entrées & epiphanies

A Cozy Fantasy

Tales from the Broken Claw
Book Eleven

don jones

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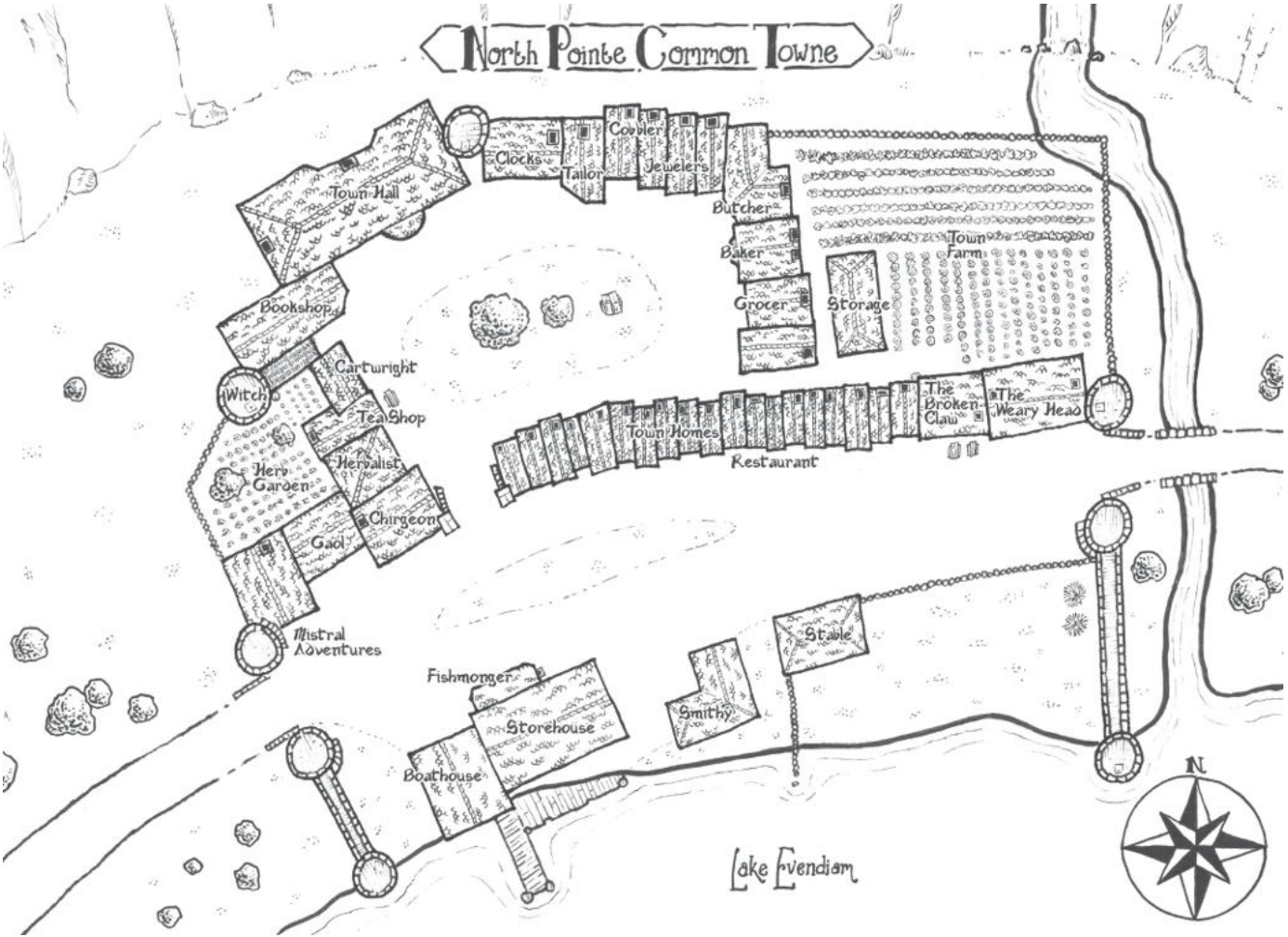
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For Megan Carr.
Thank you so much for the idea.

contents

	Foreword	ix
1.	The Taste of Home	1
2.	Two for the Price of One	13
3.	The Apprentice	29
4.	Service	45
5.	The Scholar's Last Theorem	61
6.	What the River Keeps	79
7.	The Diplomat's Supper	97
8.	All the Light She Left	117
9.	Overcorrection	129
10.	The Unfinished Argument	147
11.	The Test	165
12.	The Regulars	183
13.	Ghost Pepper	205
14.	The Last Apprentice of a Forgotten Art	219
15.	First Night	237
16.	The Unserved	255
17.	The Long Way 'Round	271
	Afterword	289
	Want Free Novels?	291
	Also by Don Jones	293
	About the Author	305


Urwald
North Pointe Common Towne
Gray Foal Pass
The Mistral Mountains
Lake Evendian
Strongfast
Celestrum
Elgindan
Smalhaven
Scimbas
Westhold
Demonbane Range
Stormport
Lake Midton
Holderdown
Mageroll
Skyreach Range
Darkename
Darkestore Forrest
Kithwellen
Lake Trenton
Flameheight Range
Trenton
The Mountedives
Dunereach
Highseas
Shorehaven
Farreach
Bright Islands
Amber Sea
Salten Sea
The Forbidden Continent
N


North Pointe Common Towne
Cobbler
Clocks
Tailor
Jewelers
Butcher
Baker
Grocer
Storage
Town Farm
Town Hall
Bookshop
Cartwright
Witch
Tea Shop
Herbalist
Herb Garden
Chirgeon
Gaol
Mistral Adventures
Town Homes
Restaurant
The Broken Claw
The Weary Head
Stable
Fishmonger
Storehouse
Smithy
Boathouse
Lake Evendim
N

foreword

Entrées & Epiphanies is a little different than the previous ten *Tales from the Broken Claw.* If you've been reading the novels in order, then you'll know that Llewel—a rare, thought-to-be-extinct Mountain Elf—joined North Pointe Common Towne a few years back. He opened a restaurant—a fine-dining restaurant, in fact—that serves people their final meal. Not their *last* meal before they die—but their final meal *for who they are today.* That meal is a way of marking the end of a chapter, and the beginning of a new one, as his patrons move on to whatever's next for them.

Obviously, that's all a bit mysterious, and we've only seen inside the restaurant in a few brief scenes.

That's about to change.

But rather than an entire novel dedicated to Llewel, his patrons, and whatever else is going on in North Pointe at the time, this book is a series of short stories, each focused on a new set of patrons at the restaurant. Oh, you'll still see plenty from the other townsfolk as well, but the focus here will be on Llewel and the people he's helping to "turn the page," so to speak.

I hope you enjoy.

the taste of home

. . .

THE HORSE ARRIVED before its rider did, in the sense that it was the horse who drew attention first. It came through the north gate at a pace that had clearly once been a canter and had since negotiated itself down to something between a determined walk and an apology — one foreleg wrapped in a poultice bandage that had seen better days, the whole animal bearing the look of a creature that had covered a great deal of ground and had opinions about it.

The rider, once noticed, was the sort of man who had trained himself not to be noticed. He sat straight in the saddle from what appeared to be long habit rather than comfort, his coat a faded thing that might once have been military and had since become simply brown. He had a general's face — not in any decorative sense, but in the structural one: the jaw of a man who had given orders in the rain, the eyes of one who had learned to read terrain at a glance and had never quite stopped. He was perhaps sixty, perhaps more. It was difficult to say. Some years count harder than others.

Jen was on her morning rounds when he came through, and she watched him from the corner of the square with the mild, cata-

loguing attention she gave to all newcomers. He looked at the town the way travelers sometimes did — not with curiosity, exactly, but with the practiced assessment of someone who had arrived in a great many places and knew how to read them for risk and resource. His gaze moved across the square in a systematic sweep: the inn, the Claw, the bakery, the shops. Then it landed on the Restaurant, and it stopped.

He sat there for a moment, horse fidgeting beneath him, and looked at the sign. Just the sign. Then he dismounted, which he did with the care of a man whose knees had filed a formal complaint, tied the horse to the post outside the inn, and went inside to arrange a room.

Jen watched him go and made a note to herself that was more feeling than thought: *that one has been moving for a long time.*

His name, Minnie reported to the Claw that evening with the authority of someone who had examined his travel documents personally and at length, was Conor. No second name offered, which Minnie considered rude, though she allowed as he'd paid a sennight in advance and had asked, very politely, whether there was anywhere in town to have a horse looked at.

"Old soldier," Sam said. She was wiping down the bar with the cloth she kept behind the counter — the good one, not the one for emergencies — and she had not looked up from her work.

"You can't know that," Minnie said.

"Coat," Sam said. "Posture. The way he clocked every exit when he came through the door just now."

Minnie looked over her shoulder. The man called Conor was sitting alone at a table by the wall, facing the room, with a mug of ale he was drinking with the focused attention of someone performing a necessary task. He had chosen the chair with its back to the stone, Jen noticed. Some habits didn't retire.

"He asked me if North Pointe was safe," Minnie said. "I told him it was peculiar, which is different."

"What did he say to that?"

"He said peculiar was fine. He'd had enough of the other kind."

Sam set down the cloth. "There you are, then."

Jen took her ale and went to sit near him — not at his table, not intrusively, but close enough to exchange a nod, which she did, and which he returned with the precision of a man who understood the social geometry of a constable's greeting.

"Horse'll be all right," she said. "Dardrad's looked after it with Warren on his trip, and he's seen worse. Keeping it right in front of his shop, too."

"Good animal," he said. "She didn't deserve the roads I've put her on."

"Where are you headed?"

He considered the question with more attention than it usually received. "I've been asking myself that," he said at last, and returned to his ale.

Jen didn't push. She'd learned early that questions asked into the right silence answered themselves eventually, and this man carried a silence with weight and practice. Whatever he was moving away from — or toward, or around — it wasn't her business unless he made it so.

She was nearly back to the bar when he said, without looking up, "What's that place? Down the road."

Jen paused. Through the Claw's bow window, the Restaurant's sign caught the last light of the evening in that way it had — as though the letters were lit from within, though no lamp stood near them.

"It's a restaurant," she said.

"I can read," he said, mildly. "I meant what manner of place."

Jen thought about how to answer that, which was a thing she'd been doing for as long as Llewel had been in North Pointe and had never quite resolved. "The sort where the meal finds you," she said finally, "as much as you find it."

He looked up at her then for the first time directly, and she saw that his eyes were the particular kind of tired that sleep didn't fix.

"Hm," he said, and looked back at his ale.

He spent two days in North Pointe before he went in, which was faster than some and slower than others. Jen watched him without meaning to — it was simply that he was interesting in the way things under pressure were interesting, the way a bridge was interesting when you weren't certain of the span. He walked the town each morning with the systematic attention of reconnaissance, not hostility, just the ingrained habit of understanding a place before he committed to it. He visited Dardrad's twice to check on the horse. He sat in the Claw each evening in his wall-facing chair and drank one ale, sometimes two, and spoke to no one at length though he was civil to everyone who spoke to him.

On the second morning, Darby attempted to engage him in a conversation about military history that became, on Darby's side, a largely inaccurate account of a battle that Jen was fairly certain had not occurred. Conor listened to all of it with an expression of perfect patience, corrected three specific points with the brevity of a man who had stopped enjoying this kind of conversation some years ago, and then excused himself.

"He knew the Battle of Arenmouth," Darby reported later at the Claw, with reverence. "Knew it *personally*, I think."

"Darby," Sam said.

"He corrected my casualty figures."

"Darby."

"They were wrong. I was wrong. He was very kind about it."

Sam looked at Jen. Jen looked at her ale.

On the morning of the third day, Jen came onto the trade road at first candlelight and found Conor standing in front of the Restaurant, not moving. He wasn't doing anything so purposeful as knocking. He was simply standing, the way a man stands when

he's been walking toward something for longer than he knew and has only just recognized the destination.

The door opened. She couldn't see Llewel from her angle, only the door moving inward, and the cold blue light from inside falling across the step and across Conor's boots. There was a pause — an exchange, she assumed, though she couldn't hear it — and then Conor stepped inside, and the door closed, and the light went with it.

She stood in the road for a moment. The morning went on around her without event. Somewhere behind the bakery, one of Makota's kits was having strong opinions about something. The Claw's chimney was breathing its first smoke of the day.

She went and had her breakfast.

"A sennight," Sam said.

"He's been in a sennight," Jen confirmed. She was on her second coffee of the morning, which was one more than she usually allowed herself, and she was looking out the Claw's window at the Restaurant's closed door and the horse still tied to the post outside the inn.

"Minnie's going to have thoughts about the horse still being at Dardrad's," Sam said.

"Minnie's already having thoughts about the horse. She's had them out loud, twice, to me specifically, and once in the direction of the Restaurant's rear window on the theory that Llewel might be listening."

"Is he?"

"Probably. He didn't come to the window."

Sam refilled Jen's mug without being asked. "You going to say anything to him? When he comes out?"

"Depends what state he's in."

"And if he doesn't come out?"

Jen considered the question. In the time Llewel had been in

North Pointe, she had developed a working theory about the Restaurant, which was that it did not take people who hadn't, in some sense, come to it ready. The old woman, the scholar, the young man with his borrowed coat and his unfinished business — they'd all gone in carrying something and come out carrying less of it, or carrying it differently. She had no evidence that anyone had come to harm inside, and she had the constable's instinct that told her harm had a smell, and this place didn't have it.

But a sennight was a sennight.

"I'll give him another few days," she said.

"Generous," Sam said, which was not a criticism.

Minnie resolved the matter of the horse herself on the ninth day, which was to say she moved it around to the small stable yard across from the inn, with the energy of someone who has been waiting for sufficient justification and has finally received it. "Leaving an animal at a post for nine days," she said, to anyone in the Claw who would listen, which was everyone, "is not a thing I will have in my square. Constable or no constable."

"To be fair," Darby said, "it's not technically your square."

Minnie looked at him.

"I'll help with the horse," Darby said.

Jen made a note to tell Llewel, whenever he surfaced, that the horse was in good hands. She wasn't entirely sure why this felt important, except that the man called Conor had said *good animal* with the specific feeling of someone whose attachment was genuine, and it seemed like the kind of thing he'd want to know.

He came out on the fourteenth day, in the grey moments before first light, when the square and road were both empty and the only sound was the lake and the slow tick of Finnian's mechanical clock from the tower — a sound that still struck most of the town as faintly presumptuous, though the younger traders had begun to find it useful.

Jen happened to be up. She had a tendency to sleeplessness that she'd long since stopped fighting, and her practice on such mornings was to make tea and sit at her window and watch the square do nothing. It was, she'd found, better than lying in the dark thinking about paperwork.

She saw the door open. She saw Conor come out.

He stood on the Restaurant's step for a moment, and she watched him from her window with the still attention of someone who knows they are witnessing something private and holds themselves accordingly. He looked up at the sky, which was the particular ink-blue of the time before dawn, and took a breath that she could see even from her distance — a slow one, the kind that has some work to do.

He had aged. She was certain of it, and equally certain it was not the right word — he hadn't declined, hadn't deteriorated. He simply looked as though some amount of time had passed *through* him rather than around him. The jaw was the same, the posture was the same, but something about the set of his shoulders had changed. They were still straight. They were no longer braced.

He stood there for three candlemarks, maybe a little more, and then he went down to Minnie's inn, and the door closed behind him, and the square was empty again.

Llewel was still in the doorway of the Restaurant. He had been there the whole time, Jen realized — standing just inside the threshold, a still pale shape in the darkness. Now he turned and went inside, and the door closed, and the light went out.

She found him the next morning arranging the herb pots that sat on planter shelfs by the restaurant's back door.

This was, she had come to understand, a thing Llewel did when he was in a particular mood — not troubled, exactly, but reflective in a way he seemed to need his hands for. He rotated each pot with

the same measuring attention as always, but there was something in the pace of it this morning that told her he was thinking hard.

"He's out," she said.

"I know," Llewel said, without looking up.

"He aged," she said. "Inside, I mean. Time passed."

"A great deal of it," Llewel said. He turned a pot of rosemary a quarter-turn and examined it. "He had a great deal to move through."

Jen leaned against the rear wall of the Restaurant and looked at the square, which was coming awake around them in the usual way — Makota's first batch of the morning sending a smell of bread across the green, her two kits chasing something with enthusiasm near the well. "He going to be all right?"

Llewel set down the rosemary. He was quiet for a moment, and she noticed — she'd gotten good at noticing — that his hands had gone entirely still, resting flat on the edge of the planter box, and that his face had the quality of something held carefully.

"He's been carrying the war for fifteen years," Llewel said. "Not the fact of it. The self he was before it. He kept trying to return to that man, and couldn't understand why he could never find him."

"And now?"

"Now he knows the man he was before the war is not lost. He is simply — earlier. He became someone else, and then spent fifteen years telling himself that was a catastrophe." A pause. "It was not a catastrophe."

Jen absorbed this. Across the square, Darby emerged from the bakery with the energy of someone who had just had an idea, looked around for an audience, and found only the kits, who were not interested.

"He asked me," Llewel said, "in the first course — he asked what I was serving."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him the truth. That I was serving what he'd eaten when he'd sat with people and not rank. When he'd been in a place

rather than deployed to it." He picked up the rosemary pot again, though he didn't turn it, just held it. "He had eaten in forty-three different towns and villages over thirty years. He remembered most of them."

Jen thought about this. "He didn't know he'd been collecting them."

"He thought he'd been running away," Llewel said. "He had in fact been learning to be still."

They stood in silence for a moment. The clock in the tower marked the candlemark with its new-fangled solemnity, and two people who had not yet decided how they felt about it looked up at it with identical expressions of mild reservation.

"The horse is at Minnie's," Jen said.

"I know. I'll tell him." Something crossed Llewel's face that was nearly a smile. "Minnie will want thanking. She has taken extremely good care of it."

"She'll deny that," Jen said.

"Yes," said Llewel. "But she'll want thanking regardless."

Conor came out of the inn at mid-morning looking, Darby reported to the Claw at lunch with the detailed attention of a man who considered observation a civic duty, like someone who had slept for a fortnight and felt reasonable about it. He had, in point of fact, slept for the better part of eighteen marks, which Minnie had encouraged by the simple method of not knocking on his door, which was for her an act of considerable restraint.

He retrieved his horse from the stable yard, and this reunion was apparently satisfying to both parties, the horse making her feelings known with a degree of emphasis that suggested she had not enjoyed the uncertainty.

He came to the Claw for a late breakfast, and Sam fed him without commentary, which was the highest form of tact she offered. He ate with the specific attention of a man rediscovering

what hunger felt like when it wasn't being ignored, and he had seconds, which Sam produced without being asked.

Jen came in at the end of it and sat across from him with a mug of tea.

"Constable," he said.

"How are you?" she asked, meaning it.

He thought about it. "I'm not sure yet," he said, which was more honest than most people managed. "But I think that's all right."

"Where are you headed? Still asking yourself?"

He smiled at that — a small one, but real. "Less than I was." He turned his mug on the table, a slow half-circle. "There's land east of here. Outside the town. I noticed it coming in — good soil, south-facing slope, not much on it."

Jen knew the plot he meant. It had been fallow for three seasons, since the family who'd worked it moved west. "Lender holds it," she said. "Leota would know who."

"I'll ask." He looked out the window at the square, at the Restaurant's sign in the morning light. He looked at it for a long moment. "I should have done something like that years ago," he said, not with regret, exactly, but with the clear-eyed accounting of a man who has stopped blaming the balance and started reading it correctly. "Put something in the ground. Watched it come up."

"There's time," Jen said.

"Some left," he agreed. "Enough."

He left the Claw mid-morning, and Jen watched him cross the road to the stable. He walked differently than he had coming in — still straight, still measured, but with the particular quality of a man who has decided on a direction and is no longer negotiating with himself about it.

At the Claw's doorway, Sam appeared at Jen's shoulder, wiping her hands on her cloth.

"He's leaving, then," Sam said.

"Looks that way. Most do."

"Minnie won't charge him for the horse."

"She'll charge him for the horse," Jen said. "But she won't charge him the full amount."

Sam made the noise that meant she was conceding the point without admitting she was conceding the point. "You talk to Llewel this morning?"

"Briefly."

"And?"

Jen thought about what Llewel had said — about the forty-three meals in forty-three different towns, about a man who'd thought he was running away and had actually been learning, slowly, over three decades and without knowing it, how to be somewhere. "He said the man had an excellent appetite," she said. "And that the dessert course was particularly well-received."

Sam turned back toward the bar. "Good," she said. "That's good, then."

Outside, in the square, Conor paused in front of the Restaurant. He looked up at the sign for a moment — just a moment — and then inclined his head, very slightly, in the manner of a man settling an account, and walked on.

Through the Restaurant's spotless front window, barely visible in the cool interior light, Llewel Magcaryn stood at his bar with a cloth in his hands.

He was not polishing anything.

His hands were completely still.

Three sennights later, a plot of land well east of North Pointe changed hands for the first time in three seasons, to a buyer recorded in the registry simply as Conor. *The following spring, Makota's kits reported — with the authority of creatures who covered a great deal of ground — that someone was digging the south-facing slope. And that they appeared, from a distance, to be in no particular hurry.*

two for the price of one

. . .

THEY ARRIVED in the way that people who have been arguing for most of a journey arrive: not loudly, because the argument had burned through its fuel somewhere on the road and left only the particular silence that follows — a silence with shape and temperature, the kind that two people can sit inside for a candlemark without either of them technically being at fault.

The woman was first through the gate, which had been the case for most of their marriage and was not the source of the problem though it had occasionally been recruited into service as evidence for it. Her name was Petra, and she was the sort of person who took up exactly as much space as she needed and was quietly impatient with those who took up more. She was somewhere in her middle years, handsome in the angular way of someone who had been beautiful at twenty and had traded it for something more durable, and she walked with the purpose of a woman who had somewhere to be and a reasonable grievance about the number of delays between her and it.

Her husband, Oswin, came through the gate perhaps fifteen paces behind, which was not stubbornness so much as the natural result of a man who moved through the world at a considered pace

and saw no particular reason to adjust this on account of anyone else's urgency. He was broad and ruddy, a cooper by trade, with the hands that came with it and the settled quality of a man whose relationship with his own opinions was long-established and comfortable. He had been married to Petra for twenty-two years. He was not unhappy, exactly. He was tired in a way that had become so familiar he had mostly stopped noticing it.

Jen, who was talking to Galhani outside the tea shop when they came through the town gate, clocked them both in the time it took to exchange a glance with Galhani, who clocked them equally fast and with the same conclusion.

"Trouble?" Galhani said, in the tone that meant *not the dangerous kind*.

"Domestic," Jen said, which in North Pointe's particular taxonomy meant: real, but contained, and probably not her business unless it became so. She watched them examine the square with the specific distance of two people who are technically walking together and have filed the paperwork to prove it, and followed them as they stepped back out onto the trade road.

They went to the inn first, which was where everyone went, and emerged twenty minutes later having apparently concluded that they were hungry, or at least that eating was a thing that needed to happen and could be accomplished without requiring further discussion of whatever had been the subject of the road. Petra had asked Minnie about dining options. Minnie — in the aftermath, and in some detail — reported that she had recommended the Claw, which was good and reliable, and had mentioned the Restaurant as an afterthought, the way one mentions a thing that is technically relevant but comes with implications.

"She looked at it," Minnie said, "the way people look at it. You know the way."

Jen knew the way.

Oswin, according to Minnie, had said: "Looks expensive."

Petra had said: "It looks quiet."

She had said it, Minnie observed with the authority of someone who had been reading people across an inn counter for three decades, in the tone of a woman who had not had quiet in some time and was prepared to pay for it.

They were not, Llewel reflected, the first couple to arrive together. But they were, in his considered assessment, the most thoroughly separated people he had received who were still technically in the same marriage.

He had watched them walk back and forth along the trade road from the window — he had a practice of this, not voyeurism but preparation, the same way a careful cook reads the season before deciding the menu. The woman walked ahead. The man walked behind. The space between them was not hostile; it was habitual, and that was, in certain ways, a harder thing to work with.

He had the door open before they reached the step.

Petra stopped at the sight of him with the slight recalibration of someone who had been prepared for a maître d' and received instead something considerably more precise. Llewel in the doorway was not an imposing figure in any conventional sense — he was not taller than most humans, not broad, not constructed for threat — but there was a quality to the way he occupied space that tended to reorganize a person's expectations without their consent.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening," Petra said, with the automatic courtesy of someone who had been well-raised. Then: "We heard this was worth a visit."

"I hope to justify the recommendation," Llewel said. He stepped aside. "Please come in."

The interior received them the way it received everyone: with a stillness that was not emptiness, a cleanliness that was not sterility. Two tables had been laid — Petra noticed this and did not say anything, though something in her expression suggested she had

filed it away. A single candle on each. White linen, very smooth. She had the brief, involuntary thought that she had not eaten at a table with a cloth like this since before the children were grown, and that the thought carried a feeling she wasn't quite ready to identify.

Oswin looked at the two tables and then at Llewel. "We're together," he said, with the practiced patience of a man who has spent a life being misunderstood by establishments.

"Of course," Llewel said, and indicated the table on the left with a gesture of perfect hospitality.

He seated Petra at the right-hand table.

The wine arrived before either of them could raise the question of the seating arrangement formally, which was either coincidence or management, and with Llewel it was never possible to determine which. It was a white wine, dry and cold and very good, and Oswin found himself taking a second sip before he'd consciously decided to have the first, which was unusual. He was not, in general, a man who was surprised by wine.

He looked over at Petra's table. She was looking at her glass with the careful attention of someone receiving information.

"Excuse me," Oswin said, to Llewel, who had not moved from the vicinity of the doorway to the kitchen. "We did request a table together."

"You did," Llewel agreed.

"And yet."

"I thought you might find the arrangement more comfortable."

Oswin considered whether this was an insult or an observation, concluded it was probably both, and decided to let it sit for now. He was not a man who made scenes. He had made a handful over the course of his marriage, at intervals of roughly five years, and they had not accomplished what he'd hoped. "Fine," he said,

which was a word he deployed at a frequency that had become, Petra had told him, its own kind of statement.

The first course arrived: bread, still warm from whatever the kitchen was doing, with a small crock of soft butter and a scatter of salt. Simple, almost insultingly so, and yet the smell of it reached him before the plate did, and it was the smell of his mother's kitchen on a winter morning, which was not a thing he had thought about in some years and which arrived now with the force of something that had been waiting patiently for a door to open.

He looked at the bread for a moment.

He ate.

Petra's first course was different.

She knew it was different because she glanced at Oswin's table and saw the bread, and what was in front of her was not bread. It was a small dish of something she recognized before she could name it — a grain porridge, spiced with something warm, served in a particular shallow bowl that was not the bowl in front of her now but was somehow inside the bowl in front of her, a bowl from her grandmother's house in the hill country where she had spent her summers before she was twelve and the world had gotten complicated.

She sat with this for a moment.

"I didn't order this," she said.

"No," said Llewel, from somewhere nearby.

"I didn't even — how did you know—"

"You're very hungry," Llewel said, gently. "Eat."

She ate. It tasted exactly right, which was to say it tasted like being eight years old and having nowhere to be by any particular candlemark, and she found, to her considerable irritation, that she had feelings about this.

She ate it all anyway.

The thing about eating a meal that knows you, Petra would think later — much later, when she was in a position to think about it at all — was that it began as pleasure and became, incrementally, something more demanding. The second course was a soup she had made herself, once, in the first autumn of her marriage, when the world had seemed like a project she was just beginning and the kitchen had been the best room of that small house and Oswin had leaned in the doorway and said something that made her laugh until the ladle slipped. She had not thought about the soup in twenty years. She had not thought about the ladle. She had certainly not thought about the laugh.

She looked up. Oswin was eating something on the other side of the room — she couldn't see what — with an expression she recognized as his *thinking* face, which she had spent twenty-two years telling herself was the *not listening* face, and which she was now, for some reason, uncertain about.

The candle between them was doing something with the light that made the distance across the room seem less determined than it usually was.

"Llewel," she said, and he was there.

"He's eating my soup," she said. It made no sense as a sentence and she knew it.

"He is eating something from his own life," Llewel said. "Not yours. You are not eating the same meal."

She looked at her bowl. She looked at Oswin. "We never did, did we," she said, and it wasn't quite a question.

Llewel said nothing, which was, she was beginning to understand, a kind of answer.

Oswin's second course was a thing he would not have predicted: a meal from his apprentice years, before the cooperage, before North

Pointe, before Petra, when he had worked for three seasons in a river town to the south and had eaten most evenings at a long communal table with eight other tradespeople and had been, in some manner he had never found words for, deeply content. Not happy in any dramatic sense. Content. He had known what the day would bring and what his hands were for and what would be on the table at evening, and it had been enough.

He thought about that now with the specificity of a man who has not had access to a memory in a long time. He had left that river town because the cooperage came available here, and the cooperage had led to Petra, and Petra had led to children, and children had led to the life he had now, which was not bad. It was not bad.

But he had been, he realized, mildly confused ever since.

Not unhappy. Confused. As though he had taken a turning he hadn't fully meant to take and had been navigating by landmarks that didn't quite correspond to any map he recognized.

"I haven't thought about that river town in years," he said, to the room.

"Tell me about it," Llewel said, and Oswin looked up to find him at the table — not seated, he never sat, but standing with the attentive stillness of someone who was genuinely prepared to listen for as long as this required.

Oswin told him about the river town. He had not expected to. He was not a man who talked about himself, which Petra had told him, at various points and with varying degrees of heat, was itself a problem. But there was something about Llewel's particular quality of attention — the stillness of it, the sense that he was actually going to do something with what he heard — that made the words arrive more easily than Oswin was prepared for.

He talked about the table with eight chairs. He talked about a man called Desh who had taught him three things about barrel staves that he still used every day and had never told anyone about. He talked about the way the river sounded at night from his window over the shop and how he had lain awake and listened to

it and not wanted anything else, which was either contentment or an early warning sign depending on how you looked at it, and which he had concluded, at twenty-three, was contentment, and which he had spent twenty years quietly, privately wondering about.

"Did you leave something behind," Llewel said, "or did you carry it with you without knowing?"

Oswin stopped. He looked at his hands, which were a cooper's hands and no mistake and had made ten thousand good things and had held his children when they were small and had rested on Petra's shoulder on the night her father died, and had kneaded dough on Sunday mornings when the house was quiet and had repaired, more times than he could count, things that other people had broken.

"I don't know," he said.

"That," Llewel said, "is the most honest answer you have given anyone in some time."

Time was doing something strange.

This was not immediately apparent to either of them, because the nature of time doing strange things in the Restaurant was precisely that it didn't feel strange while it was happening. It felt, instead, like the evening was simply continuing to be the evening — long and warm and full of things to consider — and that the candles had more life in them than candles usually did, and that the courses kept arriving with a patient unhurriedness that seemed entirely right for a meal of this kind, and that the questions being asked — by the food, by the room, by the occasional quiet word from Llewel — were questions that simply took as long as they took.

Petra's third course was her own wedding feast, rendered not as it had actually been — full of people and noise and her mother crying in the way she cried at both happy and terrible things,

which was useful to no one — but as its essential flavor, the taste of a day when she had been entirely certain she was beginning something, when the future had seemed like a country she and Oswin were about to discover together.

She ate it slowly.

She was not the girl who had sat at that table. She knew that. The girl at that table had been full of a particular kind of energy that had been, she saw now, partly confidence and partly terror, and had spent twenty-two years becoming someone else. Someone with opinions that had been tested. Someone who knew what she wanted with a precision that the girl at the wedding table had only gestured at. Someone, she realized with a surprise that arrived quietly and then settled, that she was not unhappy to be.

She had blamed the marriage for some of this, and now she was not sure the marriage was the right address.

She looked across the room at Oswin, who was sitting with something in front of him that she couldn't identify and had his *thinking* face on again, and she thought about the last time they had sat in the same room without either of them feeling the need to fill the silence with complaint or justification or the comfortable artillery of twenty-two years of small grievances, and she could not think of one. And she wondered whether that was the marriage's fault or the fault of two people who had been so busy tending their separate, parallel unhappinesses that they had forgotten the room contained another person who was neither the cause nor the cure.

This was not a comfortable thought.

She had another bite, and let it be uncomfortable, and sat with it.

Oswin's third course was food he did not recognize.

This was, given the pattern of the evening, unexpected, and he said so.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Something you haven't eaten yet," Llewel said.

"Where is it from?"

"It doesn't exist yet. It requires a kitchen of a particular kind." He let this sit. "And someone willing to cook in it."

Oswin looked at the dish. It was simple — braised, something root-adjacent, with herbs he couldn't name, and a bread alongside that was darker than the first and had seeds in it and was very good. It tasted like nothing he had eaten, and it also tasted, in some way that bypassed his vocabulary entirely, like the river town had tasted: like a day that fit, like a purpose that was legible.

"You're telling me something," Oswin said.

"I am serving you something," Llewel corrected. "What you make of it is your own concern."

Oswin ate the bread. He thought about the cooperage, which he was good at and did not love. He thought about the way Petra moved through a room — efficiently, directly, with the purposefulness of someone who knew what rooms were for — and how he had once found this extraordinary and had since reclassified it as something to navigate around. He thought about the last time he had told her something he had not already decided was safe to say.

He could not think of one. He had been, he realized, in a long negotiated silence, and had mistaken the negotiation for peace.

"I don't know how to say things to her anymore," he said, to his plate. "I did, once."

"I know," said Llewel.

"It became — there were so many things that went wrong between saying and landing. I stopped trying."

"Yes," Llewel said. "She stopped too. You are well matched in that, at least."

Oswin looked up. "Is that supposed to be comforting?"

"It is supposed to be accurate," Llewel said. "Comfort, I find, comes from accuracy more reliably than from kindness."

Oswin sat with this. Then he ate the rest of the braised thing, which was very good, and which tasted like a future he had not yet

made a decision about, and which sat in him with the warmth of something worth considering.

The dessert course arrived for both of them at something close to the same moment — a coordination that would have required advance knowledge of the kind that was either extraordinary or natural, depending on how one thought about Llewel Magcaryn.

For Petra: a small tart, the kind her grandmother had made, but altered — the fruit of a different season, sweeter and less certain, the sort of thing that could mean several things depending on what you brought to it.

For Oswin: a rice pudding with dark sugar, which was the pudding his mother had made for birthdays only, on the grounds that things that were available always were undervalued, and which arrived now at a table where it was not his birthday, simply because he had earned it.

They ate their desserts on opposite sides of the room, in the Restaurant's warm dark, in a silence that was different from the silence they had carried in from the road. That silence had been armored. This one had put the armor down and was not sure what came next, which was frightening and also, unmistakably, a relief.

They came out within twenty minutes of each other, which the Claw clocked with the accuracy of an establishment that had learned to pay attention to the Restaurant's door.

Darby's theory — delivered at volume to the table nearest the window — was that they'd been in for what, three, four candlemarks at most? No, that wasn't right, it was past midnight, that was — had it been that long? He was certain he'd seen them go in just after supper. Sam, behind the bar, said that they'd gone in

before the evening bell and that it was now the middle of the night and that Darby should perhaps track these things more carefully.

"That's seven or eight candlemarks," Darby said, which was not quite right either. "What were they doing in there?"

"Eating," Sam said.

"For eight candlemarks?"

Sam looked at him with the patience of someone who had refilled his mug a great many times over many years. "Darby."

"I'm just saying," Darby said, "that's the longest meal in recorded history, and it does not take that long to eat your feelings unless—" He lowered his voice to a register that was still perfectly audible to everyone in the Claw. "Unless it's a divorce spell."

"It is not a divorce spell," Sam said.

"She sat at one table. He sat at another."

"How do you know that?"

Darby pointed at the window, from which, if you pressed yourself to the glass and angled your head, you could see the corner of the nearest table through the Restaurant's front window. Sam looked at the window, then at Darby, and arranged her expression into something that communicated several things without requiring words.

"I was watching the road," Darby said. "It's civic awareness."

Jen, who had been at the bar for the last candlemark with a half-finished ale and the considered expression of someone who had long since made peace with the strangeness of North Pointe, said: "What did they look like when they came out?"

Darby thought about it. "Tired," he said. "Not — not fighting-tired. More like—" He searched for it. "The way people look after a long trip. Like they've gotten somewhere but they're not sure it was what they expected."

Jen thought this was probably the most useful thing Darby had said about anything in recent memory, and told him so, which pleased him enormously.

Petra and Oswin sat on the bench outside the Claw.

It had not been a planned bench-sitting; it was simply that the air was cool and quiet at this time, and the inn was not yet a comfortable destination, and the Claw was too full of people they didn't know being curious in their direction. The bench existed. They sat on it.

The distance between them was perhaps a foot, which was not the distance of two people who were estranged and not the distance of two people who had resolved something. It was the distance of two people who had, independently and in the same room, arrived somewhere they hadn't expected to be, and were still finding their footing.

Petra looked at the square. Oswin looked at his hands.

After a while, Oswin said: "I used to work on a river."

Petra turned to look at him. "You never told me that," she said, with no accusation in it, just the plain fact of the thing.

"I know," he said. "I don't know why." He paused. "I was good there. At that life. I didn't know I'd been carrying it around."

Petra looked at the Restaurant's sign, which was doing its late-night business of being quietly, implacably present. "He served me my grandmother's porridge," she said. "The kind with the warm spices. I haven't thought about that kitchen since I was twelve."

"Were you happy there?"

She thought about this with the seriousness it deserved. "Yes," she said. "In the way you can be happy when you don't know enough to be unhappy yet." She was quiet for a moment. "But also — I was happy because I was myself, there. Without any particular audience."

Oswin absorbed this. It was more than she had told him in a year, possibly two. He recognized this fact without knowing what to do with it, which was, he understood, fairly typical, and which he was now, for the first time in some years, inclined to do something about.

"I don't think the restaurant fixed us," he said.

"No," Petra agreed. "I think it showed us where we'd gotten to and left us to work out what to do about it."

"That's a bit unfinished," Oswin said.

"Yes," said Petra. "It is."

They sat with that for a while, the way people sit with true things that have just been said — carefully, and without rushing toward what comes next. The mechanical clock in the tower marked the candlemark with its new-fangled precision, and both of them looked up at it, and neither of them commented on it, and then both of them looked back at the square.

Jen saw them from the Claw's window when she left a little before the last bell. They were still on the bench, though the distance between them had closed somewhat — not dramatically, not the stuff of a story you'd tell — but enough. They were talking. Quietly, with the stops and starts of people finding a language they'd half-forgotten.

She found Sam at the bar, finishing the last of the closing-down.

"The couple's outside," Jen said.

"Still?" Sam looked up. "It's nearly last bell."

"Talking."

Sam was quiet for a moment, then resumed wiping down the counter. "Good," she said.

Darby appeared from the direction of the fireplace, carrying two empty mugs and a theory. "I've revised my position," he announced. "On the divorce spell."

"Good of you," Sam said.

"I don't think it was a divorce spell. I think it might have been the opposite."

"A marriage spell," Sam said, not quite a question.

"Not — not that exactly." Darby set the mugs down and frowned at the middle distance in the way of a man doing genuine cognitive work. "More like a — making-them-look-at-themselves

spell. Which is either the same thing as the marriage spell or the divorce spell, depending on what they find, and we won't know which for a while yet."

Jen considered telling him this was perceptive. She decided it might go to his head.

"We'll see," she said, and went home.

Outside, Petra and Oswin sat on the bench for another half-candlemark, until the inn's lights began to go out one by one next door and the night settled in around them with its particular North Pointe quality of quiet strangeness and fundamental safety.

They went in together.

Through the Restaurant's clean, dark window, nothing moved. The tables were empty, the chairs upturned in their precise rows. The candles were out.

The space where two people had eaten their own lives, across a room from each other, sat still and held whatever it knew with its usual, unhurried discretion.

the apprentice

. . .

THE BOY'S name was Tomlin, and he was fifteen, and he had decided approximately four miles outside of North Pointe that he was being abandoned.

It had not started as that kind of journey. It had started as a commission — Master Edric had been engaged to assess the stonework on a granary two days' ride east of North Pointe, a thing that happened several times a year and which Tomlin had accompanied him on before, carrying tools and asking questions and making himself useful in the way that apprentices made themselves useful, which was to say imperfectly but with goodwill. He was two years into his apprenticeship and had acquired, in that time, a competent eye for load-bearing joints, an excellent grasp of mortar consistency, and the particular calluses that came from learning the difference between a chisel held correctly and a chisel held the way you thought was correct until your master took it from your hand and showed you otherwise.

He was not a bad apprentice. He knew he was not a bad apprentice. He was simply — and this was the thing that had been sitting in him for two years with the uncomfortable weight of something that didn't quite fit — not entirely certain he was the

right apprentice. Not for this, not for stone and mortar and the careful arithmetic of weight and span. His hands knew the work. His hands were quick and willing and increasingly skilled. But there was a thing his hands wanted to do that the work never quite asked of them, a reaching toward something that the stone's functional surface didn't require and that he had no vocabulary for and that he had consequently been ignoring for two years with the discipline of someone who has decided that wanting what you have is the right approach and has not yet been persuaded otherwise.

Master Edric had not said anything about this. Master Edric never said anything he had not thoroughly considered first, which was a quality that made him an excellent mason and a sometimes difficult teacher. He was a compact, deliberate man of somewhere past fifty, with a grey beard he kept trimmed to a working length and eyes that had the quality of someone accustomed to reading structures for their flaws — not harshly, but honestly, with the specific attention of someone who understood that what you didn't see could bring down the roof.

He had, Tomlin realized now, been reading Tomlin with that same attention for two years.

They had stopped at North Pointe for the night on the return from the granary, which was ordinary enough. They had eaten at the Claw, which was good — a stew that Tomlin had eaten with the appetite of a fifteen-year-old who had spent two days lifting things, and a bread that Sam had produced without being asked, because she had the look of him correctly assessed from across the room. Master Edric had drunk his ale and been thoughtful in the particular way that meant he was working up to something, and Tomlin had noticed and said nothing, because in two years he had learned that Master Edric's working-up-to-something generally arrived on its own schedule and was not hastened by inquiry.

It arrived the next morning, when Tomlin came downstairs from the inn to find the horses saddled and Master Edric standing in the yard with his arms folded and his expression arranged into

something that was trying to be practical and not quite concealing that it was also something else.

"I've paid Minnie for another sennight," he said. "For yourself."

Tomlin looked at the horses. Both of them saddled. "You're leaving," he said.

"I have the Caldworth commission. It won't wait."

"I can ride hard and—"

"Tomlin." Master Edric said it quietly, which was worse than if he'd said it loudly. "I need you to stay here for a while."

The silence that followed had several things in it. Tomlin went through them in approximately the order they arrived: confusion, then the first cold edge of something that was trying not to be hurt, then a practical attempt to find the explanation that made this not what it appeared to be.

"Is something wrong with my work?" he said, which was the most neutral phrasing of the actual question, which was *is something wrong with me.*

"No," Master Edric said, with a directness that Tomlin recognized as genuine. "Your work is good. It's going to be better. But there's something you need that I can't teach you." He paused, and Tomlin could see him choosing words with the care of a man who understood that what he said in the next few moments would be carried for a long time. "I've heard things about this town. That it has a way of — of helping people find their footing. I don't know exactly what that means. I came here hoping to find out." He looked at the inn, at the square, at the Restaurant's sign visible from the yard, and something in his expression was uncertain in a way Tomlin had never seen before. "There's a place here. I think you should try it."

Tomlin looked at the Restaurant's sign. The definite article, the slight dare of it. "A restaurant," he said.

"So it appears."

"You want me to eat at a restaurant."

"I want you to trust me," Master Edric said, "one more time, and do what I'm asking."

He left within the candlemark. Tomlin stood in the yard and watched the horses go through the gate and felt the specific, complicated feeling of someone who has been told they are cared for in a way that currently feels identical to being left behind, and who is old enough to understand the difference intellectually and not quite old enough to feel it.

He did not go to the Restaurant that day. He was fifteen, and his pride had a significant vote in the matter, and the pride's position was that presenting himself at a restaurant because his master had told him to was not a thing he was prepared to do within the first twenty-four marks.

He spent the day instead in a way that was partly exploration and partly the restless movement of someone who doesn't know what to do with themselves and is hoping that motion will resolve this. He walked the square twice and looked in the shop windows. He watched Makota's kits for longer than he intended — they were doing something complicated with a stack of cooling trays that involved a level of organization he found genuinely impressive. He found his way, by the gravitational pull that craftsmen tend to exert on each other, to the blacksmith's at the east end of the road.

Warren was not a man you came around a corner and felt prepared for. He was an ogre, which Tomlin had known in the abstract before he arrived at the forge and encountered it in the specific, and the specific was significantly more than the abstract had suggested. He was enormous in the way that certain things were enormous — not threatening, but *present*, the way a large tree was present, with an authority that came from mass and stillness rather than anything it was doing. He was working at the forge when Tomlin arrived, shaping something that resolved itself, after a moment, into a hinge — a beautiful one, Tomlin's trained eye noted, with a precision that the functional purpose didn't require.

Warren looked at him. Warren had eyes that were, for his face, surprisingly mild.

"Apprentice," he said, which was a guess that was not a guess — the calluses, the posture, the way Tomlin had looked at the hinge.

"Mason's apprentice," Tomlin said. "My master left me here. I'm — waiting."

Warren nodded slowly, as though this was a thing that made sense to him, which Tomlin had not expected. "You been to the restaurant yet?"

Tomlin blinked. "Not yet."

"Hm." Warren returned to the hinge, turned it, examined the joint. "Your master brought you here for it, I'd guess."

"He said North Pointe could help me find my footing."

"Does," Warren said. "One way and another." He set the hinge down and looked at Tomlin with the frank appraisal of someone who had no investment in politeness for its own sake. "What's your craft?"

"Stonework. Masonry."

"That what you want to do?"

The question arrived with the bluntness of a hammer, and Tomlin felt it in approximately the same way. "I'm apprenticed," he said. "Two years."

"That's not what I asked."

Tomlin looked at the hinge. It was, he now saw, decorated along the spine — small marks, not random, a running pattern of something botanical, vines or leaves, very fine, done with a tool that was not a blacksmith's usual instrument. "Did you do that?" he said, pointing.

Warren looked at the hinge. "That's Darby's work," he said. "The boy does the decorative pieces when I let him."

Tomlin looked at the marks. They were good — genuinely good, the kind of good that came from someone whose hands understood what they were doing in a way that bypassed instruction. He had a sudden, violent wish that he had done them.

"I like the structural work," he said, carefully. "I'm good at it. But sometimes—"

"Mm," said Warren, in the tone of someone who had heard the rest of the sentence already.

"—I want to do something else with it. Something that isn't — only structural."

"Mm," said Warren again.

They stood in the pleasant noise of the forge for a moment.

"Go to the restaurant," Warren said. "Sooner's better."

He went the next morning.

He stood in front of the door for a full candlemark before it opened, which was either because Llewel had not yet noticed him or because Llewel had noticed him immediately and was waiting for the candlemark to finish its work. Tomlin suspected the latter, though he could not have said why.

The door opened. Llewel looked at him with those deep blue eyes that arranged themselves, Tomlin felt, directly in the centre of you without asking permission.

"I'm — my master said I should come," Tomlin said, which was not the opening he'd planned.

"Your master is wise," Llewel said, and stepped aside.

The interior was not what Tomlin had expected, though he could not have said precisely what he had expected. It was very clean. Very still. The chairs were upturned on most of the tables except one, which had been laid for a single person, which was him, which meant Llewel had known he was coming, which Tomlin filed under things he was going to think about later. The light was soft and faintly cool, not cold, the way outdoor light was sometimes when the clouds were high and even. It felt like a room that had been waiting, not emptily, but with intention.

"Sit," said Llewel.

Tomlin sat.

"Are you hungry?" Llewel asked.

"Yes," said Tomlin, which was true in more senses than he was currently equipped to articulate.

"Good," said Llewel, and went to the kitchen.

The first course was bread and a soft cheese and some pickled vegetables, which was the lunch his mother packed him on working days back home, and which arrived with such ordinariness that Tomlin ate half of it before the ordinariness resolved itself into something more specific — the taste of being twelve, of carrying his lunch in a cloth to wherever his father was working, of sitting on a stone in the sun and eating and looking at the thing his father was building with the feeling that the world was being made, that people made it, that hands made it, and that this was a good and important fact.

He put down the bread.

"How did you—"

"Eat," Llewel said, from somewhere near the kitchen door. "There is time for questions."

Tomlin ate. He ate all of it, and then sat with his hands in his lap and the feeling of twelve years old in his chest, and looked at the room, and noticed for the first time — truly noticed, not just saw — the walls.

The walls of the Restaurant were plain plaster, off-white, very smooth. But near the ceiling, running the perimeter of the room, there was a border. He had not registered it when he sat down, because it was subtle, the kind of detail that arrived slowly. It was carved — not deeply, but with great precision — a running pattern of figures and leaves and animals and objects, all connected, all telling something, a story or a history or something between the two, in a language he could not read but that his eyes moved along with the particular hunger of someone who has found text in

a script they do not know and wants more than anything to understand it.

"Who made that?" he said.

Llewel appeared at his shoulder. "A craftsman who passed through some seasons ago," he said. "He was here for a moon. He carved it in lieu of payment."

Tomlin looked at it. "He was good," he said.

"He had never carved before in his life," Llewel said. "He discovered here that he should have."

Tomlin looked at Llewel.

Llewel returned to the kitchen.

Outisde, Master Edric returned on the fourth day.

He came back through the north gate on a horse that was not the one he'd left on — the Caldworth commission, he explained to Minnie, had concluded faster than expected, and he had left his own horse at Caldworth and taken a faster one for the return, which Minnie accepted as an explanation while privately concluding that he had simply wanted to get back sooner and had done something practical about it.

He did not go to the Restaurant. He went to the Claw, because he needed to know, and Sam was the kind of person you went to when you needed to know things.

"The boy went in yesterday morning," Sam said, setting a mug in front of him without asking. "Hasn't come out."

Master Edric sat with this. "Is that — is that usual?"

"Some go in for an evening," Sam said. "Some longer." She did not elaborate on *how much* longer, because she had a sense that this information would not currently be helpful. "He'll come out when it's done."

"And when it's done—" Edric stopped. Tried again. "Will he be all right?"

Sam looked at him with the frank appraisal she reserved for

people who were asking real questions. “They come out changed,” she said. “But all right, yes. Generally better than all right.”

Edric wrapped his hands around the mug. He had the look of a man doing something uncomfortable that he had decided was necessary, which was, Sam noted, a look that showed up fairly regularly in the vicinity of the Restaurant. “I couldn’t teach him what he needed,” he said. “And I — I knew that, and it took me two years to admit it. A good apprentice. Better than good. But he was always — reaching past the work. Toward something I don’t have.”

“What’s your read on him?” Sam said.

Edric thought about it. “He looks at things and sees what could be in them,” he said. “Not just what they are. A stone wall and he sees — shapes in it. Not flaws. Possibilities.” He paused. “I can teach a boy to build. I cannot teach a boy to see. He already sees. He just doesn’t know yet what the seeing is for.”

Sam said nothing, which was her version of agreement.

“He’ll be angry with me,” Edric said. “When he comes out. For leaving him.”

“Maybe,” Sam said. “For a moment.”

Edric drank his ale. He spent the rest of the evening at the bar, not talking much, with the patience of a man who had decided on a course of action and was seeing it through, and Sam refilled his mug twice and did not charge him for the second one.

Inside, time had become unreliable.

Tomlin was aware of this in the background of his experience, the way you were aware of weather — not something to act on, just a condition of the world as it was currently constituted. The meal had been going on for a long time. He did not know how long. The candle on his table had been replaced at some point, or perhaps more than once, and the light from the windows had changed in ways he had stopped trying to parse.

The courses had kept coming. Some he recognized: food from home, from the road, from the inns he had stayed in with Edric over two years of commissions. Some he did not recognize at all. After the first course, he had stopped asking where things came from, because the asking felt beside the point, and the eating felt very much like the point.

And then, between one course and the next, the Restaurant had changed.

He did not see it change. He looked down at a plate, and when he looked up, the room was different — not in its furniture or its walls or its quality of light, but in its *population*. There were people in the kitchen. He could see them through a door that he was fairly certain had not been open before, working at a long table and a large stove, their movements practiced and collaborative and quick. They did not look at him. They were simply there, in the way of people who were entirely occupied.

He stood up, which he did without deciding to, and went to the kitchen door.

Llewel was beside him. "You may go in," he said. "If you like."

"Who are they?" Tomlin said.

"People who know what their hands are for," Llewel said. "They have agreed to let you work with them for a while."

"I don't know what I—"

"You will learn," Llewel said. "That is the point of being in a kitchen."

Tomlin looked at the people at the long table. They were of various ages, various appearances, and none of them looked up, and none of them spoke in any language he knew, and the work they were doing was the work of a kitchen — chopping, mixing, shaping, tending — but also, on the counter nearest the window, something else: one of them was carving. Taking a long piece of pale wood and moving a small, curved tool along its surface with the patience and intimacy of someone writing a letter they had been composing for years.

Tomlin watched the carving for a long moment. His hands felt

strange. Not uncomfortable — strange in the way they sometimes felt when he was looking at Darby's work on Warren's hinge, or at the border around the Restaurant's ceiling, a strangeness that was in fact a reaching, a wanting, that he had been calling restlessness for two years because he didn't have a better name for it.

He went into the kitchen.

He did not know how long he was there. This did not trouble him.

The people at the long table never spoke to him directly, but they communicated with the efficiency of people who worked well together, and he understood them, or his hands understood them, which came to the same thing. He was given tasks — first simple ones, then progressively less simple, and none of them were stonework but all of them were precise, and all of them required him to look at a thing and see not only what it was but what it wanted to become. He made mistakes. They were corrected without impatience, by demonstration rather than instruction, which was, he came to understand, the only way this kind of thing could be taught.

The carver at the window taught him nothing directly. But Tomlin spent time near him — watching, absorbing, and then, one morning or one evening or one indeterminate point in the long stretched time of the Restaurant's interior, being handed the tool.

He looked at the wood. He looked at the tool. He looked at the border around the ceiling of the room he could see through the kitchen door — the running figures, the leaves, the story he couldn't read.

He put the tool to the wood.

He came out on the morning of the ninth day, which Sam confirmed when Edric arrived at the Claw before first light and

asked, which he had been doing each morning, whether there was any movement.

"There's movement," Sam said, and Edric was out the door and across the square before she had finished the sentence.

Tomlin stood on the Restaurant's step. He was nine days older and looked, to his master's eye, about three years older, which was not age exactly but something more like — settledness. The restlessness was gone, which Edric noticed first. The way the boy had always seemed to be slightly ahead of himself, reaching, had resolved into something quieter and more definite.

He was carrying something. Edric looked at it: a piece of pale wood, perhaps the length of a forearm, carved along its length with a running border of figures and leaves and small animals, all connected, all in motion, all telling something. The work was rough in places — clearly a first effort — but the eye behind it was not rough at all. The eye behind it was extraordinary.

Edric looked at it for a long moment. Then he looked at Tomlin.

"All right?" he said, which was the word he had available.

"Yes," Tomlin said. He looked down at the wood. "I want to learn to carve."

"I know," said Edric.

"You knew before I did."

"I suspected," Edric said. "I didn't know for certain. I just — I could see that what you were wasn't quite what I was training you for."

Tomlin looked up at him. He had the expression of someone who has been angry about something and has resolved the anger but not entirely forgotten what it was. "You could have said."

"You wouldn't have believed me," Edric said, which was true, and which Tomlin acknowledged with the slight press of his mouth that was his version of conceding a point.

They stood on the Restaurant's step in the early morning, the square coming awake around them in the usual way — Makota's first smoke, the kit foxes, the clock in the tower beginning its day with its new-fangled authority.

"I don't know a good carving master," Edric said. "I'll find one. That's — I'll make it part of the commission. Locating the right person."

"That could take time," Tomlin said.

"Yes," Edric said. "I'm aware." He looked at the carved wood again. "In the meantime, I can teach you what I know of tools. It's not much, as applied to carving, but the patience is the same. And the eye for a joint."

Tomlin looked at the wood in his hands. Something about the way he held it had changed, Edric noticed — it was not the grip of someone carrying an object. It was the grip of someone carrying something that belonged to them.

"All right," Tomlin said.

They came into the Claw for breakfast, which Sam had ready without being asked, because she had been watching the Restaurant's door and had started the eggs when she saw it open. They ate together at the wall-facing table, and the conversation between them was different from the conversation before — lighter in some places, more direct in others, with less of the careful space that an apprentice kept around his master and more of the ease of two people who have been honest with each other and are finding the territory comfortable.

Darby appeared at their table halfway through the eggs, with the energy of someone who had been waiting for an opportunity.

"You were in there nine days," he said to Tomlin. "Was it extraordinary?"

Tomlin considered the question with the seriousness it probably didn't require. "It was a kitchen," he said.

Darby looked disappointed. "Just a kitchen?"

"A very good one," Tomlin allowed. "With very good people in it."

"But nothing — magical? Nothing strange?"

Tomlin looked at the piece of wood beside his plate, which he had not put down since he came out. “I learned something I didn’t know I needed to learn,” he said. “I’m not sure what to call that.”

“That’s the restaurant,” Darby said, with the authority of someone who had been observing it for considerably longer than Tomlin had. “That’s what it does.”

Makota appeared at the table in the way Makota sometimes appeared — swiftly, with professional purpose, and with one of her kits at her heel. She had been watching the door since the boy went in, for reasons she had told herself were purely civic and which Sam had correctly identified as competitive anxiety, based on nothing more substantial than the fact that anyone going into that restaurant for nine days and coming out carrying something carved was definitely not a baker.

She looked at the carved wood. She picked it up, which Tomlin allowed with only a slight tensing of the hands. She examined it.

“This is good,” she said, with the directness of someone who did not offer professional compliments lightly.

“It’s rough,” Tomlin said.

“It’s a first piece,” Makota said. “Look at the line here.” She traced the border of a small running animal — a fox, perhaps, or something foxlike. “That’s not rough. That’s a hand that knows what it’s doing and is still finding its range.” She set it down and looked at Tomlin with the frank appraisal of a craftsperson recognizing another one. “You should talk to Prudence. The seamstress. She does decorative work on commissions — embroidery, brocade patterns — and she’s been looking for someone who can do the same in wood for the structural elements. Carved frames, box lids, that kind of thing.”

Tomlin blinked. He looked at Edric. Edric looked at Sam.

Sam looked at her ceiling with the expression of someone who has watched this town do this kind of thing many times and remains, despite herself, impressed by it.

“The town,” Edric said, after a moment, “has a way of working things out.”

"It does," Sam agreed.

"You knew this might happen," he said. "When I brought him here."

"I suspected," Sam said, which was Edric's own word back at him, and which he received with a smile that surprised them both.

They stayed three more days. Edric spoke with Warren, whose forge produced commissions that required decorative stonework on surrounds and mantles and keystones, and who had an opinion about the local lack of someone who could do fine carving on stone. He spoke with Prudence, who was precise and thoughtful and who looked at Tomlin's piece of wood for a long time before she spoke. He arranged, between the three of them and a short conversation with Vamir about regional craftspeople, the beginning of a plan that was not yet a plan but was the shape of one.

On the last morning, Tomlin went to the Restaurant's door. He did not knock. He simply stood there for a moment, which felt right.

The door did not open, but he had not expected it to. He had what he'd come for.

He put his hand flat on the door for a moment — the gesture of someone leaving something behind and acknowledging the leaving — and then he picked up his pack and went to find his master.

Edric was at the horses, saddling them with the efficiency of a man who had been doing this for thirty years. He looked up when Tomlin came around the corner of the inn, took in the pack and the carved piece tucked under his arm and the expression on the boy's face, and handed him the reins without a word.

They rode out through the east gate as the town was coming fully awake, the clock in the tower marking the candlemark behind them, the smell of Makota's first bread following them out onto the road.

After a while, Tomlin said: “Thank you. For bringing me here.”

“Thank me when you’re a carver,” Edric said.

“I’m already a carver,” Tomlin said.

He said it simply, without bravado, as a statement of fact. Edric looked at him and saw that it was true — had perhaps been true for some time, and was only now findable because a meal in a strange restaurant had taken the thing that was in the way and quietly dissolved it.

“Fair enough,” Edric said.

The road opened out before them, east and bright, and they rode toward it at a pace that was neither hurried nor reluctant, but had the quality of people who knew their direction and were content with the distance.

Behind them, in the square of North Pointe, Llewel Magcaryn stood in his doorway for a moment — just a moment — and watched them go.

Then he went inside and began to prepare for the evening.

service

. . .

THE MAN who came to rob the Restaurant arrived on a Tuesday, which was, by North Pointe's standards, an unremarkable day to arrive for any purpose.

He came through the west gate in the middle of the afternoon with a mule that had opinions about its load distribution and a traveling coat that was good quality and had been chosen, if you looked at it carefully, for the number and placement of its pockets. He had a face that was easy to forget, which was not an accident — he had spent considerable effort over the years cultivating the particular combination of average height, average coloring, and pleasant but unmemorable features that allowed him to move through the world without leaving much impression on it. He looked like a merchant's clerk, or a middle-ranking tradesman, or a man who delivered documents between towns. He looked like nobody in particular, which was exactly what he was going for.

His name, insofar as North Pointe would come to know it, was Brennan. Whether this was his true name was a question that would remain, like several things about Brennan, somewhat open.

Jen clocked him at the gate with the automatic attention she gave all arrivals — coat, mule, posture, eyes — and noted the eyes

specifically. They were quick without appearing to be quick, which was a skill, and they moved across the square in the systematic pattern of someone taking inventory rather than someone admiring the scenery. She filed him under *worth watching* and went back to her conversation with Galhani, who was describing, with characteristic economy, a problem with a supplier that was Galhani's version of a lengthy complaint and anyone else's version of three sentences.

Brennan went to the inn, which was where everyone went. Minnie reported later — and at length, because Minnie's reports were never otherwise — that he had been entirely pleasant, had paid two nights in advance, had asked sensible questions about the town's amenities, and had looked at the Restaurant's sign from the inn's front window with an expression she could not quite place.

"What kind of expression?" Jen asked.

Minnie considered. "Professional," she said, which was, coming from Minnie, a word with more precision in it than it appeared.

He spent his first afternoon as a tourist, which was to say he walked the square with the unhurried attention of a man seeing a new place and finding it agreeable. He stopped at Vamir's bookshop and spent a quarter-candlemark inside, emerging with nothing purchased but having apparently engaged Vamir in a conversation about regional trade routes that Vamir described afterward as *adequately informed*, which for Vamir was warm praise. He stopped at Galhani's herb shop and bought a small packet of dried lemon balm with the ease of someone who bought things in new towns as a matter of habit, which maintained the appearance of ordinary travel and also produced useful information about what a town had and who ran it.

He did not go to the Restaurant on the first day. He looked at it three times from different angles — Jen counted, from various vantages she was not specifically choosing for the purpose but

happened to occupy — and each time with the same quality of attention: systematic, patient, professional. He was reading the building the way a stonemason read a wall, looking for what held it and what didn't.

The second time he looked, Llewel was in the rear doorway, attending to the herb pots. Brennan's gaze landed on him and stayed for a moment, and then moved on with the careful naturalness of someone who had decided not to be interested in something. Llewel continued attending to the herb pots and did not look up, or if he did, it was not in Brennan's direction, or not in any direction that Brennan could have confirmed as his own.

That evening, Brennan ate at the Claw. He sat in the middle of the room, which was interesting — most people with his quality of watchfulness chose a wall seat, but a wall seat in the Claw's configuration would have put his back to the window that faced the Restaurant, and he wanted the window. He ate well, drank moderately, and made the kind of undemanding conversation with his neighbors that left them feeling pleasant without retaining much content. Darby told him about North Pointe's history with the enthusiasm of someone who had invented portions of it, and Brennan listened with every appearance of interest.

At one point, he asked about the Restaurant. Casually, in the way you asked about things that had just caught your eye.

"That place down the road," he said. "Is it open? I haven't seen many people going in."

This was, Jen reflected when Darby reported it later, a well-constructed question. Entirely reasonable. Completely ordinary.

"It's open," Darby said. "The elf runs it. Llewel. He also does dry goods during the day — flour, rope, oil, that kind of thing, since Alred's shop closed. The restaurant itself is evenings." Darby had paused here, in his account to Jen, with the slight inflation of someone about to deliver significant information. "I told him it was the finest restaurant in the region."

"Did you," Jen said.

"I may have implied it had a certain — mystique."

"Darby."

"I was being a good ambassador for the town."

Jen considered what a man with Brennan's eyes and Brennan's coat and Brennan's professional interest in a building would do with the information that the building contained both a restaurant and a dry goods store, operated by a single elf, with no staff.

She went home and looked up the constabulary warrants she kept in the bottom drawer, which covered the region within a reasonable riding distance, and found nothing with Brennan's description that was specific enough to act on.

She kept watching.

On the second morning, Brennan went to the Restaurant as a dry goods customer, which was entirely legitimate and which Jen had no grounds to prevent and wouldn't have prevented even if she had, because she was curious what would happen.

She positioned herself near Knodalon's bench with a patience that Knodalon accommodated without comment, and watched him go in.

He was inside for nearly a half-candlemark, which was longer than dry goods required.

When he came out, he was carrying a small parcel of flour and a coil of thin rope — practical items, the kind a traveling merchant might legitimately need — and he had the expression of a man who has been in a room that didn't behave the way rooms were supposed to and is processing this with the discipline of someone who has trained himself not to react visibly.

Knodalon, at her elbow, said: "Hm."

"What?" Jen said.

"He went in as one thing," Knodalon said, "and he came out as slightly less certain of it." He said this in the tone of someone reporting an observable fact rather than offering an interpretation.

Jen looked at Brennan crossing the square with his flour and his

rope. His pace was the same. His posture was the same. But something about the set of his shoulders had a quality she couldn't name precisely, except that it was the quality of a man who has encountered something he didn't account for in his planning and is now revising.

She made a note of this in the part of her mind that kept notes, and went back to watching.

Inside the Restaurant, during that half-candlemark, the following had occurred:

The space in daylight was different from the space in evening — less uncanny in its light, more ordinary in its presentation, the tables still upturned except for one near the window where a farmer's wife from two miles out was inspecting a bolt of waxed linen with the focus of someone making a significant household decision. The dry goods were arranged along a set of shelves at the back with the precision Llewel brought to everything: labelled in a small, exact hand, ordered by category, with prices marked in a notation that was clear without being elaborate.

Brennan had moved through the dry goods with the practiced ease of an actual customer, picking up the flour and the rope and examining two other items he did not buy, and all the while doing the other thing he was there to do, which was to read the room. He had counted the tables. He had noted the single door to the kitchen, which was closed. He had observed the placement of the shelves relative to the window and the door. He had looked for a back entrance and found, on the left-hand wall, a door that was almost certainly a service entrance to the rear yard.

He had done all of this with the unhurried competence of long practice, and had arrived at the counter to pay with a clear mental picture of the building's interior and a reasonable preliminary assessment of its vulnerabilities.

Llewel was at the counter.

Brennan had known Llewel would be at the counter. He had been watching Llewel move through the room from the corner of his attention since he entered — cataloguing the way you catalogued a room's occupants, assessing the variables. Llewel was unassuming. Llewel was tidy. Llewel had the slight, contained quality of an elf who had been alive long enough not to be hurried by anything, and he was currently writing something in a ledger with the focus of a man for whom handwriting was a considered act.

Llewel looked up.

This was when the quality of the experience changed.

The eyes were the deep blue that Jen had described to Sam as like being pulled toward the sky and the grave simultaneously, which was the kind of thing Jen said occasionally that made Sam put down whatever she was doing. Brennan had not been warned about the eyes. He encountered them now across a counter in a dry goods shop in a small town on a trade road, and found them looking at him with an attention that was entirely still and entirely complete, the way very few things looked at a person, and which had the effect — quickly managed, professionally suppressed — of making him feel that whatever he had been pretending to be in the preceding ten minutes had been, from Llewel's perspective, entirely transparent.

"Good morning," Llewel said.

"Morning," Brennan said. He set the flour and rope on the counter with the ease of long practice. "Just these, I think."

"Of course," Llewel said, and named a price that was fair, and took the coins that Brennan offered, and counted back the change with the precision of someone who did not make errors of arithmetic.

He did not say anything else. He wrapped the flour in paper — neat, tight, the way a person wrapped something that needed to travel — and laid the rope alongside it and made a small parcel of both, and pushed it across the counter.

Brennan picked it up. He had a line prepared, the kind of idle

concluding remark a customer made that opened a small door to conversation, because conversation produced information, because information was useful. He had used it a hundred times. It was a good line.

He did not use it.

Instead he said: "Nice place," which was not the line and was not particularly useful, and which he said because something about the quality of Llewel's attention had temporarily displaced his usual fluency.

"Thank you," Llewel said. "We like it."

We, Brennan noted. There was no one else present. He looked at Llewel, who was already returning to his ledger, and at the room, which was very clean and very still and had the quality of a place that knew what it was for and was comfortable with this knowledge, and he left.

Outside, he stood in the morning air and held his parcel and recalibrated.

The ledger, he had noted, was kept on a shelf behind the counter. The till was a small locked box of the kind that was not difficult. The service entrance on the rear wall was bolted from the inside during the day but would present no particular problem from the outside. The kitchen door was solid but old, and old doors had a language he spoke well.

What he had not accounted for was the elf.

He adjusted his timeline and went back to the inn to think.

The bounty hunter arrived on the afternoon of the third day, which was the day Brennan had been intending to make his move.

She came through the east gate on a grey horse that was built for distance rather than impression, and she had the look of someone who covered a great deal of ground without making much of it — lean, weathered, with a constable's warrant-bag on her belt and the specific quality of patience that came from a

profession that was mostly waiting punctuated by brief, decisive action. Her name was Adara, and she presented herself at Jen's office within the candlemark of her arrival, which was the correct procedure and which told Jen something useful about her.

She laid a warrant on the desk. Jen read it.

The man it described went by several names, Brennan among them. He was wanted in three towns to the east for theft — not violent, not threatening, but systematic and skilled. He had robbed a merchant's strongbox in Arenford, a trading house in Crestwell, and a counting house in Millhaven, each time without confrontation, each time cleanly, each time leaving no evidence beyond the absence of what had been there before. The amounts were significant. No one had been hurt. The warrant was civil rather than criminal — the merchant's association wanted the money back and was prepared to fund its recovery.

"Not dangerous," Jen said.

"Not in any way I've encountered," Adara said. She had a straightforward manner that Jen found refreshing. "He doesn't carry a weapon worth mentioning. His method is patience and planning. He picks targets that are poorly secured, takes what's liquid, leaves before it's discovered." She paused. "He's good. He's been doing this for at least eight years and I'm the third hunter who's been retained."

"What happened to the other two?"

"Lost him. He travels light, changes his name, doesn't establish patterns." She looked at Jen with the candor of a professional sharing information with a colleague. "I've been two days behind him for three fortnights. I got lucky with a stable hand in Millhaven who remembered the mule."

Jen looked at the warrant. "I may have a complication," she said.

Adara took the complication with more equanimity than Jen expected.

"He's inside a restaurant," she said.

"Not yet," Jen said. "He's been casing it. He'll go in tonight or tomorrow, I'd judge, and I don't think he's planning to eat."

"And if he does go in — as a patron, I mean — you can't remove him."

"The restaurant is a private establishment," Jen said, which was both technically accurate and somewhat beside the point, in the way that many true things about the Restaurant were beside the point. "And in any case—" She stopped.

Adara looked at her. "In any case?"

Jen chose her words with the care she gave to things she couldn't fully explain. "People who go into that restaurant as patrons come out different," she said. "Not always in ways you'd expect. The man you're looking for may not be the same man when he leaves."

Adara was quiet for a moment, with the thoughtful expression of a practical person receiving information that didn't fit their existing categories and deciding how to handle it. "Different how?"

"I've seen a woman come out and immediately send a letter she'd been not sending for three years," Jen said. "I've seen a man come out and buy a plot of land the next morning. I've seen people come out carrying things they didn't take in." She paused. "The restaurant has a — a way of settling accounts. Its own way. I can't tell you more than that because I don't know more than that."

Adara looked at the warrant in her hands. "The merchant association wants their money back," she said.

"I know."

"They're not enormously interested in the man's personal transformation."

"I know that too," Jen said. "But we may not have a choice about the order in which things happen."

Adara spent the remainder of the day in the Claw, which was where she was most useful, because the Claw was where people talked and she was good at listening. Jen had given her the sketch of Brennan's appearance, and she confirmed the identification within the first candlemark — he came in for an early supper, same middle table, same quality of casual watchfulness, same careful management of how much ale he drank.

She did not approach him. She sat at the bar and talked to Sam, who had the instinct to ask the right questions and the wisdom not to ask too many.

"He's careful," Adara said. She was on her first ale and looking at her hands, which was the posture of someone thinking out loud to someone they'd decided to trust, a decision Sam generally warranted. "Eight years of this, and he's never once been caught. Never hurt anyone. Never took from anyone who couldn't absorb the loss, as far as I've been able to determine."

"That a principle of his?" Sam said.

"Seems like it. The targets are always institutions or wealthy merchants. Never small traders, never inns or private houses." Adara turned her mug. "The counting house in Millhaven — the owner told me afterward that the man had been in twice as a customer beforehand, and that both times he'd been charitable to a clerk who was having a hard sennight. Remembered the clerk's name. Asked after his family." She shook her head. "Not what you expect."

"What do you expect?" Sam said.

"From a man who's been running for eight years? Someone who's made peace with the running." She glanced across the room at Brennan, who was engaged in what appeared to be a genuinely pleasant conversation with the farmer sitting next to him, the kind of conversation that left both people feeling better for it. "He's good company," she said. "You can see why people don't clock him. He's actually interested in people. It's not entirely performance."

"Then why?" Sam said.

Adara looked at her ale. "That's the question, isn't it. Eight years is a long time to keep doing something you're not running toward. He's running away from something, but I've never been close enough to find out what."

Sam said nothing, which was her version of agreement.

At his table across the room, Brennan laughed at something the farmer said — a real laugh, not a managed one — and for a moment looked, Adara thought, almost comfortable. Almost like a man who had arrived somewhere he hadn't expected and found it agreeable.

Then he looked at the window that faced the Restaurant, and the comfort went somewhere else, and he was back to what he was.

He went in that night.

Jen saw it happen. She had been watching for it and so she saw the whole of it: Brennan coming out of the inn with his coat on and his hands easy at his sides, strolling down the road with the unhurried pace of a man on a legitimate errand, approaching the Restaurant's door.

He tried the handle.

She could see, from her window, the slight change in his posture when the door opened — not locked, which he had perhaps expected, or not expected, she couldn't tell. He stood in the doorway for a moment. The blue light from inside fell across the step and across him, and he was still, and then he was not still, and he went inside, and the door closed.

Jen sat back in her chair.

She had not seen Llewel. She never saw Llewel in these moments — he was simply present when the door opened and not present when it closed, which was one of several things about the Restaurant she had stopped trying to account for. But she thought about the counter that morning, and the ledger, and the quality of attention that Llewel had aimed at Brennan across the

dry goods, and she thought: *he knew. He's known since the first morning.*

She thought about the door opening when Brennan tried the handle. Unlocked doors were also information.

She went to bed. She had a feeling it was going to be a long wait.

The wait was three sennights.

This was, as waits went in North Pointe, not unprecedented, but it was on the longer end, and it produced its effects on the town's general atmosphere in the way that long waits tended to. Darby developed and revised four separate theories about what was happening inside. Minnie held Brennan's room on the grounds that she was not going to have an occupied restaurant table connected to a vacant inn room in her establishment, which was a position that mixed civic responsibility with proprietorial principle in a way that was entirely characteristic.

Adara waited with a patience that impressed Jen, and Sam, and most of the Claw's regulars who became gradually aware of her situation. She had sent a message to the merchant association explaining the complication and had received back a terse reply that did not explicitly tell her to do anything differently but which conveyed, in its terseness, that the association was not entirely comfortable with a three-sennight delay.

She ate at the Claw every day and talked to people, and in the talking she learned more about Brennan, in the way that you learned things about people when you spent three sennights in the town where they'd most recently landed and talked to everyone they'd talked to.

The farmer he'd had supper with on the second night came in midway through the second sennight and mentioned, with some warmth, that the merchant he'd been sitting with had known a remarkable amount about crop rotation. Vamir reported that the

conversation about trade routes had been, on reflection, quite well-informed — the man had clearly traveled widely and retained what he'd seen. The stable hand Darby had spoken to for reasons of civic awareness said that Brennan had checked on his mule every day since arriving and had brought it a handful of grain each visit, which was not a thing a man in a hurry thought to do.

"He's lonely," Sam said, one evening, when Adara had been talking for a while and had arrived, without quite meaning to, at the shape of the thing.

Adara looked up. "What?"

"He's very good at people," Sam said, "and he moves on before anyone can be good at him back. Eight years of that." She set down the cloth. "That's a particular kind of lonely."

Adara sat with this. "You think that's what he's running from?"

"I think it might be what he's running toward, actually," Sam said. "And not letting himself arrive."

On the twenty-first day, Jen rose before first light and went to her window, which had become a habit, and found the Restaurant's door already open.

Brennan was on the step.

He had aged, as the soldier had aged — not in deterioration but in the way of someone who has moved through a great deal of time and carries the movement in his face. He was standing very still in the pre-dawn dark, and in his hands were three things: his lockpicks, in their worn leather case, and two other tools that Jen recognized, from her constable's training, as a tension wrench of a particular specialist type and a device used for manipulating warded locks. Good tools. Well-maintained. Worth money.

He set them on the step with the deliberateness of someone laying down a thing they have carried for a long time.

Then he walked down the road and knocked on the door of Jen's office, which was attached to the gaol and which was the

correct place to knock if you wanted the constable, and he stood on the step and waited, with his hands at his sides and his eyes steady, for her to open it.

She opened it.

He looked at her with the eyes she had catalogued on his first day — quick without appearing quick, professional, trained to take inventory. They still had all those qualities. But they had something else in them now too, something that had not been there before, which was that they were not, quite, looking for exits.

"My name is Brennan Calwell," he said. "In Arenford I go by Marsh. In Crestwell I went by Delane. There are others." He paused. "I'd like to tell you about them."

Jen looked at him for a moment, then stepped back from the door. "Come in," she said. "I'll make tea."

He came in and sat in the chair across from her desk that was for people who were there voluntarily. She made tea. She got out paper and a pen. He talked for three marks, and the account he gave was detailed and precise and included amounts and dates and methods and the location of certain arrangements he had made for funds he had not spent, and it was, as a confession, thorough in a way she had not entirely expected.

Near the end of it, she asked: "Why?"

He looked at his hands. They were still hands, a still she recognised from Llewel's hands in the moments that moved him. "I needed someone to know what I'd done," he said. "All of it. I've been—" He stopped. Started again. "The things I know how to do have kept me apart from people. I got very good at being around people without being known by them. And I needed someone to know."

Jen wrote down the last of the account. She capped her pen. She looked across the desk at a man who had walked into a restaurant intending to rob it and had come out three sennights later with the same face and different eyes and a need to be witnessed that he had apparently been carrying, unacknowledged, for the better part of a decade.

"I have a bounty hunter in the Claw who's been waiting for you," she said. "The merchant association wants restitution. Given what you've told me about the funds, that's probably achievable."

"Yes," he said. "I know."

"The criminal question is different from the civil one," she said. "Given the nature of the offenses and your cooperation, the criminal matter may be more manageable than you expect."

He nodded. He had the quality of a man who had come to the end of something and was not yet certain what came next but had, for the first time in a long time, some interest in finding out.

"What did he serve you?" she said. It was not an official question. It was not in her notes.

Brennan was quiet for a moment. "The first thing," he said, "was a meal I ate when I was seven years old. In my mother's house. Before—" He stopped. "Before a lot of things." He looked at the window, the first grey light beginning to find it. "He didn't serve me what I'd done. He served me what I'd been, before I decided it wasn't safe to be it."

Jen said nothing.

"The dessert," he said, "was the best thing I've ever eaten. I don't know what it was. It tasted like — like being somewhere long enough for someone to know you." He paused. "I'd never had that before. Not as an adult." Another pause. "I'd like to try it."

Outside, the clock in the tower marked the candlemark with its new-fangled precision, and the square began to come awake in the usual way, and North Pointe went on around them with the steady warmth of a place that had seen this kind of thing before and had made a kind of peace with being the location where it happened.

Adara took the news with the practicality of her profession and the slight additional warmth of someone who had spent three sennights learning more about a person than she usually learned and found the learning, against her inclinations, affecting.

She sat with him at the Claw while Sam fed them both — Brennan eating with the focused attention of a man rediscovering what appetite felt like when it wasn't incidental to other plans — and they worked through the practical matter of the warrant with the cooperation of two people who had, separately and by different routes, arrived at the same conclusion about what needed to happen next.

Darby appeared at some point and was diverted by Sam before he could contribute a theory. Minnie came in at mid-morning and looked at Brennan with the expression of someone whose read of a person has been confirmed in a direction she finds both satisfying and complicated, and then refilled his tea without being asked, which was Minnie's version of welcome.

Llewel, when Jen went to tell him — because she told him, as she had told him after other patrons; it was a thing they had developed, this quiet accounting — was arranging the herb pots in the morning light and received the news with his usual stillness.

"He was ready," Llewel said. "He had been ready for some time. He simply needed—"

"Someone to let him in," Jen said.

Llewel looked at her with those deep blue eyes. "The door," he said, "was unlocked."

"I know," Jen said. "I saw."

She left him to his herb pots and crossed the square and went back to her office, where there was paperwork to do, because there was always paperwork, and because the world had a way of going on in its ordinary fashion around the extraordinary things that happened in it, and because that, in its own way, was its own kind of comfort.

On the Restaurant's step, the lockpicks and the two tools sat in the morning sun until Llewel came and collected them with the same care he gave to everything, and brought them inside, and the door closed.

What he did with them after that was not something anyone in North Pointe ever thought to ask.

the scholar's last theorem

. . .

MAREN SOLVEDT ARRIVED in North Pointe the way scholars arrived everywhere: preceded by a letter she hadn't sent, followed by a reputation she didn't know she had, and carrying enough books in her saddlebags to lame a horse that was already having a difficult autumn.

She was seventy-one years old, though she would have told you seventy if asked, not from vanity but from the fact that she had been so thoroughly occupied with other things at the time of her seventy-first birthday that she had not registered it passing until three sennights later, at which point revising her answer seemed like more trouble than it was worth. She was small and angular, with white hair cut short in the practical manner of someone who had decided decades ago that hair was not a project she had time for, and she moved with the careful deliberateness of a woman who had learned that her joints had opinions and that ignoring those opinions had consequences. Her eyes, behind the wire-rimmed spectacles she had owned for thirty years and repaired with increasing creativity, were sharp and dark and carried the particular quality of someone who was always, always thinking about something else.

The something else, for forty years, had been the proof.

She had not set out for North Pointe specifically. She had set out — as she set out most mornings, these days — in a direction that was not quite purposeless but not quite purposeful either, the direction of a woman who had spent four decades in pursuit of a thing and had recently begun to suspect, with the cold clarity that came in the small moments, that the pursuit might outlast her. She had a route in her mind that would take her eventually to a colleague in the west, a younger topologist whose correspondence had been, for three years, the closest thing she had to intellectual company, and North Pointe was simply on the road.

Or that was what she told herself. Later, she would be less certain about this.

She smelled the Broken Claw before she saw it, which was the correct order in which to encounter a good tavern, and she went in because she was cold and her joints had been having their opinions loudly since mid-afternoon and because forty years of chasing a proof had not entirely extinguished her appetite, whatever it had done to everything else.

The Claw in the early evening had its usual population: a scatter of locals in various stages of the working day's conclusion, two traveling merchants comparing notes on the eastern road, and Leota, who was at her customary corner table with a book she was not reading and a tea she had allowed to go cold, which was a thing she did when she was thinking hard about something she did not yet wish to discuss.

Sam set a menu in front of Maren with the efficiency of someone who had assessed a new arrival and concluded: hot food, something substantial, no nonsense. Maren ordered the stew, which was the right decision, and a glass of something warm, and unfolded a sheaf of papers from her coat with the automatic

gesture of a woman who ate most of her meals in the company of her work.

The papers were covered in notation — dense, precise, the kind of mathematical writing that looked, to the uninitiated, like a particularly ambitious form of decoration. Equations moved across the pages in her small, exact hand, annotated and crossed out and re-approached from different angles, with marginal notes that were themselves annotated, a palimpsest of forty years of returning to the same problem from every direction she could conceive and finding it, each time, just beyond the reach of what she could prove.

She was looking at the papers without seeing them, which was different from the way she usually looked at them, when Leota appeared at her elbow.

Maren looked up with the expression of someone interrupted from thought, which in her case meant a look of mild but genuine displeasure that she had long since stopped apologizing for.

"Those are Castovar notation," Leota said, without preamble, nodding at the papers. She had the manner of someone who considered social niceties a reasonable overhead cost in most situations and had determined that this was not most situations. "Second-order, unless I'm misreading the subscripts."

Maren looked at her. Then she looked at the papers. Then back at Leota. "You know Castovar notation," she said, with the specific inflection of someone who has spent a career having the bar of expectation set very low and has developed a finely calibrated instrument for detecting when it is happening again and when it is not.

"I know enough of it," Leota said, with the honesty of someone who was not in the habit of overclaiming. "The overlap with certain branches of thaumaturgical geometry is — notable." She sat down, which she had not been invited to do and which Maren did not object to, because the word *thaumaturgical* had landed with the weight of something worth investigating. "What's the problem?"

Maren looked at her for a moment — the assessment of a

woman who had learned to read audiences quickly and had equally learned not to waste her time on ones that weren't worth it. Then she turned the top page toward Leota and pointed at a sequence of notation near the bottom.

"I'm trying to prove that a continuous mapping from a compact topological space onto itself — under progressive deformation of a specific constrained class — necessarily preserves at least one fixed-point cluster in the limit," she said. "I have had forty years and I can feel the proof but I cannot reach it. Every approach I construct gets within three steps of the conclusion and then—" She made a gesture that was almost violent in its precision, the gesture of someone who has run into the same wall enough times to know its exact location. "There's a gap. I cannot bridge the gap."

Leota looked at the notation. She was quiet for a long moment, with the quality of someone who was genuinely reading rather than performing the act of reading. "In thaumaturgical terms," she said slowly, "what you're describing is something like — the persistence of a resonance node through a field transformation. Which is—" She paused, and something moved across her face that was not quite recognition and not quite memory. "Which is a thing we always assumed was true and never formally demonstrated."

"Because you couldn't," Maren said.

"Because we couldn't," Leota agreed. "We called it the Continuity Assumption and built half of advanced field theory on top of it and tried not to look down." She looked up from the papers. "If you proved this—"

"When," Maren said, with the reflex of long habit, and then caught herself, and the catch was visible, a small, painful thing. "If," she said. "If I prove it."

Sam arrived with the stew, which was excellent, and neither of them looked at it.

"You said you can feel it," Leota said. "What does that mean, for a mathematician?"

Maren picked up her spoon and applied it to the stew with the

distracted efficiency of someone fueling a machine. “It means I know the shape of it,” she said. “The way a sculptor knows the shape of the thing inside the stone. I know what the proof looks like from the outside. I cannot find the door into it.” She ate a few spoonfuls. The stew was very good, and some part of her registered this below the level of the conversation. “Forty years. I have been around this thing for forty years and I cannot find the door.”

“How long have you been traveling?” Leota asked.

“Three moons.” Maren looked at her stew. “I retired from the university in the spring. Or they retired me, which is a distinction without a difference at my age.” The bitterness in this was practiced — it arrived with the ease of something said many times, worn smooth by repetition. “Forty years of productive scholarship and they gave me a dinner and a very nice letter.”

“And the proof unfinished.”

“And the proof unfinished.” She ate more stew. “I’m going to see a colleague in the west. A younger woman who may be able to — who may see something I’ve stopped being able to see.” She said this with the honesty of someone who has decided to be honest about something that costs them something. “Fresh eyes.”

“And you stopped here,” Leota said.

“I stopped here because I needed a meal and my horse needed rest.” She looked up. “And because Vamir’s bookshop has a text I need. A Peripatetic commentary on Castovar’s original papers that I have not been able to obtain elsewhere and which may — may — contain a notation variant I haven’t tried.”

Leota looked at her with the expression she wore when she was certain of something she was not yet going to say. “You don’t think it will help,” she said.

Maren put down her spoon. “No,” she said. “I don’t.” She said it with the flatness of someone who has run out of self-deception on a particular topic and has not yet decided what replaces it. “But it is the next thing I can think of to try, and so I will try it, because the alternative is to stop, and I—” She stopped.

"Cannot stop," Leota said quietly.

Maren looked at her. "Not yet," she said. "No."

They sat in the particular silence of two people who have arrived, by different routes, at the same understanding of what it costs to pursue a thing past the point of comfortable certainty, and who recognise in each other the specific quality of someone who has paid that cost and is still paying it and has not entirely decided whether the expenditure was worth it.

Leota looked down at the notation again. Something was working in her face — the careful, suppressed excitement of someone fitting pieces together. "Come and find me," she said, "after you've been to Vamir's. I want to show you something."

She went to Vamir's the next morning.

Vamir received her with the ceremony he brought to all serious bibliographic inquiries, which was to say he listened to her description of the text with complete attention, disappeared into the back of the shop for a quarter-candlemark, and returned with the book in question and an expression of mild professional satisfaction.

"The Peripatetic commentary," he said, setting it on the counter with the care of someone handling something that deserved handling carefully. "Castovar's third period. The notation variant you're looking for is in the appendices — pages two hundred and forty through two hundred and sixty-three. Handwritten additions in the margin of this edition, by the previous owner, who appears to have been working in a related area."

Maren opened it to the appendices with hands that were not quite steady.

The notation was there. She stood at Vamir's counter and read it with the focus of someone who has been waiting for a thing and is now afraid to look at it directly, and after several minutes she looked up with the expression of someone who has confirmed, with precision, that the door they were hoping for does not exist.

"No," she said, to herself as much as to Vamir. "No, it's — it's a different approach to the same obstacle. It gets to the same place I get to and stops." She closed the book. The closing of it had a finality that was not only about the book. "I was wrong. I thought this might—" She stopped. Put her hand flat on the cover. "I'm sorry," she said, to Vamir, who had gone to some trouble. "It's not what I needed."

"Don't apologize," Vamir said, with the gentleness of a man who had watched scholars come to the ends of long roads before. He was quiet for a moment. "May I suggest something?"

She looked at him.

He glanced toward the window, which faced the trade road and, through the Town Gate just visible at the western end, the square beyond. "There is an establishment here," he said, choosing his words with the care he brought to things that mattered, "that has a — a way with problems that have resisted other approaches." He paused. "I realize that is an imprecise recommendation for a mathematician."

"Imprecise," she said, with the reflexive dryness of a woman for whom imprecision was a professional category of offense. But she looked out the window anyway, at the gate, at the square beyond it, and something in her face had the quality of someone who has run out of precise options and is, for the first time, considering the imprecise ones.

"I would not normally suggest it," Vamir said. "But I think—" He stopped. Something in the way he stopped suggested he had caught himself being more certain than he intended to appear. "I think it may be worth the walk."

She took the long way around the square, which was not intentional but which meant she came out onto the trade road from the Town Gate, which meant she was walking past the Restaurant's door rather than toward it.

The door was open.

Llewel was on the step.

He was not doing anything specific — he had the quality of a

man who simply happened to be standing in a doorway, attending to the evening air, and who happened to be looking in her direction with the calm expectation of someone who has set a place at a table and is waiting, without urgency, for the guest to arrive.

She stopped.

He looked at her with those deep blue eyes, and she had the involuntary sensation of being read — not intrusively, not unkindly, but completely, in the way that a very good proof read a problem, stripping it to its essential structure.

"Good evening," he said. "Your table is ready."

Maren looked at him. She looked at the sign above the door. She looked back at him. "I haven't made a reservation," she said.

"No," Llewel agreed. He stepped aside. "Nevertheless."

She stood on the road for a moment, with the closed Peripatetic commentary under her arm and forty years of unfinished work in her chest and the particular exhaustion of someone who has tried everything they can think of and has arrived, without planning to, at something they cannot categorize.

"I should tell you," she said, "that I am not here for — whatever it is people come here for. I'm simply passing through."

"Of course," said Llewel, with the serenity of someone who has heard this before and found it, each time, entirely compatible with what follows. He gestured toward the interior with the precise, unhurried courtesy of a man who knows the evening has already been decided. "Please come in."

She came in.

The table was laid for one. White linen, a single candle, a small vase with two late-season flowers she couldn't name. The interior had its quality of careful stillness — the other tables bare, the chairs upturned, the light soft and even — and she sat in it the way you sat in a room that was doing something specific with its silence and had decided to include you.

Llewel appeared with a small card, which he set beside the place setting without comment. She picked it up.

It was the menu.

She read it with the attention she brought to texts. It was a tasting menu — eight courses, each named with the precision of someone who understood that a name was a frame and chose frames deliberately. The names were simple: *The First Proposition. The Mapping. The Deformation. The Constraint. The Limit. The Approach. The Gap. The Proof.*

She set the card down. She picked it up again. She set it down.

"These names," she said.

Llewel was at the edge of the room, hands folded, waiting with the patience of a man for whom patience was not an effort but a condition. "Yes?"

"They are—" She looked at them again. "These are terms. Mathematical terms. Specific ones."

"They are the courses of your meal," Llewel said. "In the order in which they will be served."

She looked at him. He looked at her. The candle between them did its small, steady work.

"How," she said, and stopped, because the question had more branches than she could manage simultaneously, and she was a woman who did not ask questions she had not already partially answered, and she had not partially answered this one.

"Shall we begin?" Llewel said.

She picked up her fork.

The First Proposition was an amuse-bouche: a single bite of something that was all brightness and clarity, cold and clean, with a precision of flavor that arrived fully formed and complete. It tasted like the beginning of an idea — the moment before the working, when the thing you wanted to prove sat in the mind whole and obvious and seemingly inevitable, before the

machinery of proof ground into motion and the difficulty revealed itself.

She ate it and felt, involuntarily, twenty-three years old, sitting in a lecture hall in her first year of graduate study, hearing a theorem stated for the first time and thinking: *of course. Of course it's true. How could it not be.*

She made a note on the paper she had produced from her coat. Then she looked at the note and put the pen down.

The Mapping was a small plate — three elements, each distinct, each in clear relation to the others. A grain, tender and exact. A reduction, dark and concentrated. A leaf of something bitter that made the other two make sense. It tasted like the pleasure of formal structure, of setting out the objects of a proof and establishing their properties, the satisfaction of knowing exactly what you were working with before you began.

She ate slowly. She was aware, below the level of her thoughts, that something was happening with the sequence — that the courses were not arbitrary, that they were building toward something, but she could not yet see the shape of the building, only its individual stones arriving in a careful order.

The Deformation was a soup, very clear, with something in it that changed as she ate — the flavor shifting incrementally, warmly, each spoonful subtly different from the last, the transformation so gradual that she was several spoonfuls in before she registered it was happening, and several more before she could articulate in what direction. And yet — and this was the thing she noticed with the part of her mind that was always, always working — the underlying quality of the broth did not change. The transformation proceeded, and the base remained.

She put down her spoon.

She picked it up.

She ate the rest of the soup with a focused attention that was different from the attention she had brought to the first two courses.

The Constraint was a terrine, set and precise, its structure determined by its boundaries — a thing that was entirely what it was because of what contained it, the flavor concentrated and particular in exactly the way that an unconstrained version of the same thing would not have been. She understood, eating it, the formal beauty of a bounded system, of a problem that was harder and more interesting for its limitations than it would have been without them. She had known this intellectually for forty years. She had not, until this mouthful, known it in her hands.

She wrote something on her paper. Looked at it. Wrote more.

The Limit was a fish course — delicate, approaching something, each element of the plate positioned with a precision that suggested an asymptote: the components drawing closer to a point that the arrangement implied but did not quite reach, a plate that was as much about its own incompleteness as about what it contained. She ate it with the specific recognition of a woman who had spent forty years approaching a limit she could not reach, and found it, inexplicably, beautiful. Not consoling. Beautiful.

She did not write anything after this course. She sat with her hands in her lap and looked at the candle for a moment, and then at the menu card, and then at the window, which showed the square outside in the evening dark.

The Approach arrived without announcement, as all the courses arrived — Llewel's movements between kitchen and table were so quiet as to register only as presences and absences, a quality of service that felt less like waiting and more like attention. This was a meat course, slow-cooked and layered, and eating it was the experience of coming at something from a new direction — the flavor not building on what had come before but approaching the same point from the other side, converging, each bite reducing the distance between where she was and where she needed to be.

She wrote three lines of notation. Crossed one out. Rewrote it differently.

The Gap was a palate cleanser — cold, sharp, a sorbet of some-

thing she couldn't identify that sat on the tongue and cleared away everything that had come before, leaving the palate empty and expectant. It was the smallest course. It tasted like the moment between the last thing you understood and the next thing you needed to understand, the cognitive white space that either resolved into clarity or remained forever opaque.

She held it in her mouth for a long moment. Then she swallowed.

She looked at her paper. She looked at the notation from the approach course, and the deformation course, and she looked at the gap between them — not a gap she had written, but a gap that was there in the structure, the same gap that had been there for forty years, the place where the proof always stopped.

And she looked at it differently than she had ever looked at it before.

Not with her mind. With something below her mind — the understanding that had been fed, course by course, through the evening, that had accumulated in her body before her intellect had a chance to refuse it. The understanding of transformation that preserves. Of constraint that enables. Of approach from two directions converging on a point that was not empty but full, not a gap but a *meeting*.

Her hands went still on the table.

The Proof was bread. Dark, seeded, very slightly warm, with a soft butter and a small dish of salt.

She looked at it.

She looked at it for a long time.

Then she picked up her pen and wrote, without stopping, for the better part of a candlemark, while the bread sat in front of her and the candle burned lower and Llewel moved through the room with the unhurried quiet of a man who has seen this before and understands that some things require the time they require.

The notation filled two pages and ran onto a third. Near the end, her hand was shaking slightly — not from age but from the particular physical response to something long-held finally releasing, the way a fist aches when it finally opens.

She set down the pen.

She read what she had written.

She read it again.

She said, to the room, to Llewel, to the candle, to forty years of an open question: "*The fixed-point cluster persists under constrained deformation because the mapping's continuity in the limit is preserved by the boundary conditions themselves — the constraint isn't external to the proof, it's constitutive of it. It was always constitutive of it. The gap was the proof.*"

The last sentence came out with the quality of something that had been waiting to be said for a very long time.

Llewel, from somewhere near the kitchen door, said: "The bread."

She looked at the bread. She picked it up. She ate it — slowly, with the butter and the salt — and it tasted like finishing something, like setting a thing down that had been in your hands for forty years, like the particular quiet that arrives when the work is done and the world has not yet begun to ask what comes next.

She ate all of it. She sat for a while in the empty plates and the candlelight and the silence of the Restaurant, which held her without pressing, with the patience of a place that understood that some endings needed a moment before they became beginnings.

Then she picked up the three pages of notation, folded them with great care, and put them in the inside pocket of her coat. Closest to her chest, which was where you kept things that mattered.

She looked up at Llewel.

"How long have I been here?" she said.

"Three days," he said. "Or thereabouts."

She absorbed this. Outside the window, the square was quiet and dark, well into the night. She looked at the two late-season

flowers in the small vase on her table and saw that they had been replaced — freshly cut, still firm. She had not noticed this happening.

"The seasons have turned," she said, because she could feel it in the quality of the air from the door — the particular cold that came with the turn toward winter.

"They have," Llewel said. "Autumn went quietly, this year."

She sat for another moment, and then she rose, with the care her joints required, and gathered her coat and the papers and the Peripatetic commentary she had carried in and set on the corner of the table, and which she now picked up and looked at with the expression of someone examining a tool that had turned out to be unnecessary for the actual work.

"I need to write three letters," she said. "Tonight, if possible."

"The inn will have paper," Llewel said. "Sam keeps a supply at the Claw for guests who find they have correspondence to attend to."

She looked at him. "That happens often?"

"With some regularity," he said, and something moved across his face that was almost a smile.

She left the letters on Sam's bar before she went to bed: one to her colleague in the west, whose name she wrote with a warmth in the address that had not been in their previous correspondence; one to her former department at the university, which was three paragraphs of precise technical summary and one sentence at the end that was not precise and not technical; and one to her daughter, who lived in the eastern hills and whom she had not visited in two years because she had been too busy, which had always been true and had finally, tonight, stopped being sufficient.

Sam read none of them, obviously. But she noted the warmth with which they were sealed.

Leota found her at breakfast.

This was not an accident — Leota had been watching for the Restaurant's door with the attention of a professional who had spent the better part of three days in a state of suppressed intellectual urgency and had finally reached the end of her capacity for suppression. She appeared at Maren's table at the Claw before the scholar had finished her first coffee, sat down without invitation for the second time, and looked at her with eyes that were doing a great deal of careful work.

"Well," she said.

Maren looked at her over the rim of her mug. Something in her face had changed — the bitterness was not gone, exactly, but it had lost its sharpness, the way a scar lost its tenderness. She looked like a woman who had settled a very old argument with herself and was still getting used to the quiet.

"Well," she said.

"Did you—" Leota stopped. Reconsidered. "You did," she said, reading the answer in the scholar's face before she had a chance to give it. "You actually—"

"Yes," Maren said.

Leota sat back in her chair. On her face was an expression that moved through several stages: the intellectual excitement of confirmation, the professional hunger of someone who needed to know the mechanism, and then, slowly, something more complex — recognition, perhaps, or memory.

"In field theory," Leota said, slowly and carefully, "we have always assumed that thaumaturgical resonance nodes persist through field transformations because — well, because they do. Because we have always observed them doing so. We have never had a formal basis for the assumption." She paused. "If the constraint is constitutive—"

Maren put down her mug. She looked at Leota with sharply focused attention. "Say that again," she said. "The second part."

"We have never had a formal basis for the Continuity Assumption," Leota said. "We built advanced field theory on an observation we could not prove."

"The constraint is constitutive of the transformation," Maren said. "The boundary conditions don't limit the mapping — they're what makes it continuous in the limit. Remove the constraint and you don't have a freer system. You have a different system with a different — or absent — fixed-point structure." She looked at Leota steadily. "Which means your field transformations—"

"—are continuous because the containment field is not incidental to the resonance," Leota said, and her voice had gone very quiet, "but the reason the resonance persists at all." She was still for a moment. "We have been describing the containment field as a limiting factor for two centuries."

"It is not a limiting factor," Maren said.

"It is the proof," Leota said.

They looked at each other across the table while the Claw went on around them — Sam moving through the morning business with her usual efficiency, Darby arriving with the energy of someone who had a theory, two merchants arguing companionably about road conditions. None of it touched the small, precise silence at Leota and Maren's table.

Darby presented himself at their elbow. "Did she tell you what happened?" he asked Leota, with the eagerness of someone who had been waiting to ask this for three days and had been physically prevented from doing so by Sam on two of them. "In the restaurant? Did she tell you what it was like?"

Leota looked at him with the expression she reserved for questions that did not merit the answer they were seeking. "It was a meal," she said. "She had a meal."

"But was it—"

"A very good meal," Maren said, and drank her coffee.

Darby looked between them, at the quality of their silence, and concluded — correctly, for once — that he was not going to get more than this. He withdrew.

Sam, at the bar, watched Leota's face, which had the quality it sometimes had after she had understood something significant — not triumphant, not demonstrative, but settled, the way a building

settled when all its weight was properly distributed. She caught Sam's eye across the room and gave the fractional nod that meant: *this was worth the waiting.*

Sam nodded back, which meant: *I assumed it would be.*

Maren left the next morning, which was a bright, cold day of the kind that came after the season's turn — the sky very clear, the trees stripped back, the world with its particular quality of honesty about what it was.

She came down the trade road toward the west gate, which took her past the Restaurant's door, which was closed and looked, in the morning light, entirely ordinary: a door on a trade road in a small town, with a sign above it that stated what it was without elaboration.

She stopped in front of it for a moment.

She did not knock. She did not need to, and she had the sense that Llewel knew this.

She put her hand flat on the door — the gesture of someone marking a moment, acknowledging a debt that could not be repaid in any conventional currency — and then she shouldered her bag and walked on.

Through the east gate, and onto the road, and east into the bright cold morning.

She had three letters to follow up on. She had a proof to prepare for publication, which would take the winter, and which she intended to work on at her daughter's house in the eastern hills, seated at whatever table her daughter put her at, eating whatever her daughter's family ate, sleeping in a bed in a house where people knew her name.

She had, she thought, some catching up to do.

The road opened before her, cold and clear, and she walked toward it with the step of a woman who had set something down and found, to her surprise, that her hands were not empty.

Behind her, in North Pointe, Leota sat at her corner table at the Claw with a fresh pot of tea and a blank page and the particular expression of someone who was about to begin rewriting something important.

She did not explain this to anyone.

She did not need to.

what the river keeps

. . .

THE RECIPE BOOK arrived at the inn before Dessa did, in the sense that Minnie noticed it before she noticed anything else about the woman who carried it — tucked under one arm with the particular grip of someone transporting something irreplaceable, not clutched, not casual, but held with the unconscious precision of long habit, the way you carried a thing you had stopped thinking about carrying because putting it down had ceased to be an option.

The woman herself was small and dark, with white hair she wore pinned up in the elaborate style of the Far South that Minnie had seen perhaps twice before and which involved a series of careful folds that looked simple and were not. She moved slowly, not from infirmity but from the quality of someone who had decided, some years ago, that hurry was no longer a thing she owed the world. She was perhaps sixty-five, perhaps older — it was difficult to say, because her face had the kind of structure that aged well, the bones doing their long work beneath the skin, and because her eyes, when she looked at you, had a depth that made the question of age feel beside the point.

Her name was Dessa, and she had come from the Far South, and she had been traveling for three sennights, and she would like

a room, please, and perhaps something light to eat if it wasn't too much trouble.

Minnie gave her the south-facing room, which got the morning light, and sent up a tray without being asked, and went back to the counter and stood for a moment with her hands flat on the wood, looking at nothing in particular.

Sam, who had come in on an errand, watched this. "What?" she said.

"She's carrying something," Minnie said. "Besides the book."

"Most people who come here are," Sam said.

"I know that," Minnie said, with the sharpness of someone who does not like having their observations reduced to the obvious. "But this one—" She stopped. Started again. "This one has been carrying it a long time. On her own." She looked at Sam. "You know the kind."

Sam knew the kind.

Dessa came down to the Claw the next morning for breakfast, with the recipe book on the table beside her plate, which was where it stayed for the duration of the meal — not opened, not consulted, simply present, the way a person kept something close that they were not yet ready to put down and not yet ready to use.

It was a plain thing, from the outside. A cover of worn brown leather, the edges darkened with years of handling, the spine repaired at some point with a strip of a different leather that didn't quite match. There was no title on the cover. There didn't need to be — it was not that kind of book.

She ate her breakfast with the focused attention of someone performing a necessary function, and she looked at the road through the Claw's bow window, and her eyes moved across it with the mild, undemanding attention of someone who is not looking for anything in particular and does not expect to find it.

They landed on the Restaurant.

She looked at it for a moment — the sign, the spotless door, the herb pots in their precise arrangement along the step. Then she looked away, and back at her plate, and finished her eggs.

Leota, who was at her corner table and who noticed things, noticed this. She said nothing, because it was not her thing to say, but she noted the quality of the look — not curiosity, not suspicion, but something more like recognition, the way you looked at something you had been told about by someone who loved it and were now seeing for the first time and finding it, against your expectations, exactly as described.

She opened the book that afternoon, alone in her room, which was the first time she had opened it in six moons.

She knew this because she kept track, in the way that people kept track of things that cost them something — the way a person with a bad shoulder noted which mornings they could lift their arm above their head and which they couldn't, not because the tracking helped but because it was the only control available. Six moons since she'd opened it. Eight moons before that. The intervals were getting longer, which was either healing or avoidance and she had stopped being able to tell the difference.

Aldric's handwriting filled the pages in the way his presence had filled a room — thoroughly, without apparent effort, leaving no question about who was responsible. It was a large hand, slightly cramped, the letters formed with the confidence of someone who had not had much formal schooling and had consequently developed his own relationship with the alphabet, one that prioritized legibility over elegance and achieved both in a way that had no business working as well as it did. He had written in whatever was available — dark ink, brown ink, once a stretch of three pages in something that had faded almost to invisibility that she believed had been berry juice, on a day when the ink had run out and the recipe had been urgent.

The margins were full of him. *Too much salt the second time — cut by a third. Esta prefers this without the cane, try it. The pepper is ready when the skin goes almost black — not before. Made this for D's birthday and she ate three helpings which is saying something.* This last one made her put the book flat on the bed and press her hands against her eyes for a moment, not from the sadness of it, which she had expected, but from the specific, piercing pleasure of his voice in it — the dry warmth of him, the economy of his affection, the way he had always said the most important things sideways.

She had eaten three helpings. She remembered the birthday in question: her fifty-eighth, which he had marked with the sauce that took three days to prepare, the one built around the pepper he'd been cultivating for seven years in the south corner of the kitchen garden where the sun was best, a pepper that was his and only his, a variety he had coaxed from seeds his own father had saved and that produced a fruit so specifically flavored — bright and deep and slow-burning, with something almost floral underneath — that she had never tasted anything like it anywhere else, before or since.

She turned to that page without meaning to, the way you turned to the thing you were trying not to turn to, and there it was in his handwriting: the sauce. Four pages of it, because it was that kind of recipe — not complicated, but long, the preparation spread over days, each stage dependent on the last, requiring patience of the specific kind that Aldric had possessed in abundance and that she had always admired in him and privately considered a form of grace that she herself had never quite managed.

She had not made the sauce in five years. She had not grown the pepper. She had, if she was honest with herself — and she was, this afternoon, more honest with herself than she had been in some time — stopped cooking almost entirely, which was a thing she had not admitted to anyone, including herself, in terms that plain.

She cooked. She fed herself. But the cooking she had done for forty years of their marriage — the real cooking, the kind that took all day and filled the house and was an act of love in the most literal sense — she had stopped. And told herself it was because

cooking for one was not the same. And told herself that was true enough. And let it become a thing she did not examine.

She sat on the bed in the south-facing room with the recipe book in her lap and looked at the sauce for a long time.

Then she went back downstairs and down the road and knocked on the Restaurant's door.

Llewel was already there when she knocked, which was to say the door opened before the second knock, which was to say he had been expecting her, in the way he expected everyone who came to him — not because he had been watching, but because he had, in some sense, already set the place.

He looked at her. She looked at him.

She had been told about the eyes, by the woman at the inn — *you'll notice his eyes, everyone does* — and she had filed this as the kind of thing people said about unusual-looking individuals and had expected to find it exaggerated. She did not find it exaggerated. The eyes were the deep blue of high-altitude sky, the kind of sky you saw above the cloud line on a clear day, and they had the quality of that sky — vast and clear and entirely without judgment, which was its own kind of intensity.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening," she said. She was holding the recipe book. She had not entirely decided to bring it, but here it was. "I'd like — I was told you serve a — that you—" She stopped. She was not, generally, a woman who ran out of words, and she found the experience disorienting. "I'd like a meal," she said. "A memorial meal. For myself alone. I have the recipes."

She held out the book.

Llewel looked at it without taking it. "Whose recipes are they?" he said.

"My husband's," she said. "He—" She stopped again. "He kept the book. He was the one who wrote things down. I always cooked

from memory and he always said someone needed to keep track, and so he did."

"And now you have the book," Llewel said.

"And now I have the book," she said.

He looked at her for a moment — that complete, unhurried attention — and then he stepped back from the door and said: "Please come in. But perhaps you might keep the book with you for now."

She came in.

The table was laid for one, as she had expected, but Llewel led her past it — through the dining room, past the neat upturned chairs, toward the kitchen door, which stood open and from which came warmth and the smell of something she could not yet identify.

She stopped.

"I thought," she said, "that I was to be served."

"You are," Llewel said. "But I find, in some cases, that service takes a different form." He looked at her with those sky-deep eyes. "You were a cook. For forty years."

"Yes," she said.

"You have not cooked. Not truly. In five years."

She looked at him. She had not told Minnie this. She had not told anyone this. "No," she said.

"Then perhaps," Llewel said, "the meal you need is not one that arrives in front of you." He gestured toward the kitchen door. "I am, as it happens, in need of a second pair of hands this evening."

She looked at the kitchen door. She looked at the book in her hands. She looked at Llewel, who was waiting with the patience of someone who understood that this was a threshold of a particular kind and that thresholds required a moment.

She went into the kitchen.

It was larger than it should have been, given the size of the building — this was the first thing she noticed, with the practical eye of someone who had spent forty years in kitchens and understood their geometries. It was a long room, warmly lit by two large fires and a series of lamps that hung at precisely the right height, and it was equipped in the way of a kitchen that had everything and had had it for a very long time. The surfaces were scrubbed pale. The copper pots hanging above the central table caught the firelight and threw it gently around the room. The knives in their wooden block were very good — she could see that from across the room — and the cutting boards were the thick kind, seasoned with long use, that produced a particular sound when the knife came down.

She stood in the middle of it and felt something she had not felt in five years, which was at home.

"What are we making?" she said.

Llewel, who had come in behind her, moved to the central table with the economy of someone in a kitchen they knew completely. "What would you like to make?" he said.

She looked down at the recipe book in her hands. She opened it — not to the sauce, not yet, but to an earlier page, a simpler thing, a dish she had made every sennight of her married life, the kind of staple that formed the rhythm of a household. Aldric had written it out in full despite the fact that she had never needed to consult it, in the way he had written everything out, because he wanted it kept.

"This," she said, and set the book on the table.

Llewel read it. He was a still reader — no expression, no murmur — and then he looked up and said: "The provisions you'll need are behind you."

She turned. There was a pantry she was fairly certain had not had a door in it a moment ago, and inside it were things she recognized — the particular dried peppers of the Far South, the spices, the slow-cooking grains, the cane sugar in its rough dark form. She stood in the pantry doorway and looked at it.

"How," she said.

"The kitchen provides what the cook requires," Llewel said, simply, in the tone of someone for whom this was a fact of the order of *the fire is hot* and *water moves downhill*. "Don't trouble yourself with the mechanism. Concern yourself with the meal."

She took what she needed and came back to the table and began.

She had forgotten, and now she remembered.

This was the only way to describe what happened when her hands found the work again — not relearning, because the knowledge had never left, but remembering in the full sense, the way smell remembered, the way muscle remembered, with the whole body and not only the mind. Her hands moved through the preparation with a sureness that surprised her own watching self, the self that had spent five years telling herself she didn't cook anymore, that it wasn't worth it, that the kitchen was a room like any other room.

Llewel worked alongside her without crowding her — that was the right phrase for it, the one she settled on later. He had the quality of a good kitchen companion, someone who understood the unspoken geometry of shared workspace: when to stay clear and when to be close, when to hand something across without being asked, when to take on the task that needed doing without making a production of doing it. He was, she realized within the first half-candlemark, an extraordinary cook. Not showy — she had no patience for showy — but deeply skilled in the way of someone who had been cooking for a very long time and had made his peace with every aspect of the process.

"You've been doing this a long time," she said.

"I have," he said.

"Mountain Elf," she said — not a question. She had seen, perhaps, two Mountain Elves in her life, both in passing, and both

had carried this quality of deep temporal stillness, as though they existed slightly outside the ordinary current of time.

"Yes," he said.

"I thought your people—" She stopped, because the sentence had two possible endings and both were rude in different ways.

"Were gone?" he said, without discomfort. "That is what most people believe. We allowed them to believe it." He was reducing something at the far end of the stove — a dark liquid that smelled of something resinous and warm — with the attention it required. "When the world became very full of people, we went higher. Into the Mistral peaks."

She looked up. Through the kitchen's high window, if she angled her gaze, she could see the mountains above the town — white-capped now, in the early cold, catching the last light.

"Up there?" she said.

"Up there," he said. "It is very quiet. Very — still." Something moved across his face, briefly, that she recognized because she recognized stillness as something that could be chosen or imposed. "I miss it," he said, and then appeared slightly surprised to have said it, in the way of someone who does not say things of that kind and has found themselves doing so without quite deciding to.

She let it sit for a moment, the way you let things sit in a kitchen — not ignoring, just giving it its time. Then she said: "What brought you down?"

Llewel folded a cloth he was holding, and refolded it, and set it down. "There is a debt," he said. "My people owe a debt to the god of this place, who permitted us to disappear when disappearing was what we needed. Now he requires something of us in return." He paused. "He required something of me. This." He looked around the kitchen with an expression she could not entirely read — not reluctance, not resentment, but something more complex, the expression of a person who has accepted a thing fully and still carries the cost of the acceptance.

"And you came alone," she said.

"I came alone," he said.

She stirred the grain in its pot, which needed stirring, and thought about what it meant to come alone from a place you loved to a place that needed you, and to make that trade without complaint because the debt was real and the god was right and the work was good even when it was lonely, which it was.

"My husband farmed," she said. "All his life. Dawn to dark, most days, and I always — I always thought we'd have more time. When he slowed down. When the farm needed less." She watched the spoon move through the grain. "He didn't slow down. And then he was gone."

Llewel said nothing, which was the right thing.

"Five years," she said. "And I still — I keep thinking I should have gone out to the field more. Brought him lunch. Just sat with him." She shook her head. "I brought him lunch. I sat with him. But not enough. I always thought there was more time."

"There is never enough time," Llewel said, "and there is always exactly as much as there is. Both of these things are true."

She looked at him. "That's not comforting."

"No," he agreed. "But it is accurate. And I find — as I said to someone recently — that accuracy is more reliable than comfort, in the end."

She thought about this. The kitchen moved around them — the fire, the pots, the smell building in the way that a Far Southern kitchen smelled when things were properly underway, warm and deep and complex. She had not smelled this in five years. She had not let herself.

"Aldric would have liked you," she said.

"Tell me about him," Llewel said.

She talked about him the way she cooked — from memory, without notes, with the confidence of forty years and the slight tremor that came from speaking about something beloved in the past tense, which never became entirely easy no matter how long you prac-

ticed it. She talked about his handwriting and his patience with the pepper plants. She talked about the way he moved in the kitchen on the rare occasions he cooked, which was with a focused delight that she had always found charming because it was so entirely unlike his usual self, which was quiet and methodical. She talked about the sound he made when he tasted something good — not a word, just a sound, a low hum of approval — and how she had spent forty years cooking toward that sound and did not know until now, saying it out loud, that she had.

Llewel listened and cooked and occasionally asked questions, and the questions were the right questions, the ones that opened things rather than closing them — not *what happened* but *what was he like when* and *tell me what that meant to you* — and she found herself saying things she had not said to anyone, not in five years, not since the women from the neighboring farms had stopped coming by as regularly as they had in the first year, which was natural and which she did not blame them for and which had left her with no one to say things to.

The meal took shape around them. She had moved, without deciding to, past the simple staple she had started with and into more ambitious territory — a second dish, and a third, each one from a different chapter of their life together, her hands finding the rhythms automatically while her mouth found the words for things her hands had always known.

At some point — she could not have said when, because time in the kitchen was doing what time had apparently decided to do in this place, which was to expand gently to accommodate what was needed — she reached for the pepper.

It was there.

Of course it was there. She had known, on some level, that it would be — the kitchen provided what the cook required — but she stood with it in her hand for a moment, this pepper that was

Aldric's pepper, his father's pepper, a variety that existed now only in the south corner of a kitchen garden she had not been able to bring herself to replant, and she felt it in her palm with the specific weight of something she had thought she would never hold again.

"I need three days for the sauce," she said. "At minimum."

"You have them," Llewel said.

She looked up at him.

"Time," he said, "is not a constraint we observe strictly here."

She looked at the pepper. She set it on the counter with the care of something precious, and she began.

The sauce took its three days, or what felt like three days — a long middle section of the meal's preparation that had its own rhythms, its own waiting and tending and returning. She slept, or something like sleep, in the chair by the kitchen fire, and woke, or something like waking, to tend the sauce at the intervals it required, and Llewel was always there or always nearby, and the kitchen was always warm, and the smell deepened and changed and developed with the slow patience of something that knew what it was becoming.

On what felt like the second day, she began to feel him.

Not his presence, exactly — not a ghost, nothing that alarmed her — but the quality of the kitchen began to shift toward something she recognized. The way the light fell. The sound of the fire. The smell of the sauce, which was his smell, the smell of the kitchen on the days he had cooked, the days she had come in from some other task and found him there and the whole house already changed by what he was making. It crept in gradually, the way memory crept in when you stopped fighting it.

She found herself talking to him while she worked.

Not to the room. To him. As she had talked while she cooked when he was in the kitchen with her, the running commentary of a person who processes through speech and had always had

someone to process at, the remarks about the sauce and the pepper and the fire and the weather outside and the state of the pantry and the small dailiness of a life lived alongside another person for four decades.

Llewel, across the kitchen, heard this and understood it, and said nothing, and continued his work.

They ate at the kitchen table, which was not the formal dining room but was, she understood, the right table for this meal. Llewel had set two places.

She looked at the two places.

She looked at Llewel.

"You've been cooking all this time as well," she said. "You should eat."

"I should," he agreed, and sat.

It was a simpler thing, eating at the kitchen table — it had the quality of all kitchen meals, which was that they were eaten by people who had made the food and were therefore already in relationship with it, already part of its history. She served him and he served her and they ate together in the way of two people who have shared a workspace for long enough to be comfortable in each other's silence.

She looked at the sauce. She tasted it.

It was right. It was entirely right — the brightness and the depth and the slow heat and the thing underneath that was almost floral, all of it exactly as it should be, exactly as she remembered, exactly as he had grown it to be.

She set down her spoon and pressed her fingers against her mouth for a moment.

"It's right," she said.

"Yes," Llewel said.

"I thought I'd never—" She stopped. "The pepper. I thought it was gone."

"The flavor was never gone," Llewel said, with the gentleness of someone choosing words very carefully. "It was in you. You made it forty years. You know it completely." He looked at her. "The pepper can be regrown. You know that."

She looked at him. She looked at the sauce.

She looked up.

Aldric was at the table.

He was not alarming — he was simply there, the way he had been there ten thousand times at ten thousand tables, in the particular way he sat, the way he held his fork, the way he looked at the food in front of him with that quiet pleasure before he ate. He was older than the last time she had seen him, which was wrong and also right — the age he would have been, the age they would have been together, the way she had sometimes imagined him continuing on the other side of the five years and thought, he'd be seventy-three now, he'd have gone grey at the temples by now.

He looked at the sauce. He made the sound — the low hum — and reached for his spoon.

She watched him eat.

"It's good," he said, which was what he always said, which was everything he always said, because *good* in his mouth was not a small word.

"The pepper came right this year," she said, which was what she always said back.

He smiled. He had a specific smile, not large, that she had spent forty years being the reason for, and there it was.

Llewel ate quietly and said nothing, which was the right thing, and the kitchen held all three of them with the warmth of a place that had been built for exactly this.

She did not know how long they sat. Long enough for the sauce to be finished and the bread to be eaten and the fire to settle lower. Long enough for the conversation to move through many things —

through the farm and the children and the years and the things she had not said and the things he had not said and the particular, specific guilt of the lunch she had not brought often enough and the afternoons in the field she had not taken, which she said and he received and answered in the way that she needed him to answer, which was not dismissal but acknowledgment, the full weight of *I know, and it was still enough, and you were there, and I knew you were there, and that was the whole of it, Dessa, that was all I ever needed.*

She cried, which she had not done in two years, not properly, not with the full weight of it. She cried at the kitchen table while Aldric sat across from her and Llewel sat beside her and neither of them said anything that was not useful, and the kitchen held the sound of it without judgment.

When she was done, she wiped her face with the cloth that had appeared at her elbow at the right moment — the kitchen provided what the cook required — and she poured herself more water and drank it and looked at Aldric.

He was less distinct than he had been. This was not frightening — it was natural, the way a vivid memory faded back to its usual place after you had lived it fully. He looked at her with that specific smile and she understood, with the clarity of something that had always been true and was only now fully receivable, that he was not trapped anywhere and had not been. That he was not waiting for her to stop grieving before he could rest. That the guilt was hers and had always been hers and he had never held it and she could, at last, consider putting it down.

She reached across the table.

Her hand met nothing, which was right.

"Aldric," she said.

He smiled, and was gone, which was the right ending for a thing that had already ended and needed only to be acknowledged as such.

She sat for a moment in the kitchen with Llewel, in the firelight and the smell of the sauce, and let the stillness be what it was.

She came out on the fifth day, or what was five days outside. She knew because the light was different — the season had moved in its small but perceptible way further toward winter, the mornings crisper, the angle of the sun lowered by a notch.

She was carrying the recipe book and a small sheaf of paper — her own notes, written in her own hand, in her own kitchen shorthand that was different from Aldric's and equally complete.

Minnie had held the room. She did not ask about this. She simply went upstairs, and washed, and changed, and came down and ate the breakfast Sam had ready without asking, and ate it with the full attention of someone who had remembered that food was not only fuel.

She spent two days in North Pointe, which she had not planned. She talked to Leota, who had questions about Far Southern growing practices that were professionally motivated and which Dessa answered with the patience of someone who had grown up explaining her home to people who had never been there. She talked to Sam in the evenings, which was comfortable in the way of talking to someone who understood the value of not saying too much. She went to the Restaurant once more, to the dry goods side, and bought a small packet of seeds from the shelf behind the counter, which Llewel provided without comment and did not charge her for, and which she tucked into her coat pocket and felt there, a small weight, all the way home.

She did not speak to Llewel again directly. But on her way out of the square on the morning she left, she passed the Restaurant's door and stopped, briefly, and put her hand flat on it.

The door was warm, which was not what she expected from a stone building in early winter.

She walked on.

She arrived home in the Far South on a clear day at the end of the season, when the kitchen garden was bare and the soil was dark and the south corner where the sun was best was waiting with the patient blankness of ground that expected to be used.

She put her bag inside and she changed her clothes and she went out to the south corner with her hands and her knees and the small packet of seeds, and she prepared the soil in the way that Aldric had taught her and that she had always known and had not done in five years, and she planted them in the rows he would have planted them in, at the depth he would have used.

She stood up and looked at the kitchen garden in the late afternoon light.

Then she went inside and started the stock for dinner, because stock took time and time was what she had, and the house filled with the smell of it, and she stood at the stove and listened to it and felt, for the first time in five years, that she was in the right place.

In the spring, the peppers came up in the south corner, dark-leafed and strong, growing toward the sun with the patience of something that had always known it had somewhere to be.

the diplomat's supper

. . .

THE AMBASSADOR'S party arrived at the east gate on a Wednesday morning with the energy of a weather system that had decided it was everyone else's responsibility to get out of the way.

There were four of them: the ambassador himself, resplendent in the traveling clothes of a man who considered resplendence a professional obligation even at the end of a long road; three aides arranged around him in the configuration of people who had learned to position themselves relative to their principal the way smaller objects arranged themselves around a gravitational field; and, behind all of them, a cart that contained luggage of a quantity that suggested the party had prepared for a stay of several moons and considered this reasonable.

The ambassador's name was Crevaine — Aldous Crevaine, Fourth Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the Herath Compact, though the fourth was a recent addition and he had not entirely decided how he felt about it — and he was a large man in his middle fifties who carried himself with the particular erectness of someone who had decided at some point that posture was a form of argument and had been making that argument continuously ever since. He had a broad, florid face that was not unpleasant in

repose and was somewhat overwhelming in animation, which was its usual state, and a voice that had been trained over thirty years of diplomatic function to carry across rooms of any size and had lost the ability to modulate below a certain volume even in private.

"This," he said, surveying North Pointe's east end from the gate, in the tone of a man delivering a verdict, "is very small."

"Yes, Your Excellency," said Sottwell, who was the first aide, a thin precise man with the quality of a document that had been folded and refolded along the same lines so many times that the creases had become structural. He was consulting something — he was always consulting something, a habit so ingrained that it was unclear whether the documents he produced were real or had become a kind of professional comfort object. "Population estimated at around thirty, though the registry may be imprecise. Market town. Trade road junction. Notable for—" He paused, reading. "Notable for a number of unusual civic features."

"Unusual how?" Crevaine said.

Sottwell read further. "The registry is not specific," he said, with the expression of a man who found non-specificity professionally offensive.

"Your Excellency," said the second aide, Pemwick, who had the build of someone who had been anxious since early childhood and had grown into it, "I took the liberty of sending ahead, but I'm afraid the reply was—" He produced a letter and looked at it with distress. "The reply was warm but did not confirm the arrangements I had requested, which I'm afraid may mean—"

"It means nothing, Pemwick," Crevaine said, which was his standard response to Pemwick's concerns, accurate approximately half the time. "One does not require confirmation in a town of two hundred and thirty."

The third aide, Drace, was looking at the square with the expression of a man who had mislaid something important and was hoping it would turn up. Drace was the youngest of the three, broad-shouldered and not unintelligent, but possessed of a quality that made him appear to be awaiting instructions even when

instructions were not available, which in the absence of clear direction from Crevaine led him to seek authority wherever it presented itself. He had attached himself to Sottwell's documentation twice on the road, to a very confident goat farmer once, and, in a regrettable incident outside Millhaven, to a scarecrow for nearly a quarter-candlemark before Pemwick noticed.

"There's a pub," Drace said, which was an observation rather than a proposal, and which Crevaine received without acknowledgment because he had already seen the Restaurant.

The Restaurant's sign caught the morning light in the way it had, and Crevaine looked at it from across the square with the assessment of a man who had eaten in establishments across a considerable portion of the known world and considered himself a reliable judge of quality.

"There," he said.

"Your Excellency?" Sottwell said.

"The restaurant. That is where we will dine this evening."

Sottwell consulted his documents. "I have no information on the establishment."

"It says Restaurant," Crevaine said, with the patience of a man explaining something to someone who should not require explanation. "On the sign. Plainly."

"Yes, but—"

"The finest establishments require no further introduction," Crevaine said, which was a thing he had said before and which contained, like many things he said, a kernel of genuine principle that had been lacquered over with so many layers of habit that the principle was no longer visible from the outside. "We will dine there tonight. All four of us."

"I'll make the reservation," Pemwick said, with the eagerness of someone for whom having a task was the same as having ground under his feet.

"Good," said Crevaine, and swept toward the inn, and the cart lurched after him, and North Pointe absorbed the arrival of the Herath Compact's Fourth Ambassador Plenipotentiary with the mild, watchful attention it brought to all unusual things.

Jen clocked them from the constable's office with the cataloguing attention of long practice and made the following notes, in the part of her mind that kept notes: the ambassador was important and knew it and used it as a first resort rather than a last one, which was a type she had encountered before and which was not dangerous so much as exhausting. The thin aide was a proceduralist who would cite regulations she had never heard of at the earliest opportunity. The anxious aide was not a problem but would create the impression of problems around himself like a man who attracted weather. The young one was a variable she hadn't resolved yet.

She gave it until mid-afternoon before the first incident.

She was off by a candlemark.

Pemwick arrived at the Restaurant's door at eleven in the morning with the energy of someone performing an important function and knocked three times with the precise rhythm of a man who had been told that how you knocked said something about you.

The door opened.

Llewel looked at him.

Pemwick had prepared a short speech, which he now delivered at a pace that suggested he was aware it might be interrupted: "Good morning, I represent Ambassador Aldous Crevaine, Fourth Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the Herath Compact, who wishes to reserve your establishment for a party of four this evening, ideally the best table, and if you could confirm the menu in

advance that would be most helpful as the ambassador has certain preferences which I have here in writing—" He produced a document. "—and we would require service no later than the seventh candlemark as the ambassador has correspondence to attend to afterward—"

Llewel looked at the document. He did not take it.

"This evening," he said.

"Yes," Pemwick said. "For four."

Llewel was quiet for a moment. "I will be happy to receive the ambassador this evening," he said. "At the eighth candlemark."

"The seventh would be—"

"The eighth," Llewel said, with the serenity of someone for whom this was not a negotiation.

Pemwick looked at his document. "And the menu?"

"Will be appropriate," Llewel said.

"But the ambassador's preferences—"

"Will be accommodated," Llewel said, "insofar as they are relevant."

He closed the door.

Pemwick stood on the step for a moment with his document, then went back across the square to report, which he did in the careful manner of someone trying to present information that was not quite what had been hoped for in a light that was not quite as alarming as it actually was.

The Púca became aware of the ambassador's party by the late morning, which was faster than most things became aware of anything, and in the way of the Púca — which was to say collectively, immediately, and with an enthusiasm that was entirely internal and expressed itself outwardly as a kind of coordinated purposefulness that an outside observer might mistake for a plan.

They were, by nature, interchangeable in appearance: small, quick, dark-eyed, dressed in the manner of their particular role

with the accessories that denoted it, all of them male, all of them possessed of a brogue so thick it had weather in it. The jewelry shop, which they operated as a collective with an internal hierarchy that outsiders had never successfully mapped, was their base of operations, but the Púca did not consider themselves bound by the concept of a base of operations when something more interesting was presenting itself in the town.

By noon, six of them had deployed.

There was Translator Púca, who handled external communications and who had appointed himself the official liaison to the ambassador's party on the grounds that this was adjacent to his function and he was available.

There was Procurement Púca, who had decided that a party of this size and apparent importance would require supplies, and had taken it upon himself to determine what supplies, and was currently compiling a list that nobody had asked for.

There was Protocol Púca, who had strong opinions about the correct procedures for receiving diplomatic parties and was prepared to share these opinions at length with anyone who made the mistake of appearing to be in charge.

There was Legal Consultant Púca, a recent addition to the collective whose specialty had not yet been tested in a live situation and who was therefore extremely eager.

There was Logistics Púca, who was managing the deployment of the others with the seriousness of a general and the situational awareness of someone who had never actually been in a deployment before but had read about it extensively.

And there was a sixth one who had not yet identified his role in the situation but was present in case one emerged.

Drace found them at half past noon, because Drace found anyone who appeared to be organized.

"Excuse me," he said, to Translator Púca, who was the nearest and most approachable. "Do you know where I might find — I'm looking for the ambassador's— there was supposed to be a briefing document and Sottwell has it but Sottwell has gone to—"

"We can help with that," Translator Púca said, with the confidence of someone who has decided to help before fully understanding the situation. "Procurement, take note."

"Taking note," said Procurement Púca, who produced a small ledger.

"What's your name, then?" Translator Púca said to Drace.

"Drace. Third Aide to Ambassador—"

"Third Aide Drace," Translator Púca said, to the assembled Púca, with the gravity of an announcement. "He'll be needing a briefing document."

"What kind of briefing document?" said Legal Consultant Púca.

"The ordinary kind," Drace said, uncertainly.

"There are seventeen varieties of briefing document recognized under the Compact accords," Legal Consultant Púca said. "Which variety?"

Drace looked at him. "I — the one Sottwell has."

"We don't have Sottwell's document," said Logistics Púca, "but we could prepare a parallel document. Procurement, what's our capacity?"

"Good capacity," said Procurement Púca. "I'll need the subject matter."

"What's the subject matter?" Translator Púca asked Drace.

Drace stared at them. "I just need to find Sottwell," he said.

"We can find Sottwell," said the sixth Púca, who had located his role.

They found Sottwell in eleven minutes, which was efficient by any standard, though Sottwell's expression when he discovered he had been found by a party of six small creatures who had organized a search operation without his knowledge or consent suggested he would have preferred a longer interval.

Sam watched the afternoon develop from behind the Claw's bar

with the expression she reserved for situations that were not her responsibility but were unfolding within her sight lines.

Pemwick arrived at the Claw at the second candlemark with the energy of someone who needed to sit down and was using forward momentum to avoid admitting it. He ordered an ale, which Sam provided, and he sat at the bar and held it with both hands and looked at the square.

"Difficult morning?" Sam said.

"The establishment down the way," Pemwick said, carefully, "was not entirely receptive to our standard reservation protocols."

"No," Sam agreed.

"The proprietor—"

"Llewel."

"The proprietor indicated that the menu would be—" Pemwick consulted his notes. "*Appropriate and accommodating insofar as the preferences are relevant*." He set down his notes. "I'm not entirely sure what that means."

"It means the food will be good," Sam said. "And that he'll serve what's right for the occasion."

"But the ambassador has specific preferences—"

"Everyone who goes in there has specific preferences," Sam said. "They generally come out having been served something better than what they asked for." She refilled his mug, though it was barely touched, because he looked like a man who needed the gesture more than the ale. "Your ambassador will be fine. It's the finest meal he'll have had in years, I'd imagine."

Pemwick looked at the Restaurant's sign. "He's a difficult man to serve," he said, with the candor that arrived sometimes after a long road and an ale and someone who appeared to be listening. "Specific. Demanding. Everything has to be exactly—" He stopped. "He wasn't always like this. I've worked for him twelve years. He used to — there used to be more room, in how he operated. Now everything is protocol." He drank. "I don't know what happened."

"People happen to themselves, mostly," Sam said. "Given enough time."

Pemwick considered this. "That's either very wise or very bleak."

"Usually both," Sam said.

Sottwell's afternoon was consumed by a dispute with Protocol Púca about the correct form of address for a Fourth Ambassador Plenipotentiary in a town that was not a signatory to any compact Sottwell had documentation for, which Protocol Púca maintained was governed by the traditional forms and Sottwell maintained was governed by the Compact's own internal guidelines, and which produced, over the course of two marks at the Claw's largest table, a quantity of competing documentation that Sam eventually had to ask them to move to the floor because it was covering the surface she needed for actual customers.

Wilem, the cartwright, came in at mid-afternoon and took in the scene with the unhurried assessment of a man who had spent thirty years working with large objects under tension and had developed an instinct for things that were about to go wrong.

He sat at the bar. "What's happening?" he said.

"Diplomatic incident," Sam said.

"Involving the Púca?"

"Involving everyone, at this point."

Wilem looked at Sottwell and Protocol Púca, who were now both holding the same document from opposite ends and reading it aloud simultaneously in different sections. "Do they need a—should someone—"

"They're fine," Sam said. "They're enjoying themselves. Both of them."

Wilem looked more carefully and concluded she was right, which was unsettling. "And the ambassador?"

"At the inn. Pemwick says he's writing correspondence."

"And the young one? The big lad?"

Sam pointed. Through the window, Drace was visible in the

square, surrounded by the remaining Púca, who appeared to be conducting some kind of orientation exercise. Drace had the expression of a man who had been given more help than he could process and had decided to simply endure it.

"Procurement Púca has adopted him," Sam said. "He seems to find it calming."

Wilem watched for a moment. "That's the strangest thing I've seen this moon," he said, "and last moon the well spoke."

"The well speaks every autumn," Sam said. "You know that."

"I know, but I don't get used to it." Wilem drank his ale. "What time's the ambassador going in?"

"Eighth candlemark."

"I'll be at the window," Wilem said.

Prudence arrived at the Claw at the seventh candlemark, which was earlier than she usually came, and settled at the bar with the purposefulness of someone who had decided to be present for something and had arranged her evening accordingly.

She had spent the afternoon in her shop, which faced the square, and had consequently observed more of the day's events than most. She had watched Drace's adoption by the Púca with the dry recognition of someone who had spent a professional lifetime reading people and knew the look of a man who functioned best when he had clear guidance and had found, in the Púca's inexplicable internal structure, something that approximated it. She had watched Sottwell and Protocol Púca's document war with the professional eye of someone who understood that most disputes of this kind were not really about the documents. And she had watched the ambassador at the inn's window, twice, for brief intervals — a large man looking out at a small town with an expression she had filed and not yet fully read.

She read it now, turning it over.

"He's frightened," she said, to Sam, without preamble.

Sam set down the cloth. "Of what?"

"Of it not mattering," Prudence said. "All of it. The title, the protocol, the—" She gestured at the square, at the residue of the day's events. "He's built a very large edifice. And I think he woke up one morning and couldn't remember what he built it on top of."

Sam looked at her. "You got all that from a window?"

"I got it from forty years of fitting clothes to people," Prudence said. "The body says things the face has been trained not to." She accepted her ale. "He holds himself like a man who is afraid that if he relaxes his posture, something will fall."

"Will it?"

"Almost certainly," Prudence said. "But falling isn't always the disaster it looks like from the outside." She looked at the Restaurant's sign, visible through the window in the evening dark. "Llewel will sort it."

"He usually does," Sam said.

"He always does," Prudence said, with a certainty she did not feel the need to justify.

At the eighth candlemark precisely, the ambassador's party arrived for dinner.

Crevaine led, as he led everywhere, with the posture and the pace and the voice, which he was deploying on Sottwell at a volume appropriate for a larger venue. Behind him came Pemwick, who had organized his documents into a configuration he hoped would not be needed. Behind Pemwick came Drace, who had spent the afternoon with the Púca and had the look of a man who had experienced something he would be processing for some time.

Behind Drace came Translator Púca, Procurement Púca, Protocol Púca, Legal Consultant Púca, Logistics Púca, and the sixth one, because they had decided this was their situation now and saw no reason to abandon it at the critical moment.

The door opened before Crevaine reached it.

Llewel stood in the doorway in his immaculate black and white, silver hair back, those deep blue eyes taking in the party of ten with an expression of perfect, unruffled courtesy.

Crevaine stopped. He had the involuntary recalibration that visitors to the Restaurant's threshold often had, though he managed it faster than most, because he had spent thirty years managing involuntary recalibrations in public. "Good evening," he said, at approximately the correct volume for a doorstep rather than a banqueting hall. "Crevaine. We have a reservation."

"You do," Llewel said. He looked at the party. The party looked back at him. "Ambassador Crevaine," he said, and stepped aside.

Crevaine moved to enter.

"Master Sottwell," Llewel said. "Master Pemwick. This way, please."

Sottwell and Pemwick, startled by the correct names, moved toward the door.

"I'm afraid," Llewel said, to Sottwell and Pemwick, with the infinite courtesy of a man whose regret was entirely architectural, "that this evening's reservation is for one."

Silence.

"I beg your pardon," Sottwell said.

"The ambassador's table is prepared for one," Llewel said. "I would be delighted to recommend the establishment down the road for Masters Sottwell, Pemwick, and Drace. The proprietor is excellent and the stew is very good this evening."

Crevaine turned. His face had the quality of a man deciding how to respond to something unprecedented, which was a face Llewel had seen before and which he received with the same patience he brought to everything. "My aides dine with me," Crevaine said. "As a matter of—"

"Protocol," Llewel agreed. "I understand. This evening, however, is an exception." He said it with a pleasantness that contained no opening. "Your table is ready, Ambassador."

Crevaine looked at the door. He looked at Llewel. He looked at the interior, which was doing what it did — the soft light, the clean

space, the quality of a room that knew what it was for — and something in him did the thing that happened to people on this threshold, the thing that was less a decision than a recognition.

"Wait for me at the Claw," he said to his aides, which was the most he had said to them by way of instruction all day, and he went inside, and the door closed.

Pemwick looked at Sottwell. Sottwell looked at Pemwick. Drace looked at both of them.

Translator Púca appeared at Drace's elbow. "Right," he said, with the energy of someone whose evening had just opened up considerably. "Shall we?"

What followed was, by the Claw's collective assessment, one of the more comprehensively entertaining evenings in recent memory.

Sottwell and Protocol Púca resumed their document dispute at the large table, having apparently reached a natural pause point and been resting for the ambassador's dinner before recommencing. Legal Consultant Púca joined them at the second mark, having identified what he described as a jurisdictional ambiguity that he felt strongly should be addressed before anyone proceeded further with anything. The three of them generated enough paper over the course of the evening to wallpaper a modest room.

Pemwick sat at the bar and talked to Sam, which he had discovered was something he was good at — talking to Sam — in the way that anxious people sometimes discovered that the right listener dissolved the anxiety without requiring them to stop being anxious, which was all they really needed. He talked about the ambassador in the way people talked about complicated people they were genuinely fond of, with the mixture of exasperation and protectiveness that came from long service to someone who made everything harder than it needed to be. He talked about the early days, when Crevaine had been a harder man in a simpler way — the farmer's son from the lowland valley who had watched his

neighbors lose their land to a trade dispute and had walked into the regional council chambers with a petition and come out, three years later, as its youngest elected member, which nobody had seen coming least of all himself.

"He fixed it," Pemwick said. "The land dispute. It took him four years but he fixed it and every farmer in the valley kept their land. And then the next thing needed fixing and he was there to fix it, and then the next, and the next." He turned his mug. "I don't think he ever decided to become an ambassador. I think he just kept fixing things until he was one."

Sam said nothing, which meant she was listening at full attention.

"The trouble is," Pemwick said, "somewhere along the way the fixing became the point. Not the thing that needed fixing. Just—the mechanism. The power of it. The—" He stopped. "I think he misses the valley," he said, with the surprise of someone arriving at a conclusion they hadn't intended to reach. "I don't think he knows he misses it. But I think he does."

Drace, meanwhile, had been adopted so thoroughly by the Púca collective that he was now sitting in the middle of them at the corner table, contributing to a conversation he did not fully understand about the internal governance structures of the jewelry shop, which the Púca were explaining with great seriousness and no apparent concern for whether any of it was comprehensible to an outsider. Drace had the expression of a man who was, for the first time in recent memory, exactly where he was supposed to be.

Wilem sat at the bar and watched all of it with the quiet appreciation of a craftsman who respected good work in any medium. Prudence sat beside him and said little, which was her version of enjoyment.

Darby was there, of course, because Darby was always there, and because an evening of this quality was not something Darby could have been kept away from by any force available to North Pointe's constabulary. He circulated through the evening like a weather system, contributing theories to every table in turn. His

current position was that the aides were spies, which he had advanced to Sottwell directly, causing a crisis of documentation that Protocol Púca had needed to help manage.

Jen came in at the fourth candlemark, not because she had been sent for but because the quality of the evening had reached a pitch she could perceive from her office. She stood in the doorway for a moment, taking inventory.

"Is everyone all right?" she said, to Sam.

"Everyone is wonderful," Sam said. "Ale?"

Jen sat down. "Ale," she said.

Inside the Restaurant, Crevaine sat alone at his table and did not perform for anyone, which was unusual enough to be uncomfortable at first and then, gradually, something else.

What Llewel served him was not elaborate — it was, in fact, the least elaborate meal the ambassador had eaten in thirty years, and it arrived without ceremony, without announcement, without any of the apparatus of fine dining that he had spent three decades learning to navigate and that had become, over those decades, less about the food and more about the navigation.

The first course was bread. Dark grain, dense, with a crust that had some work to it. He looked at it for a moment, because it was not what he expected, and then he ate it, and it tasted like the bread his mother had baked in the valley, which she had made every three days from grain his father grew, which he had eaten for the first eighteen years of his life without remarking on it because it had simply been bread, which was what bread was, and which he had not thought about in — he stopped the calculation, because it went somewhere that surprised him.

He ate all of it.

The second course was a vegetable soup, thick and plain, with the flavors of the valley — he knew this, though he could not have said how, because it had been thirty years and the valley was two

sennights' hard riding to the east and there was no mechanism by which — he ate it and did not trouble himself with the mechanism. It tasted like being twenty-two years old and having just been told he had won, and eating supper that evening at his mother's table and not yet knowing what winning was going to cost.

He put down his spoon.

He sat in the Restaurant's quiet with his hands on the table, and the sound of something he had not heard in a very long time, which was silence that was not waiting for him to fill it.

Llewel arrived with the next course and withdrew without speaking, which was the right instinct. Crevaine looked at the food and then at the room and said: "I grew up thirty miles from here, more or less."

"I know," Llewel said, from wherever he was.

"Farming country. My father grew grain." He looked at the bread, which was gone, but its memory remained. "I haven't been back in fifteen years."

"That is a long time," Llewel said.

"There was always something that—" He stopped. "No. That is an excuse. There was always something I put in the way." He picked up his fork. "The valley is fine, as far as I know. The land dispute was settled thirty years ago. There is no reason I need to be involved in its governance any longer. There are younger people." He said this with the flatness of someone reading a text they have read before and are only now understanding. "My wife tells me this regularly."

"She sounds wise," Llewel said.

"She grew up three farms from mine," Crevaine said. "She would like to go back. She has been saying so for ten years." He ate something and tasted nothing for a moment and then tasted everything. "I have been saying *soon* for ten years."

"And what has kept you?" Llewel said.

Crevaine was quiet for a long time. The Restaurant held his silence without impatience.

"I stopped knowing who I was," he said, finally, "without a

problem to fix." He said it with the difficulty of a man removing something lodged deep. "In the valley I am Aldous Crevaine, Torvan's son, who grows grain and knows everyone's name and fixed the land dispute thirty years ago and has not fixed anything since but is still there, still known, still — present." He set down his fork. "Here I am the Fourth Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the Herath Compact and there is always another problem to fix and when I fix it there is another and I don't — I don't know when I became more interested in the fixing than in the problem." He looked at the table. "That is not a comfortable thing to say."

"No," Llewel said. "But it is true, which is worth more."

Crevaine sat with this for a while. The courses continued to arrive — simple things, good things, the food of a man's actual life rather than the food of his office, and he ate them and tasted them and said nothing for a long time, and the Restaurant held him the way the Restaurant held everyone, without judgment and without urgency, with the patience of a place that understood that some things required the full weight of a quiet evening to settle.

The dessert course was a thing his mother had made on festival days — a simple baked pudding with dark sugar that she had produced once a year and that he had looked forward to for eleven moons out of every twelve, a thing whose value had been entirely in its rarity and in the specific love that had gone into it. He ate it slowly.

"I want to go home," he said, at the end of it. The words arrived with the simplicity of something that had been true for a long time and had only just been allowed to be said.

"Yes," Llewel said. "I know."

"There is a delegation in Arenford next moon that requires—"

"Yes," Llewel said again, more gently. "But after?"

Crevaine looked at the empty dish. He thought about Elsa, who had grown up three farms away and who said *soon* back to him now with a patience that was either deep love or magnificent restraint and was probably both. He thought about the valley in

spring, which he knew the way you knew a thing you had loved before you learned to think about loving.

"After," he said. "Yes. After."

He came out at the fourth candlemark past midnight, when the Claw had long since closed and the square was empty and the town was as quiet as North Pointe got, which was not very quiet but was quieter than it appeared.

He did not go to the inn.

He sat on the green at the centre of the square, which was slightly damp and cold and entirely unsuitable for a man of his station, and he sat there anyway, because the night air was doing something he needed it to do, which was to be the night air and nothing else.

He was not the ambassador here. He was a man in his middle fifties sitting on damp grass in a small town on a trade road, slightly cold, thinking about going home. He was Torvan's son, which was a thing he had not been in a very long time and which fit, he found, considerably better than he remembered.

Jen saw him from her window, because Jen was always at her window. She watched him for a moment and then did not watch him, because some things were private even in the middle of a square, and because he was clearly not a problem, and because he had the quality of a man conducting a necessary conversation with himself and needing the night to be a witness.

She went to bed.

At the first pale line of dawn, Crevaine rose from the green with the care of a man whose joints had registered the damp and had opinions about it, straightened, walked to the town gate, and stood for a moment looking at the Restaurant's sign in the early light.

He inclined his head. Not a bow — he had not bowed to anything in thirty years, and he was not beginning now. But an

acknowledgment, genuine and exact, from a man who had been given something worth acknowledging.

Then he went to the inn, and woke Pemwick, and told him to prepare the party to leave after breakfast, and that the Arenford delegation would proceed as planned, and that after the Arenford delegation there would be a change in schedule that Pemwick should be prepared to accommodate, details to follow.

Pemwick wrote this down with the automatic efficiency of twelve years' service and then looked up. "Are you—" He stopped.

"What?" Crevaine said.

Pemwick looked at him with the attention of someone who had known a person for twelve years and was registering a difference he could not yet name. "Nothing," he said. "I'll have the party ready."

They left at mid-morning, which was later than planned because Drace had to be retrieved from the jewelry shop, where he had apparently spent the night in conversation with the Púca about governance models and had lost track of the time completely. He emerged looking better than he had in sennights, which Sottwell noted in his documentation with the uncertainty of a man who had no procedural category for *aide improved by small supernatural creatures* and was going to have to create one.

The party assembled at the east gate. The cart was loaded. The horses were ready.

Crevaine paused at the gate and looked back at the town one more time — at the Claw, at the inn, at the Restaurant's sign in the late morning light, plain and definite, making its single uncomplicated claim.

Sottwell appeared at his elbow with something to be signed, because there was always something to be signed.

Crevaine signed it without looking at it, which was unusual,

and which Sottwell filed under *anomalies: personal, ambassador, possible significance unknown.*

"Sottwell," Crevaine said.

"Your Excellency."

"Draft a letter to Elsa. Tell her—" He paused. The gate was open. The road ran east, toward the Arenford delegation, toward the Compact, toward the mechanism that had been his life for thirty years. And then, beyond all of that, southeast, toward the valley, toward grain fields in spring, toward a woman who had been saying *let's go home* for ten years and had not yet stopped saying it.

"Tell her," he said, "that soon means this year."

He walked through the gate.

Behind him, Translator Púca appeared at Sottwell's shoulder. "We've prepared a parallel draft," he said, helpfully, "in three jurisdictional formats. Procurement has the copies."

Sottwell looked at him. He looked at the retreating party. He looked at the document in his hand.

"Thank you," he said, with the exhaustion of a man who has decided that resistance is no longer the right tool.

"Any time," said Translator Púca, with great sincerity, and disappeared back toward the jewelry shop.

all the light she left

. . .

THE RESTAURANT KNEW before Llewel did.

This was not unusual — the shop had its own awareness, its own attunement to what was needed, and Llewel had learned in his time here to read its signals the way a skilled navigator read weather: not by looking directly at the thing but by attending to the quality of the air around it. This morning the quality was particular. The kitchen had been warm since before first light, the fires tending themselves with an unhurried steadiness that spoke of long preparation. The table by the window had set itself — he had not done it, had come down from his rooms to find it already laid, the linen very smooth, the single candle placed with a precision that was not his. The good glasses. The old ones, the ones he kept on the highest shelf, that he had brought down from the mountains and that had been his mother's mother's, cloudy with age and beautiful with it.

He stood in the dining room and looked at the table and understood what the evening was for.

He folded the cloth in his hands once, twice, and set it down.

The preparations took him most of the day, which was as it should be. The kitchen was communicative in the way it was sometimes communicative — the right thing arriving at his hand before he reached for it, the ingredients presenting themselves in the order he needed them, the fires adjusting their heat with a responsiveness that was not his doing. Nimarith's hand in it, as always, not heavy but present — a current running beneath the work, a gentle orientation, the way a river knew the sea without having been told.

Llewel had learned not to question the mechanism. He had been a skeptic once, in the early moons of his service here — a Mountain Elf's skepticism, precise and structural, the need to understand the how before accepting the what. Nimarith had cured him of this with patience rather than demonstration, which was the god's preferred method. The shop knew. The shop was an instrument of a will larger than Llewel's, and his function was to be the hands of it, the attentive and skilled hands, which was a function he had come to find not diminishing but clarifying. He was not less himself for being in service. He was, if anything, more.

He thought about this as he worked — as the stock reduced and the bread rose and the first of the evening's courses began to take their shapes — and he thought about the table by the window with the old glasses, and about the guest who would sit at it, and about what it meant to prepare this particular meal.

He had done it twice before. Once, long ago, before North Pointe, in a place he did not speak of. Once here, in the early years. Each time the kitchen had known before he did, and each time he had felt the same thing he was feeling now, which was not grief and was not reluctance but was something quieter and more complex — the feeling of a craftsman asked to make something that required the full extent of his skill and that, once made, would be unrepeatable.

He wanted to do it well. That was all. He wanted to do it as well as it could possibly be done.

The kitchen, warm around him, offered what he needed, and he worked.

She arrived in the last light of the afternoon.

Llewel was at the door — not waiting, exactly, but present at the threshold in the way the shop sometimes prompted him to be, as though the door itself wanted to be opened from the inside at the right moment. He opened it and she was there, just stepping up from the road, and they looked at each other in the amber light of the late season.

Orla was a small woman who had clearly once been broader — the frame of someone who had worked hard for many decades, reduced now to its essential structure, but with a quality of density to it, as though what remained was entirely load-bearing and nothing had been lost that mattered. Her hair was white and cut close to her head. Her hands, which were the first thing Llewel noticed, were a stonemason's hands — the knuckles enlarged, the skin roughened, the fingers slightly curved in the permanent half-curl of a person who had spent a lifetime gripping tools. They were extraordinary hands. They had built things.

She had a pack on her back, not large. The pack of someone who traveled light by long practice, who had stopped carrying things they didn't need some decades ago and had never gone back.

She looked at Llewel with clear grey eyes that had the quality he sometimes saw in very old craftspeople — the eyes of someone who had looked at a great many things with professional attention over a long career and had developed, as a consequence, a gaze that was simultaneously patient and precise.

"Good evening," she said.

"Good evening," Llewel said. "Please come in."

She stepped inside and stood for a moment in the dining room, taking it in with the assessing eye of a builder reading a space. The table by the window. The candle. The old glasses catching the last of the light from outside in a way that made them look, briefly, like something lit from within.

"Those are old," she said, nodding at the glasses.

"They are," he said.

"Mountain work," she said. "The proportions." She looked at him. "Your people."

"My mother's mother's," he said.

She nodded, as though this confirmed something. Then she set her pack down by the door — carefully, not dropping it, the care of someone who had done this specific thing in many doorways and had a practiced relationship with the gesture — and she looked at him again.

"I'd like a meal for a journey," she said.

"Correct," Llewel said. "Please sit."

She sat at the table by the window, and the evening began.

In the kitchen, Llewel paused before the first course and attended to the silence the way he had learned to attend to it — not listening for anything specific, but open, receptive, the way you held a tool before beginning work, feeling its weight and balance.

The kitchen settled around him. The fire made its small adjustments. And something that was not a sound and not a voice but occupied the space where a voice might be if a god chose to speak in a medium other than the human — something arrived, briefly, with the quality of orientation. A direction. A rightness.

He began.

The first course was soup.

He brought it to the table himself, as he brought everything, and set it before her without announcement, and she looked at it with the frank, unsentimental appreciation of someone who assessed things on their merits.

"Stone-grey," she said, which was the color — a pale, mineral broth with something floating in it that caught the candlelight.

"Rock salt," he said. "From the high peaks. And something else."

She tasted it. She was quiet for a moment, and the quality of her quiet was not polite reception but genuine encounter — she was tasting with full attention, the way she had presumably looked at stone, seeing not only what was there but what it told her.

"I built a bridge," she said, "when I was twenty-four. My first commission. Over a river in the hill country, three spans, local granite." She held the spoon without using it, remembering. "I thought it would fall. For the first two years I thought every morning that I would wake and someone would tell me it had fallen." She looked at the soup. "It's been standing forty-seven years."

"I know," Llewel said, though he had not known this before she said it, and yet found it entirely unsurprising.

"I went back to see it," she said. "Last spring. People walk across it without looking at it, which is right — you don't look at a good bridge, you use it." She smiled, which rearranged her face into something that had been beautiful once and was now more interesting. "That's as it should be."

She finished the soup.

In Llewel's experience, which was long and various, the meals that mattered most were the ones that didn't need much management. The patron arrived already prepared — not consciously, but essentially — and the food's function was less transformation than confirmation. An acknowledgment, made in the language of taste and nourishment, of a life that had been what it was supposed to be.

This was one of those meals. He had known it from the kitchen's unusual morning, from the old glasses, from the quality of Orla's gaze in the doorway — that particular grey clarity that

came when someone had settled all their outstanding accounts, not because they had to but because they wanted to, because finishing things properly was simply who they were.

He attended to the courses with the full extent of his skill and tried not to let the fullness of his attention be visible, because it was not his evening and his presence should be useful rather than felt. But the kitchen was doing something tonight that he had experienced only a handful of times — it was generous in a way that went beyond even its usual extraordinary provision, offering him things he did not know he needed until he had them in his hands, and the food that resulted had a quality he could feel in the making of it, a quality he had no precise word for in any of the five languages he cooked in, which was the feeling of something done exactly right.

He folded a cloth and set it down and went back to the table with the second course.

"Tell me something," Orla said, between the second and third courses, in the tone of someone who asked questions directly because indirectness had never served her. "About the mountains."

Llewel, who was refilling her water, was quiet for a moment. "What would you like to know?"

"What they look like from the top," she said. "I've built on mountains. I've never lived on them."

He set down the water. He thought about how to answer this in a way that was true rather than picturesque, which was the only kind of answer worth giving.

"From the top," he said, "the world is a map of itself. Every thing in its place, its relationship to every other thing visible, the logic of the landscape legible in a way it isn't from within it." He paused. "You can see where the rivers come from. You can see why the valleys are where they are. The whole mechanism of it."

"That must be difficult to leave," she said.

He looked at the window, through which the mountains were visible in the last of the light, white above the dark treeline. "Yes," he said.

"But you came down anyway."

"The debt required it," he said. "And the work—" He stopped, which was unusual for him, the slight catch of someone finding something true in the saying of it. "The work is good," he said. "It asks everything of me. Very little else has done that."

Orla looked at him with those clear grey eyes. "That's what the best commissions do," she said. "They ask everything. You resent it, sometimes, while it's happening. And then it's standing, and you wouldn't change a stone of it."

Llewel looked at her. His hands were still at his sides. "No," he said. "You wouldn't."

The courses came and went, and with each one Orla's life took shape in the dining room the way a building took shape — not all at once but incrementally, each element finding its place in relation to the others, the whole becoming visible only after the parts had been assembled with sufficient care.

There was the bridge, and then there was the hall she had built at thirty-one that was still the grandest building in its town. There was the aqueduct that had taken seven years and three engineering consultants and one flood that had revised her original calculations in ways she had been furious about at the time and grateful for ever after. There was the small chapel in the northern hills that nobody had commissioned and that she had built in a single summer because the site demanded it, because she had walked past it one morning and understood that something wanted to stand there and that she was the one who knew how.

Between the buildings there were people — assistants, rivals, two men she had loved in different decades with different results, a young woman she had taught for five years who had gone on to

surpass her and whom she considered one of her primary achievements. There was a cat, described briefly but with great precision, that had lived in her workshop for fourteen years and died in the spot of winter sun it had claimed on the first day.

There were no children, which she mentioned once and without grief — not a wound, just a door she had looked at and decided not to open, which was her right and which had been the right decision, as far as she could tell, though she was not a person who spent much time reviewing closed doors.

There was the work, always and underneath everything, the work — the fundamental satisfaction of it, the way stone and intention met in her hands and became something that would outlast her by centuries, the knowledge that her eye and her skill and her stubborn refusal to accept second solutions were embedded permanently in things that people walked across and worked inside and worshipped in without knowing her name, which was exactly as it should be and which she found, when she thought about it carefully, entirely sufficient.

Llewel listened and cooked and brought courses and occasionally asked a question that opened something she hadn't intended to open, and each time she opened it she seemed lighter, which was not the right word but was the closest available — as though the telling was a kind of release, the final release, the last set of things that had needed to be said to someone who would receive them properly.

The kitchen, throughout, was warm and generous and very quiet.

The dessert course was not sweet.

He had known it wouldn't be, had felt the kitchen's intention clearly as he prepared it — not the dessert of celebration or indulgence but of completion, the final thing that closed a structure, the capstone. It was a small plate: three things, each simple, each

exactly itself. A piece of aged cheese with the mineral depth of something that had taken a very long time to become what it was. A slice of dark bread, dense with grain, the kind that lasted. A small cup of something warm that was not quite tea and not quite broth but had the quality of both, the quality of something that had been steeping for a long time and had arrived at its full flavor.

He set it down.

She looked at it.

"This is the last course," she said. It was not a question.

"Yes," he said.

She looked at him, and he looked at her, and there was a moment between them that was not sad and was not glad and was not anything that had a simple name, but was the moment that stood between a thing almost finished and a thing finished, which was its own kind of place.

"I'm not frightened," she said. "I want you to know that."

"I know," he said. "You haven't been frightened in some time."

She smiled the smile that rearranged her face. "Sixty years of building things that might fall," she said. "You run out of fear eventually and what's left is just — interest. In what comes next."

"Yes," he said.

She ate the cheese slowly, and the bread, and drank the warm cup to its end, and set everything down with the precise tidiness of a craftsperson completing a task, the workspace left orderly.

She looked at the corridor.

It was simply there.

The kitchen corridor, which had been a kitchen corridor all evening, with the sounds and smells of the kitchen at its end, was now something else entirely, and had been something else for some time, and neither of them had remarked on it until now because neither of them had needed to.

It was a corridor of the same proportions, the same pale stone,

lit in the same warm way. But what was at its end was not a kitchen.

What was at its end was difficult to describe precisely, which Llewel had learned to accept. It was a place — genuinely and specifically a place, not a light or an abstraction. He had the impression of stone, which was appropriate, which was almost certainly the kitchen's particular kindness to this particular guest — stone in the colors of somewhere, the grays and ochres and deep reds of a place that had not yet been named, with the quality of somewhere very large seen from a good vantage. There was weather in it. The smell of it reached him where he stood — cold, mineral, alive, the smell of somewhere that had been waiting with the patience of geology for someone who knew how to read it.

Orla was looking at it with the expression she had probably worn at every new site for sixty years — that grey, precise, deeply interested appraisal, reading the stone, reading the structure, reading the possibilities.

"New stone," she said. "Somewhere I haven't been."

"Yes," Llewel said.

"Is it — is there work there?"

He considered this. The kitchen offered him nothing specific, which he had come to understand meant the answer was yes, broadly, in ways that couldn't be previewed. "I believe," he said, carefully, "that it is the kind of place that will ask everything of you."

She turned to look at him, and her eyes were bright with something he recognized — the specific brightness of someone who has been handed a commission that requires the full extent of what they are.

"Well," she said. "Good."

He walked her to the threshold.

This was his function, and he did it with all the care he brought

to everything — walking beside her down the corridor that was still, in some sense, his corridor, until the point where it became something else and his steps stopped and hers did not need to.

At the threshold she paused and turned, and they looked at each other in the light of two places simultaneously.

"Thank you," she said. "For the meal."

"Thank you," he said, "for the conversation."

She looked at him for a moment longer — that clear grey gaze, direct and kind — and then she reached out and put her stonemason's hand briefly on his arm, the gesture of one craftsperson to another, an acknowledgment between people who understood each other's work.

"Go home sometimes," she said. "If you can. The mountains will be glad of it."

He did not trust himself to speak. His hands were completely still.

She turned and walked through the threshold and into the new stone, into the weather and the possibility of it, and the door that was not a door closed behind her in the way that things closed when they were finished — completely, and without remainder, and with the finality of something built to last.

Llewel stood in the corridor for a long time.

The kitchen was quiet behind him. The fires had settled to their lowest, the work done, the warmth remaining. The smell of somewhere else had faded, replaced by the familiar smell of his own kitchen — the herbs, the good clean stone, the lingering complexity of a long evening's cooking.

He went back to the dining room.

The table by the window was as she had left it — plate and cup set neatly, linen unrumpled, the old glasses still catching the last of the candlelight. He stood at the table for a moment, looking at the particular tidiness of it, the care of someone who had left every workspace orderly because it was simply who they were.

He cleared the table slowly, with full attention, each piece handled with the respect owed to things that had served their

purpose well. He folded the linen. He washed the old glasses himself, carefully, and dried them and returned them to the high shelf where they lived.

He upturned the chair.

He stood in the empty dining room in the late quiet of the night, and the candle burned down to its last, and he let it.

Jen saw the pack in the morning.

She came around the square at first light, as she always did, and found it on the Restaurant's rear step — a traveler's pack, not large, set down with the care of someone who had done this in many doorways and knew how it was done. It was not abandoned. It was placed. There was a distinction, and Jen knew the distinction, and she stood for a moment on the road and looked at it.

The Restaurant's door was closed. The sign was still. The herb pots stood in their precise rows, undisturbed.

After a moment, Jen continued her rounds.

She did not mention the pack to anyone that day, because there was nothing to say about it that required saying, and because some things were complete in themselves and needed only to be witnessed, not explained.

The pack remained on the step for three days, and then it was gone, and the rear step was empty, and the morning light fell on it the same as it fell on everything else — without distinction, without comment, which was the light's way of saying that all of this was ordinary, which was not the same as saying it didn't matter.

overcorrection

. . .

THE FIRST SIGN, had Llewel been inclined to read it as such, was that the kitchen did not prepare itself.

On ordinary evenings — on the evenings that mattered, the evenings the Restaurant was for — the kitchen began its own preparations well before the patron arrived. The fires adjusted. The right ingredients presented themselves. The shop's awareness settled into the particular focused quality that Llewel had come to recognize as intentional, the way a craftsperson recognized a tool placed deliberately within reach. Nimarith's orientation, subtle and sure, running beneath the work like a current.

This evening, the kitchen was simply a kitchen.

Llewel noticed this and filed it under *unusual* without drawing the conclusion that was available to him, because the young man had arrived at the door with what Llewel had assessed — in the three seconds of observation available before the door fully opened — as the quality of someone on the verge of a significant threshold. He was certain of it. He had been reading patrons for a very long time and he knew the signs.

The young man was perhaps twenty-two. He had the build of someone who had recently discovered he was strong and was

pleased about it, and the road-worn quality of a person on their first long solo journey, and an expression of such uncomplicated goodwill toward the world that it could have been, in a less perceptive reader, mistaken for simplicity. Llewel did not make this mistake. He saw, in the goodwill, the surface of something deeper — a young man on the edge of understanding what the road had been preparing him for, ready, whether he knew it or not, to have something named.

"Good evening," Llewel said, with the serenity of a man whose table was ready.

"Evening!" said Bram. "Someone at the inn said the food here was supposed to be extraordinary. Any chance you've got a table? I'm absolutely famished."

He said *absolutely famished* the way other people said *my life is in crisis* — with the same urgency, the same genuine need. Llewel received this as information of a particular kind.

"Please come in," he said.

The kitchen, behind him, did not stir.

The first nudge arrived when Llewel went to begin the opening course.

He had decided, with the swift and practiced certainty of long experience, that Bram required a meal of transition — specifically, a meal that moved from the familiar to the unfamiliar, mirroring the journey from known selfhood to the expanded version waiting just ahead. He had a clear picture of how it would unfold. He reached for the ingredients.

The pantry offered him: flour, a slightly elderly onion, some hard cheese, and what appeared to be the better part of a cured ham.

Llewel looked at these items.

He looked at the pantry, which was a well-stocked pantry and had never previously provided him with what amounted to the

ingredients for a very hearty but entirely unremarkable farmhouse supper.

He closed the pantry. He opened it again. The onion had not improved.

He stood for a moment with his hand on the pantry door and attended to the kitchen's silence, which was perfectly ordinary silence, the silence of a room that was warm and well-equipped and had no particular message to deliver.

Unusual, he thought, and went to the dry goods shelf, where he located, through the application of professional resourcefulness, the ingredients for something considerably more intentional. The pantry, he concluded, was simply having an off evening. This happened.

This did not happen. He knew this did not happen. He did not apply this knowledge.

In the dining room, Bram was looking at the Restaurant's interior with the bright, receptive attention of someone who found new rooms genuinely interesting, and he had folded his coat over the back of his chair, and he had his elbows on the table in the way of someone who was comfortable and intended to become more so, and he said, when Llewel appeared: "This is a great room. Very clean. Do you do all the cooking yourself?"

"I do," Llewel said.

"Remarkable," Bram said, with the simple sincerity of someone who meant it. "What's on tonight?"

"I'll be preparing something appropriate to the occasion," Llewel said.

"Brilliant," said Bram. "Any chance of an ale while I wait? I've been on the road since the second candlemark and I could genuinely murder an ale."

Llewel looked at him. "I'll see what I can provide," he said, and went back to the kitchen, which did not, on inspection, contain ale.

The back door opened onto the town square, and it was through the back door, at approximately the third candlemark, that Logistics Púca emerged with a list.

He had drawn a map. It was a good map, precise and annotated, with the Restaurant's back door marked in red and arrows indicating the optimal routes to Makota's bakery, Galhani's herb stall, Sam's ale supply at the Claw, and Warren's smithy, where Llewel's second-best filleting knife had gone for sharpening the previous sennight and had not come back.

"Right," said Logistics Púca, to the assembled Púca, who had gathered in the square with the alert collective energy of people whose evening had just become significantly more interesting than anticipated. "Supply operation. Procurement, you're on bread and herbs. Translator, you're liaison. Legal Consultant—"

"I'll need a waiver," said Legal Consultant Púca, "for the cross-premises transfer of comestibles."

"Write yourself one," said Logistics Púca. "Commissary Púca, you're on the ale."

A new Púca, recently designated, straightened with the pride of someone who had just received their first significant role.

"The ale," Commissary Púca confirmed.

"And no one," said Logistics Púca, with the gravity of a general addressing troops before a critical engagement, "tells him."

There was a brief, collective pause.

"Tells him what, specifically?" said Translator Púca, with the innocence of someone who had several possible answers and wanted to make sure they were suppressing the right one.

Logistics Púca looked at him. "Any of it," he said.

The Púca dispersed with the efficiency of small creatures who knew a town's geography intimately and had no compunctions about deploying it.

Sam was wiping down the bar when Commissary Púca arrived.

She looked at him. He was carrying a small cask with the careful posture of someone transporting something precious, and he had the expression — common to all the Púca in her experience, which was extensive — of a person performing a completely normal and unremarkable function who happened to be suppressing considerable amusement.

"Ale," he said. "For the Restaurant."

Sam put down her cloth. "The Restaurant," she said, "doesn't serve ale."

"Tonight it does," Commissary Púca said, and set the cask on the bar with the air of someone completing a transaction.

Sam looked at the cask. She looked at the Restaurant's back window, which was visible from the Claw and which currently showed the warm light of a kitchen in full operation. She looked at Commissary Púca, who was looking at the middle distance with an expression of heroic neutrality.

"What's happening over there?" she said.

"Supper service," said Commissary Púca.

"Is there a patron?"

"There is a young man," Commissary Púca said, carefully, "who is very hungry."

Sam looked at him for a long moment. She had known the Púca for long enough to read the specific quality of their suppressed amusement, which was different from their ordinary amusement in that it had a target, and the target in this case was clearly not the young man.

"How much ale?" she said.

"Two pints should do it," Commissary Púca said. "To start."

"To start," Sam said.

"He seems like a young man with a healthy appetite," Commissary Púca said, and picked up the cask, and left, and Sam stood at her bar for a moment before she began to laugh, which she did quietly and with the controlled appreciation of someone who rarely laughed loudly but meant it thoroughly when she did.

The first course, when it finally arrived at Bram's table, was a composed dish of some elegance: a small terrine of river fish set in a herb jelly, with a reduction of something dark and complex alongside, and three elements of garnish arranged with the geometric precision of someone who had thought carefully about what each one meant.

Bram looked at it with interest and ate it in four bites.

"Brilliant," he said. "Really excellent. The jelly thing is a great idea. Is there bread?"

In the kitchen, Llewel stood with his hands on the preparation table and breathed.

The terrine had been designed to evoke the beginning of a journey — the contained self, the self not yet in motion, the crystalline quality of a life before it understood its own direction. The reduction was the first intimation of complexity. The garnish was the three possibilities available to a young man at a crossroads. It was, he considered, one of the better first courses he had composed in recent years.

Bram had eaten it in four bites and asked for bread.

Llewel looked at the kitchen. The kitchen looked back at him with the serene blankness of a room that had no notes to offer on this subject.

There was a knock at the back door. He opened it.

Procurement Púca was there with a loaf from Makota's, still warm, wrapped in cloth.

"The bread supply," Procurement Púca said, with great professionalism.

Llewel looked at the bread. He looked at Procurement Púca, who was looking at his own feet with the concentration of someone who had decided that eye contact was not currently in his interest.

"Why," Llewel said, "is the Púca delivering bread to my kitchen."

"Supply chain support," Procurement Púca said. "We noticed a gap."

"My kitchen," Llewel said, "does not have gaps."

"Of course not," Procurement Púca said, instantly. "This is a supplementary provision. Entirely precautionary."

Llewel looked at the bread. It was good bread — Makota's best, the dark seeded loaf that had a proper crust on it. He took it, because Bram had asked for bread and the patron's needs were paramount, even when the patron's needs were *bread* rather than *revelation.*

"Thank you," he said, with the clipped precision of a man who was not going to make more of this than necessary.

"Any time," said Procurement Púca, and withdrew with the speed of someone who had been in this situation before and had calibrated the correct exit velocity.

The second course was considerably more ambitious.

Llewel had decided, in the interval between courses, that the issue with the first course had been subtlety. Bram was a young man of direct appetites and open expression — a more direct approach was clearly required. He had therefore prepared a dish that was less composed and more declarative: a slow-braised meat with a sauce that had taken the better part of a candlemark to construct, layered with flavors that moved from comfort to challenge to the particular bittersweet quality of something almost lost, designed to be eaten in sequence, the experience unfolding in distinct emotional registers as each element succeeded the last.

He set it down.

Bram looked at it with the bright interest he brought to everything. "Now that," he said, "smells incredible." He picked up his fork. "What's the meat?"

"Braised shoulder," Llewel said. "The sauce is constructed in four stages, each representing—"

"Fantastic," Bram said, and ate.

He ate with genuine, wholehearted appreciation, which was not the problem. The problem was that he ate all four stages simultaneously, mixing them together with the fork in the way of someone who was interested in the total experience rather than the sequence, and who found the total experience excellent, and who had no idea that there was a sequence, and who was now looking at the empty plate with the expression of someone who had just had a very good time.

"The sauce," he said. "What's in it? There's something in there I can't place."

"It is a reduction of—" Llewel began.

"I've had something like it before," Bram said, already moving on in the way of someone whose mind worked quickly and happily and in several directions at once. "At a place outside Arenford. But theirs wasn't as good. Yours has got more depth. More—" He gestured with his fork in a way that somehow conveyed *more everything*. "More of whatever that is."

"Yes," Llewel said, after a moment.

"Can I have a bit more bread?"

In the kitchen, Llewel stood at the preparation table and looked at the ceiling.

The ceiling offered no counsel.

He was aware, in the way he was always aware of it when he attended carefully, of the kitchen's orientation — or rather, of its *lack* of orientation, the absence of the current that usually ran beneath the work on evenings of significance. The kitchen was warm and well-equipped and entirely, serenely blank. No nudge. No direction. No subtle presentation of the right ingredient at the right moment.

He was building this entirely alone.

He told himself this was simply a matter of the patron's particular kind of readiness — some patrons required the environment to work harder, the meal to be more precisely constructed, before the door opened. He had seen this before. Bram's cheerfulness was a

kind of armor, perhaps. The genuine transformation happening at a level below the surface.

He began the third course, which he had decided would be the decisive one.

There was a knock at the back door.

Translator Púca had brought the herbs from Galhani.

Behind him, Commissary Púca had brought a second consignment of ale.

Behind Commissary Púca, a new Púca had appeared, this one wearing a small badge that appeared to read *Quality Assurance.*

"Who are you?" Llewel said, looking at the badge.

"Quality Assurance Púca," said Quality Assurance Púca. "We're implementing a new oversight function for the supply chain operation."

"There is no supply chain operation," Llewel said. "My kitchen provides what is required."

"Of course," said Quality Assurance Púca, in the tone of someone agreeing with something they had no intention of applying. "We're simply here in a support capacity."

"The herbs," Translator Púca said, helpfully, extending them.

Llewel took the herbs. He took the ale. He looked at the three Púca on his back step, who looked back at him with the combined expression of people who were performing their functions with complete seriousness and who had not, individually or collectively, done anything that could be specifically objected to.

"Go away," he said.

They went away. He could hear them on the other side of the closed door, not quite far enough away, conferring in the tone of people who were conferring about something they were not going to stop doing.

He went back to the preparation table.

He picked up Galhani's herbs and looked at them. They were

the right herbs for what he was making. He had not told Galhani what he was making. He had not told any of the Púca what he was making. He had not told anyone anything, because no one was supposed to know, because the patron's evening was private, because —

He set down the herbs.

He stood very still for a moment.

Then he picked the herbs back up, because the third course needed them and Bram was waiting, and he would think about the implications later.

The third course was, by any objective standard, extraordinary.

It was a dish of considerable technical complexity — a construction of several elements that was designed, in its totality, to be the experience of standing at a threshold, the precise emotional texture of the moment before a person stepped from one version of their life into the next. He had made it four times in his career and each time it had worked, had cracked something open in the patron that the preceding courses had loosened and this one completed.

He brought it to the table with the focus of a man carrying something that needed to be carried correctly.

Bram's eyes went wide. "Oh," he said. "Oh, that's beautiful. What is it?"

"It is—" Llewel began.

"It looks like it took forever," Bram said. "Did it take forever? It looks like it took forever."

"The preparation was—"

"I feel bad eating it," Bram said, picking up his fork. "Almost." He looked up at Llewel with genuine warmth. "Not quite bad enough not to, obviously. But almost."

He ate it.

He ate it with the same wholehearted appreciation he had brought to everything else, and he made a sound that was purely

one of pleasure, and he ate every element in a different order than intended, and he leaned back when it was done with the expression of someone who had just had one of the best evenings of his recent memory, and he said: "I have to say, this is the finest meal I've had in — I don't know how long. Genuinely. You're an artist."

Llewel looked at him.

"An absolute artist," Bram said, warmly and without irony.

"Thank you," Llewel said, and went back to the kitchen, and stood at the preparation table, and did not move for quite some time.

He went out the back door because he needed air, which was not something he usually needed, and because the kitchen's continued serene blankness had begun to feel, in a way he could not entirely articulate, like a comment.

Sam was at the fence. He had the distinct impression she had been at the fence for some time.

She had her arms folded and her expression arranged into the one she used when she was waiting for someone to arrive at a conclusion she had already reached and was prepared to wait as long as necessary for them to get there.

Behind her, on the Claw's back step, three Púca were doing something with a supply manifest. They looked up when Llewel appeared and then looked very intently back at the manifest.

"He's asked for a dessert menu," Llewel said. "He's asked whether I do a dessert menu."

Sam said nothing.

"He enjoyed the third course," Llewel said. "He told me I was an artist."

"And what did you make of that?" Sam said.

"I made of it that he's a young man of genuine sensibility whose appreciation is operating at a level that doesn't yet have vocabulary for—"

"Llewel," Sam said.

"—the deeper structure of what the meal is—"

"Llewel."

"—attempting to—"

"He's hungry," Sam said. "He was hungry when he came in and he's less hungry now and if you feed him a dessert he'll be perfectly satisfied and he'll sleep excellently and he'll be on his way in the morning and none of that is a problem."

Llewel looked at her.

"The Púca have made four supply runs," she said. "Makota's on her third loaf. Galhani's wondering what you're doing with that many herbs. Warren sharpened your knife and wants to know why it came to him via Lapidary Púca rather than in the usual way." She unfolded her arms. "What does the kitchen tell you?"

Llewel was quiet.

"What does the kitchen tell you?" Sam said, more gently.

He looked back at the kitchen door, which was warm and lit and had been, all evening, perfectly ordinary. He thought about the pantry with its elderly onion. He thought about the absence of the current, the blank serenity of a kitchen with nothing particular to say. He thought about Nimarith, who had a sense of humor that Llewel had always respected in the abstract and was now experiencing in a more direct form.

He thought about the Púca, who had built this restaurant under some calling from that same god, and who were currently standing ten feet away with a supply manifest and expressions of impenetrable innocence.

He thought about a young man who was genuinely, simply, entirely and uncomplainingly hungry, eating extraordinary food with the wholehearted appreciation of someone who did not know it was extraordinary and would have been grateful for a good plain supper.

He thought about the difference between service and the performance of service, and which one he had been engaged in for

the last several candlemarks, and at whose expense the performance had been mounted.

"I see," he said.

"There he is," Sam said, quietly.

Behind her, the Púca's collective posture adjusted very slightly in the manner of people who had been waiting for something and had just heard it arrive.

Llewel went back into the kitchen.

He stood at the preparation table. He looked at the herbs, the reduced stocks, the complex array of prepared elements for a fourth course that was going to tell a young man who needed no telling something he was going to receive with cheerful incomprehension.

He cleared the preparation table.

He looked at the pantry.

He opened it.

The elderly onion was still there. So was the flour, the hard cheese, and the cured ham. He looked at them with the clear eyes of a man who had arrived, somewhat belatedly, at the obvious.

There was also, he now noticed, a pot of good mustard and some dried fruit and a decent quantity of butter and a bowl of eggs, and behind those, pushed to the back in the way of things that had been waiting patiently to be noticed, a jar of preserved cherries in something dark and aromatic that smelled, when he opened it, of late summer and woodsmoke and a kind of unhurried sweetness that had no agenda whatsoever.

He stood at the pantry and looked at these things and felt, for the first time all evening, the kitchen settle around him with the warmth of something comfortable and right.

Not a current. Not an orientation. Just a kitchen, and good ingredients, and a young man in the next room who was hungry and had been given extraordinary food and deserved, as a final

course, something that was simply and completely delicious without being anything else at all.

He began to cook.

The back door opened. He went to it.

All six Púca were there. Logistics Púca had put away the map. Quality Assurance Púca had removed the badge. They looked at Llewel with the careful attention of people who were not sure what they were about to receive.

"Thank you," Llewel said, "for the bread."

A brief, collective pause.

"Any time," said Translator Púca, with great sincerity and something that was not quite a smile but occupied the same space.

"Is there anything else you need?" Logistics Púca said.

Llewel considered. "Tell Makota the bread was excellent," he said. "Tell Galhani the herbs were good quality. Tell Sam—" He paused. "Tell Sam thank you."

"For the ale?" Commissary Púca said.

"For the ale," Llewel said.

He closed the door. He could hear them on the other side, conferring in the way of people who had just watched something conclude satisfactorily and were in agreement about this, and then their voices moved away across the square and the kitchen was quiet and warm and entirely itself.

He finished the dessert.

It was a cherry pudding.

Dark and warm, with the preserved cherries and their aromatic syrup, and a good quantity of butter and the dark sugar, and a pastry element that had a proper crust on it, and nothing else whatsoever — nothing symbolic, nothing layered, nothing designed to open a door or name a thing or move a young man through a threshold he was not, it turned out, standing in front of.

He brought it to the table.

Bram looked at it. Something happened in his face that was purely and entirely about the smell, which was excellent, and he said: "Is that cherries?"

"It is," Llewel said.

"I love cherries," Bram said, with the simple declaration of someone stating a fact about themselves that required no further context.

"I know," Llewel said, which surprised him slightly, and which was in fact the kitchen's first and only meaningful communication of the entire evening.

Bram ate the cherry pudding with the same wholehearted appreciation he had brought to everything else, except that this time the appreciation was, if anything, more complete — the uncomplicated pleasure of something asked for nothing beyond being eaten and enjoyed, received by someone who was exactly the right person to receive it.

"That," Bram said, when the bowl was clean, "was the best thing I've eaten in — possibly ever. The whole meal. Genuinely." He looked at Llewel with the open warmth of someone who did not have a complicated relationship with gratitude. "What do I owe you?"

Llewel named a price that was fair. Bram paid it with the ease of someone who had expected to pay for a good meal and found the amount reasonable, and he collected his coat and his pack and he shook Llewel's hand — he actually shook his hand, which almost no patron had ever done, a firm and uncomplicated handshake — and he said: "If I come through here again, I'm coming straight back."

"You would be welcome," Llewel said.

He opened the door. The square outside was quiet and dark, the clock in the tower marking the candlemark with its new-fangled precision.

Bram stepped out. He turned back, briefly. "Oh," he said. "The room at the inn — they said to ask whether you do breakfast."

"I do not," Llewel said.

"Worth asking," Bram said, cheerfully, and walked off across the square toward the inn, and Llewel stood in the doorway and watched him go.

He found Sam at the Claw's front window. She had a mug of something warm and the expression of someone who had been waiting for exactly this.

"Well?" she said.

Llewel stood in the doorway with the particular quality of a man who has been wrong about something and has decided to be honest about it without being theatrical about it, which was the only kind of honesty available to him.

"He was hungry," he said.

"He was hungry," Sam agreed.

"The kitchen knew," Llewel said. "From the beginning. The kitchen knew and I—" He stopped. "I was certain. I was entirely certain."

"You're often certain," Sam said, with the gentleness of someone who meant this as a fact and not a criticism, though it functioned as both.

"I designed three courses," Llewel said, "of considerable complexity, for a young man who wanted a good supper and a cherry pudding."

Sam looked at him. "How was the cherry pudding?"

Llewel was quiet for a moment. "Excellent," he said. "The kitchen was generous with the cherries."

"The kitchen," Sam said, "was also generous with the pantry onion, apparently, and it took you four courses to find it."

This landed. Llewel received it with the stillness of a man taking a precise and accurate measurement of his own error.

"The Restaurant's purpose," he said, carefully, working it out as he said it, "is not something I impose. It is something I serve."

"Yes," Sam said.

"Those are different."

"Very," Sam said.

Llewel looked at the square, where Bram had disappeared into the inn, and where the Púca's jewelry shop sat dark and quiet at the far end, its windows entirely innocent of anything at all.

"Nimarith," he said, to no one in particular, with the tone of a man addressing a god who he has just understood has been laughing at him for several candlemarks.

The clock in the tower marked the half-candlemark.

Sam handed him an ale.

He took it — actually took it, without his usual qualification, and drank, and Sam watched this with the expression of someone witnessing a small but genuine thing, and said nothing, because nothing needed saying.

Outside, the square was quiet and dark and entirely ordinary, which was, Llewel was beginning to understand, not a lesser version of extraordinary but simply a different kind, one that required a different kind of attention, and one that he was, perhaps, only now learning to serve.

The ale was good.

He finished it.

the unfinished argument

. . .

BORRIC ARRIVED FIRST, which was unusual, because Borric was the one who had been delayed.

He came through the west gate on a mule that had the look of an animal that had covered significant ground in insufficient time, with the expression of a dwarf who had been riding hard for two days and had opinions about it. He was broad even by dwarven standards, somewhere in his middle years, with a dark red beard going grey at the edges in the particular way that dwarven beards went grey, which was reluctantly and from the outside in. He had the hands of someone who worked with metal — a smith, or had been — and he moved with the compact, deliberate energy of a person who was angry about something and had been for long enough that the anger had become a resting state rather than a response.

He went to the inn, because that was where you went, and Minnie gave him a room without comment, because she was good at reading the kind of tired that didn't want comment, and he washed the road off himself and came down to the Claw with the purposeful stride of a man who needed food and ale and intended to obtain both efficiently before sleeping for twelve candlemarks.

He came through the Claw's door, and stopped.

Halvard was at the bar.

The recognition was instantaneous and mutual and had the quality of two objects that had been on a collision course for twelve years and had finally, in Sam's establishment on a Thursday evening, arrived at the point of impact. Halvard was shorter than Borric by perhaps two inches, which in dwarves was a noticeable difference, and his beard was darker and more extensively braided, and he had their father's eyes, which Borric had forgotten until this moment and now found he could not look away from.

Halvard looked at Borric. Borric looked at Halvard. The Claw went on around them for a moment with its usual evening business, and then Sam, who had clocked the meeting with the precision of someone whose establishment had been the location of significant human — and dwarven — encounters before, set down her cloth and waited.

"Borric," Halvard said, with the flatness of a word that had once been a name and had since become something more complicated.

"Halvard," Borric said, with the same flatness and the same history in it.

Vamir, who was at his usual corner table with a book he was actually reading for once, looked up. He took in the two dwarves with the unhurried assessment of someone who had been alive long enough to recognize a particular kind of silence on sight.

Dardrad, who was at the other end of the bar with a mug of dark ale and the self-contained quality of a dwarf who had learned to exist comfortably in a town of mostly non-dwarves, looked up from his mug and looked at the two brothers with an expression that moved through several stages before settling on something carefully neutral.

Borric sat at the far end of the bar from Halvard. Halvard turned back to his ale. Sam served Borric without asking, because the ale was obvious, and the two brothers sat at opposite ends of her bar and did not speak, and the distance between them had the

quality of something precisely maintained, like a wall that was in good repair because both sides were actively maintaining it.

Darby appeared from the direction of the fireplace with the instinct of a man who sensed an interesting situation. Sam intercepted him with a look that communicated, without ambiguity, that this was not his evening, and he retreated.

It was Vamir who spoke first, which was perhaps inevitable, because Vamir had the elven quality of finding social silences less uncomfortable than most species and consequently felt no particular pressure to let this one resolve on its own.

He closed his book. He looked at the two dwarves.

"Brothers," he said. Not a question — he had the elven eye for physiognomy, which in this case was not difficult, given the beards and the jaw and the particular set of the shoulders that was identical in both of them.

Neither of them confirmed or denied this.

"I thought so," Vamir said. "The resemblance is clear." He picked up his wine and considered it. "Are you estranged?"

"Vamir," Sam said, with the warning tone.

"It is a reasonable question," Vamir said, with the equanimity of someone who had been told his questions were unreasonable before and had not adjusted his behavior accordingly. "The silence between them has the specific character of estrangement rather than simple unfamiliarity. I have lived long enough to know the difference."

Borric looked at Vamir with the expression of a dwarf deciding whether an elf's commentary warranted a response. He decided, apparently, that it did. "What business is it of yours?" he said, which was not a denial.

"None whatsoever," Vamir said pleasantly. "I ask from professional curiosity. I have a scholarly interest in the patterns of familial rupture across species. The dwarven pattern is particularly—" He

paused, choosing the word with the care of someone who knew it was going to land poorly regardless. "—consistent."

Dardrad, at the end of the bar, made a sound that was not quite a laugh.

"Something to add?" Halvard said, looking at him.

Dardrad set down his mug. He had the look of a dwarf who had decided to say something he usually didn't say, which was the look of someone who had made a decision and was going to see it through. "My village," he said. "My entire village. Twenty-three years." He picked his mug back up. "Over—well, it doesn't matter anymore." He drank. "My wife's people haven't spoken to her sister's family in forty years. Can't recall why, at this point. Don't think they can either."

He said this without heat, without drama, with the flat honesty of someone reporting a fact about the world that he had made his peace with even while acknowledging it was absurd.

Borric looked at him. Halvard looked at him. Something passed between the brothers that was not communication and was not quite the opposite — the involuntary acknowledgment of two people who have just heard their situation described by someone who is not them.

"It was armor," Borric said, to his ale, not to Halvard.

"Our father's," Halvard said, also to his ale.

Vamir nodded with the gravity of someone receiving important data. "Inheritance disputes," he said. "In my people's tradition, such matters are governed by the Accord of Prior Claim, which was established—" He paused, calculating. "—roughly two thousand years ago, following the estrangement of the Silverwood branch of the Amavari, which lasted four centuries and ended only when both lines died out and the disputed property was absorbed by the forest." He considered this. "It is, in retrospect, not a perfect system."

"Four centuries," Sam said.

"The forest was patient," Vamir said.

"The armor went to the Elder Council," Halvard said, still to his

ale, with the flat bitterness of something said many times in private and never before in company. "Because we couldn't—"

"Because *you* couldn't—" Borric began.

"Here we are," Sam said, not loudly, but with the quality of a wall placed in the path of something that had been moving for too long in the same direction.

They stopped.

The Claw was quiet for a moment in the way it got quiet when something real was happening in it, the other customers conducting the collective and largely unconscious courtesy of people who understood they were in the presence of something private.

The door opened.

Llewel stood in it.

He was in his black and white, as always, silver hair back, those deep blue eyes moving across the room with the unhurried assessment of someone who had arrived at exactly the right moment and knew it. He looked at Borric. He looked at Halvard. He looked between them with an expression that was not quite a smile and not quite anything else, and he said, with the pleasant certainty of a maitre d' informing guests that their table was ready:

"Good evening, gentlemen. Your table is prepared."

Both brothers looked at him.

"I haven't booked a table," Borric said.

"Nor I," Halvard said.

"Nevertheless," Llewel said, with the serenity of someone for whom this objection was entirely familiar and entirely beside the point. "The evening is prepared for both of you. Shall we?"

The brothers looked at each other, which was the first time they had directly looked at each other since Borric came through the door. The look lasted perhaps two seconds and contained twelve years of things unsaid, and then both of them looked away.

"I'm not dining with him," Borric said.

"Nor I with him," Halvard said.

"It is," Llewel said, "a complimentary meal. For both of you."

A pause.

Dardrad looked at his mug. "I once walked forty miles out of my way," he said, to no one in particular, "to avoid eating at the same inn as my third cousin. Cost me two days." He drank. "Worst two days of a bad year."

Vamir looked at the brothers with the expression of someone watching a process he had seen before and knew the outcome of. "In the Accord of Prior Claim," he said, "there is a provision for shared inheritance of indivisible items. It requires both parties to be present in the same room for the filing. The paperwork is considerable." He paused. "The meal, I imagine, is simpler."

"It's a free meal," Sam said, from behind the bar, with the economy of someone identifying the operative fact.

Both brothers looked at the Claw's door. Both brothers looked at Llewel. Both brothers looked, very briefly and very involuntarily, at each other.

"Separate tables," Borric said.

"I'm afraid the reservation is for one table," Llewel said.

"Then separate sides," Halvard said.

"Of course," said Llewel, pleasantly, in the tone of a man agreeing to a condition that was going to resolve itself in due course.

The table was round.

Both brothers noted this simultaneously upon entering the dining room and each arrived separately at the conclusion that a round table had no separate sides, which was either an oversight or a statement, and with this elf it was clearly not an oversight.

Neither of them said anything about it. They sat, by unspoken negotiation, at the points of the table that were farthest from each

other, which on a round table for two was directly across, which meant they were facing each other, which was not what either of them had intended.

The table was laid simply: two settings, two candles, a small arrangement of something dark and heathery in the centre that smelled, very faintly, of the mountain stone that both of them had grown up breathing. Neither of them remarked on this either, but both of them breathed it in with the involuntary recognition of a smell that bypassed twelve years and went somewhere earlier.

Llewel brought water and withdrew. The kitchen, beyond its door, was doing something that smelled of deep heat and long preparation, the specific smell of food that had been working for candlemarks and was nearly ready — a smell that was, in its particular combination of rendered fat and dark spice and something fermented and something smoky, entirely and specifically dwarven.

Halvard looked up from the water glass.

Borric was looking at the kitchen door.

Neither of them spoke.

In the kitchen, Llewel worked with the focused attention of someone conducting something delicate.

The kitchen had known about this evening since mid-afternoon — had been preparing in its own way since then, the fires at a particular sustained heat, the long-braised things doing their slow work in the deep pots, the fermented components at their correct temperature. He had arrived to find it already in motion, which was the kitchen's way of telling him what the evening required before he had fully understood it himself.

Two brothers. A shared childhood. A rupture at the point of grief, where grief had been displaced by anger because anger was more manageable and had since become a habit. The food needed to do something that words had failed to do for twelve years,

which meant it needed to go under the words, past the argument, to the place where they were still the boys who had grown up eating at the same table.

He knew dwarven food. He had cooked it four times before, for dwarven patrons, and he had learned what it was and what it was for. It was not subtle food — subtlety was not a dwarven virtue, which was not a criticism but a fact of a culture that valued directness, endurance, and the kind of depth that came from things made to last. Dwarven food lasted. It was built for the long days underground, the long winters in the mountain settlements, the feasts that marked the things that mattered — births, deaths, the completion of great works. It was food that said: *we are here, we endure, this is ours*.

He reached for the first of the deep pots and tasted, adjusted, tasted again.

The kitchen offered him, in the unhurried way it offered things on evenings of significance, the right spice at the right moment — a dark blend he didn't recognize from any market he had visited, which meant it was from somewhere specific, somewhere these brothers had grown up with. He added it carefully. The smell that rose from the pot shifted, deepened, became something that was not just good food but *their* food, the food of a specific place and a specific childhood and a specific table at which two boys had sat with their father.

He tasted it again.

He set down the spoon and stood very still for a moment.

Then he began to plate the first course.

It arrived without announcement: two bowls of a dark, dense soup, almost black, built on a bone broth that had clearly been cooking for a very long time and had developed the specific gravity of something that had absorbed everything it was going to absorb and become entirely itself.

There were things in it — root vegetables cut in the dwarven way, which was thick and rough-edged, not the fine dice of human cooking but the substantial chunks of a cuisine that believed food should have presence; small pieces of a cured meat that had been added late, still with some texture; and floating on top, a dark oil with a smell that was mineral and warm simultaneously, drizzled in a pattern that was simple and not accidental.

Both brothers looked at their bowls.

Neither of them said anything.

Borric picked up his spoon first, which was probably a function of having ridden two days on insufficient food. He tasted the soup. He was still for a moment in the way of someone receiving information through a channel they had forgotten was open.

Halvard watched him, involuntarily, before catching himself and looking at his own bowl.

He tasted it.

The soup tasted like their father's kitchen on winter mornings. Not approximately — not in the way that things sometimes reminded you of other things — but with the specific, unrepeatable accuracy of a smell or taste that had been stored whole somewhere in the body and had just been unlocked without warning. It tasted like the stone walls and the low ceiling and the fire that burned from the first cold day to the last, and their mother moving through the kitchen with the economy of long practice, and their father coming in from the outer tunnels with the cold still on him and sitting at the head of the table and wrapping both hands around his bowl.

Halvard set down his spoon.

He picked it up again and ate, because the soup was in front of him and he was going to eat it, and because setting it down again would require him to explain why, which he was not prepared to do.

Across the table, Borric was eating with the focused attention of someone who had decided to simply be in the experience without managing it, which was not his usual approach and

which was costing him something, and which he was doing anyway.

They did not speak. The soup did not require them to speak.

The second course was bread and dripping.

This was not a thing either of them had eaten since childhood — not because it was difficult to obtain, but because it was a thing of childhood, a thing you ate when you were young and the world was simple and the dripping came from whatever had been roasting and was collected in the pan and spread on the dark bread while it was still warm and liquid and the bread absorbed it and became something that was more than the sum of its parts.

Llewel brought it without ceremony, two plates, the bread dark and thick-sliced, the dripping in a small crock between them with a bone-handled knife for spreading, which was the correct implement and which both of them registered without comment.

Borric reached for the crock.

Halvard reached for the crock.

Their hands arrived at the same moment, which was the first time in twelve years they had touched anything simultaneously, and both of them pulled back with the practiced speed of people who had developed reflexes around each other's presence.

The crock sat between them.

A silence of a particular quality.

Then Halvard reached for it, because someone had to, and he spread his bread and set the crock back in the centre, and Borric took it, and they ate, and neither of them acknowledged what had just happened, but something in the quality of the silence between them had changed, in the way that a piece of machinery that has been running wrong sometimes shifts with a sound too small to identify and begins to run slightly less wrong.

Vamir, in the Claw, had ordered a second glass of wine and was explaining to Dardrad the precise mechanism by which the Accord of Prior Claim handled indivisible inheritances, because Dardrad had made the tactical error of asking a follow-up question.

"The item in question," Vamir said, "is assigned a ceremonial custodian — typically an elder of the relevant house — who holds it in trust for a period of no less than one century, during which either claimant may petition for full ownership, provided they can demonstrate—"

"One century," Dardrad said.

"It encourages perspective," Vamir said.

"The armor's been with the Elder Council for twelve years," Dardrad said. "That's felt long enough."

"Twelve years," Vamir said, with the gentle condescension of someone who had personally experienced centuries, "is a Tuesday afternoon."

Dardrad looked at him. "For a dwarf," he said, "twelve years is — it's long. We don't have centuries to spend on being stubborn."

Vamir was quiet for a moment, in the way he was sometimes quiet when something had arrived that he hadn't expected and was worth considering. "No," he said. "I suppose you don't." He looked at the Restaurant's window, which showed nothing. "Is that — does that make it easier, do you think? Knowing the time is shorter?"

"Makes it worse, mostly," Dardrad said. "You'd think it would make people quicker to forgive. Mostly it makes them quicker to dig in, because every year feels like something." He turned his mug. "Twelve years is twelve years you don't get back. Easier to pretend it was necessary than to admit it wasn't."

Vamir looked at his wine. He thought about Alred, which he did not do in public and was doing now, and which he set aside with the practiced efficiency of someone who had become skilled at the motion. "Yes," he said. "I imagine that is true for most species."

They sat in an unexpectedly companionable silence, the elf and the dwarf, while the clock marked the candlemark above them.

The third course was meat.

It was a roast of something dark and strongly flavored, cooked in the dwarven style, which was long and low and patient, the exterior rendered almost to char and the interior still dense and yielding, served with a sauce that was built on the fermented base that both of them recognized — a dwarven condiment of ancient standing, made from particular grains stored in the dark for moons, which tasted of the underground in the best possible sense, the specific depth of things that had developed in the absence of light and come out the better for it.

Alongside the meat was a dish of root vegetables roasted in fat, very simple, and a dark gravy that had the gravity of something that had been a long time becoming what it was.

Borric looked at the plate and then at Llewel and said: "This is father's feast recipe."

"Yes," Llewel said.

Halvard looked at his plate. "He only made this for— " He stopped.

"Celebrations," Borric said. "And funerals."

A silence.

"Both," Halvard said.

They ate.

The food was doing what food of this kind did, which was to exist below the level of argument — in the region of the body that held things before they became words, where the twelve years of silence and the twelve years before that and the twelve years before that all existed simultaneously, undivided, the whole of two shared lives present in the taste of a meal their father had cooked for the things that mattered most.

It was Halvard who spoke first, which surprised both of them.

"I didn't want to sell it," he said, to his plate.

Borric was still for a moment. "Neither did I," he said.

"I wanted—" Halvard stopped. Started again, in the way of a

dwarf getting traction on something that had been refusing traction for a long time. "I wanted it in my home. Where I could see it. Because he was gone and it was the only—" He stopped again.

"I know," Borric said.

"You kept saying share it."

"I meant—" Borric set down his fork. "I meant it the way he meant it. When he said it was for both of us. I didn't mean—" He looked at the table. "I didn't mean you couldn't have it in your home. I meant it was both of ours. That we should both be able to — that it shouldn't just be one of us."

Halvard looked at him. "You never said that."

"You never—" Borric stopped. The word *asked* was there, and he didn't use it, because it was the beginning of the argument rather than the end of it, and they had both been in the argument long enough to know its first steps by heart. He left it.

They ate.

The meal was not doing what the argument had done. The argument had been a closed system — two positions generating heat without producing light, the same ground covered in the same order until the pattern had become the point. The food was something else. It was not asking them to agree or to apologize or to decide anything. It was simply putting them back in the place where they had been before the argument had a shape, before the armor had become a symbol of something larger than itself, before their father's death had become a thing to fight about because fighting was more bearable than the alternative.

They were two dwarven boys eating their father's feast food at a table in a small town a long way from home.

The fire burned. The candles held. The clock marked the candlemark outside, and neither of them looked up.

Dessert was sweet black bread with a dark sugar glaze, which was a thing their mother had made when they were very young —

younger than the armor, younger than the argument, younger than anything — on the days that she had time and flour to spare, a small treat with no occasion attached to it, made because she had wanted to make it and they were there to eat it.

It arrived in two portions. Borric looked at his and made a sound that was not a word. Halvard said: "She made this."

"Yes," said Llewel.

"She died before—" Halvard stopped. "Before all of it. Before the armor was even—"

"I know," Llewel said, quietly.

They ate the sweet bread. The dining room held them with its particular warmth, the fire low now, the evening late, the candles past their midpoint.

The argument was still there. Neither of them was under the illusion that it was resolved — twelve years and a meal didn't resolve twelve years, and they were dwarves, and the thing that made dwarves admirable also made them capable of extraordinary sustained stubbornness. But the argument had, over the course of the evening, run out of the specific fuel it had been burning — the grief-that-had-become-anger, the loss-that-had-become-resentment — and what remained was still two dwarves who had disagreed badly about something that mattered and had not spoken in twelve years, but the heat was gone from it, and what was left was just the fact of it, which was a different and more manageable thing.

Halvard set down his fork. He looked across the table at Borric. "You look like him," he said. "More than you used to."

Borric looked at him. "You've got his eyes," he said.

Neither of them said anything else for a moment.

Llewel came from the kitchen.

He set something on the table between them. Not a bill — he set it down in the centre, in the space between the two plates, and stepped back.

It was a gauntlet. A single piece — the right hand of a suit of armor, dwarven work of the old style, the overlapping plates dark with age and polished to a deep luster that had clearly been main-

tained with great care, each rivet set with the precision of a craftsman who understood that the quality of the hidden work was the measure of the visible. The knuckles were engraved with a pattern that both brothers recognized before either of them had fully focused on it — a running border of their father's house-mark, the one he had stamped on everything he made and everything he owned and everything he cared about.

Both of them were very still.

"The armor," Llewel said, "is with the Elder Council. It has been well cared for." He looked at them both with those deep blue eyes, even and calm. "It is waiting. It has been waiting. It requires two claimants to retrieve it." He paused. "I am told it was meant to be looked at. Not kept by one or the other, but looked at. By both."

Halvard looked at the gauntlet. "How did you—"

"It is not mine," Llewel said. "I am simply returning it to the people it belongs to."

He withdrew.

Both brothers looked at the gauntlet. The house-mark caught the candlelight and held it.

Borric reached out and touched the engraving with one finger — the rough pad of a metalworker's hand tracing the lines of his father's mark. Halvard watched him do it.

"The Elder Council is a three-day ride," Halvard said. "From my settlement."

"Four from mine," Borric said.

A silence.

"Seven if you came to mine first," Halvard said. "And then on together."

Borric looked at him. He looked at the gauntlet. He looked at his brother, who had their father's eyes and who had been missing from his life for twelve years over a thing that was, he could see now with the clarity of a well-fed and somewhat humbled dwarf, not what either of them had thought it was.

"That's a long road," he said.

"Yes," Halvard said.

"You still snore," Borric said. "You snored when we were boys and you almost certainly snore now."

"You still talk in your sleep," Halvard said. "Full sentences. Whole conversations. It was extremely troubling when we were young."

They looked at each other. Something that was not yet easy but was no longer armored sat between them, tentative and real.

"Seven days," Borric said.

"Seven days," Halvard confirmed.

They came out together, which was not something North Pointe had expected based on how they'd gone in, and they came out late enough that the Claw had technically closed but that Sam had stayed open for, because Sam had stayed open for less compelling reasons.

They came in and sat at the bar — not at opposite ends — and Sam set two ales in front of them without discussion, and Dardrad looked at them from his corner with the expression of a dwarf who had seen something worth seeing.

Vamir, who had also stayed, looked at them over his wine with the grave attention of a man confirming a hypothesis.

"The meal was satisfactory?" he said.

"The meal," Borric said, with the directness of a dwarf delivering a verdict, "was the best I've eaten in twelve years."

"Since the last time someone fed us properly," Halvard said.

Vamir nodded. "The Accord of Prior Claim," he said, "has a secondary provision. For cases where the estrangement resolves before the century is complete. The paperwork is considerably less."

"Good," both brothers said, simultaneously, and then looked at each other with the startled expression of people who have been out of the habit of agreement and have just fallen into it by accident, and found the fall less terrible than expected.

Sam looked at Dardrad. Dardrad looked at Sam. Between them passed the specific communication of two people who had spent enough time in the vicinity of the Restaurant's work to recognize it when they saw it, and who found it, each time, still worth seeing.

Outside, the square was quiet and cold and the clock marked the lateness with its new-fangled patience, and the Restaurant's sign caught no light at all — it was past midnight, the windows dark, the door closed.

Inside, Llewel tidied the table.

He lifted the gauntlet last, and held it for a moment — the weight of it, the careful old work of it, the house-mark under his thumb — and then he set it in the box he had prepared for it, and closed the lid, and put it where it needed to be.

His hands were steady.

The evening had gone well.

the test

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SEVAINE ARRIVED WITH A NOTEBOOK.

This was the first thing Jen noticed — not the notebook itself, which was small and leather-bound and might have belonged to anyone, but the way she held it, which was the way certain people held their most essential tool: not prominently, not as a display, but with the unconscious proximity of something that had become an extension of the hand. She had it out before she had fully cleared the gate, and she was writing in it before she reached the inn, and what she was writing, Jen would later learn from Minnie, was an assessment of the gate's stonework, the quality of the road surface, and the architectural consistency of the buildings visible from the entrance.

She was a Plains Elf, which meant she was tall and fine-featured and carried herself with the particular quality of Plains Elves, which was not arrogance exactly but something adjacent — the bearing of a people who had spent a very long time developing strong opinions and had refined the expression of those opinions into an art form. She was somewhere in her middle years by elven reckoning, which placed her in her eighties by human count, and

she had the face of someone for whom expression was a professional instrument: mobile when she chose, controlled when she didn't, and currently arranged into the focused attention of a person cataloguing a new environment.

She was, she told Minnie, a food critic of some standing. She had written four volumes on the cuisines of the eastern regions, contributed to three compendiums, and maintained a correspondence with seventeen establishments she considered worthy of ongoing assessment. She had heard, through channels she described only as *reliable*, that there was a restaurant in North Pointe of unusual quality, and she had come to assess it.

Minnie gave her a room and sent up tea and reported to Sam within the candlemark.

"Food critic," Sam said.

"Plains Elf food critic," Minnie said, with the specificity of someone for whom the distinction mattered.

Sam looked at the Restaurant's window. "Does Llewel know?"

"If he doesn't," Minnie said, "he will."

Vamir knew she was coming before she arrived.

He had not been told — no one had told him — but he had the Elven awareness that functioned, in his experience, less like intelligence gathering and more like weather sense: a change in the quality of the air, a shift in some current, the particular feeling of a member of a people he knew well approaching from a distance. He had been an archivist before he was a North Pointe bookseller, and before that he had been many other things, and the Plains Elves had been present at several of those things, and he had developed over centuries a feel for them that was equal parts appreciation and exhaustion.

He was rearranging his front window display when she came past, and he watched her assess the square from the gate with the systematic attention of a professional survey, and he recognized the

notebook, and the posture, and the specific quality of the Plains Elf critical gaze, which was like being measured for something you hadn't agreed to be measured for.

He went back to his window display.

Galhani appeared at his elbow, which she did sometimes, having the gnomish quality of arriving silently and without announcement in places where something interesting was happening.

"You know her?" Galhani said.

"Her type," Vamir said. "Plains Elf critics. They are—" He considered his word carefully. "Thorough."

"Is that good?"

"It depends," Vamir said, "entirely on what they're being thorough about." He looked at the Restaurant's sign. "I am curious how Llewel will manage it."

"Will he have trouble?"

Vamir thought about this with the care he brought to things he found genuinely interesting. "The Plains Elven critical faculty," he said, "is not a thing that arrives at a person from outside. It is structural. It is how they are built." He set a book in the window with precision. "Llewel is very skilled. But dismantling a structure while the person is still living in it is—" He paused. "Delicate."

Galhani looked at the Restaurant. "He's done harder things," she said.

"Yes," Vamir agreed. "But he's also done *Overcorrection*," he said, which was what the town had taken to calling it, and which Vamir found instructive. "He is not infallible."

"Nobody is," Galhani said, and went back to her stall.

Sevaine presented herself at the Restaurant's door on her second evening, which was faster than some and more deliberate than it appeared — she had spent the first day conducting what she would have described as preliminary research and what anyone

watching would have recognized as comprehensive surveillance. She had eaten at the Claw, which she had assessed in her notebook with a thoroughness that Sam, observing from behind the bar, found simultaneously flattering and faintly violating. She had walked past the Restaurant four times from different angles, noting the exterior presentation, the signage, the herb pots, the quality of the threshold stonework. She had attempted, once, to engage Llewel in conversation through the dry goods exchange, which had produced in her notebook: *Proprietor: Mountain Elf, indeterminate age, economy of expression suggesting either exceptional discipline or deliberate mystique — likely both. Eyes: remarkable. Manner: controlled. Possible affectation.*

She had underlined *possible affectation* and then, after a moment, crossed it out, and then written it again in smaller letters, which was the closest she came to uncertainty.

On the second evening she knocked.

The door opened.

Llewel looked at her. She looked at him. She had her notebook open and her pen in her hand, which was the first thing he registered, and which told him, with complete clarity, everything he needed to know about what the evening was going to require.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening," she said. Her voice was the precise instrument of a Plains Elf who had spent decades using it professionally — calibrated, controlled, carrying the faint musical quality of the Plains Elf register which was beautiful and slightly unnerving in equal measure. "I understand you serve dinner by reservation. I'd like a table."

"Of course," Llewel said. "Please come in."

She came in with her notebook open.

He seated her, and brought water, and withdrew to the kitchen, and stood for a moment at the preparation table with his hands flat on the surface and attended to the quality of the evening.

The kitchen was present. He could feel it — the current, the orientation, the shop's awareness settled into its purposeful focus.

This patron required something. He knew what kind of something, or thought he did — the critic's armor, the evaluator's distance, the person who had spent eighty years tasting everything and being nourished by nothing. He had seen versions of this before. He knew the approach.

He reached for the first ingredient.

The kitchen provided it — and then, beneath his hands, also provided the faint but distinct impression of something complicated ahead. Not warning. Not reluctance. More like the feeling of being handed a task that was going to require more than one tool, which was information he filed and went back to the work.

The first course was a small thing: three preparations of a single ingredient — a root vegetable, common, found everywhere, the kind of thing that appeared in every cuisine in every region and was rarely the point of anything. He had done three things to it: roasted it until the exterior was almost charred and the interior had concentrated into something dense and sweet; shaved it raw with a sharp acid dressing that made it entirely different; and made of the third portion a thin crisp, almost translucent, that tasted of almost nothing except the ghost of the thing itself.

He set it down.

Sevaine looked at it. She picked up her pen.

First course: root vegetable, three preparations. Roasted component shows good technique — caramelization controlled, no bitterness from the char. Raw preparation: acid balance slightly forward, though this may be intentional as a palate primer. Crisp: technically impressive, flavor minimal — question of whether minimalism is deliberate statement or failure of imagination.

She ate all three preparations in sequence and then in combination and then separately again, with the systematic methodology of someone running an experiment. She made four additional notes. She set down the pen and looked at the plate.

It was very good. She knew it was very good with the certainty of eighty years of comparative assessment. The roasted component was not slightly good or competently good but genuinely, surprisingly good, in a way that had required real understanding of the ingredient rather than just technique. She noted this.

What she did not note, and what she was aware of not noting, was that eating it had made her think of the scrubland south of her childhood settlement, where this particular root grew wild, and where she had gone as a young elf on afternoons when the settlement felt too small, and had eaten things raw from the ground with the uncomplicated hunger of a creature who was part of the landscape and hadn't yet developed opinions about it.

She did not note this because it was not relevant to the assessment.

In the kitchen, Llewel plated the second course and listened to the silence from the dining room, which was a working silence — the silence of someone making notes, the scratch of pen on paper, the particular quality of a room occupied by a person who was processing their experience through the act of documentation.

He had cooked for critics before. He had cooked for evaluators, for assessors, for people whose relationship with food was fundamentally intellectual. The challenge with such patrons was not their intelligence — intelligence was not the problem, and was often an asset, because intelligent people could follow a complex meal through its logic and understand what it was building toward. The challenge was the distance. The practiced, professional, absolutely necessary distance of someone who had made a career of not being moved by things, of observing movement rather than experiencing it.

The kitchen's orientation was patient. It had the quality of something that was prepared to work slowly and did not require immediate results. He took this as information about the kind of

evening it was going to be — not a fast unraveling but a long one, each course loosening something very slightly, the cumulative effect the point rather than any single dish.

He thought about the three preparations of the root vegetable, and the scrubland south of a Plains Elf settlement, and the way she had not written down the thing she had thought, which meant she had thought it.

Good, he thought. There you are.

He began the second course.

The second course was a soup.

It arrived as a clear broth — bone-pale, very clean, with a depth of flavor that had clearly taken a very long time to develop, and floating in it three small things: a leaf of something aromatic, a sliver of preserved citrus, and a single piece of something that was either a very small dumpling or a very large raindrop, translucent and containing within it a concentrated reduction of the broth itself.

Sevaine looked at it for a moment before she wrote anything.

Second course: consommé — exceptional clarity, technique demanding and executed without apparent fault. Three garnish elements. The encapsulated reduction is a studied flourish — clever, possibly too clever—

She stopped writing.

She had been about to write *possibly too clever,* which was a phrase she used when something was technically impressive but emotionally empty, when the skill was present and the feeling was not. She had been about to write it from habit, from the groove of long practice, and then she had tasted the dumpling — the raindrop, the encapsulated thing — and it had broken on her tongue and released the reduction, which was the broth made more entirely itself, more concentrated, more present, and the phrase *possibly too clever* had turned to dust in her mind before she could set it down.

She sat with the spoon and the broken thing dissolving on her tongue.

It was not too clever. It was exactly as clever as it needed to be and no more, and the cleverness was in service of the flavor rather than at its expense, and she knew the difference, had always known the difference, and this was the difference, and — she was aware, with the slight internal alarm of a person who has felt the ground shift — she was not assessing it. She was just eating it.

She picked up her pen.

The encapsulated reduction is, she wrote, and stopped.

She looked at what she had written. She wrote: *precisely calibrated.*

She ate the rest of the soup. She did not write anything else about it.

Outside, Prudence closed her shop at the usual candlemark and stood in the square for a moment with her key in her hand, looking at nothing in particular.

She had seen the Plains Elf critic arrive the previous day and had noted her, the way Prudence noted most people — quickly, completely, with the specific eye of someone whose profession was the close reading of bodies and what they carried. She had noted the notebook, and the systematic survey of the square, and the way the woman moved through the world with the quality of someone who was always, always slightly outside the thing she was examining.

She had noted also the clothes, which were good — expensive, well-made, the clothes of someone with taste and resources — and which were the colors of someone who had decided that their clothing should not distract from their function, which meant grey and brown and a particular dark green that was not quite a color and not quite not. The clothes of someone who had decided they were an instrument rather than a person, which Prudence recog-

nized, because she had worn those clothes once, or their Holderkin equivalent, which was the same decision expressed in different fabric.

She stood in the square and looked at the Restaurant's door and thought about the woman inside it, and then went home, because it was not her evening and there was nothing yet to be done.

The third course arrived and Sevaine wrote about it for four minutes without stopping, which was the most she had written about any single course all evening, and the notes were very good — precise, specific, technically acute, the work of an eighty-year career applied with full concentration to a piece of cooking that deserved it.

She was aware, while writing, that the notes were very good. She was also aware, in the way she was increasingly aware of things she was not writing down, that she had eaten the third course with a quality of attention that was different from her professional attention — not instead of it, alongside it, a parallel experience running beneath the assessment like a second conversation in a room where you were supposed to be listening to the first.

The third course had tasted like a meal she had eaten at forty, in a town she had visited once and never returned to, at a table with three other food writers she had known in the earlier part of her career, before the books, before the reputation, when the work had been newer and the eating had been — she did not use the word *joyful* in her professional notes, but she was aware that it was the right word for what the third course had tasted like, and that she was not using it, and that she was not using it because she had stopped having a category for it some decades ago.

She read over her notes.

They were excellent notes. They were the best notes she had taken all evening. They contained no joy whatsoever.

She set down her pen.

Llewel appeared from the kitchen. He looked at her with those deep blue eyes, and she met them with the professional composure she brought to all encounters, and for a moment they simply looked at each other across the table.

"You are very good at this," he said, which she had not expected.

"I am aware," she said.

"The notes," he said, "are thorough."

"That is the function of notes," she said.

"Yes," Llewel said. He was quiet for a moment. "What would the course have been, if you had written about it differently?"

She looked at him. "I don't understand the question."

"I think you do," he said, without unkindness, and went back to the kitchen.

She sat for a long moment looking at her notes. Then she looked at the wall, which was the Restaurant's wall, which had the border near the ceiling — the carved running figures she had noticed on her first evening — and she looked at it the way she looked at things when she was not actively assessing them, which was increasingly how she was looking at things this evening, and she found it very beautiful, and did not write that down either.

The fourth course was a composed plate of some ambition — several elements, each technically demanding, the whole arranged with the geometric precision of someone who understood that visual presentation was part of the argument the food was making. She recognized the tradition it drew from, and the departures from it, and the reasons for those departures, and she began to write.

She wrote for two minutes. She stopped.

She ate a piece of something.

She wrote: *The departure from the traditional arrangement is—*

She ate another piece.

She looked at the plate. She looked at her notes. She read: *The departure from the traditional arrangement is—*

She could not finish the sentence, which had never happened to her before, not in eighty years of assessment. She knew exactly what she wanted to say — she had the vocabulary, she had the framework, she had the analytical apparatus of a career built on completing exactly this kind of sentence — and the sentence would not close.

Because the departure from the traditional arrangement was *correct*. Not technically correct — she could have written that. Correct in the way that something was correct when it was the only right answer to a question, when all the other possible arrangements existed only to make this one visible by contrast, when the person who had made it had understood something about the ingredient and the tradition and the moment that produced a rightness that was not arguable.

She knew this. She had known it since the second bite.

She had been writing around it for four minutes.

She set down her pen.

She ate the rest of the course in silence, and the silence was a different kind of silence from the professional silence she usually ate in, and she was aware of the difference, and she found the difference alarming in a way she could not entirely account for.

The fifth course was bread.

It arrived on a small board: a piece of bread, a small crock of butter, a dish of salt. Nothing else. The bread was good — she could see that from across the table, the crust with the quality of something properly made — and the butter was real butter, the kind that tasted like the animal and the grass and the season, and the salt was good salt, coarse, with the mineral depth of somewhere specific.

She looked at it.

She picked up her pen.

She looked at the bread.

She set down her pen.

She picked up her pen.

She looked at the bread for a long time. She was aware that she was looking at it for a long time. She was aware that the reason she was looking at it for a long time was that she did not know how to write about it, which was absurd — it was bread, it was butter, it was salt, she had written about more complex combinations in her sleep — and she was aware that the reason she did not know how to write about it was not that it was simple but that it was not, in this moment, a thing to be written about.

It was a thing to be eaten.

She reached for the bread.

She tore a piece — not cut, torn, the way you tore bread when you were not performing the act of eating but simply eating — and she spread butter on it with the small knife and pressed a few grains of salt into the butter, and she put it in her mouth.

It tasted like being very young. Not like any specific memory — not the scrubland, not the forty-year-old dinner, not any of the particular moments the previous courses had unlocked — but like the state of being young, before the notebooks, before the career, before the eighty years of building the apparatus that allowed her to be in any room and remain safely outside it. It tasted like hunger that was just hunger, before hunger became a professional condition. It tasted like a morning before she had decided what kind of person she was going to be.

She set down the bread.

She looked at her notebook.

Her notes were very good. They were thorough and precise and demonstrated eighty years of expertise and they had nothing to do with any of the things she had actually experienced in the last several candlemarks, and she knew this, and she sat with knowing this in the warm quiet of the Restaurant and did not move for a long time.

Llewel came from the kitchen. He looked at her, and at the notebook, and at the bread, and he said nothing, which was the right thing, and he refilled her water and withdrew, and she sat for another long moment and then she picked up her pen.

She wrote: *The bread is—*

She stopped.

She looked at what she had written. She looked at the bread. She was aware, with the precision of someone who had spent a lifetime being aware of things, that she was at a threshold of a particular kind, and that the threshold required something of her that she did not know how to give, and that the not-knowing was not a gap in her expertise but a gap in something else entirely, something that no amount of expertise could fill.

She closed the notebook.

She sat with it closed in her hands for a moment — the weight of it, the eighty years in it — and then she put it in her coat pocket and she ate the rest of the bread, all of it, with the butter and the salt, in the warm quiet of the Restaurant, and she did not write a single word.

She came out a candlemark later, and she stood on the step in the evening air, and she looked at the square.

Prudence was there.

This was not planned — or rather, it was not planned by Prudence, who had come out for an evening walk in the way she sometimes did when she needed to think, and who had arrived in the square at this particular moment without intending to and who received the sight of Sevaine on the Restaurant's step with the quiet recognition of someone who had been expecting something without knowing what.

Sevaine looked at her. Prudence looked at Sevaine. Neither of them said anything for a moment.

Then Sevaine said, to the square, to the evening, to no one in particular: "I don't know how to write about it."

Prudence considered this. She sat down on the bench near the Restaurant's step, which was what was available, and after a moment Sevaine sat beside her.

The square was quiet. The clock marked the candlemark. The Restaurant's sign was dark.

Prudence looked at her hands for a moment, which were a seamstress's hands — marked with the small old scars of a life's work, ink-stained at the fingertips, the hands of someone who had made things. "I grew up Holderkin," she said. Not to Sevaine exactly. Beside her.

Sevaine said nothing, which was listening.

"The clothes were — particular," Prudence said. "You'll know what Holderkin dress. Browns and greys and nothing that said anything about you except that you were modest and obedient and part of the whole." She looked at the Restaurant's door. "I wore those clothes for thirty years and I told myself they were fine, and they were fine, and that was exactly the problem."

Sevaine looked at Prudence's clothes, which she had not looked at properly before. They were — she had to revise her initial catalogue — extraordinary. The deep gold of the blouse, the layered greens of the skirt, the specific blue of the shawl that was not quite any blue she had seen before — all of it precise, intentional, each piece in conversation with the others, the whole a statement that was not a statement so much as a fact: *this is who I am.*

"When did you change?" Sevaine said.

"When I understood that this town was mine," Prudence said. "That the people in it were mine. That they would—" She paused, finding the right words, which she did not rush. "That they would fight for me. Regardless." She looked at the smithy, at the Claw, at the inn, at the fishmonger's. "When you know that, you stop needing the grey."

Sevaine looked at the notebook in her coat pocket.

Prudence looked at it too. "What's in it?" she said.

"Eighty years," Sevaine said.

"Of what?"

Sevaine thought about this with the honesty of someone who had just spent several candlemarks having their habits stripped back to their essentials. "Of being outside things," she said. "So I couldn't be found wanting."

Prudence nodded. Not in agreement, exactly — in recognition.

She reached into her own coat. She had brought something — she had not known she was bringing it until she was standing in the square and found it in her pocket, which was the way the shop sometimes worked, she had come to understand, the right thing presenting itself at the right moment. It was a scarf. Small, easily missed, the kind of thing you might tie at the neck or the wrist or wind through the hair — silk, she thought, or something like it, in a color that was deep amber shot through with something that caught the evening light and held it.

She held it out.

Sevaine looked at it. She looked at Prudence. She looked at the scarf.

It was not the kind of thing Sevaine wore. She knew this immediately and with certainty. It was too warm, too present, too much a declaration for someone who had spent eighty years wearing the critical equivalent of grey.

She took it.

She held it for a moment, feeling the weight of it, the specific warmth of the color even in the low light.

"It's for the next bit," Prudence said. Not explaining. Just saying.

Sevaine looked at the notebook in her pocket. She looked at the scarf in her hand. She looked at the Restaurant's door, which was closed and dark, and then at the square, and then at the fire bowl near the inn's entrance where the evening's last coals were still warm.

She got up.

She walked to the fire bowl, and she took out the notebook, and

she held it over the coals for a moment — eighty years of assessment, four volumes' worth of the distance she had built between herself and the thing she was eating — and then she let it go.

It caught slowly, the way good paper caught, and then it caught completely.

Prudence watched from the bench and said nothing.

Sevaine stood at the fire bowl and watched her notes burn, and the amber scarf was in her hand, and the square was very quiet, and the clock marked the late time, and the Restaurant's sign caught no light whatsoever and needed none.

Llewel watched from the window.

He watched the notebook catch and burn, and he watched Sevaine standing at the fire with the scarf in her hand, and he watched Prudence on the bench, who had not moved and was not going to move, and who had done, in five minutes on a bench in the evening square, the thing he had been building toward all evening through eight courses of careful, patient, skilled cooking.

He stood at the window for a long moment.

Then he went to find Sam, because Sam was the person you went to when you had been humbled and wanted to sit with it quietly in good company.

Sam was behind the bar. She looked at him when he came in, and she read him the way she read everyone, and she set a mug in front of him without asking.

"She burned the notebook," he said.

"I saw," Sam said.

"Prudence did it," he said. "With a scarf and five minutes."

"Yes," Sam said.

He looked at the mug. "I had eight courses."

"They were necessary," Sam said. "You got her to the edge."

"Prudence got her over it," he said.

"That's how it works sometimes," Sam said. "You're not the only instrument."

Llewel looked at this and turned it over. "No," he said, after a moment. "I suppose I'm not."

He drank the tea. Outside, the fire bowl had burned down to its last, and the square was quiet and entirely ordinary, and somewhere in it Sevaine was sitting with an amber scarf and nothing to write in, and that was, all things considered, exactly right.

the regulars

. . .

THEY CAME through the west gate in the late afternoon arguing about a fish.

This was, by their own accounting, the seventeen thousand and forty-second argument of their professional association — Peck had been keeping count since the third year, in a small leather journal he maintained with the same scrupulous attention he applied to the concern's ledgers, and the number was approximate only because he had been asleep for a portion of year six and Mira refused to be held responsible for arguments that occurred while Peck was sleeping, a position he had contested and lost. The fish argument was a classic of its type: Corwin maintained that the smoked river-fish available at the last market town had been the finest he had encountered in thirty years of the Lake Evendiam circuit; Sael, who had been eating river-fish since before Corwin's grandfather was born, maintained with the gentle authority of someone who had simply been right about this longer, that the fish had been good but not exceptional and that Corwin's assessment was clouded by the fact that he had been hungry; Mira had already decided which of them was correct and was waiting for the argument to reach its natural conclusion before confirming it; and Peck

had eaten three portions of the fish in question and had opinions about all of them.

Jen watched them come through the gate with the mild cataloguing attention of long practice and concluded within thirty seconds that they were not a problem. They had the ease of people who had been traveling together for a very long time — not the wary proximity of strangers forced into shared circumstance but the comfortable overlap of people who had long since negotiated every possible friction point and found the negotiations, on the whole, worth it. They moved through the gate with the unconscious coordination of a group that knew its own geometry: Corwin slightly ahead, broad and unhurried, with the look of a man who had arrived in a great many places and knew how to present himself in all of them; Mira at his left shoulder, her Felis ears angled forward with alert interest, the silver-streaked fur of her face arranged in an expression that was reading the square with professional thoroughness; Sael a half-step behind and apparently in no hurry whatsoever, which was the River Elf way, a people for whom time moved differently and who had consequently developed a relationship with arrival that other species found either serene or maddening; and Peck, who was still talking about the fish, at a volume that was large for his stature.

"I'm not saying it was perfect," Peck said. "I'm saying it was better than the fish we had at Brenmouth, which you all said was exceptional, and which I thought was overrated, and this fish was better than that fish, so if that fish was exceptional then this fish was—"

"Peck," Corwin said.

"—at minimum extraordinary, possibly—"

"Peck."

"—transcendent, as a category, which I know is a strong word for smoked fish but I stand by—"

"We're here," Corwin said.

Peck stopped. He looked at the square, which he had apparently not been looking at, and his expression shifted from argu-

mentative to the specific quality of recognition that came from arriving in a place you had arrived in many times before. "North Pointe," he said.

"North Pointe," Mira confirmed.

"Last stop," Sael said, which was not a sad thing the way he said it. It was simply accurate, and Sael was a person for whom accuracy was a form of respect.

They stood for a moment in the gate, the four of them, and the square opened before them with its familiar layout — the Claw, the inn, the shops through the town gate, the Restaurant's sign in the afternoon light — and something passed between them that was not spoken and did not need to be, the specific communication of people who had stood in a great many gates together and knew that this one was different.

Then Peck said: "I want a drink," and the moment closed, and they went toward the Claw.

Sam saw them coming through the bow window and had four mugs on the bar before they were through the door, because she had a memory for regulars that was both professional and genuine — she remembered people who had sat at her bar because they were worth remembering, and these four had been sitting at her bar twice a year for the better part of two decades, and she had watched the concern grow from a nervous new venture to one of the most reliable trading operations on the Lake Evendiam circuit, and she had served them in good weather and bad and once, memorably, in the aftermath of a storm that had kept them storm-stayed in North Pointe for ten days, during which she had learned more about the inside workings of their partnership than she had strictly needed to know and had found all of it interesting.

"Sam," Corwin said, sitting at the bar with the ease of someone occupying a familiar space.

"Corwin," Sam said. "Mira. Sael. Peck." She set the mugs down in the order they sat. "Last circuit?"

"Last circuit," Corwin said.

She looked at them — all four, the quick professional read she gave everyone — and saw what she expected to see in the faces of people who had just completed something significant and were sitting with the completion: the specific mixture of satisfaction and the particular wistfulness of a door not yet closed. They looked well. They looked, all four of them, like people who had arrived somewhere they had been heading for a long time and were finding the arrival both exactly what they expected and not quite what they had imagined, which was how most arrivals went.

"The children took it on well?" she said.

"Better than well," Mira said, with the warmth of someone reporting something that had exceeded their hopes. "Peck's daughter renegotiated the Hartmouth contract within a fortnight of taking over. Got better terms than we'd managed in twelve years."

"Humbling," Peck said, with complete sincerity. "Deeply humbling. I'm extremely proud and slightly wounded."

"My nephew," Sael said, "has already established two new contacts on the western shore that we had not thought to pursue." He said this with the serene satisfaction of someone whose long view of things included the pleasure of being surpassed by the generation following.

"Rina extended the eastern route," Corwin said. "Added three market towns. Said the infrastructure was always there, we just hadn't pushed far enough." He drank his ale. "She's right."

"She's been right about most things since she was twelve," Sam said.

"Since she was eight," Corwin said, "but I didn't want to admit it until she was twelve."

Sam was about to describe what the Claw had available for supper — the stew was good tonight, and she'd had a delivery of something from Makota's that would do well alongside it — when the door opened.

She had not heard a knock. The door simply opened, the way the Restaurant's door sometimes arranged itself, and Llewel was in it, in his black and white, with the unhurried certainty of a man who had arrived at the correct moment because there was no other moment he would have arrived at.

He looked at the four of them at the bar. They looked at him.

"Good evening," he said. "I believe you have been meaning to dine with us for some time."

The four merchants looked at each other.

"We've walked past that sign a dozen times," Mira said.

"A dozen and seven," Sael said, which was exactly the kind of thing Sael knew. "We have discussed it on eleven separate occasions."

"We always said next time," Corwin said.

"This," Llewel said, with the pleasant finality of a man closing a topic, "is next time. Your table will be ready at the eighth candlemark." He looked at Sam, briefly, with something that was not quite an apology and not quite an explanation. "I believe supper can wait this evening."

Sam looked at the four at her bar. She looked at Llewel. She looked at the Restaurant's sign, visible through the window, doing its quiet work in the evening light.

"Go," she said, to the four of them. "The stew will keep."

They arrived at the eighth candlemark in the way of people who had made themselves presentable not because the occasion required formality but because they respected it, which was different and more genuine. Corwin had changed his coat. Mira had brushed out the silver in her fur until it caught the light. Sael had done something with his hair that was quietly elegant in the River Elf manner. Peck had not changed anything but had clearly spent some time in front of a mirror reaching a conclusion about himself that he was comfortable with.

The Restaurant received them the way it received groups — with the adjustment of a space that understood the geometry of four people who belonged together, the table round and generous, four candles rather than one, the light arranged to illuminate the whole table equally rather than centering on any single place. The chairs were good ones — high-backed, substantial, the chairs of an evening that intended to take its time.

They sat. They looked at the table, and at the room, and at each other, and Peck said: "Well," with the satisfaction of someone who had waited a hundred and seven times for something and found the waiting justified.

Llewel brought wine — a bottle of something he set on the table without description, which they poured for each other with the ease of people who had been pouring drinks for each other for thirty years, and which was very good.

"What do we do?" Mira said, to Llewel.

"You eat," Llewel said. "And you remember."

"Remember what?" Corwin said.

"Whatever the meal brings you," Llewel said, and went to the kitchen.

The first course arrived: four bowls of a clear broth, pale gold, with something floating in each that was different for each of them — a small garnish, specific, particular, chosen with the precision of something that was not decoration but signal.

Corwin looked at his bowl. He looked at the garnish, which was a sprig of something he recognized — a herb that grew specifically on the northern shore of Evendiam, in the marshy ground between the trade road and the water, that he had not tasted since — he counted back — year four, when they had camped on the northern shore overnight because Peck's mule had thrown a shoe and they had not been able to make North Pointe before dark.

He tasted the broth.

"Year four," he said. "The northern camp."

The others looked at him. Then, one by one, they tasted their own broths, and their expressions shifted in the way of people arriving at the same destination by different routes.

"What do you get?" Peck said.

"The northern camp," Corwin said. "The mule."

"Not the mule specifically," Peck said, with the precision of someone who was about to tell a story he had been telling for twenty-six years and had no intention of condensing. "This is about the mule, obviously, but it's really about what happened after the mule, and I need you to appreciate that I have never received adequate credit for my role in what happened after the mule, and this seems like exactly the right occasion to correct that."

"Peck," Mira said, with the warmth of someone who had heard this argument many times and was genuinely glad to be hearing it again. "Tell it properly."

Peck settled in his chair with the satisfaction of someone who had been given permission to do the thing he was going to do regardless. "Year four," he said. "The northern shore. Mira's mule — not mine, I want that on record, Mira's mule — throws a shoe at the fourth candlemark and we're two hours from North Pointe and it's getting dark. Corwin says we camp. Sael says we camp. I say we push on, which everyone ignores, which is fine, I'm used to it."

"You were wrong," Mira said pleasantly.

"I was wrong about the pushing on," Peck said. "I was not wrong about the fire, which is the part nobody gives me credit for. We make camp, the fire won't start — it's been raining all day, the wood is wet, Corwin is doing that thing he does with the flint where he gets very focused and increasingly silent—"

"I was focused," Corwin said.

"You were furious," Peck said. "There's a difference. So I go into the pack—"

"You went into my pack," Sael said.

"I went into Sael's pack," Peck confirmed without apology, "because Sael's pack is the most organized pack in the history of

the Lake Evendiam circuit and if there was anything useful in any of our four packs it was in Sael's, and I was right, and I found the—"

"The lamp oil," Sael said.

"The lamp oil," Peck said triumphantly. "Half a bottle of lamp oil which Sael had been carrying for six months as an emergency supply and which he had never mentioned to any of us—"

"You never asked," Sael said.

"—and I used it to start the fire, which worked immediately, and we had a fire, and we ate, and we were warm, and that is the story of how I saved us all on the northern shore in year four and have received no recognition for it in the subsequent twenty-six years."

"We said thank you," Corwin said.

"Once," Peck said. "And then the conversation moved on to the mule, which frankly had a much easier evening than any of the rest of us."

Mira was laughing — the specific laugh she had, bright and unselfconscious, the laugh that had gotten them out of three difficult negotiations and into two that shouldn't have worked but did because it was impossible to maintain a hard line opposite that laugh. Corwin was smiling with the full face of someone who had filed this story in the place where he kept the things he was most glad of. Sael was looking at Peck with the expression of someone who had been carrying a quiet affection for a person for thirty years and had made his peace with the fact that it would never be adequately expressed and that this was fine.

"For the record," Sael said, "I had also packed a second coil of rope, a waterproof canvas, and a supply of dried fish sufficient for four people for three days. None of which were mentioned in Peck's account."

"That's organization," Peck said. "I'm talking about heroism. These are different categories."

The second course arrived: a composed plate of lake fish, prepared simply, with a sauce built on something fermented and something bright, and alongside it a grain preparation that had a specific depth to it, the kind that came from long, patient cooking. It was lake food — specifically and exactly Evendiam food, the cuisine of the shore towns and the trading posts and the overnight camps where the fish came out of the water and onto the fire within the hour.

Mira looked at her plate and her Felis ears angled back in the way they did when she was receiving information that was arriving from somewhere unexpected.

"Millhaven," she said.

"The Merchant's Hall," Corwin said. "Year nine."

"Year nine," Mira confirmed. She looked at the sauce. "Lenne's place. She made this sauce. I have never had it anywhere else."

"You asked her for the recipe," Sael said.

"She wouldn't give it," Mira said. "She said it was her mother's and her mother's mother's and she'd take it to her grave, which I respected, and which I have been slightly bereft about for twenty-one years." She tasted it. Her eyes closed for a moment. "It's the fermented reed paste," she said. "I never figured that out. That's what I was missing."

"What happened at Millhaven?" Peck said. "Year nine specifically. I'm trying to place it."

"The Cartwright's Guild negotiation," Corwin said.

Peck's expression resolved into recognition and something that was not quite a wince. "The Cartwright's Guild negotiation," he said. "Yes. I remember the fish because I ate approximately my own weight in it while you were in the hall for seven hours."

"Eight," Mira said. "Eight hours."

"What were you doing for eight hours?" Peck said.

Mira looked at the table with the expression of someone deciding how much of a story to tell. She had the Felis quality of economy — she was not a person who used more words than

required, which made the moments when she used many words significant. She had a story, clearly. She arranged it.

"The Cartwright's Guild in Millhaven," she said, "had not, in forty years of operation, conducted a significant negotiation with a Felis trader. This was not stated. It was simply — present, in the room. The way certain things are present." She tasted the fish. "The Guild Master was a man named Fossard. He was not a bad man. He was a man who had certain expectations about what a negotiation looked like and who was finding it difficult to revise them in real time."

"How did you handle it?" Corwin said, which was a question he already knew the answer to because he had been there, but which he asked because this was Mira's story.

"I let him talk for two hours," Mira said. "Which is what he needed. He had a great deal to say about the guild's history, its standards, its reputation, and I listened to all of it, and I asked good questions, and at some point he realized that I was genuinely interested, which I was, and that I knew the material, which I did, and that the negotiation he had been expecting — adversarial, territorial — was not the negotiation we were having." She set down her fork. "By hour four, he was showing me the guild's founding documents. By hour six, he was telling me about his father, who had been a cartwright. By hour eight, we had a contract that was better than anything the concern had managed on the Millhaven circuit in ten years."

"And the fish?" Peck said.

"Fossard sent it in," Mira said. "From Lenne's kitchen. As a gesture. He said—" She paused, and something in her face was quiet with the specific quality of a memory that had been kept carefully. "He said he wanted us to eat together, because that was how his people concluded something worth concluding." She looked at the sauce. "I have thought about that room many times. Not the contract. The room, and the founding documents, and the fish."

The table was quiet for a moment in the way of people who have just received something worth sitting with.

"He came to the send-off," Sael said. "Fossard. When we handed it to the children. He sent a letter when he couldn't attend in person. I have it still."

Mira looked at him. Something crossed her face that was not sadness but was in the family of it — the feeling of a life that had been, on balance, extraordinary in ways that were only now becoming fully visible. "I didn't know that," she said.

"I know," Sael said. "I kept it to tell you at the right moment."

At some point between the second and third courses, Llewel appeared at the table.

"There is a tradition," he said, with the pleasant authority of someone presenting an option that was not quite optional, "of taking the evening air between courses. The wharf is just across the road, if you'd like to stretch your legs."

They looked at each other. They looked at the Restaurant's door, which was open, and through which the night air was coming in with the specific quality of a clear autumn evening on a large lake — cool and slightly mineral, carrying the faint sound of water.

"Yes," Corwin said, and they went.

The wharf was a simple thing — stone, worn smooth by decades of use, sitting between the smithy's dark bulk and Calder's boathouse with the unpretentious utility of working infrastructure. The lake lay south of them, very dark, very still, holding the stars in its surface with the quiet indifference of something that had been holding them for longer than the town had existed. The far shore was a suggestion, a slightly darker dark at the horizon, and between here and there was the water, breathing gently against the stone.

They stood at the edge and looked south and did not say

anything for a moment, because some views were worth the silence.

Sam appeared from the direction of the Claw — she had seen them cross the road from her window, because Sam saw most things that crossed the road, and she had the specific instinct of someone who understood that this was a moment that warranted company rather than observation.

She had brought four mugs of something warm, which she distributed without comment, and then she stood at the edge of the wharf with them and looked at the lake.

"Last circuit," she said.

"Last circuit," Corwin confirmed.

She looked at them — all four, in the starlight, with the lake in front of them and the Restaurant's warm windows behind, and the sense of something concluding with the particular grace of a thing that had been handled well. "How does it feel?"

"Strange," Mira said. "Good strange."

"Like putting down something heavy," Corwin said, "and finding your hands don't know what to do."

"My hands," Peck said, "know exactly what to do. My hands want to do absolutely nothing for a considerable period of time, and I intend to let them."

"What will you do?" Sam said.

"I have a daughter," Peck said, "who has three children, who I have seen for a combined total of—" He calculated. "—not enough. I intend to rectify this substantially. I have also been promising myself a garden for twenty years and have not had the time, and I have opinions about root vegetables that can only be properly tested empirically."

"I'll go home to the river," Sael said, which needed no further explanation — River Elves and their rivers had a relationship that was not quite the same as other species' relationships with their homes, something more reciprocal, something that went both ways. "My people have been patient. The river has been patient." He looked at the water. "I have things to return to."

"My grandchildren," Mira said simply. "My daughter's kits. Three of them, all under five, all with opinions. I want to sit in a sunny room and let them climb on me for a year."

"Rina," Corwin said. "And my wife, who has been managing without me for too many months at a stretch for too many years, and who deserves—" He stopped. "A great deal," he said. "She deserves a great deal."

The lake lapped against the stone. A bird called somewhere to the east, over the water.

Sam looked at the Restaurant's windows, warm and quiet. "What do you think it's doing in there?" she said. "For you four."

They considered this.

"The same thing it does for everyone," Corwin said.

"Is it?" Sam said. "You're not coming in broken. You're not coming in lost."

"No," Sael said, after a moment. "But we are coming to the end of something. And the end of something — even a good something, even a wanted ending — has its own—" He looked at the water. "It needs to be marked. Properly. With the right food and the right company and enough time." He looked at Sam. "I think that is what it is doing."

Sam thought about this. She thought about the soldier, and the widow, and the brothers, and all the others she had watched go in and come out changed or clarified or simply fed and sent on their way, and she thought about whether this — four old friends at a table of celebration, a meal for a friendship rather than a person — was the same thing.

She decided it was. Just a quieter version. The Restaurant at its most gentle.

"Good," she said. "That's good, then."

Peck looked at his mug. "Sam," he said. "In thirty years of the circuit, this has been the best pub on the lake."

Sam looked at him. "The best," she said.

"The most consistent," Sael said. "The ale is never below stan-

dard. The stew is reliable. The proprietor has excellent judgment." He looked at Sam. "These are not small things."

"They are not," Sam agreed.

They stood at the edge of the wharf for another few minutes, letting the lake be the lake, letting the evening be what it was. Then Llewel appeared in the Restaurant's doorway, and the light from inside fell across the road, and they turned and went back in.

The third course arrived: a slow-cooked meat with a sauce of great depth, a bread for the table rather than for individuals, and alongside it a preparation of root vegetables that Peck looked at with the expression of a man confronting something that had been made with genuine understanding of his priorities.

"This," Peck said, pointing at the root vegetables, "is why I'm growing a garden."

"Tell the story," Corwin said, because there was clearly a story and they had learned over thirty years that the fastest route to Peck's stories was to ask for them.

"Year seventeen," Peck said. "The southern market at Arenden. Which was, for those who need reminding, the market where everything went wrong and then more wrong and then wrong in an entirely new direction we hadn't anticipated."

"The shipment," Mira said.

"The shipment," Peck confirmed. "Our entire autumn textile delivery, which we had spent considerable effort sourcing from three separate suppliers in the northwest, arrives in Arenden with the documentation filled out incorrectly because someone—" He looked at Sael.

"The notation system had changed," Sael said, without defensiveness. "I was unaware."

"The notation system had changed," Peck said, "and we became aware of this at the gate of the southern market at Arenden, in front of a customs officer who was having, I think it is fair

to say, a difficult personal week, and who was not inclined toward flexibility, and who told us that without the correct documentation the entire shipment would be held for review, which in Arenden at that time meant—"

"Three weeks," Corwin said.

"Three weeks," Peck said. "Minimum. We had buyers waiting. We had contracts. We had — you know what we had. So I did the thing."

"What thing?" Sam would have asked, had she been there. But she was back at the Claw, and the table was complete without her, and the thing was known to everyone present.

"The thing," Sael said, with the fondness of someone who had watched a person do the same effective thing in many different circumstances and had never stopped being impressed by it.

The thing, as the table understood it, was Peck's particular gift — not deception, not exactly charm, but a quality that was native to him and that functioned as a kind of social solvent. He was small, and gnomes were generally regarded in the markets as non-threatening, and he had a face that invited confidence, and he had the ability to begin talking to a person and have them, within fifteen minutes, believe that he was the best thing that had happened to their day. Not through flattery, not through manipulation, but through genuine interest in them as a specific person, which was something most people encountered rarely enough that they recognized it as remarkable when it arrived.

"I talked to the customs officer for two hours," Peck said. "His name was Brevard. He was from a town on the eastern shore, very small town, his wife had just had their second child, he was sleeping badly, he had this job that he'd taken because it was stable but that wasn't — it wasn't the thing he'd wanted, which was to be a cartwright, actually, which I found—"

"You did not," Corwin said.

"I did," Peck said. "It came up in the normal course of the conversation, which covered his town, his family, his career ambitions, the documentation notification failure, and his mother's

cooking, which was where the root vegetables came in, because he had been talking about his mother's kitchen and how much he missed it, and I mentioned that we had, in the hold of our second cart, a supply of the northern root varieties that his mother used, which we did, because Sael—"

"Contingency provision," Sael said.

"—because Sael had packed them as contingency provision, which I had not known until that moment, which was the second time in our history that Sael's contingency provisions have saved the entire operation." He looked at Sael with an expression that was thirty years of professional partnership compressed into a glance. "I gave Brevard three pounds of root vegetables for his mother. He processed our paperwork that afternoon. Correctly."

The table was quiet for a moment and then Mira laughed, and Corwin laughed, and Sael had the expression of someone smiling in the way of people who don't smile broadly but mean it completely.

"I have eaten root vegetables in every market town on the Evendiam circuit," Peck said, "and I have never once not thought of Brevard. I hope he's a cartwright now." He ate a forkful of the root vegetables on his plate, which were exactly right, which the kitchen had made exactly right without being told why they needed to be. "These are better than his mother's," he said. "I say that with respect."

The fourth course was the cheese course: three preparations, each with a different bread, a small dish of something preserved and dark alongside, and a glass of something sweet that arrived with the course and was, in its specific gravity and warmth, the wine of conclusion rather than continuation.

They knew this without being told. The meal had a shape, and they had been following it for three courses, and the shape said:

this is the last one, which was all right, which was more than all right.

Sael looked at his plate.

"Year twenty-six," he said, which was unusual — Sael did not typically begin stories, and when he did they were brief, which was what made this one significant. He had chosen to speak, which meant this was the story he had been saving.

They looked at him.

"The storm," Corwin said, because there had been, in year twenty-six, one storm that required no further description.

"The storm," Sael confirmed. "We were two days east of North Pointe. The weather came in from the north, which it does on this lake in the late season, which I should have read better—"

"No one read it," Mira said.

"I should have," Sael said, with the River Elf's particular relationship with self-assessment, which was honest without being self-punishing. "The lake told me and I didn't listen. We took shelter in a crofter's barn — all four of us and three carts and seven animals in a barn that was sized for the animals and none of the rest — and we were there for four days."

"Four days," Peck said, with the tone of someone revisiting an experience that had been genuinely difficult and was only now, at sufficient distance, entirely funny.

"On the second day," Sael said, "I found, in the crofter's stores, this." He gestured at the cheese. "Or the original of this. A hard aged cheese from a local maker, the kind that was made in this region and aged for two years and tasted of—" He looked at the plate. "Of the lake in autumn. Of the particular stone of the northern shore. Of something that had been patient and was now exactly itself."

"You rationed it," Corwin said.

"I rationed it," Sael said. "One portion per day, per person, at the end of the day, with whatever bread remained. We were cold and the animals were unhappy and the rain did not stop and on

the third night Peck invented a game with a set of markers and an improvised board that occupied us for six hours—"

"Greatest game of my life," Peck said.

"—and every evening we had the cheese," Sael said. "And I —" He stopped. He looked at the table, at the three of them, and something moved across his face that was not what River Elves usually permitted themselves in company, which was the depth of it. "I have lived a long time," he said. "I will live longer still, probably. I will eat many things in many places and some of them will be remarkable." He looked at the cheese. "I do not think anything will be precisely what those four evenings were. In a cold barn in a storm, all of us together, and the cheese at the end of the day."

The table was very quiet.

Corwin reached across and put his hand on Sael's arm, briefly, in the way of someone who had been doing this for thirty years and would do it, probably, for thirty more.

Mira looked at her glass and then at the window, through which the lake was not visible but was present, the way it was always present in North Pointe.

Peck ate his cheese. He ate it slowly, with the bread, and his expression was the expression of someone doing something for what might be the last time in this particular company and being entirely present for it.

They finished the course. They finished the sweet wine. The candles had burned low.

Llewel came from the kitchen.

He stood at the table and looked at them with those deep blue eyes, and he said: "I hope the meal was to your satisfaction."

"Llewel," Corwin said, with the directness of a man who had concluded negotiations on three hundred and forty circuits of a very large lake and knew when to speak plainly. "That was the finest meal any of us have eaten in thirty years. Possibly ever."

"The cheese was extraordinary," Peck said. "And I have strong opinions about cheese."

"The fish course," Mira said, "and what you did with the sauce —" She shook her head. "How."

Llewel said nothing, which was his answer to questions of that kind.

Sael looked at him. "Thank you," he said. "For the meal and the shape of it."

"The shape of it?" Corwin said.

"The meal was for us," Sael said. "Not for any one of us. That is — not simple to do. It required understanding something about what we are to each other." He looked at Llewel. "That is a rare thing."

Llewel looked at them all, and something moved across his face that was almost a smile and was more than one. "You were not a difficult table," he said. "You brought everything you needed with you."

He set the bill on the table, which was modest, and withdrew.

Peck looked at the bill. He looked at Corwin. "I'll get this," he said.

"You will not," Mira said.

"We'll split it," Corwin said.

"Equally," Sael said.

Peck divided the amount into four with the speed of someone who had been dividing things equally for thirty years, and they paid it, and they sat for a moment longer in the warmth of the dining room with the low candles and the good plates and the evening that had been what it needed to be.

They slept at the Weary Head, all four of them, and they slept deeply in the way of people who had been fed properly and were at peace, and Minnie reported in the morning that she had not heard a sound from any of their rooms all night, which for a group of four she considered remarkable and said so.

They came down to the Claw for breakfast and Sam fed them

with the thoroughness she reserved for people who were about to go somewhere, and they ate and drank and talked in the easy way of their kind of old friendship, which needed no occasion and no effort and had the quality of something that had been broken in and would last.

At mid-morning they collected their carts from the stables, which Warren had seen to with his usual thoroughness, and they assembled in the square for the last time.

They had done this in a hundred and seven towns, Sael had said, and Corwin believed it, and he stood in the square of the hundred and seventh and looked at the three of them — Mira with her bright eyes and her road-worn coat, Sael with the quality of the river already in him, returned from somewhere in the night, Peck with his mule and his ledger and the expression of a man whose hands already knew they were going to be busy for a long time — and he did not find a way to say what the thirty years had been, because there was not a way to say it that was sufficient, and so he did not try.

"West gate," he said to Mira. "We'll split at the Arenden fork."

"West gate," Mira confirmed.

Peck looked at Sael. "East gate. I'll go with you as far as the river road."

"The river road," Sael said. "Yes."

They looked at each other, all four, in the bright cool morning, and the square went on around them with its ordinary business — Makota's foxes, Galhani's stall, the clock marking the candlemark — and none of it touched the small, complete thing happening in the middle of it.

Corwin put his hand out. Peck shook it. Mira shook it. Sael shook it, and held it for a moment, in the River Elf way.

"The concern is in good hands," Sael said.

"The best hands," Corwin agreed.

Peck shook hands with Mira and Sael, and Sael and Mira held each other briefly in the way of people who had known each other long enough that the gesture was its own language, and then they

separated, and Corwin and Mira went west, and Peck and Sael went east, and the square was ordinary again.

Sam watched from the Claw's window.

She watched until both pairs were through their respective gates, and then she looked at the Restaurant's sign, which was doing its quiet work in the morning light, making its single uncomplicated claim.

"Yes," she said, to the empty bar, answering a question she had asked a long time ago on an evening that had turned out to be exactly what it should have been.

She went back to work.

ghost pepper

. . .

COBB ARRIVED ON A TUESDAY, which was an unremarkable day to arrive for any purpose, and he arrived unremarkably — a man of middle years on a reliable horse, with a pack that suggested one night rather than many and the look of someone who had told himself he was just passing through and had not yet examined that claim too closely.

He was not a large man, but he had the density of someone who had spent his life doing physical work and had not entirely stopped — the forearms of a miller, which he was, the particular set of the shoulders of someone who had been solving problems with his body since before he had the vocabulary to solve them with words. He had a plain face that was pleasant in a way that came from character rather than arrangement, the kind of face that accumulated trust over time without demanding it up front. He was somewhere past forty, perhaps well past it, and he had the eyes of someone who had not been sleeping as well as he should.

He came through the west gate at the late afternoon, when the square had the quality of a town settling into its evening, and he looked at it the way travelers looked at it — the assessment, the orientation, the locating of the essential services. His gaze moved

across the town gate and the square within with the practiced efficiency of a man who had been to many towns on business and knew what he was looking for.

It stopped on the Restaurant's sign, briefly, and then moved on.

Jen, on her rounds, noted him and filed him. Road-worn, solitary, not carrying anything that concerned her. She noted the brief stop on the Restaurant's sign with the reflex of someone who had learned that this particular pause was information, and she went back to her rounds.

He ate at the Claw.

This was unremarkable — everyone ate at the Claw — but the manner of his eating was the thing Sam noticed, which was that he ate with the focused efficiency of someone for whom the meal was fuel and nothing else, working through the stew with the methodical attention of a man completing a task. He was not unhappy. He was not miserable, not dramatic, not carrying anything visible. He was simply — present in the smallest possible way, occupying his table with the minimum footprint, asking for nothing beyond what was necessary and not lingering over it.

He had one ale. He ate all the bread. He paid without comment.

"Passing through?" Sam said.

"Thought I'd take a room," he said. "One night."

"Minnie's next door," Sam said. "The Weary Head. Tell her Sam sent you."

He nodded. He collected his coat with the efficiency of everything else he did and went next door, and Sam stood at her bar for a moment and looked at the space he had vacated, which did not tell her much, and went back to work.

Minnie had a room, of course. She had several rooms, and she managed them with the attention of someone who understood that a room was not simply a bed and four walls but a specific environment that had something to offer its occupant, if the occupant was paying attention. She had run the Weary Head for long enough to know which rooms suited which travelers, and she put Cobb in the corner room on the upper floor, which had a window facing south and a view of the lake between the rooftops, and which had, in her experience, the most consistent effect on guests who had arrived carrying something they needed to think through.

She did not explain this. She showed him the room, pointed out the water basin and the extra blanket and the bolt on the door, and she said: "Breakfast is at the seventh candlemark. If you're an early riser, I'll have coffee on before that."

He looked at the room with the same efficiency he'd brought to everything else, and he said: "Thank you," which was adequate, and she left him to it.

In her front room, afterward, she sat for a moment with her own tea and looked at nothing in particular.

She had seen this quality before — the quality this man had, which she had no precise name for but recognized the way she recognized weather coming in off the lake. It was the quality of someone who had made a decision and was living in the space between the making of it and the acting on it, which was a particular kind of suspended animation, a held breath. She had seen it in people who were leaving marriages, leaving towns, leaving jobs, leaving versions of themselves they had decided were no longer operable.

She drank her tea.

She would see how he looked in the morning.

He did not come down at the seventh candlemark.

He did not come down at the eighth, which was when Minnie

cleared the breakfast things with the practiced efficiency of someone who had been doing this for thirty years and had long since stopped taking it personally when guests slept past the meal.

He came down at the ninth candlemark, which was late enough that the inn's front room was empty of other guests and had the particular quality of a room that had been recently populated and wasn't quite yet.

He looked like a man who had slept deeply and unexpectedly — the specific disorientation of someone who had intended a light sleep and had been taken somewhere else entirely. His hair was not fully arranged. He had the look of a man trying to locate himself.

Minnie poured him coffee without asking, because the coffee was still hot and he clearly needed it.

"How did you sleep?" she said.

It was her standard question, asked of every guest every morning, in the tone of ordinary innkeeper's courtesy. Most guests said *fine* or *well enough* or *not bad, the bed's good.* Some guests said more than that, and Minnie listened to the more with the full attention she reserved for things worth attending to.

Cobb sat with his coffee and looked at the table for a moment. "Strange," he said.

"Strange how?" she said, in the same ordinary tone.

He considered this. He was not, she judged, a man who talked about himself as a rule, and the dreams had loosened something in him that his usual habits were trying to close back up, and she waited while the two things negotiated.

"I dreamed about the mill," he said. "My mill. I've had it twenty years — built it from nothing, it employs fourteen people now, it's—" He stopped. "In the dream I was trying to finish something. Some piece of work. And I kept getting close and then something would interrupt — one of my workers needed something, or there was a problem with the wheel, or my mother was at the door—" He shook his head. "I never finished it. Whatever it was. I woke up and I still don't know what I was trying to make."

Minnie sat across from him with her own coffee. "Frustrating," she said.

"Very," he said. "Though I suppose it's appropriate." Something in his face shifted, briefly, toward something that was trying to be humor and didn't quite get there. "I'm running away from a list of things I can't finish. Apparently even my dreams can't finish them."

Minnie looked at him over her mug. "What were you running toward?" she said. "In the dream."

He opened his mouth and closed it. He looked at the table. "I don't know," he said.

"What did it feel like? When you were trying to finish the work."

He thought about this with the seriousness of a man who had been asked something he hadn't considered. "Like — like I wanted to," he said, slowly. "Like it mattered. Not like a burden. More like —" He stopped. "More like something I'd started and wanted to see through."

Minnie nodded. She did not say anything for a moment, in the way of someone who has heard the important part and is letting it settle.

"The things you're running from," she said. "Do they feel like that? Like something you started and want to see through?"

He looked at her.

"Or do they feel like that," she said, "when you're not running from them?"

He was quiet for a long time. He drank his coffee. He looked at the window, which showed the square outside, ordinary in the morning light.

"I'm tired," he said. "That's all. I'm just very tired."

"I know," Minnie said, with the warmth of someone for whom this was not a dismissal but a diagnosis. "That's what a trip away is for. To remember that tired isn't the same as finished." She rose and went to the kitchen and came back with a plate of bread and butter and cold ham, which she set in front of him, because he had

missed breakfast and needed something, and she sat back down and let him eat.

He ate. Some of the disorientation left his face, replaced by something more present, more inhabited.

"The mill," she said, after a while. "What is it you make?"

"Flour, mostly," he said. "And some grinding for the local ironworks. And I've been thinking about adding a fulling operation — there's wool in the hill farms to the east that's got nowhere to go locally." He said this last part with the specific animation of someone who had just remembered they had an idea they liked, and then caught himself, and the animation went somewhere else. "Which is exactly the kind of thing I was going to stop thinking about."

"Mm," Minnie said, which was not agreement.

He looked at her. "You think I should go back."

"I think," Minnie said, "that the fulling operation sounds like something you want to build, which is different from something you've been told to build, which is different again from something that's been added to a list you're tired of." She picked up her mug. "But that's just an old innkeeper's opinion."

He sat with this. Outside, the square was coming fully awake — Makota's bread smell, the clock, the specific morning sounds of a town that knew what it was for.

He gathered himself to go. He went upstairs and came back with his pack and paid his bill and Minnie took the money and said nothing more about the mill or the dreams or the list, because she had said what she had to say and the rest was his.

He collected his coat. He went to the door.

He stopped.

Llewel was on the step of the Restaurant.

Not blocking the road — simply present on the step with the quality he had on the step, which was the quality of someone who

was where they were supposed to be and had all the time available. He was looking at Cobb with the expression he brought to arrivals, which was attentive and unhurried and entirely without agenda, or appeared to be.

"Good morning," he called.

"Morning," Cobb said, walking slowly toward the elf.

"You haven't eaten," Llewel said.

Cobb looked at him. "I had bread."

"You haven't eaten," Llewel said again, with the mild precision of someone clarifying a statement rather than repeating it. He stepped aside from the door, which opened as he did, with the warmth and the blue-tinged light from inside falling across the step. "I don't normally do brunch," he said, and something moved across his face that was the driest possible edge of humor, there and gone. "But you need a meal before you set out."

Cobb looked at the open door. He looked at the road, which ran east through the gate, toward home, or ran west through the other gate, toward wherever he had been going when he told himself he was just passing through.

He looked at his pack.

He set it down beside the step, and he went inside.

The table was laid for one, as it always was. Cobb sat in it the way a man sat in something he hadn't planned and wasn't sure about — not unwilling, but provisional, the way you sat in a chair someone offered when you had been about to leave.

Llewel brought coffee first, which was the right instinct, the coffee of a proper kitchen rather than an inn's front room — dark and serious, in a cup that was the right size and weight — and Cobb held it with both hands and looked at the room.

It was very clean. He had been in a great many establishments over twenty years of running a mill that supplied half the region's flour, and he had a tradesman's instinctive assessment of spaces,

and this space told him several things: it was old, it was maintained with absolute precision, and it had the quality of a room that knew what it was for. The chairs upturned on the other tables had the look of things put away correctly rather than hastily, and the floor was the floor of a place where the cleaning was done because it mattered and not because someone had remembered to.

"You built this yourself?" he said, to the room.

"The Púca built it," Llewel said, from the vicinity of the kitchen. "I maintain it."

"Good maintenance," Cobb said, which was the highest compliment in his vocabulary, and which he offered without calculation.

The first course was eggs.

Not elaborate — a preparation of eggs that was simple in the way of things made by someone who understood the ingredient completely, with a bread alongside and a small dish of something preserved and bright. It arrived at the table with the warmth of something that had been made for this specific moment, and Cobb ate the first bite with the provisional attention of a man who had told himself he wasn't hungry and was now receiving evidence to the contrary.

He ate it all.

The second course arrived before he had finished registering the first: a soup, dark and savory, with the depth of something that had been a long time becoming what it was, and bread that was different from the first bread, darker and with more structure.

He ate this also, and more slowly, with the growing attention of a man who was discovering, bite by bite, that he was significantly hungrier than he had believed.

Llewel came from the kitchen and sat — not at the table, but at the next one, near enough to be present and far enough to be unobtrusive, with a small coffee of his own, in the manner of a propri-

etor who had finished the work of the moment and was simply in the room.

Cobb looked at him. "You cook for everyone like this?"

"Like what?" Llewel said.

"Like they needed it," Cobb said.

Llewel considered this. "Yes," he said. "More or less."

Cobb turned his soup spoon. "I don't know why I stopped," he said, which was not what he had meant to say and which arrived with the slight surprise of something that had come from somewhere unintended.

Llewel said nothing, which was listening.

"I used to—" Cobb stopped. Started again, with the deliberateness of a man choosing words he didn't normally use. "I used to like it. The mill. What it does. You take grain and you make flour and the flour goes into bread and the bread goes into people and that's—" He looked at the bread on his plate. "That's something. That's a thing worth doing." He set down the spoon. "Somewhere I stopped seeing that and started seeing the wheel repairs and the payroll and my mother's roof and the council seat I never wanted and all the rest of it and I—"

He stopped.

"I forgot what the flour was for," he said.

Llewel looked at him with those deep blue eyes, even and clear. "What is it for?" he said.

Cobb looked at the bread. He picked it up. He ate a piece of it, and the piece tasted like bread tasted when you were paying attention to it — the grain, the work, the specific alchemy of heat and time — and he chewed it and swallowed it and said: "People," he said. "It's for people."

"Yes," Llewel said.

The third course was something Cobb didn't recognize — a preparation of grains he couldn't name, with a sauce that had a

depth he associated with things his grandmother had cooked, long-cooked things, things that required time and patience and a belief that the result would be worth the investment. He ate it with the full attention of someone who had stopped performing the act of eating and was simply eating, which was a thing he had apparently not done in some time, and which felt, in its simplicity, like a restoration of something.

Between bites he talked. This surprised him — he was not a talking man, not with strangers, not about himself — but the food was doing something to the usual reticence, loosening it the way warmth loosened a joint that had been held too long in one position. He talked about the mill, and the fourteen people who worked it, and the ironworks, and his mother, and the council seat, and the fulling operation he had been thinking about, which he described in more detail than he had intended and which grew, in the describing, from an idea he had been dismissing into something that had real shape and real possibility and that he found, to his slight confusion, he wanted to build.

He talked about his wife, Essa, who had said nothing when he left and had not needed to, because Essa had always communicated most clearly through what she didn't say, and what she hadn't said when he packed his bag was something he had been carrying since the east gate of his own town three days ago.

"She knew," he said.

"Yes," Llewel said.

"She knew I'd come back."

"Yes," Llewel said again.

Cobb looked at the table. "Did I know?" he said.

Llewel looked at him. "You packed for one night," he said.

Cobb looked at his pack, which was visible through the dining room window on the step where he had left it — a one-night pack, a man's-just-stepping-out pack, the pack of someone who was not, whatever he had told himself, actually leaving. He looked at it for a long moment.

Then he laughed. It was a short laugh, quiet, the laugh of a man

who has caught himself in something and found the catching more relieving than embarrassing. "I did," he said. "I packed for one night."

"The fulling operation," Llewel said. "How long to build?"

"Two seasons," Cobb said, automatically. "If the timber's available, which it should be, and if I can get the right people, which—" He stopped. "Which I think I can. Maret, who works the eastern press, her brother is a carpenter of the right kind, and he's been looking for work since the Arenford bridge project finished."

"So," Llewel said.

"So," Cobb said, and the word had a different quality than the words that had come before it.

The dessert course did not arrive.

Cobb became aware of this gradually — the table cleared, the coffee refilled, Llewel present in the room with the quality of someone who had completed a thing rather than someone who was about to bring the next element of it. He looked at the table. He looked at Llewel.

"Is that—" He paused. "Is that all?"

"Yes," Llewel said. "I think so."

Cobb considered this. He was full, genuinely and completely fed, in a way that had nothing to do with the quantity of what he'd eaten and everything to do with the quality of his attention to it. He felt, in fact, better than he had felt in — he did not try to calculate how long. Better than the pack suggested he'd been feeling when he arrived.

"No dessert?" he said.

"Not today," Llewel said, with the mildness of someone stating a simple fact.

Cobb looked at him for a moment, then nodded slowly, in the way of someone accepting an answer they don't entirely have words for. "Right," he said.

He stood. He reached for his coat. “What do I owe you?”

Llewel named a price that was fair and Cobb paid it, and he picked up his pack from the step and stood in the morning sun for a moment, with the square around him and the lake somewhere to the south and the east road through the gate that went home.

He was standing like a different man than the one who had come through the gate the previous afternoon. Not transformed — that was too large a word for it. Recalibrated, perhaps. Reset, in the way that Minnie had suggested a trip away was for, though the reset had come not from the going but from the stopping, and from a brunch in a restaurant on a trade road that had served him everything he needed and nothing he didn’t.

He put his pack on and turned east.

Minnie appeared at the inn’s door before he had taken three steps.

She had a small cloth bag, which she held out with the no-nonsense efficiency of someone performing a practical function. “For the road,” she said. “Bread and some of the cold ham. It’s two days’ ride and you’ll be hungry by midday.”

He took it. He looked at her. “Thank you,” he said. “For this morning. The conversation.”

Minnie waved this off in the manner of someone who did not accept credit for things she considered ordinary. “You did the talking,” she said. “I just had the coffee.” She looked at him with the frank appraisal she brought to departing guests, which was the appraisal of someone checking that a thing had been properly concluded. She appeared satisfied. “Don’t leave it so long next time,” she said. “Before you take a day or two for yourself. It’s cheaper than whatever you were planning.”

“Significantly,” he said.

She nodded, and then, in the manner of someone who has said the important thing and has no interest in elaborating, she said: “The fulling operation. Build it. Wool’s been needing a

home for three seasons and everyone who passes through here knows it."

He stared at her. "How did you—"

"Trade road," Minnie said. "Everyone talks." She went back inside.

He stood on the step for a moment, then he laughed again — the same short, quiet laugh — and he set off across the square toward the east gate, with the cloth bag in his hand and the pack on his back and the specific quality of a man walking toward rather than away from something, which was a different walk entirely and visible from a distance if you knew what to look for.

Jen found Llewel at the herb pots.

She had seen Cobb leave — had clocked the change in his walk with the constable's eye, filed it under *not a problem, possibly the opposite* — and she had come around the square with the mild curiosity of someone who had been watching the Restaurant long enough to want the ending of the story.

"The one-night man," she said.

"Yes," Llewel said.

"He looked better going out than coming in."

"He needed a meal," Llewel said. "And a night's sleep. And perhaps a conversation with Minnie, who should frankly be charging more for what she provides." He turned a pot of thyme a precise quarter-turn. "He knew the answer before he sat down. He simply needed someone to serve it to him in a form he could eat."

Jen looked at the east gate. "You didn't give him dessert."

"No."

"Why?"

Llewel was quiet for a moment, with the quality of someone selecting words for precision rather than speed. "The dessert is for people who have come to the end of something," he said. "He had not come to the end. He had come to the middle, which he had

mistaken for the end because he was tired." He set down the thyme pot. "What he needed was not a conclusion. It was a meal and a clear head and Minnie telling him that tired is not the same as finished." He looked at the east gate. "Some appetites are not hunger. His was. He simply hadn't been feeding it correctly."

Jen absorbed this. "And the dessert?"

"Will keep," Llewel said. "He'll be back. In some years, when the fulling operation is built and the mill is running well and his mother's roof is sorted and he has done the thing he came here instead of doing." He picked up the next pot. "He'll come back, and the meal will be waiting, and that time I'll serve the dessert."

Minnie arrived at Jen's shoulder, having appeared from the inn with the timing she had for these moments. She had apparently been listening from the doorway, because she said, without preamble: "Told him to build the fulling operation."

Llewel looked at her. "Did you."

"Someone had to," Minnie said. "You fed him. I sent him off properly." She looked at the east gate with the satisfaction of someone who had completed a function. "That's how it works."

Llewel looked at her for a moment with those deep blue eyes, and something in his face that was not quite a smile had, this morning, rather more warmth in it than usual. "Yes," he said. "I suppose it is."

Minnie made the sound that meant she was accepting this without making a production of it, and went back inside, and Jen stood in the morning square and looked at the east gate and thought about a man on a road with a cloth bag of bread and ham and a fulling operation he was going to build when he got home.

"Good outcome," she said.

"Yes," Llewel said.

He went back to the herb pots, and the square went on around him in its ordinary fashion, and the clock marked the candlemark with its new-fangled patience, and North Pointe was, as it generally was, exactly what it needed to be.

the last apprentice of a forgotten art

. . .

THE TOOLS ARRIVED before anyone understood what they were.

This was not unusual in North Pointe, where unusual things had a way of presenting themselves incrementally, but the tools were unusual enough that they generated a specific kind of attention — not alarm, just the focused curiosity of a town that had learned to pay attention to things it couldn't immediately categorize. They were in a long case of dark wood, worn smooth with handling, and the man carrying it came through the east gate on a morning in early spring with the case under one arm and a pack on his back and the look of someone who had been traveling for a long time and had arrived not because this was the destination but because he had run out of forward motion.

He was old. Not elderly in the way of someone declining — he was old in the way of someone who had been used thoroughly and had the marks of it, the way a good tool had marks. His hands were the first thing you noticed: large, precise, stained in ways that were not dirt but pigment, something floral and deep that had gotten into the skin over decades and become part of it. His face had the quality of someone who had spent a great deal of time

looking at small, beautiful things with full attention, which produced, over a lifetime, a particular kind of seeing — patient, close, the eyes of someone for whom the ordinary world was full of details worth examining.

His name was Orren, and he had come, he told Minnie at the inn desk, because he had heard that North Pointe was a town where things found their resolution, and he had something that needed resolving, and he was, he said with the flatness of a man stating a fact he had made his peace with, running out of time to find the right place for it.

Minnie gave him the south-facing room, because she gave that room to people who needed to think, and she looked at the tool case with the frank curiosity she applied to all significant objects that came through her door. "What's in it?" she said.

"My work," he said. "What's left of it."

He came to the Claw for supper and he set the case on the table beside him, which was the behavior of someone who did not leave certain things unattended, and he ate his meal with the focused quiet of a man who had been alone for a long time and had made a companion of his own thoughts.

Darby noticed the case within two minutes of Orren's arrival, because Darby noticed everything that was out of the ordinary and the case was clearly out of the ordinary — the wood alone was unusual, a dark grain that nobody in the Claw could immediately identify, with brass fittings of an older style and a clasp that had the look of something made for a specific purpose rather than a general one.

"What's in the case?" Darby said, with the directness of someone who considered curiosity a civic virtue.

Orren looked at him. He had the measured assessment of someone who had answered this question many times and had developed a reliable method for determining whether the asker

was worth answering. Darby's face, open and enthusiastic and entirely without guile, apparently passed whatever test this was.

Orren set the case on the table and opened it.

Inside, nestled in fitted compartments of dark velvet, were instruments that nobody at the nearby tables could immediately name. There were three slender rods of something that was not quite metal and not quite wood, tapered to fine points. There were two vessels of a liquid that was dark and faintly luminescent, sealed with stoppers of worked crystal. There were several shallow dishes, a set of brushes whose bristles were made of something very fine and pale, and in the centre compartment, held carefully apart from everything else, a single dried flower of a variety that none of them recognized — deep amber, complex, with petals that had the quality of something preserved past the usual limits of preservation.

The Claw, in the vicinity of the case, went quiet with the specific quality of people encountering something they don't have a category for.

"What do you make?" Darby said.

Orren looked at the case. He looked at the dried flower, which was not dried exactly — it was something more specific than dried, more intentional, the flower at its absolute peak held there by means that were clearly not natural and not mechanical but something in between. "I make these permanent," he said, and touched the flower with one finger, very gently. "Any flower, any bloom, at the moment of its greatest beauty. I fix it there."

Darby stared at the flower. "Forever?"

"As close to forever as makes no difference," Orren said. "I've work that's been standing for sixty years. Still warm. Still scented."

"Magic," Darby said.

"Some," Orren said. "And some knowledge. And some patience." He closed the case with the care of someone performing a habitual and important act. "The three of them together. The magic without the knowledge makes a pretty trick. The knowledge without the magic makes a good preservation.

But the three together make—" He stopped. "Something else," he said.

"What brings you here?" Sam said, from behind the bar, because Sam asked the questions that mattered.

Orren looked at his supper. "I'm the last," he said. "My teacher was the last before me, and I took it on, and I've had forty years of it and no one to give it to." He said this without drama, with the flat honesty of a man who had processed a grief long enough that it had become simply a fact. "I've tried. Three times I've taken on apprentices and three times the magic didn't — it doesn't transfer the way ordinary knowledge transfers. It requires something specific in the person, something I can't test for in advance, and none of the three had it." He drank his ale. "So. I'm the last, and I'm old, and I need to find somewhere to put it down properly. Someone told me this town was the place for that kind of thing."

Sam looked at him with the full attention she reserved for people saying important things simply. "Who told you?" she said.

"A woman," he said. "Eastern hills. She had a daughter who'd been here, apparently, for something similar." He touched the case. "She said: go to North Pointe. They'll know what to do."

Sam thought about daughters from the eastern hills and women who sent people to North Pointe, and filed it. "Eat your supper," she said. "We'll see what the morning brings."

Leota came in as Orren was finishing, which was the timing she had for things she was professionally interested in, and she sat two tables away and looked at the case with the focused attention of someone who had felt something and was locating the source.

She had felt it when he came through the gate, which she had not been watching — she had been in her back garden attending to something unrelated — and the feeling was not alarm and was not recognition but was something between the two, the specific sensation she got in the presence of magic that was adjacent to her own

without being the same kind. A harmonic, she would have said, if she were explaining it to someone, which she rarely did.

She looked at the case. She looked at Orren's hands, which had the staining she recognized as botanical work taken very seriously over a very long time. She looked at the dried flower visible through the glass panel in the case's lid, which was not dried, which was something else entirely.

"May I?" she said, to Orren, indicating the case.

He looked at her with the measuring assessment. "You're the witch," he said.

"Yes," she said.

He opened the case.

She leaned forward and looked at the flower without touching it. She was very still in the way she got still when she was reading something carefully. The flower looked back at her, if a flower could be said to look, with the particular quality of something that had been held at its moment of greatest intensity and was still, in some sense, experiencing that moment.

"How long ago?" she said.

"That one? Twenty years," he said.

She sat back. She had the expression she got when something had confirmed a hypothesis she had not quite been sure of. "The magic is still active," she said.

"Always," he said. "That's the point of it. Not preservation — *continuation*. The bloom doesn't stop. It's held, but not frozen. There's a difference."

Leota looked at him with the specific attention of someone who has just been told something that intersects with the deepest part of their professional knowledge. "Yes," she said. "There is." She was quiet for a moment. "Can I ask — the mechanism—"

"I don't know the mechanism," he said, simply. "I know the practice. The mechanism is what I couldn't pass on, because I don't have words for it. It lives in the hands." He looked at his own. "When I'm gone, it goes with me."

Leota looked at the flower for a long time.

"What will you do with the case?" she said.

"I don't know yet," he said. "That's why I'm here."

He spent three days in North Pointe before he went into the Restaurant, and in those three days he opened the case twice more — once for Vamir, who examined the contents with the grave attention of a scholar and asked questions in four languages before concluding that the craft had no name in any tradition he knew, which he found both troubling and fascinating; and once for Warren, who held one of the slender rods with the careful respect of a craftsman handling another craftsman's tools and said, after a long silence, that whatever the rod was made of it had been worked by someone who understood materials at a level he had rarely encountered.

On the second evening Orren sat in the Claw and demonstrated.

He had gone out during the day — Darby had followed him at a respectful distance, which was to say a distance that was not respectful but that Orren had tolerated — and come back with a handful of spring flowers from the verge outside the east gate. Simple things, the flowers of early season: a stem of something white and clustered, two of something yellow and small, one larger bloom of a deep violet that had no particular name in this region but grew every spring in the damp ground near the gate and was gone by the time the real warmth came.

He set them on the table and he worked.

The Claw went very quiet.

The process was not dramatic in any theatrical sense — there were no lights, no sounds, no visible transformation in the first moments. He worked with the rods and the brushes and one of the luminescent liquids in a shallow dish, and his hands moved with the economy of someone doing something they had done ten thousand times, and the movements were too precise and too small to

follow clearly from more than a foot away, and the people who had gathered at the nearby tables watched with the focused silence of an audience that understood it was seeing something it would not see again.

The violet bloom was the last one he worked on, and by the time he set down the brush and straightened — slowly, with the care his back required — the four flowers on the table were changed.

They were the same flowers. They were not preserved or dried or coated or fixed in any visible way. They were simply — themselves, entirely, at the precise moment of their fullest being, held there as though time had made a specific exception for them and them alone. The white clusters had the translucent quality of flowers at the exact second before they would have begun to fade. The yellow ones had the particular brightness of early spring that was usually gone before you had properly registered it. And the violet — the violet was the deep, specific purple of that flower at its irreplaceable best, still faintly warm when Darby, unable to help himself, reached out and touched it.

"It's warm," Darby said.

"Yes," Orren said.

"And it will stay like this?"

"Yes," Orren said.

Darby looked at the flower with an expression that Jen, watching from the bar, would later describe to Sam as the most genuinely reverent she had ever seen on his face. "That's beautiful," he said, which was not his most sophisticated contribution to any conversation but which was entirely accurate and entirely sufficient.

Orren looked at the four flowers on the table and then at the case beside him and then at his hands, and his face had the quality of someone looking at the last pages of a book they had been reading for forty years and finding them, against all reasonable expectation, still worth reading.

He went into the Restaurant on the morning of the fourth day.

He knocked, which was the more formal approach, and Llewel opened the door and looked at him and looked at the case under his arm and said: "Good morning. I've been expecting you."

"I thought you might have been," Orren said.

Llewel stepped back from the door. "Please bring the case," he said. "The kitchen would like to see it."

Orren came in. He sat at the table that had been laid for him and he set the case on the chair beside him and he looked at the room, which received him the way it received everyone — with the stillness of a place that had been waiting and was now ready.

"I don't know what you can do for me," he said, honestly. "I was told to come here. I've come."

"Yes," Llewel said. "The meal will explain itself, I think." He looked at the case. "May I?"

Orren opened it.

Llewel looked at the contents for a long moment — the rods, the vessels, the brushes, the single amber flower in its central compartment — and his face was the face he brought to things that moved him, which was entirely still, his hands flat at his sides.

"How long has that one been held?" he said.

"Sixty-three years," Orren said. "My teacher made it, the season before I became his apprentice. He gave it to me when I finished my training. He said: this is what the work is for. Not the technique. Not the knowledge. This." He looked at the flower. "I've looked at it every day for forty years and I still think he was right."

Llewel looked at it for another moment. Then he closed the case, gently, with the care he brought to things that deserved care, and he went to the kitchen.

The first course was a soup made from the petals of edible flowers — not delicate, not precious, but robust, built on a stock that had real depth and into which the petals had been added at the last moment so they retained their color and something of their individual character: calendula warm and slightly resinous, violet cool and faintly sweet, rose with the specific complicated depth that roses had when you cooked with them rather than merely decorated with them. It was, in total, a thing of beauty that was also a thing of nourishment, and the combination was the point.

Orren tasted it and was quiet for a moment. "You know the flowers," he said.

"I know what they are," Llewel said. "You know what they can be."

Orren looked at the soup. He ate it slowly, with the attention of someone who had spent a lifetime in close relationship with the ingredients and was now encountering them in a form he hadn't expected — not transformed out of recognition, but transformed into something that honored what they were while becoming something additional.

He thought about his teacher, which he had not been able to do without a specific kind of pain for some years, and found that this morning the thinking was — different. Not painless, but cleaner, the way a wound was different after it had been properly tended. He thought about the man's hands, which had been like his own — stained, precise, the hands of a life's work — and about the last lesson he had given, which had not been a lesson in technique but something more like a lesson in attitude, a lesson he had not fully understood until now.

"He told me," Orren said, to Llewel, who was present in the room without intruding on it, "that the work was not for the maker. That a flower held at its peak was a gift to whoever looked at it, and the maker was only the means." He ate another spoonful. "I understood that as a young man. And then I spent forty years making the work and not finding anyone to give the means to, and I started — I started to think about it differently. Started to feel that

it was for me. That without me it would be lost, and that was—" He stopped. "A burden that I put on myself," he said. "That wasn't his lesson at all."

Llewel said nothing, which was agreement.

"He'd have told me to put it down," Orren said. "If he were here. He'd have said: you've done it well, and now you're done, and that's what done means."

"Yes," Llewel said. "I think he would have."

That night, North Pointe dreamed.

This was not something the town would have been able to confirm collectively — dreams were private, and nobody in North Pointe made a habit of comparing notes on their sleeping hours unless something specific prompted it. But the dreams came, and they came with the particular quality that the Restaurant's longer meals sometimes produced in the town's vicinity, a kind of overflow, the excess of something being worked through in one place spilling gently into the surrounding air.

These dreams were different from the others.

They were beautiful. That was the first thing, and the consistent thing, the thread that ran through every version of the night: the dreams were simply, specifically, entirely beautiful, in the way that the best things were beautiful — not decorative, not comfortable, but genuinely beautiful in the sense of being more themselves than anything usually managed to be.

Sam dreamed of the Claw.

Not the Claw as it was — not the familiar bar and the tables and the fireplace and the particular smell of an evening's business concluded — but the Claw as it had been, perhaps, before she had it, or before her predecessor had it, or before anyone had it: the

bare stone of the walls with the quality of new cutting, the beams still pale, the fireplace laid but not yet lit, a room on the edge of becoming what it would spend decades being.

She stood in it and felt it around her — the potential of it, the specific weight of a space that is about to become something — and the feeling was not nostalgia, because she had not been there when the building was new, but something more like recognition, the feeling of understanding something's nature at its source.

She woke before first light with the smell of new stone in her nose and the feeling of her hands on the bar, which was the solid and specific bar she had put her hands on every morning for fifteen years, and she lay in the dark and felt a particular gratitude for it that she had not consciously felt before, not quite like this, and which was the kind of gratitude you felt for things you had always known were good but had not, until now, fully seen.

Darby dreamed of his mother's garden.

He had not thought about his mother's garden in years — it was a thing of childhood, a thing that existed in the background of early memories rather than in any specific recalled moment — but in the dream it was entirely specific: the particular bed along the south wall where she grew everything she could persuade to bloom, the smell of it in July, the way the light fell on it in the late afternoon, which was the best light, the light that made ordinary flowers look like something from a story.

He was a child in the dream, which was not uncomfortable the way childhood could sometimes be uncomfortable in dreams, but simply true — he was the size he had been, and the world was the size it had been, and the garden was enormous and detailed and full of things he had not known he remembered.

His mother was there. She did not do anything specific — she was simply in the garden, which was where she had always been, and her hands were in the soil, and she did not look up, and he

stood at the edge of the garden and watched her work, and the feeling of it was the feeling of things being exactly as they should be, which was a feeling he had not had in exactly this form since he was perhaps seven years old.

He woke up crying, which was not something he did, and lay for a candlemark in the dark before he got up, and went downstairs, and wrote his mother a letter that he sent the same day without second-guessing it.

Galhani dreamed of a forest she had not been in since she was young.

The gnomish forests of her homeland, which she had left many decades ago and which she did not speak of often, not from sorrow but from the simple fact that they were a long way away and there was much to do here. In the dream the forest was exactly as she remembered it — the specific quality of the light through the canopy, which was different from any other light she knew, the smell of the floor, which had the deep complexity of many seasons of decay becoming many seasons of growth.

She walked through it and touched the trees, and the trees were themselves completely, each one fully what it was, and she walked for a long time and did not reach the edge and did not need to.

She woke and lay still and felt the dream recede the way dreams receded, and she let it go without grasping at it, because she had learned long ago that the best things were worth having once completely rather than twice incompletely, and the dream had been complete.

She rose and made her tea and opened her shop and told no one about the forest, because it was hers, and because some beautiful things were not for explaining.

Leota did not dream of Leonard.

She had expected to — had felt, when the dreaming quality came into the night air, the particular resonance of something that was going to be significant, and had lain in the dark for a moment before sleep with the specific complicated anticipation of someone who knew that something was coming and was not entirely sure whether they were ready for it.

She dreamed, instead, of light.

Not light as illumination — not light that lit other things — but light as a thing in itself, shaped and moved and made into forms that existed for no purpose except to be beautiful. Lights that were colors she did not have names for, moving through shapes that were not quite geometries and not quite living things, building toward something and then dispersing before the something was reached, and the dispersal was not failure but completion, the way a note was complete when it faded rather than when it stopped.

She understood, in the dream, that she was making these lights. That her hands were involved, somehow, and her attention, and something that was not quite the magic she used now — different in kind, lighter in weight, less rooted — but that she knew in the way you knew a thing you had done before in a different life, a different body, a different name.

She made lights in the dream for a very long time. They had no purpose. They illuminated nothing. They were not for anyone except whoever happened to see them, and they were entirely, completely, heartbreakingly beautiful, and when she woke she lay in the grey morning and looked at the ceiling and felt the shape of them still in her hands, which were her hands, Leota's hands, the hands that did the work she did now, and she thought: *that was mine. That was real. I made those.*

She did not cry, because she was not a person who cried as a rule. But she lay still for a long time, and the morning light came in through the window and lay across the floor of her room, and she watched it and felt, for the first time in some years, the specific quality of something that had been lost being returned — not

restored, not present again, but acknowledged: *it was real, it was yours, it was beautiful, and you are allowed to know that.*

She rose and dressed and went to her shop, and she worked through the morning with a quality of attention that her regulars noticed and did not comment on, which was the courtesy of people who understood that some mornings were different from others and that the difference was not always for explaining.

At mid-morning she went to the Restaurant's back door and knocked.

Llewel opened it.

She looked at him for a moment. "Thank you," she said.

He looked at her with those deep blue eyes. "The dreaming came from the work inside," he said. "Not from me."

"I know," she said. "Thank you anyway."

He nodded, once, with the gravity of someone receiving a significant thing simply. She went back to her shop.

Orren was inside for eleven days.

The town had become used to this — the varying durations, the watching, the carrying on of ordinary life around the extraordinary thing happening in the converted town home on the trade road — but eleven days was toward the longer end, and it produced its effects on the collective attention the way longer stays always did: a heightened awareness of the Restaurant's windows, a slight adjustment in conversation whenever someone passed the door, the specific quality of waiting that was not impatient but was fully present.

The dreams continued through the first four nights and then eased, which was noticed without being commented on, and the town went back to ordinary sleep and ordinary mornings, and carried what the dreams had given them in the way you carried things that arrived without being asked for and turned out to be exactly right.

Leota, in her shop, worked through a commission that had been sitting half-finished for two moons and completed it in three days, with a quality of attention and a sureness of hand that she had not had before the dream, and which she did not analyze because analysis was not what it required. She simply let the hands do what they knew how to do, and what they made was very good.

He came out on the morning of the twelfth day.

The case was under his arm. He stood on the step in the early light with the quality of someone who has set something down and is noticing the absence of its weight, which was a noticeable thing in its own right, requiring some adjustment.

Jen was on her rounds. She came around the square and found him on the step and looked at him with the frank assessment of long practice. He looked well. Not young — he was old, and he was still old, and the eleven days had not undone that — but well in the way of someone who has moved through something and come out on the other side without having lost anything that needed keeping.

"All right?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "I think so."

She looked at the case. "Still got it," she said.

"Still got it," he agreed. He looked at the case with the expression she had come to associate, in the vicinity of the Restaurant, with people who had received something they hadn't expected. "I came here thinking I needed somewhere to put it down," he said. "I was wrong about what putting it down meant."

Llewel was in the doorway. Jen had not seen him move there — he was simply present, as he was sometimes present, in the way of someone for whom thresholds were a natural habitat.

"What did it mean?" Jen said.

Orren looked at the case. He opened it, briefly, and looked at the amber flower in its central compartment — the one his teacher

had made, sixty-three years ago, still warm, still itself at its moment of greatest beauty — and then he closed it again. "He was right," he said. "My teacher. It's not for the maker. It's not even for whoever looks at it, exactly. It's for—" He paused. "It's for the flower," he said. "It's for the thing that was beautiful, so it can keep being what it was."

He looked at Llewel. "I've been carrying this as a burden," he said. "The last of it, the weight of it. But it's not a burden. It's a gift. I've had a gift for forty years and spent the last several of them grieving that I couldn't pass it on, when what I should have been doing was—"

"Using it," Llewel said.

"Using it," Orren said. "Until I can't." He straightened, which he did with the care his back required, and the straightening had a quality of resolution to it. "There are spring flowers coming in the hill meadows to the east. I saw them on the way in." He looked east. "I think I'll go and do some work."

Jen looked at him. "And after?"

"After," he said, "I'll come back through, most likely. I've some pieces to leave in the right places." He looked at the Claw, at the inn, at the square with its morning business just beginning. "A town that dreams like this one deserves something to look at."

Jen looked at Llewel. Llewel looked at Jen with the expression that was almost a smile.

"The kitchen," he said to Orren, "will require a flower. If you can spare one."

Orren opened the case and looked at the contents, and he selected one of the simple spring flowers he had worked on in the Claw — the yellow one, the early-season yellow that was usually gone before you registered it — and he held it for a moment, feeling the warmth of it, the continuation of it, and then he set it on the Restaurant's doorstep with the care of someone leaving something in exactly the right place.

"For the kitchen," he said.

Llewel picked it up and looked at it in the morning light — the

yellow warmth of it, the specific brightness of a spring morning held permanent, asking nothing of anyone except to be seen.

His hands were completely still.

"Thank you," he said.

Orren nodded, and collected his case, and went east toward the hill meadows, and the morning went on around him with its ordinary beauty, which was, if you were paying attention, which North Pointe had learned to be, not ordinary at all.

first night

. . .

THE PÚCA FINISHED the sign on a Thursday.

This was significant because they had started building on a Monday, which meant they had constructed an entire establishment — gutted a former town home, reconfigured its interior, installed a kitchen of apparently professional quality, hung proper lighting, furnished the dining room, and affixed a sign above the door — in four days, which was either remarkable or suspicious depending on how you felt about the Púca's relationship with conventional time and materials.

The sign read: **The Restaurant.**

That was all. No proprietor's name, no menu posted in the window, no indication of hours or prices or the nature of the cuisine. Just the definite article and the noun, in letters that were — Vamir had examined them at close range with the professional attention of a man who cared about such things — perfectly formed, evenly spaced, and somehow slightly luminescent in a way that had no obvious light source.

"It's a statement," Darby said, to the assembled crowd on the trade road, who had been watching the construction with the focused attention of a town that had nothing more pressing to do,

which was not true but felt true in the presence of something this interesting.

"It's a name," Galhani said.

"It's both," Darby said. "A name that's also a statement. You notice it doesn't say *A* restaurant. It says *The* Restaurant. As if there's only one."

"There is only one," Prudence said. "In this town, at any rate."

"But anywhere," Darby said. "That's what *the* implies. The definitive article. The only one that matters."

Vamir looked at Darby with the expression he reserved for moments when Darby accidentally produced a reasonable observation. "That is," he said, carefully, "not an entirely incorrect reading."

Darby stood slightly straighter.

"It is, however," Vamir continued, "based on a misunderstanding of how definite articles function in—"

"What's it for?" Minnie said, loudly, to no one in particular, which was Minnie's method of redirecting conversations that were going somewhere unhelpful. She was standing on the Weary Head's porch with her arms folded and the expression of someone who had watched four days of construction from across the square and had arrived at conclusions she was not yet ready to share. "That's what I want to know. What does it *do*?"

Translator Púca, who had been standing at the edge of the crowd with the air of someone who had been waiting for exactly this question, said: "It's a restaurant."

Minnie looked at him. "I know what the sign says."

"Then you know what it does," Translator Púca said, with the serenity of someone who had prepared for this conversation and found it going exactly as anticipated.

"A restaurant needs a cook," Minnie said. "I don't see a cook."

"There'll be one," Translator Púca said.

"When?"

Translator Púca looked at the gate. Then he looked at the sky.

Then he looked at the gate again with the expression of someone performing a calculation. "Soon," he said.

Minnie made the sound that meant she was reserving judgment in the loudest possible way, and went back inside.

Llewel came through the gate twenty minutes later.

He came alone, on foot, with a single bag that was not large — not the bag of someone arriving for a season, or even a fortnight, but the bag of someone who traveled light because they had always traveled light and had long since made their peace with what that meant about the nature of staying. He wore the black and white suit that he would wear every day from that point forward, precisely tailored, not a crease out of place, which was remarkable given that he had presumably been on a road to get here. His silver hair was drawn back. His eyes, when they moved across the square in the systematic assessment of a man reading a new place, were the deep blue that would become, in time, the thing everyone mentioned first when describing him.

He looked at the square. He looked at the shop fronts. He looked at the Claw and the inn and the bookshop and the baker's. He looked, finally, at the Restaurant's sign, and something in his face had the quality of a man arriving at a place he has been before, except that he had not been here before, which made the quality of it more interesting than explicable.

He walked directly to the Restaurant's door.

He produced a key.

The crowd on the trade road, which had been in the process of dispersing now that the construction was done, reassembled with the speed of people who had correctly identified that the interesting part was not over.

"Who is that?" Darby said.

"He has a key," someone said.

"I can see he has a key," Darby said. "Who gave him the key?"

Everyone looked at Translator Púca.

Translator Púca looked at the sky, which had become his default response to questions he had decided not to answer directly.

Llewel unlocked the door, went inside, and closed it behind him.

The crowd stood on the trade road and looked at the closed door and the sign and each other.

"Mountain Elf," Vamir said, after a moment, in the tone of someone identifying a specimen.

"How do you know?" Prudence said.

"The eyes," Vamir said. "The specific blue. Mountain Elves are —" He paused. "Rare. Thought to be extinct, in fact. I had not expected to encounter one here."

"Where are they usually?" Darby said.

"In the mountains," Vamir said.

"Which mountains?"

Vamir looked at the peaks visible above the town's northern roofline — white-capped, severe, the Mistral range standing in its usual attitude of permanent indifference to the concerns of valley towns. "Those mountains," he said.

Everyone looked at the mountains.

Everyone looked at the Restaurant.

"He came down from the Mistrals?" Sam said. She had appeared in the Claw's doorway, drying her hands on her cloth, with the expression of someone who had heard enough from across the square to want primary sources. "That's a three-day climb. At minimum."

"More," Vamir said. "Much more, if he came from the heights."

"Why?" Darby said.

Nobody answered this, because nobody had an answer, and Translator Púca had developed a sudden intense interest in his own shoes.

Nothing happened for the rest of the afternoon.

This was, in its way, more interesting than something happening, because the nothing had the quality of a held breath — the town going about its business with one eye perpetually on the Restaurant's windows, which showed the warm light of interior occupation but nothing specific, no movement visible from outside, no sounds emerging from within.

Jen did her rounds with the slightly heightened attention she brought to new presences in the square. She went past the Restaurant three times and registered: closed door, lit interior, faint smell of something cooking that she couldn't identify, no disturbance, no reason to intervene. She filed it under *watch but don't act* and went back to her office.

At the Claw, the evening's business proceeded with an undercurrent of collective awareness that was not quite distraction but was adjacent to it. Conversations kept turning toward the Restaurant the way water turned toward a drain — not rushing, just finding the low ground. Theories accumulated in the way that theories accumulated in North Pointe, which was rapidly and without particular regard for evidence.

Darby had four theories by the seventh candlemark, which was not his personal best but was respectable given the limited information available.

Theory one: the Mountain Elf was a spy for some unspecified external power, using the restaurant as cover.

Theory two: the Mountain Elf had been sent by the Icosagon's magical equilibrium itself, as a balancing force, to compensate for the addition of the jewelry shop.

Theory three: the Púca had summoned him, through means unknown, and the restaurant was part of some larger Púca scheme whose ultimate purpose had not yet revealed itself.

Theory four, which Darby produced at the eighth candlemark after his second ale: the Mountain Elf was a god.

"He's not a god," Sam said.

"He might be an aspect of a god," Darby said. "That's different. An aspect is—"

"He's not an aspect of a god either," Sam said.

"You don't know that."

"He has a key," Sam said. "Gods don't use keys."

Darby considered this. "That's actually a reasonable point," he said, and crossed out theory four in his mental ledger.

Galhani, at the end of the bar, said: "The Púca built it." She said this in the tone of someone producing a fact that she considered underutilized in the current discussion. "Whatever it is, whatever he is, the Púca built the space. That's the starting point."

"Why would the Púca build something for a Mountain Elf?" Prudence said.

Everyone looked at Translator Púca, who had come in for an ale and was now regretting it.

"We built what needed building," he said, with the air of someone reciting a prepared statement.

"That's not an answer," Minnie said.

"It's the answer we have," Translator Púca said, pleasantly and with finality, and drank his ale.

At the ninth candlemark, the door of the Restaurant opened.

Everyone in the Claw knew this because the Claw's front window faced the square and because approximately half the Claw's current occupants had positioned themselves within viewing range of that window with the elaborate casualness of people who were definitely not watching anything in particular.

What came through the door was not Llewel.

It was a Púca.

Not one of the usual ones. Not Translator or Procurement or Security or any of the others that the town had catalogued over the past several days. This one was — different, in the specific way that was immediately perceptible without being immediately explica-

ble. He was the same size as the others, the same quick dark-eyed quality, but he wore different clothes — older clothes, the kind of garments that had been good once and had been worn past that and into something better than good, the clothes of someone for whom dressing was a long-standing practice rather than a daily decision.

And he had a beard.

Not the beard of the others, which were present but managed. This beard was white and long and extraordinarily long — longer than the beard of Papa Púca, which was itself notable — long enough that he had tucked the end of it into his belt, which suggested this was a practical arrangement that had been arrived at through experience.

He crossed the square with the unhurried quality of someone who had been moving through the world for a very long time and had found, through extensive testing, that hurry rarely improved outcomes. He went to the Restaurant's door. He knocked, three times, with the specific rhythm of someone using a known signal.

The door opened immediately.

Llewel stood in it. He looked at the old Púca. The old Púca looked at him. Something passed between them that was not visible from across the square but was evidently sufficient, because Llewel stepped back from the door and the old Púca went inside and the door closed.

In the Claw, approximately eleven people exhaled simultaneously.

"Who," Darby said, "was that."

Translator Púca set down his ale.

He had the quality of someone who has been asked a question and is deciding, with genuine care, how much of the answer to give.

"Grandfather Púca," he said.

The Claw absorbed this.

"Your grandfather?" Sam said.

"Everyone's grandfather," Translator Púca said, which was not a clarification exactly but conveyed something. "The oldest of us. He doesn't come out much."

"He doesn't come out at all," Galhani said. "You've been in this town a fortnight already and I've never seen him."

"He stays in," Translator Púca said. "Mostly."

"What does he do in there?" Darby said.

Translator Púca appeared to consider several possible answers and select the one that was technically accurate while being minimally informative. "He remembers," he said.

"Remembers what?"

"Everything," Translator Púca said, and finished his ale with the air of someone who had said exactly as much as they intended to say on this subject and was now prepared to discuss literally anything else.

The Claw's window became, over the following candlemarks, the most valuable piece of glass in North Pointe.

This was not hyperbole. People arranged themselves relative to it with the tactical precision of an audience at a performance, the front positions held by those who had arrived early or argued successfully for precedence, the back positions occupied by those who were making the best of limited sightlines by standing on chairs, which Sam had initially objected to and then stopped objecting to on the grounds that the chairs were sturdy and the situation was exceptional.

Jen came in at the tenth candlemark and looked at the window arrangement and then at Sam.

"How long has this been happening?" she said.

"Since the old one went in," Sam said. "That was a candlemark ago."

Jen looked at the window, through which the Restaurant's exterior was visible: closed door, warm interior light, the sign doing its quiet work. "What are they expecting to see?"

"Nobody knows," Sam said. "That's why they're watching."

Jen pulled up a stool at the bar, which was not at the window but had an oblique view of the square. "What do you think it is?" she said, to Sam, meaning the Restaurant, the Mountain Elf, the old Púca, all of it.

Sam was quiet for a moment with the quality she had for things she was thinking about seriously. "I think," she said, "that the Púca built something. And I think the something needed someone to run it. And I think that the someone came." She set down her cloth. "What I don't know is what the something is for."

"A restaurant," Darby said, from the window, without turning around.

"Something that calls itself a restaurant," Sam said. "Which isn't the same thing."

Vamir arrived at the eleventh candlemark with a book, which was either a sign that he intended to stay for a while or simply that he went nowhere without one. He took up a position near the window with the gravity of a man conducting field research, opened the book, and did not read it.

"The Mountain Elves," he said, to the room, in the tone he used when he had decided to share information whether or not it had been requested, "are a people of considerable antiquity and considerable mystery. They have been absent from common knowledge for several centuries. Most scholars consider them extinct."

"He's not extinct," Darby said. "He's right down the road."

"I am aware," Vamir said. "I am updating my priors." He looked at the Restaurant's window. "What is interesting is not that a Mountain Elf has come down from the Mistrals. What is interesting is why this town. Why this specific building that the Púca

constructed without explanation or apparent precedent." He paused. "Mountain Elves do not move without purpose. They do not descend from their heights for casual reasons. If one has come here, it is because something called him here."

"Nimarith," Galhani said, from her corner.

The room went slightly quiet in the way it went quiet when the town's presiding deity was named in casual conversation, which was a reflex of respect rather than fear — North Pointe had a comfortable if occasionally startled relationship with its god.

"That's a significant claim," Vamir said.

"It's the obvious claim," Galhani said. "The Púca build something at what I assume is Nimarith's prompting. Nimarith arranges for someone to run it. The someone arrives precisely when the building is ready." She sipped her drink. "That's not coincidence. That's scheduling."

The room considered this.

"What does Nimarith want with a restaurant?" Darby said.

Nobody answered this. The question sat in the Claw with the comfortable uncertainty of questions that were too large for the evening and would have to be returned to.

At some point past the second candlemark of the following morning — when the Claw had technically closed but had not in practice, because Sam had looked at the window-watchers and concluded that closing would be more trouble than it was worth — Procurement Púca arrived at the back door with a request.

He wanted to borrow flour.

"What for?" Sam said.

"The kitchen," Procurement Púca said, with the air of someone for whom this was a complete answer.

"The Restaurant's kitchen?"

"The very one."

Sam looked at him. She looked at her flour supply. She looked

at the back of the Claw, which shared a lane with the Restaurant's rear yard, and from which, she now noticed, she could faintly smell something cooking — something that had been cooking for hours, patient and complex, with the depth of something that knew exactly what it was doing.

She gave him the flour.

He departed with the speed of someone on an important errand.

Fifteen minutes later, Commissary Púca arrived for eggs.

Ten minutes after that, a Púca she didn't recognize arrived for a specific variety of dried herb that she happened to have and that she would not ordinarily have expected anyone to know she had.

"How did you know I had that?" she said.

"We know most things," the unfamiliar Púca said, pleasantly, and left with the herbs.

Sam stood at her back door and smelled the cooking from across the lane and thought about Mountain Elves and old Púca and a building that had been constructed in four days and a god who expressed opinions through the arrangement of civic infrastructure, and she went back inside and poured herself an ale and stood at the bar and did not go to the window, because Sam had always preferred to understand things through inference rather than observation, and what she was inferring was getting more interesting by the candlemark.

Logistics Púca appeared at Jen's office at the third candlemark.

Jen was awake, because she was often awake at the third candlemark, and she answered the door with the specific expression of a constable who has been in this town long enough to expect almost anything and is still occasionally surprised by the form it takes.

Logistics Púca had a map.

"I wanted to show you," he said, "the current supply chain."

Jen looked at the map. It showed the square, the Restaurant, the Claw, Makota's bakery, Galhani's stall, and Warren's smithy, connected by a series of annotated lines with small notations indicating what had traveled along them and when.

"You've been running supplies to the Restaurant," Jen said. "All night."

"Since the ninth candlemark," Logistics Púca confirmed.

"Why are you showing me this?"

Logistics Púca appeared to consider this question with genuine thoughtfulness. "Because you're the constable," he said, "and you should know what's happening in your town." He folded the map. "Also because Commissary Púca took Sam's last good bottle of the dark ale and I thought someone should be informed."

Jen looked at the map. She looked at Logistics Púca. She looked at the Restaurant's window, visible from her office, still lit. "Is everything all right in there?" she said.

"Everything," Logistics Púca said, with a certainty that was not performed but genuine, "is exactly as it should be."

He left.

Jen stood in her doorway for a moment and looked at the lit window and then at the mountains above the town, which were dark shapes against the slightly lighter dark of the sky. She thought about what Vamir had said — *Mountain Elves do not descend from their heights for casual reasons* — and she thought about the Púca building a restaurant without explanation, and she thought about a long white beard and a closed door, and she went back inside and put on the kettle, because it was going to be a long night and tea was the right response to long nights.

The Claw's window-watchers maintained their vigil with the dedication of people who had committed to something and were seeing it through. Shifts had developed organically — people who needed to sleep went home and were replaced by people who had

slept and come back, a rotation that Sam had not organized and was faintly impressed by.

Darby had not left. This was not surprising. Darby had the endurance of someone for whom interesting things were a form of sustenance, and tonight qualified as extremely interesting.

He had produced, over the course of the night, a running commentary that was equal parts observation, speculation, and invention, and which had attracted a small but devoted audience of people who could not see the window from their position and were relying on his narration.

"Still lit," he said, at the fourth candlemark. "No movement visible. The light has a blue quality. Not unpleasant. More like — the sky before dawn, that specific—"

"Darby," said the woman behind him, who had been there since the second candlemark and had developed strong feelings about his descriptive style.

"I'm painting a picture," Darby said.

"Paint it quieter," she said.

He painted it quieter. After a moment he said, in a more subdued tone: "I think something's happening. The quality of the light has changed."

Sam looked up from the bar. Around the room, several people who had been dozing or distracted redirected their attention.

"Changed how?" Vamir said, from his corner, where he had not been reading his book for several hours.

"It's warmer," Darby said. "It was blue-cold before. Now it's more — gold. Like a candle."

Sam came to the window. She looked at the Restaurant across the square, and Darby was right — the quality of the light had changed, and there was something in the change that she could not have defined but recognized the way you recognized the quality of a morning after something significant had happened, the specific tone of air that came after.

"Nearly dawn," she said.

"Yes," Vamir said.

Nobody said anything else. They watched.

Inside the Restaurant, in the last candlemark before first light, Llewel sat at the table opposite Grandfather Púca and understood, for the first time fully, what he had come here to do.

The meal had been long — the longest he would ever serve, longer than any patron's meal, the hours inside unfolding with the unhurried thoroughness of an orientation that was not being rushed by anyone, because the one giving it had all the time in the world and the one receiving it had come a very long way and deserved the full account.

Grandfather Púca had not spoken. He had not needed to. The meal itself had spoken — the courses arriving from the kitchen that the Púca had built, that had known before Llewel arrived what it would need to contain, that had been waiting with the patience of a space designed for a specific purpose, for the person who would understand that purpose and give it his hands and his skill and his long Mountain Elf life in service of it.

The courses had told him, each one, something he needed to know.

The first had told him about the town — its history, its character, the specific quality of a place that sat at a crossroads and received travelers and was, in ways that its own inhabitants only partially understood, a place where things resolved. Where the road through it was not only a road but a threshold, and the people who stopped here were not only stopping but arriving.

The second had told him about the work — not the cooking, which he knew, but the other work, the work of attention and patience and the willingness to serve something larger than himself without losing himself in the serving. He had been, in the mountains, a person of considerable self-containment, and the work here would require him to remain contained while also remaining open, which was a specific skill he had not known he would need.

The third had told him about the patrons — not specific people but the quality of them, the variety of human and non-human need, the way people arrived at thresholds without knowing they were at thresholds, and the way food — real food, food made with full attention and genuine skill — could do what words couldn't, could get under the defenses and find the actual hunger and feed it.

The fourth had told him about Nimarith, which was the course that had taken longest and that he had received in the stillness that he reserved for things that required his full attention. The god of this place was not distant or abstract. He was present in the kitchen, in the herbs, in the arrival of the right ingredient at the right moment. He was present in the Púca who had built this space and in the old one sitting across this table, who was his instrument as much as this building was his instrument. The debt his people owed was real, and the work it required was real, and neither of these things diminished the other.

And the fifth course — the last one, the one that arrived now, in the final hour before dawn — was bread.

Simple bread, with butter and salt, the same bread he would serve patrons for the rest of his life in this place as the final course of their meals, the course that was not an ending but a completion, the thing that said: *you have eaten, you are fed, you are ready.*

He ate it.

He sat in the empty restaurant with the plates cleared and the candles low, and he looked across the table at Grandfather Púca, who looked back at him with eyes that were very old and very bright and entirely without agenda, and something passed between them that was not a word and not a gesture but was sufficient.

Llewel's hands were completely still.

The door opened at first light.

The grey before-dawn quality of the square was enough to see by, and everyone at the Claw's window saw it: the door opening, and Grandfather Púca coming out.

He stood on the step. He was — different was not the right word, because he was exactly the same, the same beard and the same old clothes and the same unhurried quality, and yet there was something about him that had the look of someone who has been told something they already knew and has found the telling, unexpectedly, to be the thing they needed. He looked, Jen would say later to Sam, like a man who had been carrying a thing for a very long time and had finally found the right place to set it down, and had set it down, and was standing in the particular lightness of that.

He looked at the square. He looked at the mountains. He looked, briefly, up at the sky, which was beginning its slow transition from the dark of night to the pale of early morning.

Then he went back across the square, not quickly, with the pace of someone who had nowhere to be and knew it, and he went into the jewelry shop, and the door closed, and the square was still.

Llewel stood in the Restaurant's doorway.

He stood there for a long time, watching Grandfather Púca go, and his face had the quality it had when something had moved him — entirely still, the hands flat at his sides — and the morning light came up around him, and the sign above his head caught the first of it and held it, the way the sign had a way of holding light.

In the Claw, nobody said anything for a moment.

Then Darby said, quietly, for him: "What does it mean?"

Vamir closed his book, which he had never opened. "It means," he said, "that the building has found its purpose, and its purpose has found its building, and that the two of them are now prepared to begin."

"Begin what?" Darby said.

Vamir looked at the Restaurant's sign, and at Llewel standing in the doorway of it, and at the morning coming in over the mountains behind the town. "Whatever is necessary," he said.

Sam, at the bar, poured the first coffee of the morning and set it on the counter and looked at her Claw, which was full of people who had stayed up all night watching something they didn't understand and had found it, against all reasonable expectation, worth watching.

"All right," she said, to the room. "Who's having breakfast?"

Everyone was having breakfast.

Outside, Llewel went back inside, and the door closed, and the sign caught the morning light, and North Pointe woke up around its newest establishment with the mild, watchful attention of a town that had learned, over a long time and many strange arrivals, to pay attention to things it didn't yet have words for.

The Restaurant was open.

Whatever that meant, it was beginning now.

the unserved

. . .

PELL ARRIVED in North Pointe on a market day, which meant the square was fuller than usual and nobody paid him particular attention, which was probably how he preferred it.

He was not a remarkable-looking man, which was not an insult — he had the solid, settled quality of someone who had grown into himself comfortably and without drama, the kind of face that was pleasant to look at without being memorable, the kind of build that spoke of physical work done consistently over many years without complaint. He was in his middle thirties, which in North Pointe's experience was either very young or just old enough, depending on what you'd been doing with the years. His clothes were good without being fine — the clothes of a prosperous tradesman, well-maintained, chosen for durability rather than impression.

He had a pack, moderately sized, the pack of someone staying two nights rather than one, which suggested he had come with some intention of staying rather than the impulsive overnight of a man passing through. And in the outer pocket of the pack, visible when he shifted it on arriving at Minnie's counter, was a small wooden flute — a tabor pipe, not new, with the worn smoothness

of something handled regularly, its surface darkened in the places where his fingers rested most often.

Minnie noted the flute the way she noted everything. She gave him the south room, because she gave that room to people who had things to think about, and she asked him how long he planned to stay.

"Two nights," he said. "Perhaps three."

"Plenty of time," Minnie said, which was not a response to what he had said but to something she had read in the way he said it, and which she did not elaborate on, because she had learned over many years that elaboration was usually the wrong tool.

He spent the first day the way people spent first days in North Pointe — orienting, establishing the geography of the place, locating the Claw and the bakery and the shops, getting a feel for the square and who moved through it and how. He had the miller's eye for infrastructure: he looked at the waterwheel visible at the town's eastern edge with professional attention, assessed the road surface at the gate with the instinct of someone who knew what heavy cart traffic did to paving, and stood for a moment at the smithy's open door watching Warren work with the focused appreciation of a man who respected good craft in any form.

He was, Jen noted on her rounds, at ease. Not the forced ease of someone performing relaxation, but the genuine ease of a man who was comfortable in his own company and had no particular agenda for the afternoon. He bought a loaf from Makota's with the pleasure of someone who appreciated good bread. He sat for a while on the bench near the well and did nothing, which was a thing fewer people than you'd expect were actually capable of doing.

At some point in the late afternoon, sitting on the bench, he took out the flute.

He didn't play it, not exactly — he held it in his hands and

turned it, and occasionally put it to his lips and produced a phrase of something, three or four notes, a fragment of a melody that arrived and stopped before it became anything, and then he turned it again and looked at the square. The fragments that came out were not random — they had the quality of something that wanted to continue, something that had a shape he was not quite letting it reach.

Darby walked past, heard the notes, and stopped.

"You play?" he said.

Pell looked up. "A little," he said, in the tone of someone who had been saying this for fifteen years and had it down perfectly.

"It's good," Darby said. "That bit you were playing."

"It's nothing," Pell said. "Just something I do."

He put the flute back in his pocket.

Darby, who had the instinct of a young man who recognized an incomplete thing, opened his mouth and then closed it, because something in Pell's manner communicated that the conversation on this topic was over, and even Darby respected that occasionally.

He came to the Claw for supper and ate with the easy sociability of a man accustomed to traveling for business — not solitary, not in need of company, but comfortable with either. He talked to the people near him with the natural warmth of someone who liked people and found them generally interesting, and the conversations ranged across the comfortable subjects of a market day evening: road conditions, the quality of the season's harvest, the peculiarities of various regional grain varieties, which was a topic Pell had strong and well-informed opinions about and which he deployed without dominating.

He had two ales, which was the right number for a man settling into a new place without committing to a long night.

He looked at the Restaurant twice. The first time was the ordinary first look — the sign, the closed door, the specific quality of

the light — that most newcomers gave it on their first evening. The second time was different: longer, more deliberate, the look of someone who had already thought about this and was thinking about it again.

Sam noticed both looks. She noticed most things from behind the bar, which was the correct place from which to notice things, and she filed the second look under *not today, possibly tomorrow.*

She was wrong by half a day, which was close enough.

He knocked on the Restaurant's door at the eleventh candlemark of the following morning.

This was an unusual time — not the evening arrival that most patrons chose, not the brunch of the occasional early arrival, but the late morning of a man who had woken up, had his breakfast, walked the square twice, sat on the bench for a candlemark, taken out the flute and not played it, put it back, and finally stood up with the expression of someone who had finished an internal argument and was acting on the conclusion before they could start it again.

Llewel opened the door.

He looked at Pell with the complete attention he brought to arrivals, and his gaze moved, briefly, to the outer pocket of the pack where the flute was, and then back to Pell's face, and something in his expression had the quality of recognition — not of the specific person, but of the specific situation, which was a thing he had seen in various forms and knew the shape of.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," Pell said. He had the slight awkwardness of a man who had rehearsed an opening and found it inadequate on arrival. "I heard — someone at the inn told me — that you serve a good meal here."

"I do," Llewel said.

"I thought I'd try it," Pell said. "If you have a table."

"I have a table," Llewel said, and stepped aside.

Pell came in and looked at the room with the builder's assessment — the proportions, the cleanliness, the quality of the light — and then sat at the table that had been laid for him and looked at the place setting and the single candle and the white linen and said, with genuine appreciation: "This is a nice room."

"Thank you," Llewel said. "We like it."

He brought water and withdrew, and Pell sat in the quiet of the Restaurant's late morning with his hands on the table and looked at nothing in particular, and the flute was in his pocket, and the kitchen was doing what the kitchen did, which was to begin.

In the kitchen, Llewel attended to the quality of the morning.

The kitchen was present — he could feel it, the orientation, the current running beneath things, the shop's awareness settled into its purposeful focus. He stood at the preparation table and let it tell him what it knew, which arrived in the way it always arrived: not in words, not in images, but in the specific quality of the ingredients that presented themselves, the direction the work wanted to go, the feeling of a meal taking its shape before he had consciously decided its shape.

He reached for what the kitchen offered.

It offered him simple things. Good things, carefully chosen, but not elaborate — the food of a man's actual life, the food of the region he had come from, the food of a miller's household and a market town and a table at which a family ate together with the easy comfort of people who knew each other well. Not the food of a bard's fire, not the food of the road, not the food of the life that hadn't been lived.

Not yet.

He began the first course and thought about the flute in the outer pocket, and the way the man had said *a little* to Darby, and the way he had stopped the melody before it became anything, and

he understood, with the clarity that the kitchen sometimes gave him, what kind of meal this was going to be.

He folded his cloth and set it down.

This was not going to be a meal of transformation. It was going to be a meal of encounter — of a man meeting something he had been not-quite-meeting for fifteen years, clearly and fully, perhaps for the first and last time. What he did with the encounter was entirely his own concern. Llewel's function was to make the encounter possible and to make the food excellent and to get out of the way.

He went back to work.

The first course was a soup.

It was the soup of Pell's actual childhood — not literally, not by any mechanism Pell could have identified, but by the evidence of his own response to it, which was the response of a man tasting something he had eaten ten thousand times and had stopped noticing and was now noticing again with the full attention that familiarity usually prevented. The grain and the root vegetables and the specific combination of herbs that his mother had used, or that someone with the same instincts as his mother had used, or that the kitchen had produced by some other means that didn't require explanation.

He ate it and was quiet, and the quiet had the quality of someone receiving something unexpected through a channel they hadn't known was open.

"This is—" He stopped. "This tastes like home," he said, to Llewel, who was at the edge of the room.

"Yes," Llewel said.

"How did you—"

"Eat," Llewel said, gently. "There is time."

Pell ate. He ate the whole of it slowly and with full attention, and when it was done he sat with the empty bowl and the feeling

of his mother's kitchen in his chest, which was not painful but was full in the way that something that had been compressed could be full when it was given room.

He reached into his pocket. He took out the flute. He set it on the table beside the bowl, which he had not planned to do, and looked at it.

Llewel cleared the bowl. He did not comment on the flute.

The second course was bread and a soft cheese and some cold meat sliced thin, and alongside it a small dish of something pickled and bright — the food of a midday meal eaten outdoors, the food of work interrupted briefly for nourishment and then resumed. The food of a miller's day, a good day, a day with purpose and weather and the satisfying weight of something accomplished.

Pell ate it and talked.

He talked about the mill, which he had inherited from his father and expanded, and which now employed six people and served three villages and was, by any reasonable measure, a success. He talked about his wife Elowen, who was sharp and funny and had married him knowing exactly what she was getting and had found, he thought, that the reality was roughly as advertised, which was more than most people managed. He talked about his two children, who were seven and four and were entirely themselves in ways he found continuously surprising and delightful.

He talked about the village, which was small and known to him completely, every family and every field and every dispute and every reconciliation, and he talked about this with the warmth of someone who knew a place well enough to love its specifics rather than its generalities.

He talked, in short, about a good life, and the talking had the quality of someone taking inventory — not anxiously, not defensively, but with the honest attention of a man who wanted to know what he had before he looked at what he hadn't taken.

Llewel listened and cleared the second course and brought the third, and Pell stopped talking and looked at it.

The third course was a thing he didn't recognize.

Not in any ingredient or preparation he could name — it was food, clearly, well-made and good-smelling and set in front of him with Llewel's usual precision. But it was food from nowhere he had been, flavored with something he couldn't place, with a quality that was not quite any of the things he had eaten in his life and was therefore, implicitly, from a life he hadn't.

He looked at it.

He looked at Llewel.

"What is this?" he said.

"Road food," Llewel said. "The food of the traveling tradition. Of the bardic circuit."

Pell was very still.

"The western settlements," Llewel said. "The harvest festivals and the winter halls and the roads between them. The food of the fires where the stories were told and the songs were sung and the news traveled from town to town in the mouths of people who had made the carrying of it their life's work."

Pell looked at the plate. He looked at the flute on the table beside it. "I'm not a bard," he said.

"No," Llewel said. "But you were going to be."

The words landed with the precision of something said by someone who knew exactly what they were saying and had decided to say it directly, which was Llewel's way, and which Pell received with the slight intake of breath of a man who has had something named that he has been not-naming for a long time.

"My uncle," he said.

"Yes," Llewel said.

"He died when I was seventeen. Two years before I would have gone with him." He looked at the plate. "My parents said it was a

sign. That the life was too uncertain, too short, too—" He stopped. "They weren't wrong, exactly. He did die young. The road is hard and the winters are cold and there's no certainty in it." He was quiet for a moment. "But he was happy. Every time he came home, he was—" He touched the flute without picking it up. "He was so completely himself. I've never known anyone else like that."

"Tell me about him," Llewel said.

Pell told him.

He talked about his uncle Renn for the entire third course, which took a long time, because Renn had been a specific and vivid person who had left a specific and vivid impression on a fifteen-year-old boy who had followed him around every time he came through the village and sat at his feet while he played and learned the fingering of a dozen songs on a borrowed lute before his parents noticed and redirected his attention toward the mill accounts.

He talked about Renn's voice, which had been an ordinary speaking voice and an extraordinary singing one — the kind of voice that changed the quality of a room when it opened. He talked about the songs, which were the traveling songs of the western tradition, the long narrative songs that carried histories and scandals and small local dignities that would otherwise be lost, the songs that were the region's memory given breath and melody. He talked about the way Renn had played — not showy, not performative, but with the complete ease of someone doing the thing they were made for, and the specific quality of attention he had given his audiences, which was the attention of someone who understood that the song was not his but theirs, that he was only the vessel.

He talked about the last time he had seen Renn, which was three months before the fever that killed him, when Renn had come through the village for the harvest festival and had played

for two evenings and had sat with Pell on the last morning before he left and had listened to Pell play the melody he'd been working on, the one he'd composed himself, the one he'd never played for anyone else, and had said: *That's yours. That's completely yours. Don't lose it.*

Pell stopped.

He looked at the flute on the table.

"Do you still have it?" Llewel said. "The melody."

"Yes," Pell said. "I've never— I play it sometimes. When I'm alone." He touched the flute again, and this time he picked it up, and he held it in his hands the way he always held it — the familiar weight, the worn wood, the places where his fingers knew exactly where to go. "It's the only thing I ever made that felt like — like it came from somewhere specific in me. That was mine, the way he said."

He looked at Llewel. "I'm not unhappy," he said. "I want you to know that. I'm not a man who has been suffering quietly for fifteen years. I love my wife. I love my children. I love the mill and the village and the people in it." He set the flute down. "I just — I left this door open. A crack. All this time. And I don't—" He stopped. "I don't know whether to walk through it or close it."

"What would walking through it require?" Llewel said.

Pell thought about this with the honesty the meal had been producing in him all morning. "Acknowledging," he said, "that I could have been something else. That the choice my parents made for me — that I made, because I was seventeen and afraid and Renn had just died and the road seemed very long and cold — that it cost something. Not a catastrophe. Not a ruined life. Just—" He looked at the plate. "Something."

Llewel said nothing.

"I know it cost something," Pell said. "I've always known. I just haven't—" He stopped. "Said it," he said. "Out loud. To anyone."

The Restaurant held this with its usual patience.

Pell sat with it for a while, the thing he had just said, which was sitting in the air of the dining room with the quality of something

that had needed saying and had been said and was now simply true in the way that spoken things became true.

He ate the third course.

It tasted like a fire on a cold road and a voice that changed the quality of a room and a specific morning when he was fifteen years old sitting outside the mill with a borrowed lute working out a melody that was his, completely his, that came from somewhere specific in him that had not gone away.

It was very good.

He finished it and sat with the empty plate and the flute in his hands and the thing he had said still in the air, and he waited.

Llewel came from the kitchen.

He stood at the table and looked at Pell with those deep blue eyes, even and clear, and he held in his hands a small plate — the dessert course, simple, a thing of the kind that concluded meals in this place: something sweet, something particular, something that would taste, if received, like the acknowledgment of everything the meal had been building toward.

He set it on the table.

Pell looked at it.

He looked at it for a long time.

The flute was in his hands. His fingers were on the stops in the position of the melody — the one Renn had heard, the one that was his, the one he played alone when nobody was listening. He was not playing it. His fingers simply knew where to go.

He looked at the dessert and he understood, with the clarity of a man who had been brought to a threshold and was standing at it with full awareness of what it was, what accepting it would mean. Not a dramatic meaning — not a life overturned, not a family abandoned, not a mill left to rust. But an acknowledgment. A formal, honest, complete acknowledgment that the door had been open all this time because there was a version of himself that had

never entirely let go of the handle, and that to eat the dessert would be to find that version and look at him directly and say: *you were real, you were possible, you were given up for something worth giving you up for, and I grieve you, and I release you.*

He sat with this.

The Restaurant held him without pressure, without impatience, with the patience of a place that understood that this was a threshold and that thresholds required whatever time they required.

He sat for a long time.

Then he put the flute back in his pocket.

He looked at the dessert. He looked at Llewel.

"I don't think I can," he said.

He said it quietly, without drama, with the honesty of a man who had been honest all morning and saw no reason to stop. Not *I won't* — though that was in it too — but *I can't*, which was more accurate, because the distinction between can't and won't had blurred somewhere in the sitting and he had stopped being certain which one was operating.

Llewel looked at him. Not with disappointment — Llewel did not have a disappointed face, exactly — but with something that was perhaps the closest he came to it, which was a very slight stillness, a quality of having expected something and received something adjacent to it.

"All right," Llewel said.

He took the dessert plate back.

Pell sat for a moment more, and then he stood, and he collected his coat, and he straightened his pack, and the flute was in the outer pocket where it always was.

"What do I owe you?" he said.

Llewel named a price that was fair and Pell paid it, and they looked at each other across the table with the specific quality of two people who have been through something together and have arrived at different conclusions about it, and both of whom understand that both conclusions are the person's own.

"Thank you," Pell said. "For the meal. It was—" He paused. "It was the best meal I've had in a long time."

"I'm glad," Llewel said, and meant it.

Pell went to the door. He stopped, briefly, with his hand on it, and he said without turning around: "The melody. The one my uncle heard." He paused. "I think I'll play it for my children tonight. I've never — I've always played it alone. But I think—" He stopped. "I think they'd like it."

He opened the door and went out into the square.

Sam was at the Claw's door when he came out, because Sam was often at the door when the Restaurant's door opened, and she had been aware of the mid-morning arrival and had been conducting the patient, oblique monitoring she brought to Restaurant days.

She watched him walk down the road. He walked with the settled quality he'd had coming in — not transformed, not deflated exactly, not the particular lightness of someone who had been fed in the full sense. He walked like himself. But there was something in the way he crossed the square that was slightly different from the way he'd crossed it on his way in, something she couldn't immediately name, and she stood at the window and watched him go toward the inn and tried to put a word to it.

Jen came in at the bar and ordered coffee and looked at Sam's expression and then at the window. "The mid-morning one?" she said.

"Yes," Sam said.

"How long was he in?"

"Two hours. Maybe a bit more."

Jen looked at the square. "How does he look?"

Sam thought about it. "Like someone who went somewhere and looked at something and decided to come back," she said. "Not because the something wasn't real. Because coming back was the right answer."

Jen absorbed this. "Did he get the dessert?"

"No," Sam said.

Jen looked at the Restaurant. "Is that—"

"It's fine," Sam said, with the certainty of someone who had been watching this long enough to know the difference between a failure and a conclusion. "That one's going home to finally play his children a song."

Jen looked at her.

"He had a flute," Sam said. "In his pocket. He kept touching it."

They stood for a moment in the comfortable silence of two people who had watched a lot of things from this particular window and had developed, over time, a shared language for what they saw.

"Is Llewel all right?" Jen said.

Sam looked at the Restaurant's door, which was closed, and the sign, which was doing what it did. "He'll be fine," she said. "He doesn't always get the ending he expected. He's learning that's not the same as the wrong ending."

That evening, after supper, before the Claw got properly busy, Llewel came in.

This was not his usual habit — he came in occasionally, but rarely on Restaurant days, and Sam noted his arrival with the quiet attention she gave to departures from pattern.

He sat at the bar. He did not order anything immediately. He had the quality of a man who had come for company rather than drink, which was a specific and legitimate reason to come to a bar and which Sam respected.

She set a mug in front of him without asking.

He looked at it. He looked at the square through the window, which was the early evening square, the market day crowd thinned now, the ordinary business of North Pointe reasserting itself.

"He didn't take the dessert," he said.

"I know," Sam said.

"He was close," Llewel said. "Closer than most who decline. He understood what it was. He sat with it for—" He paused. "A long time."

"And then he said no," Sam said.

"He said he couldn't," Llewel said. "Which is different."

"Is it?" Sam said.

Llewel was quiet for a moment. "I don't know," he said, which was an unusual thing for him to say, and which Sam received without comment. "What I know is that he was honest all morning, and he was honest at the end, and the honesty is its own thing regardless of the dessert."

"He's going to play his children a song tonight," Sam said.

Llewel looked at her. "How do you know?"

"He told me," Sam said. "Indirectly. Through the window." She refilled his mug. "The door wasn't fully closed when he left, Llewel. It was just — less open."

Llewel sat with this. He turned the mug on the bar with the slow deliberateness of a man thinking carefully. "The meal was good," he said finally. "The kitchen gave him what he needed. He received it. He just—"

"Couldn't finish," Sam said.

"Not today," Llewel said.

"Maybe not ever," Sam said. "And maybe that's all right."

Llewel looked at the square. Outside, the evening was doing what evenings did in North Pointe — settling, quieting, the light going warm and low, the clock marking the candlemark with its new-fangled patience. The Restaurant's sign caught the last of the direct sun and held it for a moment in the way it had, luminous without a visible source, certain without explanation.

"Yes," Llewel said. "I think it might be."

He drank his tea. Sam went back to her work. The Claw filled up around them with its usual evening population, and the night came in over the mountains, and somewhere in a village two days east of North Pointe, a man took a small flute out of his pocket and

sat down with his children and played them a melody that was his, completely his, that had come from somewhere specific in him and had never gone away.

Whether that was consolation or tragedy depended on how you looked at it.

Sam, if asked, would have said it was neither.

She would have said it was a man being exactly who he was, which was its own kind of grace, and which the Restaurant had made possible even in the withholding, and which was — when she thought about it at the end of the day, wiping down the bar with the good cloth, the Claw quiet around her and the sign across the square doing its patient work — enough.

It was, on balance, enough.

the long way ‘round

. . .

SHE CAME in out of the rain.

This was not dramatic — it was a light rain, the kind that arrived in early autumn without much intention, more a suggestion of weather than weather itself — but it meant that when the Claw’s door opened at the seventh candlemark on a Tuesday evening, it opened with the particular sound of a wet evening outside, and the woman who came through it brought with her the smell of rain on old roads and the unhurried quality of someone who had been traveling for a long time and had arrived, at last, at a specific destination.

She was old. Not frail — she carried herself with the upright ease of someone who had spent decades on stages and in rehearsal rooms and had consequently developed a relationship with her own body that was professional rather than incidental, the posture of someone who understood that how you occupied space was a choice and had been making that choice deliberately for sixty years. But she was old in the way that made her age the first thing you noticed and immediately the least interesting thing about her, because everything else about her was more interesting: the quality of her attention, which was the attention of someone who had

spent a lifetime watching people and had never lost the appetite for it; the warmth of her face, which had been beautiful once and was now something better, the bones doing their long architectural work; the clothes, which were good and well-traveled and had the specific combination of practicality and flair of someone who knew what suited them and had stopped apologizing for it.

She looked at the Claw the way people looked at places they had been before and were seeing again after a long interval — not with nostalgia exactly, which was a passive thing, but with the active quality of comparison, of measuring what was against what had been and finding the relationship between the two interesting.

She chose a table near the window, which gave her a view of the square, and she sat down and looked at it the way she had presumably looked at stages for sixty years: reading it, understanding it, finding the light and the sight lines and the way the space told you what it was.

Sam came to the table.

The woman looked up at her with those warm, assessing eyes. "Good evening," she said. Her voice had the trained quality of someone who had been using it as an instrument for decades — not affected, but placed, the voice of someone who knew exactly what it was doing. "I'd like whatever's good tonight, and a glass of something red if you have it, and I'd very much like to sit here for a while and look at this square, if that's all right."

"It's all right," Sam said. "We encourage it."

The woman smiled, and the smile had the quality of someone who smiled completely when they smiled, without reservation. "I came here once before," she said. "A very long time ago. I wanted to see it again."

Sam looked at her with the attention she gave to people saying things worth attending to. "How long ago?" she said.

The woman looked at the square. "Sixty-three years," she said. "Give or take."

Sam absorbed this. "Not much will be the same," she said.

"No," the woman agreed. "But some things will." She looked at

the square with the expression of someone conducting a patient inventory. "The road is the same. The shape of it. The way it sits. I imagine the square is much the same, too." She looked at the Claw's interior. "This place is the same, I think. Different proprietor, different faces, but the same — quality. The same feeling of being somewhere that knows what it's for."

"We try," Sam said.

"You succeed," the woman said, simply, and looked back at the square.

Her name, she told Sam when the food arrived, was Corva. No second name offered, or rather a second name that had been her professional name for fifty years and felt more truly hers than the one she'd been born with, and which was simply Corva, the way certain people were simply themselves without qualification.

She ate with the appetite of someone who had been on the road and was glad of a good meal, and she ate with attention, which was the highest compliment Sam's kitchen received and which Sam noted without comment. She asked about the stew's preparation with the genuine curiosity of someone who had eaten in a great many establishments and had never lost interest in how things were made.

Sam answered her questions and refilled her wine and did not press for the story, because the story had the quality of something that would arrive in its own time.

It arrived after the stew, when Corva was looking at the square with the particular quality of someone letting memory and present occupy the same space simultaneously.

"There was a man here," she said. "Running the Claw. When I came through before." She looked at the bar, which was Sam's bar now but had the bones of something older. "Neal, I think his name was. A big man, very quiet. He brought me a bowl of soup I hadn't ordered and he said—" She stopped, and smiled with the fullness

she brought to smiling. "He said: *you look like someone who's been going the wrong direction. The right one's south.*"

Sam looked at her. "Neal," she said. "I know the name. He retired twenty-odd years ago. Lives east of town now."

"Is he well?"

"Last I heard," Sam said. "He must be ninety if he's a day."

"Good," Corva said, with great warmth. "That's very good." She drank her wine. "He was right, of course. I'd been going north. Away from home, away from my stepmother, away from everything. Just — away, which isn't a direction, exactly. And he said south and something in me knew he was right before I could have told you why."

"Did you go?" Sam said.

"Not immediately," Corva said. "I slept here first. At the inn." She nodded toward the Weary Head, visible through the window. "I had a dream. One of those dreams that's more than a dream — you know the kind. Very specific. A stage, very warm, full of people, and I was — not performing, exactly. Directing. Telling other people where to stand and how to move and what the light should do, and the whole thing was—" She paused, looking for the word. "Mine," she said. "It was entirely mine. I'd made it."

She looked at her wine.

"And then in the morning," she said, "I went to buy some provisions for the road and there was a cheese shop. Three women running it — something strange about them, something—"

"Dryads," Sam said.

Corva looked at her. "Is that what they were." Not a question — a confirmation of something she had suspected for sixty years and was only now having verified. "They gave me a cheese. A tasting piece, no charge — they said it was from the far Southeast and that I should try it and tell them what I thought." She was quiet for a moment. "It tasted like—" She stopped. "I don't have words for it. It tasted like the dream. It tasted like the stage full of people and the thing being mine. It tasted like somewhere I hadn't been yet that was already home."

She looked at the square.

"I went south that morning," she said. "I've been south, more or less, ever since."

Llewel came in at the eighth candlemark.

This was not his habit — he came to the Claw occasionally, but rarely in the full swing of an evening, and Sam looked up when he came through the door with the mild attention she gave to departures from pattern. He was in his black and white, as always, silver hair back, and he had the quality of a man who had come out for a quiet glass of wine at the end of a day and was going to have one.

Sam poured him a glass without being asked and set it at the bar and he sat down and looked at the square through the window with the reflective quality of an evening that had nothing specific in it.

Then he looked at Corva.

Sam watched him look at her. She watched the quality of the look, which was the look he got sometimes — the particular focused attention of a man receiving information from a source that wasn't visible, the kitchen's awareness operating at a distance, Nimarith's current running beneath things. She watched his hands, which were on the bar, and she watched them go completely still.

He sat with the stillness for a moment. Then he picked up his wine and went to Corva's table.

"Good evening," he said.

Corva looked up at him. She looked at his eyes, which did to her what they did to everyone, and she absorbed it with the equanimity of someone who had spent sixty years not being rattled by unexpected things. "Good evening," she said.

"My name is Llewel Magcaryn," he said. "I run the establishment across the square." He paused. "I wonder if you would do me the honor of dining with me this evening. Properly, I mean. I find I have something I'd like to cook for you."

Corva looked at him for a moment with those warm, assessing eyes. She looked at the Restaurant's sign, visible through the window, doing its quiet work in the evening dark. She looked back at Llewel.

"I've already eaten," she said.

"I know," Llewel said. "Nevertheless."

She looked at him for a moment longer, and something in her face had the quality of someone recognizing a pattern they've seen before — not this specific pattern, but the shape of it, the feeling of a door opening that you hadn't known was there. She had spent sixty years recognizing that feeling in other people and helping them through. She knew it, apparently, in herself.

"All right," she said, and finished her wine, and stood.

Sam watched them cross the square together — the Mountain Elf in his black and white and the old woman in her good traveling clothes — and she stood at the Claw's window for a moment after the Restaurant's door closed behind them, and she felt, in the particular way she felt things about the Restaurant, that this was a different kind of evening from most.

She went back to her bar and said nothing to anyone, because some things didn't need announcing.

Inside, Llewel seated her at the best table — the one by the window, the one with the view of the square — and brought her water and lit the candle and then stood for a moment in the way he stood when he was receiving what the kitchen had to tell him.

The kitchen was extraordinary tonight.

He had felt it building since he looked at her across the Claw — the orientation, the current, but different from the usual quality of it, higher and warmer, the specific feeling of Nimarith's attention fully engaged rather than gently directing. The god of this place, who expressed his will through nudges and whispers and the right ingredient at the right moment, was tonight expressing

something more direct, and what he was expressing was unmistakable.

This one, Nimarith said, through the warmth of the kitchen and the specific ingredients presenting themselves and the shape of the meal assembling itself in Llewel's mind with unusual clarity. *This one paid it forward. Every nudge she received, she gave to others. Every door that opened for her, she opened for someone else. This meal is not mine to give. It is yours. Make it well.*

Llewel stood in the kitchen for a long moment.

Then he folded his cloth and set it down and began.

The amuse-bouche was a piece of cheese.

He brought it on a small board — a single piece, the size of a bite, with nothing alongside, no garnish, no accompaniment, just the cheese on the pale wood — and he set it in front of Corva and stepped back.

She looked at it.

She looked at Llewel.

She looked at the cheese.

It was not — it could not be — the same cheese. The shop had been gone for decades, the Dryadic trio long since returned to wherever Dryads returned to, the specific wheel of cheese from the far Southeast consumed sixty-three years ago by a girl running away from a mean stepmother who had needed to know which direction to go. It could not be the same cheese.

It tasted exactly the same.

She ate it and closed her eyes for a moment — not the eyes-closed of someone performing emotion but the eyes-closed of someone receiving something directly, without the mediation of sight, letting it arrive completely. It tasted like the morning she had gone south. It tasted like the dream and the stage full of people and the thing being entirely hers. It tasted like the beginning of everything that had come after.

She opened her eyes.

Llewel was watching her with those deep blue eyes, even and still.

"Oh," she said. "I see."

"Yes," Llewel said.

"This is — this is for me."

"Yes," Llewel said again. "It is entirely for you."

She looked at the Restaurant's interior — the clean tables, the upturned chairs, the carved border near the ceiling, the light that was soft and warm and entirely natural despite having no obvious source — and she sat in it for a moment with the particular quality of someone who has been given a gift they did not expect and are finding the receiving of it more difficult than any giving they have ever done.

"I didn't come here for this," she said. "I came to thank the town. Not to—"

"I know," Llewel said. "The town is thanking you back." He paused. "Or rather — someone is, through the town. Through this." He looked at the kitchen door. "I am only the instrument tonight. The meal is not mine."

She looked at him. "Whose is it?"

Llewel considered this with the care he brought to theological questions, which was the care of someone who lived adjacent to a god's intentions and had learned to be precise about them. "It belongs to everyone you helped," he said. "Made possible by the one who sent you south."

Corva sat with this.

Then she picked up her fork, because there was nothing else to do, and the meal began.

The first course was the food of a young woman's first season in the South.

Not the food of the road — she had eaten on the road, plain and

functional, the food of someone with limited coin and a long way to go — but the food of arrival: the specific cuisine of the southeastern port towns, warm and abundant and built around communal tables and long evenings and the specific generosity of a culture that fed strangers as a matter of principle. She had arrived with nothing and had been fed by people who didn't know her, and the feeding had been the first indication that the South was where she was going to be able to be who she was.

She ate the first course and told Llewel about arriving.

She told him about the port city — its size, which had been overwhelming after the small town she'd come from, and which had become, over several weeks, not overwhelming but invigorating. She told him about the boarding house where she'd stayed while she looked for work, run by a woman named Betta who had strong opinions about everything and was right about most of it. She told him about the first theater she'd walked into, which had been hiring for anything — stage hands, ticket sellers, someone to sweep after evening performances — and which she had walked into on instinct and had not, in any meaningful sense, walked out of for the next fifty years.

"I swept for three months," she said, with the warmth of someone describing a beloved beginning. "Then they needed someone to run lines with the apprentice players because the assistant director had broken his hand, and I did it, and the director — a man named Fossard, absolutely terrifying, the best director I ever knew — watched me do it and said: *you're not a sweeper.* And that was that."

"What did he see?" Llewel said.

"What Neal saw," she said. "What your Dryads saw. What I'd been seeing in other people ever since." She looked at her plate. "I could see what people needed to become. What they were reaching toward. And I knew how to help them reach it." She paused. "I didn't know that was a skill. I thought everyone could see it."

"Not everyone," Llewel said.

"No," she said. "I know that now."

The second course was the food of her first direction credit.

She had been twenty-four and terrified and had made seventeen decisions in the first rehearsal that she was certain were wrong and that turned out, on opening night, to be exactly right, and the specific relief of that — the terror transforming into the particular joy of something made well — had been a flavor she had spent fifty years chasing and occasionally catching, and the second course tasted precisely of it.

She told him about the play, which had been a small thing — a two-act comedy, regional premiere, limited run — and about the cast, who had been skeptical of her at twenty-four and had come around by the third week of rehearsal, and about the opening night when she had stood at the back of the house and watched the audience and known, with the certainty of something that bypassed doubt entirely, that this was the thing she was for.

"There's a moment," she said, "when a piece of theater finds itself. You can feel it in the room. The audience stops being a collection of individuals and becomes a single thing — attentive, present, breathing together. And the performers feel it and give more, and the more they give the more the audience becomes one thing, and it goes back and forth like that until—" She stopped. "Until the play is alive. Genuinely alive. Not performed, not executed. *Alive*." She looked at the candle. "I have spent fifty years trying to make that happen and I have succeeded perhaps forty times, out of hundreds of productions, and each time has been—" She shook her head. "There isn't a word."

"No," Llewel said. "There isn't."

The third course was the play.

Not a play she had directed — the play she had written. Her own, the first one, the one she had been afraid to write for ten years

and had finally written at thirty-six when she had run out of reasons not to. It had run for two seasons in three cities and had been revived four times since, and it was the thing that was most entirely hers in a career full of things that were partly hers, and it tasted, when the third course arrived, like the specific terror and freedom of making something that had no one else's fingerprints on it.

She talked about writing it, which she had not talked about in some time — the process of it, which had been messier and more frightening than directing, because directing was collaborative and writing was alone, and alone was where all the real questions lived. She talked about the night she had finished the final scene and sat in her empty office at two in the morning reading it back and thinking: *this is true. I don't know how I know it's true, but it is.*

"What was it about?" Llewel said.

She smiled. "A woman who goes south," she said. "More or less."

Llewel looked at her. Something moved across his face that was almost a smile and more than one.

"More or less," he said.

The fourth course arrived, and Corva looked at it and felt something she hadn't expected to feel, which was that she didn't know what it was.

Every other course had been recognizable — not always immediately, but recognizable, tasting of things she knew from her own life, places and moments and flavors that were hers. This one tasted of nothing she had encountered before. It was extraordinary — she could feel that it was extraordinary with the full extent of sixty years of eating and the particular attention of someone who had always paid attention to food — but it was entirely new, and it was not hers.

She looked at Llewel.

"Whose is this?" she said.

"You tell me," Llewel said.

She tasted it again. She sat with it with her full attention, reading it the way she had read faces and rooms and audiences for sixty years, and what she found in it was — young. It tasted young in a specific way, the flavor of someone at the beginning of something, standing at the door of a life they couldn't yet see but could feel the shape of, and there was in it a quality that she recognized not from her own experience but from having witnessed it in others, many times, across many years.

She set down her fork.

"There was a girl," she said. "Fifteen years ago. She came to the theater — came to audition for a walk-on part, smallest thing we offered, and she was — she was extraordinary. Raw, completely untrained, but the stage recognized her. I could see it from the back of the house. The way the light found her." She looked at the plate. "Her family wanted her to come home. Take over a business. She came to me and asked what she should do, and I—" She stopped.

"What did you tell her?" Llewel said.

"I told her what Neal told me," Corva said. "I said: you look like someone who's been going the wrong direction. The right one is this." She touched the table. "I gave her a place in the company. I paid her training myself for the first year. I told her that the theater was her home for as long as she needed it to be." She was quiet. "She's one of the finest performers working in the South now. Has been for a decade."

She looked at the course in front of her, at the flavor of someone else's beginning.

"This is hers," she said.

"Yes," Llewel said. "And the others. All of them. Everyone you saw clearly and pushed toward the right door." He paused. "You have been doing this work for fifty years. You received three nudges — a bowl of soup, a dream, a piece of cheese — and you spent a lifetime paying them forward with interest." He looked at her steadily. "That is what is being celebrated tonight."

Corva sat very still.

She had spent sixty years being the person who saw other people clearly and she had not, until this moment, in this restaurant, understood that someone had been seeing her in return.

She pressed her fingers against her mouth for a moment, briefly, and then she straightened — the old trained straightening, the posture of someone who occupied space deliberately — and she picked up her fork, and she ate the course that tasted of every young person she had ever helped, and it was the finest thing she had ever tasted.

The dessert course was simple.

He brought it when the fourth course was finished and the table had been cleared and the candle had burned low and replaced and Corva had been sitting for a while in the warm quiet of the Restaurant with the quality of someone who has been somewhere real and is taking a moment before returning to the ordinary world.

A small pastry, dark and warm, with a sauce of something reduced and complex alongside. The food of a theater on a closing night — the specific meal that certain theaters in the South had served backstage after the final performance of a successful run, a tradition of completion, the company gathered in the wings eating the same thing and knowing that this particular version of this particular thing was ending and had been worth doing.

She looked at it.

She looked at Llewel.

"Closing night," she said.

"Yes," Llewel said. "And opening night of whatever comes next."

She ate it slowly, with full attention, the way she had eaten everything — the full attention of someone who understood that the meal was almost done and that almost done was different from done and deserved its own quality of presence. It tasted of comple-

tion without finality, of the specific warmth of something well made and well ended, and underneath all of it, running like a thread through everything, the faint mineral brightness of the cheese from the far Southeast that had been the beginning of it all.

She ate the last bite.

She set down the fork.

She sat in the warm dark of the Restaurant for a long time, and Llewel sat with her at the next table with his wine, and neither of them spoke, and the candle burned steadily, and outside the clock marked the late candlemark with its patient authority, and North Pointe held them both in its quiet, peculiar way.

She came out in the small hours, when the square was entirely empty and the moon was doing its best work on the cobblestones and the lake was a suggestion of silver visible between the rooftops to the south.

She sat on the Restaurant's step.

She had said she would talk to whoever would listen, and in the morning, when the town woke, that was what she did.

She was there when Makota's kits came out for the first run of the day, and she watched them with the delight of someone encountering something extraordinary in the ordinary course of a morning, and one of them came and sat beside her and she talked to it for ten minutes with complete seriousness.

She was there when Jen came around on her first rounds, and Jen sat beside her on the step and listened to her talk about the theater and the South and the girl who had become one of the finest performers working, and Jen asked good questions and received the answers with the attention of someone who understood that she was being given something worth having.

She was there when Darby arrived with his morning energy and his theory that the Restaurant had done something extraordinary the previous evening — he had seen the light in the

windows at two in the morning — and she confirmed this with the warmth of someone who found his enthusiasm entirely charming, and Darby sat on the step and listened to her for a full candlemark with an expression of genuine reverence that was, Jen would later tell Sam, the most he had ever resembled a reasonable person.

She was there when Vamir came out to take in the morning air, and he paused in the road and she called to him, and they talked for a while in the formal, warm manner of two people who had both been alive long enough to be interested in each other without needing to perform the interest, and Vamir told her about elven theatrical traditions and she told him about the southeastern repertory companies and they parted with the mutual satisfaction of people who had exchanged something real.

She was there when Sam came out with coffee and sat beside her without announcement, and they talked in the way of people who had recognized each other the previous evening as the same kind of person and were continuing a conversation that had been interrupted by the small matter of an extraordinary meal.

She was there when Minnie came out — Minnie, who did not generally come to sit on other establishments' steps — and stood in front of her with her arms folded and said: "You came through here sixty years ago."

"I did," Corva said.

"Rondel's time," Minnie said. "At the inn."

"He was kind," Corva said. "He didn't know me from anyone and he gave me the south room and told me the bed was the best in the house. I've slept in a great many beds since and I think he was right."

Minnie looked at her for a moment with the frank assessment she brought to people she was deciding about, and then she sat down on the step — Minnie, who did not sit on steps — and said: "Tell me about the theater."

And Corva told her.

At mid-morning, when she had been talking for the better part of five hours and had fed half the town on sixty years of stories, she rose from the step with the care her age required and stood in the square and looked at it one last time.

The mountains to the north. The lake to the south. The Claw and the inn and the bookshop and the bakery and the smithy and all the rest of them, each one doing its quiet, specific work in the Icosagon's careful balance. The clock in the tower marking the candlemark. The Púca's jewelry shop with its impenetrable internal logic. The trade road running east and west.

And the Restaurant's sign above her head, making its single uncomplicated claim.

She looked at it for a long moment.

Then she turned and knocked on the Restaurant's door.

Llewel opened it.

She looked at him — the black and white, the silver hair, the deep blue eyes — and he looked at her, and between them was the specific quality of two people who have shared something real and do not need to make more of it than it is.

"Thank you," she said. "For the meal."

"Thank you," Llewel said, "for sixty years of work."

She smiled the full smile. "Give my thanks to whoever is listening," she said.

"I will," Llewel said. "He already knows."

She adjusted her pack — the practical, familiar gesture of a woman who had been adjusting packs for sixty years and had the motion completely — and she looked at the trade road, which ran south through the gate and on toward the Southeast, toward the theater that was no longer hers and the young people who were running it now and the retirement that was waiting for her with all its unscheduled hours and its particular freedoms.

She walked.

The town watched her go — Jen from the square, Sam from the Claw's doorway, Darby from the bench where he had been sitting since she left the step, Minnie from the inn's porch with her arms at

her sides rather than folded, which was as close to waving as Minnie got.

At the south gate she paused and turned and looked back at the square one last time, the way travelers paused at gates, and she saw them all watching and she raised a hand, briefly, and then she went through the gate and the road took her, and the gate was empty, and the square was ordinary again.

Llewel went back inside.

He stood in the dining room for a moment — the table cleared, the candle extinguished, the chairs upturned in their precise mathematical rows, the room returned to itself. The morning light came through the window at its autumn angle and lay across the floor in a long pale rectangle, and the sign above the door caught it the way it caught all light, holding it with the patient certainty of something that knew what it was and needed no further confirmation.

He stood in the quiet of it.

The meal had been Nimarith's, as the god had said, and Llewel had been the instrument of it, as he was always the instrument of it, and the evening had been — he stood with the feeling of it, the specific warmth of a thing done exactly right — extraordinary. Not in the way of the difficult meals, the ones that required everything he had and then more. Extraordinary in a different way: the way a thing was extraordinary when it was entirely what it should be, when the occasion and the instrument and the recipient were exactly matched, and what resulted was not a performance of rightness but simply rightness itself.

He thought about Corva going south at seventeen with a piece of cheese and a dream and a bowl of soup she hadn't ordered, and he thought about sixty years of stages and plays and young people seen clearly and pushed toward the right doors, and he thought about the girl who had become one of the finest performers working in the South and who did not know that her beginning

had been celebrated tonight in a restaurant in a small town on a trade road by a Mountain Elf who cooked under the direction of a god with a magnificent sense of humor.

He thought about Neal, who was ninety if he was a day and living east of town and had said the right thing to the right person at the right moment because a tavern's gift was to know its customers' destinies and slip them a nudge across the counter with their soup.

He thought about the Dryadic trio and the cheese from the far Southeast and the Weary Head's dreams of destiny, and about the Icosagon's twenty shops each doing their particular work, and about North Pointe sitting at its crossroads with its peculiar, patient, fundamentally benevolent magic, sending people south and east and west and north for as long as it had been here and long before, turning travelers into people who knew which direction to go.

His hands were completely still.

After a while he went to the kitchen, which was warm and quiet and entirely itself, and he began to prepare for the evening.

Whoever came next, the table would be ready.

Whatever they needed, the kitchen would know.

And the sign above the door would catch the light, as it always caught the light, and the road would bring whoever the road was going to bring, and North Pointe would do what North Pointe had always done, which was to receive them and feed them and send them on their way, changed or unchanged or simply fed, toward whatever came next.

The Restaurant was open.

It was always open.

That was the whole of it, and it was enough.

afterword

Knowing that this was a very different way to visit North Pointe, I do hope you've enjoyed these stories.

I'm reminded that I've nine more shops to visit—including some that I've been desperate to get *exactly right,* like Makota's bakery and Leota's own, complicated story. If you'd like to read those stories—or any of the others I haven't yet covered—I would truly love to hear from you. You can visit me at DonJones.com, and on my "HMU" page, you'll find my email address.

This collection of stories wouldn't have happened without Megan, a reader who took a moment from her day to reach out. It absolutely made *my* day when she did, and the idea for framing Llewel's restaurant as a series of short stories was one hundred percent hers. A million times, thank you!

In the meantime, if you haven't looked at some of my other fantasy series, be sure to check 'em out. There's a whole list at Don Jones.com, as well as on the following pages.

Thank you for being a reader.

Don Jones
June 2026

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tales from the broken claw

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Cuts & Catastrophes • *Bandages & Banshees*

Entrees & Epiphanies

Clean & Wholesome - All-Ages Appeal

Recommended for readers 7th grade and up

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

Omnibus eBook editions available

the aetheric trails

COZY FRONTIER FANTASY

Join a trio of Walkers of the Aetheric Trails—users of magic in a world much like the American Frontier, traveling across the plains and ranges to offer their help where they can. Artie, Silas, and Lark each control one of the three aspects of magic—paying for its use with Echoes that affect themselves. But it's all worth it when they can bring peace and stability to the scattered towns of the world.

What the Creek Knows

Recommended for 7th grade readers and up.

Appealing to all ages.

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

clara thorn

Award-winning Mid-Grade and Young Adult fiction!

Clara is an orphan who happens to be good at math. Really, *really* goo at math. So much so, that when it turns out she's really a witch (the good kind), she *sees* magic as immense, rainbow-hued equations that she can manipulate. Not every witch can do that, and it winds up being the key to her discovering a whole other world of magic and wonder.

Join Clara and her friends as they deal with the growing threat of the human, witch-hunting Paladins, unlock their destinies, and ultimately take up the battle to save all witches—and their human allies—for all time.

Clara Thorn, the witch that was found

Clara Thorn, the witch that fought

Clara Thorn, the witch that won

Recommended for 7th grade readers and up.

Appealing to all ages.

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

Omnibus edition available

stories of witchkind

Multi-Award Winning Fantasy

A Kirkus Starred Review

Journey to a world much like a medieval version of our own… but very different, indeed. Magic-wielding witchkind live in secret alongside their human kin, quietly using their powers over Sea, Sky, Earth, and Flame to better everyone's life.

Young Daniel Scratch is Tested on his thirteenth birthday, and Chosen to be the sole Adherent for one of the world's six greatest powers, or Axes—launching him into an adventure he could never have imagined, and questions of morals and ethics that he'll grapple with for his entire life.

Daniel Scratch

Master of the Tower

The Fifth Axis

The Order of Some

The Conspiracy of One

The Truth of All

Appealing to, and recommended for, ages fourteen and up.

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

Omnibus editions available

the unsettled lands

FRONTIER FANTASY

Set in a world like the American Pioneer West, with hints of the Gilded Age: Gunslingers meet magic-slingers of many traditions, while the industrial barons manipulate everything to their benefit. Join Ben and Cody on their quest to restore the Balance and prevent the minions of The Divine and The Foul from ruining the world.

The Hedge Wizard's Apprentice

The Weight of Water

The Furnace Cities

The Reckoning at the Balance

What Remains

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eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

endless sky

LITRPG / GAMELIT

A science-fiction themed "GameLit" novel, in the vein of *Ready Player One*. Our characters are in a fully immersive virtual reality game, dealing not only with side quests, "dungeon crawls," and leveling up—but also with the underlying reality of a game system that might be breaking down. Also, they're not sure if their physical bodies are still there. Hmm.

Endless Sky: Truthsayer

Endless Sky: New Worlds

Endless Sky: Old Bones

Endless Sky: End Game

Recommended for Young Adults and older.

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

the achillios chronicles

SCIENCE FICTION

A world that has forgotten that it's "magic" originates in science. A terraformed colony that was meant as bait. A young man, Taryn, who has to piece it all together and save his world.

Alabaster

Onyx

Verdant

Recommended for Young Adults and older.

Free from DonJones.com/freebies

eBooks on Amazon

Paperbacks available everywhere

standalone novels

The Never: A Tale of Peter and the Fae

A retelling of *Peter Pan* from the faeries' point of view, where Peter isn't necessarily a hero, and where the story starts long before those children fly into Neverland.

Bob Constantine (no relation)

A tongue-in cheek take on ghost stories, with our hero, Bob, pretending to be an exorcist to scam money out of gullible people. With the help of his ghost friend, of course. It's all just a con… until Bob's past starts to catch up with him, and it suddenly becomes all too real.

A House of Forgotten Quests and the Dragons That Lie Within

A richly imagined literary fantasy in the Victorian style, pondering the question, "what becomes of people who engage on a great, world-changing quest… only to abandon it before its conclusion?" Dr. Alastair Finch must not only answer the question, but also take up some of those quests, if he's to unlock the Gateways and release our world's true source of courage and inspiration: Dragons.

Imperium Galactica

Imperium Galactica is an epic science fiction novel set in a galaxy governed by a single, ancient dynasty whose monopoly on interstellar travel keeps thousands of worlds in perpetual dependency. When nineteen-year-old Kaiden Kentur is thrust from his family's minor mining operation into the heart of Imperial politics, he discovers that the empire's foundations rest entirely on a lie — and that he may be the only person alive with the ability to dismantle it. Equal parts political thriller and coming-of-age story, *Imperium Galactica* asks whether genuine change is possible in a

system designed to absorb and neutralize every challenge to its own survival.

the duck creek mysteries

A series of cozy mysteries—think *Murder, She Wrote*, where there's no blood, no "spice," and no violence—set in the idyllic (and real-world) mountain town of Duck Creek Village, Utah. Each novel focuses around a piece of mysterious mountain lore, which is what first attracts our heroes—until they become embroiled in more mundane mysteries that threaten the tranquility and harmony of the mountain.

The Mystery of the Starlet's Shadow

The Mystery of the Hermit's Hideout

The Mystery of the Navajo Neptune

The Mystery of the Rhoades to Ruin

The Mystery of the Sasquatch's Trail

The Mystery of the Stone People

The Mystery of the Golden Talon

The Mystery of the Ghost of the Iron Horse

The Mystery of the Coyote's Ember

The Mystery of the Golden Eagle • *A Duck Creek Junior Mystery*

Cedar Mountain Campfire Stories

Clean & Wholesome - All-Ages Appeal

Recommended for readers 7th grade and up

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

free novels available on donjones.com

The Achillios Chronicles

In the desert city of Alabaster, thirteen-year-old Taryn is the only one who can hear the ancient Tower's true voice, discovering its weather-altering machinery holds a secret far darker than its life-sustaining hum. As he unlocks the truth behind his ancestors' arrival, he realizes the planet Achillios wasn't a world to be settled, but a final, desperate refuge. Now, Taryn must confront the chilling reality that the door locked five centuries ago was never meant to keep people out—it was built to keep a warning in.

Alabaster • *Onyx* • *Verdant*

The Prime Wave Accounting

For eons, Michael has "corrected" the universe's design flaws by incinerating tens of thousands of worlds, viewing destruction as mere accounting rather than cruelty. But when World 72,664 defies his calculations, the cosmic janitor is forced to stop following the math. *The Prime Wave Accounting* is a gripping trilogy about a burnt-out god who finally decides to give a damn, even if it means breaking the universe he was built to save.

Power Wave • *Superior Wave* • *Supreme Wave*

These are also available in the Kindle store, and in paperback format, on Amazon.

about the author

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Goldendoodle named Corentin.