure on the bench shifted and looked up.

Jen. Her face was drawn tight, creased at the edges by a day that had been nothing but tension, but her eyes tracked him with the steadiness of a housecat watching its own reflection. She wore her uniform, a concession to public decorum that was undone by the muddy boots and the battered cup she held in one hand. The other arm was draped across her body, fist tucked just beneath the line of her ribs, a position Dexter recognized from long habit: old pain, flaring up as the body tried to recover from a day spent resisting it.

"Evening," he said, pausing at the bottom of the steps. The word came out softer than he intended, lost in the hush.

Jen nodded. "Didn't mean to catch you," she said. "Couldn't sleep. Mind kept running around like a fox in a chicken coop." She gestured at the cup. "Galhani says this is supposed to help. I think she lied."

Dexter's gaze flicked to the mug, then back to her face. "It might," he said. "If you drank the whole thing."

She snorted, then sipped and grimaced. "I'd need a stomach made of brick."

He glanced at the door, then at the empty patch of bench beside her. "Are you waiting for me?"

"Not exactly," she said. "Just didn't want to be the only thing awake in the square. It's easier, with someone else around."

He nodded and sat, careful to keep the space between them as neutral as possible. The wood of the bench was cold even through his coat, but the night air was dry, and the sharpness of it made his nerves wake up in a pleasant way. There was a silence, the kind that wasn't awkward because it had been there first, and both of them just fit themselves into it.

Jen watched the snow at her feet, then the lamplight halo that caught on Dexter's boots and trousers. "You always come back from the woods this late?" she asked, not looking at him.

"Only when necessary."

She raised her mug, half in salute, half in query. "Anything interesting out there?"

"Wolves," Dexter said. "Less trouble than most townsfolk."

That coaxed a real laugh from her, quick and low. "I've heard that before." She looked at her boots again, then at the horizon, where the town's wall and rooftops cut the sky into neat triangles. "I used to be good at quiet. Now, every time I try to sit with it, it goes wrong. Feels like there's always a noise waiting to get me."

"The banshee."

She shrugged. "That's the new one, sure. But it's not just the noise. It's the pressure." She rapped her knuckles on her breastbone, a hollow sound. "Right here, like someone keeps knocking, wanting to be let in. Or out."

Dexter traced the line of the lantern's shadow across the ground. "It's not a warning. It's a message. That pain shared is pain halved."

Jen grunted. "Not much use if the sharing just makes two people miserable, is it?"

He considered this. "No," he said at last. "But maybe it dulls the edge."

For a while, the only sound was the wind rattling the dry remnants of a banner at the green's center. Jen leaned back, her mug resting on her knee. "You know what my father used to say? You can't pour new water into a cup that's still half-full of old tea. No matter how good the water is, it'll still taste bitter."

Dexter blinked. He'd heard a thousand analogies in his lifetime, but never one that fit so neatly onto his own problem.

Jen seemed to sense this. She cocked her head, just slightly. "Whatever it is you run from out there," she said, "you don't have to bring it back with you every time."

He opened his mouth to reply—something automatic, something tidy—but the words stalled before reaching the air. He thought, for a moment, about the banshees: the first wails, the way their shapes coalesced in the roundhouse, and the terrible relief that came after the pain was harvested and loosed upon the world. He wondered if Jen could hear, even now, the echo of that scream inside him.

She watched him, calm as a winter pond. "You don't have to tell me anything," she said. "But I can tell you this: no one here's scared of you, Dexter. You're not as weird as you think you are."

He almost laughed. The night had been long, and the pain in his jaw had built up from hours of clenching, but her words loosened something in his chest.

He reached for the mug, and Jen handed it over without a fuss. The tea was cold, bitter, and pungent with herbs that had no business sharing a vessel, but it grounded him. He drank, handed it back, and wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve.

"Thank you," he said, and meant it.

She stood, stretching until her spine cracked. "I should go. The town'll need me in the morning, and I'd rather not be the crankiest thing in it."

He nodded, but she didn't leave right away. Instead, she put a hand on his shoulder, gentle but decisive. "If you ever need to talk, or just... not be alone with it, you know where to find me."

He looked up, met her eyes, and for once didn't look away. "I know," he said.

Jen squeezed his shoulder, then walked off, boots crunching a precise rhythm in the snow. The night closed around him again, but it was less absolute than before. The pain was still there, in the old places and the new ones, but it felt less like an invasion and more like something that could be worked with—like a bone that, once set, would knit itself back together, stronger than before.

Dexter sat until the first rim of dawn brightened the edge of the green. He listened to the wind, and the hush, and the memory of Jen's advice. When he finally rose and went inside, the world felt quieter, and—against all reason—less haunted.

The next day would bring new wounds, new complaints, new debts. But for the moment, Dexter let himself believe that the banshee's warning had been heard.

He locked the clinic behind him and went to rest, the ghost of a smile warming the edges of his face.

fourteen

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AS ALWAYS, he didn't so much sleep as meditate. When he surfaced from the depths of his own thoughts, there was no lag between consciousness and motion. The banshee noise lingered, a tension in the jaw and a line of pressure across the scalp. Dexter rose, refreshed his clothes, and moved through the quiet clinic with a speed and economy born from centuries of practice.

He passed the examination table, the orderly rows of jars, and the daybook, already open to a blank page. Instead of preparing the front room for patients, he angled left, toward the trapdoor half-hidden beneath a tangle of drying roots. The lock was unnecessary, but he worked it anyway—one, two, three clicks, each in precise order. He set his hand to the iron ring, and with a single, fluid motion, levered the door up and out of the way.

The stairs below were not stairs at all but a set of shallow stone ridges, worn slick as if by a hundred years of feet—although as far as Dexter knew, he was the only one who'd ever descended. The drop was steep, then quickly leveled into a cool and silent chamber—a room dug deep enough that even the hardest frost did not breach its walls. No one came down here but Dexter. He was not sure anyone else even remembered it existed.

The laboratory—he always called it that, even though the real work was not so formal—was a box of calm in a world of noise. It was cold, but not unpleasant; the air was dry and smelled of old paper and faintly, very faintly, of lemon balm. Most of the space was taken up by a worktable, a slab of oiled wood the color of smoked honey, and every inch of it was organized with a clarity that bordered on the obsessive. The left side: implements for mixing, measuring, boiling, and filtering—beakers, pipettes, a pair of retorts. The center: tools for finer work, each set in a fitted slot, from bone-handled scalpels to jeweler's tweezers so delicate they bowed under their own weight. The right: stockpiled ingredients, some in glass jars with wax seals, some wrapped in twist of linen and marked with neat labels in Dexter's own hand.

Above the bench, shelves climbed the wall in three narrow tiers. Each was packed with parcels and boxes, sorted by function and, within that, by rarity. There were squares of lead foil, a spool of silver wire, a set of tin discs stamped with runes so fine they could only be read by touch. Hanging beneath the shelf, a row of mortars and pestles—porcelain, brass, even one of black stone—waited, bowls clean and ready.

The only light was from a single oil lamp, bolted to the wall at eye-level. It was always full, always trimmed; the lamp's lens was polished to perfect clarity, so the light cut clean lines across the workbench and left the corners of the room in forgiving darkness.

Dexter went first to the farthest shelf, where he kept the coil of pure copper wire. He lifted it, set it down, and without looking, pulled the next thing he needed: a pouch of miniature glass beads, sorted by size and finish, and a canister of solder, soft enough to melt but strong enough to anchor a frame. He set these in the center of the workbench, then reached for the thin-handled calipers. The process was always the same: lay out every part, review it for damage or corrosion, discard any piece that was even a hair off, and then start over with new stock if required.

He had already sketched the design in his head—a bowl, shallow, with three curved arms rising from its rim. The arms would hold the

copper coil suspended above a platform of crystal, which would catch and re-tune whatever resonance the banshee's scream threw at it. The logic was simple, almost elegant. No moving parts. Nothing to break or jam. If it worked, it would dampen the wail before it found the nerves of the living.

He measured the copper wire by length, snipped it, and shaped it around a mandrel. The wire was stiff, but Dexter's hands were stronger; he bent it into perfect arcs, then double-checked each curve against the blueprint in his mind. When he was satisfied, he set the three wire segments aside and reached for the soldering kit.

He paused, then. He heard it: a faint, high-pitched vibration, not unlike a mosquito at the limit of hearing. The banshee, already beginning its day. The sound traveled through the stone of the basement, through the floor of the clinic above, and found Dexter's ear as a simple note—an A-flat, slightly off, with a modulation that suggested distress or impatience.

He set his jaw. He knew the sound would grow louder as the sun climbed, and that if he did not hurry, the wail would force him above ground before the job was half done.

He lit the soldering iron. It hissed as it came up to temperature, the coil inside glowing first dull, then bright. The solder itself was expensive—Galhani had traded him a chunk of it for a year's worth of poppy extract—and it caught the light, reflecting a flash of blue as Dexter touched it to the copper. He worked in tiny increments, never allowing the heat to overtake the precision of the joint. The glass beads, threaded onto the arms, rested perfectly in the crook where copper met air. He anchored each bead with a dot of glue, then set the assembly to cool atop a folded cloth.

As he worked, the banshee note doubled, then tripled. At times it seemed to shift direction, as if searching for something. Dexter ignored it with the force of pure will. His hands did not shake. The only sign of tension was the way he held his mouth, lips pressed into a line so narrow it looked like a cut.

Next, he shaped the bowl. This was the trickiest part. He took a disc of hammered copper, already annealed, and set it over the form.

He pressed it first with the flat of his thumb, then with the rounded end of a wooden mallet, coaxing the metal into a shallow dish. Any error here and the resonance would scatter, making the device useless. Dexter checked, double-checked, then used a file to smooth the lip until it sang when struck.

He checked the measurements: diameter, depth, the rise of each arm, the distance from bead to bead. All correct. He allowed himself a single, short exhale.

With the body of the device assembled, he began the finishing steps. He cleaned the solder joints with a bit of fine cloth, then used a drop of alcohol to wipe away any residue. The glass beads gleamed, each one a different color—amber, blue, clear as ice. He'd chosen them not for their beauty, but for the way each interacted with sound: the amber deadened it, the blue refracted it, the clear amplified whatever was left.

He attached the arms to the rim, pressing them in until the bowl gave a faint, harmonious ring. Then he set the Harmonic Capacitor—the name was a joke, a private one, but it fit—onto the center of the workbench and tested it.

He waited, letting the banshee's wail build. When the note peaked, he tapped the bowl, just once, with the tip of a glass rod.

The device vibrated in sympathy. For a brief instant, the banshee's note was doubled, then canceled. The basement went silent, all at once, as if a dome had been dropped over the world.

Dexter allowed himself to smile, just slightly. The test was not complete, and there were refinements to make, but the principle worked. The bowl had done its job.

He wrapped the Capacitor in a length of soft linen and set it in a padded box. The remaining tasks—anchoring the device to the town's old bell tower, tuning it to local conditions, convincing the others to let him test it in public—would take time. But the most important work was finished.

He cleaned the workbench, replaced each tool in its slot, and climbed the stairs back to the upper world.

The banshee's wail had lessened, even up here. It was not gone, but

for the first time in a week, it was manageable—a background hum, not a threat.

Dexter unlocked the clinic, propped the door, and watched as the light crept over the square. The pain of the world, he knew, would never be erased. But it could be channeled, shaped, given purpose. That was the work.

He stood for a while in the bright, cold air, listening to the near-silence, then turned inside to prepare for the day's wounds.

The next round of work was finer, riskier. He waited until the clinic was empty, then set the Harmonic Capacitor on the wide bench in the main room, arranging his tools in a crescent around it. The bowl already rang with a silent promise, but it needed to do more than just mute a note for a second. It needed to hold the wail, stretch it, render it harmless—ideally, render it beautiful.

Dexter donned a magnifying lens and steadying brace, both relics from the old world. His fingers found the first copper ring and the micro-soldering iron. The heat came up fast, a blue-white dot that seemed to eat into the wire, and in that instant, a trick of light or memory brought him back to the first time he had handled this kind of material.

He was not in the clinic. Not in the town. Not even in his own body, exactly.

He was a child—no, a creature only just learning to be a child—in a roundhouse filled with pain-eaters and elders, the Siphon at the center. The coil had been twice the size of a man's head, the wires fanned out in rigid symmetry, and the air had vibrated with a tension that was not yet sound.

He could smell the solder, the flux burning off into a curl of acid-sweet smoke. He could see the elders hunched around the Siphon, their white hands steady, their eyes hollowed by a lifetime of focus. He could hear the moan building as they charged the lens, a frequency that drilled into the skull and made the teeth sing.

The memory locked his hands. The soldering iron hovered, spitting a pinprick of heat at the copper ring. In his mind, the Siphon's pulse hit its peak. The coil glowed, glass tubes shook in their bracings, and then—failure. Not a quiet one. The air ripped open, sucking all heat and light and sense from the room, and in the vacuum that followed came a scream so pure it erased every other noise.

Shards of glass whistled past his face. One of the elders fell, clutching her jaw, mouth open in a silent shriek. The banshees—he'd never seen the moment of their creation before, not like this—emerged as a boiling blue-white filament, flickering into forms as thin as paper and as sharp as a bone needle. They spiraled up and out, leaving a residue of violence and cold.

In the present, Dexter's breath caught. The tip of the iron touched his glove, and the heat bled through before he could move. Not enough to burn, but enough to wake him.

He set the iron in its holder and flexed his fingers, one at a time. They trembled, just a bit, the way a tuning fork keeps ringing after the force has left it. He waited, then forced them steady.

"Overbuilt," he muttered, staring at the half-finished device. "Too clever by half." He heard his old teacher's voice, the one who believed in elegance over excess: "A solution that works only in theory isn't a solution." The Siphon had been brilliant, but it was a trap for the clever. Too many variables, too much ambition. This—his device—was humble. It was a cup for pain, not a dam. It did not erase, it only tamed.

He returned to the work, even more careful now. Each joint was checked, then checked again. Where the old Siphon had demanded perfect symmetry, he allowed for minute imperfection—an off-kilter bead here, a rough edge there. It would make the resonance more human, he thought, less likely to turn monstrous.

He finished the ring, let the solder cool, then inspected it under the lens. The joint was sound, a perfect silvery seam with no frays or cold spots. He ran a fingernail over it, savoring the way the surface felt—not sharp, but not soft, either.

The next step was winding the resonance wire. This, too, was tricky. If he wound it too tight, the bowl would hum only at the

banshee's peak; too loose, and it would vibrate off pitch. He worked with slow, even pressure, pausing every turn to listen for the change in tone.

The banshee's note outside spiked, as if it knew what he was doing. The sound hit him in the molars, but he did not stop. Instead, he hummed back—a low, even note, undercutting the banshee by a full interval. The wire settled into place, and with it, a new stability filled the device.

He soldered the last bead, then set the Harmonic Capacitor down and exhaled.

He considered the work. It was good. Not perfect, but good. He could almost believe in it as a fix.

The Siphon would never have forgiven such simplicity. He forgave it now.

He washed his hands, wiped down the tools, and let the memory settle back into its corner. He would remember the failure, but he would not repeat it.

When the last tools were stowed, and the clinic's door latched for the night, Dexter stood by the window and let the banshee's wail wash over him. It hurt, but it no longer surprised him. He watched the moon rise, the edge of it sliced sharp against the sky, and waited for the morning.

He was not afraid of the banshees. Not anymore.

Dexter had always preferred the late-night 'marks for the final phase of any project. The world above grew still enough for his senses to stretch into the seams of the clinic, even down into the stone bones of the cellar where the quiet pressed like a velvet glove. Tonight, there was only the barest remnant of banshee-song—a single, high thread that shivered at the edge of perception. He liked it that way; it made him feel like he could outwit it.

He set the lamp a little higher, and with tweezers picked up the first of the glass components: the central mounting cup, blown thin and absolutely flawless, its inner curve a match for the Moon-Stone.

He wiped the glass with a lintless cloth, the movements hypnotic, each pass taking a shade more cloudiness from the surface. The glass didn't just need to be clean—it needed to be transparent on a level you could not see but only sense, as if the resonance itself could spot a fleck of dust and complain.

He set the piece aside, then reached for the Moon-Stone. He handled it gently, as if it were alive. The stone was a dull pearl in daylight, but in the lamp-glow it sparked with strange colors—greys, purples, the blue of a bruise healing. It was heavy for its size, almost as if it disliked leaving the ground. Llewel had sent it over, wrapped in the kind of waxed linen used for sacred texts, and the note with it had been a single sentence: “It wants to help.” He had turned the words over and over in his mind, trying to decide if they were a joke or a warning.

He prepared the mounting resin, then paused. His eyes drifted to the back of the bench, where the communication crystal sat. It was small—a cube of deep green glass, each face etched with a different pattern. It wasn't from this continent. He'd traded for it years ago, always promising himself he'd never use it. The thing was for emergencies, the kind that required his people to respond as one, to converge. He'd always suspected that the banshees were watching for moments like that—moments when the old kin gathered, and the pain of the world concentrated itself enough to draw their attention.

He considered the crystal. Then, as if catching himself in a bad habit, shook his head and went back to the assembly. He dipped a tiny spatula into the resin, smeared a bead into the bottom of the glass mount, and set the Moon-Stone gently inside. It made a faint click, not a sound so much as a confirmation. He felt the resonance run up his arm and stop at his elbow, then fade.

He checked the alignment, rotating the piece a quarter turn to be sure the facets of the Moon-Stone caught the light from all angles. Satisfied, he set it aside to cure.

The stool across from the bench was empty, as always. In a different life, perhaps, there would be an apprentice there, or a colleague, or even someone to question the design and suggest improvements. Sometimes Dexter caught himself looking at it, almost

expecting a voice. He would have liked a voice. The memory of the Siphon roundhouse—so full of people, of purpose—sometimes made the silence here seem so complete as to be ridiculous.

He wiped his hands, got up, and paced a slow circuit around the edge of the cellar. His footsteps echoed, then muffled themselves as he passed through the cold zone near the preserved herbs. He stopped beside the wall, where a few of the really rare ingredients—verdigris, powdered nephrite, a thumb-sized nugget of orichalcum—were kept in nested boxes. He checked the boxes, not because he needed anything from them, but because the act of checking gave his nerves a way out.

He returned to the bench. The resin had set. He lifted the Harmonic Capacitor, now complete, and ran a finger around the edge of the bowl. It sang—not loudly, just a soft, glassy resonance, like the memory of a sound rather than the sound itself. He brought it close to his ear, and for a moment he swore he could hear the banshee wail, not in pain or anger, but as a lullaby.

He grinned, but the expression didn't last. He set the device down, then allowed himself a long moment to stare at it. The temptation to test it now, here, was strong. But a part of him—a part honed by every failure and lesson from before—knew that some things required an audience.

He packed the Capacitor in a soft nest of cotton, then wrapped the box in waxed canvas. He placed the whole bundle at the foot of the stairs, ready for morning. Only then did he finally sit, facing the empty stool, and rest his chin on his hands.

He almost reached for the crystal again, just to touch it, to see if it would be cold or warm. He didn't. Instead, he spoke aloud, voice low but not self-mocking: "You'd be proud," he said, and for a moment he let himself imagine who 'you' might be.

The banshee thread outside rose, then fell, as if in answer. He wondered if the world could be healed by so small a thing as a bowl and a stone, by the will of a single stubborn doctor.

He doubted it. But he would try.

He stayed like that until the lamp guttered, then rose, gathered the box, and made his way upstairs.

Don Jones

The banshee sound waited for him at the door, but now it was just one more part of the town's morning. He carried the Capacitor out into the light, its weight somehow more than the sum of its parts, and set his mind to the day's work.

This time, he allowed the hope to last a little longer.

fifteen

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DEXTER HAD NOT YET FINISHED ALIGNING the Harmonic Capacitor when the knock came at the clinic door—three sharp taps, followed by the squeal of hinges and an uncertain step. He recognized the rhythm. It was the sound of someone who believed themselves a bother. He straightened the device, checked the seating of the Moon-Stone one last time, and returned to the clinic to face his morning's first wound.

She hovered just inside the threshold: a girl barely out of adolescence, dressed in the uniform of the university's lower faculty—plain, ink-stained tunic, boots with the laces wound too tight, spectacles glinting off-kilter on her nose. The spectacles were not needed, Dexter noted; she wore them to hide the rest of her face. She clutched a portfolio so tightly the edges threatened to cut through the case. Her eyes darted from the polished floor to the bottles on the shelf, to the arrangement of tools on the workbench, and finally, after an interval of three heartbeats, to Dexter himself.

"Good morning," he said, recalling her name from a slip of paper in his ledger. "You are early."

She opened her mouth, closed it, then tried again. "I'm sorry. I can come back—"

Dexter cut her off with a gentle wave. "You are here. That is sufficient. Your name?"

"Mila." As she advanced, the banshee wail—dormant since dawn—returned in a rush, so abrupt that even Dexter felt it as a pressure behind the eyes. The glass bottles on the north wall trembled, their stoppers clicking in uneven sympathy. Outside, a trio of townsfolk walking the square paused mid-step, all three grimacing and pressing hands to their ears.

Mila did not seem to hear the wail at all. Or rather, it had become so familiar to her that its return was just another irritation, like a poorly-washed garment or a stone in her shoe.

Dexter gestured to the patient's bench, but she hesitated, standing with her back pressed to the wall as if expecting it to support more than her weight. Her hands fidgeted, worrying at the seam of her portfolio, then smoothing her tunic, then returning to the portfolio in a loop that would have exhausted a less anxious person in seconds.

He watched, silent, until the motion slowed. "You are in pain."

She flinched at the word, then attempted a smile. "Not—well, yes, but not the kind you fix with stitches or salve."

Dexter inclined his head. "Describe it."

Mila drew a breath, held it, then let it out in a long, uneven stream. "It's... performance," she managed, the word barely audible. "I have to lecture tomorrow. There's a panel. Visiting scholars. And every time I imagine it, I—" She stopped, searching for a word. "—it's as if my mind collapses. The thought gets so loud I can't think of anything else. The noise in my head, it drowns out everything. Including," she added, with a shaky laugh, "the actual noise."

Dexter considered this. He had seen injuries like hers before, but never so distilled, so pure. Most academic types brought their neuroses like a badge; Mila's was more a parasite, draining color from her face and sap from her bones.

He motioned her to sit. She did, perching at the very edge of the bench, as if unwilling to claim more space than was strictly necessary. "You have performed before?" he asked.

"Twice." She gave a little wince. "The first time, I fainted. The second, I got through, but I stuttered so badly they thought it was a

joke." She squeezed her portfolio even tighter, paper inside crunching in protest. "If I fail again, they'll replace me."

Dexter noted the language: "replace," not "fire." The stakes, for Mila, were existential.

The banshee wail intensified as she spoke, ratcheting up to a pitch that made the glass in the window vibrate, then shatter into a small, neat pile at the corner of the frame. Mila didn't notice. She was lost in the memory of her own failures, her eyes gone glassy with the recollection.

Dexter rose and crossed to the cabinet. He found a small bottle—poplar bark tincture, meant for tremors of the hand—and poured a measured drop into a cup of warm water. He set this in front of Mila, who eyed it as if it might leap up and scald her on its own.

"You may drink," he said. "It will not cure. It will only soften."

She nodded, and after a moment's hesitation, took a tentative sip. The bitter taste drew another wince, but she drank the rest with quick, shallow swallows.

"Better?" he asked.

She set the cup down, staring at the ring it left on the bench. "Not worse."

Dexter sat across from her, folding his long hands in his lap. He let the silence grow, as he always did, until Mila felt compelled to fill it.

"I know it's foolish," she said at last. "There are people with real problems. I should be able to just—" She made a chopping gesture with her hand, as if slicing through her own complaint. "Just do the job. But the closer it gets, the more I think I'll die of it."

Dexter nodded. "The pain is real. It does not require blood to exist."

She looked up, startled by his bluntness, then managed a smile that held for almost a full second. "That's what the last surgeon said, too. Except he prescribed leeches."

"Did they help?"

She laughed, for real this time, brief and bright. "No. I fainted again."

He nodded, making a note. "You are not broken. You are simply tuned to a frequency the rest of the world ignores."

She frowned, working through the statement as if it were a puzzle on an exam. "You mean the banshee noise? I thought only a few people could hear it."

"Most can ignore it," Dexter said, "if their wounds are shallow. Yours are not." He gestured to the Harmonic Capacitor, which vibrated gently on its shelf. "The sound is not external. It is a resonance, looking for a place to resolve."

Mila stared at the device, then back at Dexter. "So how do I fix it?"

He was about to answer when, from outside, a voice sliced through the morning: "Dexter! Urgent!" It was Warren, the blacksmith, who rarely called unless someone was in pieces, or soon to be.

Dexter was up and at the door before Mila could process the interruption. He turned, caught her eye, and said, "Wait here. Ten minutes."

She nodded, blinking in confusion.

He snatched his kit from the counter—just the essentials, no more—and vanished out the door. For a moment, the air in the clinic seemed to stretch after him, then snapped back, leaving Mila alone with her fear and the faint, diminishing hum of the banshee wail.

The green outside the clinic was chaos, which was to say it looked exactly as Dexter expected. The banshee wail had drawn a small but excitable crowd; even from the steps, he could see heads clustered and bodies leaning forward in the classic posture of the human drama: who will fix this, and how fast will it happen?

At the epicenter stood Warren, bare arms crossed over a chest that could have doubled as a siege engine, green skin bright against the drab of the winter morning. At his feet, the horse—Dexter recognized the piebald coloring of the tanner's delivery mare—stood three-legged, the rear left hoof curled inward, trembling with the effort of staying upright. Warren's hands, each the size of a full-grown rabbit, hovered just above the injured limb, unwilling to touch but unable to do nothing.

Jen was already there, shoulders squared and every inch the law, except for the way her left arm hung slightly lower, the shoulder bunched tight with pain. She was flanked by two other villagers: one with a broom (useless for anything but pointing), and another with a

notebook, already scribbling down witness statements as if the incident would be filed with the gods themselves.

Dexter covered the distance in a blink—a trick of movement that still startled new arrivals but, in the cold logic of efficiency, made perfect sense. He crouched beside the mare, letting her smell his hands, then touched the leg. The swelling had doubled since he last saw her; the heat radiating from the fetlock told him everything he needed.

“Warren, brace her,” he said, and the ogre’s hands snapped into position, one around the mare’s neck and the other on her chest, so gentle it looked like a child holding a bird.

Jen stepped closer. “What do you need?” Her voice was sharp, more from the pain than the situation.

Dexter did not look up. “Clear the crowd.”

Jen didn’t argue. She turned and barked orders, her voice rising above the banshee wail, which now vibrated in the very marrow of the road. The broom-holder flinched, the note-taker obeyed without protest, and within seconds, only the essential personnel remained.

He set the kit on the ground, extracted a packet of numbing salve, and spread it in a band around the swollen joint. The mare’s leg twitched but did not pull away. He waited five seconds, then pressed his fingers along the line of the bone, searching for the place where it had buckled. There was a pop as he manipulated the joint—loud enough that Warren hissed, and Jen winced in sympathy.

The banshee wail surged, sharp and immediate, then faded for just a moment. Dexter exhaled and reached for the splints, which he’d fashioned from the kind of wood that bent but did not snap. He wrapped them in place, binding them with a strip of linen torn from his own sleeve.

“Hold her steady,” he told Warren.

Warren nodded, sweat beading his brow despite the chill. “Is she—?”

“She will keep the leg,” Dexter said. “But she will hate you for a month.”

Warren bared his teeth in what might have been a smile. “She likely already does.”

Dexter set the leg down. The mare bore weight on it, just barely, then stamped once as if to protest the whole affair. Warren loosened his grip, and the animal backed away, giving Dexter a look that promised future trouble.

Jen knelt beside him, hands on her knees. "Good work," she said, and it sounded like a verdict, not a compliment.

He nodded. "Your shoulder."

She scowled, as if reminded of a debt she'd hoped to ignore. "It's fine."

He met her gaze. "Show me."

Jen hesitated, then shrugged out of her jacket. The shoulder was swollen, the joint angry and red under the skin. Dexter pressed lightly. Jen didn't flinch, but her jaw went tight.

"You should rest it," Dexter said. "You won't."

She shrugged again, a motion made ugly by the pain. "Someone's got to keep the peace."

"The town can survive a day without your oversight."

"Can it?" She glanced at the crowd, which had re-formed at a polite distance, eyes fixed on the scene. "The wail's getting to them."

Dexter stood, stretching the kinks from his back. "It is not the wail. It is the pain."

Jen made a face. "What's the difference?"

He considered how much to say. "Some can ignore it. Others amplify it. The noise is only as loud as the wound that feeds it."

She smirked. "Sounds like therapy."

He didn't answer, just packed away his kit and turned to see what the crowd would do next.

At the edge of the assembly, a cluster of travelers watched with thinly veiled distaste. They wore white, hooded robes—a uniform Dexter had come to associate with the Purist movement, those who abhorred any manipulation of the body or mind that was not strictly natural. Their faces were clean and pinched; their hands, even in the cold, were folded in the universal posture of condemnation.

One, the tallest, spoke just loud enough to carry. "Is it safe to let him work on animals?"

Another replied, "If it's unnatural, it's a risk. They say the pain just moves somewhere else."

Dexter heard every word, but so did Jen, who turned on them with a glare that could have cracked stone. "If you need a surgeon," she said, "he's the only one here. If you don't, move along."

The Purists muttered, then drifted away, but not before a third cast a sidelong glance at Dexter's hands—as if expecting to see them stained with something unholy.

Warren, sensing the mood, broke the tension with a question: "If the sound only bothers the hurt, why do I hear it so loud?"

Dexter considered the question. "Because you do not speak of your pain. You only work through it."

Warren snorted. "Easier than talking."

Dexter almost smiled. "For some."

Jen rolled her good shoulder. "What about me?"

"You admit it," Dexter said. "But you don't let anyone help."

Jen glanced away, toward the crowd, then back at the horse, which was now grazing like nothing had happened.

Warren thumped Dexter on the back—a blow that would have sent a lesser man into the mud—and grinned. "Thanks, Doc."

Dexter nodded, then turned to leave. The banshee wail, for the first time all morning, had dropped to a dull hum.

As he walked away, he caught the eyes of the Purist leader. The man looked at Dexter as if measuring him against an invisible standard, then looked away, unimpressed.

Back in the clinic, the residual noise clung to Dexter's coat. He shook it off, set his kit on the bench, and prepared for the next round.

He did not begrudge the town its skepticism. It was easier to fear what you did not understand, and easier still to blame the pain on the one who named it.

He knew the wail would return. But he also knew that the more people who faced their wounds, the quieter it would get.

That, he thought, was progress.

The clinic had gone quiet in Dexter's absence, or as quiet as any building could get with the banshee's after-song still threading through

the mortar. The Harmonic Capacitor, left on the shelf, trembled at a frequency only Dexter could feel: a minor vibration, the shadow of the wail that still lingered in the streets. He set his kit on the workbench, washed his hands, and listened for any sound from the patient's side.

Mila was still there, in the same spot, though her portfolio now rested in her lap instead of gripped like a shield. She stared at the far wall, where the morning sun caught the edge of a row of medicine bottles and cast their colored shadows onto the plaster. Her face was slack, drained, but her eyes flicked up as soon as Dexter entered.

"You came back," she said, voice thin and surprised.

"I said I would," Dexter replied.

She nodded, a short, downward motion. "Sorry I stayed. I can leave if—"

He shook his head. "It is your appointment. You may stay as long as you like."

Mila took a breath, trying to steady her hands, which hovered just above her knees, fingers drumming a silent, anxious code. The banshee wail rose, then faded. Dexter wondered if the device would ever fully mute the noise, or if its best use was to render the resonance bearable rather than abolish it.

He sat across from her, mirroring her posture: hands in his lap, shoulders forward but not aggressive. "Did the tea help?"

She shrugged. "A little. But I think I'm beyond tea."

Dexter considered the problem. All his best medicines had limits; physical pain, you could mend. With the rest, sometimes you could only bear witness.

"You are not here for a cure," he said.

Mila looked at him, searching for mockery. Finding none, she nodded. "No. I just... I wanted to know if it was possible not to be afraid."

He let that sit. "It is not possible. The best you can hope for is to name it."

She frowned. "Name it?"

Dexter pointed to her portfolio. "You study language. Words have power."

Mila made a face, but did not disagree.

"The banshee wail," he continued, "it does not cause pain. It only announces it. If you try to ignore it, it grows louder. But if you name it—say it aloud—it becomes something else. Not gone. Just manageable."

She chewed on that, the silence between them stretching out, as Dexter preferred.

Finally, she said, "You want me to say it."

He inclined his head, just once.

Mila closed her eyes. "I'm afraid I'll freeze in front of everyone. That I'll go blank, and they'll see me as a joke. That if I fail, I'll never belong here."

There. It hung in the air, trembling, a drop of blood in water.

The banshee wail, which had spiked to a knife-edge as she spoke, softened immediately. Dexter noted the change in her shoulders, the way her breathing slowed. The fear was still there—he could see it in the set of her jaw—but it was now outside her, a thing with boundaries and limits.

He said, "That will not make it vanish."

"I know."

"But you survived saying it."

Mila looked at him, a smile flickering at the corners of her mouth. "Yes."

Dexter nodded. "If you wish, you can say it again. And again, until it is only a sentence, not a threat."

She tried, and the next time her voice did not crack. "I am afraid I will freeze and embarrass myself." Then again, firmer: "I am afraid they'll never respect me."

Each repetition changed the resonance, brought the wail down to a background buzz.

Dexter let her sit with the words, then offered her another cup of the bitter tea. She drank, this time without flinching.

"Thank you," Mila said, after a long minute. "No one else ever told me it was okay to be scared."

He shrugged. "It is not a failing. It is a signal."

Mila gathered her things, then paused at the door. "Will it come back?"

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"The fear?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "Yes. But it will not catch you unprepared."

Mila stood a little straighter, though her steps were careful as she left.

Dexter watched her go, the banshee wail now only a faint harmonic in the glass. He turned back to the Harmonic Capacitor, the Moon-Stone at its heart glimmering with a softness that reminded him of old, sad memories. The device would never erase the pain, only give it a place to be named.

He sat at his counter, folding his hands as always, and waited for the next knock at the door.

The world's wounds were not his to heal, but he could at least teach them how to speak.

Outside, the wail continued, but in the clinic, there was peace.

sixteen

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DEXTER HEARD SAM'S approach before he saw her—a hesitation on the wooden sidewalk outside, a shuffling adjustment of coat over bulk, the faintest intake of breath at the threshold. He marked each moment, even as his hands went through the quiet ritual of resetting the bench: empty cup to sink, quill to slot, ledger closed and squared to the edge. When Sam entered, she did not bother with decorum. Her gait was half a stumble, half an angry march, and her face had the grey, waxy look of meat left in the cold too long.

She closed the door behind her, but not gently. The wood snapped against the jamb, and the sound echoed through the tiled room like a challenge.

"You're open," she said, as if she might catch him off guard.

"I am always open," Dexter replied, the words as much an observation as a greeting. He gestured with his chin to the padded bench along the back wall, then watched as she debated whether to use it.

She did, eventually. With her good arm, she levered herself up and onto the bench, every motion careful to keep the other arm pressed to her body, the elbow locked, hand clamped to the far shoulder in a grip white-knuckled and trembling. It was an old wound—everyone in

town knew that. But most believed the pain was as ceremonial as the scar on her cheek, some piece of legend she carried around for the benefit of storytellers and drunks.

It was not ceremonial today.

Dexter moved to the sideboard, uncorked the little bottle of honey spirit, and poured a measure into a cup. He did not ask if she wanted it. He set it down on the low table within her reach, then waited.

Sam ignored the drink. She fixed her gaze on a point in the air three inches above Dexter's right shoulder, a trick he had seen in prisoners and newlyweds alike. Her breathing was slow, not quite even. There was a salt shine to the skin at her temples, and when she blinked, her eyelashes clung together as if she had just stepped out of a downpour.

"Constable said you might be up," Sam muttered.

"I rarely sleep," Dexter said. "You are not here for tea."

She made a noise—a huff, or maybe a grunt of assent—and shifted her weight. The movement sent a twitch through the whole left side of her body. She did not let herself wince, but Dexter saw the contraction in the jaw, the moment the lower eyelid jumped. He catalogued it.

"Shoulder?" he asked, even though there was no other possibility.

She looked away, past the lamp and its neat circle of yellow light. "Went numb a day ago. Kept thinking it would unstick, like always." She paused, rolled her lower lip between her teeth, then added, "I need it back."

Dexter took a step closer. The air between them held the ozone sharpness of dried willow and old alcohol, overlaid with the faint, persistent hum of the clinic's gift. When the room was quiet and the lights were low, you could almost feel it, like a barometer swing or the hush that comes just before thunder.

"You are late," Dexter said. "You should have come sooner."

Sam bristled, but then let the comment pass. "Didn't want to waste your time."

Dexter studied her—taking in the sweat, the colorless lips, the pallor under her tan. He had seen dying men look more alive.

"Move to the table," he said. "Face down. You can swear if you must."

Sam eyed the wooden table, the clean white linen draped over it, and for a moment looked like she might argue. Instead, she uncrossed her ankles and rose, catching herself on the edge of the bench with her good hand. She crossed to the table and, with a series of tiny, practiced adjustments, lowered herself onto it. The process took longer than it should have. When she was in place, she let out a breath that sounded like the end of a very long shift.

Dexter rolled up his sleeves. The clinic was cold, the tile always a little damp at the seams no matter how hard you scrubbed, but in his undershirt and gloves, Dexter was comfortable. He approached Sam with the deliberate calm of a priest or a hangman—no hurry, no pause.

Her hair, long and white, had come partly loose from its braid, fanning out over the linen like a spill of moonlit water. He took the braid and draped it over her far shoulder, careful not to jar the wound. She did not thank him, but she did not protest.

"Tell me," Dexter said.

She breathed in, a shaky inhale. "It was a blade, years back. Notched me deep and the surgeon—other town, other life—sewed it up with pig gut and boot polish. Never healed right. Sometimes, if the weather goes bad, it sings."

"Now it howls," Dexter said.

She laughed, and the sound was a thing that had been living in her chest a long time. "Yeah. You could say that."

He pressed his fingers along the trapezius, feeling the ridges of old scar tissue, the layers of tension. The muscle twitched, but she did not flinch. He pushed harder, found the seam where the original wound had healed shut, then the second, more recent tear—likely from lifting a keg, or fighting off a patron. Beneath the surface, a current of pain ran hot and fast, a river that had eroded its own path through years of use and neglect.

"Let go," Dexter said.

Sam shook her head against the table, but she loosened her grip anyway. He saw the way her hand trembled when she released her own shoulder, how the tremor ran through the whole arm and set the fingers tapping against the linen.

"Will it work?" she asked.

Dexter nodded, though she could not see him. "Yes. But it will not be pleasant."

She grunted again. "Figured as much."

He took the jar of blue moss liniment from the shelf, uncapped it, and let the smell fill the air: sharp, almost medicinal, with an undertone of loam and something like mint. He spread a thin layer over the scar, then set his hand flat against her skin. The effect was immediate—Sam jerked, not in surprise but in recognition, the way a veteran recognizes the opening note of a march.

A subtle charge hummed up from the table. The clinic's gift, always ready, sensed the magnitude of the wound and answered with a gentle suppression, a kind of anesthesia that was more kindness than numbness. Dexter felt it in his bones, a vibration so fine it was almost emotion.

He began the real work. His fingers, long and pale against the dark lines of her skin, pressed deeper, seeking the places where the pain had burrowed in and refused to come out. He worked the tissue, drawing heat to the surface, then releasing it. Each motion was precise, economical. He kept his eyes on her neck, watching for the subtle signs of distress—the flutter of an artery, the grit of her teeth. He noted every change, every adjustment in posture.

At one point, Sam said, "Mother of bones, do you enjoy this?"

Dexter did not look up. "No. But I am good at it."

She made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob.

The treatment lasted five minutes, maybe less. By the end, the whole room smelled of blue moss and burnt sugar, and Sam's breathing had steadied. Dexter stepped back, wiped his hands on a towel, and observed the change.

Sam remained facedown, but the tension in her back had gone. Her hand lay loose at her side, fingers curled but not clenched. The skin around the wound was red, but the swelling had receded. Most importantly, her voice, when she spoke, was level and clear.

"Feels better," she said. "Like you poured the pain into a cup and drank it."

Dexter considered the metaphor, then nodded. "That is close."

He helped her sit, moving with the same care as before. She flexed her arm, first cautiously, then with increasing confidence.

"It will hurt tomorrow," Dexter said. "You will want to rest it."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Can I ignore you?"

"You can try."

She smiled, genuine this time, and rolled her shoulder. The motion was smooth, almost normal.

"Thank you," she said, and this time there was no irony in it.

Dexter watched her stand, watched the transformation from defeated to defiant. She glanced at the cup on the table, then, as an afterthought, took a sip. "Better than I thought," she said.

Dexter inclined his head. "It is not the tea. It is the relief."

Sam reached for her coat, shrugged it on, and headed for the door. She paused with her hand on the latch.

"What about the noise?" she asked.

Dexter listened. The banshee wail, ever present, had receded. In the clinic, it was now barely a murmur—a memory, not a threat.

"It will be quiet, for now," Dexter said. "But it will come back, if you do not let yourself heal."

She nodded, as if that made sense, and left.

Dexter stood alone in the lamplight, the faint hum of the clinic's magic settling back into its usual rhythm. The pain was never really gone, he knew. But, for a time, it could be named, and that was enough.

He cleaned the table, reset the bench, and waited for the next wound to walk through the door.

Dexter worked through the night, not because he needed to, but because the alternatives were less appealing. The only real company was the moonlight on the tiles, the slow settling of the building's bones, and the faint, shifting pressure that marked the clinic's magic at work. He set out the implements for the next case, double-checked the sharpness of the blades and the calibration of his pressure scales, and

then, when the world had convinced itself nothing would happen before dawn, the door opened again.

It was Sam, but not as she had left. In the lamplight she looked older, the edges of her face pulled tight around the eyes, a five-day exhaustion in her shoulders. She wore the same coat, but now it was buttoned to the throat, and her hair, usually so precisely contained, was coming undone at the left temple. She did not pause in the hall. She walked to the examination table and sat, all at once, as if daring herself to refuse retreat.

"I'm back," she said. "Guess that means you win."

Dexter put down the scalpel and wiped his hands. "The pain?"

"Came back," she admitted. "Angrier."

He nodded, and she gave a thin smile, the kind that implied both apology and threat. "Figured I'd try it your way this time."

He moved to the table, standing on her left side, and gestured for her to slip off the coat. The scar was visible even in the half-light: a white seam jagged from collarbone down to the deltoid, clean in some places but twisted in others, as if someone had used a dull blade to tie off a knot inside her flesh.

"Tell me what you feel," he said.

Sam rolled her good shoulder, then tilted her chin to one side, exposing the scar. "Starts as a pinch, then spreads. By night it's like I swallowed a nest of hornets." She frowned. "Sometimes, if I'm lucky, the arm goes numb for an hour or two."

Dexter nodded and traced the line of the scar with a gloved finger. Underneath, he felt the web of old sutures, the build-up of calcified tissue, the way the muscle had learned to pull against itself just to keep working. He pressed, gently, and Sam's arm jerked, then stilled.

He said, "It is not the wound itself. It is the pattern of pain."

Sam watched him, eyes dark and unblinking. "What does that mean?"

"Your body learned to expect the pain. It will not release it without help." Dexter pressed harder. "You have made a home for it. The banshees use that."

She made a noise, part laugh, part curse. "Always said I was a slow learner."

He bent to examine the shoulder from the other side, fingers moving lightly, then with increasing pressure. The skin beneath his touch was hot—too hot for the room—and each pulse of heat carried the rhythm of her heartbeat. He listened, not with his ears but with something else, something old and hungry.

“It will hurt,” Dexter said.

Sam’s lips pulled back, showing the line of her teeth. “Do it.”

He set his left hand at the nape of her neck, anchoring her, and placed the right on her shoulder. The air in the clinic changed; the hum of the pain-dampening spell grew louder, the light from the lamp gained a blue edge. He could feel the clinic’s magic trying to deaden the pain, to smooth it, but the deeper thing—the root of the suffering—was beyond its reach.

He drew in a breath, and with a precise, rapid sequence of motions, began to knead the tissue, each pass deeper and more invasive than the last. His fingers moved faster than normal eyes could follow, the skin flexing and shifting as the old scars were forced to yield. Sam’s hand braced the edge of the table. The muscles in her arm and neck corded with the effort of not screaming.

Dexter kept his focus. With each layer of resistance, he pushed harder, letting his own senses track the splinters of pain as they surfaced. He could taste it—bitterness, metallic, sharp as a winter wind. The banshee wail, so loud before, was now a stuttered hiss, the frequency changing as he drew the pain out and into himself.

He went deeper. His vision tunneled. The world contracted to the points where his hands touched her, and in those points, he found the exact location where the pain had nested. With a final, brutal twist, he broke the pattern. The pain rushed up his arms, not as heat but as an electric surge that left every nerve awake and screaming.

Sam gasped, her whole body going rigid, then shuddering. Her free hand clawed at the linen, then at his wrist, but Dexter did not flinch. He held her there, absorbing the last of the pain, until the tremors passed.

The banshee wail vanished.

For a second, there was nothing but the sound of Sam’s ragged breathing and the tick of the lamp. Then, slowly, she sat up. The arm

hung loose at her side, but there was color back in her face, and the eyes were wet but clear.

Sam flexed her hand, then her elbow, then rolled the shoulder in a small, careful arc. She looked at Dexter, as if expecting an explanation, then at the wall, as if expecting the wail to come back.

"It's gone," she said, disbelieving. "The noise. I can't—" She stopped, lost for words.

Dexter released her neck and stepped back. "It is finished."

Sam's jaw worked, as if she wanted to say something clever, or angry, or grateful, but all that came out was a soft, wet laugh. She wiped her face with the back of her hand and tried the shoulder again, this time with more force.

"You fixed it," she said.

Dexter shook his head. "It is not fixed. It is simply no longer a wound."

She considered this, then nodded, slowly. "Feels like I lost ten pounds. Maybe more."

He collected the bandages, replaced the ointment jar, and cleaned his gloves. The pain still lingered in his arms—a hot, cold fire that would last until it finished cycling through his system—but he welcomed it. It was easier to carry someone else's pain than to let it rot where it was.

Sam put on her coat. The movement was smooth, unforced, and the look she gave him now was different: less adversarial, more uncertain.

"Do I owe you?" she said.

Dexter shrugged. "Of course not." Nobody in the town charged their neighbors for anything.

Sam made for the door. She paused, hand on the latch, and looked over her shoulder. "Thanks," she said. "I mean it."

He nodded once.

When she left, the world outside seemed quieter than before—not just in the absence of the banshee wail, but in the way the snow muffled even the usual sounds of a winter morning. Dexter stood in the doorway for a minute, letting the chill soak through his shirt, then turned back to the business of healing.

There would be more wounds, more noise, more suffering. The world was unfinished, and that was how it liked to stay.

But, for the moment, it was enough.

He closed the clinic's door, set the lamp to low, and let himself rest, just for a little while.

The clinic was never truly quiet, but after Sam left, the absence of noise pressed in with a physical density. Dexter stood for a while, letting the cold lamp light cast faint lines over the workbench and the battered ledger. He rotated his shoulder, absently checking for phantom pain, and found only the familiar stiffness that never quite left him, no matter how much he moved or how long he waited.

The banshee wail, so constant for days, had become a suggestion. Still there, but muted, backgrounded like the memory of pain rather than its present. Dexter ran through the logic: the wail tracked to unresolved injuries, especially old wounds left to fester; when those wounds were healed—or at least given an exit—the wail receded. The pattern was clear, at least to him. The banshees didn't *absorb* pain so much as *reflect* it.

He went to the window and looked across the square. The snow had not stopped, and the lamps around the green had gone yellow in the shifting light. He spotted Sam, already halfway to the bakery, her posture different—shoulders back, head up, stride full of the energy she usually reserved for the end of a long night at the pub. She stopped at the bakery's door, scanned the street, and then, after a moment, smiled at something Dexter couldn't see.

He wondered if she'd hear the wail again, or if it would move on to someone else. He thought of the list of patients in his ledger: the ones with old wounds, the ones with newer but less obvious pains. He thought of the constable, whose shoulder never fully healed, and of the baker, whose hands ached each time the weather turned, and of the children who screamed in the night when the wail was at its loudest. Each case was the same in its difference.

Dexter's own ear still caught the sound. It was quieter, yes, but not gone. He knew why. The pain he carried was not physical, or at least not primarily. It was the risk, the vigilance, the decades of hiding his own nature from a world that would never understand what he was

or why he did what he did. He was an Eater of Pain, but he'd never learned to finish the meal.

He turned from the window and pulled his black coat from the peg. The fabric was heavier than it looked, the pockets weighted with small tools, vials, and a single slip of wire-wrapped crystal. He checked the stove, banked the lamp, and moved to the far corner, where the floorboards were worn by repeated, secret traffic. He pressed his heel to the right spot, knelt, and opened the trapdoor.

The air below was colder than the clinic, but it had a steadiness Dexter liked. He climbed down, pulling the trap shut behind him. The steps were narrow, the stone worn slick by his own passage. At the bottom, the laboratory was unchanged: workbench, shelves, the tools of medicine and invention, and at the center, the device he'd named the Harmonic Capacitor.

He set the lamp on the bench, trimmed the wick, and examined the bowl and its copper arms. In the quiet, he could hear the faintest resonance—less a sound than a pressure, a vibration at the edge of sense. He checked the solder points, adjusted the position of the beads, and readied the new mounting for the Moon-Stone. Each step was methodical, a ritual as old as his first year at the roundhouse.

Above him, the world went on. He imagined Sam at the bakery, laughing with Makota, flexing her arm and showing off to anyone who would listen. He imagined the constable's rounds, and the way the green would fill with children again once the wail was truly gone. He imagined the next wound, the next complaint, the next small defeat or victory.

He did not let himself imagine a world without pain. That would have been a mistake, and anyway, he would not have believed in it. He preferred the idea of pain as a river, always moving, always seeking the lowest point. Sometimes, all you could do was build a better channel.

Dexter checked the Moon-Stone for flaws, then fitted it to the device. He picked up the soldering iron, watched it come to life with a blue-white spark, and set to work.

The rest of the night was easy: a problem, a solution, the delicate

play between what was lost and what could be kept. When he finished, the device hummed in his palm, barely more than a thought.

He placed it on the shelf, cleaned the bench, and sat in the darkness for a long time, just listening.

Outside, the wail had faded. In the lab, there was only the low, steady thrum of work yet to be done.

seventeen

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THE VELVET quiet of Dexter's basement laboratory was broken only by the sizzle of solder and the low thrum of the oil lamp, magnified in the close stone space. He worked by touch as much as by sight, guiding a hair-fine copper wire around the glass belly of the new Harmonic Capacitor. The banshee wail had, for the most part, receded, replaced by an afterimage that lived only in the nerves, like a memory of a song you can't stop humming. The device was nearly complete, a bowl of copper and glass nested in his hands, every joint polished and true.

He was adjusting the final coil when a sound rose through the floorboards above—subtle, so soft that most would have called it silence, but he heard the difference. It was the sound of motion without friction, paws whispering over old wood, the careful regulation of breath so it wouldn't fog the air or announce intent. Dexter paused with the soldering iron raised, listening as the steps came to the door at the top of the stairs, then waited. There was a pause, an interval of five heartbeats, and then the tiniest click as the latch disengaged. The door opened. Another pause, a recalculation of strategy.

The Shadow Wolf entered, not in the brute form of legend, but standing, nearly human: tall, arms long and jointed for reach, head

cocked at the precise angle of both predator and ambassador. Kael's hair was the color of new ash, banded here and there with a charcoal stripe. His skin, or what you could see of it, was pale, almost hairless on the face, but the line of his jaw and brow gave away the riddle of the species. He wore the tunic of a woodsman—patched, but clean—and he closed the door behind him with a gentleness Dexter noted as both affectation and warning.

Dexter set the soldering iron down on its stand and waited. He was not afraid, not exactly, but the first rule with Shadow Wolves was to let them set the tone. Kael did not advance, not right away. Instead, he opened his mouth and sang—not words, but a phrase of pure resonance, a handful of notes that hung in the cold air and bounced along the stone. It was not music as people knew it, but it was communication. Dexter received it in his bones, a signal of trust and intent, layered with a subharmonic that could have meant caution or nostalgia or both.

He answered in kind, tapping two knuckles against the wood of the bench. The gesture was not in the old lexicon, but it was close enough. Kael's lips pulled back in something almost like a smile, showing teeth that were white, straight, and at least twice as numerous as necessary.

The Shadow Wolf came forward, eyes never leaving Dexter's. He circled the workbench once, examining the Harmonic Capacitor, then set his hands on the edge of the table and leaned in, inhaling the air just above the device.

"The banshee's song is lessened," Kael said, voice deep and flexible. "This is your doing."

Dexter considered the bowl, its web of copper, the Moon-Stone socketed at the heart. "Partly. I found the wound that called to them, and closed it."

Kael's eyes narrowed. "You fixed someone."

Dexter nodded. "The pubkeeper. Her pain was old. Persistent."

A low rumble rolled in Kael's chest. "You know what this means, Eater. The cry of the banshee, it was not just nuisance. It kept the others away."

Dexter had not considered that. He thought of the Night People,

the creatures who lived between stories and rarely made themselves known. "It was a ward."

Kael's gaze flicked to the far wall, then back. "You know the old world. You know what they kept back, even if unintentionally."

Dexter nodded. "Hunters."

"Yes." Kael spat the word as if it were a bone fragment. "Already, there are some in the town. *Puritans*, the townspeople call them." His fingers drummed the bench, flexing in a rhythm meant to steady rather than signal.

Dexter adjusted the Capacitor in its cradle, running his finger along the newly-set coil. "You want me to bring the song back."

Kael shook his head, sharp and sudden. "Not exactly. But you must be careful. If the pain is all gone, they will come hunting for what made the quiet. The Hidden Society is exposed."

Dexter filed away the phrase—Hidden Society—committing it to the private ledger he kept in his mind. The Night People had never before called themselves anything, at least not in his hearing. It was both a confidence and a warning.

"I can slow the healing," Dexter offered, though the thought made his teeth ache. "Or, perhaps, fake a symptom."

Kael grunted, a quick exhale. "They will test. They have toys for such things."

Dexter's lip curled. "I know their toys."

For a moment, the two of them stood there, the air filled with the ozone tang of fresh solder and the not-unpleasant musk of Shadow Wolf. It was not awkward. They had been here before, in a dozen different towns, a hundred different near-misses. They had survived on patience and on the ability to make even the most painful truths into a kind of banter.

Kael leaned closer, lowering his voice. "There is something else. The banshee's song—when you tuned it, some of us felt... better. Less hungry. The ache in the bones, it faded."

Dexter absorbed that, surprise flickering across his face. "You are affected by it?"

"We are," Kael said. "But only the ones who have lived close to your kind. The purebloods do not feel it. The rest of us, the ones who

stayed near these towns, who tried to pass as normal, we wake up every morning with that cry in our heads. When you fixed the pubkeeper, it was like a fever breaking."

Dexter looked down at the bowl, at his own hands, then back at Kael. "I did not mean to change the world."

Kael smiled, softer this time. "But you always do."

They lapsed into silence, which was not the absence of words but the presence of mutual understanding. Dexter resumed work, threading a wire through the mounting bracket and bending it to catch the next phase of the design. Kael watched, the tips of his claws tapping a tattoo against the bench.

"I will tell the others to be careful," Kael said. "If the hunters come, we will try not to draw notice."

Dexter nodded. "If you need anything—" He trailed off, not knowing the right word.

Kael provided it. "If you need to run, you know our song. Yes?"

Dexter considered, then imitated the opening note of Kael's greeting, low and through the back of the throat. Kael's smile widened.

"Good. You are one of us, Eater. Even if you pretend not to be."

Dexter said, "I don't pretend."

Kael's expression was full of teeth. "You do. But you are not alone, now."

He turned, flexed his shoulders, and was gone, the steps up the stairs as soft as before, but with a finality that spoke of long journeys and heavy secrets.

Dexter watched the door close, then listened for the sound of Kael's passage through the clinic. There was nothing. He was already gone, or hidden.

The laboratory seemed smaller, suddenly, the lamps brighter than necessary. Dexter finished winding the last wire, then set the bowl in its cradle and stared at the pattern of its shadow on the wall. The urge to test it, to bring back the song and see how it changed, was strong, but he resisted. The world did not need more noise. It needed caution.

For a moment, Dexter tried to imagine the town from Kael's point of view: the walls, the windows, the storehouse by the water. The way every face was a possible threat or a possible kin. The hunger that

never quite went away. He found it not so different from his own, except for the part about family.

He wondered if he was lonely. He wondered if the Hidden Society could ever be anything more than a rumor, a footnote in someone else's history.

He set the soldering iron aside and washed his hands. The pain in his wrists, always worst after a long session of fine work, had receded. In the upper world, the snow still fell, and the green would soon fill with the next round of wounds, complaints, and small, desperate requests.

Dexter was ready. He would be careful, and he would not forget the warning.

But for now, he allowed himself a brief, sharp joy: the banshee song was quiet, and the world was safer by at least a hair.

It was enough.

The air had chilled by two degrees. It was not a fault of the stove or the insulation, but a simple matter of displacement: when a Shadow Wolf left a room, it carried the warmth with it. He stood for a moment on the lowest step, letting his senses recalibrate to the old, familiar quiet. The sounds above—boots scuffing wood, mugs clinking in the pub, even the faint whistle of wind at the chimney—faded, and he became aware only of the stone beneath his feet, the lamp's steady glow, and the half-assembled device on the bench.

The Harmonic Capacitor had come together with the odd logic of a dream: the coil and bowl perfect in their symmetry, but the Moon-Stone still unseated, waiting for the final solder and blessing. Dexter ran his finger along the rim, feeling for burrs. There were none. The bowl caught the lamp-light and held it, refracting it into a pattern that trembled with every pulse of his heart.

He sat at the bench, elbows on the scarred wood, and stared at the device. It looked so small, so unthreatening, and yet it was the sum of everything he had learned since the banshee's first cry. He thought of Kael's words: the Hidden Society, the warning, the strange effect the Capacitor had on Shadow Wolves and their kin. It was not enough to fix the noise. The world wanted something deeper—a true healing, the

kind that could only happen when all the wounds were named, not just patched over.

Dexter reached for the packet of glass beads and chose one at random: a small sphere of deep green, heavy for its size. He rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, listening to the barely-audible note it made as it tapped the side of the bowl. The device would work, he knew, if he finished it. It would dampen the banshee's song for everyone, not just the bravest or most afflicted. But the pain would remain, unprocessed, simply hiding in a new frequency. The solution, he realized, was not just a better Capacitor.

It was a matter of participation. The townsfolk would have to bring their pains to him, or to each other, and let the wounds see daylight. There would be no tricking the magic of the world: it had always been built on a foundation of confession, of voices raised together in honest hurt. Even now, he could hear the town's old wounds in the way the snow muffled the square, the way laughter was always a little too forced, a little too fast.

He set the bead down, then folded his hands and rested his chin atop them. He closed his eyes, and for a moment he allowed himself to imagine how it would be: every soul in North Pointe, from the pubkeeper to the seamstress to the constable and the baker's wife, lined up at his door, each holding a scrap of pain and waiting to set it in the bowl. A kind of mass confession, a ritual of the unfinished. The thought was almost comforting, in its way.

Except for one detail.

Who would take his confession? Who would he trust with the truth of his own scars?

He could not imagine it. He had lived through centuries and seen a thousand versions of this town. He had watched empires rise and fall, watched the very rivers carve new paths through stone, and not once had he ever found a place where his own pain could be unburdened. He was, by definition, a vessel for the suffering of others. To release even a fraction of it would be to upend the careful balance that kept him sane, and the town safe.

He opened his eyes. The lamp was burning low, and the glow had

turned the shadows along the walls into something living, something that shifted and waited for his next move.

He reached for the soldering iron, heated it, and began to fuse the Moon-Stone into its seat. Each pass of the tool was perfect. The resin beaded and cooled in a line of silver, no excess, no waste. When he finished, the device hummed, almost imperceptibly, a promise of what it would do when it was set in place on the tower above.

Dexter wiped the bead of sweat from his temple, then checked his hands for tremor. There was none. He boxed the device, padded it with linen, and set it aside. He made a note in the ledger: "Device complete. Awaiting full test. See notes re: communal release."

He wondered if the others would understand what he was trying to do. If they would bring their wounds forward, if they would trust him to hold them, even temporarily. The idea of asking was alien to him. He'd always been the fixer, never the supplicant.

The banshee song, though faint, was still there in the mortar of the basement, a whisper of old pain that resisted the best efforts of logic and artifice. It would not vanish, not until the town was ready. Maybe not even then.

Dexter closed the ledger, banked the lamp, and stood. He allowed himself to stretch, to savor the pleasant ache of a job well done. Upstairs, the world was moving on—children would be waking soon, and the bakery would be filling the air with the promise of fresh bread.

He listened for a while, then, unable to stop himself, sang the Shadow Wolf greeting back into the stone, just in case Kael was listening. The notes hung in the cold air, then faded, replaced by the old, beloved silence.

He smiled, just barely.

The world was not finished, but neither was he.

eighteen

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THE HOUR WAS LATE ENOUGH that the town's frost had crusted over, but the lamps in the square still burned with a determination Dexter admired. He walked from his clinic's stoop as he always did: deliberate, coat buttoned tight, chin tucked in, eyes down. To an observer, he moved with a kind of economy that suggested he'd already rehearsed every step and needed only to execute.

He had not left the building in two days. The world outside seemed different than he remembered—colder, for one, but also edgier, as if the lines of each building had been sharpened overnight. His boots whispered over the packed snow, and every window he passed seemed, in his peripheral vision, to flicker with anticipation. Not for him, exactly, but for something.

He passed the bakery first. The windows were dark, but the inside glowed faintly, enough to suggest that someone was either cleaning up or refusing to go home. He could smell the end-of-shift sugar and ash. He let it carry him forward. He counted his steps, three dozen to the center of the green, another fifteen to the crossroads that cut the square.

It was there, at the town's midpoint, that he heard the first rattle.

He stopped, just short of the flagstone ring, and watched. A crowd

had gathered at the base of the Town Hall steps. Maybe two dozen, maybe more—Dexter's mind was not the sort to waste energy on an exact count when the sum was already too many. They clustered in a rough wedge, backs to the square, eyes fixed on the white-robed figures at the top of the stairs.

The robes were as bright as paper, trimmed in a red so vivid it looked painted on with fresh blood. There were five of them, three men and two women, each holding a glass jar half-filled with the milky bones of birds or mice. They shook the jars in unison, the sound dry and percussive, and as they did, the crowd below shuffled their feet and muttered responses. Dexter, who had grown up among silence, flinched at the noise. It was not the volume but the intent behind it—the way the rhythm made his teeth vibrate, the way the words seemed to coil around the listeners rather than pass through.

He recognized the language. Old Church, or a bastardization of it: *"Sanguinem mundari. Spiritus pestis."* Cleanse the blood. Drive out the pestilence. The leader, a woman with a jaw sharp enough to chisel granite, held her jar overhead and chanted, "This place is infested with darkness." She pointed down the line of the street, her finger trembling with the effort of conviction. "It festers in these homes, in these bodies. You have invited the rot with your lenience and your false comforts."

Dexter did not move. For a moment, he felt the precise sensation of standing at the edge of a river that was about to flood its banks. The words in the square were not meant for him personally, but he knew the story well enough to know how quickly such things could become personal. He saw, in his mind's eye, the old roundhouses where the Siphons worked, the way a mob could go from reverent to rabid in a single syllable.

He felt a tightening in his chest—not the banshee's echo, which had finally faded, but something older and colder. He recognized it as terror. He had not felt terror in years.

The leader pointed toward the bakery, then to the blacksmith's, then finally toward the low, squat building of the clinic itself. "There," she announced, "the work of the adversary festers. They mend flesh, but not spirit. They patch wounds, but they do not seek the source.

They feed the pain, let it breed.” She let the words hang, waiting for them to curdle in the air before continuing.

Dexter felt every eye in the crowd following her gesture. Most did not know him, or if they did, knew him only as the man who worked strange miracles in a place that always smelled faintly of poppy and citrus. But he saw, here and there, a face tighten in recognition. He saw the way the words stuck—not just to him, but to the whole street, to the bodies that filled it.

He could not turn around without being seen. Instead, he did what he had always done when faced with the threat of discovery: he let his body go slack, let his mind go quiet, and trusted that if he was careful, he could pass through the world without leaving so much as a fingerprint.

He slipped into the shadow of the weaver’s shop, pressed himself flat against the cold stone, and waited. The ritual on the steps was reaching its peak. The five in white now chanted in unison, their voices rising and falling like the tide. The bone jars were shaken harder, the sound now a counterpoint to the dull thud of boots and the low, throaty hum of the crowd.

Dexter closed his eyes and forced his breathing to slow. This was the part of the story where people like him ran. He thought of Kael’s warning, of what might happen if the town’s pain was quieted for too long. He wondered if he’d been foolish to believe that just because the banshee wail was gone, the world would be safe.

He counted to twenty, then to thirty. The chanting on the steps lost its rhythm, the crowd’s energy sagging as the cold bit deeper. The leader lowered her jar, and the other four followed suit. With a final, declarative sentence—one that Dexter, in his distraction, did not catch—the white-robed woman turned and led her group up the steps, through the big double doors, and into the Town Hall.

The crowd scattered, some lingering in clusters to gossip, others drifting off to warm themselves or to spread the news of what they had witnessed.

Dexter did not move until the square was nearly empty. When he finally stepped out, his feet felt numb, not from the cold but from the effort of standing so long without moving. He looked once toward the

Town Hall, saw a white robe vanish around a corner, then turned in the opposite direction.

He walked quickly, but not so quickly as to draw attention. His boots crunched the top layer of frost, leaving a perfect trail behind him. He kept his head down, but not so far that it looked like an admission of guilt.

He reached the Broken Claw without incident, but as he paused on the threshold, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window. His face, always pale, now looked almost translucent. His eyes were wide and black, and his mouth was set in a line he did not recognize. He forced a smile, but it would not stick.

Inside, the pub was half-lit and half-full. Sam was behind the bar, polishing a glass with the kind of focus that suggested she might shatter it if it dared misbehave. The heat and light hit Dexter like a wave, and for a moment, he thought he might turn around and walk right back out.

Instead, he stepped through the door, felt the eyes of the patrons as they took him in, and made for the back table where he knew no one would bother him. He sat, folded his hands in his lap, and listened to the low, familiar sounds of the only place in town that had ever felt even halfway safe.

The warmth did not chase the cold from his bones, but it helped.

He closed his eyes and let the pain settle.

For the first time all day, he allowed himself to hope that the worst was over.



He did not call out for service, nor did he expect to be waited on. The rhythm at the Claw was always the same: you showed up, you waited for the world to calm around you, and if you looked like you belonged, Sam would bring something to the table before you even knew what you needed.

Tonight, he did not belong, or at least he did not feel like he did. His hands were cold, and he had to set them in his lap to keep them from

shaking. The air inside was several degrees warmer than the street, and it carried the layered smell of hearth smoke, spiced root vegetables, and the low, metallic note of beer just past its prime. There was a trace of roasted meat, but only the memory of it—whatever was cooked that day had long since been eaten by the regulars and the insomniacs.

Sam glanced up from behind the bar and caught sight of him. She set her glass down, wiped her hands on the rag, and, with a nod so small it might have been a tic, acknowledged his arrival. She finished stacking the last few mugs, then made her way to his table, the wooden floor creaking in a familiar counterpoint to her measured stride.

He did not look up as she approached. Instead, he watched the way her reflection bent and shimmered in the curved side of his water glass, the way she carried herself even when off-balance. Sam was not built for subtlety, but she could muster it when required.

She slid into the seat across from him, resting her elbows on the table and folding her hands. "You look like you just ran from a burning building," she said.

He tried to manage a smile, but it faltered. "No fire. Not yet."

She studied him for a few seconds, eyes narrowed, the way a farmer studies a stormcloud. "I heard the commotion outside. Something new, or just the usual?"

Dexter thought of the square, the voices, the way the crowd had looked at the Town Hall and then at the clinic. "New," he said. "White robes. Old Church, or a version of it."

Sam grunted. "Huh." She glanced toward the window, as if expecting to see the procession right outside.

"They had jars. Bones. Some kind of warding ritual." He realized, even as he spoke, how absurd it sounded. In this town, wards were something you bought from Leota and then forgot about. People did not get together and chant. People did not make threats in public.

Sam let the words settle, then said, "Did anyone call you out by name?"

He shook his head, but the memory of the pointing hand was still fresh. "No."

She leaned back and tapped her knuckles against the table, thinking. "You want a drink?"

He hesitated, then nodded. She knew he never touched alcohol, but she brought him water in a chipped glass, the rim sanded smooth by years of abuse. She poured herself a finger of whiskey and let it roll around the base of the glass before knocking it back.

The two of them sat in silence for a while, watching the fire in the little brick hearth at the back of the room. The flames had almost gone out, but Sam had a habit of stirring them whenever she passed, so they never died all the way.

He watched as she did just that—rose, poked at the fire, added a log from the basket—and returned, the sleeves of her shirt rolled up and forearms dusted with soot. "You're thinking about leaving," she said, sitting down again.

He blinked, surprised. "I'm not."

She met his eyes, then looked away. "People like them, they don't come here for the beer. They want to find a reason to clear the place out. Make sure no one remembers anything except the story they tell." Her voice was soft, but every word was a warning.

He listened, then tried, "Maybe they'll be gone by morning."

Sam snorted. "Not unless someone bribes them to hunt rats in the next town."

He let that hang. He was grateful for her presence, and more grateful for the way she made his panic seem smaller, manageable. There was a comfort in her skepticism, the way she refused to believe in anything that couldn't be weighed or drunk.

The door opened, and a draft of night air swept in ahead of the next patron. Dexter turned his head, half-expecting to see a white robe, but instead it was just a regular—one of the tanners, his boots stained and his face windburned. He stomped the snow from his soles and headed straight for the bar, where Sam greeted him with a nod and poured his usual. Dexter watched as the man threw a look over his shoulder, then leaned in to say something to Sam in a low voice.

She glanced at Dexter, then shrugged and replied in a tone that could have been either amusement or dismissal.

The man retreated to the far end of the room, leaving Sam to return to her cleaning.

Dexter sipped his water. The glass was cold, the rim smooth against his mouth. He stared at the surface, watching for the first hint of a tremor in his hands.

He heard Sam's footsteps before she reached him. "You're safe here," she said, voice lower now, as if she'd decided to drop all pretense. "No one comes in without my say-so."

He nodded, knowing that in this, she would not be outmaneuvered.

"Jen's coming by later," Sam said. "Said she'd swing through after her rounds. Maybe she's got news."

He didn't ask if Jen would have answers. He doubted any of them would. But he was comforted, a little, by the idea that someone with a badge and a blade would be in the room.

As if on cue, the door opened a second time. Jen entered, the chill swirling around her as she scraped her boots on the mat. Her hair was tied back, a strip of faded cloth keeping it out of her eyes, and her uniform was rumpled in a way that said she'd been on her feet since dawn. She scanned the room, registered Dexter and Sam, then made her way over.

"Evening," she said, sliding into the bench next to Dexter. She offered him a tight smile, then turned to Sam. "You got anything that isn't horse piss or last week's ale?"

"Fresh cider, if you trust Galhani's recipe," Sam replied.

"I'll risk it," Jen said.

Sam brought the drink, poured it, and watched as Jen took a cautious sip. "It's not bad," Jen admitted. She set the mug down, then faced Dexter.

"So. They're here?"

Dexter nodded. "Five, maybe more. They were at the Hall."

Jen sighed. "That's faster than I expected. I heard they were still two days out." She looked at Sam. "You see them?"

"Just heard them from the window," Sam said. "Sounded like a funeral and a toothache at the same time."

Jen almost laughed. "You should write for a broadsheet."

Sam shrugged. "I'm better at headlines."

Jen's gaze returned to Dexter. "Any direct threats?"

"Not yet," he said. "But it's only a matter of time."

Jen drummed her fingers on the mug, considering. "They're not locals. They're Purists, or close enough—came up from the South Road, trailing that caravan of pilgrims." She frowned. "I'll keep an eye on them."

Dexter relaxed, infinitesimally.

Sam leaned in, her voice conspiratorial. "Want me to do anything?"

"Just stay open," Jen said. "If they make trouble, I'll deal with it."

Dexter looked at the two of them: Sam's hands, broad and steady; Jen's jaw set in its usual line of absolute certainty. For the first time since the ritual in the square, he felt less alone.

The next hour passed in fragments—snatches of conversation, the shuffle of the fire, Sam's quiet rounds from table to table. Jen finished her cider and another, then made a show of inspecting the pub's locks and windows, as if she expected someone to come after them with torches and pitchforks.

No one did. The Purists kept to their camp at the edge of town, lighting their own fires and leaving the rest of North Pointe to its usual business.

Just before closing, Sam set a bowl of stew in front of Dexter, a slab of bread to one side. He stared at it for a minute before taking a bite. It was hot, salty, and familiar. He ate half the bread and all of the broth, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

He looked up to find Sam watching him from across the room, her arms crossed, face unreadable.

He nodded his thanks.

She nodded back.

The fire dwindled, the regulars drifted out, and the Claw grew quiet. Jen set her empty mug on the bar and made for the door, pausing just long enough to glance at Dexter. "If you need me, you know where to find me."

He nodded, knowing she meant it.

Sam locked the door behind her, then turned out the lamps one by one. She paused at Dexter's table, her hand on the back of the chair.

"You ever need to disappear," she said, "I've got a trapdoor in the back. Just for emergencies."

He almost smiled. "Thank you."

She smiled, the smallest tilt of her mouth. "Get some rest. Tomorrow will be better, or at least different."

He waited until she vanished into the kitchen, then stood, stretched, and slipped out the back, careful not to wake the ghosts.

The air outside was colder, but the square was empty, the snow untouched. He looked at the Town Hall, saw no light in the windows, and felt—if not safe, then at least not immediately in danger.

He walked home, the darkness holding its breath, and for once, he felt like he could breathe with it.

The next morning, the Claw was empty except for the three of them. Sam had shooed the last regular out just before dawn, locked the door, and drawn the curtains so only a slit of sunlight knifed through. Jen nursed a mug of black tea, her shoulders hunched in a way that made her look like she was bracing for a winter squall. Dexter took his seat at the booth's inside edge, keeping the wall at his back and his hands folded in plain view atop the table.

He had not slept, not that it made any difference. The device was finished, the banshee wail now no more than a ghost of itself, but the threat from the square still rattled through him. He'd seen enough of the old world to know how quickly an accusation could become a verdict.

Sam set a kettle on the table, three chipped mugs lined up like soldiers. "You want to talk, or just stare at the table until we grow roots?" she asked, sliding into the booth beside Jen.

Dexter looked up, met her eyes, and decided to stop rehearsing the speech. "You've both guessed what I am," he said, voice low. "Or enough of it that the details won't surprise you."

Jen snorted. "I know you're not a demon. Demons don't take their tea with honey."

Sam leaned forward, her hands splayed on the scarred tabletop. "Talk, Dex. You're not going to scare us."

He nodded. "I'm what's called a Pain-Eater. My kind aren't monsters. Not by our own rules. We don't create pain—we consume it, metabolize it, transform it. My job at the clinic, the way I treat wounds, is only part of it." He hesitated, then continued, "When I mend an injury, I don't just help the body close itself. I draw off the residue—the pain that's left behind. I take it in. Sometimes it's physical, sometimes not. My people don't allow us to create suffering. That's the oldest law. But the world generates more pain than it needs, so we take the surplus."

Sam was quiet for a moment, then let out a short, sharp laugh. "Well, that explains why you always look like you're starving, and why you move like you're being chased." She reached across and gave his hand a single, fierce squeeze. "Not so scary."

Jen considered. "So if the Purists found out—?"

He met her gaze. "They'd burn me. Or, if they were feeling generous, banish me and salt the ground after."

Jen shrugged. "Seen worse." She took a long drink of tea, then added, "You're not the only one who can't heal what hurts."

Sam shifted. "Is that a confession, Jen? Because I'd pay to hear one of yours."

Jen's face did not change, but she ran her thumb over the mug's rim, slow and methodical. "My joints. They ache every morning. When I was on campaign, the field surgeons said it was normal, but it's getting worse." She flexed her hand, knuckles popping. "Can't draw a sword with my left some mornings."

Dexter hesitated. "I can help," he said. "But it's not a fix. The pain comes back. It always does."

Jen nodded. "Better to have a break from it than none at all."

Sam watched the exchange with an expression that was part amusement, part pride. "Well, go on, then," she said. "Let's see a demonstration."

Dexter stood, moved around to Jen's side, and placed his hands on her shoulders. The skin was warm through the rough cloth, the muscle underneath bunched and tense. He closed his eyes, not for effect but to

focus on the sensation. There was no magic, no flash or warmth—just the slow, steady transfer of tension from her body to his. He felt the ache as it crept along his own bones, a shadow of her years, and welcomed it in.

Jen let out a slow breath, and her posture shifted—first subtle, then pronounced. Her shoulders dropped. Her jaw unclenched. She looked at her hands, then back at Dexter. “Still there, but duller. Like the edge got blunted.”

He nodded. “It will last a few days. Maybe longer.”

Sam exhaled, a sound almost like a laugh. “You’re a miracle worker and an idiot for keeping it to yourself this long.”

He shrugged. “Habit.”

The three sat in silence, letting the new equilibrium settle. From outside, the faintest clang of Warren’s forge drifted across the green, a mundane counterpoint to the drama of the morning. For the first time since he’d heard the wail, Dexter realized it was gone, truly gone—the world was still full of pain, but the supernatural pressure had vanished.

Jen straightened, flexed her hands, and grinned. “You ever need an alibi or a distraction, just say so. We’ll back you.”

Sam nodded. “Town’s better with you in it, Dex. Let’s keep it that way.”

He looked at both of them. The fear was still there—his kind never really shook it—but in this booth, with these two, he let it be outnumbered by gratitude. He found himself smiling, a small, clumsy thing, but real.

“Thank you,” he said.

Sam raised her mug. “To pain that can be handled, and friends who don’t scare easy.”

They clinked mugs, tea sloshing over the sides. Jen refilled hers and Sam’s, and Dexter drank his in long, measured sips. The hot, bitter taste burned away the last chill of the morning.

It would not last—nothing ever did. But in the space of that hour, with the fire and the sunlight and the world outside holding its breath, the unfinished business of pain and fear found a kind of balance.

And for now, that was enough.

That night, the wind shifted, and with it the scent of smoke changed from bread and beer to something harsher—resin, scorched bone, the acrid twist of ritual herbs. Dexter stood in the lee of the bakery with Sam and Jen, all three watching the white tents go up just beyond the north gate.

The Purists worked with an efficiency that was neither military nor domestic. Their tents rose in geometric precision, each one marked by the red slash of their symbol. Fires flickered in metal bowls arranged at regular intervals, and at each, a figure in a white robe stood sentinel, arms folded, faces hidden by cowls or shadow.

"They're not even trying to hide," Sam said. She tugged her coat tighter, the fabric stretched taut by the width of her shoulders. "They want us to see them."

Jen spat into the slush. "That's the point. You scare a town, you make them easier to sweep."

Dexter watched the pattern of the fires, the way the smoke rose and twisted into the air. He could feel the pressure behind the camp—no magic he recognized, but an intent so focused it seemed to pull at the nerves. These were not the wild mobs of old stories, but something more organized, more practiced.

A group of Purists approached the gate, their boots scraping over frozen mud. At their head was a tall woman, features as sharp as a drawn blade, eyes a pale blue that never seemed to blink. She stopped ten paces from the line of the town's boundary stones and raised her right hand, palm out.

Sam and Jen stepped forward together, and Dexter fell in a half-step behind, his coat flaring as he moved to keep them both in view.

The woman's voice was clear and unwavering. "This settlement is under observation by the Church of Final Mercy. We have detected the presence of unnatural forces within. There will be no violence unless you initiate it. Our order will not cross your boundary unless invited, but we will not leave until the place is made safe."

Jen raised an eyebrow. "Safe for who?"

The woman did not smile. "For everyone." He expression softened

slightly. "You may not be able to hear the unholy keening that accompanies it, but I assure you—your town is infested."

Sam's voice was as flat as winter ice. "You should see the spiders come spring. But what if we say no?"

The woman let her hand drop. "Then we will wait. But others will come. And you will be known for what you have harbored."

Dexter felt the hairs on his arms rise, a response less to the words than to the chill behind them. These were the hunters Kael had spoken of, dressed in conviction and unyielding certainty. They would not tire, and they would not be outwaited.

Jen considered the response, then nodded as if it confirmed something she'd suspected all along. "You want to talk? We'll talk. You try anything else, you answer to me."

The woman inclined her head. "We will respect your authority as long as it is honest."

She turned, robes whispering over the ground, and rejoined her people. The group retreated, resuming their posts at the fires, silent and vigilant.

Jen exhaled. "So much for hoping they'd get bored."

Sam looked at Dexter, her gaze softer than usual. "How you holding up?"

He answered honestly. "I've seen this before. It doesn't end quickly."

Sam squeezed his shoulder, gentle despite the bulk of her hand. "We'll make sure it ends right."

They walked back to the center of town, past the bakery, the blacksmith's, the green where snow was beginning to gather in little eddies and whorls. Sam's hand hovered near her hip, where the hilt of her sword would have been if she carried it openly. Jen's fingers toyed with the thick metal bracelet at her wrist, a habit she'd picked up since the last time she'd needed to remind someone what happened when you pushed North Pointe too far.

Dexter walked between them, coat buttoned, posture easy, eyes open and alert. He was not hunted, not yet—but neither was he alone. As they neared the Claw, he caught the glow of the hearth through the window and felt, for a single heartbeat, the pain in his chest shift from

fear to something warmer, brighter, and more dangerous to anyone who tried to extinguish it.

They stepped inside, the door closing behind them with the steady, familiar sound of a home locking out the cold. The three of them sat, side by side, and waited for morning.

Beyond the gate, the Purists waited too.

The world was not finished. But neither were they.

nineteen

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THE FIRST HOUR after dawn was always the best for work that demanded precision. The world outside had not yet begun its noise; even the crows gave the clinic a wide berth, and the chill in the air seemed to polish the edges of every thought. Dexter stood at the center of his examination room, sleeves rolled up, hands bare and so pale they nearly matched the porcelain of the implements set in their tidy line. On the cleared work table before him sat the Harmonic Capacitor: a copper-and-glass bowl, three-armed, each tip capped with a bead of blue or amber or the faintest hint of green. It gleamed in the half-light, the etched lines of runes catching and throwing the rays in unpredictable directions.

He worked in silence, not out of any reverence but because every sense was attuned to the possibility of error. The bowl was delicate; too much pressure on a solder joint and the hair-fine coil would snap, too little and the resonance would wander, rendering the whole device nothing more than an ornament. Dexter's fingers guided the final copper arm into its mounting, the spiral settling with a sound so slight that only someone bred for the frequency would have noticed it. A click, a flex, then the whisper as the fitted glass ring slid over the lip and locked in place.

He tested the assembly, rotating it by a fraction, checking the play and the alignment. Each step was measured. In his mind's eye, he was already writing the notes in his ledger: 'Assembly complete. No rattle, no drift. Capacitor at rest: low hum, as predicted.'

He leaned back, only then aware that he'd been holding his breath for most of the operation. The air in the clinic was thick with the residue of last night's distillation—licorice root and dried feverfew, just a touch of the poppy tincture that he always claimed was for emergencies but which made its way into nearly every one of his after-hours projects. There was another scent, under that: the low, earthy smell of the wood, cut with the sharper, metallic edge of fresh solder. For a moment, he felt perfectly calibrated, the world reduced to a series of tasks and the short, pleasant ache in his wrists.

It was then that Jen entered.

She did not knock, but there was a warning anyway: the faintest shift in the wood grain as her boots crossed the threshold, the hush as she let the door ease itself closed behind her. She paused, just inside the entrance, hands in the pockets of her faded uniform. If Dexter had not known her for years, he might have missed the subtle signs that she was impressed: the way her gaze lingered on the capacitor, the brief but deliberate scan of his workspace for the inevitable chaos. She found none, and her lips pressed together in something close to satisfaction.

He did not turn, but acknowledged her with a tilt of the head. "You are early."

Jen's voice was unhurried, but it carried the gravity of someone who'd spent her life giving and receiving orders. "Couldn't sleep," she said. "Didn't see the point in pretending."

He heard the unspoken addendum: especially with that thing howling out by the lakeside. It was quieter now, but the banshee's wail had become as much a feature of the town as the fog or the smell of wet hay.

She approached the work table, the only sound a tiny exhale as she leaned in to study the device. "Looks expensive," she said.

"Only in time," Dexter replied, hands hovering just above the bowl as if unwilling to let it go. He allowed himself a glance at her: Jen's

hair was still in its morning tail, streaked with a little more grey than the week before; her eyes had the bloodless clarity of someone who had not yet decided how to feel about the day. She wore her badge, but the sword was missing. That was new.

For a moment, Jen just watched. Dexter felt the weight of it, the measured, patient observation. It would have been easier if she'd just demanded an explanation; the silence was more invasive than any question. He busied himself with a cloth, buffing a thumbprint from the inside of the bowl.

"You ever get tired?" Jen said, at last.

He blinked, surprised by the question. "Of what?"

She gestured, not at the device, but at him. "Of pretending you're not afraid."

His hand froze, the cloth stilled in mid-motion. "I do not—"

"Dex," she cut in, gently. "You move so fast around town, it's like you're always two steps ahead of something. If you're not thinking, you're fixing. If you're not fixing, you're building. I get it, I really do." She shrugged, a motion that made her shoulders look even broader. "But you know, if you slowed down a little, people would still like you. Maybe more."

Dexter found himself staring at the copper rim, the way the light bent and refracted through the glass. The words landed in a place he'd spent years trying not to acknowledge. He felt a warmth at the tips of his ears, a tell that would have infuriated him if he were not already so completely caught off guard.

Jen went on, softer now: "You're not alone in this. Whatever it is you're carrying, the rest of us can take a turn."

He tried to speak, but the words caught. His mind raced to find a retort—something witty, or at least functional—but nothing surfaced. Instead, he watched his own hand as it trembled just slightly, the steadiness that had served him in a thousand emergencies now undermined by a single, precise incision of empathy.

He set the bowl down, careful not to make a sound.

Jen must have noticed, because she smiled—not a smirk, but a real, slow smile that brought out the old campaign lines at the corners of

her eyes. "That thing gonna fix the noise?" she asked, nodding at the capacitor.

Dexter cleared his throat, then nodded. "It will help. If the theory is right."

Jen straightened, all business again. "You want me to help install it?"

He hesitated, then found himself saying, "No. I—yes. Maybe. I would appreciate that."

Her eyebrows went up, and for a split second she looked genuinely pleased. "See?" she said. "Not so hard."

He blinked, unsure if she was talking about the device or about asking for help. He risked a look at her face, and in the steely grey of her eyes he found nothing but unguarded affection.

The banshee wail, which had been dormant all morning, chose that moment to flutter back into the edge of hearing: a thin, needle-fine vibration that ran straight up Dexter's spine. He winced, but Jen either did not notice or chose to ignore it.

She reached out, just for a second, and rested her hand on his shoulder. It was not a comforting gesture, not exactly—it was more a statement, a way of saying you're here, and I'm here, and that's the end of it. The contact shocked him; it was like finding out your own house had a secret room, and that someone had been living there all along.

Dexter let out a long, slow breath. He did not realize how much tension he had been holding until it started to bleed away, leaving him hollow but strangely buoyant.

They stood like that for a moment, neither moving nor speaking. Outside, the world was warming; he could hear the first sounds of carts on the road, the hiss of water poured over a fresh fire. The banshee wail receded as quickly as it had come, leaving behind only the memory and the slow, steady pulse of Jen's hand.

Finally, she let go. "If you need a ladder, mine's in the shed."

He nodded, blinking fast to clear the haze. "Thank you."

Jen grinned, then stepped back. "I'll see you at noon, then."

She left as quietly as she had entered, the only trace her scent—a

mix of cold morning and the black soap they all used in the winter—and the memory of her words.

Dexter stood alone in the clinic, hands finally still. He looked at the Harmonic Capacitor, then at his own reflection in the curved glass. For the first time in a long while, he did not look like someone preparing to run.

He allowed himself to think, just briefly, that maybe he could stand still after all.

For most of the morning, Dexter kept his hands busy. It was safer that way; better to wrap splints, grind leaves, polish glass, than to let his mind dwell on the words Jen had left behind. The Harmonic Capacitor sat in its pride of place on the work table, steady as a clock, every component aligned and humming with stored potential. He'd found a rhythm in the work, a way to stretch minutes into hours, and if he caught himself thinking about Jen's visit, he would let the thought pass by like a stray cat—seen but not followed.

Still, the words had landed. They echoed in the quiet, just under the sound of his own movements.

"You're not alone in this. Whatever it is you're carrying, the rest of us can take a turn."

He'd never thought of himself as alone, exactly. Isolated, yes, but not alone—he lived in the middle of a town that brought him its wounds and its gossip with equal regularity. But Jen had said it differently, had made it sound like a kind of invitation, and it unsettled him in ways he could not define.

A little before noon, as promised, Jen returned. This time, she knocked—two short, sharp raps, just enough warning for Dexter to slide the pestle into the mortar and wipe his hands on a cloth. He called out, "Enter," and watched the door swing inward.

She wore the same uniform, though she'd put the sword on this time. Her hair was damp, and she smelled of cold air and the sour tang of the town's well water. She closed the door behind her, careful not to let it slam.

Dexter nodded in greeting, then gestured at the table. "It's ready."

Jen glanced at the device, then at him. "You look better," she said.

He shrugged. "Work helps."

She moved to the table, ran her finger along the glass lip of the Capacitor. "It's a thing of beauty," she said, and meant it.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Dexter waited, sure that she had something else to say. He was not disappointed.

"You know," Jen began, voice soft but steady, "I've watched you for a long time, Dex. Not in a creepy way—more like a neighbor checking on a neighbor." She smiled, and it made her face look almost young. "You move so fast, sometimes I don't even see you leave. One moment you're on the square, next you're by the lakeside, then you're back at the clinic with blood on your shirt and not a hair out of place."

Dexter tensed. "Is that... a problem?"

She shook her head. "No. Not for me. Not for anyone who matters."

The banshee wail chose that moment to return, threading through the walls and vibrating the bottles on the shelf. It started low, then climbed into a high, quivering note that hovered at the edge of perception. Dexter felt his jaw clench, the old tension building at the base of his skull.

Jen heard it, too. She made a face, then looked at him sideways. "Does it hurt, for you? The noise?"

He thought about lying, but her eyes made it pointless. "Yes," he said. "It's like being held together with wire."

She considered that, then nodded. "You could tell people, you know. Most would understand."

He doubted it, but did not argue.

Jen let her gaze drift over the room—the jars, the neat rows of tools, the little shelf of curiosities he'd never admitted to collecting. "I saw you, once," she said, as if it were a secret she'd been saving. "A year or two ago. A child broke his leg at the blacksmith's. Someone ran to get you, but by the time they came back, you were already there. I saw you. You moved faster than anything I've ever seen. Faster than the eye could track."

Dexter's hands stilled. He felt his pulse quicken, the edges of his

vision sharpening. The banshee wail crested and trembled, as if in sympathy.

"I thought I'd imagined it," Jen went on. "But then you kept doing it. Not always, not in front of crowds, but enough that I noticed."

He looked down at his hands, then at the floor. "I didn't mean to—"

She cut him off with a laugh. "Dex. You saved the kid's leg. No one cared how you did it. No one wanted to look too close. That's the real magic of this place: everyone's a little bit strange, and everyone is loved anyway. That's what makes North Pointe special. It's what makes *you* special."

He said nothing, but his shoulders eased a fraction.

Jen leaned in, elbows on the table. "You think you're hiding, but you're not. Not really. People see what they want to see, and what they see is the man who fixes what hurts."

For the first time in the conversation, Dexter met her eyes. He saw the years in her face, the tiredness and the stubborn hope, the kindness that never needed a reason. Her acceptance was total, unflinching.

The banshee wail dipped, then faded. In the silence that followed, Dexter felt the world shift, just slightly, as if a weight had been moved from one side of the scales to the other.

He cleared his throat. "Why are you telling me this?"

Jen sat back, thinking. "Because I've known too many people who thought they had to live half a life, just to make everyone else comfortable. And I think you deserve a whole one."

It was not an argument, or a demand. It was a gift, wrapped in plain words and left on the table for him to open at his own pace.

He did not know what to say, so he said nothing. He let the quiet fill the room, let the last of the banshee's echo settle into the plaster and the floorboards.

Jen checked the clock on the wall. "We should go soon. If we want to get this thing on the tower before the evening wind picks up."

He nodded, grateful for the change in subject.

She stood, stretching. "I'll get the ladder."

He watched her go, her stride easy, the weight of the world no heavier than it had been when she entered. Dexter listened to her

footsteps down the hallway, then let his breath out in a long, slow sigh.

He looked at the Harmonic Capacitor, then at his own reflection in the glass. The face he saw was not what he expected: it was softer, less haunted. He thought of Jen's words—everyone is a little strange, and everyone is loved anyway.

He let himself believe it.

When Jen returned, they carried the device between them, careful not to touch the glass. Outside, the wind was cold but manageable. They worked in tandem: Jen steady on the ladder, Dexter passing tools and making adjustments as she called for them. The two of them made an easy team. When the device was mounted, Dexter checked the alignment, then stepped back to admire their work.

The bowl caught the sun, refracted it in a circle of light that danced across the clinic's wall. Jen grinned, and for a moment, Dexter felt a smile tug at his own mouth.

"Looks right," she said.

He agreed. "It does."

They stood there together, side by side, not speaking. The wind picked up, but the wail did not return.

It was enough.

It wasn't until Jen was halfway down the ladder, boots crunching in the frost, that Dexter felt the moment slip away from him. The task was complete, the device installed, the world as it was supposed to be—except for a single, unignorable fact: the real work, the terrifying, unavoidable work, had not yet begun.

He lingered, staring up at the copper bowl where it gleamed atop the clinic's eaves. The wind pressed at his back, insistent but not unkind. There was nothing left to adjust, nothing left to fix with the steadiness of his hands. The thought made him uneasy, but there was also a freedom in it, the sense that he could, just this once, stand in place and not be consumed by the need to act.

Jen waited at the bottom, arms folded. She didn't speak, didn't

hurry him along. She just stood in the sunlight, letting him decide when to move.

He came down slowly, one rung at a time. When he reached the ground, he dusted his hands off on his coat and said, "Thank you."

Jen smiled, her face ruddy from the wind. "It was nothing. I like a job where you can see the result."

He nodded, then hesitated. The words he wanted to say gathered at the back of his throat, each one heavier than the last. He'd rehearsed them, in one form or another, for years, but had never managed to let them out.

He tried, and failed. He tried again, and this time the words came, halting but clear:

"I need your help, Jen. I can't solve this alone."

There was a silence—not uncomfortable, but so absolute that he could hear the blood in his ears. For a second, he regretted saying anything, wanted to take it back and bury the admission where no one could find it.

But Jen only nodded, slow and deliberate. She stepped closer, looking up at the Harmonic Capacitor, then back at Dexter.

"I know," she said. "I figured it out a while ago."

He blinked. "How?"

She shrugged. "You're good at a lot of things, Dex. Pretending isn't one of them. At least, not with me."

He didn't know whether to laugh or to disappear. Instead, he looked away, studying the clinic's windows, the way the sunlight caught on the frost, the shadows that pooled beneath the eaves. He could feel Jen watching him, not with pity, but with something steadier.

She reached out, not to comfort, but to connect. Her hand settled on his shoulder, and he realized that she'd done this before—last night, this morning, a dozen times in small ways he'd always managed to overlook.

"We'll fix it," Jen said. "The two of us. If the wail comes back, we'll make it quiet. And if it doesn't, we'll find something else to do."

Dexter's heart thumped, wild and irregular, but with each breath the rhythm grew calmer. The tension that had lined his shoulders since

the first day of the noise began to ease, replaced by a warmth that was almost embarrassing. He felt the flush creep up his neck, into his cheeks, and wondered if Jen noticed.

Of course she did.

"You look better," she said. "More alive."

He made a face. "I'll try not to let it go to my head."

She snorted, amused. "I'll see you tonight at the Claw?"

He nodded, and the thought of it—the noise, the light, the unguarded laughter—did not fill him with dread.

After she left, Dexter remained by the ladder, hands shoved deep in his pockets. The banshee wail had not returned, but he could sense the tension in the air, as if the world was waiting to see what he'd do next.

He took a breath, then another, letting them settle inside him.

He looked up at the Harmonic Capacitor, at the way the sun set fire to the glass and sent flickers of color across the snow. It was not perfect—nothing ever was—but it was there, and it worked, and it was something he had made with his own hands.

He allowed himself a small smile, just enough to feel it.

When the next wail came, he'd be ready.

And this time, he wouldn't face it alone.

twenty

. . .

THE BANSHEE WAIL returned at noon—rising, without warning, from the low winter light like a wire pulled taut until it snapped. It vibrated through the square, through stone and mortar, through the glass of the bakery window where Dexter watched the children play, and then, as if all the world had been waiting for a signal, the noise detonated. It was louder than before, brighter, sharp enough to strip paint from walls and reason from the mind.

He felt it first as a pressure behind the eyes. Then, as the air in his lungs thickened and the muscles in his chest clamped down, the banshee song crashed through the world like a tidal wave.

Dexter dropped the cup in his hand. It hit the counter and shattered, the pieces rattling out a syncopated percussion to the banshee's sustained note. He was already at the door—coat half-buttoned, sleeves rolled up—before anyone in the bakery even managed to look up.

Sam was outside, leaning against the bakery's north wall, a cigar in her teeth and her hands jammed into the pockets of her vest. She was grinning, but in the way someone does when the only other choice is to let the panic show. "Here we go," she called, rolling her head to pop the tension in her neck. "The encore we didn't order."

Jen was next, stepping out from the side alley where she'd been inspecting the town's boundary stones. Her face was stone: all cheek-bone and intent, eyes narrowed to slits against the noise. The banshee's cry was so loud, she had to lean in close to Dexter and yell directly into his ear: "We gather, or we scatter. Pick."

Dexter did not hesitate. "Gather," he said. He scanned the street and pointed: "Start at the green, work clockwise. Sam, take the tailor and the clockmaker. Jen, the cobbler and the grocer. I'll take the fishmonger and the smithy." He met their eyes—Sam's sparking, Jen's steady—and knew they were already running through their own checklists.

Sam laughed, short and sharp. "This town," she said, as if to no one in particular, "wouldn't know what to do without a disaster every other week." She snapped her fingers at Dexter, as if to say, "You owe me a drink if we survive."

He followed Jen, coat flying behind him, the banshee's wail a physical force that pressed against his skull and made every step feel like an act of defiance.

The main green was chaos. A dozen townsfolk stood in uneven clumps: some with hands over their ears, some with their faces twisted in agony, some just staring up at the sky as if the source of the noise might appear there, in a crack between the clouds.

Dexter wove through them, pausing just long enough to take a head count, then crossed the road to the stables.

Warren was there, as always, arms folded over his chest, his green skin gone a pallid yellow under the force of the noise. The banshee wail seemed to have no respect for biology or size; Warren looked seconds from tears.

"Dexter!" he bellowed, but even at full volume it was barely audible. "What in the lakeside hell is this?"

Dexter motioned for him to stay put, then pointed at the banshee's direction—up and over the rooftops, toward the old bell tower at the center of town. Warren got the message, nodded once, and stayed where he was.

The fishmonger was next. Dexter ducked through the door, blinking against the half-dark, and found one of Calder's kids curled

on the floor, hands over her ears, rocking. Dexter knelt beside her, forced her hands away from her head, and met her eyes. "It will end," he said. "You are safe." She trembled, but the words seemed to give her a line to hold onto.

He guided her up, steered her gently toward the door, and sent her in the direction of the green. Only then did he allow himself a moment to recalibrate.

The banshee wail was, impossibly, getting worse. It was no longer a single note, but a harmony of three, then five, then more, a stack of voices that crawled over each other in a desperate bid for attention. It didn't just hurt; it demanded to be understood. He felt the urge to scream himself, to match the sound, to make his own pain matter in the face of so much unfiltered noise.

He took a breath, then two, then reached for the thin sliver of logic he had left.

To the bakery, then. He ran, the sound flaying the edges of his mind, until he slammed through the door and into a wall of heat and sugar.

Makota was at the oven, whiskers laid back flat against her face, tail lashing, hands buried in the dough as if she could knead her own pain into submission. Sora and Kene were nowhere to be seen; perhaps they had burrowed into a flour bin, or maybe they had the sense to hide in the root cellar.

Makota did not look up. "Dexter," she said, her voice nearly lost. "It is in my head. I can feel it in my teeth."

Dexter moved behind the counter, placed his hands lightly on her shoulders, and felt the tremor running through her body. "It wants you to listen," he said. "Not to fear it. Just listen."

She hissed, but not at him. "It is too much."

He squeezed, then let go. "Come outside. Bring bread if you want. The others are gathering."

She nodded, once, and then, with a quick swipe of her paw, snatched a loaf from the shelf. "I need to finish the bake," she said, the words a feeble protest. "Tomorrow is seed-day."

He smiled, despite everything. "There will be bread. There is always bread."

She followed him out, her posture still agitated, but her eyes clearer than before.

In the green, Sam had already gathered a cluster of townsfolk: the tailor and the potter, a pair of children, a tanner's apprentice, and the traveling mapmaker who had spent the last two days sketching the town's outer wall in obsessive detail. Sam stood at the center, her hands raised as if conducting an orchestra. "Everyone shut up," she bellowed, and the effect was immediate: the group fell silent, save for the keening that filled every other space.

Dexter caught Sam's eye, and she flashed him a grin that showed every one of her teeth. "We good?" she called.

He nodded, then turned to see Jen shepherding the rest of the town across the green, her presence so calm and authoritative that even the screaming seemed to soften as she passed.

In less than five minutes, they had everyone: the essential staff, the curious, the terrified, the ones who could not possibly have made a difference but were here anyway. The banshee wail had lost none of its force, but the act of gathering—the simple refusal to be alone in the face of it—had changed the quality of the sound.

Dexter stepped onto the low stone step at the edge of the square, raised his hands, and tried to make his voice carry over the noise. "It feeds on what is not said," he shouted. "It gets stronger when we pretend we're not hurting. This is all an echo of our own unhealed pain."

Sam picked up the thread instantly. "So let's hurt out loud!" she called. "Best therapy in the world!"

There was laughter—real laughter, jagged and weak, but genuine. The banshee song dipped, then surged back, but its edge had been blunted.

Dexter looked at the crowd, searching for the first volunteer. It was Makota who stepped forward, the loaf of bread clutched to her chest as if it were a shield.

She looked up, eyes wide, voice barely more than a whisper: "Every day, my back aches," she said. "I bend over the oven, and I pretend it's nothing. But I want to whimper. Sometimes I do."

The banshee's wail shifted. The pitch around Makota's head

changed, from shrill to almost... tender. It was still loud, but it harmonized, layering in a resonance that sounded like the echo of her own voice.

Sam patted Makota's shoulder, then took a bite from the bread, speaking around it: "I can't feel three fingers on my left hand," she said. "Never could, never will. They stitched them back, but the nerves are gone. Sometimes I feel them anyway, in the cold."

The air around Sam shimmered, the banshee's note diving and weaving, then settling into a rhythm that matched her words.

Dexter looked at Jen, who raised her chin. "My sister," she said, "died in a fire. I think about her every time I see the lamps lit, every night. I don't talk about it, but I should."

The banshee wail became almost musical, the separate strands forming a kind of call and response, a dialogue instead of a scream.

A traveler in the crowd—a man with boots crusted in salt, eyes red-rimmed from more than just the noise—stepped forward. He looked at his shoes, then up at the sky. "I'm lonely," he said. "My wife died last spring. I haven't slept through the night since." He shrugged, the motion hopeless. "It feels better to say it."

The banshee's voice around him dropped an octave, the pressure in the air releasing just a bit. He straightened, as if the weight of the world had been redistributed, if not entirely lifted.

One of the children piped up, emboldened by the new rules. "I'm afraid of the cellar at night," she said. "There's nothing down there, but I hate it."

The wail, in her space, trilled and flickered, then faded to a whisper. She giggled, then looked at her mother, who only shook her head and squeezed her daughter tight.

Dexter scanned the crowd, seeing each person in turn—each confession, each admission, each little truth changing the banshee's cry in a unique way. The song was still immense, still inescapable, but it was no longer pure pain. It was now a choir, a hundred voices woven together, each strand a story that refused to be hidden.

The traveler's confession stuck in Dexter's mind. He saw how the man's shoulders dropped, how he stopped shaking. The relief was real, if fleeting.

Jen worked the crowd like a campaign sergeant, moving from cluster to cluster, encouraging more truths. She set a firm hand on the shoulder of a farm boy who had not yet spoken, and he blurted out: "I stole coins from my father's till. I never told anyone. I'm sorry." The banshee noise in his space dissolved entirely, leaving only the sound of his own ragged breaths.

Sam, on the other side of the green, pulled laughter from the older crowd: "If I have to hear one more person complain about the privy seat in the pub, I swear I'll set it on fire myself." The banshee responded with a kind of chortle—a warble that almost sounded like delight.

Makota's next words were quieter, meant only for Dexter. "Does it ever go away?"

He shook his head. "No. But it can be carried."

She nodded, accepting this, and returned to her station behind the bread table, shoulders looser than he had ever seen them.

The confessions spread, at first in fits and starts, then in waves. The banshee's song changed with each admission, sometimes fading, sometimes intensifying, always shifting. It became a living thing, a mirror for the pain the town had tried so hard to ignore.

By the time the sun began to dip behind the ridge, the banshee wail had been transformed. It was still present—sometimes even louder than before—but it had been made familiar. It no longer ruled the green with terror; now, it was a thing to be acknowledged, even respected.

Dexter stood with Jen and Sam at the edge of the square, listening to the new harmony. "It isn't gone," he said.

"It never is," said Jen.

"But it's bearable," said Sam. She looked at Dexter, grinning, but with a new respect. "Not a bad day's work, Doc."

He nodded, allowing himself a rare smile. The banshee's song was their song, now—loud, imperfect, but entirely their own.

And in the middle of it, the town stood together, every one of them a little less afraid than they had been that morning.

Dexter slipped away while Jen and Sam held court on the green, their voices rising above the chorus of confessions like anchors for the

whole desperate scene. He did not announce his exit; he simply ducked through the crowd, moved past the bakery's shadow, and out onto the town square, where the cold wind swept everything clean.

Here, the banshee's song was thinner, but no less sharp. The Harmonic Capacitor—mounted at the peak of the bakery, its copper bowl tilted skyward—caught the late-day sun and scattered it in overlapping rings, projecting halos that trembled with every pulse of the wail. The glass arms of the device vibrated, blurring at the tips, and when the wind shifted, Dexter could hear the resonance it made: a quiet, bell-like undertone that chased the banshee's voice from one end of the green to the other.

For a moment, Dexter stood still and simply let the noise pass through him. In the aftermath of so many confessions, his own mind felt like a house after a storm: every shelf upended, every loose object rattling in memory of what had just happened. He put his hands in his coat pockets and watched the sun draw lines along the rooftops, watched the light refract through the Capacitor and paint the world in shades of orange and blue.

Beyond the bakery, past the town's double gates, the Purists had set up a perimeter. Even from this distance, their white robes stood out against the mud and the frost, a row of lanterns and torches held aloft like an accusation. They circled a brass brazier, each figure in turn casting handfuls of some pungent herb into the flames. The smoke rolled out in heavy coils, thicker than air, clinging to the ground before being yanked upward by the banshee's shriek.

They chanted—not in unison, but in a jagged, overlapping rhythm, as if every one of them believed their own voice would be the one to finally push back the darkness. Dexter listened to the sound, and though he did not understand every word, the intent behind them was clear. These were not the hopeful prayers of a town in need; they were the weaponized catechisms of those convinced the world must be fixed, no matter how much it had to be broken first.

He studied the effect the Purists had on the banshee wail. For a second, he thought the noise had lessened. Then, with the precision of a surgeon, he realized what had changed: the song had doubled in volume around the camp, the harmonics so strong they actually bent

the firelight, distorting the white robes into grim caricatures of themselves. Each new round of chanting seemed to feed the wail, to give it a new verse, a higher octave. The banshees, whatever they were, were not being banished. They were being invited in, over and over, by the very people trying to exorcise them.

Dexter pressed his lips together, jaw locked, as he considered the implications. The Harmonic Capacitor was working—he could see its effect on the green, where the townsfolk milled in uneasy peace. But the pain outside the gates, the fear and the old, ossified shame, was not his to heal. Not alone.

He stood with his hands clenched in his pockets, motionless for so long that the light shifted, the sun dipping behind the ridge and turning the white of the Purists' robes to a shade like rotting teeth.

He could not stop thinking about the stories his people used to tell. Not the ones about Eaters of Pain, but the stories about those who thought pain could be erased from the world entirely. The old Siphons, the roundhouses, the generation that had tried to cure suffering by engineering it out of existence—and had failed, had left in their wake nothing but the banshee wails, the echo of every unhealed hurt stretched across centuries.

It had not been their fault, exactly. They had meant well. But every time Dexter closed his eyes, he could see their faces, could feel the weight of all that pain looking for a vessel, a way out.

He realized that he was trembling. It was not the cold; it was the knowledge that the song out there, beyond the gates, was an accusation with his name on it.

He pulled his hands free and flexed his fingers, staring at the skin stretched over bone, at the tiny scars that mapped the history of every experiment, every wound he'd ever borrowed or bartered away. He could not fix this by himself. He could not mend the world with just a bowl and a wire and a few clever tricks. The Capacitor was only a mirror; it needed the world to show itself honestly before it could do anything at all.

A scream—this one human, not banshee—echoed from the far side of the square. A cluster of townsfolk ran for the gate, voices tangled in panic. Dexter saw the cause immediately: the Purists had tried some-

thing new, had thrown a ring of fire onto the packed earth just beyond the gate, as if to summon or repel whatever it was they believed haunted the place.

But the banshee song did not fear the fire. It roared, swelled, and for the first time, it breached the gate entirely, filling the square with a physical wave of sound that made the shop signs shake and the icicles rattle on every roof.

Dexter moved without thinking, crossing the square in a handful of steps. The banshee's presence was palpable; he could feel the pressure in his joints, the itch in his teeth, the sensation that every molecule of his body was being rewritten, bent toward some alien logic. He welcomed it, just for a moment, let it fill him completely. Then, with a force of will that surprised even him, he shoved it back out, let it pass through without leaving a mark.

The effect was immediate. The children in the square stopped crying. The old men with their hands pressed to their temples looked up, confused to find themselves still alive. The noise was still there, but its power to terrify was diminished.

Behind him, he heard Sam's voice: "Dex! The hell are you doing?"

He turned, saw her and Jen arriving from opposite ends of the green, each with a crowd of townsfolk trailing behind them. They looked at him—at his posture, at the weird stillness in his face—and then, as if on cue, both moved toward him.

He met them at the center of the square, not trusting his voice until the echo of the banshee's latest cry had faded.

"We can't fight it," he said. "Not like this."

Jen's brow furrowed. "We keep the town together. That's always worked before."

Dexter shook his head, motioned at the gates, at the hungry fire and the white-robed figures who had become so certain in their ritual. "That's not a wound," he said. "It's a habit. The world keeps making more pain, every time someone tries to fix it by force."

Sam stared at him, then shrugged. "So what do we do? Wait it out?"

He considered the Harmonic Capacitor, the way it held the sun even as darkness crept in. "No," he said. "We let it finish the song."

Jen set her jaw, but nodded. "You mean a real confession. Not just the surface-level stuff."

He met her eyes. "Everyone. Not just the town. Even the ones who think they're outside of it."

The banshee's wail began anew, higher this time, more urgent. It circled the green, seeking a new place to settle.

Dexter turned to face the town. The people who had followed Jen and Sam now clustered around him, all of them watching, waiting for the next instruction. He could see the confusion in their eyes, the fear, the hope that someone else would take charge.

He stepped up onto the base of the old statue that had stood in the center of the square since the town's founding—a memorial to a hero no one really remembered. He took a breath, steadied himself, and let his voice ring out:

"If you have a pain you haven't named, say it now. If you have a truth you have never spoken, say it now."

A hush fell, so deep it seemed to devour the banshee's cry for a moment.

The first voice was a child, then two, then the potter's apprentice, then a wave of voices that broke over the square. Every confession, every admission, bent the banshee's song, made it less alien, more familiar. The noise no longer sounded like a monster clawing at the walls; it sounded like what it had always been: the sum of everything left unsaid.

Jen stepped up next to Dexter, her face as soft as he had ever seen it. She said, "Go on. We're listening."

Sam watched them both, a look of disbelief and admiration in her eyes, then clapped her hands together and barked, "Last one to confess has to buy the first round at the Claw."

That broke the tension. Laughter, even through tears, spread out like a balm.

The banshee's wail did not end. But, standing there in the fading sunlight, Dexter could see the truth of it: it had never wanted to be banished, only to be acknowledged. It was not a curse. It was a witness.

Dexter looked out over the crowd, their faces upturned and expect-

tant, and felt a weight settle in his chest that was both heavier and lighter than anything the banshees had ever conjured. Every instinct told him to shrink, to vanish into the edge of the crowd and become nothing more than a rumor, a shadow, a town legend nobody could quite remember. Instead, he forced himself up onto the plinth of the old hero statue, boots scraping stone, and let the last of the day's sunlight paint his face bone-white for everyone to see.

The banshee wail trembled on the threshold of silence, the town holding its breath with it. He tried to begin, found his mouth dry, and had to start over, the words coming slower than he liked. "My name is Dexter," he said, voice carrying farther than he'd have thought possible. "You know me as your surgeon, or your neighbor, or the one who shows up when the pain gets too loud."

The crowd nodded, some faces open, some wary. Even the children, usually so quick to fidget, stood completely still.

"I was born a Pain-Eater," he said. There was no reaction—not even a whisper—so he clarified: "It means that my kind are drawn to wounds. Not just the ones you see. The ones you carry inside, or the ones nobody wants to name. When I came here, I thought I could keep it quiet, that I could just... blend in."

He looked at his hands, noticed the tremor in his left, and tucked them into his coat pockets. "But the world doesn't work that way. What hurts wants to be heard, one way or another."

He lifted his head, met the eyes of the Purists standing at the back, their white robes now gray with soot and fear. "The banshees are not monsters. They are us—the noise of every sorrow, every regret, every pain we tried to bury. They started as a mistake. My people tried to end all suffering, centuries ago, and instead we made it impossible for anyone to hide from it ever again. The banshee's song is every wound we left unfinished."

A murmur ran through the square: not outrage, not disgust—just the slow, uncertain exhale of people realizing that the world was stranger, and perhaps simpler, than they'd thought.

Dexter looked at Jen and Sam. Jen's gaze was locked on his, unwavering, her arms folded but her posture open. Sam winked, grinned, and raised her eyebrows as if to say, "Took you long enough."

He almost laughed. Instead, he pressed on: "I thought I could fix this alone. But the song is louder than just me. If we want it gone, or at least changed, we have to name the hurt. All of it. Not just once, not just the easy parts. As long as there's pain unspoken, the world will find a way to shout it."

He let the silence hang. The banshee wail, true to its new nature, sang not with anger but with a kind of vigilant longing.

The first person to speak was Makota, her voice steady despite the way her tail flicked at her ankles. "Is that why the bread tastes different, some days?" she asked. "When you buy it, I mean."

Dexter nodded, and she gave a small, contented hum. "Good. I thought I was losing my mind."

Someone else—a woman from the lakeside, whose name Dexter never learned because she changed it every season—asked: "If we tell you, will it really go away?"

"No," Dexter said, honest. "But it will have a place. It won't hurt the same way."

Warren, arms folded, bellowed from halfway up the street. "I can live with that."

Questions followed: Could the banshee be tamed? Was it safe for children? Would it hurt less, or would it just be different? Would it come back if they left town? Dexter answered every one, sometimes with words, sometimes just by holding the gaze of the one asking, letting them see that nothing in the world frightened him more than his own fear of not belonging.

Then Sam, ever the one to cut through the haze, raised her chin and called out: "Well, you heard the doc. If you want a world with less screaming, let's get on with the screaming."

Laughter spread in waves, even through the exhaustion. The townsfolk crowded the statue base, each voice joining the next, a harmony not of suffering, but of things finally named. Even the Purists—so rigid in their doctrine—looked at each other, some with skepticism, some with something like relief, and lowered their arms.

Jen climbed up next to Dexter, her presence at his side unspoken reassurance. She said nothing, only looked at the crowd with the eyes

of someone who knew the cost of secrets and the worth of standing with the truth.

Dexter let his hands relax, the tremor gone, and looked out over the square. He saw the faces of a hundred different stories, and knew that every one of them would, in time, come to him with what they needed to say. The banshee's wail hovered, softer now, almost content.

He cleared his throat, found a smile, and said, "Thank you for listening. And... for not running away."

A beat, then Sam called out: "You kidding? I came for the drama, but I'm staying for the company."

Even the banshee, in that moment, seemed to laugh.

The chapter did not end with the world perfected, or the pain cured. There was still work to be done: wounds to be set, wounds to be witnessed, things to be said that nobody had words for yet.

But, for the first time, Dexter believed he could face it.

He looked at Jen, at Sam, at the faces in the square, and then at the trembling light of the Harmonic Capacitor as it caught the last of the day.

He straightened his coat, tucked his hands behind his back, and said—clear and confident—"I have an idea."

And this time, everyone was listening.

twenty-one

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NORTH POINTE COMMON TOWNE'S green was not so much a square as a gentle swelling of grass, rimmed with close-built stone shops whose roofs seemed to lean in to eavesdrop. This afternoon, it shone: tables ran nearly the width of the green, each creaking under the weight of plates, crocks, and every homemade curiosity the town could muster. At the far side, under a banner painted with three colors of indigo, Dardrad Pebbleblade stabbed a slab of something pink and marbled with a knife the size of a dog's leg, carving slices that steamed in the air and made the children howl for more.

Makota, standing a full head shorter, presided over the bakery's offering: a sprawling riot of rolls, crescents, and cookies so delicate that the merest touch might send a drift of sugar over the edge of the plate. Next to her, Prudence arranged swatches of fabric into careful piles, then unrolled a bolt of ribbon with a flourish that would have impressed the late Queen herself. Sam distributed the spirits, bottle in each hand, not even pretending she was measuring out fair shares.

Even Knodalon had left his post on the storehouse bench to claim a seat near the fountain, where he watched the world with an impassive satisfaction. The singing fountain itself—usually a trickle and a warble—now played a steady, gentle chord that layered itself behind all the

laughter and shouted greetings, as if the stone pipes were proud to be included.

Dexter stood at the near edge, hands hidden in his coat pockets, and felt the warmth of the scene as something both alien and astonishing. For a long moment, he considered returning to his clinic, inventing a new emergency, or perhaps helping the older children corral the small ones into a game that required neither teams nor rules. Instead, he set his jaw and walked straight into the heart of the celebration, determined not to orbit, but to land.

The first to spot him was Calder's daughter, Daisy. She nudged her sister and pointed, and within three seconds the whole family of Seaherders had set down their forks and begun a round of stage whispers:

"There he is—"

"Told you he'd show—"

"Ask him if he ever does eat, or if he's just a rumor—"

"Bet you a salmon spine he doesn't sit down—"

Dexter let them finish, then made a small bow to Daisy. "I have, in fact, eaten before," he said. "But I am partial to sardines, if there are any to spare."

Calder, never one for verbosity, scooped a forkful of pickled fish onto a slice of bread and handed it to Dexter with a gravity that bordered on ceremonial. "We done with the banshee business?" he asked, voice low.

Dexter nodded. "Soon."

The whole Seaherder table exhaled as if they'd been holding their breath for three days. Daisy clapped her hands. "Then you're one of us again!" She looked genuinely delighted, as if this had been in doubt. "Sit! Eat! If you don't, Mum will have to pack up the rest and it'll go to the dogs."

Dexter took the seat, surprised at how little resistance he had to the idea. The fish was soft, salty, and a little sharp at the end. "Excellent," he said, and meant it. The Seaherders watched him eat in a silence so expectant he felt compelled to add: "There is a theory I've been considering. About pain, and about the world."

Calder's eyebrows rose. "Let's hear it."

Dexter dabbed the corner of his mouth. "You do not have to keep pain forever. You can give it up, and the world will supply you with new pain as required. There's no need to hoard what you already have."

The table considered this, with the patience unique to fishing people. Calder shrugged. "Always figured the lake took as much as it gave. Makes sense." He poured a tiny shot of something for Dexter, and one for himself. They toasted, and Daisy cheered.

Across the green, Makota's laugh cut through the hum of conversation. Dexter, intent on following his new policy of maximum engagement, thanked the Seaherders and stood. He crossed to the bakery table, where Makota was locked in a high-stakes negotiation with two children, one of whom was in tears over a missing cookie.

"Impossible," Makota said, placing a gentle hand on the child's head. "I counted every one, and you—" she nodded at the weeping boy's sister, "—were seen with three at once." The accused wilted, then tried to recover with a plea of innocence.

Dexter interceded. "If the cookie did vanish, perhaps it can be replaced with a slice of that gingerbread? The one with the candied orange?"

Makota eyed him, whiskers twitching. "You think so? This one's a gingerbread critic." But she cut the slice anyway and handed it to the boy, whose tears vanished at the first taste.

Makota drew Dexter aside. "You look different today."

He considered. "I am attempting an experiment."

"Oh?"

"I am here, rather than not."

Makota grinned, a flash of tooth and good humor. "Don't overdo it. Your face might freeze like that." She offered him a poppyseed twist, which he accepted. "How's the banshee problem?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Mutated, not solved," Dexter said. "I think the solution is to get everyone to participate."

"Participate in what?"

"In being less alone with what hurts."

Makota seemed to think this was a perfectly reasonable suggestion. "That's what bread is for," she said. "That, and breakfast."

Dexter nodded, then, catching the eye of Dardrad Pebbleblade—whose beard bristled as he diced a sausage—excused himself and approached the butcher's table.

"Can I help you, Doc?" Dardrad asked, with a wariness that suggested a history of receiving unasked-for medical advice.

Dexter motioned to the array of meats. "What is that one, with the purple edge?"

Dardrad grunted. "Smoked venison, cured with wine. Try it." He stabbed a slice and handed it over on the tip of his knife.

Dexter took it, chewed, and found it excellent. "You take pride in your work."

The dwarf nodded. "Of course."

"Even though every time you cut yourself, you ask Jen to bandage it."

Dardrad scowled. "Better her than you. Last time you fixed my finger, I couldn't feel it for two days."

Dexter said, "That's what happens when you ask for numbness, and then double the dose."

The butcher laughed, a low rumble. "So what's your point, Doc?"

Dexter considered. "Perhaps pain isn't the enemy. Perhaps the hiding of it is."

Dardrad squinted, then shrugged. "Can't argue with that. But if you ever see Jen, tell her she owes me a drink."

Dexter promised, then moved on.

Prudence's table was an island of color. Every square inch was draped in fine cloth—bolts of blue and yellow and red, a fan of festival ribbons, and the centerpiece: a banner so new that the gold thread still caught the sunlight in every stitch. Prudence herself was arranging a handful of silk poppies in a glass jar, fussing with their angle, as if the entire celebration hinged on their precise orientation.

Dexter stopped at the edge of her table, uncertain whether to interrupt the performance or let it resolve. Prudence noticed him but did not immediately acknowledge. Instead, she pinned one more poppy in

place, then leaned back, surveying the display with the air of a general deploying her troops.

"Good day," Dexter said, voice low.

She replied with a tiny, exacting nod. "Dexter. Is this an emergency, or a review of table settings?"

He looked at the silk poppies, then the banner, then her hands—pale and trembling, but steady as a scale when they held cloth. "Neither," he said. "Though I do have a question."

Prudence regarded him with a skepticism usually reserved for apprentices. "Proceed."

Dexter gestured at the festival's edge, at the banners fluttering from every eave. "You are not from here," he said. "Yet your banners are everywhere. Your hand is everywhere."

She tensed, the movement almost invisible, but visible enough to him. "That's not unusual. Most people in North Pointe aren't from here. Most of us are running from somewhere."

Dexter waited a beat. "Your sisters. Have you heard from them since you left?"

The silence between them was perfect. Not the brittle silence of offense, but the hush that follows the first note of an unfamiliar tune.

Prudence reached for a ribbon, rolled it between her fingers, and said, "No. They don't write. They wouldn't dare. Our father would see the letters." She inhaled, quick and shallow, then let the ribbon coil loose. "I had to go. It was not a choice, not really. But I think about them every day."

Dexter considered the weight of her admission, the way her hands—so deft a moment before—now hovered, uncertain, above the bolts of cloth.

"I have wondered," Dexter said, "whether they miss you. Or whether they are angry you escaped."

Prudence looked at him for the first time, a quick, sharp glance. "Both, I suspect. I do not blame them. I would have been angry, too."

Dexter said, "You did not leave them behind. You left so they would have a way to follow, if needed."

This time her fingers stilled, resting flat on the cloth. The set of her jaw softened; her shoulders, which had been drawn up in perfect

posture, lowered by a fraction. She did not say anything for a long moment, but her whole presence shifted, as if a hidden stitch had finally given way and let the rest of her settle.

"If that is true," she said, "then I have done them a kindness, even if they never know it."

He nodded. "It is enough."

Prudence smiled, just barely—a tiny quirk at the edge of her lips, there and gone. "Thank you, Dexter."

He inclined his head, then stepped aside to let a pair of children ask about the price of hair ribbons. As he moved away, he heard her voice—quieter, more private—telling the children, "That's two for a copper. But today, you can have three. Tell your mother it was a festival discount."

Warren was easy to find. He stood near the butcher's table, one foot planted on the lower rail of a bench, his head and shoulders towering over the rest of the crowd. He had a tankard in one hand, a slice of Dardrad's sausage in the other, and his laugh rolled over the green like the call of a happy beast.

Dexter approached, weaving through the knots of people. Warren spotted him at a distance and bellowed, "Dexter! Come see what a real man's lunch looks like!"

Dexter joined the table, eye-level with Warren's elbow, and accepted a slab of sausage that could have doubled as a bludgeon. He nodded his thanks, then waited until Warren had finished a long swallow of whatever passed for beer at the Pebbleblade tent.

Warren wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, grinned, and leaned in. "You want something? Or are you just admiring the view?"

Dexter replied, "I have been interviewing the town."

Warren barked a laugh. "You and the Purists both, then."

Dexter's mouth twitched, but he pressed on. "I am looking for something specific. Old pain. The kind that does not heal on its own."

Warren's grin faded, replaced by a thoughtful frown. He set down the tankard, laced his fingers together, and rested his arms on the table. "You think I have old pain?"

Dexter shrugged. "You are the strongest man here. But sometimes the strongest have the deepest wounds."

Warren regarded him, then looked over the green, scanning the tables, the children, the laughing chaos of the festival. "I suppose you want to know about my family," he said, not quite a question.

"If you wish to tell it," Dexter replied.

Warren's face changed. The joking, affable exterior shrank, and in its place was something older and heavier. "It's not a secret. I was chased from home. My parents thought Susan was a curse, or a trick. That I was being manipulated by humans." He snorted, bitter. "Never saw it as love. Never saw her as anything but an enemy."

Dexter asked, "Do you miss them?"

Warren's eyes shone, but he did not look away. "Of course. I think of them when I look at Darby, and wonder if he would have made them proud, if they'd given him a chance."

There was a long, slow silence. The sound of the festival faded behind them, replaced by the softer notes of the singing fountain, which seemed to play only for the two of them now.

Dexter said, "You know, the world is full of people who inflict pain. But you alone can decide if you carry it with you."

Warren's hands, huge and green, balled into fists, then opened. He took a deep breath, let it out, and said, "Easier said than done."

"Yes," Dexter agreed. "But sometimes you just need to put it down for a while."

Warren laughed, this time softly. "Like a sword at the end of a battle?"

"Exactly."

The blacksmith considered, then looked over at the edge of the green, where Susan and Darby were helping Makota pack up trays of sweets. Darby was trying to balance a pie tin on his head, Susan laughing so hard she nearly dropped her own load.

Warren smiled, and his whole body softened. "I suppose I do have a family, after all."

Dexter patted Warren's arm. "A very good one."

Warren's voice was thick, but warm. "Thank you, Dexter. If you ever want a horseshoe, or a sword, you come to me. No charge."

Dexter smiled. "I will keep that in mind."

Leota was last, by design. She stood apart from the festival, at the

edge of the fountain, her black dress unmoved by the spring wind, her hair so dark it seemed to eat the sunlight. She watched the town with an intensity that was not judgment, but something closer to longing.

Dexter joined her in the shadow of the fountain's basin. He said nothing, simply mirrored her posture, hands folded behind his back.

Leota spoke first. "You are gathering confessions," she said. "You are very obvious."

He inclined his head, conceding the point.

She looked at him, eyes so dark they caught the blue of the sky and returned it black. "You do not need mine. I have made peace with what I was."

"Have you?" Dexter asked, voice gentle.

She smiled, small and private. "I do, most days. But even a witch has wounds." She touched her chest, above her heart. "I lived a long time as someone else. I gave up my name, my life, for this second chance. Sometimes I wonder if I regret it."

Dexter said, "It is possible to honor the past without carrying all of its weight."

Leota laughed, a sound like glass bells. "You are wise for one so thin."

He shrugged. "It is my nature."

She considered him, then said, "Would you like to see it?" She did not wait for his answer, only closed her eyes and let a slow breath slip from her lips. Her hands moved in a simple, fluid motion—one palm cupped, the other sweeping above it—and the air shimmered. For a moment, the light around her bent, and Dexter saw a memory projected in the shadow of the fountain: a young man, lean and proud, standing in armor with a sword at rest. Then the image faded, replaced by Leota herself, same as ever, but lighter somehow. She opened her eyes and looked at Dexter. "There. Gone."

Dexter, who had seen hundreds of illusions and magics in his years, found himself unexpectedly moved. "Thank you," he said.

Leota smiled, a real and brilliant thing. "I suspect you will need that gesture soon. There are bigger pains to mend."

He nodded. "It is nearly time."

She patted his hand, cool and sure. "Go on, then. Save the world."

Dexter bowed, then left her to the fountain's song.

He walked a slow lap around the green, replaying each conversation, each confession. His head was full, not with pain, but with the strange, weightless feeling of a secret finally aired. He realized, suddenly, that the banshee's wail—which had haunted every corner of the town for days—was absent. In its place was only the quiet, persistent hum of life, and the laughter of people who knew, at last, that they were not alone.

Dexter stopped in the center of the green, hands in his pockets, and watched as the sun lowered itself onto the slate roofs and the children ran wild between the legs of every table and bench. The world was not finished, not by a long shot.

But the next part was ready.

He straightened his coat, checked that his hands were steady, and walked toward the fountain, where the town would soon gather for the final confession.

The last of the sunlight spread itself over the green, gilding every shopfront and banner, even the deep shadow at the base of the singing fountain. The tables had emptied and refilled, each cycle leaving more laughter in the air and less tension in the shoulders of the crowd. Children dashed through the leftover food and confetti, but even their wildest shrieks seemed muted, as if the town itself was learning to keep its voice to a pleasant hum.

Dexter waited for a lull. He watched the crowd—Makota holding a tray of citrus bars aloft like a trophy, Sam arguing the relative merits of sour ale with a trio of travelers, Prudence retightening the banner's cord, Warren tossing Darby in the air while Susan watched with mock disapproval. Even Leota had taken a seat, perched on the fountain's rim, black dress pooling around her feet like a midnight tide.

When the time felt right, Dexter stepped up beside the fountain and raised his voice, amplified not by magic or force but by an odd, natural authority he'd never known he had.

"If you are not allergic to sentiment," he called, "I have a few words to say."

A ripple ran through the green—curiosity first, then an expectant hush. People drew closer, some with plates, some with drinks, some

with only the uncertain hope that something memorable was about to happen.

Dexter looked at his hands, then at the faces in the crowd, and began.

"I have lived in North Pointe for eight years," he said. "Some of you have known me since the first week. Some only know me from the clinic, or from my occasional laps around the green. I have tried, very hard, not to stand out."

He paused, measuring the silence. The fountain bubbled on, a single pure note threading through the hush.

"But the world, as you may have noticed, does not like things to stay hidden. Especially pain." He waited for a laugh, but none came, so he pressed on. "You've all felt the noise these past weeks—the banshee song, the headaches, the dreams that do not leave you alone. Some of you may have wondered why it always seemed louder when I was near."

A few nervous chuckles; a few glances exchanged.

"It is because I am an Eater of Pain. My kind is rare, and generally tries not to advertise, but the wail is tuned to us, like a bell to its own echo. I have spent my life trying to quiet it—first by myself, then, when that failed, by learning to help other people do the same. That is why I am a surgeon, and why the town's pain, for a while, got so loud."

He could see it now: the subtle change in posture as people remembered old wounds, old arguments, and the first time the wail had pierced their sleep.

"My kind has always served as a kind of confessor for the Night People," Dexter went on. "You may have heard that phrase, or the other: The Hidden Society. What it means is that there are more kinds of people in the world than the old stories tell, and most of them have never had anyone to name the thing that hurts. In North Pointe, you gave me the chance to do that work. Even when it got strange."

He looked at Jen, then at Sam, then at the whole of the green, and said, "So, if you are wondering what comes next—what happens when someone like me tells you the truth—I have no answer except

this: the world does not get quieter on its own. But, together, it can get easier to bear."

He stopped, feeling suddenly foolish. The fountain filled the silence with a gentle, harmonic buzz, as if it, too, had decided to let the moment linger.

Warren, predictably, was the first to break the silence. He raised his tankard, voice booming. "Well, that explains a few things!" Laughter, this time, rolled through the crowd.

Makota, next, called out, "Does that mean you can't get hang-overs?" More laughter.

Sam put down her glass, wiped her mouth on the back of her sleeve, and said, "You're one of us, Dexter. Always have been. And you're not the only one who eats pain for a living."

That earned a long, scattered applause—awkward at first, then genuine.

Prudence, ever the analyst, raised a finger. "Is it possible for you to take away sorrow as easily as you do physical pain?"

Dexter replied, "Sorrow is persistent. But it is lighter when shared." He felt the truth of it as he spoke; for the first time in years, the band of tension around his chest slackened, as if every confession had, in its own way, let a little more air into the world.

Leota, from her place on the fountain, tilted her head and said, "You realize, of course, that the Purists have no answer for this kind of magic."

Dexter shrugged. "Let them try."

A round of toasts followed—half-sincere, half-mocking the seriousness of the moment. The mood, previously edged with uncertainty, softened. Even the travelers, who had not understood every word, seemed to sense that something important had shifted.

For a while, the green was nothing but noise—laughter, conversation, the clatter of mugs, the splintering of children's games as the sun slipped low. But under it all, the banshee's wail was gone, replaced by the warm, full chord of voices in agreement.

Dexter stood by the fountain, hands at his sides, and tried to process the new feeling in his own chest. There was no band of pressure, no buzz at the edge of hearing. For a moment, he wondered if he

would miss the old pain, the way a man might miss a limp he'd grown used to.

But then Susan's laughter cut the air, and Warren's son tumbled past with a slice of pie, and Sam pulled Dexter into a sudden, bear-hugging side-clinch that nearly took him off his feet. "You're not done yet, Doc," she said in his ear. "Town's gonna have a new injury before nightfall, and I want to see if you can still fix it with your secret out."

Dexter smiled, not the careful, polite smile of before, but a full, unguarded baring of teeth. "I expect business will improve."

Makota waved a pastry in his direction. "You must try the lemon. It's an experiment, like you."

He took the pastry, and found it excellent.

Jen, leaning in the shadow of the bakery's eaves, caught his eye and lifted her mug in salute. "You did good, Dexter."

He nodded, unable to find any words that improved on the moment.

Leota, alone now on the fountain's rim, spoke quietly to him as he passed: "Now you are ready."

"For what?"

"To listen to the banshees. For real, this time."

Dexter considered, then nodded. "I am."

He walked to the center of the green, among the voices and the lights, and let himself settle. The world's wounds were not gone; they never would be. But, for once, they did not demand to be shouted or hidden. They could simply be named, and then, maybe, forgotten.

He closed his eyes, let the warmth and the noise settle into his bones, and waited for whatever the world needed to say next.

It would come, in its time. He was ready.

twenty-two

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AT THE HINGE of day and night, the square emptied out. Twilight stretched the shopfront shadows long and thin, and the bright canvas of festival banners sagged, their paint bleeding in the dew. Dexter stood in the town center, back to the old statue and face to the lintel of the bakery where the last children shrieked and scrambled for whatever cookies Makota let them steal from the trays. His coat, heavier and blacker than the evening itself, was the only thing in motion. He did not shiver.

He listened.

The town's festival had ended like all the others: in a sticky hum of satisfied bellies, mild tipsiness, and the exhausted hilarity of people who knew they'd have to clean it all up in the morning. The human voices faded first, replaced by the distant click of insects waking to their own midnight, and then by the intermittent howl of the wind through the chimney pots. Dexter waited for the next layer, the one that belonged to no world he'd ever seen mapped.

The banshees sang. Not a steady, low wail this time, but a brawl of noise: as if a hundred griefs, long smothered, had clawed their way out of the root cellar and now argued for primacy. It made the air seem brittle, made the cobbles under Dexter's boots vibrate with memory of

every regret the town had ever accumulated. The sound didn't rise so much as congeal, all edges and desperate, overlapping need.

Dexter let it happen. He let the square empty itself of noise and of people. He let his hands come out of his pockets, pale and precise, and splay on either side of his ribs, as if bracing himself against a blow he both expected and deserved.

He drew in a breath. Not shallow, not sharp—he made it slow, as if to convince the body to accept what was coming. It felt, at first, like nothing: air, cold and faintly sweet, the way it always was in the hours after a rain. But then the taste of it changed. The temperature dropped, or seemed to, and the breath thickened with something not so much chemical as emotional—a flavor of panic and loss that was instantly familiar.

He closed his eyes. The world did not vanish; it became, if anything, more saturated. In the darkness behind his eyelids, he could map every resonance in the square, every echo trapped by the stone walls or the eaves of the bakery. He let his mind divide the sound by source: the creak of a wagon, the stutter of a window left unlatched, the ring of a distant anvil. Then, beneath all of it, the banshee's song. It hid nowhere. It was the only constant in the landscape.

He listened with a different part of himself. Not the ears—those would have gone deaf long ago, had they been tasked to carry all of this—but with the sense that belonged to his people and to their oldest, most forbidden art. He sifted the wails for pattern, searching for the undertone, the root note that never varied. It was a trick his first teacher had called “pulling the spike from the wheel”: finding, inside the chaos, the single axis that let the world turn.

At first, all he got was noise. Too much, too loud, too full of contradiction. But as he focused, as he made his will into a tight, sharp thing, the chaos resolved by increments. Here was the voice of a child lost to fever, there the moan of a wife mourning the absence of a man who never once said he loved her. There were older pains, too: the betrayal of kin, the theft of home, the disappointment that came from living long enough to see all your heroes shrink into ordinary men. Each pain tried to claim the song for itself, but Dexter knew better.

He reached for the center.

It was dangerous, this kind of work. His kind had learned to do it with a layer of disinterest, a veil that let them survive the contact with other people's suffering. But tonight, that was not the goal. Tonight, he wanted to take it all in. He wanted to bring the wail into himself, not as a doctor with forceps and gloves, but as a vessel whose only function was to receive.

He braced. It came.

First, a flush of heat, then a line of cold, like a filament running the length of his spine. Then the familiar nausea—mild, but insistent—as the pressure found its way to the back of his tongue, making him taste salt and rust at once. His knees locked, his shoulders hunched, and the world's color retreated, leaving only the contours of sensation.

It was not a pain anyone else would have called pain. It was bigger, emptier, more of a hunger than an injury. It felt, for a moment, like falling into the void between two heartbeats, or like listening to your own name repeated until it became meaningless.

He did not fight it. He opened himself. He let the banshee's wail pour into every nerve, let it pool in the hollow at the base of his skull, let it prickle and hiss until he was full to bursting. The only sound left was the thrum of his own pulse, louder now, a war drum that kept him anchored.

His hands shook. Not visibly, not at first, but the tremor ran up the tendons and into the meat of his forearms, making the skin itch and the bones ache. He tasted his own panic, noted it, then put it aside. There was no space for self-pity.

He held the pain for as long as he dared, then let his training take over.

The first thing he did was to compartmentalize. He imagined the pain as a series of jars, each sealed with a different color wax, each labeled with the name of its owner. Some jars were heavy; some rattled, half-empty. He mapped them, ordered them, made them manageable.

Next, he sought the steady note. It was an anatomical trick, one that belonged to the other half of his lineage—the side that believed in logic, in the application of science to the heart's softest problems. He visualized the pain as a frequency, a wave to be measured and, if

necessary, matched. He hunted for the signal that did not change, the vibration that held all the other suffering in place.

He found it, at last, in the rhythm of the icosagon. The town's own heartbeat. The magic that pulsed beneath the stone and the loam and the layered bricks, a force that had been shaped and reshaped by every hand that had ever lived here. It was the same magic that healed wounds, that kept the bakery's ovens hot, that let even the most impossible children grow to adulthood. It had a signature, a shape. He matched his own pulse to it, locked his breathing into the tempo.

The world came back, one detail at a time. The square, now empty, was brightened by the reflected fire from the lanterns set out by the festival committee. The wind that had battered the banners all day was down to a sigh. The only sound left was the banshee wail, but it was now a single note, held in harmony with Dexter's own body.

He opened his eyes.

It did not look like much. A man, gaunt and dark-eyed, standing at the center of a deserted square, hands outstretched like a novice trying to call down lightning. But the change was real, and it echoed in the empty windows and the loose slates of the bakery roof.

Dexter's hands steadied. He set them at his sides, then pressed his fingertips together, just to feel the difference. The tremor was gone, replaced by a tingling that was almost pleasant.

He stood for a while, eyes unfocused, as the world balanced itself around him.

If anyone had been watching, they would have seen the tension leave his body in a single, convulsive shudder. They might have seen the way he smiled, just for a heartbeat, as if surprised to find himself still alive.

He listened. The banshee's wail was still there. But it was quieter, more honest, less of a threat and more of a statement.

He took one last breath, then turned his face to the bakery's eaves, where the Harmonic Capacitor waited like a promise.

He was ready.

He stood in the center of the square, the world held at arm's length by the banshee's pulse and his own stubborn will. The edges of vision blurred; the cold had worked its way through coat and skin,

making him keenly aware of every tendon, every hollow between bone and muscle. The bakery's lantern cast a faint pool of blue-yellow light, but beyond that, the world was made of shadow and echo.

The first of the wolves arrived without announcement, only a slow distortion at the edge of Dexter's focus, as if the air had changed density. Then another, and another, until the empty lanes and alleys were crowded with the shape of predators who owed allegiance to no one and nothing. Their eyes, shining silver or gold or a watery pale, picked up the light and bounced it back with an intelligence that was not entirely animal.

Kael led them, of course. In the light of the square, his silhouette was almost a mockery of a man's: too tall by half, joints a fraction too wide, head tilted with a precision that came from generations of learning what it was to not quite fit. He wore the tunic and the leggings of a woodcutter, but the fabric seemed to hold itself away from his skin, as if it, too, was aware of the flesh underneath.

Kael approached at a measured pace, the others fanning out behind. Some moved upright, hands dangling, faces made for intimidation; others dropped to all fours, blending the movement of wolf and man in a way that was neither and both. There was no sound, not even the crunch of paw or foot on the square's hard-packed ground. The only proof of their reality was the way the lantern light bent as they moved through it, carving away slices of shadow and returning them, altered, to the edges of Dexter's sight.

The wolves closed around him, not in threat, but in the kind of careful choreography that could only be learned by animals who lived and died by the perimeter. Dexter did not flinch. He faced Kael as an equal, or at least as something worthy of being seen. Kael stopped a pace away, and the rest of the wolves settled—some sitting on their haunches, others curling into a waiting stillness, a few even pressing bellies to the ground as if preparing for a call.

They all turned their eyes on Dexter, waiting for him to acknowledge them.

He did, with the smallest of gestures: a tilt of the chin, a spreading of the fingers at his side. It was enough. Kael's lips curled back—not in

a snarl, but in something like a smile, if a smile could contain centuries of both threat and promise.

Then Kael opened his mouth and sang.

It started low, a note so deep it lived in the chest and not the ears. It vibrated in the stones beneath Dexter's boots, in the glass of the bakery window, in the roots of the old maple that overhung the statue's head. The sound grew, layering in complexity as each of the wolves took up the call: some in harmony, others in discordant intervals that made the air seem to tremble.

Dexter had never heard the full song before. He had heard versions, in the dark of the old world, in the half-remembered stories of people who had not survived to tell them. This was different. This was deliberate, and it was for him.

He let the song pass through him, the way he'd let the banshee wail. But where the banshee's voice was all chaos, the wolf-song was order—a lattice of intent that caught the wild grief and held it, refusing to let it spill or break. He felt the song as a pressure, a steady push that held his bones in place and forced his heart to keep time with the rhythm.

The wolves were not just singing to him; they were building a barrier, a wall of vibration that let no pain escape. As the sound grew, the banshee's single note was caught and spun, forced to follow the logic of the pack.

Kael stepped closer, his eyes catching every shift of Dexter's face. There was no need for words. Dexter nodded, just once, and Kael returned the gesture, amplifying it with a straightening of the spine that made him seem taller, more resolved.

The two of them—predator and healer, monster and outcast—stood at the eye of the storm, and let the noise of the world arrange itself around them.

The town watched, as towns always do. Faces gathered in the dark behind the bakery windows, behind the blacksmith's shutters, in the upper stories of the inn where the last of the festival guests had gone to collapse. Nobody dared the square itself, but the presence was palpable; every pair of eyes in North Pointe trained on the ritual unfolding at the center.

The wolf-song climbed. Some notes were so high they sounded like glass about to break, others so low they vibrated the lungs and made the world taste of iron. It circled the square, bounced off the closed doors, climbed the bakery walls. Every so often, a wolf would snap its jaws shut or throw back its head, modulating the sound with a violence that made even the banshee wail blink and yield.

Dexter stood at the center of the circle, eyes wide open now, watching the world filter itself through this new order. He let the pain flow in, and the wolves took it from him, divided it, carried it on the air. Each wolf sang a different aspect of it—regret, hunger, betrayal, hope—until there was nothing left that could not be named.

He felt his body relax, just a fraction. The tremor was gone, replaced by a buzzing energy that did not frighten him. The grief was still there, but it was different now: domesticated, if not tamed.

Kael's voice rose above the rest, steady and bright. The harmony was complete.

Dexter looked down at his hands, saw them steady, then lifted his head to meet Kael's eyes.

He did not say thank you. He did not have to.

The wolves held the note for a count of heartbeats, then let it fade, not all at once, but in a slow diminuendo that let every flavor of pain resolve into memory. The banshee's echo persisted, but it was softer now, more familiar—a background hum rather than a threat.

For a moment, all was still.

Then Kael nodded again, a deeper, more formal dip of the head. The wolves broke the circle, fanning out to the edges of the square, each watching for the next move.

Dexter understood what was required. He turned his face to the bakery eaves, to the Harmonic Capacitor that waited, and prepared himself to finish the song.

Behind him, the wolves settled into a guard, silent but present, watching him the way a family might watch the youngest take a first step.

The town watched, too.

It was almost time.

He raised his face to the bakery rooftop, to the Harmonic Capacitor

perched there like a bowl meant to catch the first tears of a coming storm. In the near-dark, the glass and copper fixture seemed to glow with its own private weather: a shimmer of blue, faint and nervous, wavering at the rim as if the sky itself hesitated to touch it. The wind, what little of it there was, dragged a snatch of flour scent and hearth-smoke across the square.

Dexter let the wolf-song pulse through his chest and bones, then reached for the pain he'd gathered. It was not a matter of muscles or even nerves; it was a trick of the will, and a surrender to something deeper than either. He let his breathing slow, then stilled it altogether.

He felt the pain gather in his sternum, a sphere of pressure that grew denser with every pulse of the song. It ached, then burned, then threatened to explode—only for the wolf voices to catch it, wrap it in silk and sinew, and make it manageable. His knees went loose, and he dropped into a half-crouch, fighting not to double over. For a moment, he wondered if he would die right there, in the center of his own experiment.

But he did not die. The pain, contained, began to vibrate. The vibration spread from his chest to his arms, down the bones of his forearms to his hands, which shook now in earnest. The banshee's wail, funneled and shaped by the wolves' work, began to climb out of him—not as noise, but as a continuous, rising note, the way heat rises from a forge or song from a well-tuned bell.

He focused on the bowl, letting his whole being narrow to that point. It wasn't the shape of the device that mattered; it was the intention behind it, the way the town had come together to build it, to trust in it, to trust in him. He understood then that the Capacitor was just a mirror—a place for all their hope, and a place to set down what could not be carried alone.

Dexter lifted his hands, palms up, and let the energy move. The pain left his body in a rush, flooding the air with a resonance that made every hair stand on end. The air shimmered. The blue in the bowl brightened, deepened, then went molten-white at the core, a star collapsing and rebirthing in the same instant. The force of it knocked him back, but the wolves caught him, steadying him with a circle of fur and muscle and will.

He tasted salt and iron and a sweetness he could not name. He saw, just for a second, the shadow of his own face reflected in the Capacitor's surface: it looked less haunted, more awake. The pain was gone, but the memory of it lingered, not as agony, but as a promise.

The bowl accepted the charge, drank it in, and glowed a new color: not blue, but amber, like sunlight trapped in honey or a hearth-fire just before sleep. The light washed across the square, making even the shadowed corners feel less like absences and more like potential.

Dexter stood, unsure if he'd ever be able to do so again, and watched as the wolf-song shifted. The banshee wail, forced through the filter of pain and confession and acceptance, came out changed. It was still there—he doubted it would ever be gone—but it was different now. It was music, of a sort, and it belonged to everyone who could hear it.

He looked around. The wolves sat in a loose ring, tongues lolling, eyes half-lidded with exhaustion or joy. In the windows, the townsfolk had dropped all pretense of privacy; they pressed faces and hands to the glass, silent witnesses to something no one would ever quite believe. Even the old statue, the one that had watched centuries of disaster and survival, seemed to stand straighter, as if it finally understood the point of all those years.

Dexter turned to Kael, who stood at his shoulder, and nodded a final time.

Kael, ever the ambassador, bared his teeth in a smile that was almost gentle. "You did it," he said, voice a whisper of wind and wildness. "You found the heart of the song."

Dexter managed a laugh, or maybe a sob; it was hard to tell. "It was never mine alone," he said. "It never is."

Kael grunted, pleased. "You will live to see the next full moon, at least."

The wolves melted into the dark, one by one, some lingering to taste the new air, some vanishing with the abruptness of a dream. The banshee's wail faded to a memory, an undertone in the silence, but nothing that would keep a child awake or drive a widow mad.

Dexter stood in the empty square, the night wind moving over him like a benediction. His hands, at last, were steady.

He looked up at the bowl, at the amber light, at the new kind of music that echoed from it. He listened, not just with his ears, but with every part of himself that remembered what it meant to be in pain.

He listened, and he smiled.

Behind him, one of the windows opened, and a child's voice—Daisy's, probably—called down: "Did you fix it, Dr. Dexter?"

He turned, wiped his face, and called back: "No. We just made it ours."

The window closed, and laughter spilled out instead, bright as the light from the bakery's oven.

He put his hands in his pockets and walked, slow and content, toward the waiting warmth. The pain was never gone. But neither, he realized, was the joy.

Above, the Harmonic Capacitor hummed its new song, and the town, for the first time in its history, slept soundly through the night.

twenty-three

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AT DAWN, North Pointe Common Towne's square came awake to the gentle chime of the Harmonic Capacitor. Its glow had shifted in the night—amber shot through with wavering blue, like a bowl of fireflies trapped beneath lakewater. The usual aches and groans of morning were absent, replaced by a nervous excitement. People paused on their doorsteps, listening with their heads cocked to the new music, uncertain whether to be charmed or alarmed.

The only souls unimpressed by the transformation were the Purists.

They had spent the night in their half-pitched camp by the outer gate, their tents arranged with geometric precision and their brass braziers burning like little, angry suns. They'd taken turns maintaining a vigil—marching in pairs, white robes bright and menacing, the red slash of their symbol sharp as an accusation. At first, they had treated the banshee wail as a tactical obstacle; something to endure, then defeat. The sound in the morning, gentler but unyielding, gave them no such comfort.

Dexter stood on the bakery stoop, arms folded. He watched as the leader of the Purists—her features as severe as the lines of her cowl—emerged from her tent, flanked by two nervous-looking juniors. Her

jaw moved as she chewed over the sight of the singing bowl still active, still humming its alien music into the square.

She pointed at the rooftop, her hand shaking so badly it was barely more than a waggle. "See? See what has happened?" she said, voice ragged from a night without sleep. "You have not banished the evil—you have given it a home!" She turned, gathering momentum, and shouted for all to hear: "Singing demons! This town is cursed!"

Behind her, the Purists scurried to break camp. Poles and ropes tangled, sheets of white canvas flapped in the sudden breeze, and several sacred bones spilled from a ritual basket, clattering across the frozen ground. One novice tried to recover them, only to trip and send the whole mess into the slush where it landed with an embarrassing splat.

The townsfolk, roused by the clamor, gathered along the edges of the square. Some watched with interest, others with the tight-mouthed smirk of people who'd spent their lives building something only to see it mocked by outsiders. The children—always first to adapt—stood in a loose pack, whispering behind their hands and giggling at every new mishap.

Dexter took it all in, slow and steady. His own night had been dreamless for the first time in years; he felt, if not rested, then at least ready. He straightened his coat, stepped down to the street, and walked toward the epicenter of the commotion.

The leader of the Purists caught sight of him. Her eyes widened, and she made the sign against the evil eye with two trembling fingers. "There he is!" she cried, the phrase shrill enough to startle the bakery's cats from under the porch. "The demon's familiar! You—Doctor! Do you deny what you have done?"

He stopped just short of the town's boundary stones, the point where her conviction met the limits of her courage. He considered the question for a moment, then answered with the truth. "I have done only what was needed."

His calm seemed to infuriate her. "Needed?" she spat. "You have consorted with the Night People, and now their evil sings from your rooftops! The wailing was bad enough, but this—this—" She gestured at the Capacitor, unable to find a word that did the horror justice.

Dexter looked up at the bowl, where the amber-and-blue light reflected off the bakery's slate tiles. "It sings," he said. "That's all."

The crowd laughed—a small, contained ripple, but enough to make the leader's ears flush red.

She pressed on, voice hoarse. "You think this is a joke? The world will not suffer such abominations. I tell you now: this settlement is under quarantine by the authority of the Church of Final Mercy. No one is to enter or leave. Anyone caught consorting with demons will be subject to purification. This I swear!"

One of her juniors, robes caught under a tent stake, yanked so hard that he tore a sleeve from shoulder to wrist. He looked around in panic, then tried to use his teeth to re-fasten the robe while keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Dexter.

The leader planted herself at the center of the gate, her back straight and voice rising above the murmurs of the crowd. "You think you are clever, Doctor. But the world will not allow your kind to flourish. The next time you see us, it will be with a host large enough to scour this town from the map. No one will be spared. No one!"

Dexter felt the words like a ripple over water. He'd heard them before, a thousand times in a thousand variations. The people who feared pain always came for those who learned to live with it.

He raised his voice, not shouting, but with enough force that every head in the square turned to listen. "If you wish to quarantine us, do so. If you wish to return, bring every man you have. But know that you will find only people here—people who hurt, and heal, and love their lives, in all the ways that matter."

He let the silence stand for a moment, then added, "And you will find that the song only gets louder the more you try to silence it."

For a heartbeat, the leader's face was blank. Then she twisted her lips into a snarl, spun on her heel, and barked at her retinue to move. The Purists abandoned their canvas and their bones, hustled through the open gate, and spilled onto the trade road in a flurry of dirty white and red. Their leader did not look back. She kept a hand pressed to her breastbone, as if to steady the heart beneath.

Once the Purists were gone, the square was filled with a sense of gentle anticlimax. The townsfolk lingered, waiting to see if the world

would revert to normal or if this new harmony would hold. Some laughed, some shook their heads, and a few picked through the detritus left behind—nosing at the sacred bones with sticks, daring each other to touch.

Dexter let the tension bleed from his shoulders. The threat was real, but not immediate. He turned, caught the eye of Jen, who stood at the back of the crowd, arms folded and eyebrows arched in a silent “I told you so.”

He moved toward her, pausing when Sam, still smelling of breakfast beer, clapped him on the back. “You handled that well, Doc,” she said. “I half-expected you to sprout wings and bite her.”

He smiled, just a little. “I save that for emergencies.”

Sam snorted, then drifted away, already bored with the lack of violence.

Jen spoke in a low voice. “They’ll come back, you know.”

He nodded. “They always do.”

She looked at him—really looked, as if searching for the part of him that had changed since yesterday. “You afraid?”

He thought about it, considered the hollow ache where the pain used to live. “No,” he said. “Not anymore.”

She grinned, slow and wide, and cuffed him on the shoulder. “Good. Because I’m not, either.”

They stood in silence, watching as the rest of the town sorted itself out. The song from the Capacitor was no longer strange; it had woven itself into the rhythm of the morning. The bakery cats, having recovered from their fright, returned to the stoop and circled Dexter’s boots, purring.

In the distance, a single, high note from the bowl caught the wind and floated up over the rooftops, a sound of hope rather than dread.

Dexter listened. He let the note settle, let it take root in the place where the pain had lived. The Purists’ threat lingered, but he knew it would never be enough to drown the music.

Not here. Not ever again.

With the threat gone and the sky in a blush of early sun, North Pointe breathed a collective sigh—the kind that only comes after a long siege or a hard winter, when the future has been restored by some

impossible act of hope. The first order of business for most was food: the bakery opened before the bells, the butcher's knives flashed in the windows, and the smell of yeast and sharp onion rolled through the lanes, irresistible as gossip.

Dexter stood in the square a full hour before he realized he was no longer waiting for anything to go wrong. The sense of disaster had not only retreated—it had been replaced by a restlessness, as if the whole town was eager to figure out who they were in this new, less haunted world.

He was not left alone for long. The first to approach was Daisy, her hair in a tangle and her coat buttoned wrong. She held up a sheaf of paper—her latest “journal,” he suspected—flapped it at him, and declared, “I wrote down the whole thing. Even the part where the lady called you a demon. Is that true?”

He crouched so they were eye-level. “Not exactly. But I suppose it’s true enough if you are frightened of things that are different.”

She nodded, thinking it over, and handed him a half-eaten roll, which he accepted with grave ceremony.

Next came the elders, two by two, as if attending a wedding or a wake. The twins from the lakeside, old as driftwood and twice as tough, brought him a jar of pickled fish and pressed it into his hands. “For your nerves,” one said, and the other added, “Or for the next time the Church tries to starve us out.”

Then came Makota, holding a basket full of things that must have been baked before dawn. She gave him a look—half gratitude, half warning—and set the basket on the ground between them. “I do not know if it is over,” she said. “But I do know that if you keep fixing things, there will be no one left for me to feed.”

He smiled, genuine. “You have always been the real healer here.”

Makota accepted the compliment with a flick of her whiskers and turned back toward her shop, but not before patting his shoulder with a flour-dusted hand.

The children gathered, then the apprentices, then the journeymen and the recently retired. They formed a loose circle around Dexter, each contributing a word, a joke, a question. It was not a hero’s welcome, not exactly; it was more like the arrival of a prodigal son, or

the quiet elevation of a man who had always belonged but never been celebrated.

Someone—it might have been Sam, but he wasn't sure—dubbed the new phenomenon the “North Pointe Harmonics,” and within an hour the phrase had spread up and down the trade road, carried on the voices of bakers and butchers and the newly reconciled. There was talk of making the bowl a permanent fixture; of tuning it, perhaps, to the seasons or the festivals. Dexter listened, bemused, as they plotted the future of their accidental miracle.

The song itself had changed overnight. It no longer prowled the edges of perception, waiting to ambush. Instead, it mapped the town's hurts with a gentle, almost curious attention. When a child skinned her knee, the bowl let out a note of sympathy—soft, blue-green, the color of shallow water. When the baker's helper burned his arm on the oven, the song twitched, then settled, marking the pain but never magnifying it. Even the old men at the pub, when they argued over dominoes and politics, found that their headaches arrived not as punishment, but as a cautionary chorus that faded as soon as they apologized or agreed to disagree.

By the noon bell, the town had assembled in the square, as if called by some unspoken order. Dexter, not sure what to do with himself, leaned against the statue at the center and tried to look inconspicuous. It didn't work.

Jen found him first. She wore her badge, her sword, and a smile that was half pride, half warning. “You're not a demon, you know,” she said, loud enough for the crowd to hear. “But you might be the strangest chirurgeon in a three-county radius.”

“Probably true,” he replied. “But I have competition.”

Jen barked a laugh, then signaled to the others. Sam strolled over, tankard in hand and face as open as the sky. She raised it in a toast. “To the only doctor in the world who can out-sing a banshee.”

He accepted the honor with a tilt of his head, then glanced at the bowl. The song, as if on cue, flared up—a shimmer of gold and blue that rang off the bakery tiles and set every hair on his arms standing at attention. The sound was so beautiful it hurt, in a way he'd never known beauty could.

The rest of the town moved closer, drawn by the moment or by the need to see what would happen next. Makota, Prudence, Warren, even the mapmaker and the traveling entertainers who'd tried (and failed) to sneak out before dawn. They all circled in, forming a ring as organic and natural as breathing.

Dexter stepped forward, unsure what to say. The words came easier than he expected.

"They are not demons," he said, nodding at the Capacitor and the resonance that hovered above it. "They are only the parts of us we tried to hide. The pain, the grief, the memories we never learned to name. The more we fought it, the louder it became. But now, if we listen, it can tell us what needs to be healed."

He looked at the faces, so many of them marked by worry, hope, or the scars of old arguments.

"They will sing for us now. Not to frighten or torment, but to remind us—when something is wrong, when someone is hurting, when we have a truth to tell."

There was a hush—less a silence than a readiness, as if the town was holding its breath for the first real news in a century.

Makota spoke first, because someone had to. "And if we do not listen?"

He shrugged. "Then the song will wait. It is very patient."

The crowd absorbed this, each person filing the information somewhere useful or sharing it with a neighbor in a whisper.

Jen folded her arms, face soft. "What about when the Purists come back?"

Dexter considered. "Let them come. I suspect they will hear their own song, just as we did. Maybe they'll even learn something from it."

The mood lightened; there was laughter, low and shy at first, then growing in strength as people remembered the difference between celebration and anxiety. The baker's helper brought out a tray of fresh rolls, which was promptly demolished. The old men from the pub started a card game on the statue's plinth, claiming it was "for science." Someone passed Dexter a mug of sweet cider, which he sipped, and found excellent.

He stayed until the sun began to slip behind the ridge. The song of

the Capacitor, already the new normal, drifted over the square like a benediction. The townsfolk scattered, back to homes and shops and, in a few lucky cases, to naps in the soft gold of afternoon. Even Jen and Sam, after a round of back-slapping and gentle ribbing, left him to himself.

He stood in the emptying square, the air scented with yeast and the sharp tang of apple wood smoke, and felt an unfamiliar ease. He was not waiting for pain, or danger, or a verdict from strangers. He was simply here.

At the edge of the green, he spotted the last of the Shadow Wolves—Kael, tall and impossible, watching from the half-light beneath the willow tree. Kael did not approach, only nodded once, slow and deliberate. Dexter returned the gesture, and the wolf melted into the shadows, as if he had never been there at all.

The day's last bell rang, and the world settled. The bowl on the bakery roof shimmered, a thin, beautiful note arcing out and away, impossible to tell if it was meant for the town, for Dexter, or for the sky itself.

He listened to it, and he smiled.

The work was not done. But for now, it was enough.

twenty-four

. . .

TWILIGHT FOUND Dexter at the forest's edge, the day's heat caught in the moss and leaf litter and the shadows deeper than ink between the old trees. He paused at the border, boots balanced on the seam where grass gave way to mulch, and waited—not for a sign, but for his own resolve to settle into something like readiness. Behind him, North Pointe glowed with the last shreds of daylight; ahead, the woods had already gone blue and secret.

He walked.

The path, if it could be called that, wound around the thickest roots and ducked under the low arms of larch and oak. Every third step, the ground squished and released a damp, rooty breath. He could smell the lingering smoke from the town's new music—sweet, metallic, and faintly bitter at the edges—and underneath that, the wild: fur, mushrooms, old water.

The wolves were waiting.

He knew it before he saw them. The woods did not go silent when predators gathered; instead, they rearranged their noise, each animal keeping its own appointment. The soft percussion of small paws. The distant, almost musical notes of birds. And, layered beneath it, the low, shared hum of voices not meant for human ears.

Dexter's own heart found the beat of it and adjusted. He walked softer.

The shelter was a hollow set in a rise, roofed with moss and woven sticks, almost invisible unless you knew where to look. At its center, a scatter of coals burned, the glow nearly invisible through the cover of branches. Around the coals, arranged in a rough crescent, the Shadow Wolves waited—some upright and clothed, others lolling in near-wolf forms, all of them motionless in that predatory way that looked lazy but could be violence in an instant.

A pair of yellow eyes blinked from a tangle of fallen tree; then another, and another. Within seconds, he was the focus of at least a dozen cool, appraising gazes.

He stopped at the threshold, every instinct telling him to make himself smaller, but he resisted. Instead, he drew his hands from his pockets and showed them, palms out. It was not a formal gesture—he doubted the Shadow Wolves cared about such things—but it was as close to a peace offering as he could muster.

From the rightmost end of the crescent, a shape detached. It was the young one, the pup whose leg he'd set two nights before. It moved with a careful, testing gait, as if trying to decide whether to trust its own limbs. Then it saw Dexter and bounded forward, tail high and ears akimbo, every step a declaration of its own survival.

Dexter crouched, ignoring the squelch of mud against his knees. The pup danced around him, testing its foot on the ground, then pressing its snout to his wrist in a series of quick, hopeful sniffs. Its tongue flicked out, a single, shy lick, then it yipped in delight.

The mother approached next, her movement a lesson in controlled power. She was fully wolf at first glance—fur bristled, nose sharp—but her eyes were watchful, almost calculating. She gave the pup a single nudge with her jaw, as if to say, "That's enough," then looked at Dexter and, after a moment, let her posture slacken.

The rest of the pack did not move, but their collective attention never wavered. If anything, it intensified.

Then Kael emerged.

He did not stride or stalk; he simply was, appearing at the far end of the crescent and moving toward Dexter with a pace that made the

air around him seem to thin. He wore a tunic and loose trousers, but the line of his jaw was dusted with dark fur, and his nails were just a shade too long for comfort. The muscles of his neck bunched and shifted as he approached, and his pupils, caught by the firelight, were a shade of gold not found anywhere else in the world.

Dexter stood, careful and slow. The pup circled his boots, then scampered back to its mother, who caught it by the scruff and settled it under her belly with a single, practiced motion.

Kael stopped two paces from Dexter. For a long moment, neither moved.

"You came," Kael said. His voice was the growl of a landslide, but the words were careful, even hesitant.

"I did," Dexter replied. "You said there was a debt to settle."

Kael's lips twitched, a smile or a snarl; with the Shadow Wolves, the difference was academic. "Debt is not always punishment," he said. "Sometimes it is... what's the word?" He looked over his shoulder, as if consulting the pack. "Owed. Sometimes it is owed."

Dexter nodded. "Then I am here to pay, or collect."

Kael laughed, a sound that startled the birds into silence for several heartbeats. "You have done more than heal our young one," he said, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "You have protected our way of life." He gestured at the woods with one long arm. "Hunters are gone now. Driven off by your banshee noise. No one has ever done that for us."

Dexter let the compliment settle, unsure how to respond. It was not the first time he'd been thanked for his work, but it was the first time the gratitude felt this formal, almost sacred.

Kael seemed to sense his discomfort. "We wish to make you welcome," he said, and the words had the ring of a script, memorized but still strange in his mouth.

Dexter looked around. The pack had not moved, but their eyes were softer. The mother wolf allowed her pup to venture forward again, this time with a hop and a squeak.

"Thank you," Dexter said. "That's all I ever wanted."

Kael inclined his head, a gesture so precise it had to have been practiced a thousand times. "Then join us. For tonight, you are pack."

Dexter felt his pulse jump, the words heavier than they sounded. He glanced at the circle—at the wolves in their various forms, at the careful watchfulness in every gaze, at the way even the smallest of them seemed to hold the whole of the forest in its bones.

He stepped forward.

The circle shifted, making space for him, and the mother wolf nudged her pup so that it sat at Dexter's right side, tongue lolling. Kael took his place at the left, close enough that Dexter could smell the clean, wild musk that came off him in waves.

For a while, they sat in silence, listening to the night. The only sound was the gentle pop of the coals and, from time to time, the contented sigh of the pup as it leaned into Dexter's leg.

Eventually, Kael spoke again, this time in a tone that was almost companionable. "Do you know our kind?" he asked.

Dexter considered. "Not well. My people are... solitary. We do not pack."

Kael grunted. "A pity. Much is lost in solitude." He reached into the fire and pulled out a stick, the end glowing red. He twirled it, watching the ember arc in the dark. "We remember our friends. We sing for them. Even if they leave, they are never truly gone." He poked at the coals, sending sparks into the air. "You are now part of the song."

Dexter felt his chest tighten. He tried to imagine what it would mean, to be remembered by something as old and wild as the Shadow Wolves.

The pup rested its head on his foot, then yawned. The mother, satisfied, curled around both of them, her tail wrapping over the pup's back like a blanket.

Kael leaned back, letting his posture loosen for the first time. "You have done good work here, Dexter of North Pointe. Your pain is our pain, now."

Dexter managed a smile. "That's fair. I'll try not to bring you too much."

Kael's teeth flashed, but this time the smile was clear. "We can take it."

They sat together until the last of the coals cooled and the night

filled up with its own quiet music. When Dexter rose to leave, the pack parted for him, the passage silent but absolute.

At the forest's edge, he looked back once. Kael stood at the hollow's mouth, gold eyes catching the starlight, the rest of him lost in shadow.

"Come back," Kael called. "Even if you don't hurt."

Dexter nodded. "I will."

He walked home, the memory of the pack's acceptance a warm weight inside him.

The woods did not close behind him. Instead, they seemed to linger, holding the promise of welcome for as long as he cared to return.

The next evening, Dexter returned to the woods, not as a visitor but as one who had been invited. He found the pack in the same hollow, the coals replaced with a tighter ring of stones, heat radiating up into the close air and making the ground soft underfoot. Kael waited at the center, flanked by the pup—now limping only when he thought someone was watching—and the mother wolf, whose eyes tracked every shadow.

Dexter stepped inside the ring. No one spoke, but every wolf in the crescent angled their head, ears forward, waiting. Kael motioned for him to sit, and Dexter did, folding himself onto a mossy patch with his hands open on his knees.

Kael began the song.

It was nothing like a human voice, nothing like the careful harmonies of a choir or the simple melody of a nursery rhyme. Kael started with a low rumble, barely a note at all, just the suggestion of thunder rolling far off. It vibrated through the ground and up into Dexter's bones, a physical sound more than an audible one. Then, from the rest of the pack, a second layer: a high, fluttering warble, almost birdlike, circling around the leader's tone without ever settling on it.

The pack built the sound, adding in yips, howls, and something

closer to a hum, each layer winding over the last until the hollow was saturated. Dexter felt the song more than he heard it—his own pulse began to match the rhythm, his skin prickling as the air thickened and thinned in time to the pack's breathing.

Kael lifted his chin. The rumble changed, adding a note of longing or grief. Dexter couldn't tell if it was deliberate, but the emotion of it struck him. The Shadow Wolves were not simply singing—they were telling a story, or making a promise, or maybe both.

After a minute, the song plateaued. The other wolves dropped out, one by one, until only Kael's voice remained, holding the line alone. He looked at Dexter and, with a slow motion, pointed at his own chest, then at Dexter, then at the air.

Dexter understood, at least in theory: it was his turn.

He hesitated. His voice, never trained for music, caught in his throat. Kael's gaze was steady but patient, as if he expected this. Dexter drew in a breath and tried to match the rumble. It came out as a growl at first, awkward and stilted, but Kael's mouth twitched, not quite a laugh, more like encouragement. Dexter tried again, lowering his voice and letting the breath shake itself out.

On the second attempt, the tone was truer. Not the same as Kael's, but a close cousin—one that belonged to him, and maybe to his line, if he'd ever had one. The pack's ears perked in unison. Kael responded with a matching note, then layered in a third above it. Dexter followed, and for a brief, surreal moment, he was part of the song.

Kael upped the complexity, weaving in a counterpoint. Dexter tried, faltered, and almost stopped, but Kael gestured—gentle, guiding. He adjusted his own voice, making it simpler. Dexter matched it, this time more easily.

A ripple of approval ran through the pack. Some wagged their tails. The mother wolf let out a sigh. The pup wriggled in place, making a noise somewhere between a bark and a purr.

Kael dropped his voice to a hush, then let it fade completely. Silence reclaimed the hollow, but it was not empty. The song lingered, hanging in the air like the ghost of a scent.

"You are known to us," Kael said, the Common Tongue thick but certain. "No longer stranger. You are called in our song."

Dexter felt his face flush, the heat unfamiliar and a little embarrassing. He looked at his hands, then at the pack, then at the pup, whose tail thudded against his boot.

"Thank you," he managed, voice small.

Kael nodded, then explained, "You know the borders now. All of them." He pointed at the woods, then at the space between the trees. "Our song will keep you safe here. Yours, and your town's."

Dexter reached down, fingers trembling, and touched the pup's fur. It was softer than he remembered. The pup licked his hand, then leaned against him, trust absolute.

For a long minute, no one spoke. The pack watched, then, one at a time, began to melt into the dark, the sound of their steps swallowed by the moss and mulch. The mother wolf circled Dexter once, nose to the ground, then nudged her pup to follow.

Kael lingered, eyes fixed on Dexter.

"Will you return?" Kael asked.

Dexter nodded. "If you'll have me."

Kael smiled, the teeth more amusement than threat. "Always."

The Shadow Wolves left as they had come: in silence, barely more than a whisper of fur and muscle through the brush. One by one, they slipped away from the hollow, vanishing into the corridor of old trees where even moonlight couldn't quite keep its footing. Only the pup hesitated, looking back at Dexter with ears cocked and tail flicking. The mother nudged it forward, but not before she stepped close enough to press her nose—cold and dry—into the center of Dexter's palm. He held still, letting her scent him, and she withdrew with a single, steady look, as if to mark him once and for all.

Kael was the last to go. He lingered just beyond the firepit, more shadow than man now, his eyes reflecting gold in the blue of the night. He did not speak at first, only studied Dexter as if memorizing the pattern of his breath, the way his fingers curled into the moss.

At length, Kael straightened. The movement was fluid, nearly feline, and when he spoke, the words were low but sure. "Our song will remain in these woods," he said. "No one will cross who means you harm."

Dexter felt the words settle, not just in his ears but in the thin space

between skin and bone. The protection was not a fence or a trap, but a presence—a constant, watching awareness that would bend the world's mischief away from the town, or at least give warning before it reached the threshold.

"Thank you," Dexter said, voice soft. He meant it in every possible way.

Kael smiled, lips barely moving. "Remember, friend: song is stronger when sung together."

Then, without another word, he was gone, fading into the undergrowth in a way that made Dexter question whether he'd been there at all.

Dexter waited, listening to the space left behind. The hollow held onto the heat for a few minutes, the scent of singed bark and wild animal settling over the stones. The woods did not return to their old silence; instead, a new layer had been added, a faint vibration that lived at the edge of hearing. It was not a banshee's cry, nor a human song, but something that belonged to both and neither: a wild, living thing that would never be caged or shamed.

He rose, brushing the moss from his coat, and stood for a while at the edge of the circle, hand pressed to the spot where the mother wolf had touched him. The warmth there lingered, out of proportion to the brief contact.

It would fade, he knew, but something would remain.

He walked home with no hurry, letting the woods lead him. The moon rode low and heavy over the trees, every branch limned with silver. Once, he caught the flash of yellow eyes in the undergrowth, watching. He paused, lifted a hand, and felt rather than heard a distant rumble of approval.

The path emptied him onto the trade road at the margin of North Pointe, just as the last lamps guttered in the windows. The town was quiet, the bakery long shuttered and the green asleep beneath a fine dust of frost. But there was no sense of emptiness. If anything, the place seemed fuller—like the town was being held in a pair of invisible, careful hands.

Dexter crossed the square, boots hardly making a sound. He saw the glow of the Harmonic Capacitor high on the bakery eaves: the

amber-and-blue light had settled into a steady, gentle radiance, casting a circle of warmth onto the stones below.

He stood in the center of that light, and let himself feel the world—its hurts and its healing, the pulse of the wild and the rhythm of the people, the way everything was woven together even when it tried so hard to be apart.

For a long time, he had seen himself as an outlier, a flaw in the pattern. It was only now, with the song of the woods alive under his skin, that he realized: the flaws were where the world let the new things in. The places that didn't fit were the ones most worth protecting.

He looked up at the bowl, and thought of the wolves. Of Kael's voice, of the mother and her pup, of the song that would never end. He thought, too, of Jen, and Sam, and Makota, and the others—how they had taken him in not because he was the same, but because he was different.

He smiled, a real one.

The irony was not lost on him: for all the years spent running from monsters, it was only when he cared for them that he found a place to belong.

He turned for home, the echo of the song following, softer and steadier now. It would not leave him, not ever, and he would not want it to.

The night air was cold, but the warmth inside was more than enough.

And in the woods, the Shadow Wolves sang on.

twenty-five

. . .

THE CLINIC, at dawn, was a room of soft light and low sound: a warm yellow spill from the lantern, the round-bellied hush of lake air coming through the cracked window, the faintest vibration of the Harmonic Capacitor where it hummed on the shelf above Dexter's desk. The scent of bruised mint and smokeleaf clung to the ceiling, while underfoot the boards creaked in polite, measured complaint. Dexter stood by the patient's chair with his black coat neatly on its peg—bare-armed and so pale he seemed almost translucent—and looked over his first client of the day.

The traveler had one hand pressed hard to his jaw, his face set in a shape that spoke of a night spent negotiating with pain and losing every round. He had the look of someone used to minor calamities: a boot with a split seam, fingers missing from the left hand, a tangle of healed cuts across the back of the other. His eyes were a color that might once have been blue, and his beard had the consistency of old straw. He regarded Dexter with the open suspicion that all travelers kept ready for country doctors.

"It's the tooth," he said, the words forced through barely-parted lips. "Worse every day."

Dexter nodded, gentle. "Second molar, lower left. The swelling extends to the jaw. There is drainage, yes?"

The man grimaced, then nodded in a way that made a line of sweat spring to his brow.

"Please sit." Dexter gestured to the padded chair, which the man eyed before lowering himself with a huff.

Dexter washed his hands with a scoop of witch hazel from the basin. His movements were slow and deliberate—nothing of the old, frantic blur. He dried his fingers on a linen cloth and selected his tools with a care that bordered on ceremonial. The small, bright tray held everything in its place: a scalpel with a horn handle, a set of copper-plated forceps, a slender probe, and a glass ampoule of anesthetic, which he set aside, knowing it would not be needed.

He donned a pair of gloves. "It will hurt," he said, his voice even, "but not as you expect."

The traveler flinched as Dexter leaned close to examine the tooth. The gum was red and spongy, the tooth itself black at the edge. Dexter pressed along the gumline, feeling the subtle, high-pitched note of infection. The Harmonic Capacitor registered it, humming with a vibration that drew the pain up and out, already thinning the agony behind the traveler's eyes. The effect was not total, but enough to make the man's hand drop away from his jaw.

"You can fix it?" The traveler's tone was hopeful, but shaded by a lifetime's disappointment.

Dexter nodded. "We must extract. The infection is deep."

He did not wait for permission. Instead, he let the traveler's skepticism fill the room, let it drain away as he readied the scalpel. He sliced a tiny window at the gum's base, quick and almost painless, then probed with the forceps. The traveler did not whimper or curse; he only gripped the chair's arm and stared at a fixed point above Dexter's shoulder.

There was a click as the root shifted. A little blood, a little more, and then Dexter eased the tooth free with a movement so fluid it seemed to bypass the intervening moments. He dropped the ruined molar into a cup and reached for a wad of medicated cotton.

"Bite down," he said, pressing the cotton into place.

The traveler obeyed. His eyes were wide, uncomprehending.

Dexter set the forceps aside and stripped off his gloves. He picked up the glass ampoule, broke the tip, and handed it to the patient. "Swish and spit. Not for drinking." The man did as told, then spat a pink-tinged stream into the basin at his elbow.

"Done?" he asked, incredulous. He lifted a tentative hand to his cheek and tapped. "No pain?"

Dexter smiled—just a crease at the corner of his mouth. "You will feel none. The Capacitor takes what remains."

The man stared at the device, which now pulsed with a soft blue. "That's witchcraft, or better."

"Neither," said Dexter. "It is only tuned to what hurts."

The traveler flexed his jaw, testing it. "First night in a sennight I might sleep, then."

"You will." Dexter wiped his instruments, set the tray aside, and began to reset the room for the next patient. "Do not eat until the numbness fades. Do not touch the socket. Return if you see fever, or if the pain comes back in the night."

The man reached into his pocket and placed a coin on the table. "That's all I have," he said, sheepish.

Dexter waved it away. "It is more than enough."

The traveler stood, wobbled a bit, then straightened. He looked at Dexter for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether gratitude was appropriate.

"Thank you," he said at last.

Dexter inclined his head. "Safe travels."

The man left, the door swinging shut behind him with a click that was almost elegant.

For a while, the only sound in the clinic was the gentle chime of the Capacitor and the scrape of Dexter's tools as he set them in order. He felt the echo of the pain he'd drawn in—like a memory of a song, vibrating in the hollow of his chest. It was not hunger, not anymore. It was something finer, the satisfaction of a job well done.

Dexter allowed himself a moment to savor it before preparing for the next patient, and the next after that.

After sunset, the clinic filled with a different kind of light. The lanterns burned lower, their glow catching the edges of glass and brass, making the herb jars gleam with soft, indistinct colors. The town outside quieted: children's laughter replaced by the measured, comforting pattern of the North Pointe Harmonics. The banshee wail was gone; in its place, a gentle, melodic undertone that seemed to brush the lintel of every house and shop.

Jen arrived first. She rapped twice on the lintel and stepped inside without waiting, as she always had. She looked a little less severe out of uniform: the sword left at home, her hair down, sleeves rolled at the wrist. She held a tin of what looked like butter cookies, the lid already dented from use as an impromptu coaster.

"Doc," she said, nodding, as Dexter waved her to the worktable.

Sam was next, grinning as she edged through the door. She brought nothing but herself and a flask tucked in her vest. "I heard you had an eventful day," she announced, collapsing into a chair with her boots crossed on the lowest rung. "Any fatalities?"

"None," Dexter said.

"Boring," Sam replied. She glanced at Jen, who smiled in that small, private way she reserved for her closest friends. Dexter poured water into the kettle and set it on the little stove by the wall.

The table was already set for three: mismatched mugs, the battered teapot, a plate with the best of the previous day's ginger snaps. Jen added her cookies to the spread and made a show of sampling each before deciding which would pair best with tea (answer: both, together). Sam uncapped her flask and offered it around. Dexter declined, but Jen accepted, splashing a little into her mug before passing it back.

They sat in the companionable quiet of people who had long ago run out of need for small talk.

The Harmonic Capacitor sang to them from its perch above the window: a faint, cyclical hum, touched by the wind outside. Every so often it harmonized with the clink of spoon against mug or the rumble of Jen's low laugh. The device glimmered in the lantern light—a

simple bowl of copper and glass, but it seemed to hold all the warmth and color of the room.

Jen sipped her tea. "You know, I never thought I'd get used to it."

"The sound?" Dexter asked.

She nodded. "First night, I kept waiting for the screaming to start up again. But now? It's like it's always been there. Like it's what the town needed, just took a while to figure out how to listen."

Sam topped off her mug with a little more from her flask and raised it. "I'll drink to that."

Dexter smiled, small and content. He watched the steam rise from his own cup, the pattern of it familiar and pleasing.

Jen reached for a cookie. "When the wailing was bad, I thought it was some kind of curse. But I think I was wrong." She looked at Dexter, her gaze level. "It was trying to help. Just... didn't know how to do it right."

Dexter considered. "All healing hurts, at first."

Sam pointed at him with a ginger snap. "There's the doc I know. Always with the morbid wisdom."

"Better than cheerful ignorance," Jen replied, and the two of them laughed.

Outside, the wind shifted, and the song of the Harmonic Capacitor dropped into a lower register. It made the windows buzz gently, the sound rolling underfoot like a cat weaving around ankles.

Sam sobered a little. "Town feels different, doesn't it? Safer. Or... I don't know. Cleaner." She tapped her mug. "Not just the wailing. The rest of it too. Like nothing can hide anymore—not even the stupid things that hurt but aren't really wounds."

Jen nodded. "No more secrets. Except maybe what's in that flask."

"Trade secret," Sam said, grinning again.

They let the conversation lull, each of them content to sit in the bubble of golden light and good tea.

Dexter listened, as he always did, more to the space between the words than to the words themselves. The tension that had lived in his spine since the night the banshee wail started was gone, replaced by a steady, pulsing ease. He felt no urge to leave, no itch to pace or fidget. He traced the rim of the Harmonic Capacitor with his index finger,

feeling the faint tingle in the copper, the sympathetic vibration of the world made manageable.

He thought about the years before: the endless search for a way to fix what hurt, the half-mad drive to empty the world of pain entirely, the need to outsmart or outrun the thing that made him different. All of it had led, somehow, to this table, to this moment. The ache in his own chest was not gone, but it had softened, taken a seat at the table with the rest of him.

He looked at Jen, and at Sam, and felt something like gratitude—big and strange and almost unnameable.

Jen caught his eye and tilted her head. “You alright?”

Dexter nodded. “Better than ever.”

Sam raised her mug again. “To better than ever,” she said, and all three touched cups, the sound clear and bright.

For a while, they said nothing more. The Harmonic Capacitor’s song filled the silence, comforting as a blanket. The town outside the window was asleep, the world holding its breath between one day and the next.

When the tea was gone and the cookies reduced to crumbs, Sam stood, stretched, and declared, “I’m for the pub. You two coming?”

Jen shook her head. “Not tonight. Someone’s got to walk the rounds in the morning.”

Sam shrugged, clapped Dexter on the shoulder, and left with a wink. Jen lingered at the table, clearing the mugs and plates into a tidy stack.

“Leave them,” Dexter said. “I’ll clean up.”

Jen considered, then let her hands fall to her sides. She crossed to the door and paused, looking back at him. “If you ever need anything—anything at all—you know you can call, right?”

“I do,” Dexter said. “Thank you.”

She nodded, satisfied, and pulled the door shut behind her.

Dexter remained at the table for a long time, the light growing softer and the hum of the Capacitor fading into the hush of true night. He set his hands flat on the tabletop, felt the smooth wood and the heat left behind by the mugs, the memory of company lingering in the air.

He was no longer waiting for disaster. He was not trying to hide from himself, or from the world. He was only here, exactly as he was, with nothing in need of fixing.

It was, he decided, a good place to be.

Outside, the wind sang through the town. Inside, Dexter let the silence settle around him, as comforting as any embrace.

When he finally stood and turned down the lantern, the Harmonic Capacitor's glow was the last thing to fade—a persistent, hopeful glimmer, waiting for the next new day.

epilogue

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THE CLINIC after hours belonged to no one. The benches stood empty, bottles recapped and shelved, each drawer of tincture or suture or splint closed with its own distinct clack. Dexter moved through the familiar space without hurry, his skin pale against the evening's deepening shadow, the sleeves of his black coat trailing an inch or two past his wrists. Tonight he worked slow, and he worked well.

The Harmonic Capacitor, perched high on its shelf, still vibrated with a memory of the day's work—faint, blue-green, as if the glass and copper had been left to steep in lakewater. Its hum barely registered now, tuned as it was to the smallest ache or hurt in the air. Dexter washed his hands at the basin, the cold water tingling at the knuckles, and let himself enjoy the bracing clarity of it. He dried them on a piece of linen, careful and precise, then folded the cloth and returned it to the rack.

He moved through the closing ritual as if it were a kind of benediction. Each tool went home in its velvet-lined drawer, each bottle to its slot in the grid. The last patient's bed, already made, received a final smoothing of the blanket; the lantern, trimmed to its lowest, gave just enough light to see the floor without making the glass sweat with heat. He locked the medicine cabinet with a practiced twist and hung the

key on its hook, then checked the window latch twice, though the air outside was too warm for anything to break in tonight.

The familiar scents layered themselves in the stillness. Witch hazel, clean and sharp; the ghost of smokeleaf, sweet and heavy; bruised mint, always clinging to the ceiling beams from the time Makota had gifted him a bushel “for emergencies.” The air, though, belonged to the magic—the subtle, post-healing ozone of the Capacitor, a lingering blue in the lungs that made every breath feel like the air after a storm.

He paused, letting his fingers rest against the cool brass of the lantern. In the old days, he would have been halfway down the alley by now, coat collar up, hunched against the world. Tonight, there was no need to run. He lingered, letting the silence settle, letting the stillness soak into bone and mind and memory.

When he finally stepped outside, the square was empty, awash in the kind of moonlight that sharpened every line and blurred every color. The familiar gray stone of the bakery, the two-story huddle of the townhomes across the green, the low arc of the fountain—each had been washed to a flat, clean silver. Even the banner strung over the baker’s door was only a thin ghost, its three indigos gone to a single stripe of darkness.

He walked across the square at a measured pace, boots hardly making a sound against the worn path. The air was cold and dry, and with each breath, he felt the edge of the old hurts fade just a little more. He stopped, halfway between the fountain and the bakery, and looked up. The moon hung low over the rooftops, immense and bright, making every shadow sharper than it had a right to be.

He did not try to hide in them.

He let the moon paint him as it would: a tall, thin figure with a shock of black against bone-white skin, hands loose at his sides and head tilted back, as if drinking in the night. He stood perfectly still for several heartbeats, letting the world measure him, letting it take his full and honest inventory. His breathing slowed, deep and even, and for the first time in memory, the tension that lived between his shoulders vanished.

He belonged. He had done what was needed. He was allowed to be still.

He might have stayed there all night, just breathing, but the Broken Claw's door yawned wide down the trade road. Warm light spilled out onto the stone, carrying laughter and the faintest music—nothing rowdy, just the soft pulse of people at ease with each other. Dexter looked over, expecting the usual changeover of merchants and travelers, but instead saw Sam and Jen stepping into the light together.

They were talking—Sam with her hands already in motion, a bottle swinging from one finger, Jen listening with her head cocked, her long hair loose in the night. They paused on the pub's stoop, framed for a moment by the glow behind them. Sam's laugh carried clear across the square, followed by Jen's quieter, steadier rumble. They were unmistakably themselves, and unmistakably together.

Jen wore her constable's badge even off-duty; the silver caught the moon and flashed once as she stepped down from the stoop. She had a way of walking that made every stone give her the right of way, and tonight she moved with the easy confidence of someone who had survived a lifetime's worth of emergencies. Sam, just behind, managed to look both casual and coiled, ready to intervene or instigate as the mood required.

They spotted Dexter at once. No squint, no surprise—just the kind of acknowledgment that said, "We expected you." They shared a look, then both raised their hands in greeting.

"Goodnight, Dexter!" Sam's voice cut the quiet, bright and affectionate, with none of the wariness people used to show after dark.

Jen added, "Clinic all shut up?"

He nodded. "Better than ever."

They smiled, then, and continued on their way—shoulder to shoulder, footsteps matched, Sam's white hair and Jen's gray catching the light in alternating stripes.

Dexter watched them walk, feeling the last of the old, tight loneliness drop away. He raised a hand in return, slow and deliberate, not the quick flick he used to hide behind. He let them see it, and let them see him, standing in the open, a little odd but perfectly present.

He saw, too, how they saw him: not as the town's problem or its mystery, but as a friend who had made himself useful, and welcome, and real.

A small smile came to his mouth, unbidden. He thought of how many nights he'd spent invisible, how many times he'd slipped through shadows to avoid these very encounters. Now, the square was his, the moonlight was his, and the world was not about to chase him away.

Sam and Jen disappeared down the lane, their voices fading but not gone.

He lingered another minute, then turned, and followed at his own, unhurried pace. The air was sharp and clean, the town square safe and soft beneath his feet. For the first time, Dexter did not feel like he was leaving anything behind.

He walked as himself, and the world let him.

A breeze stirred the top of the green, and for a moment Dexter thought he caught a sound—a far-off echo of the Purists' chant, the barest aftertaste of their promise to return and "cleanse" the town. It was no more than a phrase, torn and thinned by the miles, but it lingered on the air, a whisper from beyond the safe walls.

He stopped in the middle of the square, listening, but there was nothing more. No reason for alarm, no sense of old dread returning. Just a bit of night, and a warning so faint it could hardly call itself a threat.

Dexter breathed in, slow and full. He let the sound roll over him, let it settle into his memory with all the other noises that had once kept him up at night. There was no urge to run. Not now. The world would do as it always had; he would meet it on his own terms, and if trouble ever did return, it would have to fight its way through an entire town to reach him.

He swept his gaze across the green—at the bakery, now dark except for a sliver of candlelight in the back window; at the sturdy homes, shutters closed and warm from within; at the faint line of footprints where Sam and Jen had walked together, still visible on the stone. Even the Harmonic Capacitor, up on the eaves, glimmered with a soft, persistent hope.

These were his people. This was his home. And if the world ever tried to take it from him, it would find a surgeon who had lived through worse, and who had learned, at last, how to be still.

He turned, squared his shoulders, and walked toward his own little door at the far edge of the square. His steps left a trail of shadow on the stones, but his heart was light, and the air hummed with the promise of one more day.

The moon watched him all the way home. He let it.

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about the author

Don Jones spent two decades writing tech books before he finally penned his first sci-fi novella, *A History of the Galactic War*. His well-reviewed and award-winning novels span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters.

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