

peacekeepers & púca

A Cozy Fantasy

Tales from the Broken Claw

Book Seven

donjones

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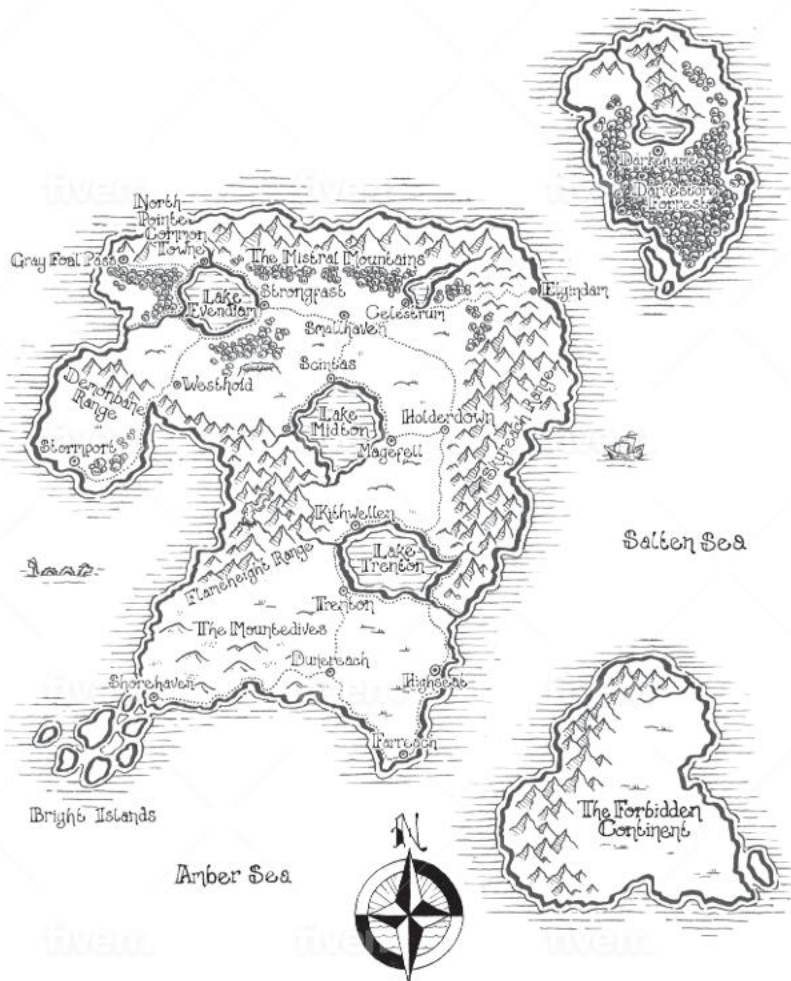
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Urwald



2019



one

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JENNIFER DARME WOKE two candlemarks before sunrise, as always. She emerged from dreamless sleep already certain of the time, the weather, and the reason her right knee ached more than usual. No one had ever called her delicate, but the bed in the gaol's upper-floor apartment seemed designed to grind every joint against the raw edges of morning. She swore it added a new wooden slat whenever she slept particularly well, just to keep her honest.

She sat on the edge of the bed for a breath or two, keeping her eyes half-lidded. For a moment she let herself listen—first to the building itself (timbers settling, the sound of water dripping in the gaol's cellar), then to the silence outside, which was profound and perfect and, this close to midsummer, already promising to fray at the edges with bird noise and wind before the candlemark burned down. Once, in her first moons here, Jen had clung to this moment or two as a comfort; now, it was simply the blank space between one set of obligations and the next.

She rose, wrapped herself in the heavy, gray blanket she'd liberated from the inn years ago, and crossed the room to her kitchen shelf. Two mugs hung by their handles from the low beam above, each chipped and lopsided. She plucked the one nearest, ran a thumb over its pitted

rim, and filled it with water from the pitcher she'd left to settle overnight. There was a new layer of dust on the pitcher's lid—nothing escaped the fine grit that blew in from the foothills—so she rinsed the mug, watched the swirl of clouded water in the basin, and set about making her tea.

She preferred strong tea, the sort that left tannin stains on the mug and would, if left long enough, pit the enamel off her molars. She spooned dried leaves into the pot with exaggerated care, poured in the water, and set it directly over the small blue flame of her stove. While it steeped, she dressed: loose black trousers, sleeveless white shirt (both from the basket of town laundry that rotated through every sennight), then her constable's vest, a battered thing with faded insignia and more than one singe along the hem. Last came her boots, which she knocked against the wall to dislodge a pebble.

Jen drank the tea standing by the window, looking out on the grassy square. From here she could see the inn, the bakery, and—just barely, over the main buildings—the shadowed outline of the stables. There was not a light visible in any of them. The common had that pre-dawn quality of looking both smaller and more mysterious than it ever would in daylight, as if the town was a stage that hadn't yet decided what play it would perform today.

She sipped her tea, let the bitterness sear her tongue, and remembered other mornings.

Once, when she was younger, Jen had spent mornings like this standing watch in fortresses much larger than this, under skies that threatened arrows or worse, waiting for alarms and signals, the raising of flags that meant trouble was on the way. Even then, she hadn't minded the waiting—better than fighting. Now, this waiting was all she had, and she liked it even more. There was no one to share it with, which made it better still.

Jen finished the tea, set the mug in the sink, and fastened the bracelet of Hellsting around her right wrist. The inside was stamped with the sigil of the long-dead magicker she'd served—out of habit, she spun it so the crest faced in. Then she took up her ring of keys and descended the stairs.

Downstairs was colder, the stone walls holding the night's chill.

Her office was a converted cell just inside the door, its desk stacked with ledgers and paperwork. She paused long enough to check that her calendar was current (it was) and that the bottle of painkiller for her knee was where it should be (it wasn't, but she found it three minutes later, in her outbox, with a note attached: "Don't forget."). She popped the cork, dry-swallowed the tablet, and pocketed the rest.

Before leaving, she stepped into the holding cell. The cot was made, the bucket emptied, and the only thing in the cell was a folded square of paper, tucked in the back corner. She picked it up and unfolded it. There was a message scrawled in an unfamiliar hand:

"Good jail. Good sleep. Thanks. —W"

She refolded it, smiled despite herself, and stuck it to the cell door with a bit of wax.

Outside, the town was motionless. Jen locked up behind her, tucked the ring of keys into her vest, and set off on her rounds.

Her route began at the gaol, circled the square, then branched off depending on the season and what her instincts told her was likely. Today she moved on the covered walkway that ran along three sides of the square before stepping through the town gate and onto the trade road. As always, Knodalon was on already his bench, back perfectly straight, hands folded atop his knees, eyes fixed on the gate. He looked like a statue grown tired of its own company.

Jen stopped in front of him, cleared her throat.

He turned his head by a single degree. "Jennifer."

She tipped her chin in acknowledgment. "Knodalon."

They stared at the morning together. The silence between them was never uncomfortable. She wondered, not for the first time, if he actually slept, or if he simply sat here all night, measuring out each passing minute. If he did sleep, she'd never caught him at it.

"Anything change?" she asked.

He didn't answer for a full thirty seconds, and then: "Clouds coming. Distant, but they have lightning in them." He turned his head a little more. "Some travelers on the road before sunrise. You will see them from the ridge."

"Thanks," she said, and meant it.

He nodded once, and resumed his vigil. She moved on.

She continued west, past the gaol's roadside entrance and Tyran's outfitter shop, to the western road gate, not quite out of the town proper. Here, the town wall—in reality, the back side of the two-story buildings—rose from the grass, notched and patched, a peculiar artifact of a time when defense was a daily worry. These days, even the gates were more ornamental than functional, but a wide path along the top of the roofs provided a perfect vantage over the outlying farms, the distant road, and, on clear days, the shimmer of the lake.

Jen scaled the high ladder up to the walk and paced the wall's length. Her footsteps, heavy-soled, thudded in time with her pulse. She paused at each corner, surveying the surroundings for movement, then continued on. There was nothing out of place—no sign of threat, no one sneaking in or out, no animals behaving oddly. Even the wind was in its right quarter.

At the east gate, she glanced upward, and sure enough, the clouds Knodalon had promised were visible above the mountain line. It would be hot by noon, thunder in the late afternoon. Good. The fields could use the rain, and thunder always made the pub quieter for a few blessed 'marks.

She clambered down a ladder and examined the east gate, pausing to note a scratch on the wood—new, probably made by a wagon axle. She ran a calloused thumb along the gouge, nodded to herself, and kept walking. The sun was higher now, the sky bleached to an ugly, hopeful blue.

She continued along the trade road, glancing at the Weary Head and the Broken Claw on one side and Warren's smithy on the other. Passing the storehouse with another nod to Knodalon, she finished her loop at the western gate, just as the bell from the town hall began its first slow, uneven chime. The sound was warped and off-tempo, but that was how everyone liked it: no two days ever started exactly the same in North Pointe. Jen listened to the bell, let it fade, and felt, for a moment, that particular satisfaction of having finished something before anyone else had even started their day.

She returned to the gaol, unlocked the door, and settled behind her desk with a fresh sheet of paper. She made a note about the travelers Knodalon had mentioned, then drew a small map of the scratch on the

gate, just in case. She looked out the window one more time, watched as smoke began to thread upward from the bakery's chimney, and felt the quiet hum of the town's magic—her own small part in it—settle around her shoulders like a second, invisible cloak.

Then she waited for the day to begin.

When the first yeasty notes of the bakery's produce drifted across the square, Jen rose from her paperwork. She swept the windowsill for crumbs, replaced her ledger precisely where it belonged, and—after a final, reluctant glance at the neat columns of her report—slipped outside into the full, sticky glow of midsummer morning.

The sun had just cleared the slate roof of the inn. With it came a shimmer of low, purposeful activity: Darby whistling as he swept dung from the stableyard; the first of the day's wagons clattering down the trade road, loaded with something caged and restless; and the scent, carried in lazy circles by the wind, of yeast and fresh fruit and smoke from the bakery ovens.

Jen walked with her hands tucked behind her back, boots sending up small eddies of dust from the road. She nodded to Darby, who grunted in reply, and sidestepped a puddle left by the overnight storm. The town's pace was perfect here, neither drowsy nor frantic, and she could feel her own heartbeat smoothing out to match it. She liked to think the town was teaching her how to live, one measured breath at a time.

The bakery, Makota's Hearth, stood inside the square of the town itself. Its windows were already fogged with steam, and above the door hung a simple painted sign: a cat's paw print, charred along the edges to look like it had been seared there by a playful, or perhaps vengeful, claw. The door stood open, propped by a brick, and the heady smell inside could have knocked a weaker woman flat.

Inside, the ceiling was low and heavy-beamed, the tables close together and crowded with the first customers of the day: a pair of day laborers with arms dusted in flour, a hunched old shepherd who'd likely been nursing the same mug of cider since sunrise, and three

merchants in heated debate about the relative quality of plums versus cherries. No one looked up as Jen entered. This, too, was part of her routine: to be unremarkable until needed.

Makota herself was behind the counter, claws flying as she twisted a coil of sweet dough into a loose, perfect knot. She spotted Jen, flashed her a grin full of small, sharp teeth, and let the dough rest as she wiped her hands on her apron.

"Constable!" she said, voice warm and bright as a hearth fire. "You're early today. I'd have wagered two coppers you'd be another quarter-'mark."

"I ran out of paperwork," Jen said, which was a lie, but a good-natured one.

Makota flicked her tail, unconvinced. "You're never out of paperwork. You simply pretend it doesn't exist." She nodded to the back counter, where her kits—Kene and Sora—were clambering over a tray of buns, arguing in hissing whispers about whose turn it was to glaze. "Take your pick. The raspberry crowns are best if you want them before the kits lick off all the sugar."

"I'll risk the crowns," Jen said, and selected one from the tray. The pastry was still warm, delicate layers flaking under her grip, and when she bit in, the filling was both tart and sweet and so fresh it nearly stung.

Makota's ears perked with satisfaction. "You like? Kene picked the berries himself yesterday evening."

Jen glanced over at the older kit, whose head snapped up at the praise. His ears went pink and he ducked back to work, pretending not to care, though Jen could see the tip of his tail flicking in pleasure.

"Not bad for a morning's work," Jen said. "Better than last year's batch."

Makota's pupils narrowed in mock offense. "Last year was a bad season! All rain and fungus and not a berry worth saving. Don't remind me. I nearly lost my mind, and my customers."

"Never lost me," Jen said, and it was true. She'd eaten every pastry Makota ever made, even the failures.

The younger kit, Sora, bounded over with a mug of something steaming. "For the constable!" she declared, tail coiled in excitement.

Jen took the mug, inhaled. Not tea, but a spiced oat-milk—Makota's answer to the fact that half the town were now wary about caffeine after a certain herbalist's failed experiment two seasons back. Jen had built up an immunity, but the oat-milk was genuinely good, and she drank it in three steady gulps.

Sora stared at her, wide-eyed. "Did you taste it?"

"Better than yesterday's," Jen said, solemn as a judge.

Sora purred, delighted, and scampered away.

Makota leaned against the counter, watching her kits with a fond, exasperated look. "They never stop moving," she said. "Is it like this with human children?"

"Worse," Jen said. "Ours don't learn to climb until later, but once they do, nothing is safe."

Makota laughed, a rough, genuine sound. "That's why you stopped at the one, yes?"

"Not my decision," Jen said, and the two women exchanged a glance that was both understanding and, for a moment, heavy with memory.

But Makota didn't push, and Jen didn't linger on it. She finished her crown and set the mug on the counter. "See you later."

"Bye."

Jen made her exit, the bell's chime clipped and tidy behind her. Outside, the street was brighter, heat starting to rise off the paving stones. She made her way toward the herbalist, the square now humming with the soft pulse of morning traffic: a boy chasing a runaway chicken, two elders debating the best route to the west, a couple from the next village up the road peering in shop windows as if they might discover something strange.

Galhani's shops were wedged between the cartwright's and the chirgeon, its windows shadowed by thick blue-green glass. Inside, the air was cool and damp, heavy with the scent of dried leaves and crushed root. Shelves lined every wall, stacked high with jars and crocks and, along one rafter, bundles of something spiky and probably toxic.

Galhani was standing on a wooden stool, arranging a row of small bottles by size. Her hair was braided in silver coils, her face set in an

expression of absolute focus. Jen waited until the bottles were perfectly aligned before clearing her throat.

"Constable!" Galhani beamed, hopping off the stool with the practiced ease of someone who had done it a hundred times. "You're here early. Did you sleep at all?"

"A little," Jen admitted. "Woke before the sun, did my round, survived Makota's baking. You?"

"Not a wink," Galhani said, with a strange pride. "Lara's been up all night blending a new sleep tonic and insisted I sample every variant. I've either developed a tolerance or a mild allergy, but I'm wide awake."

"You look it," Jen said, and she meant it. Galhani's eyes, enormous and violet, sparkled with the effort of simply existing.

"I've got your order ready," Galhani said, and moved to the back counter. She returned with a parcel wrapped in waxed paper, plus a small tin. "Digestive seeds, on the house," she said, winking. "You'll need them."

Jen accepted both, tucking the parcel under her arm. "You spoil me."

Galhani leaned in, voice lowering as if about to relay a great secret. "I hear there are travelers on the ridge," she said.

Jen nodded. "From the far lake country. Knodalon saw them first."

Galhani sighed, equal parts admiration and resignation. "Nothing gets by him."

"No," Jen agreed. "He sees everything."

"Even things he shouldn't," Galhani said, more to herself than to Jen. Then she shook off the mood, smiled wide. "You'll let me know if you need anything else?"

"I will."

They stood in comfortable silence for a moment, then Jen made to leave.

"Jen?" Galhani called, and she turned.

"Yes?"

Galhani smiled. "Good luck today."

Jen gave a small salute, which made the gnome laugh, and left the shop.

She found a sunlit spot on the low stone wall outside, unwrapped her breakfast, and ate it with the slow, deliberate pleasure of someone who'd learned to savor peace wherever it appeared. She let the warmth soak into her bones, listened to the sound of the town fully awake now, and thought: For all its oddities, North Pointe was the safest place she'd ever known.

She finished her meal, licked the sugar from her thumb, and set off for the last stop on her morning routine.

The pub wouldn't open for another 'mark, but Jen preferred to be early.

The Broken Claw sat opposite the stables along the trade road, its windows gold with reflected sunrise, its door barely ajar as Jen approached. She paused just outside, letting the last of the town's cool air sink into her shirt, then nudged the door with her shoulder and stepped inside.

The pub was as she liked it best: quiet, empty save for the ghosts of last night's crowd and the two travelers currently trying to shout them. The trestle tables were stained with generations of spills, the air hung with the scent of dried hops and last evening's fried onions, and behind the bar, Sam Godsdotter was sorting bottles into a kind of order only she could understand.

The travelers sat facing each other at a table just left of the hearth. Both wore the road like a second skin—dust to the knees, sunburnt ears, hands that curled into fists even at rest. Their packs slumped in a heap on the floor, as if exhausted by their company. Between them, a small pile of silver coins and a ledger book, open to a page bristling with numbers and cryptic notations.

"You're the one who tallied it!" the taller traveler snapped, finger stabbing at the page. "You marked it double on the fourth day—"

"Because you ate half the provisions, you ox! I had to. You never ration." The shorter one's voice cracked, more raw than angry, but she slammed her palm on the table anyway, sending a coin skittering into the gap between floorboards.

Sam didn't look up, but the faintest twitch of her scarred eyebrow said she'd heard all of it. Jen crossed to the bar and leaned her hip against the edge.

"Thought you didn't open till full bell," she said.

Sam's mouth quirked. "I don't, but I'm afraid no one told them. Want something, or just policing the peace?"

"I'll take the usual," Jen said, "but only after." She nodded to the travelers, whose voices had dropped to a kind of venomous whisper.

Sam's eyes followed Jen's gaze. "You want me to toss them?"

"They're not a problem yet," Jen said, and meant it.

She strolled past the tables, picking up a stray chair here, righting a crooked picture frame there. She moved slow, deliberate, a show of calm in a room vibrating on the edge of storm. As she drew near the travelers, the argument reached a fresh crescendo.

"You owe me—" the tall one said, but Jen was already at their table, not looming, just standing with her hands behind her back, waiting.

The effect was immediate and, to an outsider, almost comical: the travelers both shut up mid-breath, tension draining from their shoulders as if someone had slashed the cords holding them upright. The ledger lay open, but neither looked at it; instead, they glared at each other with the grudging respect of duelists who'd both survived the draw.

"Is there a problem?" Jen asked, voice even.

Both shook their heads in unison.

"We're just working it out," said the taller. "Nothing to trouble the constable."

"Glad to hear it," Jen said, letting a small smile pull at the edge of her mouth. "I'd hate to see such a promising partnership spoiled over arithmetic."

The shorter one—who, on closer inspection, wore the colors of the southern valley traders—gathered up the ledger and closed it with a snap. "We're fine," she said. "Apologies for the noise."

"No need," said Jen. "That's what the walls are for."

She moved off, but not before the two reached a wordless agreement to split the coins down the middle and buy each other's first ale, the ledger forgotten. By the time Jen had looped back to the bar, Sam was pouring her a mug.

"Show-off," Sam said, setting the mug down with a thunk.

Jen shrugged. "You're the one who says peace is good for business."

"Peace is boring," Sam said. "But it pays better." She wiped the bar with a clean cloth, then leaned in. "That's what the magic does, isn't it? They don't even know you've worked them over."

Jen sipped her ale, let the bitter edge cut the lingering sugar from the morning's pastry. "It's not magic," she said. "It's the badge."

Sam snorted. "That's what you call it. My da always said a badge is just a piece of tin. What you've got is the real thing."

Jen glanced at the travelers, who now laughed in the awkward, relieved way of people who realize their anger has become ridiculous. "They'll be friends by sundown," she said.

Sam eyed her. "Ever worry it makes things too easy?"

Jen considered. "No. People bring enough trouble on their own."

They stood in companionable silence, each watching the morning crowd trickle in: the day laborers from the bakery, the stablehand fresh from mucking stalls, a pair of elders still arguing the best route to the lake. The noise level rose, but never tipped into chaos. Every squabble dissolved before it could become a real fight.

"Any word from the trade road?" Sam asked, eyes on the newcomers.

"Nothing out of place," Jen said. "Knodalon said there's travelers coming from the ridge, but he always says that."

Sam snorted. "Man's a fossil. I heard he sleeps with his eyes open."

"He does," Jen said. "Makes him hard to surprise."

Sam grinned, revealing a row of teeth stained by years of strong drink and stronger opinions. "You and him, you keep this place running. Makes my job dull."

"Glad I can help," Jen said.

Sam poured herself a splash of cider, raised it in a silent toast, and downed it. "To boredom," she said.

Jen raised her own mug. "To peace."

They clinked mugs, the sound sharp and reassuring in the dim room.

The morning wore on. More patrons drifted in, the volume growing but never threatening to spill over. The travelers from earlier

had moved to a corner table, sharing breakfast and trading stories in the manner of people who've decided not to hold a grudge.

Jen watched them, content. She'd seen enough of the world to know how rare peace was. Even rarer was the kind that lasted past breakfast.

She finished her ale. Sam nodded, eyes already tracking the next potential troublemakers. Jen stepped out into the morning, the sun now high, the road now alive with color and sound.

The morning crowd had grown. Not as busy as some days, busier than others, and exactly how Jen liked it. The sign of a prosperous town and, more importantly in the case of North Pointe, a town that was doing its job.

Then her eyebrows rose.

The four mercenaries entered as a single organism, all swagger and laughter and boot-thumps. The tallest led—clean-shaven, gray at the temples, the sort who never missed a meal or a chance for a brawl. Behind him, two moved with careful economy, eyes scanning every face and corner, as if nothing in the world surprised them but everything might. The fourth, a woman not much older than Jen's daughter would have been, moved like a shadow, her gaze flickering with quick calculation. All four wore their swords plain, but peacebound, straps buckled tight and hilts wrapped in colored cloth.

They headed straight for the pub, the lead merc breaking off to intercept Jen as she nodded a silent greeting.

"Constable Darne." He said it as if it was still her rank, not her job.

"Sergeant Olt," Jen replied, and she let herself smile for half a second. "Didn't expect to see you this far north."

"We follow the contracts," he said, the old joke, but it landed softer here. "And the rumors." He followed his companions into the pub, Jen in tow. Once inside, he glanced at the room—at Sam, at the handful of customers, at the travelers who'd been fighting earlier, now deep in a game of cards.

"We're not taking new business," Jen said.

"Wasn't here for a bounty," Olt said. "Can we talk?"

He kept his hands visible, respectful. The others hung back, casual but alert.

Jen took a breath and nodded toward the back room, a private nook with battered cushions and a table gouged with more initials than wood grain.

Olt waited for her to sit, then took the opposite bench. For a moment, neither spoke. Jen found herself counting scars on his knuckles, the healed-over bite on his jaw.

Olt broke the silence: "Captain's out, Jen."

Jen blinked. Then she folded her arms. "Sorry, Olt. He was a bastard, but he kept us breathing."

"He did," Olt agreed. "And now that he's gone, there's a hole where he used to be. You know how mercenaries are. Nature abhors a vacuum."

"What's it to me?" Jen kept her tone flat.

"We want you to come back," he said, leaning in. "Not as a sword. We need someone steady at headquarters—someone who can keep the peace when the contracts dry up. Just a season, maybe less. Safe work. No killing."

Jen felt the bracelet tighten around her wrist, a chill blooming under the steel. She let her fingers rub the sigil out of habit, buying herself a heartbeat.

"I'm not leaving North Pointe," she said. "I've got responsibilities here."

Olt's eyes softened, and for the first time Jen saw the man who'd once bandaged her wounds in a rain-slick trench, the one who'd dug graves for enemies and friends alike without complaint.

"We know you do," he said. "But sometimes a duty finds you, whether you want it or not."

He let that hang. Then, more gently: "You could train the new recruits, at least. Teach them how to keep their heads on straight."

Jen tried to imagine herself back in that world—training grounds, grit, barked orders and the endless push to keep moving. It felt impossibly distant. But also, if she was honest, impossibly familiar.

"I'll think about it," she said, which was the closest she could get to a yes or no.

Olt grinned, real and tired. "That's all I ask." He rose, offered a

hand, and Jen shook it, feeling the old bones of respect settle between them.

As he left, the other three mercs gave her small, respectful nods—each one a silent reminder of shared history and debts unpaid. They found a table, ordered drinks, and set about quietly dissecting every person in the room, just as they always had.

Jen stayed in the nook, picking at the wood with a thumbnail. Eventually, Sam appeared, sliding into the bench across from her.

"They were always your people, weren't they?" Sam asked, her voice gentle.

"Not anymore," Jen said. "You saw how fast they moved on. Loyalty's just a job for them."

Sam considered that, then: "You ever wonder if you made the wrong choice, leaving?"

Jen looked out through the warped glass at the square, the bakery, the line of townsfolk waiting for the herbalist to open shop. "I never wonder," she said. "I always know."

They sat in silence. Sam poured two small glasses of something sharp and clear from a bottle she kept for special occasions. She raised hers.

"To your Captain," she said.

Jen lifted hers, but only after a pause. "To the ones who kept us breathing."

They drank, the liquor burning clean and then gone, leaving only memory behind.

After a while, Sam said, "You'll stay, though. I can tell."

"I'll stay," Jen agreed. "Somebody has to keep the peace."

They smiled at each other, the old camaraderie both a comfort and a wound. Outside, the sun was climbing, and the sounds of the town grew louder, more insistent. The day was starting over again.

Jen touched the bracelet once more, felt it pulse against her skin, and wondered if it would ever let her go.

She doubted it. Some debts, she thought, were meant to be paid over a lifetime.

two

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THERE WAS a spot on the trade road where the ruts from spring's mud hardened into sawtoothed ridges by midsummer. Everyone who used the road learned to swerve or slow—unless, like today's luckless traveler, they hadn't been warned, or thought themselves immune to the malice of bad roads.

The cart in question had broken just beyond the worst patch, its left wheel screaming every time it completed a turn. Wilem Cartwright crouched beside it, his hands wrist-deep in the spokes, the traveler hovering nearby in a state of agitated apology. The smell of grease and burned wood hung in the air, thick as a promise.

Jen saw them from a distance and adjusted her stride to a steady approach. She liked Wilem, or at least admired the way he handled work and crisis with the same level gaze. The man rarely hurried, even when the world required it. Today he was stripped to the waist, arms covered in streaks of axle paste, face set in its usual stoic mask.

"Trouble?" Jen called, already knowing the answer.

Wilem grunted, not looking up. "Not yet, but give it another quarter-candle."

The traveler, a stout man with the sunburned look of someone from farther south, snapped his hat off his head and fanned himself. "I

told the stablehand these wheels were too dry. Should have listened to my mother, rest her soul. She always said to keep the wood oiled."

Wilem levered the axle up, and Jen stepped in to help, bracing her shoulder under the load. The cart shifted, its contents—bags of millet, a sack of onion bulbs, and a small barrel marked with an unfamiliar seal—clinking together like bones in a basket. The wheel, when lifted clear, wobbled in a way that made Jen wince.

"This is what happens," Wilem said, voice heavy with the patience of a man who'd delivered the same lecture for half his life, "when you let the pins dry out. The rim warps, the iron shrinks, and then you get this." He flicked the rim with his thumb, producing a thin, metallic ring.

"I was just up the road from Tembil," the traveler protested. "Not so much as a squeak till yesterday. The whole trip, fine as a prince's carriage. Then this morning, it's howling."

Jen grunted, her hands steady on the axle. "Road's worse past the ridge. All the rain last fortnight." She felt the sweat prickling under her shirt; the sun was climbing hard and the air pressed close, smelling of grass and grit.

Wilem worked a wedge between the rim and hub, pried it free with the slow confidence of experience. "I can fix it," he said, "but you'll have to walk it to the shop. Nothing to be done with the sun at its height and the wood as hot as a cook stove."

The traveler sagged, but nodded. "I've got time," he said, though his eyes lingered on the barrel as if it might sprout legs and disappear.

Jen let the cart settle back onto its good wheel, wiped the sweat from her temple with the back of her hand. She noticed, absently, how the sun caught on the metal of her bracelet—Hellsting, disguised as a simple band. The sigil inside glimmered, sharp-edged and precise. Old habits made her check the area for anything that might require the sword's actual form, but nothing so dramatic ever happened on repair days.

"Give us a lift?" Wilem asked, and Jen nodded, moving to the front to steady the tongue of the cart.

They pushed it together, Wilem guiding the broken wheel to roll as smoothly as possible, the traveler huffing along at their side, narrating

the adventure with the air of a man who hadn't had a good audience in years.

"Lost a wheel once, three towns south. Had to drag the whole cart behind a mule. Wife nearly killed me when I got home, and the children didn't speak to me for a sennight. But I delivered the shipment. That's what counts in this business." He glanced at Jen, perhaps for the first time recognizing her as more than just a helper. "You're the constable, aren't you?"

"Sometimes," Jen said, voice flat as the road.

"Never thought a constable would be pushing carts. Seems above your station."

Jen braced the cart through a rough patch. "Every job's my job," she said. "Otherwise nothing gets done."

Wilem's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "Truth."

They reached the edge of North Pointe proper, where the trade road smoothed out and the deeper ruts gave way to honest cobble. Wilem gestured the traveler ahead, then turned to Jen.

"Could have managed, you know," he said, though without any bite.

"I know," Jen replied. "But then you'd owe me a favor. That's worth more than a cart."

He considered this, then gave a single, appreciative nod. "I'll remember that next time the gaol's door sticks."

As Wilem guided the cart down the lane toward his shop, the traveler trailing behind like a chastened dog, Jen paused in the heat. She turned her wrist, catching the sunlight on Hellsting's band, and watched as a bead of sweat ran the length of her forearm before flicking away. She thought about all the things that could go wrong in a day, and how sometimes the world allowed a simple fix, if only you had the right leverage.

From up the road, Wilem's voice drifted back. "The world's just a big wheel, Jen. Sooner or later, everyone takes a turn at the bottom."

She smiled to herself, the way you do when someone else's philosophy matches your own, and set off to see what other emergencies awaited before the next bell.

If the bakery's morning aroma was a punch, the air in Galhani's tea shop was a lullaby. Even with the door open, sunlight struggled to reach the floor, filtered as it was through a canopy of drying herbs that tangled across the ceiling and down the walls. Blue-glass bottles and pottery crocks cluttered every ledge. The faint clink of metal tools and the hum of a distant mortar told Jen that Galhani was already deep in her day.

"Jen!" came the greeting, even before Jen had shut the door. "Come in, come in, I need a palate unspoiled by flower tea." Galhani appeared around the corner, her braid swinging behind her like a live wire. She wore a stained smock over her usual layered dress, and her hands were stained the color of old plums.

Jen did as instructed, weaving between low shelves and a stack of crates labeled with scribbled threats—"DO NOT TOUCH (I mean it)"—until she found Galhani at her workbench, perched atop a high stool. The gnome's legs dangled, unable to reach the footrest, but her energy filled the room.

"What's the experiment?" Jen asked, eyeing the assortment of berries, each in its own glass jar.

Galhani bounced, nearly tipping off the stool. "A new toy!" she said, voice a stage whisper. "Came up in the north garden last moon—completely uninvited, but that's how all the best things arrive." She pointed at a squat jar of star-shaped, indigo berries. "Lara thought they might be poison, but only if you eat them raw. Brewed, they smell delicious."

Jen raised an eyebrow. "And you're sure they aren't poison?"

"Oh, absolutely," Galhani said, not missing a beat. "I ate three yesterday, just to be sure. Felt wonderful. Might have hallucinated a bit, but only during my nap, and that's not unusual."

Jen snorted. "What's it called?"

Galhani's face crumpled in thought. "Haven't decided yet. Thought I'd wait and see if anyone liked it, first."

"Mystery tea, then," Jen said, grinning. "Let's see what all the fuss is."

Galhani hopped off her stool, motioned Jen to a sunlit table by the window. The gnome's hands moved with the speed of someone who'd long ago stopped caring about making messes—hot water splashed, a tea infuser was crammed full, and a spoonful of honey found its way in without ceremony. The aroma as the water hit the berries was sharp, sweet, and somehow nostalgic, like the memory of summer hidden inside a winter morning.

Across the room, a low door led into the adjoining space where Lara worked. Jen caught a glimpse of the other gnome, hair cropped even shorter than her mate's, sleeves rolled up as she sorted something in tidy, geometric piles. She glanced up, met Jen's gaze, and offered a quick wave before returning to her perfect rows.

"Lara's sorting seeds," Galhani whispered, as if the work required total silence. "She says chaos is good for business but bad for seeds."

Jen watched the tea deepen in color, the liquid going from pale gold to a violent, inviting violet. Galhani poured it into a tiny, chipped cup and set it before Jen, eyes bright with anticipation.

Jen took a cautious sip. The taste was wild—bright berry up front, then a rolling, sweet finish that lingered in the throat. There was a hint of earthiness, but not the kind that made you regret it later. She swallowed and blinked.

"Well?" Galhani's hands gripped the table, knuckles pale.

"Best thing I've had all day," Jen said, and saw the joy flare across Galhani's face. "Might even be the best this moon."

Galhani did a little wiggle, then darted back to her workbench and came up with a pouch, already labeled in her looping script. She scooped a measure of dried berries inside, sealed it with wax, and slid it across the table.

"For you," she said, almost shy. "On the house, of course. For—" She hesitated, then found the words. "For keeping things together when the rest of us would probably set the town on fire by mistake."

Jen accepted the pouch, running her thumb over the label. "Thank you."

Galhani straightened, dusted off her hands, and looked at Jen with something almost like awe. "You know, a good, comforting berry tea is supposed to help you remember old friends. Or forget bad ones, if

that's what you prefer." She paused, squinting up at Jen as if weighing her entire soul. "Which do you need more?"

The question hung there, not intrusive, but patient. Jen studied the tea in her cup, watched the light play through it and scatter in tiny moving patterns on the table.

"I haven't decided," she said, and meant it.

Galhani nodded, understanding without pressing. She hopped back onto her stool, already reaching for the next jar of possibilities.

As Jen stood to leave, she caught Lara's eye through the little door. The other gnome smiled, just a flash, then flicked her fingers in a gesture that was either good luck or a dare to survive the tea.

Outside, the air felt cooler, as if the tea's memory had altered the day itself. Jen tucked the pouch into her vest, rolled her shoulders, and set out for whatever came next. It was a good town, she thought. Even on the hardest days, there was always a reason to keep going.



The Broken Claw was never truly quiet, not even in the lean moments between breakfast and midday. Some townsfolk claimed you could hear the building settle, or the ghosts of old drunks muttering beneath the floorboards. Jen doubted the ghosts—she'd chased out enough living ones to know the difference—but she liked the notion that the pub had its own heartbeat.

She was on her second mug of something light, sitting with her back to the wall and her boots crossed under the table, when the traveler stumbled in. He was young, barely more than a child, with hair the color of dishwater and a cloak that looked borrowed from a much larger uncle. He spied Jen at once and hurried over, ignoring the pub's three other customers and nearly tripping over a bench in the process.

"Constable!" he blurted, breathless. "I need the law. I— It's— Someone—" He waved his arms, nearly whacking a sleeping dog.

Jen set down her mug. "Slow down. Catch your wind, then tell me."

The traveler did as told, chest heaving. Sam, behind the bar, didn't

even look up from her bottle-wiping, though the scar across her face seemed to deepen as she smiled to herself.

Jen waited. Patience was a muscle she'd spent years developing, and she was proud of its strength.

The traveler gulped, then: "Someone's stolen my purse."

Jen's foot began tapping before she could stop it. She forced herself to relax, folding her hands on the table. "Where were you when it happened?"

He blinked. "I— I don't know exactly. Last I remember, I had it at the bakery, paid for a roll, then I went to the stables to look at a horse, then the grocer, and now—" He patted his belt, then his pockets, as if the purse might have reappeared since his last check. "Gone. It's gone."

"Any idea who might have done it?"

He shook his head, miserable. "I didn't even feel it. I've been on the road a fortnight, never lost so much as a button. But here—" He gestured at the pub, at Jen, at the very walls. "Someone just plucked it off me like I was an apple on a tree."

Jen considered. "No one threatened you? No one crowded you, got close?"

"No! I swear, I— I kept my distance. People here are nice. Too nice. Maybe I let my guard down." He looked ready to cry.

Jen reached across the table, her hand surprisingly gentle on his arm. "What did the purse look like?"

He brightened, a little. "Brown leather, drawstring. Stitched on one side, with a wheat sheaf. My mother gave it to me. There's a brass button inside, a keepsake." He grimaced. "And twelve silvers, three copper, a lucky tile from home, and a ring I was hoping to sell." He listed each item like a rosary.

Jen's eyes narrowed as she replayed his route through town. "You said you were at the bakery first, then the stables, then the grocer?"

He nodded. "And here, last. I checked at the bakery—Makota swore she saw the purse on my belt. I had it at the stables, too. The horse dealer says he remembers it jingling."

"Anyone follow you?" Jen pressed.

"No. Not that I noticed." He looked up at her, pleading. "I can pay for your time if you find it."

She waved the offer away. "No one pays for justice in North Pointe. Unless they start the trouble."

He laughed, a nervous hiccup of sound. "I wish every town thought that way."

Jen stood, stretched, and motioned for him to follow. "I'll need your name, and a place to reach you in case I find it."

"Ren," he said. "Renlow. I'm at the inn, third room in from the door."

"Wait there after lunch," Jen instructed. "If your purse turns up, I'll bring it myself."

He nodded, relief clear in the droop of his shoulders. "Thank you, Constable. I know it's not much, but—" He stopped himself, realizing there was nothing more to say.

Jen watched him go, her mind already ticking through the angles. Petty theft was rare here. Not impossible, but rare. Crime of any kind was rare, and the worst offender was usually a wandering dog or someone's half-tame goat. But travelers could be another matter: travelers were careless, or too trusting.

Sam came over, drying her hands on a towel. "First purse lifted since I can remember," she said, not bothering to keep her voice down.

Jen grunted. "You hear anything, Sam?"

The pub owner's eyes glinted. "Heard a pair of traders from the east road whispering about easy marks, but they left before sunrise. Might've circled back, though."

Jen looked at her friend. "You really think someone in town would risk it?"

Sam shrugged. "If they did, they'd be gone before you blinked. But if they're still here, you'll find them." She tapped the bracelet on Jen's wrist. "That thing's not just for show."

Jen rolled the bracelet, feeling the sigil press against her skin. "Not for purse thieves, anyway."

Sam's smile was soft, almost maternal. "You'll catch them. Or they'll trip over their own feet and confess."

Jen nodded, not in agreement, but in acceptance. "Either way, it gets sorted."

She stepped outside, letting the pub's shadows fall away. The light was harsh, the street empty for now. Somewhere, a bell chimed, marking the half-day.

She turned up the road, scanning for anyone moving too fast or too slow, anyone whose hands were hidden or whose face was turned away. The purse could be anywhere by now—ditched, spent, or stashed for later.

Jen walked with purpose, every line of her weathered face fixed in concentration. She cataloged the names, the colors, the stories of everyone she passed. North Pointe was her town, her responsibility. She would keep it safe, even if the work was as dull and thankless as chasing ghosts.

Her foot tapped again, then stopped. Old habits, she thought. Some debts were paid over a lifetime. Others were paid one coin at a time.



If the town had a heart, the smithy was its thump and pulse. Even at midday, the forge's heat shimmered out into the street, carrying with it a staccato symphony of metal-on-metal and the clatter of tongs against anvil. Warren, the smith, barely acknowledged Jen as she passed, but she caught the sly upward flick of his eyebrows, an unspoken "watch your back" that he reserved for anyone approaching the old enemies' bench near the shop.

She was halfway past the open yard when the first of the mercenaries hailed her.

"Darme! If you walk any faster, you'll wear a trench in the road."

Jen slowed, bracing for the onslaught. The four stood in a loose, confident arc, sun gleaming on leather and the unpolished shine of well-loved steel. They looked out of place, as always—a pack of predators who'd somehow agreed to sheathe their claws for a time, but never lost the habit of sizing up every room.

Olt led the way, hands in plain sight. The others—Dren, Piotr, and

Marelle—flanked him, all grins and elbows. There was nothing threatening in their stance, but their eyes, even in the shade, were too bright.

“Morning, Olt,” Jen said, pausing just out of arm’s reach. “Didn’t expect to see you this side of lunch.”

He shrugged. “Can’t sleep in a town this quiet. Besides, you promised us a show.”

Dren, the biggest of the lot, cracked his knuckles. “Heard there’s been a theft. Petty larceny! What a step up for you, Darne. Used to be murder at breakfast, now it’s lost-and-found.”

Marelle twirled her dagger, careful to keep the blade away from her own fingers. “Don’t listen to them, Jen. They’re jealous. No one’s ever invited them to guard a plum tart.”

Jen smiled, but only with the thin lines around her eyes. “You three can walk the perimeter if you’re so bored. I hear the bakery’s desperate for security.”

Piotr, ever the quiet one, just nodded, gaze flicking between Jen’s hands and the smithy door. He carried himself like a man expecting the world to explode at any moment, and would have been disappointed if it didn’t.

Olt stepped in, voice dropping to a private register. “Serious, Jen. I meant what I said. There’s a spot for you if you want it. Even just to train up the next lot. After Captain—” He stopped, a flicker of pain crossing his face. “Well, you know how it is. Hard to find someone steady these days.”

Jen set her jaw. “I’m steady right here.”

Dren snorted. “You’re steady, all right. Steady as a tombstone.”

The word hung there, too heavy for banter. For a moment, no one moved. Then Olt, in a rare display of tact, broke the silence. “Speaking of tombstones—Makota’s coming, and she looks armed.”

Jen turned to see the baker striding across the road, tray balanced on one palm, her kits trailing behind her in a swirl of tails and laughter.

“Jen!” Makota called, singling Jen out. “You didn’t come for second breakfast, so I am bringing second breakfast to you. And friends.” She dipped her head to the mercenaries, whiskers twitching.

Marelle accepted a pastry with exaggerated politeness. "You're a saint, Makota. If every battlefield had a baker, we'd have fewer wars."

Makota bared her teeth in a smile. "And more fat soldiers." She offered Jen a roll, still warm. "You look like you could use it."

Jen took the roll, bit in, and nearly choked at the speed the flavor hit her tongue. She chewed, then said, "If you ever decide to take up crime, Makota, I'll have to let you go. Can't jail the only honest baker in five towns."

Makota's eyes sparkled. "I'd never leave North Pointe. Too much work here, and too many mouths to feed."

Dren, swallowing his pastry in two bites, said, "You'd be wasted in the big city anyway. No taste for politics."

Makota's smile vanished in an instant, replaced by something sharp. "That's why I like it here. We have only one constable, and she can outwit all the politicians in a single day."

Olt nudged Jen. "See? Even the felines get it. You're wasted here."

Jen dusted crumbs from her hands, savoring the pause. She glanced at the mercs, then at Makota, and finally at the stretch of road leading out of town. In the silence, she found the words she'd been looking for.

"Maybe you don't see it," she said, "but this town—most of the people here used to be something else. Soldiers, mages, traders, thieves. Even bakers. All of us, trying to outrun whatever it was we used to do. At some point, you have to stop chasing. That's what this place is for."

Olt started to protest, but Jen cut him off. "You want to keep moving, keep chasing—fine. That's your business. But don't mistake quiet for waste. There's more work here than you could handle in three lifetimes, and none of it ends in a mass grave."

The other mercs fell quiet, letting her words sink in. Even Dren seemed cowed, chewing thoughtfully.

Makota, eyes bright, said, "We don't chase adventures anymore. We tend to adventurers instead." She set the tray down on the smithy steps, a little altar to peace.

Marelle nodded, expression softening. "That's not bad, Jen."

Piotr, finally speaking, said, "Better than the city. Safer, too."

Olt stared at Jen, really looked at her, and something old and bitter in his face melted away. "You'd have made a good Captain."

Jen shook her head. "I was never any good at keeping anyone but myself alive."

Olt smiled, rueful. "Now you keep a whole town."

Jen said nothing, but the set of her shoulders eased.

The mercenaries drifted off, Olt last to go. He clapped Jen once on the back, a soldier's gesture, and said, "If you ever change your mind, we'll be around."

They vanished up the road, laughing again, but it was softer this time. Less an insult, more an inside joke.

Makota lingered. "You really staying forever, Jen?"

Jen looked at the bakery, the smithy, the low line of the hills beyond. She thought of the memberry tea tucked in her vest, the taste of the roll in her mouth, the weight of Hellsting against her wrist.

"I'm staying," she said, voice certain as steel.

Makota nodded, satisfied, and bounded after her kits.

Jen lingered, watching the dust rise behind her old comrades as they marched out of sight. She felt something she hadn't in a long time—not hope, exactly, but a kind of readiness. As if the world could surprise her, but she'd be able to take the blow and stay standing.

She squared her shoulders, tucked the roll into her pocket for later, and walked back to her rounds. The town was still there, still hers. That was enough.

three

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THE DAY'S first light always found North Pointe in a state of self-satisfaction, as if the town congratulated itself for surviving another night without incident worth writing down. This dawn, though, was primed for disruption. Two 'marks before sunrise, the trade road typically belonged to the wind, loose chickens, and the rare wagoner with a tight schedule. Today, a wagon that looked to have borrowed its paint from a child's dreams—blue, green, a patch here and there of stubborn red—came barreling toward the town's empty square, pulled by a small, sturdy pony and driven by exactly no one at all.

The wagon rattled and dipped over the hard-packed ruts, springs groaning in protest. It careened to a halt in front of the old menagerie shop, its wheels skidding just enough to threaten spectacle, but not quite. The silence that followed was so unlikely that even the bakery's resident mice poked their noses from cracks in the wall to witness what happened next.

Jen, just off the wall from her morning patrol, raised an eyebrow as the wagon rolled by. Her other eyebrow joined it as, without hesitation, the wagon turned smartly off the trade road and through the town gate, trundled across the grassy town square, and pulled to a

stop in front of the empty space that had once held Dooley's menagerie.

"Interesting," she murmured, following quickly to the town gate.

A chorus of small voices erupted from the wagon's interior—all babble and laughter, bright as well-oiled bells. The back doors flung themselves wide, and out spilled a surge of figures so alike that, for a split second, Jen suspected an enchantment—or a trick mirror, gone quite daft. The newcomers tumbled out with the careful chaos of experts: each knee-high, each blessed with a thick beard, each with broadly pointed ears that could put a cat to shame. Some wore tiny caps, others had their hair slicked or wild, but all carried something—a mallet, a crate, a jumble of glittering, unfamiliar tools that looked handmade and, possibly, illegal in five neighboring provinces.

The first wave hit the ground running, straight for the menagerie's battered front door. No hesitation, no announcement, and certainly no time for introductions. Jen stopped dead in her tracks. She counted seven—no, nine—of the little bearded men by the time the shop's door was heaved open. More followed, arms heavy with bundles and casks. They streamed inside, their voices ricocheting off the stone and wood in a patter that could only be described as several families' worth of gossips attending the same party—each determined to outtalk the other.

From her vantage, Jen saw the last straggler—a stout one with a green waistcoat and an armload of what might have been tiny anvils—kick the wagon's tailboard closed with a flourish. The door to the menagerie slammed shut with a shudder that rattled the window glass. Then, silence. Not a single one of the little men remained in sight. The peculiar wagon, now childishly empty, listed slightly to the side and seemed to exhale in relief at being abandoned. Even the stout pony that had pulled the thing seemed to slouch a bit before lowering its head to chew on the lush grass of the square.

The town's response was immediate: by ones and twos, residents filtered to their windows, or inched out onto porches, or gathered in discreet knots close enough to see but far enough to avoid being volunteered for... whatever was happening. Jen caught sight of Darby peering through the town gate, his hair uncombed and his jaw

hanging open. Makota's eldest kit, Kene, crouched atop the bakery's stoop with the wide, fixed stare of someone witnessing history, or at least breakfast entertainment worth gossiping about for a sennight.

Jen, with a sigh, approached.

She crossed the square in measured strides, careful not to look as curious as she felt. The menagerie itself had not changed in the night: still a wedge of stone and weathered wood, windows clouded as if from years' worth of dust and disuse. The sign hung a bit askew—painted, once, with a dancing fox and a bird Jen had never seen outside a fairytale. This morning's headline, though, was the wagon parked out front and the sense of intent radiating from the shop's threshold.

She paused outside the door, listening. The inside sounded like—if not a fight—certainly a commotion. Hammers tapped, something metallic clanged, and the Púca voices zipped through the air, overlapping and colliding with the speed of a barroom argument on free cider night. Underneath it all was a smell: not of animal, as the menagerie's last tenant had left, but of wood shavings, hot metal, and something starchy. Bread? Or, less likely, potato pancakes.

Jen rapped her knuckles smartly on the panel. "Constable!" she called, more a courtesy than any real expectation.

What came back was an orchestra of clatters and thumps, punctuated by a yelp and a cry of "Mind yer toes, Handy!" followed by several voices correcting Handy's technique, his lineage, and his taste in waistcoats. Not a single voice acknowledged the knock.

She waited, lips pressed tight, then knocked again, louder.

Same result. The sounds of activity redoubled, as if the entire population inside had been handed double rations and a deadline.

She weighed her options: she could force her way in, but with no screaming, smoke, or blood pouring under the door, it hardly seemed time for theatrics. Instead, she stepped back to survey the wagon, now the most cooperative entity on the scene.

The wagon was a marvel of opposite intentions. Clearly built for function—heavy wheels, reinforced tongue, no-nonsense harness—yet painted with designs so whimsical that Jen wondered if the pony had opinions about art. The animal itself was chewing complacently, as if

this sort of appearance was entirely common. The interior was still cluttered: open crates stacked three deep, tool rolls bundled with leather cords, jars of thick, cloudy liquids wedged between parcels wrapped in oilcloth.

Jen reached for the nearest crate, nudged it with her boot. It didn't move. Hefting one of the tool rolls, she noted the contents: pliers in six sizes, wrenches that bent in ways she'd never seen, and what looked suspiciously like a device for extracting teeth—possibly from something not inclined to surrender them. Another jar, stoppered and waxed, was filled with blue marbles that floated in clear syrup. She eyed a strip of paper wired to the stem—with writing identifiable only as Not Her Language.

For a moment, Jen considered confiscating the lot as evidence, but the thought of arguing legal fine points with an entire clan of miniature artisans gave her pause.

Behind her a ripple of whispers signaled the shifting attention of the town's folk.

"They're leprechauns," hissed someone from the bakery porch.

"No, that's a fairy tale. Real leprechauns don't have beards. Or do they?" replied a voice—Galhani, probably, with the certainty of an herbalist debating folklore.

"Maybe they're gnomes," offered a third—Makota's, clipped and amused. "Not that I've ever seen a gnome with elbows like that."

"Not gnomes," Galhani insisted.

Jen glanced up to see the crowd swelling in confidence, emboldened by the presence of a constable-shaped shield. Even Susan, Warren's partner, had managed to slip out onto the square, her apron dusted in flour and hands perched on her hips.

Jen could feel the heat of their curiosity prickling the back of her neck. For the record, she preferred a good, honest brawl to an ambush of questions any day.

She set aside the tool roll, crouched to peer deeper into the wagon's shadowed storage. Here were long, spiral-tipped augers, pouches of metallic flakes in every color, tiny hammers with heads shaped like animals. She allowed herself a low whistle, careful not to draw further notice.

"Constable, what are they doing?" piped up someone behind her. She recognized the voice—Darby, now emboldened enough to have joined the onlookers.

Jen straightened. "Moving in, by the look of it."

"Do they have a permit?" asked Galhani's mate, Lara, appearing from the herbalist's with her arms folded and eyes narrowed.

Jen sighed. "We still don't do permits," she reminded everyone.

The crowd laughed, the sound rolling outward and loosening the last of the dawn's chill. It was mostly harmless, just people with nothing better to do than speculate on small strangers and their grand ambitions. But Jen filed away the moment: new arrivals, no warnings, and not a care for even introductions. It was, in her experience, the sort of thing that could go either way.

She returned to her inspection, picking at the edge of a particularly odd bundle tied with green string. There were hand bells inside—each tuned to a different note, if the labels were to be believed. At the bottom of the crate, a thick ledger sat, open to a page covered in meticulous script. Jen tried to decipher it—columns, numbers, and names, all punctuated by exclamation marks—but quickly gave up. She wasn't sure if it was meant for accounting or to warn the casual reader against meddling.

Inside the former menagerie, a fresh wave of commotion suggested the new arrivals were setting up house at a pace that put professional movers to shame. Something toppled—possibly a shelf—and a chorus of "Aye, that's the way!" went up, followed by a rush of footsteps across the back rooms.

Jen considered her options again. She could wait, post a notice, or try a third time at the door. She opted for patience, which was not her favorite virtue but one the job required. She took a step back, surveying the tableau: the wagon, the menagerie, the crowd, and her own baffled reflection in the shop's warped window.

It didn't look like trouble. Not yet. But it certainly didn't look like any dawn she'd lived through in North Pointe, either.

"First time I've seen anything like that," muttered a laborer to Jen's left.

Jen nodded, slow. "Me too."

As the sun crept higher and the town bell rang the arrival of proper morning, the little men remained securely ensconced in the menagerie, refusing to answer knocks or questions. The wagon stayed where it was, oddly dignified in its abandonment. The townsfolk, comforted by the lack of open violence or fire, drifted back to their routines, though the glances they cast at the shop were long and speculative.

Jen let the confusion settle deep into her bones, added it to the day's ledger of unexplained phenomena, and promised herself a second cup of tea after her next stop.

This was, she supposed, what constables were for: standing between the ordinary and the plainly ridiculous, and deciding when—if ever—to take action.

She gave the wagon one last, thoughtful look, then resumed her rounds, already replaying the scene in her mind.

Some mornings, the job really earned its keep.

If there was a hierarchy of town wisdom, Leota's little home perched comfortably at the top. The path to her door was a shuffle through sunlight and grass, the kind that held morning dew past its proper time. Jen made the walk with her hands deep in her vest pockets, boots leaving neat prints in the glittering blades.

The house itself was something of a contradiction—old bones, new curtains, and that faint shimmer at the threshold that kept casual callers guessing. The wards pulsed in and out of view, an invisible net Jen had learned to respect but not to fear.

She ducked under the nearest arch, flinched as the tingling air brushed her scalp, and stepped into Leota's domain. Inside, the daylight was a presence all its own. Every surface captured dust motes and memory; the table by the window was stacked with jars, faded books, and a centerpiece that demanded attention: a wooden icosahedron, each face carved with different runes.

Leota was exactly as the legends preferred—dark hair spilling down her back like spilled ink, eyes sharper than the awl she used to

trace the artifact's edges. Her hands, pale and steady, hovered over the shape as if coaxing out secrets one by one.

Jen waited by the door, then cleared her throat. "Leota."

The witch didn't look up right away. She finished a circuit of the carving, then set the awl down with quiet precision. "You sound less like a constable and more like a woman who's seen something she can't explain," she said. The words were teasing, but her attention was fixed.

"That would be about right," Jen admitted. She slipped further into the room, careful not to jostle the crowded table. "The old menagerie? Full of strangers. Bearded, knee-high, organized like an army of tailors on a market day."

Leota's brow furrowed—not in concern, but in calculation. "Gnomes?"

"Galhani says not."

"Too small for dwarves."

"Decidedly. Someone mentioned leprechauns?"

The witch shook her head. "Mythological. Anything else?"

"They all carried tools. And... I'm pretty sure they were all male."

Leota's eyes narrowed as she considered. "Could be Púca."

It was Jen's turn to frown. "Pookuh? Never heard of 'em."

"You wouldn't. They're *nearly* mythological. Skilled craftsman, the stories say. All male, no telling how they reproduce or if they even do. But they keep to themselves. Tiny hidden villages deep in the forest, that kind of thing. Big on berries. Usually set themselves up as opponents of some local dark wizard. Again, the stories say."

"They seem to have come for a field trip."

"Interesting. Notice anything else?"

Jen described the morning: the wagon, the pony, the poppyfield explosion of little men and their tools. She tried to find the words for the voices, the lilt and tumble of the Púca speech, but gave up. "They moved in without a by-your-leave," she concluded. "And refused to answer when I knocked."

Leota finally looked up, her gaze as direct as always. "The town's magic feels no alarm," she said. "Whatever they're up to isn't tripping any wards or warnings. If anything, it feels like—" She wiggled her

fingers, searching. “—a roundabout puzzle. Not a threat, not an answer. Just more of a question.” She paused, again seeming to taste the town’s magic. “I haven’t seen their like before, only read of them. If in fact that’s what they are. It’s not a glamour, not a changeling trick, the town would object. If you’re asking if they’re safe? The wards haven’t gone up in smoke. That’s as close as I can get to reassurance.”

Jen grunted. “So, a mystery, but not an emergency.”

“For now.” Leota’s smile was quick, brittle. “If they start brewing thunder or inviting curses, I’ll be first to know.”

“Hope you’re right,” Jen said. She allowed herself a glance around the room, admiring the calm that leaked from Leota’s walls. “But if you get a notion, send word. I’ll be on my rounds.”

Leota inclined her head, already returning to the dance of her fingers over the carving. “I always do.”

Jen let herself out, back into the brightness of the square. This side of the street was quieter; the rest of the town still orbited the menagerie’s drama, leaving the garden path untouched. She moved downhill, boots squelching where the grass grew thick, and made for the lakeside.

The lake, at this time of morning, was glass. Only the reeds and low rushes remembered to move. Knodalon’s bench, perched in its usual spot, looked as if it had grown out of the earth by accident—nothing else around it matched for age or stubbornness.

Knodalon sat where he always did, hands folded on his knees, beard drifting in the wind. He did not blink as Jen approached, nor did he seem inclined to offer greetings before necessity forced his hand.

She stood a respectful distance away and addressed the top of his head. “Something new in town,” she said. “The menagerie’s got tenants. Bunch of little men, beards down to their belts, noses like turnips. Came in a wagon all their own, talked fast, moved faster.”

Knodalon didn’t turn or nod. For a while, Jen thought he’d not heard her. Then, a shrug—a minor earthquake of a gesture, from a man who often went whole days without one. “They came. They’re here,” he said, voice as dry as the wind off the lake.

“That’s all?” Jen pressed. She searched his profile for a sign of more

—disapproval, warning, even a joke. But Knodalon offered nothing more than a shift in the set of his jaw.

“If they mean trouble, you’ll know. Not before,” he said.

Jen waited, hoping for wisdom to spill out like it sometimes did. Nothing. She glanced at the horizon; even the clouds seemed perfectly content to let the matter slide for now.

She exhaled, let the tension go. “If you see or hear anything—”

He cut her off. “I see everything.” He didn’t say it as a boast—more a simple accounting.

Jen considered arguing, but the urge faded. There was no point pushing him. Not on a morning like this.

She nodded, mostly to herself, and let him resume his vigil.

At the edge of the water, a pair of herons startled each other into flight. Jen watched them circle, then set her jaw and turned back toward the road.

Between the witch and the old man, she’d learned almost nothing. But at least she understood the perimeter of her own ignorance.

Some mysteries needed time. If the Púca were trouble, they weren’t advertising it yet.

Jen flexed her fingers, tucked her badge a little tighter, and set off for the next complication lurking in the day’s schedule.

By the time the sun had finished painting the trade road a glare-bright silver, Jen was already two paces into the Broken Claw’s cool interior, trying to remember if she’d had breakfast or just wished she had. She preferred the pub in its early mode—quiet, with the ghosts giving up the floor to honest business. Today, she got a bonus: Darby, flushed from running and brimming with the rare excitement of a real errand.

“Constable!” he called, nearly tripping over the threshold. “The little men’s pony—it’s in Warren’s stable now!”

He delivered the news as if expecting applause. Jen set her mug down and met him at the rail. “You sure?”

Darby’s nod could have dislocated his neck. “Positive. Saw it myself. Warren says it’s eating oats already, like it owns the place.”

It took less than a half-'mark for Jen to reach the stable. She found Warren—green skin, white hair, and an expression that said he'd seen every oddity this side of the mountains—waiting with a pitchfork propped in one arm. The pony looked up as she entered, considered whether to bother, and returned its attention to a deep bucket of feed.

Warren gestured with his chin. "Organized little fellows, aren't they? Tied off the halter, left the animal right where I'd notice it. No confusion, no mess. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were after my job."

Jen smirked. "You ever seen anything like them before?"

He shook his head, slow as a tolling bell. "New to me. Susan spoke to Leota, said you'd discussed it. I've heard stories about Púca, but I thought they stuck to the forests. Usually after berries or something shinier."

She ran a hand along the pony's flank. It was clean, not a scratch on it, and wore a fancy little bell that caught the light in shifting colors. Not exactly subtle.

"You think they'll pay you for stabling?"

Warren grinned, a slow stretch of his impressive jaw. "Wouldn't surprise me, if they slip coins under the door at night. Weirder things have turned up here."

Darby added, "I hope they don't take the horse apart and put it back together different."

Warren snorted. "Not unless they can make it faster. Or green."

They shared the joke, but Jen could see the way Warren's eyes lingered on the stableyard—measuring, cataloging. He was as curious as she was, though less inclined to fuss. She logged the detail, then took her leave, the stable already alive with the sounds of travelers fussing over borrowed mounts and merchants bickering over cart space.

By the time Jen circled the main square, the day's other drama had reached proper volume. Outside the bakery, a knot of travelers argued about the price of rolls and the honesty of local coinage. Two doors down, a merchant from the riverlands was in heated debate with a glassblower about whether or not someone had pinched a small, expensive-looking tile from her pocket. At first, Jen assumed it was the

usual—travelers misplacing valuables, blaming anyone but themselves. But by midmorning, a pattern was undeniable.

Every complaint came from a visitor.

The first was a trading pair—tall man, short woman, both with the sunburned skin of a long sennight on the road. “Gone,” said the man. “I had it in my vest this morning, checked it not two ‘marks ago, then gone.”

Jen asked the standard questions—where had they been, who had they talked to, had anyone bumped or jostled them? The answers were as vague as rumors, but detailed in all the ways that mattered: always on the trade road or on the green, never at a shop or home. Always someone passing through, never a local.

Next came a pilgrim, sandals worn thin, who’d lost a tiny brass icon—a gift, she said, from her grandmother, and not the sort of thing easily replaced. Again, nothing: no sign of a pickpocket, no rush or crowd, just a gentle vanishing as if the item had simply preferred to move along.

By mid-bell, the list had grown. Two coin purses, a charm, a map, a trinket shaped like a fish. Jen started a ledger, tracking every detail. The only thing she could guarantee was the thief’s preference: outsiders only, never so much as a copper taken from North Pointe’s own.

She set up watch near the west gate, sitting on a barrel and letting her gaze sweep back and forth over the day’s travelers. The crowd was decent, but not overwhelming: a line of wagons, merchants with goats or crates, pilgrims alone or in clutches. She cataloged each face, each set of hands, each nervous glance. No single person stood out; if there was a thief, they moved like a wisp in water.

Gossip drifted as steadily as the wind. Someone claimed the bakery’s kits had seen a shadow lurking by the grocer, but the kits, when questioned, shrugged in confusion. Makota dropped by with a roll “for stamina,” then added, “If you catch the thief, let me know. I’ll bake him a tart he’ll never forget.”

Jen thanked her, tore off a bite, and waited. The sun climbed and so did her frustration.

She saw more travelers come and go, all in a state of cautious opti-

mism or mild agitation. At least twice, small arguments broke out between visitors over who had misplaced what. Each time, her presence was enough to drain the venom from the dispute, but not to produce a culprit.

She kept the ledger growing. There was a rhythm to the absences, but not a pattern she could name. For every item lost, there was a shrug, a muttered complaint, and a sense that perhaps, in this town, your possessions traveled as freely as you did.

The bell marked the half, and Jen finally took a break. She followed the road to the lake, needing a vantage that promised more answers than questions.

Knodalon waited on his bench, same as always, beard blowing like a banner. This time, when she approached, he looked up—just barely.

“Something on your mind,” he said. Not quite a question.

Jen explained the thefts: visitors, valuables, all vanishing without drama. She outlined her suspicions, her stakeouts, her certainty that no one local could or would bother with such pettiness. She even described the Púca, just in case they were more enterprising than advertised.

Knodalon listened, eyes fixed on the water. When she finished, he said, “Something eludes my eye as well.”

Jen blinked. She’d expected stonewalling, not camaraderie. “You’re admitting it?”

He grunted, which, for Knodalon, was akin to drawing a map and highlighting the trouble spot. “Some things want to be lost,” he said.

Jen sighed, more relieved than frustrated, and pulled the pouch of Galhani’s new berry blend from her vest. “Want to try this?” she offered, shaking the pouch.

Knodalon waved a hand, dismissive but not unkind. “I do that all the time. You go ahead.”

She tilted her head at the cryptic remark, but took the hint, pouring a measure into her cup and letting the aroma settle. The scent was sharp—berries, a hint of wild wood, the memory of rain. She sipped. The taste was brighter than she’d expected, tart on the tongue with a chase of sweetness that lingered at the back of her mouth.

She drank, and for a moment the world narrowed to that sensation:

warmth, flavor, and the clarity of someone having done their work perfectly. The moment passed, but the mood remained.

She sat with Knodalon in companionable silence, the ledger still in her lap but the urgency gone. One more complaint drifted in on the wind—a traveler up at the inn who'd lost a ring, but the detail barely merited a note.

Eventually, Knodalon said, "Nothing lasts forever. Not even trouble."

Jen grinned. "We'll see."

When the sun finally dialed itself down and the wind picked up, she left the bench and made her way back toward the common. The crowd had thinned, but the sense of unresolved questions clung to the air like humidity before a thunderstorm.

Back at the edge of the square, she watched as lights inside the menagerie flickered on—some magical, some simply ambitious lanterns. The wagon was still there, but now someone had painted a new sigil on its side in careful script. She made a note, did not bother deciphering it, and continued her slow, measured circuit.

If there was a thief in North Pointe, it was a polite one. No threats, no mess, just a trail of inconvenience and vanished keepsakes.

Jen's job, as always, was to make the invisible visible. She tucked the tea pouch back into her vest, flexed her wrists, and prepared for another round.

Tomorrow, she'd start again. For tonight, the town could rest—if not easy, at least amused.



The taste of Galhani's berry tea lingered long after the cup was empty. Jen perched on a barrel just outside the Broken Claw's shadow, legs stretched and eyes half-closed—not from sleepiness, but from the sensation that every petty problem in a day had a way of collecting in the hollows behind her eyelids. The first travelers of the morning had already begun their slow drift along the trade road, some bravely airing grievances, some quietly pretending the world owed them nothing.

She'd barely set her cup down when the mercenaries found her. Three this time, all with the battered look of people who'd survived more fortnights on campaign than they cared to count. They leaned against the pub's sun-warmed wall, taking up space as if the stone had always belonged to them.

The biggest of the lot, with a scar that mapped his jawline, nodded in greeting. "Constable. But I suppose you don't get called that to your face, do you?"

"Mornin'," Jen replied. She refused to rise to the bait. "You hear about our new residents yet?"

The second merc, taller and lean as a fencing foil, smirked. "Heard? Hard to miss, when a dozen of them stormed the menagerie." His boots found a comfortable post on the porch rail. "Little bearded men, you said?"

"That's the story." Jen rolled her shoulders, the muscles still stiff from a night better spent in motion. "Might be something called a Púca. They arrived yesterday with more tools than sense, took over the shop, and haven't bothered to say so much as boo to anyone. Left their pony for Warren to sort."

The third mercenary, Marelle, arched an eyebrow. "You plan to let them keep the place?"

"I plan to knock again, ask what their intentions are, and maybe see about that wagon before anyone gets clever ideas about souvenirs." Jen offered them a half-smile. "If you're hoping it turns into a brawl, you'll be disappointed."

The conversation paused. The warmth of the dawn pressed in, thick with the promise of a muggy day. Someone coughed, a dry sound that hung between words.

Then, without warning, the world tipped.

For a moment, Jen couldn't see the road or the mercenaries' faces. Instead: firelight. Woodsmoke curling lazy above a camp deep in unfriendly country. She was twenty years younger, thigh-deep in battered armor, her hair plastered to her forehead with sweat. Across the fire, Lyra grinned—teeth white, eyes wicked. She'd just finished the punchline of some nobleman's horse joke, and the laughter rolled low and dangerous among the tents. The sense memory was perfect:

the ache in her shoulders, the sour-sweet taste of old wine, the comfort of knowing every person here would step into a blade for her, without question.

The nostalgia cut deeper than Jen expected. She reached for her mug, found only emptiness, and the world spun back.

Noise roared up to meet her: the shouts of two travelers locked in a dispute, one hand gripping the other's sleeve, voices raw with accusation. For one breath, Jen stood untethered, her usual calm replaced by a pulse of confusion. The men didn't notice her—didn't slow, didn't even glance her way. The magic that colored her badge, the thing that kept tempers in check and fists sheathed, was simply gone.

She blinked hard, forced her hands to unclench. Her tongue felt thick, slow to recall the words.

"Gentlemen," she said, the tone as flat as a blade left in winter.

It was enough. The moment the sound broke the noise, the tension collapsed. The travelers—one gaunt, the other built like a haystack—turned, eyes wide, hands falling away from sleeves and accusations alike. The air seemed to let out a sigh Jen hadn't realized she was holding.

She stepped between them, boots placed with deliberate care. "Suppose you tell me what this is about, before the whole square gets involved?"

The taller traveler, cheeks flushed, pointed at the other with shaky certainty. "He stole my coin purse. Was here, then gone. I saw his hand—"

"You're mad," said the accused, eyes darting everywhere but Jen's. "I never came near your belt. If he lost his purse, maybe he should have tied it better."

Both fell silent, waiting for judgment.

Jen made a show of slow breathing, let her own heartbeat settle. "I'm going to ask once," she said. "Anyone here recognize either man? Ever seen them in town before?"

A dozen heads shook from the nearby gate and pub porch.

Jen fixed each man with a stare. "First time in North Pointe for both of you, isn't it?"

The haystack nodded, miserable. "Passed through, never stopped before."

"Same," muttered the accuser. "Just needed supplies."

She let the silence stretch, saw the way shame began to fill the space where anger had been. "If we had a thief," she said, "they wouldn't waste time getting caught in public. More likely you dropped it, or someone lighter on their feet took the opportunity while you argued."

The accused, hands trembling, checked his own pouches and pockets. Empty, except for a linty button and a folded scrap of paper.

Jen scanned the ground, just in case the purse had been discarded. Nothing but dust and a few plum stones spat out by the bakery crowd.

She faced the pair. "Best thing for now is to get breakfast, remember what you had and where. If your purse shows, I'll find it. If not—" she offered them a firm, impersonal smile— "well, you know who to blame."

The tension evaporated, replaced by embarrassment and a hunger neither could admit. They edged toward the pub, muttering apologies that were more ritual than sincere.

The square reset itself; the only remaining evidence was a scuffed heel mark and Jen's own uneasy pulse.

The mercenaries, who'd witnessed the entire affair, watched with curious calculation.

"Never seen anyone break up a fight that clean," observed the first merc, voice pitched low.

"It wasn't clean," Jen said, perhaps too sharply. "Whatever keeps the peace here—it slipped. Only came back once I reminded myself of how to do the job."

Marelle's gaze stayed fixed on her. "That ever happen before?"

Jen shrugged, not trusting herself with real answers. "First time for everything."

The mercs exchanged looks. The conversation shifted, perhaps out of respect for an old comrade's dignity.

They lingered a while, sharing stories of botched jobs and botched breakfasts, but Jen only followed with half an ear. The vision hadn't left her—Lyra's voice, the heat and reek of old battles. The

memory clung behind her eyes like the taste of burnt honey on a bad morning.

She hid it well, or thought she did. When the bell sounded, the mercenaries drifted off, promising to catch up when the next round was on her.

Jen accepted their banter, but inside she traced the outline of the feeling: pride and regret, nostalgia laced with warning. She could still command a quarrel, could still unmake a confrontation—but the certainty she wore like a second skin had found a crack.

She added it to her internal ledger, squared her shoulders, and got back to work. Magic or no, North Pointe wasn't the sort of place to let a lapse go unchallenged.

For now, though, the day rolled forward. The Púca were still silent in the menagerie, the travelers still nervous in the square, and Jen still at her post, a little more human than before.

She dusted off her hands and prepared for whatever came next.

Jen kept her gait brisk, but the motions felt borrowed, as if her feet were running patrol without waiting for her brain to catch up. She made notes in her ledger—lost purses, sour tempers, who'd said what to whom—but the lines between entries blurred, the details drifting together like ink in a puddle. At every turn, the memory of Lyra's laughter hovered, just out of reach. So did the quiet, relentless presence of the Púca, who (for all their noise inside the menagerie) managed to never appear in the street. Even the mundane—the tap of her boots, the wind curling around the bakery's eaves—felt loaded with some private warning she couldn't quite read.

Passing through the square, Jen fielded three separate questions about the new arrivals. "What are they selling?" from a merchant's apprentice, eyes wide and eager. "Too soon to tell," Jen replied, not slowing. From Makota: "They haven't bought bread, so maybe they don't eat?" "Maybe," Jen said, brushing off the thought, "but I wouldn't bet against their appetites." Even Galhani, usually unflappable, called over the heads of customers, "If they need herbs or oint-

ments, send them our way!" Jen raised a hand in vague assent, already forgetting the thread of the conversation.

Travelers, meanwhile, were unrelenting in their complaints. At one point, a trio from the saltlands accosted her in the street: "How is it," they demanded, "that a town as neat as yours can't keep hold of a coin purse?" Jen answered, "Because thieves only get clever when new faces roll in. If you want safety, be less interesting." They laughed, a little, but Jen didn't join. She marked the details and pushed on.

Each bell found her at a different post—gaol, bakery, herbalist, even the shadow of the menagerie itself, where the Púca's activity was audible but always hidden. Jen knocked more than once, but the only reply was a cymbal crash of tools colliding with exuberance. She made notes, added new losses to the list (today: a glass bead, a hat pin, a string of cheap pearls). All gone from travelers' pockets; no sign of the loot in alley or gutter.

At the east gate, she watched arrivals: a half-dozen merchants, a priest in travel-stained robes, a bard whose mandolin appeared to be his only baggage. None of them stayed long. At the west gate, Jen perched again, scanning for suspicious movement, but the only thing shifty was her own attention span. By the time the sun slipped behind the ridgelines, she realized she'd walked the trade road end to end so many times that she could have done it asleep.

In the lull before dusk, traffic thinned. The more ambitious travelers checked into the inn; the rest found benches, stoops, or the company of whoever offered dinner and shade. The noise level dropped back to what Jen considered ideal—enough to guarantee life, not enough to start a riot.

She waited a few minutes more, just in case, then locked the gaol and let her route meander back to the Broken Claw.

The pub was at its peak: tables cluttered, voices low, Sam Godsdotter behind the bar like a general surveying her front line. She poured Jen a mug without being asked and, when Jen took the stool, slid a second one her way, "for emergencies."

"Rough day?" Sam asked, not looking up from a ledger she was annotating with cheerful violence.

"It's been a sennight's worth of trouble in a single afternoon," Jen

replied, voice hoarse. "Petty theft, agitated travelers, and enough rumors to keep the bakery's cats awake."

Sam snorted. "You mean the Púca?"

"And the rest," Jen said. She ran a fingertip around the rim of her cup. "Something about today is off. Feels like there's a pulse in the air I can't hear."

Sam eyed her over the rim of a bottle. "Getting poetic in your old age?"

Jen managed a half-smile. "Or just tired."

"Either way, you're still in one piece," Sam said, voice softening. "That puts you ahead of most." She leaned closer, lowering her words. "Any luck tracking the thief?"

Jen shook her head. "Too clean. Not a single mistake, not a single witness. Whoever's behind it knows how not to be seen."

Sam considered. "Could be magic. Could be something else."

"Could be both." Jen let the ale wash the taste of indecision from her mouth.

The conversation retreated into comfortable silence, punctuated by the clink of mugs and the contented groans of travelers with full bellies and lighter pockets. Jen tried to focus, but the pub's hum only made her mind wander more—back to the campfire vision, to the feeling of helplessness when her badge's gift had vanished, to the clatter and secrecy of the Púca behind locked doors.

Twice, Sam tried to rouse her with a joke, but the punchlines slid right through Jen's thoughts and dissolved before she could laugh.

By the third mug, she'd surrendered to the fugue. "I'm no good for company tonight," Jen said at last. "Best let me sleep off the edge."

Sam nodded, understanding. She polished a shot glass and said, "Tomorrow's a new set of problems, if you're lucky."

Jen headed out, letting the night air slap her awake. The walk home was short, but the climb up the gaol's stairs felt longer than usual. In her apartment, she washed her face, left her boots by the bed, and stretched out in darkness, the blankets stiffer than she remembered but comfortingly familiar.

Sleep, when it came, brought no peace. The dreams spiraled: Lyra's laughter, the forgotten faces from old campaigns, the echo of voices

too small and quick to comprehend. Even the tea—supposed to foster rest—seemed to agitate her nerves, not calm them.

When she woke, it was with the grudging certainty that none of today's riddles had solved themselves overnight.

But the job was the job. There'd be more rounds, more questions, and, if she was lucky, at least one good mug of something strong before the Púca decided to play by the rules.

For now, that was enough.

four

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WHEN DAWN CAME, North Pointe put on its best hush, waiting for the bell to peel the day open like a fruit. The first two chimes passed without fuss, echoing out over dew-heavy grass and the warped boards of the town square. On the third, the entire world bucked.

At the last toll, the menagerie—recently refitted by the invasion of maybe-Púca—erupted. Not in flame or sorcery, but in a wall of sound that rippled through the square and out into the trade road, shuddering doors in their frames and rattling loose teeth in any jaw within hearing.

It wasn't random, nor even raucous. It was measured, unyielding, precise. Every hammer, saw, mallet, or chisel inside that building had been calibrated to strike in perfect synchrony with the others. The result: a constant, industrial thrum, never lagging, never pausing. The air itself seemed to vibrate with the assurance that whatever the Púca were doing in there, they would do it until the heat death of the world, or until their arms fell off.

Jen stood just outside the gaol, one boot on the step and her hands curled around her mug. She waited a full minute before deciding that this was not a brief outburst, nor even the kind of minor disturbance

that burned itself out by breakfast. She made a mental note: sustained action, probable fatigue within the bell if they were human, probable escalation if not. She set her mug down with the resignation of a soldier facing a sennight's guard duty, then started her rounds.

Makota's bakery, first as always, was already half-lit and thick with the scent of yeast and plum jam. Inside, Makota kneaded dough at a furious pace, tail lashing behind her as she punched and folded and turned out a dozen loaves in what looked like a single breath. The noise outside did not seem to trouble her. If anything, her ears tracked it with the professional interest of one who had survived six siblings and four overlapping trade apprenticeships. Her kits, meanwhile, had gone full chaos: Kene perched on the counter, sticking his tongue out to the rhythm of the hammers, while Sora attempted to chase her own tail in time with the saws.

"You hear that?" Jen asked, pausing at the threshold.

Makota grinned, claws flashing in the soft light. "I would need to be dead not to. It reminds me of my mother's village, when the whole row baked for festival. Only less singing and more screaming." She glanced at Jen's wrist, then at the window, then back to her dough. "Is it dangerous?"

Jen considered. "Not if you like precision. Or if you hate sleeping in." She leaned in, voice lower. "You see any of them outside since last night?"

Makota shook her head, flicking flour into the air with each gesture. "If I see a single bearded shoe out of place, you'll know first."

"Thank you," Jen said, not bothering to keep the relief from her voice. She left with a roll, hot and sticky in its waxed paper, and moved to the next stop.

At the tea shop, the hammers hit hardest. The walls—never thick—transmitted the sound as a series of concussive reports. Galhani was in the front, measuring out seeds with tweezers and trying not to spill them every time a new strike landed. Her braid was halfway undone, silver strands fraying in all directions. She looked up as Jen entered, eyes wild.

"You'd think," Galhani said, voice pitching high to clear the din, "that a town known for its quiet could handle a bit of noise. But I

swear if I have to reseal this jar one more time, I'll—" She snapped the lid shut and glared at the wall.

Jen smiled, not unsympathetically. "Want me to lodge a formal complaint?"

Galhani made a face, then softened. "You can try, but they're not going to listen. Not until they finish, whatever finishing means to them." She gestured to a nearby shelf, where a row of blue-glass jars wobbled in sympathetic vibration. "If they break anything, send them my bill."

"I'll add it to the ledger," Jen promised.

She left Galhani with her frustration and cut across the lane to the butcher.

Dardrad was already at his block, the morning's first hindquarter laid out in reverent display. The old dwarf eyed the vibration in his carving knives with utter loathing, muttering a chain of curses so ancient that even Jen's polyglot history couldn't translate them entirely. He took a long, deliberate draw on his pipe, then addressed the room at large:

"If I wanted to live next to a quarry, I'd have married a stonemason. What kind of madman hammers before breakfast?" He slammed his cleaver into the block for emphasis, perfectly timed with the hammers outside, and glared at Jen. "You let them run wild, Darma. Not like the old days."

Jen shrugged. "If you want to deputize and shut them up, be my guest."

Dardrad grumbled, but the threat never reached his feet. He just started sharpening his knives, every pass of the steel matched to the tempo of the distant racket. Jen watched him for a moment, then left him to his orchestration.

At the grocer's, Cole had abandoned hope of counting. He leaned on the scales, massaging the bridge of his nose with a thumb and forefinger, while his youngest tried to balance a pyramid of apples on the counter. Each new volley from the menagerie set a tremor through the fruit display, sending apples rolling to the floor with relentless efficiency.

"I spent all morning sorting these," Cole said, voice flat with

defeat. "And now I get to do it again. Maybe I'll just start selling them bruised."

Jen grinned. "You could claim it as a new variety. Púca pomme."

He let out a low, defeated laugh. "Maybe. At least the customers would have something to talk about besides the noise." He flicked a glance at the trade road, then at Jen. "Is it ever going to stop?"

Jen, honest: "Not until they run out of nails or patience. I assume they're remodeling."

"Usually the town just... provides."

"Usually."

Cole sighed. "Let me know when you're arresting them. I'll bake a pie for the occasion."

She left with a bruised apple, a peace offering of sorts, and found herself drawn toward the dry goods store next.

Alred, the usual composure of a plains elf only slightly dented, was attempting to explain the merits of waxed twine to a customer who clearly wanted nothing but silence. The noise shook the windows, and even Alred's calm began to crack around the edges.

"I swear," he said, voice carrying the edge of a threat, "if they shake loose a single shelf in my store, I'll—" He caught Jen's gaze, then shrugged. "Never mind. You don't want to know."

Jen raised an eyebrow. "You could always move your stock across the square. No hammering there."

Alred smiled, thin as paper. "Tempting, but I'm stubborn."

"Stubborn keeps us here," Jen agreed.

They shared a knowing look. Jen bought a coil of twine, partly to soothe Alred's pride, partly to see if she could tie up her own frustration.

She was halfway back to the gaol when Prudence intercepted her, moving with brisk, apologetic urgency. The seamstress had lost none of her formality, even in a town that ran on improvisation, but today her hair was loose and her dress uncharacteristically wrinkled. She clutched a battered wooden frame in one hand, threads trailing from it like the aftermath of a bird's nest collision.

"Constable," she said, "I—I hesitate to call it a complaint, but—" She fumbled for words, then found them. "My frame. It shakes every

time the noise goes up. I can't stitch a straight seam. I can't even hem. I have a commission due by the fortnight's end. If this keeps up—" She stopped, coloring, as if she'd committed a social crime.

Jen tried not to smile, but failed. "You want me to tell them to stop?"

Prudence looked mortified. "No, no, I would never—I just thought—if you had a way to... dampen the sound, or at least warn us when they plan to take a break—"

Jen nodded, understanding. "I'll see what I can do."

Prudence managed a grateful smile, the tension draining from her shoulders. "Thank you. It's only that I pride myself on consistency, and—well—this is difficult."

"Understood," Jen said. She watched as Prudence retreated toward her shop, careful not to drop her tangled frame, and made a silent promise to at least try.

She looped the square once more before returning to the gaol. Everywhere, the noise: it pounded the walls, skittered along the boards, wormed its way into the day's every conversation. Jen began to note subtleties—how the tempo never changed, how no two tools struck at the same instant, how the sound neither faded nor grew louder but maintained itself at a supernatural constancy. It was less construction and more incantation, as if the Púca worked not with materials but with the air itself.

Her peacekeeping gift, which usually prickled when violence or discord threatened, stayed silent. It was as if the town's magic had decided this was not a real threat—annoyance, yes, but not malice. She tried to argue with it, but the logic was sound. The Púca were not breaking the peace; they were just defining it differently.

By mid-bell, she found herself back at the menagerie, the sound now a part of her own pulse. She stood in the shadow of the doorway and considered: there were a dozen ways to make noise stop, but none that wouldn't escalate things, or make her look foolish, or—worst—fail in public. She watched the windows, looking for faces or even a shadow, but the Púca worked deep inside, immune to intrusion.

She imagined what her old company would make of this: the stoic veterans gritting their teeth, the fresh conscripts pulling hats over their

ears. Lyra would have made a joke of it, then outdone the Púca in volume just to prove a point. Jen missed her, in moments like this.

She let the noise soak into her bones and tried to think. She could outwait them, or she could confront them, or—possibly—she could figure out what the hell they were building and why.

She decided to go home and sleep on it, if sleep was possible.

As she crossed the square, a new sound entered the mix: laughter, bright and unbothered. The kits from the bakery had orchestrated a game with the rolling apples, slapping them down the street in time with the hammer blows, racing them against the cadence of the saws. For a moment, the noise didn't seem quite so oppressive.

Jen shook her head, grinning despite herself. Maybe that was the only answer.

Maybe, sometimes, the job was to live through it until the next bell.



The next day, the noise got worse.

It should have been impossible, but somehow the Púca found another gear. By the time Jen reached the square, every window in the menagerie had gone opaque with sawdust. The air outside shimmered with the pressure of their work—less a sound now and more a solid wall. Even the bakery's windows, usually steamed over by dawn, rattled in their frames as if the yeast inside was planning mutiny.

Jen squared her shoulders and crossed the square, boots hitting the flagstones in a parade-ground march. She made a line for the menagerie, determined to at least be seen trying. The building's door looked as solid as the day it was built, but Jen could see—faintly—shadows flickering behind the glass. She rapped her knuckles, then her fist, then the edge of her boot, each effort swallowed whole by the roar within.

She tried again, drawing on her years of professional projection: "Constable Darme! Open up!"

If the Púca inside heard her, they gave no sign. The hammering never slowed, not even to mock her efforts. Jen stood in the threshold,

sweat trickling down her back, and debated whether to kick the door in for the sake of pride alone.

A pair of travelers, luggage in tow, watched from a safe distance across the square. One of them, noticing Jen's uniform and the set of her jaw, offered a tentative wave as if to say, "It's none of my business, but I support you in spirit."

She let her hand drop. There was no point making a scene if the scene refused to acknowledge you. Jen glared at the door, made a mental note to find the thickest piece of beeswax in the town for earplugs, and stormed off.

The day did not improve. At every shop, the noise pressed in, coloring every conversation with a taut, exhausted energy. Even the bakery's kits, formerly delighted by the mayhem, now hissed and retreated under the counter when a particularly sharp volley rang out. Dardrad, in the butcher's, had stopped sharpening altogether and now simply growled at anyone who entered. Galhani's hands shook so badly she spilled an entire rack of dried mushrooms, and had to start over from scratch.

The worst of it, for Jen, was that she could do nothing. There was no threat to address, no misbehavior to correct. The Púca were, in their own way, the most law-abiding residents she'd ever encountered—except for the small matter of the town's collective sanity.

She wandered the road for the rest of the day, doing her best to reassure travelers and locals alike. Most took the noise as an inconvenience, the price of living in a town where something strange happened every few days. Some, especially the new arrivals, treated it as a novelty—another story to carry home, proof that North Pointe was as odd as advertised. But Jen could sense the fatigue gathering in the bones of the regulars. Even the grocer's youngest, usually riotous by midday, sat on the counter with his chin in his hands and stared at the ground.

By the second bell, Jen's patience had begun to fray. She retreated to the Broken Claw, hoping the thick walls and heavy door would cut the worst of the noise. No such luck. The sound funneled in through the eaves and made the mugs on the shelves buzz in place.

Sam, behind the bar, took one look at Jen's face and reached for the strongest bottle. "Rough day?" she asked, already pouring.

Jen shook her head. "Even the gaol can't help with this one."

Sam set down two mugs, both brimming. "Peacekeeping doesn't work on sawdust and hammers."

Jen grunted, but didn't reach for the ale. Instead, she slid onto a stool, elbows braced on the bar, and said, "You got any of Galhani's new tea? The one with the berries?"

Sam raised an eyebrow. "You're switching sides?"

"Just for tonight. If I start on ale, I'll break something before sunrise."

Sam chuckled, wiped her hands, and set about brewing a pot. The process was calming: water drawn and heated, tea measured with a battered silver spoon, a slow pour and a careful steep. The smell hit first—berry and honey and something sharp, like the promise of rain. Jen breathed it in and felt her shoulders drop.

While Sam worked, two other patrons—travelers again, tired and dust-streaked—claimed seats at the far end of the bar. They cast wary glances at the door, as if expecting the noise to burst in and knock them off their stools.

Sam poured the tea, filling Jen's mug with the dark, fragrant brew. She lifted it, took a sip, and closed her eyes. The world did not become quieter, but the edges of it softened, like a bruise eased by warm cloth.

Sam offered the second mug to the travelers. "It's a house blend," she said. "On the house, today. Beats yelling over the Púca."

The travelers declined, one with a polite shake, the other with a nervous, "I'm more of an ale man, myself." Sam gave them a shrug and sipped the tea herself.

For the first time all day, Jen found herself almost at ease. She let the mug warm her hands, let the taste chase away the memory of hammering, and let herself believe, for just a moment, that tomorrow might be quieter.

"Thanks," she said, soft enough that only Sam could hear.

"Anytime," Sam replied. "That's what we're here for."

They sat for a while, watching the tea leaves swirl and settle in the

bottom of the cup. The Púca labored on, but in here, it seemed more distant, almost ignorable.

Jen raised her mug, saluted Sam, and drank deep.

It was the fourth time the bell at the pub door jangled in as many minutes, but this time the air changed. The four mercenaries—still together, still dressed in the same piecemeal leather and chain—marched in as if they owned the floor. Two split off for the back wall, staking a claim to a battered trestle table; the third and fourth, with Olt in the lead, peeled off toward the bar and Jen.

The noise outside remained, but within the Claw it faded, replaced by the low thunder of military camaraderie. Boots hit floorboards, armor creaked, and the men and women wore the scars and the confidence of people who'd seen too much and learned to enjoy it.

Olt hailed Jen before he reached her: "Heard you failed to arrest a single one yet, Darne. You going soft?"

"Soft is what you get after you lose the will to live," she shot back. "So yes, I recommend it."

He barked a laugh and slid onto the bench beside her. Marelle, the fourth, offered a quick salute before sitting at the other end, leaving the space between for negotiation.

"We're considering heading south tomorrow," Olt said, propping his elbows on the table. "I thought you might want to reconsider our offer."

"Thought you said it was a sennight's work, tops," Jen replied.

"It is. But a good sennight." Olt leaned in. "Better than this."

Jen raised an eyebrow. "You say that like you're not half in love with this town already."

He ignored the bait. "I've heard your peacekeeping doesn't work so well on things that don't bleed. That true?"

"Ask the Púca," Jen said. "Or anyone who's bought flour this sennight."

Olt smiled, all teeth. "Remember how we used to complain about

the silence between campaigns? About how the world just... stopped?"

Marelle joined in: "Now you'd give your sword arm for a day of it."

Jen glanced at her hands, at the banded scars along her knuckles, and snorted. "Some people can't be pleased."

Olt shrugged. "Some people just need the right incentive."

For a while, they let the conversation drift: who was hiring out on the southern border, what rumors ran the lakeshore, who'd made it to the old age of thirty without getting themselves properly killed. The rhythm was old, and safe. Jen realized, with a chill, how much she'd missed it.

The door opened again, softer this time. Prudence entered, arms full of fabric, her gait careful, eyes darting over every face in the room. She paused at the sight of the mercs, then made a beeline for Jen's table.

"Constable," she said, offering a quick curtsy before shifting the fabric bolt to her hip. She regarded Olt and Marelle with a critical eye, taking in the state of their uniforms, the battered sleeves, the way Olt's shirt strained at the seams.

"Your clothes," she said, "they don't fit who you'll be."

The mercenaries, caught off guard, looked at each other.

"I mean," Prudence continued, gesturing at the roll of fabric, "you'll need better fitting. Something that lasts. If you want to place an order, I can measure after the midday bell."

She offered a brief, enigmatic smile, then turned and strode to the bar, leaving behind a minor silence.

Olt recovered first, shaking his head in mock despair. "She always like that?"

Jen shrugged. "Only when she's right."

The fabric on the table caught a ray of sunlight and glowed, a blue so sharp it made Jen blink.

And then she wasn't in North Pointe at all.

She was back in the camp, years ago. The company tailor—called "Buttons" by everyone, for his habit of collecting discarded ones—had been ordered to fit the entire command for a diplomatic mission. He'd

done his best, but the suits arrived a size too large for every man and too tight for every woman, the buttons mismatched and the sleeves uneven. When the parade assembled, the entire line marched with their cuffs flapping like laundry and their collars choking them to tears.

Lyra had laughed until she'd nearly wet herself. Olt had tried to stuff his sleeves with straw, but the effect was worse. When the delegation arrived, the company had looked so pitiful that their adversaries declared truce out of pure pity.

The memory flashed through Jen's mind in an instant, every sound and smell and mortification returning as if it had never left. She blinked, and the Claw returned, her hands clutching the edge of the table so hard the knuckles ached.

At the next table, a noise cut through: the slap of dice, the rise of angry voices. Two travelers, both rough, both well into their cups, were on the verge of blows. Warren, in for a midday meal, had already stepped in to separate them, hands wide and calm. Sam hovered nearby, mug raised as an improvised weapon.

For a second, the old rhythm took over: Jen's senses tuned to the edge of violence, her gift humming along her spine, waiting to do its work.

She stood, letting her presence fill the space, and walked to the table. "Enough," she said, not loud, but with the finality of a closing door.

The travelers froze, eyes tracking her badge, her wrist, the scar on her jaw.

"Disagreement?" she asked.

One man, red-faced and shaking, jabbed a finger at the other. "He cheats."

The accused lifted his hands. "The dice are his! I just rolled them."

Jen considered, then reached down and scooped up the dice. She weighed them, tested their feel, and rolled them herself. Snake eyes.

She rolled again. Double sixes.

She rolled a third time, not watching the dice, but the men. Both stared at her, willing the answer into existence.

Jen set the dice down. "Weighted. Both of them."

Warren leaned in, examining them. "He's right. Both are off."

The two travelers looked at each other, realization dawning. Then, instead of fighting, they broke into laughter—sudden, unrestrained, the sort that only came from tension released all at once.

Sam clapped, delighted. Warren poured two fresh mugs and set them down. The argument, so close to trouble, had vanished.

Jen felt her badge pulse, the magic sifting through the room and smoothing it flat again. She exhaled, hands still tight, and returned to her seat.

Olt raised his mug in salute. "You're still the best at that, Darne."

Jen shrugged. "Old habits."

They finished the meal in relative peace. The noise outside dulled, or perhaps she just stopped hearing it. The old bond with the mercenaries, the pulse of the Claw, the memory of a disaster turned farce—it all mixed in her mind, less a blur than a pattern, something she'd never be free of.

When the mercenaries stood to leave, Olt lingered.

"You ever want back in, just send word," he said. "Some places never change."

She nodded, not trusting herself to answer.

They left, boots echoing down the porch. Prudence, now at the bar, caught Jen's eye and nodded, as if she'd seen everything and would keep it safe.

Jen lingered for a while, letting the last of the tea cool. When she left the Claw, the air outside felt different. The noise from the menagerie persisted, but now it seemed more like weather—unavoidable, but not personal.

She set off for the trade road, steps light, head clear.

The job, as always, was not to end trouble, but to survive it. She walked the perimeter, hands loose, and dared the world to try again.

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JEN SPENT most of the night lying awake, counting hammer blows as if they were the clacks of a clock counting down to something unpleasant and inevitable. Every time she drifted off, she found herself in a dream where she was the only guard on shift during a sennight-long siege, the enemy using nothing but percussion and the world's most determined drumline. In the morning she poured extra tea, then marched herself to the gaol's mirror and made a face at her own reflection—gray hair in a mess, eyes underslung with shadow. The worst part was, she'd seen it all before: the fine exhaustion of a siege where nothing bled except patience.

She was two sips into her third mug when someone knocked on her door. Not a timid, do-I-have-permission knock—more the knock of someone holding a solution and needing an accomplice. Jen opened up to find Galhani, perched on her doorstep like a blue-and-silver-tufted kestrel. The gnome wore a cloak Jen had never seen before, all embroidery and tiny, dangling bells. She looked up at Jen and grinned, the effect more alarming than reassuring.

"I brought you an idea," Galhani said, skipping the greeting.

"Does it involve silence?" Jen said, only half-joking.

Galhani flicked her braid. "It involves answers. We're going to visit

the new tenants." She pronounced "tenants" with the weight of a holy office.

Jen eyed her. "You're volunteering?"

"I know Gnomish and three dialects of Forest Elf," Galhani replied, as if this were normal. "I'm as prepared as anyone."

"Better than me," Jen admitted, finishing her tea. "Give me a moment to find my badge."

"I'll wait!" Galhani chirped, and then, after a pause: "We short species stick together, you know."

Jen snorted. "That's a first, but I'll take it."

They walked together, Galhani taking two steps for every one of Jen's, boots whispering through the dew-wet grass. The air vibrated with the Púca's labor, the old menagerie pulsing with a kind of relentless certainty. It was more than just construction noise; it was construction ideology. The sky was already light, and a fine shiver of sawdust dusted the town green, making everything look dipped in flour.

At the menagerie door, Galhani knocked. It was a polite tap, but the moment her knuckles struck wood, the building stilled. The pause was so total that Jen found herself holding her breath, unsure if they'd stopped working or if the entire town had been yanked into some kind of auditory void.

Then came the footsteps—many of them, all at once, like the march of a tiny army on hardwood. The door opened to reveal a Púca with the posture of a shopkeeper but the eyes of a lawyer on a winning streak. His beard was snow-white, his ears broad enough to cast shadows, and he wore an apron stuffed with more tools than the average smithy kept on hand for a sennight's worth of emergencies. He looked up—waaaay up—at Jen, then down to Galhani, whose presence seemed to activate a kind of mental relay.

"Aha!" the Púca exclaimed, voice three times the volume necessary. "Ambassador, I presume!" He bowed, then waved a hand behind him. "Ambassador Púca to the fore!"

Another Púca—identical in every detail but for a pince-nez and a sash made of copper wire—scrambled into view, accompanied by two others who looked, to Jen's eye, like twins cloned from the original by a very enthusiastic baker. These newcomers gathered around Galhani

and began to talk at her in a concerted barrage, the words tumbling over each other in a kind of organized anarchy.

"Pleasure and privilege!" said the first.

"Honor and obligation!" said the next.

"Foregone conclusion, more like," muttered the third, who wore his cap at a sullen slant.

Galhani bobbed a small bow in return. "Thank you. This is Jen Darne, our constable."

Three Púca nodded, but only the cap-slanted one gave Jen a proper once-over, then said, "Ah, the muscle. Good. Sometimes these discussions go sideways."

"We are here for a diplomatic parley," Galhani said, switching to a formal Gnomish. The sound was like two sets of dentures arguing over a chessboard—clicks, pops, and glottal flourishes. Jen didn't understand a word, but recognized the rhythm: formal, respectful, and deeply, deeply pedantic.

"Translator Púca!" the first one called, and a fourth, slightly shorter, Púca arrived, carrying a slate and a stick of chalk. The new arrival listened for a second, then began translating with a kind of fierce joy.

"Ambassador says: We recognize the authority of the local governance and agree to abide by terms of engagement as set forth in the previous communication, unless superseded by mutual treaty." The translation was flawless, but punctuated by sudden insertions of the word "Púca" in odd places.

"Also," said the original, "we Púca never shirk a Púca-promise. Púca!" He added the last "Púca" with a flourish, as if it solved the entire negotiation.

Jen had to force her features into neutrality. She could feel Galhani vibrating next to her, either from nerves or from trying not to burst out laughing.

"May we know your purpose here?" Galhani asked, sticking to plain language.

The Púca conferred with each other for a breath, conversation passing so quickly between them that Jen could barely track who was talking. Then all four turned as one and recited, "We are summoned.

We assemble. We fulfill. We never question a true Púca-summons. Púca!" The last was delivered in unison.

"Is there something you require from us?" Galhani pressed.

The slate-and-chalk one scribbled furiously, then showed Jen the message: "Púca wish to build. Púca only wish to build."

"Build what?" Jen asked, switching in. "And why so much noise?"

The four looked at each other, then at her, as if amazed by the question.

"We build what is required," said the first, "by the call of the work. And as to the noise—" He hesitated, then shrugged. "We have no quieter."

Jen blinked. "You could—take breaks?"

They conferred again, more slowly this time, then shook their heads in unison. "No, no breaks. Once commenced, we build till completion or collapse. If you wish collapse, you can try to stop us, but be warned: many have tried, only to be Púca'd in turn."

Jen pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'd rather not get Púca'd," she said, unsure if the word was threat or promise.

The council of Púca bristled in pride. The cap-slanted one actually rose a good inch in height.

"Perhaps you can tell us what you're building, then?" Jen suggested.

The four Púca looked at each other, then at the slate-holder, who wrote: "We build as we are bidden. It is not the Púca-way to ask why, but only to do. If it helps, we Púca are not here to trouble. Just to build, and maybe to enjoy a berry tart."

Jen nodded, taking the hint. "I'll see what I can do about tarts."

The Púca all bowed, each in their own flavor of dramatic, then withdrew into the depths of the menagerie. The door shut behind them with a click so synchronized it could have been the town's official timepiece.

Jen and Galhani stood in silence for a full 'mark.

"Thoughts?" Jen asked.

Galhani beamed, then deflated. "Not a single useful word in all that. I think they mistook me for the mayor, or possibly a baby Púca."

"They like you," Jen said, "and they love to talk. But I'd bet a

season's pay they're not lying about their compulsion. They really don't know what they're building."

"They're all men, too," Galhani added. "Did you notice?"

"Every single one. I wonder if they grow from the same beard trimmings."

"I was thinking maybe a fungus," Galhani mused, "but that's just professional bias."

They started walking back toward the green, Galhani's cloak jingling, Jen's boots leaving careful tracks in the dust.

"Should we try again?" Galhani asked.

"I think we'll know when they're done," Jen said. "If the town's still standing, maybe we'll have them for a festival."

They walked in companionable silence, the hammering resuming as soon as they left the stoop. Behind them, the former menagerie pulsed with energy, every window now aglow with the soft, lambent light of something impossible underway.

Jen watched the building over her shoulder as she walked, then looked down at Galhani. "Still want to stick together, Ambassador?"

Galhani puffed out her chest. "We short species must. Otherwise the world would never know what happened below waist-level."

Jen grinned, the first real smile in days. "True enough."

They set off for the bakery, where rumors were already gathering like flies. Behind them, the town's newest mystery sawed, hammered, and chiseled its way into legend.

By the time they reached the herbalist's threshold, half-munched pastries in hand, the sun had started to slouch west, and the air in the square was shot through with the tang of berry compote and the deeper hum of sawdust. Jen felt the weariness roll in behind her eyes, but she kept her spine straight, unwilling to let the Púca (or her own knees) see her wilt.

Galhani opened the shop door, stepped inside, and immediately began repotting something poisonous-looking with a pair of tongs. Jen

hovered on the step, wondering if she should say more about the meeting, but Galhani spoke first.

"I'm glad that's over," the gnome said. "My ears are still ringing from Translator Púca."

Jen grunted, eyeing the jars. "I could use a mug of the new berry tea, if you have it."

Galhani grinned, not looking up from her work. "I'll steep a pot in a moment. Berries are at their best today. My theory is the noise is stimulating the fruit."

"Or driving it mad," Jen muttered, then turned as she heard boots quickening on the flagstone outside.

A traveler—a man, just this side of forty, with a road-burned face and the desperate focus of a merchant whose math didn't add up—hurried straight for them. "Excuse me, pardon, please," he called, voice carrying. "I—did either of you see anyone just now, a child or a—" He broke off, eyes pinwheeling as he tried to explain.

"Who's missing what?" Jen said, squaring herself between him and Galhani.

The man brandished a belt, its leather torn and the space where a purse should have hung now empty. "It was just there," he said. "I paid for tea at the little shop—" (here he gestured at Galhani, who raised an eyebrow) "and then I walked across the square, and—" He mimed reaching for his coin, and the surprise of nothing being there.

"Did anyone bump you?" Jen said, watching his hands, the way he clung to the belt like a lifeline.

"No!" he insisted. "I'd remember. I—look, I keep my purse in front, not behind, on account of the risk. Never lost one in twenty years."

Jen stepped off the stoop and motioned for him to walk her through it. "Show me exactly how you wore it. Then walk the square, same as you did."

He did as asked, strapping the belt across his belly and pantomiming the trip: out of the tea shop, past the bakery, then across the grass toward the road. He stopped, staring in disbelief at the ground, as if the purse might simply have refused to keep up and stayed behind.

Jen scanned the path, looking for disruptions in the grass, marks in

the dust, anything out of place. She found nothing—no scattered coins, no clever footprints, not even a stray thread. “Who else was in the square?” she asked.

The man considered. “There was a group of children by the bakery, but none of them got close. And a woman with a cart, but she was three steps ahead. No one came near me until now.”

Jen felt the prickle behind her ears. Petty theft was one thing, but a purse vanished off a grown man’s belt, right under the constable’s nose—someone was either very brave or very stupid. Or, just maybe, very magical.

She caught Galhani’s eye. “You ever lose anything walking the square?”

Galhani, already prepping the tea, shook her head. “Never, but I keep my pockets buttoned. And I don’t carry cash if I can avoid it.” *No need*, she added with a shrug.

“Wise,” Jen said, and to the traveler: “You’re welcome to wait here and see if it turns up, but if it’s gone, it’s gone. I’ll keep an eye out.”

He thanked her with the sagging relief of someone who just needed to be heard, then slunk off toward the inn, muttering to himself.

Jen watched him go, then pivoted to Galhani. “I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” Galhani replied, pouring water over the leaves and letting the steam rise. “But maybe this was just... an opportunist.”

Jen grunted. “Or maybe not.” She accepted a cup of tea—deep purple, flecked with bits of crushed seed. “Save me another for later,” she said. “I have a hunch to chase.”

She left Galhani to her pots and powders, moving with more urgency than she felt. The traveler’s story reeked of something old and familiar—something that had never left North Pointe, even when the faces changed. Jen considered the way the purse had gone missing: no jostle, no contact, just absent, as if air itself had teeth.

The only other place in town where things disappeared that fast was the lakeside storehouse. She aimed herself toward it, boots crunching the gravel in a way that felt purposeful, not menacing. She passed the bakery—Makota’s kits now sitting on the stoop, faces sticky and sated—and caught a snatch of their conversation:

“...so then it just *poofed*, and nobody saw it again!”

Jen didn’t slow, but the words crawled under her skin and lodged there.

Knodalon’s bench was in its usual spot, unchanging and somehow more permanent than the stone it sat on. The old man—if “man” was the right word—occupied the full width of it, arms spread, beard drifting in the lake breeze like a forgotten battle flag. His eyes were shut, but Jen knew better than to take that for inattention.

She stood beside the bench, hands in vest pockets, and waited.

After a minute, Knodalon spoke, voice pitched for the wind’s benefit. “Another thing gone?”

“Yes,” Jen said.

He opened his eyes, lids snapping up as if triggered by clockwork. “And you want to know if it’s the usual.”

Jen nodded, letting the silence be an answer.

Knodalon considered. “I have not seen any small gods in town this season,” he said. “No new ones, anyway. And the old ones are sleeping, mostly.”

“Mostly,” Jen repeated, glancing at the storehouse behind him. It looked the same as always, long and low and half-bleached by sun, but Jen remembered last spring when something had gotten loose in there and eaten every wheel of cheese in a single night, not so much as a crumb left behind.

Knodalon followed her gaze, then said, “If you want to check inside, I can stand aside. But nothing’s gone missing from the stores, not yet. Travelers lose things. That is the nature of travel.”

“It’s not the nature of North Pointe,” Jen said, more sharp than she intended.

Knodalon shrugged. “Perhaps the town is not in a good mood.”

Jen shot him a look. “Is something afoot?”

His eyes darted sideways, as if trying to catch a shadow moving just at the edge of sight. “Yes,” he said, almost to himself. “But not the usual sort. This is... lighter. It skips.”

“Skips,” Jen echoed. She searched his profile for further hints, but his features were schooled into neutrality.

“I’ll walk the trade road,” she said.

He nodded, already returning to whatever internal horizon he watched when no one else was looking.

Jen moved off, hands still in pockets, thoughts tumbling over themselves. The thefts were picking up, the travelers getting more anxious, and the town itself seemed ready to snap from the tension.

She considered, for the first time, whether the Púca's construction project and the missing purses were connected. On the surface, they couldn't have less in common, but the timing—itched at her.

At the next cross-street, she paused, ran a finger along the inside of her wrist where the sword-bracelet waited, and made a promise to herself: she'd get to the bottom of it, one way or another. Maybe the town wanted a fight, maybe it just wanted a witness. Either way, Jen was ready to oblige.

The wind off the lake carried with it the promise of rain. Jen squinted up at the sky, then resumed her rounds, senses sharpened and her pulse beating a little faster than before.

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WHEN THE DUSK BELL SOUNDED, North Pointe's square shuddered. One by one, the blows and shrieks from the menagerie dropped away, as if the Púca had been struck senseless by the moment's demand. The air, after so much relentless racket, hung empty, as raw and bright as a wound. Most townsfolk paused wherever they were—the bakery, the green, the edge of the trade road—waiting to see if the silence was a prelude to worse. In the Broken Claw, everyone noticed at once.

Jen sat at the bar, mug in hand, shoulders dipped low in the way of a fighter at rest but never off guard. The aroma of Galhani's new berry blend floated up to her nose, and for a moment she imagined it would calm her nerves. Instead, her mind kept tallying every lost item, every frayed thread of patience, every complaint from a town convinced the world was building to something catastrophic and pointless.

The barroom filled with an assortment of travelers, pressed together at the battered trestle tables, eyes darting to the door with each new guest. The regulars clustered by the hearth, keeping to their own, while the travelers—especially the five-strong party of merchants—staked out the table nearest the bar and set to carousing with the speed of men who'd spent the day feigning restraint. The merchants

drank and bluffed and argued in a cycle as predictable as the sun's path, but Jen had seen enough travelers to know the real business would begin once the first quarrel boiled over.

Sam, all white hair and scar and long-suffering grace, stood sentinel behind the bar, drying mugs with a flick that left her hands free for the next emergency. She kept one eye on the regulars and another on Jen. In Sam's pub, nothing happened without her say-so, and even the rowdiest merchant knew to mind her boundaries.

The noise of conversation, a dull roar a minute ago, sharpened in the absence of the Púca's din. Every cough, every dice roll, every scrape of boot on floor became as clear as if the room itself had been remade in glass and air.

Jen finished her mug in three methodical swallows. The berry tea tasted of promise, but not the kind that lasted. She slid the empty down the bar, nodded to Sam for a refill, and watched the merchants over the rim of her hand.

Their leader—a tall man with a face full of red beard and the nose of someone who'd lost at least three fights—leaned in, braced his arms on the table, and called, "Show it to us again, then, if you're so sure." The youngest of the lot, a fresh-faced kid barely old enough to claim a wage, dug into his coat pocket and held up a slim silver compass, the kind favored by river navigators but worth more in town than on any water.

The others whistled, whined, and tried to snatch the thing away, but the boy jerked his hand back with a speed that surprised even him. "It's mine," he said, voice too loud for the room. "And I'm not betting it, not for another round, not for your coin, and not for your—"

A hand flashed, faster than the eye, and the compass was gone. For a moment, no one noticed. The merchants roared at some other jest, the table shuddered with laughter. But then the boy's hand closed on empty, and his face went the color of dishwater.

"Which of you—" He didn't finish, just searched their faces, wild-eyed.

The others all put hands up. "Not me," said the man on his left, and "Not in this lifetime," said another. The leader grinned, teeth

white in his beard. "You're the one showed it off, lad. Maybe you dropped it."

The boy scrambled under the table, eyes wet and frantic. When he resurfaced, the panic in his voice had a new edge. "It's gone," he whispered. "It's really gone."

The leader leaned back, stretching his arms wide. "You heard him, everyone. Best check your own pockets."

That was when it started. The five rose in tandem, each checking the other for sleight of hand, for nimble fingers or guilty smirks. The youngest clung to the edge of the table, despair working its way down his shoulders. Voices escalated—first one accusing the next, then a pair squaring off, then all five talking at once, loud enough to drown out even the ghosts of the Púca's racket.

Sam shot Jen a look over the bar, all warning and weary expectation.

Jen set down her mug with a thud, jaw clenched so hard she felt it in her temples. She'd dealt with petty theft for days, but this—theft in the Claw—was different. She pushed away from the bar, boots thudding against the floorboards. For a moment her face went dark, the lines of fatigue deepening, and something sharper—fury, or maybe insult—twisted her features.

A thief in the Claw, she thought. Even the worst of them had standards.

As she crossed the room, her hand went to her wrist. The cool weight of Hellsting, hidden under its band, gave her an electric comfort. She squared her shoulders, watched the travelers as they squared up to each other. The leader pointed a thick finger at the youngest, spit-flecked and certain. "You're trying to claim we stole it, but you're the shiftest bastard at the table. Admit it now, and we'll go easy."

The kid shook his head, trembling. "I swear, I had it just now, and now it's gone. Search me! Search the table!"

One of the others swept aside the mugs and dice, sending a spill of ale across the floor. Another tried to pat down the youngest, but his hands shook with the thrill of accusation. The noise rose. The argument built in the way of all true chaos—fast, ugly, impossible to steer.

Jen moved closer, lips drawn tight, the flare of her peacekeeper's badge visible at her hip. Every muscle in her body remembered the old days—when a room like this meant violence or worse.

The last thing she wanted tonight was another fight, but Hellsting pulsed on her wrist, reminding her that sometimes peacekeeping required more than presence.

As she stepped between the two loudest, their hands already balled to fists, Jen found herself tensing for the inevitable. She reached for her old voice, the one that could freeze a barracks, and let it rip through the noise.

"Enough," she said.

The room froze, the only movement the slow drip of ale onto the floor.

And then, for a split second, the world slipped. Jen's hand hovered just above her wrist, ready to draw. But as the travelers stared at her, mouths open, the noise faded—not just from the Claw, but from every sense. Her vision spun, then tunneled, and the memory overtook her before she could stop it.



It was the Drunken Spear, not the Claw. The walls sweated with old smoke and damp, the floor slick with two generations of spilled spirits, the ceiling so low even Jen had to stoop. It was Westmark, on the borderlands, and the place reeked of sweat and sour beer and the optimism of men with nothing to lose and everything to gamble.

Her company filled the place—battered veterans, fresh recruits, and the hangers-on who came with any mercenary band worth its wage. The air sang with laughter, a hundred insults traded for every actual wound. No one sat still for long; every few minutes someone would get up and swap tables, or shout across the room, or topple a chair just for the satisfaction of the crash.

She was at a table with Leeta, Olt, and two of the new boys, both of whom cheated at cards with the enthusiasm of children robbing a larder. Jen held her hand close, counting cards, mind split between the

play and the way Leeta kept one hand on her dagger even while slapping the table with the other.

When it started, it was purest Leeta.

"Liar," she said, smiling too wide for the insult to really stick. She pointed at the local—wiry, twitchy, all muscle and nerves—who'd just swept the pot with a straight that none of them had seen coming. "You stacked it, you shit," Leeta said, and for a moment it was almost funny.

The local grinned. "If you're going to lose, lose pretty."

Leeta's fist hit the table. The noise cut through the room, and the next three events happened with choreographed perfection: Olt upended his mug (accident), Leeta reached for her dagger (habit), the local threw both hands up (surrender or stagecraft). Someone behind Jen, eager for a fight, crashed into the table from behind, launching all the cards and coins into the air. The table itself skidded across the floor, knocking into a pair of gamblers whose only crime was sitting too close to the action.

Chaos, then. Chairs flying. Mugs following, never far behind. The local tried to duck and caught a knee to the chin, while Leeta, howling with laughter, clambered onto the table and used the vantage to insult everyone in the room. Olt attempted to mediate, which in practice meant he tackled the largest man present and started a new argument on the floor.

Jen stood to avoid the carnage, but misjudged the angle. An errant elbow—she never saw whose—caught her square on the brow, and the force of it sent her stumbling backwards, heels skating across the ale-slick boards. She went down hard, shoulder clipping a bench and then face-planting into a puddle of someone's lost lunch and half a flagon of cheap red.

For a second, she just lay there, the pain dull and glorious, the taste of blood and beer in her mouth. Above her, the brawl rolled on—bodies tumbling, voices raised to a fever pitch. Leeta's laughter was loudest of all, the kind that doubled a person over, shrill and unashamed. The company's laughter built and built, and even the locals joined in, all anger forgotten.

"Get up, Darne!" Leeta howled, "You're missing all the good parts!"

She tried, but her vision doubled, and she could see—just for a moment—the outline of herself on the floor, black eye already blooming, a trail of pink-tinged ale tracing her cheek. The company roared approval, as if her humiliation had completed some sacred ritual.

The memory held her tight. She could smell the smoke, the spilled drink, the sharp tang of blood, and the weight of a dozen stares. It felt better than any peace, better than silence, better than anything in the world.

It held her so tight she almost didn't hear the Claw's noise, didn't feel the tension of the present until it snapped her back—like a brace pulled too hard, or a tendon popping free. For one moment, the world was both then and now, her face wet with both past and present sweat, her body still ready for the next blow.

And then the memory let go, and the Claw's air rushed in.

The room had frozen when she spoke, but it didn't thaw all at once. Jen stood for a breath and a half, feeling the twin aches of memory and duty, watching the travelers' outrage swirl in the air like a thunderhead that didn't know if it wanted to rain or simply collapse. She blinked hard, once, twice, and as the world sorted itself, she saw Sam already at the travelers' table—her white hair like a signal flag, posture loose but hands splayed on the table with a promise that no one would leave until the mess was sorted. Beside her stood Dardrad, arms folded across a chest thick as an old barrel stave, boots planted so deep in the floor that for a second Jen thought he might pull up the planks if provoked.

The peace of the gaol reasserted itself—not a spell, not exactly, but a force that slid over the Claw's rowdiest moments and sanded down the splinters. The magic was in the walls, or maybe in the badge at Jen's hip, but she liked to think it was just the memory of every fight she'd ever ended before blood hit the floor. The travelers' voices dipped, all at once. The leader, beard and all, shifted his weight and let

his hands fall flat. The youngest looked ready to weep, until Sam spoke, and her words took the room's attention like a wedge in a log.

"Check your pockets again, all of you," she said, voice even. "Not just for the compass. If anything else is missing, say so. And if you find it, return it—no questions, no pride, no drama."

Dardrad nodded, a short, silent dip of the head that said he'd sooner wring necks than listen to another round of finger-pointing. The travelers did as they were told. One by one, they patted coats, turned out vest pockets, even checked the insides of their boots for good measure. Nothing. The compass was gone.

The boy looked up at Sam, eyes still wet but steadier. "I swear it's gone. Had it in my hand, not five heartbeats ago."

Sam fixed him with a stare. "Nothing vanishes like that unless it's meant to." She turned to Dardrad, who grunted and swept a hand under the table, then looked back at Jen as if to say, We both know what's coming next.

Jen walked over, letting each step carry her deeper into the routine, letting the ache behind her eyes fade into the old rhythm. She squared herself at the end of the table, so she could see every face at once. Even the regulars had gone quiet—only the crackle of the hearth and the distant, muffled resumption of Púca hammering broke the silence.

"None of you is our thief," Jen said, letting her voice flatten the words. "You're not the only ones. This has happened all over town, three times today alone, and not just to travelers."

The merchants exchanged glances, and it was a sight to see—the skepticism first, then the slow recognition as each recalled their own stories, or stories from the road, of towns with peculiar habits and rules that ran deeper than the soil.

Dardrad spoke then, voice like gravel poured into a barrel. "Could be the town itself. Things here have a way of staying put. Or going where they want."

The beard leader snorted, but not unkindly. "So what, the compass grew legs?"

Sam's lips twitched, but she refused the bait. "If it turns up, we'll find it. Until then, you're welcome to finish your round. With less noise."

The merchants settled, all of them. The youngest slumped back in his chair, letting the tension slough off like a bad coat. The others mumbled half-apologies to each other and to the room, and one even reached for a coin to tip the mess out of memory. Dardrad unclenched his arms, which was as close to a benediction as Jen had ever seen from him.

She let the calm hold for a moment, then turned to Sam, keeping her voice low. "You ever seen it this bad?"

Sam shook her head. "Not since the first year, when the wards were new and everyone thought the town ran on luck alone. It's gotten worse since the Púca set up shop."

"Or since the mercenaries showed," Dardrad grumbled. "Trouble follows them."

Jen considered that. She wanted to believe it was all coincidence, but she'd lived through too many wars to trust luck or magic with this much consistency.

The regulars, sensing that the drama was over, eased back into their own conversations—softer now, with sidelong glances at Jen and Sam and the table of travelers. The Claw resumed its breathing, though a half-beat slower than before.

Jen lingered, giving the travelers time to reset, then drifted back toward the bar. The weight of the moment clung to her, but so did the comfort of old muscle memory—order restored, if only for the length of an evening.

At the bar, Sam poured her another mug of the berry tea, this time with a splash of something darker beneath. "You look like you could use it," she said, pushing the mug across the polished wood.

Jen took it, savoring the warmth. She looked up to see Dardrad already retreating to his usual haunt at the end of the bar, where he nursed a glass and glared at the world until it decided to leave him in peace.

"Thanks," Jen said.

Sam leaned in, lowering her voice so only Jen could hear. "You want my guess? The compass isn't gone. It just doesn't want to be found yet. Maybe tomorrow, it'll be waiting for you on the green, or

stuck to the side of the gaol, or in the bottom of someone's boot. Things here have a way of turning up when they matter most."

Jen nodded, not convinced but willing to believe, for Sam's sake if not her own. She watched the travelers, now subdued, picking at the remains of their meal and talking in softer, more reasonable tones.

If anything, the flare-up had left them less angry and more united—bound together by the oddity of the event, the same way soldiers sometimes forgot why they fought and remembered only the relief of surviving together.

Jen let the mug's heat leach into her hands, let the aftershocks of the old memory ebb. The gaol's magic, or the Claw's, or her own, did its work. For the moment, that was enough.

At the travelers' table, the boy who'd lost his compass caught her eye. He offered a sheepish smile, half apology and half gratitude. Jen gave him a nod, the kind that meant no harm done.

In the corner, Dardrad's beard glimmered as he drank, a silent totem of peace enforced by muscle and memory.

The town, too, seemed to exhale. The menagerie's noise was a faint tattoo against the darkening sky, the travelers' argument faded into the regular pulse of the Claw.

Sam patted her arm, then returned to her endless task of sorting, pouring, and watching over her domain.

Jen let herself relax, just a little, knowing that the work was never really done.

The wind changed, and with it the mood in the Claw. Jen felt it before the pub door even opened—a twitch in the scar along her jaw, a shift in the air pressure that set every old wound to humming. She turned on her stool just as the door banged wide and the four mercenaries entered, shoulders hunched against the cold, boots heavy enough to threaten the floorboards.

They stood just inside for a second, the way soldiers do in strange towns: eyes everywhere, muscles loose but ready, attention sweeping the room for threats or friends. They found both at once. Olt, the leader, was first to catch Jen's gaze. He grinned—one of those slow, predatory grins that could mean anything from admiration to intent to steal your breakfast.

"Trouble in paradise?" he said, voice pitched for Jen's ears but not bothering to hide from the rest of the Claw. His eyes darted to her hands, where the mug of berry tea trembled just a little, enough that she cursed herself for not controlling it.

"Not unless you count a missing compass as the end of days," she replied, setting the mug down with deliberate care.

Olt's grin didn't falter. "I've seen wars start over less." He jerked his chin at the table of travelers, then looked back at Jen. "You keeping the peace, or is this just an audition for old times' sake?"

Jen ignored him and turned to Sam, who was already pouring out a round of ales for the newcomers. Sam's face was neutral, but her eyes flicked to Jen, asking if she needed the usual warning or if this was a fight she wanted to finish on her own.

Leeta, the only woman in the mercenary group and the one with the most scars visible, sidled up to Jen's left. She dropped onto the next stool and angled herself to watch both the bar and the door, as if the real threat might walk in at any moment. "You look worn, Darne," she said, voice half-mocking and half-sincere. "When's the last time you slept like a real person, not like a bat with a guilty conscience?"

Jen started to snap back, but Leeta's smirk softened. "I mean it. You're not at war anymore. You can let it drop for a night."

"I'll sleep when North Pointe does," Jen replied, not quite meaning it.

The other two mercs joined, Piotr and Bell, each with the posture of men who knew every angle in a room and liked them all. Piotr knocked back his ale in a single swallow, while Bell sipped at his with the delicate care of a priest taking communion.

Olt leaned in, his voice dropping to just above a whisper. "We're heading out in two days. Captain needs a quartermaster, someone who knows more than how to sign forms. You come back with us, it's clean quarters, regular meals, no one trying to outfox you with a thimble and a smile. No magic. Just honest coin, same as it ever was."

Jen flexed her fingers on the mug, knuckles going white. "Honest, you say, in the same breath as offering me a job."

Olt laughed, but his eyes stayed on her face. "You think this town's going to thank you when the next Púca wave comes through? Or

when the bakery runs out of flour, or the green goes fallow, or the magic that keeps the peace decides it's had enough of you?"

Leeta snorted. "You're not even a real constable. You just had the best resume when they built the gaol."

Jen fought the urge to wince, or to rise to the bait. "I keep things running," she said. "That's more than I can say for the last ten towns you passed through."

The mercs all laughed at that—genuine, not forced. Even Sam, at the end of the bar, allowed herself a sideways grin as she slid them their second round.

Leeta leaned in closer, this time soft enough that even Olt had to strain to hear. "You know he means it, right? It's not a joke. If you came back, you could—" She broke off, searching for the right word. "You could be more than the person who cleans up after everyone else's mess."

Jen stared at her mug, then at the scarred wood of the bar, then at her own hands. For a moment she let herself imagine it: barracks sleep, the rhythm of marching, the simple clarity of a job with a beginning, middle, and end. The nostalgia made her throat close.

Olt waited, letting the silence stretch. "We're not saying you have to go. Just... don't get stuck, is all."

Jen looked up, catching the glint of lamplight on Olt's eyes. "I'm not stuck," she said, more for herself than anyone. "I'm just... here."

"Maybe that's worse," Piotr muttered, but it was almost a compliment.

The travelers at the table had resumed their game, the tension completely gone. Even the missing compass had become just another story, the sort of loss that made a good boast later and a better lie after a bottle or two. In the corner, Dardrad polished off his glass and muttered a prayer in Dwarven—probably to a god that specialized in lost things and patience.

Sam came by with the bottle and refilled Jen's mug. "Let me know if you want me to throw them out," she said, jerking her thumb at the mercs. "Or if you just want company."

Jen smiled, grateful, and Sam moved on.

Olt drained his second ale, then set it down with finality. "We're

here until sunrise. You want in, you know where to find us." He paused, then added more softly, "We could linger a bit longer, if you need the time."

The mercenaries pushed away from the bar, Leeta last. She paused, looking at Jen with a mix of longing and exasperation. "Don't let them eat you alive," she said. "If you can help it."

Jen watched them go, feeling the pull of old loyalties and the gravity of her own stubbornness. She could follow, have a night of old stories, maybe even say yes.

Instead, she turned to the window, watching the lights of the menagerie flicker against the dark. The Púca, or whatever ran this town, would be at it again tomorrow. The green would need watching, and so would the trade road, and the bakery, and the herbalist's, and a hundred other things no one ever noticed but her.

She picked up her mug, cradled it in both hands, and drank deep.

Sam slid up beside her, silent as always, and together they watched the Claw fill with warmth and noise and the promise of another impossible day.

It was enough, for now.

seven

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THE NEXT MORNING, the sun found Jen already at her post, crouched behind a tangle of hawthorn at the west gate, with Sam standing sentinel on the open trade road some twenty paces off. The air was brittle with anticipation, broken only by the creak of cart axles and the distant, unholy clamor of the Púca's latest improvement project.

They'd agreed, silently and with nothing more than an exchange of glances, that today was for catching the thief. It was a new feeling for Jen—collaboration—but Sam made it feel like an old habit, a muscle she'd merely neglected, not lost. The plan was simple: Jen would watch from concealment, Sam would mill with the travelers and townsfolk, and together they'd bait out the thing that had half the region convinced North Pointe was run by amateurs.

The first wagon of the day arrived at a crawl, dusted with the pale powder of early trade roads. The driver, a local, waved at Sam and barely slowed. A pair of pilgrims came next, faces gray with sleep, eyes already set on the tea shop. Nothing. Another wagon, this one with a merchant and his daughter, their goods lashed down with the paranoia of professionals. Jen tracked them with her eyes, muscles still as pond ice.

Two bells later, the road filled with a caravan: five wagons, four drivers, three of them strangers to Jen, and enough hired hands to suggest a sennight's journey ahead. The travelers slowed at the gate, gesturing at Sam for directions, then clustered together as if proximity to another living being could ward off whatever lingered in the ditches.

That was when Jen saw it. A shimmer—a distortion in the air, like the sun warming stones after a rain. It blinked into existence just at the edge of the crowd, hovering near a trader whose pack bulged in the lopsided way of people who valued speed over symmetry. The trader, a bearded man with the drawn face of the recently robbed, stumbled as he passed Sam. The shimmer darted to his side, then snapped away, weaving through the jumble of travelers like a needle through velvet.

Jen's heart tripped over itself, then settled into a hard, fast rhythm. She flashed the signal—two fingers and a thumb, as quick and subtle as a mosquito's bite—then stepped from cover, boots silent on the grass.

Sam caught the cue, and without breaking stride, shifted her position to block the shimmer's path. The thing—creature, person, whatever—skidded to a halt, then reversed direction, doubling back toward the nearest wagon. Jen broke into a low, ground-devouring run, keeping her eyes fixed on the blur even as it lost and regained definition with every second.

A scream rose from the crowd—a child's, shrill and panicked. The shimmer shot upward, leaping onto the wagon's sideboard, then up again, landing with impossible lightness on the roof. For a half-breath it resolved into shape: a small, hunched figure, body wrapped in something that defied focus, legs bent for motion.

Jen charged, arms pumping, eyes locked on her target. Sam, already in pursuit, vaulted the wagon's tailgate and landed with a grunt, moving faster than any woman her age had a right to. The shimmer saw them coming and hesitated—just a flicker of indecision, a lizard's tongue of fear. Then it bolted, running the length of the wagon and springing off the far end in a blur.

Jen leapt after, hitting the grass and rolling to absorb the shock. She came up running, her lungs burning and her legs hungry for more.

The shimmer dodged left, then right, then plunged straight for the orchard behind the bakery. Jen cursed, loud enough that even Sam would have blushed, and followed.

They weaved through the trees, ducking branches, sidestepping piles of old fruit. The shimmer flickered in and out of sight, a will-o'-the-wisp in broad daylight. Jen focused on the movement, not the shape; she let her instincts guide her, ignoring the impossibility of the angles and the fact that the thing seemed to cheat reality every third step.

They reached the far side of the orchard and burst out onto the green, where the morning's trade had gathered in a knot of buyers. The shimmer shot into the crowd, moving low and fast, always just at the edge of vision. Jen slowed, calculated, then cut across the green at an angle, aiming to intercept.

Sam, to her credit, had anticipated the same move. She emerged from between two wagons just as the shimmer tried to slip past, arms wide and stance solid as a drawbridge. The shimmer juked left, then—finding Jen already there—stopped dead. For a second, all three parties held their ground, the world frozen around them.

Then the shimmer grinned, or maybe just showed teeth, and vanished. Not faded—vanished, as if pulled through a gap in the air by invisible thread.

Jen skidded to a stop, panting and sweating, heart thundering with the unfairness of it all. She scanned the green, eyes darting for the tell-tale distortion, but found nothing.

Sam walked over, hands on hips, face flushed and victorious in spite of the outcome. "That," she said, voice rough, "was definitely magic. Not powerful, but effective."

Jen spat onto the grass, her patience worn thin. "I hate it when things don't bleed," she said.

They stood together, breathing hard, watching the spot where the shimmer had last existed. The crowd, sensing the threat had passed, resumed its commerce—albeit at a more cautious tempo.

Jen wiped sweat from her brow and scowled. "Next time, we trap it. You ever build a snare for a ghost?"

Sam smiled, wide and mean. "I'll have one ready by dusk."

They walked back to the road, shoulders touching just enough to remind each other that failure was temporary, and that tomorrow was another chance to finish the job.

Jen watched the horizon, her mind already plotting the next move.

Galhani's tea shop was empty except for Jen and the memory of a thousand jars, their labels twitching as the hammers from the menagerie crashed in through the thin walls. Jen poured water over a scoop of berry blend, watched the steam rise, then huddled herself into a corner where the noise sounded less like construction and more like far-off thunder.

The tea steeped dark and sweet. Jen poured a mug, sat, and let her thoughts trace the events of the morning. She pictured the shimmer, the way it'd juiced out of their trap, and the grin—real or imagined—that flashed before it vanished. Jen rolled the cup between her palms, hoping the heat would thaw her mood.

Through the window, she watched the trade road. Midday brought a lull in traffic, but at the far gate a knot of travelers gathered, wagons inching in both directions and neither party yielding. Two drivers stood chest-to-chest, arms gesturing in ever-widening circles as they argued over the right of way. Even from here, Jen recognized the choreography: escalation, then threat, then—unless someone intervened—an argument no badge could smooth over.

She drained the mug in a single swallow, left it on the counter, and strode into the street.

The moment her boots hit the grass, she was somewhere else.

Mud. Up to her ankles, slick and deep, turning every step into a gamble. The rain poured so hard it flattened the world to gray lines, and the wind howled through the gaps in her armor, finding every scar and old injury to remind her of what she'd once been. Ahead, the battle-wagon was mired axle-deep in the sucking mire, twenty hands pushing or shouting or both. Jen's own hands wrapped a rope, raw and burning, as she dug in to haul the bloody thing out.

To her left, Leeta, hair plastered to her skull, cackled like a banshee.

"If you're going to let a puddle beat you, Darne, I'll carve a canoe and float you to the next fight!" Jen grunted, put her shoulder into the rope, and slipped, planting face-first in the muck. The taste of mud, the press of sodden leather, the chorus of laughter from her company—every sense, every sound, as crisp as the moment it happened.

The memory didn't let go, not for a long while.

When it did, Jen found herself standing in the middle of the green, fists clenched, boots leaving twin gouges in the turf. She blinked, wiped rainwater from her brow—except it wasn't raining, and the only thing wet was the sweat on her skin.

At the gate, the wagon argument had reached the stage where threats were turning creative. One driver, face red as a fresh cut, was threatening to unhitch his oxen and drag the rival cart into the lake. The other—a woman with a voice loud enough to shatter stone—countered by threatening to sell the oxen to the butcher, one slice at a time, unless the man moved first.

Jen stalked up, found the midpoint, and planted herself in the wagon rut. She used the voice she'd learned in the mud: "Move them both or I'll have the smith build a fire under each of you and see which cooks faster."

The drivers stared, then bristled, then—sensing the impossibility of winning—sighed and started unlashings their carts. Jen supervised with the patience of a saint and the volume of a field sergeant, directing one to back up, the other to angle left, both to stop moaning and just push. It took five minutes, a broken crate, and a ruined wheel, but eventually both wagons cleared the gate and rolled on.

Jen waited until the last one passed, then leaned against the post and let herself laugh—a short, ugly sound, but honest. The wind off the green caught her hair, and for a second she felt lighter, unburdened. She flexed her hands, checking for rope burns, and shook her head at herself.

"Some things never change," she muttered, and headed back to her rounds, the flavor of mud and berry tea both lingering on her tongue.

The path from the green to Mistral Adventures cut through a gauntlet of complaints. Every traveler she passed seemed to have a fresh grievance about the noise, the crowds, or the sense that North Pointe was no longer the haven it had promised to be. One old merchant shook his head at Jen, muttering, "Used to be so peaceful here," just as a crash from the menagerie rattled the windows on both sides of the road.

Jen managed a thin smile and kept walking.

Inside the shop, the racket was worse—somehow the hollow of the shop caught every echo and spun it into a headache. Tyran loomed behind the counter, arms crossed, the usual sunshine of his voice dimmed to a cloudier register. He was trying to sell a compass—an actual, brass-inlaid, glass-domed beauty—to a traveler who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else.

"—and if you find a better compass this side of the capital, I'll eat my own boots!" Tyran declared, voice only slightly louder than the pounding outside.

The traveler didn't bite, just shrugged and mumbled something about "seeing what the next town had to offer."

Tyran set the compass down with exaggerated care. When the customer left, he leaned forward and addressed Jen without looking up. "This noise is driving away half my customers," he said. "Can't hear themselves think in here, let alone listen to my excellent sales pitch!"

Jen stepped up to the counter, resting her elbows beside the compass. "You want me to arrest the Púca?"

Tyran's laugh was short. "If you could. Morgaine's about ready to file a complaint with whoever will hear it. Says if this keeps up, we'll have to sell earplugs instead of equipment." He gestured at the shelves—rows of climbing gear, weather cloaks, even a few exotic pieces like a horn that claimed to summon rescue in case of avalanche. "See all this? It's gathering dust. Nobody wants to linger."

Jen ran a finger along the compass, then met Tyran's eye. "You know it's not malicious. The Púca are just... compelled."

Tyran grunted, all bear and no honey. "I know. But try explaining

that to a trader who's spent a fortnight sleeping with one eye open. They want results, not reasons."

"Don't we all," Jen said. "I'll try again, see if there's a diplomatic option."

Tyran shrugged, but his smile crept back. "You're good at those. Better than most."

He slid a packet across the counter, labeled "Stamina Drops." "Try these," he said. "Galhani swears by them."

Jen took the packet, pocketed it, and left with a nod.

Outside, the world was still chaos, but at least the sun had come out. Down the road, the Broken Claw's porch was a sea of elbows and tankards. Jen's old company—Olt, Leeta, Piotr, and Marelle—were already three rounds in, voices ringing out over even the worst of the town's noise.

As she walked by, Olt raised his mug in salute. "Battles are easier, Darmel!" he called.

Leeta cackled. "At least then you know who you're supposed to hit."

Jen shot them a glare, but it was all show. She envied them, just for a heartbeat—the clarity, the camaraderie, the simplicity of a fight you could win or lose.

Her hand drifted to the bracelet at her wrist, the steel cool and alive against her skin. For a moment she considered, seriously, how much simpler things would be if North Pointe's problems could be solved with just a blade and a little muscle.

But they couldn't, and she wouldn't want it, not really.

She smiled, turned her face to the sun, and kept walking, the world's racket fading for once into the background.

Some fights lasted a lifetime, and the only prize was the next quiet cup of tea.

eight

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THE SILENCE WAS SO sudden it clapped the town on both ears at once. For a full ten heartbeats, every animal, every human, every spirit in North Pointe Common Towne froze in place, as if afraid to be the first to break it. The air still shimmered with the memory of the Púca's hammering, as if the noise itself had left an afterimage on the inside of everyone's skull.

Jen was standing near the green at the time, chewing the inside of her cheek and watching the bakery kits attempt to herd a rolling barrel of yeast. She blinked and almost dropped her mug. Around her, the town's regulars stood at attention: a seamstress with pins poking out of her bun, the ever-worried grocer Cole, Makota with a dusting of flour over both ears, and, farther down, Galhani the herbalist clutching a handful of wild mint as if prepared to weaponize it. Even the bakery's mouse colony peeked out from under a stoop, whiskers trembling in anticipation.

The silence held another moment, as if it had a schedule to keep. Then the town square erupted.

The Púca poured from the menagerie in a single, churning line—a parade of knee-high, white-bearded men, each with a face like a wrinkled apple and the pointed ears of a folk tale villain. They marched

double-file, carrying an arsenal of tools and parcels, none of them pausing to acknowledge the gathering audience. In their wake drifted a fog of sawdust and the sharp tang of raw pine.

At the far side of the square, an empty town home—one of those limestone cubes sometimes rented to travelers staying more than a night or two—stood in dignified emptiness. The Púca didn't so much invade it as envelop it. Within three breaths, they vanished inside; within five, the windows vibrated with the sound of activity. This was not the carefully tuned industrial thrum of their menagerie work; this was improvisation, a riot of hammers, saws, and what sounded suspiciously like a sheep being sheared at double speed.

The townsfolk, having come to a mutual understanding that this warranted at least a half-bell's observation, began to drift toward the new epicenter. Makota led the charge, dusting her paws and signaling the kits to keep up. Jen, hands in pockets and senses on high alert, fell in beside the baker.

"Didn't even wait for a landlord," Makota muttered, craning her neck.

"Who'd lease to them?" the Cole said, voice tight with the suspicion of one who'd spent too many years inventorying cabbages. "They'd tear out the walls before the ink dried."

The seamstress, Prudence, eyed the building with the precision of a woman who judged everything by the regularity of its stitching. "They're flipping the entrance," she said after a minute. "The door's—well, it's not on the square anymore."

Makota squinted. Sure enough, the front door was gone, replaced by a wall of dark rock and slate.

Darby ran into the square. "They opened up an entrance from the trade road!" he cried.

"They're reversing it," Jen said, not quite believing her own eyes. "Making it face the road."

"Why?" Galhani said, sidling up to Jen's elbow and waving the mint at the construction as if it might ward off whatever was inside.

"Maybe they don't want a view of the bakery," Makota said. She grinned, exposing a row of sharp, flour-coated teeth.

"Maybe they just want a clear path for escape," Cole replied, a little too loudly.

By now, a respectable crowd had gathered. Even Minnie from the inn showed up, Trevor in tow, her apron crisp and eyes alert. "Are they opening another shop?" Minnie asked, voice pitched to carry. "What about the Icosagon?"

A ripple went through the townsfolk: a second Púca shop? The implications were too large for a single brain, so the crowd split the work. One group argued whether this counted as "filling the vacancy" for the town's magic; another debated whether the old menagerie, now possibly redundant, would count as abandoned; a third simply tried to guess, with mounting horror, what kind of shop the Púca would build when left unsupervised.

Jen stood at the edge of the crowd, arms folded, taking notes with her eyes. She let the debates rage for a bit, then drifted toward the building, boots crunching on the new stone chips scattered about the stoop. She peered through one of the dusty windows and blinked, not sure she trusted her own sight.

Inside, the Púca worked in perfect, silent coordination. Half the clan was busy installing a series of tables—small, round, and topped with a strange, almost glasslike surface. Another squad was erecting a counter, above which hung a menu board already lettered in perfect, if minuscule, script. Shelves lined the walls, some packed with jars and tins, others waiting for whatever inventory would follow. At the far end, a kitchen had been framed out, the stove already blazing, and in the corner, a wood-fired oven (complete with tiny chimney) puffed a contented ribbon of smoke.

It was, Jen realized, a restaurant.

She let out a low whistle and stepped back, shaking her head.

Makota caught her at the elbow. "You see what it is?"

Jen nodded, but before she could explain, the crowd surged forward, demanding news. She cleared her throat. "Looks like a restaurant. Not an inn, not a bakery, not a tavern—just a place to sit and eat."

Minnie frowned. "But we already have a kitchen. Who needs another?"

Makota snorted. "You ever had Púca food, Minnie?"

"Never, and I never will," Minnie replied, the indignation crisp as a new napkin. "What will happen to the Icosagon?"

"That's the question, isn't it," said Cole, twisting his hands.

The crowd fell silent, considering.

The old rule—sacred as bread—was that the town's magic functioned at full tilt only when exactly twenty shops, each of a different kind, stood open and in use. Each time a business closed or changed hands, the magic shifted, sometimes violently, until equilibrium was restored. But never had two new shops tried to fill a single vacancy. Never had the math not added up.

"What if it breaks everything?" someone muttered.

"What if it makes double magic?" another said, eyes wide. "You remember a few seasons back..."

"We won't discuss it," Galhani growled from knee height.

Jen caught Prudence's gaze; the seamstress was frowning, a look of calculation running across her features. "I don't think it will break," Prudence said quietly, more to herself than anyone. "But it might... change."

That, more than anything, unsettled the crowd. North Pointe's stability was the whole point; the one thing that held the town together, despite the chaos, was its magical equilibrium. If that changed, who knew what else might unravel?

"I want to go watch," Darby announced.

Everyone followed him onto the trade road, just as the Púca's construction reached a crescendo. The front door—now facing the trade road—slammed into place with a boom that echoed down the square. The sound was so final, so definitive, that it nearly erased all the debate. The crowd stood in silence as the Púca began to file out of the house, each one brushing dust from their clothes and nodding to the others as if a job well done.

One of them—Translator Púca, recognizable by the chalkboard slung across his back—spotted Jen and waved, then hurried over.

"Is it finished?" Jen asked.

"Críochnaithe!" said Translator Púca, grinning up at her. "Openin'

soon, once we get the all-clear from the health inspector and give it a final wipe down." He nodded to Makota and Galhani, then to Minnie, who scowled in reply.

"What'll ya be servin'?" Makota asked, curiosity trumping professional rivalry.

"Haven't a clue," Translator said, "but sure someone'll know. Soon."

Minnie huffed. "We already have a kitchen."

"Not like this, you don't," Translator said, then tipped his hat and rejoined the line.

The crowd watched as the Púca assembled in front of the new entrance. With a well-timed flourish, the lead Púca unrolled a long, narrow banner and tacked it above the door. The sign read, in perfectly inscribed letters: "The Restaurant."

A simple name, but the message was clear. This was a declaration.

The crowd began to disperse, but the arguments carried on, trailing through the square like the tail of a parade. Would the Icosagon accept this? Was the town now over quota, or had it simply recalibrated? Was the menagerie still a shop, or had it been converted into... something else?

Jen watched the Púca as they filed back inside, already bustling about the kitchen and rearranging tables. She felt a prickle at the base of her skull, the kind that said magic was gathering, about to resolve itself in a way nobody expected.

Makota elbowed her. "You think the world will end?"

Jen snorted. "If it hasn't already, I doubt this is the last straw."

"Good," Makota said. "Because I want to try that place."

They stood together for a moment, watching the smoke curl from the new chimney, listening to the faint clink of dishes behind the walls. The world, for the time being, held.

But the silence was different now—a new kind of waiting.

And somewhere, Jen was certain, the magic that kept North Pointe spinning was preparing its answer.

Jen could have walked the path to Leota's blindfolded, but this morning she kept her eyes wide and her senses tuned for anything strange. The town's mood was still on edge—waiting for the next shoe to fall, or for the Púca to break into a third vacancy and declare themselves majority shareholders. She wasn't sure which would happen first.

Leota's home was a riot of shadow and light: bundles of dried sage and wormwood hanging from the rafters, their shapes casting wiggling patterns on the walls; runes carved into the doorframe catching the sun and sending tiny rainbows across the entryway. If anything, the place felt more alive than usual—buzzing with anticipation, or maybe just with the nervous energy of the witch who lived there.

Jen rapped on the frame, not waiting for the bell pull. The door opened at once, Leota's pale hand motioning her inside before Jen could finish her greeting.

The interior was a study in organized chaos. A dozen jars, each labeled with a scrawl of illegible runes, lined the shelves. The table was stacked with books, a spread of playing cards (mid-game), and an enormous honeycomb dripping onto a dish. Leota herself was perched behind the table, sleeves rolled up, ink smudged on her fingers and a look of skepticism already set on her face.

"Jen," she said, voice dry as a bark. "To what do I owe the pleasure? Trouble at the menagerie again?"

"Sort of," Jen said, taking the stool offered her. "They've opened a new front."

Leota's left eyebrow shot up. "Literally?"

"They reversed a house," Jen said. "Changed the entrance to face the road, set up a restaurant, even hung a sign."

Leota let the information sit for a moment, then steepled her hands in front of her. "And the Icosagon?"

Jen shook her head. "That's what I came to ask you about. Everyone's got a theory. Some think the town's magic will snap back and evict one of them. Others think it'll double up and swallow us all."

Leota laughed, a sound like a match striking. "It's not that fragile,

Jen. Even if the Icosagon likes symmetry, it's got some slack in the system." She flicked her gaze at the honeycomb, then at Jen. "Want some?"

Jen passed. "Just the wisdom, thanks."

Leota ran a finger along the edge of her desk, then traced a pattern in the air—a series of curls and twists, like someone sketching a knot without touching it. The air above her hand shimmered, briefly, and Jen felt the hair rise on her arms.

"The wards are holding," Leota said, more to herself than to Jen. "No alarms, no tremors. The magic is stable."

"But two shops in one slot?" Jen pressed.

Leota's eyes glinted. "Unprecedented, I'll grant you. But the town might be...evolving." She made a small motion, as if adjusting an invisible collar. "Or maybe one of them isn't a shop at all, just a façade."

"A what?"

Leota grinned. "You know—smoke and mirrors. Sometimes the Icosagon tests us. Sometimes it just wants a new angle."

Jen frowned, unconvinced. "So what happens if there's a surplus?"

"Well," Leota said, "in pure geometry, the next shape after an icosagon is an icosikaihenagon. Twenty-one sides."

Jen blinked. "That's not a thing."

Leota looked delighted. "Not until now, apparently. Maybe the town wants twenty-one shops, just for the thrill."

Jen let out a breath and leaned back. "So we wait and see?"

"Or," Leota said, picking up the honeycomb and stabbing it with a tiny fork, "you could try the food. Maybe it'll give you a vision." She made a face at her own joke, then added, "If it gets weird, come back. I'll be here."

Jen thanked her and stood, feeling only slightly less adrift than before. The rules of the town had always been simple—until now. She left the cottage with the sense that the magic was in a holding pattern, waiting for the next move. Which meant the next move was probably hers.

She let her boots find their own rhythm and headed for the Claw,

where the day's early crowd had already staked out the best tables and Sam was stacking mugs behind the bar in a display of silent efficiency.

Sam glanced up as Jen entered, read her mood in one look, and reached for the brown-glass bottle. "Tea today?" Sam asked, already halfway through the pour.

"Please," Jen said, and slid onto her usual stool.

Sam set the mug down and waited, letting Jen decide if she wanted to talk or just drink. Jen let the silence settle, then said, "You hear about the new restaurant?"

Sam grunted. "Hard to miss. Minnie nearly choked on a roll when she saw the sign."

"Does it bother you?"

Sam shrugged. "There's always room for more. As long as they don't start serving my ale, I don't care if they build a circus."

Jen sipped the tea, savoring the tart, heady flavor. "Leota thinks the town might be evolving."

Sam made a face. "That sounds expensive."

"It might be," Jen said. "Or maybe it just means more paperwork."

Sam snorted, then polished a glass with a clean swipe. "You want my advice? Let it play out. If there's trouble, the town will let you know. If not—maybe you'll get a decent lunch for once."

They shared a companionable silence. The noise from the square was softer now, as if the town itself was taking a breather.

Jen finished her mug and set it down. "Thanks, Sam."

"Anytime," Sam said, and turned back to the mugs, humming under her breath.

Jen stood, her boots light for the first time all day. She wasn't sure what the town would do, or if the Icosagon was really as flexible as Leota claimed. But she knew her place in it: not to predict the future, but to meet it when it arrived.

One second she was listening to Sam rant about the folly of serving soup before midday, and the next—she was gone.

The world tilted, the pub's worn wood replaced by splintery benches and a lean-to of stitched canvas. Mud sucked at her boots, and

the campfire's oily smoke clung to her tongue. She was twenty years younger, jaw unscarred, and her shield-sister Leeta was alive and wheezing at her own joke—something about a nobleman, a donkey, and a barrel of fish sauce. The whole company was there, faces more real than memory ever deserved. Jen felt the weight of her sword at her hip, the sharp cold of her drinking tin, the pulse of her own laughter in her chest. She could even taste the coffee—burned, black, perfect.

The scene held for a perfect, aching moment. Jen saw herself from the outside, boots planted wide, voice cutting through the haze, fingers dancing on a battered deck of cards. She saw the warmth, the motion, the purpose. And she let herself feel it, all the way through.

Then the world snapped back. The Claw reasserted itself: Sam's scar, the glint of glass, the low drone of the travelers' game. Jen gasped, surprised to find the mug still in her hand and the sun at the same slant in the sky.

Sam was watching her, eyes narrowed. "You left for a moment," Sam said, voice soft. "Gone as a ghost."

Jen's fingers trembled as she set down the cup. "It was the tea," she said, more to herself than to Sam. "Something in it. It pulled me under. It's been doing it all along."

Sam nodded, as if this was the most natural thing in the world. "I've seen worse side effects."

Jen stood, bones shaky. "I need to see Galhani."

Sam gestured to the door. "Go, before it wears off. I'll hold your place."

Outside, the green was soft with new grass, the old menagerie's windows still dark. Jen crossed the square with long, sure strides, heart thudding as if she'd just run a mile. The herbalist's door was open, and Galhani was bent over the counter, grinding something in a mortar and pestle with the intensity of a scholar defending her dissertation.

"Galhani," Jen said, voice low. "We need to talk."

The gnome looked up, eyes bright as poppyseed. "Jen! Did you try the new blend?"

"That's the problem," Jen said. "I didn't just remember—I was there. All of it. As if time had looped around and bitten me."

Galhani set down the pestle, concern flickering. "Oh dear. I had a moment earlier, but I thought it was just... daydreaming."

Jen shook her head. "This was full immersion. Real as breathing."

Galhani tapped her chin. "There are some compounds—very old ones—that can trigger what's called a retrograde vision. Usually harmless, sometimes even medicinal. But I thought... well. Didn't think it would crop up here."

"Apparently it did," Jen said, unable to keep the edge from her tone.

Galhani looked properly chastened. "Would you mind if I borrowed a memory? For study?"

Jen stared at her, caught between horror and laughter. "No," she said, "I'd rather you didn't."

Galhani nodded, accepting the boundary. "I'll put a warning on the blend. Memberry Tea—it's catchy." She found a scrap of label and wrote it out in her best script, then added: "Caution—may induce strong visions of the past."

Jen let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "You might want to tell Leota. She'd love it."

"I will," Galhani said. "And thank you, for testing it so thoroughly."

They exchanged a look, the kind that said, "never again," but also, "that was not the worst thing to happen in this town." Jen left the shop, brain still humming with echoes of laughter and the memory of a firelit night that would never be again.

She crossed the green and headed back to the trade road, boots steady now, and caught sight of the new restaurant's sign. "The Restaurant," it said, as if daring the world to find fault. Jen almost wished she could step inside and order up a plate of the past, but she knew better. Some things were better as memory, and some should be left to the tea.

Back at the Claw, Sam looked up as she entered. "You survived."

Jen grinned, the edge of the memory still sweet in her mouth. "I always do."

Sam poured her a fresh mug—this time, plain black—and slid it down the bar. “No more surprises,” she said. “Not today.”

Jen sipped, letting the warmth anchor her in the now. Outside, the sun crept along the edge of the windows, and the square hummed with the anticipation of whatever tomorrow would bring.

She was ready. Or as ready as anyone could be.

The sunrise found Jen already at her post, boots planted in the gravel by the west gate, eyes narrowed at the slant of the morning trade. She and Sam had agreed—without needing to say it—that today they’d catch the thief if it killed them, or at least if it made them look like fools.

Sam leaned against the far post at the east gate, arms folded, looking for all the world like she was just another early riser with nowhere to be. In truth, she missed nothing. Even from here, Jen could sense Sam’s gaze flicking over every wagon, every stray dog, every traveler with a suspicious bulge in their pack.

In the middle ground, the regulars went about their day with just a shade more drama than usual. Knodalon sat on his lakeside bench, as unmoving as a tombstone, but Jen could tell his eyes tracked every motion from gate to green. The bakery’s kits scampered through their chores, occasionally glancing at Jen as if expecting her to sprout extra arms or pounce on a passing pigeon.

The first bell brought a surge of travelers: a sour-faced merchant with a cart of onions, two pilgrims in mud-caked robes, and a trio of farmhands with sunburnt noses and the posture of men who knew the value of a quick escape. Jen watched each with the intensity of a predator, but nothing seemed amiss.

Then, precisely as the trade road reached its peak, it happened.

A shout rang out from the crowd—a traveler clutching his belt, face gone from ruddy to milk-white in a single breath. “My purse!” he yelled. “It was just there!”

Jen moved before he could finish, closing the distance in three strides. “When did you last have it?” she demanded.

"Just now," the man said, voice shaky. "I reached to pay the toll, and—"

"There is no toll," Jen said, but the man was too stunned to argue.

She scanned the crowd, looking for the telltale motion of a hand withdrawing or a figure retreating, but everyone stood exactly where they had, as if the entire moment had been staged.

Sam arrived seconds later, breathless but alert. "You see anyone?"

Jen shook her head. "Nothing. Not a twitch."

The crowd began to murmur, people shuffling away from the center as if the theft might be contagious. Knodalon, from his bench, simply stared.

A second traveler, this one a woman with a copper braid, patted her side and frowned. "My buckle's gone," she said, voice less panicked, more offended. She lifted her cloak to show the clean break where a decorative brass piece had once held the fabric together.

Jen ran the math again: two thefts, one in plain view, no suspects, no witnesses, no evidence.

From the direction of the Claw came the low, rolling laughter of the former mercs, already three mugs deep and enjoying the spectacle. "Quite the mystery you've got there, Constable!" called the one with the broken nose, raising his drink in salute. "Maybe it's the town itself, bored of your vigilance."

Jen ignored them, but her jaw tightened.

She and Sam walked the length of the trade road twice, comparing notes in clipped tones.

"Couldn't have been a pickpocket," Sam said. "I watched every pair of hands from here to the bakery."

"No children close enough," Jen agreed. "No one bumped or even brushed the victims. It's our shimmering thief again, no question."

They walked in silence for a while, letting the steady rhythm of boots on dust settle their thoughts.

Sam finally said, "You ever hear of a thief who doesn't care what they steal? That buckle was worth nothing."

Jen grunted. "Pride, maybe. Or practice."

They ended up near Knodalon's bench, where the old man waited, still as an anchor in the grass.

"You see anything?" Jen asked, half expecting him to grunt or ignore her.

Instead, Knodalon blinked, slow as a lizard. "Sometimes a thing wants to be lost," he said.

Jen considered this, then shook her head. "Not good enough," she muttered.

They returned to the gates, each more determined than before, each knowing the town would test them until the end of days.

As the sun arched toward noon, a fresh bell tolled from the center of the square, and Jen prepared herself for the next round. Tomorrow, she thought, she'd catch the thief. Or maybe the town itself would tire of the joke.

Either way, she'd be waiting.

Jen should have known it was going to be a day for the records when a five-man parade of officialdom blocked the west gate before. At the front marched a portly, red-faced man in an eggshell tunic and a moustache that twirled at the tips like pastry. He was flanked by four men-at-arms in matching livery, all of them grim as tombs. Behind the procession trailed two clerks with bundles of scrolls and a leather satchel so battered it looked like it had survived a fortnight in a dogfight.

They moved with purpose, their steps trampling the grass flat, and the leader's voice boomed over the green before he was even in sight.

"Where is the constable of this town?" he bellowed.

Jen, who'd just managed a sip of hot black tea—no Memberries, this time, thank you—set it down on the post and walked toward the commotion. The bakery kits stopped their game and stared. Knodalon looked up from his bench, assessing the newcomers with the faint, resigned interest of a man who had seen the same show many times before.

"I'm the constable," Jen said, folding her arms. "You have business in North Pointe?"

The portly man swept a theatrical bow—more for show than

respect. "Guilder Arrons," he announced, voice straining to fill the entire square. "Southern Trade Commissioner, at the behest of the town of Southmark and the greater Riverlands Guild. I am here under authority of the merchant's compact and the charter of the Second Concordance."

One of the clerks began shuffling through parchments, producing a wax-stamped document before Jen could even open her mouth.

She glanced at the writing, saw a tangle of legal script and a signature in a hand so bold it could have been written with a paintbrush. "What's the complaint?" she asked, keeping her tone flat.

Arrons puffed out his chest. "You have accepted a rogue enterprise, operated by outlaws and squatters. The Púca have abandoned a lawful lease in Southmark—leaving debts, incomplete orders, and a violated contract. By the laws of the Compact, they are not permitted to open a new shop within two sennights, nor are they allowed to practice their trade within three day's ride of the abandoned lease."

Jen processed this, then glanced at the clerks. One was already scribbling notes, the other examining every building in the square as if calculating how much back-rent the town owed.

Arrons leaned forward, his moustache quivering. "I am here to demand their immediate extradition, with restitution and censure. And, should you fail to comply, to begin formal charges against the magistrate and the town as a whole."

Jen had been yelled at by men better armed and less literate, but something about the Commissioner's tone made her back tighten. "We don't have a magistrate," she said. "You can file your charges with the town witch, but she charges double if you waste her time."

Arrons's face went a dangerous shade of plum. "I am not here for humor," he said. "I am here for law."

"Is that all?" Jen said, letting the silence stretch.

Behind the Commissioner, the guards shifted their weight. Jen could tell from a glance that they were good men, used to following orders, but not sure what to do if the orders involved an actual confrontation.

"Just tell the Púca to close the shop," Arrons said, voice slipping to the whine of a man who'd already lost the argument. "That's all you

have to do. Close the shop and post a notice of embargo for the full span of the moon."

Jen started to say, "Of course," but the moment the words touched her tongue, something strange happened.

She felt the magic of the town rise up—a heavy, silent force, not unlike the air before a storm. Her chest seized, her pulse skittered. The world tipped, and a tight, cold pressure wrapped her ribs. Her brain screamed at her to comply, to give the order, to fix the problem and return the town to equilibrium. But her mouth refused to move.

Arrons stared at her, eyes bugging. "Are you listening, woman? It is your legal duty—"

Jen tried again, but the pressure doubled. She could feel it in her bones: the town had accepted the Púca. Whatever the legal math said, the Icosagon had already written them into the geometry of North Pointe. To remove them now would break something, not fix it.

She sucked in a breath, steadied herself, and said, "The shop stays."

Arrons went white, then red, then a strange, unhealthy blue. "You would defy a lawful order?"

Jen squared her shoulders. "The town has its own rules. The Púca are part of it now."

One of the guards opened his mouth to speak, but Arrons cut him off with a slicing gesture. "This isn't over," he spat. "I'll bring the full censure of the Guild, and every town this side of the capital will black-list North Pointe."

"Good luck," Jen said. "Half the shops here don't even have bank accounts."

The guards looked at each other, then at Jen, then at Knodalon, who was now openly grinning. The clerks packed up their scrolls and scuttled after Arrons, who stomped off down the trade road with the dignity of a man who would not be outdone by simple common sense.

Sam appeared at Jen's shoulder, having watched the whole affair from the inn porch. "Do I want to know?" she asked.

"Legal trouble," Jen said, massaging her ribs. "But nothing the bakery can't fix."

Sam nodded. "Best to let the town witch handle it."

“Already planned,” Jen replied. “Though I’ll need a mug of the new Memberry Tea if I’m going to write the paperwork.”

They shared a laugh—brief, honest, and edged with relief.

The town held, the magic stayed balanced, and the sun climbed toward its noon peak. It would be a long day, but Jen felt ready for it.

After all, she thought, there were worse things than bureaucracy.

nine

. . .

BY LATE AFTERNOON the trade road baked in a heat haze, making even the rocks look tired. Jen stood with her boots in the scant shade of the town's archway, one hip braced against the post, her gaze fixed on the not-quite horizon. The sun had not yet surrendered, but the air tasted of evening: fresh grass, horse sweat, a drift of yeast from the bakery behind her. If she stood still, she could imagine the whole world was caught holding its breath, waiting for some signal to let the day finish collapsing.

She saw him first.

The man walked alone, emerging from the shimmer of the heat as though stepping between worlds. Even from a distance Jen pegged him for an elf—nobody else had limbs that long, or the kind of stride that made every rut and stone seem pre-negotiated. She took him in at a glance: tall, built lean as a fencing foil, long hair rippling like poured mercury down his back. At first, she slotted him in the mental ledger with the other merchants and wanderers who passed through North Pointe—probably a Forest Elf, maybe looking for the bookshop. Maybe in a hurry to reach somewhere else.

But as he drew closer, she realized he moved with a deliberateness that was neither hurry nor fatigue. His gait was precise. Each foot

landed exactly where it ought, no more, no less. She watched as he paused at the turn before the bridge, looking out over the wetlands to the east, and stood perfectly still for ten, maybe fifteen counts, as if measuring the lay of the land for future reference. Then he resumed, crossing the dry gulley in three smooth steps and following the rutted path to the gate.

He wore traveler's clothes, but not the kind anyone local would ever soil on an actual road: a coat of soft, gray fabric that caught the light like cloud-reflected moon, fastened with a single line of jet buttons. Beneath, a tailored vest in muted plum, shot through with thread so fine it seemed liquid. Trousers, dark and crisp, tucked into boots that gleamed like they'd never seen honest dirt. The effect was that of a prince slumming, or a very well-paid courier who'd never had to run.

When he hit the boundary of North Pointe, he didn't slow—just let his pace shift to match the rhythm of the town. Jen stiffened a little, just in case, but the elf only turned his head, eyes meeting hers with a kind of polite, reserved curiosity. Up close, she saw the color of them: a blue so deep it carried its own shadow, like night trapped in ice. He gave a fraction of a nod, more formal than friendly, then continued on.

For a second, Jen was left with the impression he'd walked right through her. She watched him until the angle of the lane hid him from view, then checked herself: hands steady, breath even, badge still pinned at her belt. Nothing about him said "problem," but itched at her all the same.

Behind her, the bakery's kits abandoned their game of marbles to press against the shop's window, gawping as the newcomer strolled past. Galhani's gnome apprentice, up a ladder dusting wild thyme along the eaves, nearly toppled off in an effort to get a better look. The stranger took it all in with a sort of practiced obliviousness, neither feigning humility nor seeking attention.

Jen let him get three houses ahead before she started after, boots silent on the packed earth. She kept her distance, following the faintest whiff of wildwood aftershave and something colder—stone, or maybe snow, though it was late summer and no sane person would waste magic on a glamour just to seem chilly.

At the town gate, the elf stopped again. He studied the square: the arc of the road, the new front of the Púca's restaurant, the tangle of tavern-goers on the Claw's porch, the battered signage above the grocer's. Jen caught up in time to see his eyes settle on the bookshop, and the hint of a smile, so fleeting she nearly doubted it, flicker over his mouth.

He walked to the shop with the same measured pace, ignoring the sideways glances of every townsfolk in view. At the door, he hesitated—then stepped inside, vanishing into the low shadow as if he'd always belonged there.

Jen waited in the square for a long moment, hands clasped behind her back. She let herself look up and down the row of shops, then at the town's east boundary, where the legal party from earlier still loitered, licking their wounds and pretending not to glare at the menagerie. Satisfied that nothing else would erupt in her absence, she crossed the grass and entered the bookshop behind the elf.

Vamir's bookshop always felt a few degrees cooler than the outside air, the light filtering through painted glass and landing soft on the haphazard rows of shelves. Jen stepped inside and was hit by the triple scent of old paper, beeswax, and that specific musky spice elves always managed to bring into a place. She squinted past the glare and found Vamir perched on a high stool behind the desk, his long white hair tied back in a loop and his fingers sorting through a delivery of new ledgers. Polyocular, the shop's living rumor mill, nested in the crook of his neck, three eyes open and already tracking the door.

The new elf stood at the front table, one gloved hand resting on the corner, as if waiting for the room's permission to move. Up close, his coat was even more perfect, not a single crease or travel mark. The silence, already thick, became glacial. Vamir looked up, lips parted for the rote "Welcome to my shop" greeting, but no words came out.

Polyocular let out a faint, trembling chirp. Its feathers had gone emerald, the edges shifting toward yellow, and all three eyes pinged between Llewel and Vamir as if searching for a punchline.

"Ah," said Vamir, after a full two-count. "A visitor from the high ridges."

Llewel inclined his head a degree, as if to acknowledge both the

statement and its implications. "Excuse the intrusion. I am Llewel Magcaryn. I come at the request of those who..." He paused, searching for a neutral phrasing, "oversee the interests of tradition."

Vamir managed a laugh. "We honor tradition here, though not always in the ways our kin would approve."

Jen, standing just inside the door, raised an eyebrow at the diplomacy. She knew elves by reputation—obsessed with protocol, tight with their secrets, and never ones to pass up a chance for drama if it could be done tastefully. Still, she'd never seen Vamir so much as blink at a customer before.

Before she could so much as clear her throat, the bell over the door sounded again. Alred, the other elf in town, stepped through, carrying a crate of pressed paper and looking as if he'd just been told his house was on fire. He saw the back of Llewel's head, then Poly's color, then Vamir's posture, and everything about him went blank for a half-second. Then he set the crate down gently and did a very formal Plains Elf bow, which in this space was the equivalent of falling to one knee and confessing your sins.

"Alred Grasswalker," he said, voice stripped to its bones. "At your service, if service is required."

Llewel gave a Plains bow in reply, almost imperceptible, then gestured to Vamir. "I did not mean to intrude upon you—" he searched for the word, "routine."

"It is no intrusion," said Vamir. "Only a pleasure to see the ways of the mountains have not been entirely lost."

A brief silence. Polyocular, perhaps in a bid to keep the mood from curdling, leapt from Vamir's shoulder to the table and scuttled between the ledgers, popping its third eye in and out of existence like a nervous tic.

Jen watched the volley of glances: Vamir to Alred, Alred to Llewel, Llewel to Poly, Poly to Jen, and then back around. None of the elves seemed to have remembered she was present, or at least none would admit it.

Finally, Llewel said, "You have good stock," nodding at the rows of journals and hand-pressed editions. "It is rare to find such care in these times."

"Thank you," Vamir replied. "Is it books you seek, or news?"

"Neither," Llewel said. "I was called here by a—" He hesitated, as if the right noun might betray a state secret. "A summons. I am to establish a place for dining. Uniquely... appointed. I see the builders are already well along."

Alred shot a glance at Vamir, who shrugged, helpless. "The Púca," Alred muttered. "No one can outpace them."

Llewel smiled, but it was a measured, diplomatic smile. "I have always admired their efficiency."

The moment dragged, and Jen felt the urge to fill it with something, but knew from experience that the best thing was to let elves finish their elaborate, invisible dance before she dared interrupt.

"Have you traveled far?" Alred asked, voice soft.

"A moderate distance," Llewel replied. "The high range to the east. Our population is, as you know, not what it once was."

Vamir's face flickered, a brief pang of memory or regret. "Some things never return. But some do."

"Indeed," said Llewel, and for a second the two regarded each other, silent as the inside of a grave.

Polyocular broke the tension with a low, warbling note and pawed at the new ledger as if to say, "Order, please." Llewel acknowledged the animal with a small, respectful bow, which seemed to please Poly immensely. It preened and let out a tiny, piping sound, feathers rippling colors.

Jen decided the play had run long enough. "If you're opening a restaurant," she said, "you'll need to maybe warn the inn, or the grocer, or both."

Three sets of elvish eyes swung to her. Llewel smiled—this time almost genuinely. "I am happy to comply."

Vamir gestured to the small, hardbound book at the counter. "The tradition is to sign in."

Llewel walked to the desk and took the pen, writing with a hand so elegant that even the signature looked ceremonial. He finished, then turned to Vamir. "Thank you for the welcome."

"It is our privilege," said Vamir, and Alred repeated, "Our privilege," as if reciting from a script they both knew by heart.

Llewel nodded to them both, then to Jen, and left as quietly as he had entered.

When the door closed, the silence didn't break so much as dissolve. Vamir sat down hard, then reached for Poly and buried his face in the creature's feathers. "We are in for it," he muttered.

Alred exhaled through his nose. "It's like seeing a ghost, except the ghost is better dressed than you."

Jen leaned against the desk. "Is it going to be trouble?"

"Not trouble," Vamir said, "just—a lot of very complicated feelings. Mountain Elves aren't supposed to exist anymore, except as rumors or in the old stories. And even if they did, they weren't supposed to show up in places like this."

Alred nodded, eyes distant. "My uncle used to say, 'If you see a Mountain Elf, make three wishes, then run away.'"

"Did you make any wishes?" Jen asked, lips quirking.

Alred considered, then said, "Yes, but I think all of them are now impossible."

They shared a laugh, small but genuine, and Jen felt some of the tension bleed away.

After a minute, Vamir gathered himself. "He will be watched. Word will travel faster than he can walk. I'd wager the Púca already know his favorite soup and how he takes his bread."

"Best to keep ahead of it," Jen said. "I'll walk the square and see what the gossip is."

Vamir looked grateful. "Thank you."

Jen nodded, and left the elves to their post-mortem. Outside, the light had shifted: the sun behind the shop cast long shadows across the green, and the bakery had set out racks of rolls cooling in the breeze. Llewel was halfway down the row, already pausing to watch the restaurant's finishing touches.

Jen caught up to him, keeping a pace that was neither threatening nor sneaky, just professional. He turned, acknowledged her, and together they continued in the direction of the square, neither speaking nor needing to. After a while, Jen realized she was matching her steps to his, and decided she didn't mind.

At the crossroads, he stopped and looked back at her, the deep blue of his eyes flat and unreadable.

"You may ask your question, Constable," he said.

Jen shrugged, letting the silence answer for her. "No question yet," she said. "Just curious."

He smiled again, then set off toward the restaurant, boots never once scuffing the dust.

Jen watched him go, then took her own path back toward the green, trying to decide if she'd just witnessed the start of an ordinary day, or the end of one.



The sun dropped behind the ridgeline in a hurry, leaving the square striped in shadow and lighting up the restaurant's new façade with the last gold of the day. Jen watched as the Púca, punctual as always, finished whatever arcane punch-list they maintained and assembled outside the door in a two-by-two column. Without preamble, they marched back to the old menagerie, white beards bobbing in step, tools slung like instruments of war. The only evidence of their presence was the perfect, unblemished sign now hanging above the door: "The Restaurant." No name, no boast, just the definite article and an implied dare.

At the far end of the road, the Broken Claw was already into its second wave of custom. The mercenaries—Olt, Leeta, Bell, and the new one, Piotr—had staked out the battered plank table nearest the trade road. Leeta leaned back on two legs of her chair, boots on the table, grinning as she spun a dagger between her fingers. Olt, larger than life even in a faded shirt, watched the world with a slow predator's ease. Piotr, thin as a tent pole and twice as nervous, hunched over a hand of cards, mouthing calculations under his breath. Bell did what Bell always did: drank and kept the peace.

Llewel Magcaryn, having watched the Púca depart, walked straight for the mercs' table. He did not quicken his pace or attempt any social prelude, just stepped off the grass onto the packed earth and presented himself with the gravity of a man delivering a verdict.

The mercenaries all looked up at once, a flock of wolves surprised by the sudden approach of a swan.

"Evening, sir," Olt said, with the amused politeness reserved for wealthy travelers and lunatics. "You looking to join, or just lost?"

Llewel stood at the end of the table, posture so exact it hurt to look at. "I seek the one called Piotr," he said.

Three faces swung to the new guy, who paled a shade but stayed put. "That's me," he said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"I invite you," Llewel said, "to dine with me this evening." His tone suggested the "invite" was both courtesy and imperative.

Leeta snickered. "Careful, Piotr. Last time a man in a coat like that bought me dinner, I woke up with fewer teeth."

Piotr ignored her. "Why me?"

Llewel tilted his head, as if the question were both expected and immaterial. "Your name was given to me by a mutual acquaintance," he said. "You have a reputation for discernment."

Piotr stared, caught between pride and panic. He looked at Olt, who shrugged, and at Bell, who raised his mug in solemn salute.

Leeta said, "If you get murdered, can I have your boots?"

"Shut up, Leeta," Olt said, but his eyes glimmered. "Go on, Piotr. Get yourself some manners."

With a visible effort, Piotr stood. He brushed his coat (still too big, still bearing old regimental patches) and sheathed his dagger, which he hadn't quite realized was in his hand. He looked to Jen for rescue, but she just folded her arms and offered him her best "don't embarrass us" nod.

Llewel waited until Piotr had closed the distance, then walked with him to the restaurant. The new door swung open with a hush, and the two vanished inside, the interior lit by a soft, almost phosphorescent blue. The door closed as gently as a lullaby.

The mercenaries watched the entry for a beat. Then Leeta said, "Ten coin says he's back in a bell, five if he's missing an organ."

"Piotr's got no organs worth taking," Bell replied.

Olt grunted. "You think it's a recruitment?"

"Or a poisoning," Leeta said. "Either way, I want to see the look on his face when he eats Púca food."

Jen lingered on the edge of their table, watching the restaurant. From this vantage, the windows showed nothing but a blur of shadows and light. She pictured Piotr, hands sweating, trying to figure out which fork to use, all while Llewel sat across from him, perfectly composed and silently judging every move.

She almost felt bad for the kid. Almost.

The first bell of dusk sounded. Somewhere inside the restaurant, new rituals were being invented. On the porch of the Claw, Olt poured himself a fresh drink and toasted the closed door.

"To Piotr," he said. "May he eat and live to tell us about it."

"Or at least not die on the carpet," Bell muttered.

The sun left the last of the sky, and Jen felt the day click into place: the town, balanced; the magic, for once, stable; the new arrivals, making their moves. She wondered how long it would last.

She leaned on the railing and watched the restaurant, and waited for whatever would come out next.

The Claw was so full that the fogged glass windows bulged with the force of the talk inside. The air smelled of yeast, hot stew, and that damp tangle of sweat and wool that came with early autumn and a full crowd. Jen wedged herself into her usual seat at the end of the bar, elbows planted, nursing a mug of ale while letting the day's racket wash over her. Sam, all bone and scar, glided behind the bar like a crow defending its nest: eyes everywhere, hands already cleaning a second mug before the first had even been picked up. She kept her own peace, but missed nothing.

Minnie the innkeeper had colonized the center table. She was in rare form, apron starched to perfection, cheeks flushed, and her voice carrying better than the bell outside. "You mean to tell me," she said, to nobody and everybody, "that after twenty years of feeding every mouth in this town, we suddenly need fine plates and silver spoons? Who ever heard of such nonsense? A meal is a meal, not a performance."

The tables around her laughed or groaned, depending on alle-

giance. A farmer with ears like cauliflowers offered, "Maybe they just want to see if Mountain Elf stew tastes different."

Minnie snorted. "If it does, it's because they put moss in it and charge double."

At the bar, a pair of merchant guards debated the Icosagon. "There's only one slot left," said the taller one, "so what happens now? Either the new place counts as two, or we get a blowout and the town's magic resets."

"That'd be something," the shorter one replied. "Last time the magic reset, my cousin had to grow back a whole arm. Took him a full sennight."

"Better than losing your tongue," said the first. "I remember that spring. All the bakers went mute for a fortnight."

Sam polished a shot glass with a towel that looked like it had been in service since the founding of the town. She nodded at Jen. "They're all wound up, aren't they?"

Jen shrugged. "It's not every day you get a Mountain Elf and a new restaurant in one."

Minnie stormed over to the bar, hands on hips, voice pitched for the room. "You listen here, Sam. When that place fails—and it will fail—I want it on record that I predicted the exact day. No town can keep two kitchens. Not even North Pointe."

Sam smiled, slow and thin. "I'll write it in the ledger, Minnie. Anything else?"

"Tell the Púca they owe me for stealing half my staff," Minnie said, then marched back to her table.

Jen leaned in. "She always this dramatic?"

"Only when she's right," Sam said.

The mercenaries arrived just before the first dusk bell, bringing with them a cold draft and the mood of a squad returning from patrol. Leeta barreled in first, slapping the bar and hollering for a round. Olt followed, giving the room a survey before planting himself on a stool. Bell trailed, already tipsy, while Piotr—well, Piotr was still inside the restaurant, as far as anyone knew.

"Pour for Piotr," Olt said, "if he ever gets out alive."

Leeta added, "Or if he ever gets out at all."

Sam lined up the mugs. "How's he holding up?"

"Last we saw," said Olt, "he was looking for a back exit. Never seen a man so scared of a bread basket."

Leeta rolled her eyes. "He's a good kid. Never meant for mercenary life, but I like him."

Bell, who never spoke if he could nod, nodded.

Jen sipped her ale, watching the door to the restaurant. It hadn't opened since Piotr entered. The windows were still aglow with the odd, cold light, and from inside came only the faintest scrape of cutlery and the muted murmur of voices.

A group of seamstresses gathered at the end of the bar. "What if the new shop doesn't count?" one whispered. "What if it's a trap, or a test? The magic could break, you know."

Jen heard the words "double magic" whispered, too. The town's old stories all agreed that double magic was possible, but never ended well. Sometimes it meant two birthdays in one year; sometimes it meant twice as many funerals. Either way, nobody wanted to be the one to test the theory.

At last bell, the restaurant door still had not opened. The diners and drinkers drifted home in twos and threes, the square falling quiet except for the rumble of laughter from the mercs and the sniping of Minnie as she closed up shop. Sam wiped down the bar, stacked the chairs, and leaned on her elbows, watching the door across the green.

"You think they'll come out tonight?" she asked.

Jen shook her head. "If they do, it'll be when nobody's looking."

The two watched in silence, the only sound the distant clink of glass from the menagerie, where the Púca were no doubt already planning tomorrow's project.

"You ever get the feeling," said Sam, "that the world is testing us, just to see how much weirdness we can swallow?"

Jen grinned, the first real smile of her night. "Every day."

The restaurant's sign glimmered in the moonlight. Its door remained shut, its secrets safe for one more night.

Jen finished her drink, set the mug down, and let the calm of the Claw seep into her bones. Whatever came next, she'd be ready.

Maybe even hungry.

ten

. . .

THE MORNING after the Mountain Elf's arrival, Jen made her rounds with the practiced caution of someone expecting every puddle to be deeper than it looked. The night's chill lingered in the creases of the town, and with each 'mark, more of the regulars emerged, blinking at the sun as if daring it to burn away the prior day's oddities. On her way past the bakery, she counted the kits: five, all present and chewing at raw dough with the intent focus of a school of piranha. Nothing amiss, unless you counted Makota's red-rimmed eyes—she'd slept poorly, and said as much, but refused to elaborate.

It was just after the first bell when a string of complaints reeled her in the direction of the Weary Head. The inn's porch was alive with voices, and for once, they didn't belong to the regular collection of ale-heads or homesick traders. These were the crisp, urgent tones of travelers who'd discovered the world owed them more than a bumpy bed and last night's stew.

Inside, the front parlor seethed. Minnie, round and apple-cheeked even when grim, stood behind her desk looking as if she'd traded in her usual apron for a straitjacket. A ring of guests hemmed her in—two river merchants, a long-bearded scholar, and a knot of laborers still wearing the dust of the road. Every single one clutched something

empty or broken: a snapped belt, a ragged coin pouch, a box of trinkets now only half full.

Jen stepped over the threshold and froze, letting the scene survey itself. She didn't announce her arrival—Minnie's gaze locked on her the moment she passed the door. "Constable!" Minnie called, voice straining at the edges. "Thank goodness. It's a crime scene in here."

The nearest merchant thrust a hand at Jen, palm up in outrage. "My purse!" he said. "Gone. I checked it before bed, and now it's vanished."

A chorus followed:

"—took my silver comb—"

"—all my tobacco—"

"—copper cufflinks—"

"Even my best toothpick, dammit!"

Jen waited for the first wave to subside, then lifted a hand. "One at a time. We'll start with the purses. Who's missing coin?"

All but the scholar raised their hands.

Jen kept her voice flat. "Anyone lose more than a handful?"

"Every last bit," said the merchant, face pink with offense. "And it's not just me—my apprentice lost his, too, and he never parts with it even when he bathes. It's... attached."

Jen made a note in her leather-bound book, writing in a hand so tiny she could have fit a treaty on her own thumbnail. "All right. What about the rest? Trinkets, jewelry, anything irreplaceable?"

The scholar shuffled forward, holding up a battered pipe. "They left this," he said, voice shaking with a mixture of fear and pride. "But the special box I kept it in is gone. It was carved from rootwood, one of a kind, gifted by a friend—" He faltered, then steadied himself. "It's irreplaceable."

Minnie leaned over the desk, hands planted like she might launch herself over at any moment. "Constable, I swear, every lock in this place was checked at dusk. No signs of tampering. I even did the rounds myself before turning in."

Jen nodded, eyes narrowing. "When did you first notice?"

The scholar answered, "At sunrise. I woke to find my door ajar and the box gone."

Jen logged the detail, then turned to the merchants. "Did any of you hear noise in the night?"

"Not a peep," said the apprentice, voice muffled by embarrassment. "And I'm a light sleeper. If someone came in, they moved quieter than a shadow."

She turned to the laborers, who all shook their heads in practiced unison.

Jen jotted the details, then flipped her book closed with a snap. "All right. I'll need to see every room where something was lost."

The guests traded glances, but one by one, they led Jen through the inn. Minnie followed, her hands worrying at the ends of her apron.

The tour revealed nothing obvious: each door's lock worked smoothly, every window latched and unbroken. The only oddity was a faint whiff of something herbal in the upper corridor, like dried sage burnt in haste. Jen inhaled once, then again, filing it away.

The first merchant's room looked as she expected—neat, untouched except for the heap of clothing upended on the bed. "You're certain you left the purse inside the coat?" she asked.

The merchant nodded, his anger replaced with a kind of trembling disbelief. "Always. I even sleep with it under my pillow."

Jen checked the pillow, the seams of the bed, the underside of the chest. Nothing.

The scholar's chamber was more telling: the pipe, left behind on a side table, showed a dusting of wood chips—barely visible, but present. "Was the box locked?" Jen asked.

The scholar shook his head. "No, but it had a clever latch. Took some finesse."

She studied the window: no marks on the sill, no scuffs in the paint. She knelt and checked the floorboards, then the hinge. When she stood, her face had gone tight and careful.

The laborers' loft was the worst. Three men to a room, their gear strewn with the casual entropy of the very tired. The missing items here were less precious—one complained of his "lucky stone," another a metal flask. All agreed: nothing seemed out of place except for the vanished objects.

"Any of you drink at the Claw last night?" Jen asked.

All three nodded.

"Did you leave the inn after dusk?"

They looked at each other, then the biggest said, "I went for a smoke by the porch. Came right back."

"Alone?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

Jen scanned the scene again. "All right," she said. "I'm going to inspect the windows and locks again. Don't touch anything in the meantime."

When she finished her survey, Minnie followed her back to the front parlor, her face collapsed into worry.

"Well?" she whispered, voice pitched to avoid the guests' ears. "You ever seen anything like this?"

Jen shook her head. "Not this scale. Not in one night, and not inside the Weary Head." She considered her notes, thumb flicking through the pages. "It's too clean. No break-ins, nothing left behind, no marks."

"Ghost?" Minnie ventured, only half-joking.

"Ghosts don't need coin, and they don't pick locks."

Minnie shuddered. "You think it's magical, then?"

Jen looked up, meeting her eyes. "If it is, it's subtle. More likely a thief with a very particular skillset, or—" she let the words hang "—a team, working in shifts."

"But they'd have to get past me, or Trevor. And we don't sleep at the same time."

Jen nodded, voice dropping. "That's what worries me." She let her gaze drift to the wall, where a painting of the old town square hung crooked from its nail. "If it's not magic, then it's someone who knows how to move invisible through a crowd. Someone who can vanish, even when every eye is open."

Minnie followed her gaze, then squared her shoulders. "I'll keep the guests calm. You find the bastard."

Jen almost smiled. "That's the plan."

She stepped onto the porch, squinting at the pale day. Already, word of the thefts was trickling into the square: the kits whispered about it, Galhani's gnome apprentice scribbled in her notebook, and a

pair of old men at the green's edge were arguing whether the town was now officially doomed.

Jen ignored them, walking the perimeter of the inn with slow, deliberate steps. She crouched at each window, checked the footprints beneath, eyed the eaves for rope marks or telltale snags. Nothing. If a thief had visited, they'd floated over the ground and left no impression.

Back inside, Minnie had restored her desk to order, but her eyes still darted from guest to guest as if waiting for someone to confess. Jen stood at the threshold, watching, then scanned the room for anything out of the ordinary.

There. A slip of parchment, poking from beneath the leg of the guest register. She bent, tugged it free, and examined the marks: a set of numbers, crudely written, with a smudge of what looked like grease on the edge.

She pocketed it, then turned to the guests. "All right," she said. "I'll need each of you to make a list of everything that was stolen—no matter how small or worthless. Leave it at the desk. If anything turns up, I'll let you know."

The crowd grumbled, but no one argued.

Jen stepped outside and circled the square, letting the shape of the problem take hold in her mind. A thief, or thieves, who could move through a locked inn without waking a soul. Who took only what was valuable to the owner—not always coin, but often sentiment. Who left no trace except for a faint scent in the air and a sense of being watched.

She looked back at the inn, saw Minnie standing in the window, her arms wrapped around herself.

The town's prosperity, its survival, depended on travelers feeling safe. If word got out that the Weary Head couldn't guard its guests, North Pointe would become just another stop on the road—if it survived at all.

Jen felt the old, iron certainty of her mercenary days settle in her bones. She would find the thief. She would fix it, no matter what, or who, she had to face to do it.

She pulled the slip of parchment from her pocket, studied the numbers, and let herself hope it was a clue.

Then she set her jaw, and walked toward the green.
The town would not be lost—not on her watch.

Jen found herself in the square before the sun could burn off the mist, and this early, the only beings awake were the bakery's kits and the Mountain Elf.

The kits lined up on the green, small jaws snapping at imaginary beetles and giggling over the night's drama. The Mountain Elf—Llewel Magcaryn, as Vamir had announced—stood by the entrance to his new restaurant, arranging potted herbs with a severity that would have shamed a surgeon.

Jen observed for a moment, letting the oddity settle. Llewel's hands moved like they'd practiced every gesture in advance: rotate the pot, pinch a wilted leaf, turn it so the glaze caught the light in a perfect, cold shimmer. He wore the same suit as yesterday, but the lines of fatigue were gone, replaced by a wintery calm. Even his hair, luminous in the morning, seemed arranged by decree.

Jen considered letting him alone—he had the air of a man preparing for a funeral, not a grand opening—but duty gnawed. She strolled over, boots clipping the wet stone with a rhythm she hoped was unthreatening.

"Early start," she said, aiming for casual. "You get any sleep at all?"

Llewel turned, eyes leveling at her. The blue in them was so deep it felt like being pulled toward the sky and the grave at the same time. "I do not require much. The air here is dense with... novelty."

Jen gave a lopsided smile. "You'll find a lot of that, most days. Are the herbs just for show, or are you planning to make the whole place smell like soup stock?"

"Both," said Llewel. "Some establishments rely on spectacle; others, on substance. I aim for a balance."

She hesitated, feeling around for the right opening. "We're having a bit of a situation at the inn. Multiple thefts, right out from under

Minnie's nose. If you see anything odd in the neighborhood, let me know?"

Llewel inclined his head. "Of course. I doubt the perpetrator will trouble me, but vigilance is always wise."

She didn't miss the shade in that: whatever thief plagued the town, Llewel Magcaryn was not afraid of them. "Maybe you'll luck out," Jen said. "The last guest who crossed Minnie ended up doing kitchen duty for a month."

He smiled—barely. "In my experience, trouble adapts. As do kitchens."

She followed his gaze to the herbs, which now stood in a line so exact they'd pass muster at a barracks inspection. "You should come by the Claw tonight," she said. "Town's still getting used to the idea of a Mountain Elf in residence, but Sam's pub is a good way to meet everyone at once. She'll pour you anything, and if you have a bad time, you can blame me."

A pause, a flicker in Llewel's face. "I appreciate the invitation," he said. "But Nimarith's eye is already on me. It's best I limit my exposure."

The words dropped like stones. For a moment, Jen couldn't parse the intent—if he was joking, it was with a humor bone so dry it rattled. But then the implication bloomed in her chest: he was aware, more than aware, of the god's gaze. Of the weird geometry that gave North Pointe its peculiar rules.

She covered with a shrug. "Suit yourself. If you change your mind, we're open bell to bell."

He nodded, then returned to his work, lifting the next pot and examining it for the smallest imperfection. "Thank you, Constable," he said, not looking up.

Jen left him there, feeling the world tilt a few degrees colder.

She circled the square once, stopping at the bakery for a coffee and a side of gossip. The kits reported nothing unusual—Makota had them on

double chores, and if a thief had slipped through, he'd have to outrun seven of them at a dead sprint. Jen thanked them and moved on, ignoring the huddle of travelers still complaining on the porch of the Weary Head.

By the time she returned to the Claw, Sam was sweeping the threshold, white hair already loose from its tie. "You look like you've seen a ghost," she said.

"I talked to the Mountain Elf," Jen replied. "He's not coming in tonight. Says he's under surveillance."

Sam arched a brow. "Did he say whose?"

"Nimarith," Jen said. "He name-dropped the god like it was a cousin who owed him money."

Sam absorbed this. "Did he seem the type to lie?"

Jen considered. "He seemed the type to say what he meant, and nothing more."

Sam made a noise in her throat, then jerked her chin at the restaurant. "He's got the whole town's number, I think. Nobody will admit it, but they're all watching him."

They stood together, staring across the square as Llewel moved inside, potted herbs left sentry on the stoop.

"Any progress on the thief?" Sam asked.

"None," said Jen. "Unless you count a slip of numbers under the register and a scholar who lost a pipe box but not the pipe."

Sam snorted. "People always care more about the box. You solve this one, and the next ale's on the house."

Jen grinned, then let her gaze drift to the restaurant. "You ever get the feeling we're a side show in someone else's story?"

"All the time," Sam said. "But you keep showing up, so maybe it's not the worst role."

They watched as the first sunlight hit the restaurant sign, which now gleamed with the certainty of a headstone.

Llewel was inside, alone, but Jen felt his presence ripple through the square like a riddle waiting to be solved.

She squared her shoulders. The investigation would keep—this place had always run on secrets, and she meant to drag every one of them into daylight.

For now, the only thing to do was keep walking, keep asking, keep watching for the crack in the world.

And when it split, be ready to wedge her hands inside and pull the truth free.

Dawn bell hit like a mallet, and the Púca were already at it: hammers, saws, a dozen drills screaming into stone. The former menagerie pulsed with activity, and the noise had a weird sort of pulse—sometimes a straight assault, sometimes a syncopated chatter that made the town's teeth rattle in their gums.

Jen winced as she passed, boots crunching the flagstones in time with the commotion. She tried to keep her eyes off the windows, but they drew her anyway. Behind each pane, at least two Púca zipped by every second, hauling beams, hoisting glass, or arguing in a language that sounded like bagpipes thrown down a staircase. They were fast—so fast, Jen could barely believe they weren't using some trick of mirrors. Or magic. Or both.

The air stank of sap and caulk. It was barely second bell, and the square was a hive of travelers doing their best to outshout the construction, mostly by complaining at each other. Jen ignored the complaints, aiming herself toward the Claw for a moment's peace.

Peace was, predictably, unavailable.

Inside, the mercenaries clustered at their usual table, all but Piotr, who'd last been seen entering Llewel's restaurant the previous night. Leeta looked hung over, but her eyes tracked Jen from the door to the bar.

"Darme," she said. "You seen Piotr?"

"Not since last bell," Jen said. "He didn't sleep in?"

Leeta shook her head, the motion slow and deliberate. "His bed wasn't slept in. Neither was his travel bag touched, and the last time I saw him he was white as a sheet."

Olt, arms folded, chimed in: "He's not one to run, even from weirdness."

Bell, who rarely spoke, just scowled at the beer in his mug.

Jen pulled up a stool, frowning. "Did he say anything?"

Leeta hesitated. "He said he had a bad feeling. That the Mountain Elf was testing him, or something."

Olt grunted. "He always was the type to attract trouble."

Jen drummed her fingers on the bar. "I'll ask Llewel. He doesn't seem the type to eat guests, but you never know."

The mercenaries exchanged a glance. "Keep us posted," Leeta said. "And if you find him with less than all his parts, let us know so we can arrange a proper memorial."

Jen nodded, then made her way across the square.



The restaurant's sign, never subtle, caught the light just so—like a black box at the center of the world. Jen found Llewel outside, sweeping the stoop, unbothered by the noise of the Púca. He looked up as she approached, set the broom aside, and waited.

"Morning," Jen said, stopping a few paces short. "You see Piotr after dinner last night?"

Llewel considered, then nodded. "He had an excellent meal. I believe he is weighing some life changes."

Jen felt her jaw tighten. "You didn't put him in the stew pot, did you?"

He almost smiled. "That would be wasteful. He seemed to desire a purpose. This place—" he gestured at the restaurant—"gives that, sometimes."

Jen chewed the inside of her cheek, then decided there was no point pushing. If Piotr was alive, he'd show up. If not, she'd find him, one way or another.

"Thanks," she said, turning to go.

Llewel's voice stopped her. "Constable?"

She turned back.

"If you see Piotr, remind him he is not obliged. But choice is better than drifting."

Jen stared for a second, then shrugged. "He's never liked being cornered. I'll pass it on."

She left Llewel there, sweeping the same stoop that never seemed to accumulate dust.

The Púca's racket climbed and climbed, then stopped, dead, on the noon bell. The silence was so abrupt that Jen swore her ears rang with phantom hammering for at least five minutes after.

She took the opportunity, cut across the square, and planted herself outside the menagerie's transformed shop. The new door was heavy, dark, and covered with brass rivets—clearly the work of someone who wanted to discourage casual entry.

She knocked, hard.

It opened just enough to reveal a single, bright eye and the tip of a very white beard.

"Constable," she said, "I need a word."

The eye widened, and the Púca disappeared. A minute later, the door opened wider, admitting Jen into a corridor that had once been lined with cages and now looked more like a bank vault in a fever dream.

The Púca, who came up to her knee, led her inside with a rapid shuffle and a flutter of apologies. "Awfully sorry, guard. Mind yerself on the step, now—ah, this way, and watch yer head, oh dear—"

She followed into a back room where three more Púca waited, each indistinguishable from the other except by the cut of their waistcoats. The one with a deep blue vest cleared his throat and bowed. "Advocate Púca, at yer service."

Jen blinked. "Advocate?"

"It's just the formalities, but ye'll find us more precise than yer average builder."

She let it pass. "There's been a wave of thefts at the inn. And I have reason to believe one or more of your... clan was in the area last night."

The Advocate's beard twitched. "We've no interest in human money, unless it's rare or real shiny. And as for trinkets, we've our

hands full with the project at hand. Any Púca caught freelancing would be disciplined, or at least given a good tickle."

A chorus of nods from the others.

Jen pulled out the slip of parchment she'd found at the inn. "Ye recognize this?"

The Advocate scanned it, then handed it off to his left-hand neighbor, who produced a jeweler's loupe and squinted at the numbers. "Looks like a serial code. Used for shipments. Might be a label from a crate."

"From where?" Jen asked.

The Púca conferred—fast, hissing back and forth in a language of clicks and tiny sneezes. Then: "It's ours," said the blue-vested Advocate. "A shipment of fasteners. But it was delivered to the inn days ago, left at the rear gate."

Jen wrote it down. "Could someone have followed the shipment?"

"Not unless they could tunnel through granite," said the Púca, eyes going flat. "We pack our goods securely, and we never leave a trail. That's the Púca guarantee."

"Still," Jen said, "maybe someone wanted you to look guilty."

A glint of fear passed between the little men.

"Impossible," said the Advocate, but softer this time. "We're trusted partners. We are—" He fumbled for the phrase. "We are what we are."

Jen let it hang, then stood. "If you think of anything, send word."

The Púca bowed her out, closing the door with the delicate finality of a coffin lid.

Outside, the sun was blazing, but the square felt colder. Jen scanned the town, trying to overlay the pattern of the thefts against the parade of new arrivals. Nothing matched, unless she counted the arrival of Llewel, and that didn't track—he hadn't left the square all day.

She walked the edge of the green, eyes tracing the routines of every merchant, every kid, every local. Something was off, but it was buried under too many layers of noise.

She passed the bakery, where Makota's kits staged a doughball-throwing contest, then the herbalist, where Galhani's gnome appren-

tice watered the same plant three times in a row. At the Claw, the mercenaries nursed their beers in silence, for once.

Jen ducked inside, signaled for Sam to pour her an ale, and leaned on the bar.

Sam slid the mug over. "You look like someone just gave you a math test."

Jen grunted, downed half the ale, and wiped her mouth. "I talked to the Púca. They think someone's trying to frame them."

Sam nodded, not surprised. "You buy it?"

Jen hesitated. "I don't know. Nothing about them feels sneaky, except how they move. But every time I get close to a lead, it turns into a dead end."

"Maybe it's not about what's missing," Sam said, voice low. "Maybe it's about what's being left behind."

Jen blinked. "That's so backwards, it might make sense."

Sam just grinned, then went back to cleaning.

By dusk, the square was as calm as it ever got. The Púca, silent now, had retreated to wherever they spent the night. The only sound was the chitter of the bakery's mice and the far-off call of a waterbird at the lake.

Jen circled the green again, hoping for a miracle. Instead, she got a half-torn label, stuck to the underside of the inn's porch. She peeled it free and studied the marks: a set of numbers, almost—but not quite—identical to the last slip she'd found.

She felt the hair on her arms rise.

She pocketed the label, then headed for the Claw.

Tomorrow, she'd wake up and do it all again.

Maybe, if she was lucky, the noise would clear her head.

But for now, she had a beer, a barstool, and a growing suspicion that the world was a lot stranger than even the Púca wanted to admit.

eleven

. . .

JEN AWOKE to the sound of her own name shouted across the green, which was a bad omen, especially at this time of day. By the time she stumbled outside and squared her face to the light, the mercenaries had formed a wedge at the edge of the square, boots planted in the dust and arms folded across their chests like a team of carpenters preparing to knock down a wall.

Leeta was at the front, hair freshly braided and attitude sharp enough to skin a hog. Behind her, Olt, Piotr, and Bell fanned out with the coordination of people who'd spent too much of their lives marching in formation and not enough learning how to take up less space. They wore their traveling gear, patched and faded, and though none of them carried weapons openly, the way they looked at the world made it clear they could conjure violence out of thin air if the mood caught them.

Leeta caught Jen's eye and grinned, then beckoned. "Come on, Darne. Don't pretend you didn't see us."

Jen stifled a groan and crossed the green at a measured pace, past Makota's bakery where the kits had their faces pressed to the glass, and the grocer's where Cole was busy unloading a cart but managed to glare in their direction all the same. It was impossible not to notice:

the entire square was doing its best to ignore the scene, which only meant everyone was watching.

She stopped three paces from the tip of Leeta's boot. "You're making a spectacle."

Leeta shrugged. "You left us no choice. If you won't hear us out in private, we'll have it in public. It's too important."

Olt spoke next, voice heavy as a sack of flour. "We're leaving at dawn. You're coming with us."

Jen shook her head, keeping her voice neutral. "My answer hasn't changed. Although your departure date seems to." She grinned.

Bell, who rarely spoke, looked at the sky and muttered, "Maybe it will, now that you see what you're throwing away."

Piotr, who had the look of a man who'd spent the night in a book and regretted every minute, pointed at her with two fingers and said, "We're not asking you to be the old Darne. Just... be the best one. For yourself, not for this—" he gestured at the square, at the bakery and the inn and the careful rows of houses— "this dollhouse."

Jen's jaw clenched, but she didn't answer. She could feel the eyes of the town gathering, pretending not to listen but inching closer with each word.

Leeta pressed the advantage. "You remember Kettlemire? The bridge at dusk? No one else saw it, but I did. You held the line until Olt could drag the wounded out, and the whole company still talks about it. Not because you were a brute, but because you cared. You kept us alive."

"Or Tallowgate," Olt said, warming to the subject. "We were all ready to turn tail, but you were the only one who'd walk into a burning farmhouse to get three kids out. You—" He broke off, searching for the right words. "You did more good as a merc than anyone I've ever met."

Jen grunted. "I did what was needed."

Leeta's expression softened. "That's all we're asking. The company's changed. The old captain's dead—"

"Dead, dead?" Jen interrupted, surprised. "You'd implied..."

Olt nodded. "First snow, two moons back. Heart attack, in the saddle." His voice was softer now, almost gentle. "We need someone

steady. Someone who remembers what it means to serve, even if the pay's late and the glory is all in the stories."

Makota, never one to let an argument go unchallenged, poked her head out of the bakery door and called, "If you want glory, there's a batch of rye rolls in the oven that'll make you see the gods."

Leeta barked a laugh. "We're not here for bread, Makota."

"But you're always hungry," Makota shot back, wiping her hands on her apron and stepping fully into the square. She walked up to Jen's side and faced the mercenaries. "Last winter, when the snows collapsed the pass and two wagons got stranded, who dug them out? Not you four. It was Jen and three kids from the town, and she stayed up two days straight to make sure no one froze."

Leeta looked a little abashed, but Olt just said, "We're not arguing that she's a hero. We're saying she's a better one in our company."

Jen's hand drifted unconsciously to her wrist, where the cold weight of Hellsting, in bracelet form, pressed against the skin. She stared at the ground, then looked up, not at the mercs, but at the bakery. The kits watched from the window, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, as if waiting for a thunderstorm to break.

Alred arrived next, hands in pockets, chin up and posture loose. "Is this about the property line again?" he asked, with the deliberate innocence of someone who already knew the answer.

Olt bristled, but Leeta said, "No, Alred. We're trying to rescue a friend."

Alred grinned, unbothered. "Funny, she already looks rescued to me."

He turned to Jen, speaking just loud enough for everyone to hear. "You remember the summer the water rights dispute nearly broke out into fists? She stood between two angry mobs and talked them down with nothing but her hands and a promise of free tea for the losers. I've never seen anyone stare down three generations of pride and win, until that day."

Bell, who had stayed quiet, tried another tack. "You're meant for more than this. If you're worried about the company, we'll follow your orders. You could run it."

Jen snorted, but there was no humor in it. "That's the last thing I want."

Olt tried again, gentler this time. "We're not asking you to fight old wars. We just... we need someone we trust."

A pause. The crowd, by now, was no longer pretending not to listen. Even Cole had stopped unloading his cart, and a pair of old men from the green had edged close enough to hear the rest.

Warren spoke up from the gate, voice rumbling. "I've seen her walk the town before dawn every day, just to make sure the stray dogs don't get into the flour bins. She's never missed a bell. Never let a fight go longer than it had to. Maybe she's not chasing glory, but she's keeping the peace. That's more than most can say."

The words hung in the air, heavy as fresh iron. Jen, still staring at the dust, exhaled slow and long. The wind shifted, bringing with it the smells of yeast, grass, and the faintest edge of lake water from the far side of town.

Leeta seemed to realize it was over, but made one last attempt. "You could walk away from this place, and nothing would change. You know that, right?"

Jen looked up, her eyes flat. "Maybe. But I don't want to walk away."

Old, seeing the writing on the wall, shrugged and said, "At least think about it. We're here until new moon. If you change your mind, we'll be at the Claw. First round's on us."

Jen nodded, grateful for the out. The mercenaries fell back, regrouping near the side of the square, voices low but not angry—just tired.

As the crowd dispersed, Makota lingered. She offered Jen a roll, still warm. "You don't owe anyone an explanation," she said, voice softer now. "But if you want one, you can tell them you belong to us. We're not letting you go, not for all the coin in the world."

Jen took the roll, broke it in half, and handed a piece back. "Thanks, Makota."

They ate in companionable silence, watching as the mercenaries melted into the traffic of the day.

Across the square, Prudence watched from the threshold of her

shop, one hand clutching the frame and the other holding a measuring tape like a wand. Her eyes followed the mercs as they retreated, then flicked to Jen and Makota. There was a kind of calculation in her face, as if already drawing up a pattern for what would happen next.

Jen, for her part, felt the tension slough off. She turned to Makota, who had already started listing the day's chores, and for the first time in a long while, let herself laugh at the absurdity of it all.

The rest of the day promised trouble, but at least it would be honest trouble.

She was ready.

It wasn't even the next bell when the mercenaries resurfaced, minus the bravado and formation. Instead they drifted, haunted, through the square, uncertain what to do with their day now that the drama was over and Jen had rebuffed them so neatly in front of the world.

Prudence Simonsdotter spotted them from the doorway of her shop, arms folded and gaze keen as a surgeon's. She stepped forward with the soft authority of someone who owned both the building and the secrets of half the town.

"Come inside," she said to Leeta, nodding at the others. "All of you."

Leeta glanced at Olt, who shrugged; Bell and Piotr followed out of habit more than intent. Jen, passing nearby, saw the invitation and lingered at the threshold, curious.

Prudence ushered the mercs into the shop, then swept the door shut behind them. Inside, the space glowed with a drowsy gold: sun angled through colored glass, filtered through dozens of fabrics that hung like banners from every beam. The air smelled of starch, beeswax, and something sweeter—perhaps a whiff of the bakery across the square, but laced with lavender and the bite of fresh-washed linen.

She circled her guests, assessing with quick, surgical glances. "Your leathers don't fit," she announced.

Leeta tried to muster a sneer, but it came off tired. "We outgrew them, maybe. Too much good food on the road."

Prudence ignored the joke. "It's not the shape that's wrong. It's the future. You're wearing someone else's story."

Olt looked down, then at the wall of fabric, as if he'd never considered the possibility. Silent for once, he picked at the edge of his cuff and found it wanting.

Prudence fetched a tape from her apron, then beckoned Leeta to stand on a low wooden block near the front window. "Boots off," she said.

Leeta obeyed, balance wary. Jen pressed herself into the doorframe, arms folded. She couldn't help but watch.

"Spin," Prudence said, and Leeta turned as the measuring tape zipped around her chest, then waist, then arms. "What was your best battle?" Prudence asked, almost conversational.

Leeta blinked, unsure, then said, "Second Rake. We took the hill with one company and held it three days."

"Which part did you like most?"

Leeta frowned. "You mean... the fight?"

"No," Prudence said, "the part that felt right."

Leeta hesitated. "I liked the planning. The timing, when everyone moved together." She looked away, cheeks pinking. "The rest is just muscle and noise."

Prudence nodded, wrote a number on her palm, and moved to Olt.

Olt's arms were twice Leeta's circumference, and he towered over the seamstress, but Prudence didn't flinch as she looped the tape around his bicep, then held it steady with a single, immovable hand.

"Did you ever want something different?" she asked.

Olt stared at the display of vests, then at the gold thread on the counter. "Never knew it was an option," he said. "Someone always needed me to break something or move it."

"And if you could choose?"

Olt considered. "I'd run a team. Not for battle—maybe for building. Or moving freight. Something that lasts after you're done."

Prudence grunted, as if expecting the answer, and wrote a number on her wrist.

Bell, next, tried to wave her away, but Prudence fixed him with a stare. "Even silent men have a destiny. You're not invisible."

Bell sighed, then stood for the tape. Prudence measured him with the efficiency of a soldier folding a tent, then asked, "What are you best at?"

Bell shrugged. "I see things coming. Patterns, ways to get out."

Prudence's eyes twinkled. "That's not cowardice. That's logistics."

Piotr was last. He climbed onto the block with the air of someone submitting to a prank. "Do I get a tunic with stars on it?"

"Would you wear it if you did?" Prudence asked.

He grinned, showing bad teeth. "If it meant never being cold again, yes."

She measured him quickly, then stood back, surveying the group.

"There's a story about this town," she said, rolling up her tape. "About how it makes people into what they're supposed to be, if you let it."

Leeta, skeptical, said, "Is this the part where you sell us matching uniforms and we swear off violence?"

Prudence's voice stayed gentle, but her eyes hardened. "It's the part where I fix what's broken. Sometimes that's a button. Sometimes, it's the whole world."

She led the mercs to a row of stools near the workbench and selected bolts of fabric from the walls. For Leeta, she chose a crisp blue canvas, the kind favored by civil engineers and town planners. For Olt, a heavy corduroy in brown and cream stripes, paired with a pair of suspenders and a ruler tucked into the pocket. For Bell, she selected the subtle navy of a stationmaster's coat, then accented it with a sash of red. For Piotr, she picked the softest wool, dyed in a pattern that looked like midnight sky.

As she cut and measured, Prudence told the Holderdown Tale. "Three travelers," she began, "each with a job to do, but none in the right clothes. The first, in the leathers of a bandit, tried to settle a border dispute, but nobody would listen. The second, dressed as a priest, tried to haul water from the well, but his robes tangled in the rope and he fell in. The third, a baker by trade but clothed like a scholar, spent his whole life writing recipes he never dared to bake. All

three failed, until a wise tailor put them in their proper outfits. Then the first became a constable, the second a miller, and the third... opened a bakery, where all were welcome, especially priests who fell down wells."

By the time she'd finished, the first pieces were ready to try on. She handed Leeta the canvas jacket and a roll of blueprints. Leeta slipped it over her shoulders, and something about her posture changed: she looked taller, more present, less defensive. Olt donned the corduroy vest, and immediately began measuring things with the ruler, absently at first, then with real intent. Bell, in his stationmaster coat, seemed to disappear even more into the background, but when he spoke, it was with a new assurance. Piotr wrapped himself in the midnight wool and sat down, shivering with delight.

Jen, who'd never put much faith in magical clothes, had to admit the transformation was... uncanny.

"None of this makes us less," Leeta said, admiring her reflection in the polished copper at the end of the room. "Just different."

"Maybe even more," Olt said, eyes bright.

Prudence smiled, then reached for a strip of yellow cloth. She wrapped it around Leeta's arm in a practiced motion, then tucked the end into the sleeve. "That's for luck. And for finding each other again when you need it."

Bell watched the process, then turned to Jen, who still lingered at the door. "You going to let her work on you, too?"

Jen shook her head. "She already did. Ages ago."

It was true: Jen's own clothes, though humble, never wore out, never stained, and never left her cold or too warm. Prudence's talent was subtle but pervasive, and Jen suspected it had saved more lives than her own sword arm ever had.

Leeta, Olt, and Bell admired their new fits, then all at once seemed to remember they had a choice in their next move.

"We'll talk this over at the Claw," Leeta said. "Maybe figure out who we really are."

Jen nodded. "You might even like it."

Prudence ushered them out, then lingered near Jen. "You want to

know what I see in your future?" she asked, soft so only Jen could hear.

Jen stiffened. "Not really."

Prudence smiled, but it was a sad one. "You don't have to stay, you know. But you should at least finish the thing you started."

Jen rolled her eyes, but the words stayed with her as she left the shop and started her rounds again.

She wondered how many destinies had been sewn, stitched, or ironed flat in this little town—and how many people, herself included, would ever be able to shed them again.

By the time the sun had sunk behind the ridgeline, the four mercs were posted outside the Claw, talking animatedly over mugs of the house's best. They looked like themselves, but also like the people they were supposed to be.

Jen found her own table, and let herself wonder—for just a moment—if she'd been wrong to resist so long.

She flexed her hand, feeling the hard edge of Hellsting at her wrist, and waited for the next trouble to find her.

In North Pointe, it always did.



The next morning, the Púca's shop was locked up tighter than a taxman's heart. The wagon that had served as their mobile headquarters was gone from the green, leaving only a faint scrape in the dust and a scattering of wood shavings, like the scene of a crime abandoned mid-confession.

Jen circled the place, eyes alert for anything that might indicate where the little men had gone. The curtains were drawn, the steps freshly swept, and the air outside the door held a faint tang of lemon oil and the aftershock of too much activity. She tried the handle—locked, as expected. She knocked, once, with the full intent to rattle the windows.

It worked. The door creaked open half an inch, and the broad, bright eye of Security Guard Púca fixed her from the crack.

He started before she could even speak. "Top o' the mornin' to ye,

Miss Constable, but unless ye've official business or a signed-an'-stamped writ from the Magistrate—which, as I recall, this town's sorely missin'—I'd be thankin' ye to leave us be until our openin' bell. No exceptions for folks of distinction, regardless of their grand service record or, ah, legendary status in local disputes."

Jen blinked, thrown off by the accent and the velocity, but held her ground. "I just want—"

"I must also inform ye," the Púca barreled ahead, "that any attempt to enter by force, subterfuge, or some clever trick will be considered a breach of our contract, and the offendin' party'll be subject to all sorts of reciprocal mischief as laid out in the Folk Compendium, version eleven, addendum C. Now, is there anything else, or shall we bid ye good day?"

The door began to close. Jen jammed her boot in the crack. "This is about the thefts. I need to ask—"

"Nothin's been nicked from this shop, nor from any affiliated concern, and if ye're after lost property, I'd suggest ye look where the light don't shine. Púca never takes what's not freely offered, that's the policy."

He paused, seemed to realize he'd said too much, then tried to slam the door. Jen's boot stopped it.

"Did you see anything odd last night?" she said, now using the low, dangerous tone that used to silence entire barracks. "Anyone or anything around the square?"

"Nothin' that isn't here every night, barrin' a few stargazers and a curious squirrel." The Púca's eyes shifted, then settled. "It's North Pointe, madam. Odd is the default, is what we were told."

He gave her a brisk, two-fingered salute and managed, with impossible leverage, to dislodge her boot and close the door. She heard the snick of three locks sliding home.

Jen let out a string of curse words under her breath, then turned to find herself being watched by Sam, Warren, and Darby, who were loitering by the bakery's stoop, faces smug with the knowledge they'd seen the whole thing.

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Productive chat?"

"About as much as talking to a wall," Jen muttered.

Warren grinned, arms folded, the green skin of his knuckles nearly blue from the cold. "They're small, but they don't rattle easy. You want help, or are you planning to intimidate them into confession by sheer force of personality?"

Sam leaned over and offered, "Or we could try my plan."

Jen arched a brow, suspicious. "Your plan involves fire, doesn't it?"

Sam grinned wider. "Not this time."

Darby stepped forward, clutching the lapels of his brand-new vest—shiny buttons, fancy belt buckle, the whole ensemble. Jen caught on. "You're using him as bait."

Warren nodded, ruffling Darby's hair with one massive paw. "He's got the flashiest gear in town. If there's a thief with a taste for shiny, it won't be able to resist."

"I'll be careful," Darby said, voice grave. "We've set up a relay: I walk the trade road, and Sam and Warren tail me at a distance. You watch from the green, in case anything sneaks in from the side."

Jen ran through the plan, eyes narrowing at the risk. "You're sure you want to use your son as the cheese in your mouse trap?"

Warren's face was serious now. "He can handle himself. And nothing's getting past us."

Jen weighed the options. If the thief had half a brain, it would see through the ploy, but if it was truly magical—or truly shameless—it might fall for the obvious. She nodded. "Let's do it."

They split up, Jen taking a spot behind the bakery's side door, Warren and Sam hanging back by the well, Darby walking the length of the trade road like he owned it, hands swinging with the exaggerated casualness of someone who knew they were being watched but wanted to look cool anyway.

For ten minutes, nothing happened. Travelers passed, a few of the kits chased each other across the green, and even the bakery's mice seemed bored. Darby reached the far end, looped around, and headed back, the shiny buckle glinting in the early sun.

At the midpoint, Darby stopped, patted his belt, and frowned. He looked around, checked his vest, then waved both arms in an urgent gesture.

Jen darted out first, with Warren and Sam close behind.

"It's gone," Darby announced. "The buckle. I didn't feel anything, but it's not there."

Jen inspected the spot. The grass was flat, undisturbed, no footprints except for Darby's. No magic residue—at least, nothing a human could detect. She squinted at the horizon, then at the silent, watchful faces of the regulars who had started to gather.

"Did anyone see anything?" she called. "Not even a shimmer?"

Heads shook. The consensus was clear: one second, buckle; the next, nothing.

Warren scratched his head, looking equal parts angry and impressed. "That's a new one."

Sam grinned, despite herself. "You know, if it wasn't my town, I'd admire the style."

Jen, though, felt her patience boiling over. She let out a bellow that should have sent pigeons scattering from three blocks away.

But the fury didn't come. The anger rose to the edge, and then—like hitting a padded wall—it simply... dispersed. She tried to stoke it, to feel the righteous heat, but all she got was a warm, dull glow that turned rapidly to confusion, then laughter.

She let the laughter out, startling everyone.

Sam clapped her on the back. "See? Even the town's magic is working against you."

"I'm starting to hate this place," Jen said, but the words had no venom.

Warren reached down, lifted Darby to his shoulder. "We'll try again at new moon," he said. "Magic's always weaker then. If something's watching, it'll slip up."

Sam nodded. "Until then, maybe just don't wear the family jewels in public."

Darby grinned, unbothered.

Jen put her hands on her hips, took a long breath, and looked at the blue sky. "Fine. We'll wait for later."

She walked back to the gaol, content, for once, to let the world turn without her in the center.

Whatever was stealing the shine in North Pointe, it would have to try harder.

This time, Jen would be ready for it.

It was the kind of late afternoon when the world hunkered down, light fading quick as a rumor. Jen leaned in the doorway of the Broken Claw, rolling the last of her tea between her palms and watching the square for any sign of a new crisis. The bakery's kits were closing up, the menagerie's windows were dark, and the Púca had not made a peep since the morning's standoff. Even the usual chorus of travelers was subdued, most of them indoors or already halfway through a bottle of something strong.

Across the green, Vamir and Alred stood in conference with the Mountain Elf, their postures stiff and formal, arms locked behind their backs in a mirror of each other's stance. The conversation was silent from this distance, but Jen could read the mood as if it had been sung aloud: Vamir's head inclined, listening; Alred's jaw set, eyes never leaving Llewel's face; and Llewel, as always, held himself utterly still, like the wind was the only force allowed to move him.

Jen watched as Vamir said something, then gestured up and down the street. Llewel replied with a shallow nod, then a word or two, then a glance at the sky, the sort of movement that suggested the whole affair was a burden he'd rather have skipped. When it ended, Llewel stepped back, gave a precise bow, and slipped into the restaurant, the door closing behind him as quiet as a shroud.

The two elves made their way across the green, heads close together, talking in low, quick phrases. Jen met them halfway, catching Vamir's eye first.

"Well?" she said, voice low.

Vamir didn't answer right away. Instead, he glanced around, checked the windows, and then fixed her with a look sharp enough to cut linen. "We cannot enter unless invited," he said, sotto voce.

Jen raised an eyebrow. "You're not vampires."

"Etiquette," Alred said, voice thin. "Among elves, to enter a rival's domain without invitation is—" he searched for a word, "a kind of duel. We're not ready for that."

Jen let it pass. "Did he say why he's here?"

Vamir sighed. "He told us what we already suspected. He is Mountain Elf, true and through. The line was thought extinct."

Alred looked at his boots. "It's not good news, Jen."

She waited.

Vamir continued, "In the old days, Mountain Elves rarely left their peaks. If one comes down, it's because something in the heights wants it. They're—" He glanced at Alred, who gave a brief, sad nod. "They're not like the rest of us. More stubborn, more... set. And when they take a role, it's for life."

Jen mulled it over. "So why run a restaurant?"

"Why does anyone do anything in North Pointe?" Alred said, and for once, there was no irony in his voice.

Jen held up her logbook, thumbed to the latest entries. "Have a look," she said, and let the elves read the list: lost purses, vanished cufflinks, and the morning's theft of Darby's best buckle.

Alred scanned the column, then glanced at Vamir. "It's getting worse."

"It's escalating," Vamir agreed. "If this were an elf town, I'd suspect a gremlin or a spite. Something petty, but with a point to make."

Jen tapped the page. "That's what I thought. But it's faster than any pickpocket, leaves no trace, and didn't even trip the gaol's wards."

The elves exchanged a look, communicating something ancient and private.

"You think it's magic," Jen prompted.

Vamir nodded. "Obviously. A form of glamour. Or something that bends light, maybe time. Lesser Fae do it for fun, sometimes. You said you saw a shimmer, a few days back."

Alred muttered, "Fun. He means, mostly to annoy. Sometimes to warn."

Jen rolled her eyes. "Any way to catch it?"

"New moon," Alred said, surprising her with the speed of the answer. "It's the weakest time for glammers. If you're going to see it, that's your chance."

Jen flipped the logbook shut, satisfied to have at least a plan. "You want in on the hunt?"

Vamir grinned, white teeth catching the last of the light. "If you can promise no paperwork after."

"No paperwork," Jen swore.

They parted with the quiet efficiency of professionals, Vamir and Alred disappearing down the lane toward the bookshop, Jen back to the warmth of the Claw.

Inside, she nursed a dark beer and let her mind unravel the day's events. The town had gone from chaos to calm in the space of a bell, but every instinct told her this was just the eye of the storm. She watched the windows, waiting for the next thread to fray.

When dusk settled in earnest, the Mountain Elf's restaurant flickered to life: a candle in every window, a steady glow that made the place seem like it belonged there, as if it had always existed. From her vantage, Jen saw a group of travelers—mountain-bound, by the look of their boots and the stubborn set of their shoulders—pause at the door. Llewel greeted them with a bow, then ushered them in, the gesture as graceful as a king's.

Jen watched the door close behind them, then turned to see Knodalon waving her over from his bench at the edge of the square.

She joined him, careful not to startle. He never moved much, but his eyes followed everything, bright and unreadable beneath that thicket of white hair.

"Is it the new moon soon?" he asked, as if the answer was not already carved into the lines of his face.

Jen nodded. "Tomorrow."

He made a sound, almost a laugh. "You will see what hunts you, then. And maybe you'll catch it. Or maybe it will catch you."

She waited, expecting more, and Knodalon did not disappoint.

"You think this town keeps people safe," he said, voice barely louder than the wind. "But it does more than that. It prepares them. For what, no one can say. Sometimes even the town doesn't know."

Jen squinted at him, suspicious. "You sound like you know something I don't."

Knodalon gave her a sideways look. "I know only what the wind brings. And sometimes, what it takes away."

She tried not to smile. "That's very comforting."

He shrugged. "Nimarith has many paths. None of them straight, all of them leading somewhere." He fixed her with a look that cut deeper than any question. "Don't worry so much about which path anyone takes."

Jen nodded, a little mollified, and left Knodalon to his twilight.

She crossed the green in darkness, boots silent on the cold ground, the whole world waiting for something to break the silence.

It would be a long sennight, but she was ready for it.

twelve

. . .

THE NEW MOON delivered as promised: not a trace of silver leaked through the clouds, and the darkness pooled in the hollows of North Pointe so thick that the town bell itself seemed muffled by the weight of it. Somewhere, a cricket tested the air with a half-hearted chirp, then thought better of it. Jen crouched behind the empty hulk of a merchant stall, knees stiff from the cold and one hand glued to the hilt at her wrist. It was just past third 'mark by her reckoning, though the absence of light made every moment feel like its own little eternity.

She peeked over the edge of the stall and found the world had not rearranged itself: the green was empty, the windows shuttered, and only the faintest trail of torchlight wandered out from Makota's bakery, where a single loaf cooled on the sill. The rest of the square looked as if it had been erased and hastily redrawn, all shadows and jagged outlines.

Across the lane, Sam waited in the black of a cut-through alley, every muscle tensed for the signal. Jen caught the glint of white hair as Sam flicked her head in greeting, then sank back into the dark. To the left, nearer the storehouse, Warren's bulk pressed against a battered water barrel, which, by some trick of perspective, made the ogre look

smaller than he was. He'd painted his face with a strip of soot, which did nothing to hide the green, but did make his eyes look like lanterns burning in a cave.

The bait sat square in the middle of the trade road.

Darby shifted his weight from foot to foot, every inch of him broadcasting terror and excitement, but if you'd asked him he'd have sworn on the gods he was calm as a sleeping dog. Prudence's creation covered him from neck to ankles: a tailcoat stitched with brass buttons big as teacups, a shirt with a mock cravat of gold-braided cord, and a vest that shone with an iridescent sheen that shifted color as he moved. Each sleeve was lined with three rows of silver-plated fasteners, and at his belt hung a sack of "coin" so obviously fake that only a complete magpie would be unable to resist it. Darby looked like a child's painting of a nobleman, drawn by someone who had never met a nobleman but had heard, with certainty, that they were allergic to subtlety.

He stood under the broken Claw sign, clutching the "shopping list" he was supposed to read aloud once the moment felt right.

Jen signaled with a twitch of her hand, and Sam returned it. They watched.

For half a bell, nothing happened.

Then, just as Jen was about to shift her position, Darby cleared his throat and said—at full volume—"If only someone would help me carry my enormous purse home, I'd be ever so grateful!" He slapped the coin sack for emphasis, which made a noise like a drum full of angry insects.

There was a ripple in the air behind him, as if the world had blinked. Jen's heart squeezed tight. She squinted, trying to catch the shape she knew was there, but the shimmer vanished before her eyes could fix on it.

Darby, to his credit, did not flinch. He waited the prescribed two-count, then, as rehearsed, turned in a slow circle, feigning confusion. "Mother said to meet her here, but I haven't a clue where she's gone!" He paused, squinted into the darkness, and said, "If only there were a friend in this lonely place—"

The shimmer resolved, just for a heartbeat, into a low, hunched shape, no more than three feet tall, gliding across the grass toward Darby's left side. It left no trail, and where it moved, even the faintest gleam of light bent away from it.

Jen's pulse thrummed. She risked a glance at Sam, caught the glint of the blade already in hand, and nodded.

Darby, sensing his cue, pivoted to face the approaching blur. "Oh! There you are!" he called, too bright by half.

The shimmer froze, then darted in a zig-zag motion so fast Jen's eyes watered. It stopped just out of arm's reach, then, as if testing the world's patience, slid closer and reached for Darby's coin purse.

That was the signal.

Sam and Jen moved in the same instant, not with noise but with purpose—a calculated, silent dash that cut off both escape routes at once. The shimmer tried to retreat, but Warren, with a practiced swiftness that belied his size, stepped out of the shadow and blocked the path back to the lake.

The shimmer flickered, brightened, and suddenly became a solid shape: knee-high, slender, and blue-skinned, with a shock of silver hair that shot out at impossible angles. Its eyes were bright as polished steel, and its mouth, when it opened, revealed teeth so sharp and numerous they looked like a saw blade set into a child's smile. A pair of translucent wings, like those of a dragonfly but twice as large as its body, unfurled behind it with a snap that set the air to vibrating.

"Sìthe!" Darby squeaked, nearly dropping his "purse."

The Sìthe hissed and, with a burst of frantic energy, shot straight up. But the new moon's magic had thinned; instead of vanishing, the creature left a streak of blue light as it climbed. Jen reached for it, missed by inches, but Sam, anticipating the move, leapt and snagged a handful of its wing. The Sìthe shrieked, twisted, and slashed at Sam's wrist with claws so fine they barely left a mark. It twisted free, made for the open sky—

—and ran straight into Warren's waiting palm.

There was a pop like a soap bubble, a flash of cold blue, and the ogre closed his fist around empty air. For a second, Jen thought the

Sithe had escaped—but then it reappeared, blinking in and out, its body compressed in Warren’s grip like a particularly nasty beetle.

“Gotcha,” Warren said, his voice low.

The Sithe wriggled, tried to claw Warren’s fingers, and then, seeing the futility, snapped, “Unhand me, you oversized shrub! This is entrapment!”

Warren held it at arm’s length. “Uglier up close,” he observed. “Don’t know why I expected different.”

The Sithe bared its teeth and hissed. “You can’t keep me, ogre. I’ll curse your blood for a thousand years.”

“Join the queue,” Warren said, nonplussed.

Jen stepped forward, letting the tension in her body leak out one joint at a time. “Constable,” she introduced herself, voice cool. “You’ve been a busy little wraith.”

The Sithe’s eyes darted from face to face. “Nothing in your laws says I can’t take what’s left unguarded. I claim my rights by the oldest rules.”

Sam, massaging her wrist, said, “You picked the wrong night for old rules, friend.”

Darby, still clutching the coin sack, said, “Do I still need to—?”

Jen shook her head. “You did great, Darby.”

Warren set the Sithe down, but kept his hand ready. The little fae straightened its vest—a patchwork of stolen threads and bits of ribbon, if Jen’s eyes didn’t lie—and eyed its captors with a wounded pride.

Knodalon’s voice drifted over from the bench, so soft Jen almost missed it. “They never read the fine print, do they?”

The Sithe flicked an ear toward the old man, but otherwise ignored him.

Jen crouched to eye level. “I’ll make this simple: you give back what you stole, and we let you leave with all your limbs intact. Refuse, and... Warren gets to eat you.” She let the words hang, let the Sithe weigh them.

It sneered, but the edge was gone. “You wouldn’t.”

Jen shrugged. “He’s huge. He eats a lot.”

“OGRE EAT LITTLE BUG PERSON!” Warren roared, playing along.

The Sìthe looked at Darby, at Warren, then at Sam, who gave a bare-toothed grin. It sagged. "You want the goods or the confession first?"

Jen smiled. "Neither, actually. Let's pick this up in the gaol."

The Sìthe spat at the dirt, then sulked along behind, wings drooping.

Sam clapped Jen on the shoulder. "Nicely done, Constable."

Warren scooped up Darby, who squirmed with pride and relief.

As they walked to the gaol, the Sìthe kept up a steady grumble. "It isn't fair. The town is supposed to be neutral. No one said there'd be traps, or ogres, or—"

"—or rules?" Jen finished.

The Sìthe glared. "No one said there'd be you."

Jen almost smiled.

Behind them, the first hint of dawn peeled back the edge of the sky, and the long darkness started to crack.

The gaol at North Pointe looked exactly like the shops that lined the town square, built from stone so local you could still see lichen on some of the bricks. The inside, however, was another matter: iron bars lined the cell, but the true barrier was the faint glow of blue that ran between them. Jen keyed the lock, stepped inside, and felt her skin prick as the magic in the walls recognized her.

The Sìthe sat cross-legged on the cell's cot, wings drooping behind her like damp silk. The once-vibrant blue of her skin had faded, replaced by the grayish tone of spent lightning. She glared at Jen, but lacked the energy to make it convincing.

Jen leaned on the bars, careful to stay on the lawful side. "By the order of the Stay in Peace clause, North Pointe Common Towne, you are to be held until such time as you agree to return all stolen goods and depart the town's boundaries for a period of not less than one sennight, never to return without prior leave from the council." She said it in her best "don't argue with me" tone, but it came out more tired than stern.

The Sithe yawned, revealing a flash of those dreadful teeth. "You sound like a scribe," she said. "Didn't take you for the rule-quoting type."

Jen shrugged. "It's a living. But there *is* a rule. We serve all whom come in peace, stay in peace, and leave in peace. You haven't kept to it."

Outside the cell, the early light spilled across the entryway. Sam poked her head in, then slid a tray through the slot at the bottom of the door. "Try the berry loaf," she said, "it's the best thing you'll eat this side of a sennight." She gave the Sithe a wink, then faded back to the gaol's antechamber.

Warren loomed behind, Darby at his side. Darby's eyes were huge, round with pride. "Are you sure she can't get out?" he whispered.

Warren nodded. "Not unless she shrinks to the size of a mouse and grows a taste for iron."

The Sithe caught the exchange and snorted. "You lot take all the fun out of crime."

Jen grinned. "That's the goal." She eyed the Sithe, then the food, then the shimmer of magic that, even now, drew back from the fae like oil from water. "You're losing your edge," she said. "Town's magic doesn't like freeloaders."

"Neither do I," the Sithe muttered, but she ate the loaf anyway. "You going to drag me to the gallows next?"

Jen leaned in, voice low. "You know we don't have a gallows. We're not that kind of place."

The Sithe laughed, once, a bright and bitter sound. "Could have fooled me. Last place I tried this, they threw me a feast and called it an even trade."

"Maybe they had more coin to spare," Jen said.

Sam, reappearing at the door, added, "Or fewer smiths with sons who can outrun a horse." She winked at Darby, who beamed.

The Sithe flicked her wings, tested the blue glow, and gave up. "You're not going to let me go, are you?"

"Not until you return everything," Jen replied.

The Sithe eyed her, then Warren, then Darby. "What if I told you I

kept a stash outside the walls? In the foothills, maybe half a league out."

Jen folded her arms. "Then you'd better show us, or we'll send the town's witch after it, and she won't be as nice about it."

The Sìthe considered this, then nodded. "You'll have to let me out, first."

Jen glanced at Warren, who nodded.

"If you try to run," Warren said, "I'll catch you twice as hard." He withdrew a slim iron chain from one pocket and let it slink from one meaty hand to the other, as the Sìthe's eyes widened.

"Do we chain you up?" Jen asked.

The Sìthe rolled her eyes. "You want the loot, or not?"

Sam unlocked the cell and Warren moved in, hand ready but not threatening. The Sìthe slid off the cot, wings dragging, and shuffled to the door.

As they filed out, Jen gave Darby a pat on the shoulder. "You did well," she said, and meant it.

Darby grinned. "Can I come with you?"

Warren shrugged. "If you keep your head down."

Sam took up the rear, and for a moment, Jen almost felt sorry for the Sìthe: four against one, and no glamour to hide behind.

They walked through the sleeping town in silence, the only sound the soft crunch of boots on frost. Knodalon watched from his bench, eyes hooded. He gave a little wave, then closed them again, as if the conclusion was exactly what he'd expected.

At the edge of the green, the Sìthe paused. "If you banish me," she said, "the wards will kill me if I try to come back."

Jen shrugged. "Then don't come back."

The Sìthe gave a small, sly smile. "I might miss it. You've got good bread."

"Remember that next time you're tempted," Jen said.

The Sìthe led them out to the foothills, not even pretending to run. The sun was up by the time they reached the hollow, a narrow gap between two boulders where, sure enough, a nest of shiny goods waited in a heap: purses, combs, bits of chain, even a pair of boots that looked suspiciously like the ones Darby used to own.

Jen let Darby do the honors, scooping the pile into a sack while the Sithe looked on with something between contempt and resignation.

Warren set a hand on the Sithe's shoulder, gentle but final. "You know what happens now?"

She nodded. "Barred for life."

"Let's make it official," Jen said. "You are hereby barred from North Pointe Common Towne, by my authority as Constable." The effect was subtle and immediate. A rush of magic reared away from the little Sithe, leaving a void that none of them could see—but that they all could feel. "The town's gifts are against you now," Jen warned. "Don't return. Warren, let her go."

Warren nodded, then let go. The Sithe stretched her wings, tested the air, and—after a pause—gave them a mocking bow before zipping away, leaving only a shimmer in the sunlight.

Jen watched her go, then looked at the sack of goods. "That's it?"

"Town's safe," Sam said.

Warren nodded. "Until the next one."

They headed back to North Pointe, sack slung over Darby's shoulder, and for the first time in a while, Jen let herself believe it might be a quiet day.

She should have known better, but for now, she enjoyed the possibility. "Come on," she sighed. "Let's categorize the haul in case people come back for their stuff."

The night air was thick with the kind of cold that worked through your bones, not just your skin. Jen stood at the gaol's threshold, shoulders hunched, watching the empty square. The blue glow of the gaol's bars had faded, replaced by the occasional flicker of candlelight in the windows across the green. She rocked on her heels, listening to the crack of frost under her boots, and let the silence do what it would with her.

She was still standing there when the three remaining mercenaries appeared, walking in a line so loose it almost looked accidental. Leeta had traded her battered leathers for a crisp blue jacket, collar sharp

and pockets bristling with oddments—ruler, folded charts, even a stub of chalk peeking out. Olt wore a heavy vest and corduroy trousers, with a tool belt slung low and a patch emblazoned with the crest of a local mill. Bell was almost unrecognizable: the stationmaster's coat fit him so well he looked like he'd been born in it, and the red sash at his waist made his movements look decisive rather than furtive.

They stopped three paces from Jen, and for a moment, nobody said anything. Then Leeta cleared her throat.

"You win," she said, but her voice was soft, not angry. "It's not our war anymore, is it?"

Jen shrugged. "Never was."

Olt looked her up and down, then nodded at her badge. "You could have led the company, you know. Still could, if you wanted."

Bell, silent as always, just stared at the blue light pooling from the gaol windows.

Leeta squared her shoulders, the old bravado replaced with something like relief. "We're heading north," she said. "There's work for all sorts up there, and—" She gestured at her new jacket. "Turns out Prudence can spot a future even when you're too stubborn to see it."

Jen smiled, despite herself. "She's good at that."

Bell reached into his sleeve and pulled out a slip of paper, which he handed to Jen. "A note from Piotr," he said, voice barely above a whisper.

Jen blinked. "He's alive?"

Leeta grinned. "More than alive. He's probably eating better than any of us."

Jen unfolded the note: it was written in a tight, precise hand, and read simply, "Tell them I'm happy."

Olt looked at the gaol, then back at Jen. "We're not coming back. Not like this, anyway." He grinned, the old fire sparking for a moment. "If you ever want to visit, look for us near the river. Or wherever the best bread is."

They shook hands, Leeta's grip strong, Olt's brief but warm, and Bell's a soft squeeze that lingered. For a second, Jen wanted to say something—anything—but all the words felt flat compared to the

comfort of just standing in the cold together, not as soldiers but as people with somewhere to go.

As the mercenaries turned toward the road, the door to Llewel's restaurant opened. A slant of golden light sliced the darkness, and out stepped Piotr.

It took Jen a second to register him: hair cropped short, a neat beard, and the sober black-and-white of a scribe's uniform. He blinked at the trio, then at Jen, and for a heartbeat the world seemed to hold its breath.

"Stars above," Piotr said, and his voice was older, deeper, but unmistakable. "You're here."

Leeta's jaw dropped. "Piotr?"

He smiled, sheepish and proud at once. "They offered me a job, and I never left. I thought you'd all gone east."

Olt barked a laugh. "We did, and we failed at it."

Bell stepped forward, looked Piotr up and down, and grinned. "You're taller," he said.

Piotr shrugged. "I've had a lot of good meals."

Leeta cuffed him on the shoulder, hard, but then pulled him into a rough hug. "You idiot," she said. "We thought you'd died."

"Almost did," Piotr replied, "but the Mountain Elf convinced me... well, nothing, I guess. But that meal was the last one I had as the old me. As a merc. It just... by the time we got to dessert, it wasn't the right meal anymore."

Olt shook his hand, then Bell did the same. For a second, it was like nothing had ever changed, and Jen felt her chest go tight in the old, familiar way.

"We're going north," Leeta said. "You coming?"

Piotr hesitated, then looked back at Llewel, who stood in the restaurant's doorway, arms folded and face as neutral as fresh snow.

"I have to finish a few things," Piotr said, "but I'll catch up."

Olt grinned. "If you don't, we'll come back and kidnap you."

Bell nodded. "We mean it."

They said their goodbyes, the talk soft and fond, and then Piotr watched as the three disappeared into the night, their shapes growing smaller, but steadier, with each step.

When they were gone, Jen stood alone, the square silent except for the ticking of frost in the eaves and the faint click of the gaol's magic resetting for the night.

Llewell met her eye from across the square, gave her a slow, precise nod, then vanished inside without a word.

Jen looked at the slip of paper Piotr had given her, then at the empty street, and—for once—let herself smile without caution.

Maybe things didn't always go back the way they were.

Maybe sometimes, they went forward.



The last of the nighttime slid off the town's rooftops as the sun peeked over the horizon and Jen made her way across the green, hands buried in her pockets and feet dragging with the kind of exhaustion that only two nights of sleepless crisis could provide. She skirted the bakery, now closed and dark, and glanced in at the Weary Head, where Minnie was already setting tables for the breakfast rush. Even the regulars seemed to sense that this night was over before it began.

At the far edge of the square, the Púca's shop blazed with light—lanterns in every window, a pale glow spilling across the stoop. Above the door hung a new sign, still blank and raw, the wood's grain showing through. Jen tilted her head and smiled; they'd probably painted the sign three times already, only to sand it back to nothing, unable to agree on a name.

She clomped up to the door, took a breath, and knocked twice.

The door flew open, and she was greeted by a Púca she'd never seen before: gray beard, spectacles balanced on the end of his nose, and a jacket patched with at least nine colors of thread. He looked her up and down, eyes bright as coins.

"Constable!" he said, with a nod of his head. "Púca the Seanchaí, at yer service. I see ye made it through the night, so." His accent was twice as thick as the others; Jen had to really concentrate to follow along.

"Good evening," Jen managed. "I—"

But the Púca barreled ahead, waving her inside with a flourish.

"Ah, sure you're here fer the yarn, so ye are! It's the grandest one yet. I've only just landed meself, an' the air's already buzzin' with it, so it is. C'mon, c'mon." He steered her to a tiny stool just inside the doorway, then hopped up onto a box to deliver his speech.

"Sure, picture it: way back in the day, the gem-cutters of that far-off city stumbled upon a batch of stones so pure and full of power, they reckoned the whole world might be torn asunder. And who was it that found them? None other than the great wizard Thalimbar himself, with a beard so long he had to wrap it three times 'round his waist just to avoid takin' a tumble. Now, Thalimbar, not bein' any sort of eejit, realized that if ye cracked the right gem at just the right angle, ya could stash spells inside 'em! Not just spells, mind ya, but entire arguments, memories, even wee scraps of half-finished thoughts—like messages in bottles, just waitin' for the right person to give 'em a look."

Jen tried to interrupt, but the Púca powered on. "That's how the business started, so it is! Wizards all over started stashin' their best work in these gems, passin' them down, sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose. Every now and then, one'd show up in a pot of stew or inside the wall of an old bank, and whoever opened it—phew!—got a right dose of magic, sometimes grand, sometimes not so much. Whole towns were built around findin' these bits and bobs, and the first thing they did was open a shop to buy and sell 'em. That's history for ye, Constable!"

He beamed, wiped his brow, and produced a handkerchief from nowhere. "Now, if ye want to know the rest, ye'll have to come back after breakfast tomorrow, because the shipment isn't due till the second bell, and Lapidarist Púca won't let us see the good stuff until it's been properly dusted for curses. But I promise ye, it'll be worth the wait!"

Jen blinked. "I just wanted to ask about the sign," she said, finally.

The Púca nodded. "Of course, of course. The name isn't finished. Namer Púca is still workin' on it."

Jen smiled, despite herself. "I'll keep that in mind."

The Púca hopped down, clapped his hands together, and gave her another bow. "Goodnight, Constable Darne. I'll be seein' ya then." He

shut the door, quick as a wink, leaving Jen on the stoop with nothing but the glow of the lanterns and a strange sense of déjà vu.

She shook her head, stepped back into the chilly dark, and looked up at the empty sign.

Maybe tomorrow she'd have a better story.

For now, she settled for the one where North Pointe was, against all odds, still hers.

thirteen

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THE OLD MENAGERIE looked nothing like itself. In place of animal musk and iron cages, the air now carried a constant prickle of solvent, wood smoke, and a smell Jen could only classify as “new money.” Gone were the battered animal doors and straw-packed runs; every plank and lintel gleamed under a fresh coat of oil. Where once rutted floors bore the grooves of restless paws, now a fat wooden sign dangled above the stoop, its hand-painted letters still tacky in the morning cool:

Púcagems

The word meant little to most, but the subtext was obvious: whatever else the Púca had become overnight, they’d become jewelers.

What drew people in that first morning wasn’t the sign, or even the promise of valuables, but the sound. The menagerie-turned-shop was a living metronome: a rhythmic click, click, click, as hundreds of tiny hammers struck hundreds of even tinier anvils. Every so often, the click would yield to the sharp chitter of a saw blade, the metallic tap of a setting punch, or the fine, nasal whir of a polishing wheel. The effect, from the street, was that of a clock gone berserk, or a nest of insects determined to outlast the sun.

Jen didn’t need to be told what was happening inside; she could

picture it in her head, every step of the process. She'd watched her own mother-in-law, once, in a backroom in Northmark, fit a line of pearls into a torque so delicate it took a full day's focus just to get the tension right. The Púca were moving ten times that speed, and she suspected the results would show it.

By the next 'mark, a crowd had started to form on the green. Some were travelers, peering through the spotless windows with their noses smudging the glass. Most were townsfolk, equal parts curious and indignant: it was not every day a shop opened itself, staff included, in the span of one night.

Makota was first among the onlookers, her round face pressed to the window as she narrated the scene for a half-circle of bakery kits. "You see that one?" she said, pointing a flour-dusted paw at a Púca perched atop a stepladder, wiring a chandelier to a crossbeam. "He's not even using nails. That's glue, and it's stronger than any spell I've ever smelled."

One of the kits, tail twitching, whispered, "Do you think they eat the gems?"

Makota's whiskers stiffened. "If they do, I hope they share."

Next to Makota, Galhani squinted, hands cupped to her face to block the sun. "Are those real gold inlays on the counters?" she muttered, mostly to herself. "That's more gold than an orge's own front tooth."

"Hey," Warren objected from somewhere.

From inside, a set of Púca in matching emerald waistcoats worked at lining up what looked like a dozen miniature display cases. The cases themselves were pristine—glass so clean it vanished from certain angles, set in dark wood and fitted with velvet too rich to be sourced locally. At the back of the shop, a single Púca stood on a barrel, ticking off a ledger as the others scuttled in and out of view.

When Jen arrived, she took in the crowd, the fresh sign, and the impossibility of it all. "Is this an opening or an invasion?" she asked, loud enough for Makota to hear.

Makota grinned. "Why not both?"

Galhani, never one to be left out, fluttered her fingers in Jen's direc-

tion. "You're just in time, Constable. They're about to unlock the door."

As if on cue, the interior din fell silent. The Púca inside clustered at the far end of the shop, a white-bearded one in front. They conferred, quick and animated, hands flashing in a semaphore of trade talk. The white-bearded Púca broke away, straightened his tiny suit jacket, and approached the door. On the other side, anticipation built like a fever: the kits pressed closer, Makota bounced on her toes, and even Jen caught herself leaning in.

The Púca opened the door precisely two inches.

"Top o' the mornin' to ye!" he roared, his voice too grand for the wee body it filled. "Thanks a million for waitin' while we finish settin' the last o' the jewels. Ah, watch yer step there now, the varnish is still a bit tacky—aye, aye, we're almost ready for ye."

The crowd surged, but the Púca held up a hand. "Ah, the shop's not open just yet, so it is! Last bits an' bobs to check an' calibrate, y'know yourself. Can't be lettin' the dust settle in the cases, for it's a real devil to clean up after, so it is." He gave a wink, the effect magnified by the sheer size of his left eye. "Why don't ye come back at midday, eh? Or maybe later. Sure, tomorrow's grand too, or maybe the day after. First one who turns up gets a wee discount, but only if they can solve a riddle, mind you."

A groan of disappointment rippled through the crowd. Jen, less eager to play along, stepped forward and caught the door before it could close.

"Can we at least look inside?" she asked, in her best neutral voice.

The Púca's nose wiggled, considering. "Well, I suppose if it's you, Miss Constable. But not too far, mind the floor, and no fingerprints on the display glass. It smudges something fierce."

Jen opened the door just wide enough to peek. Inside, the transformation was complete: racks of rings and brooches stood ready, each labeled with a tiny tag in perfect block lettering. At the far end, a velvet-lined table displayed the most expensive pieces—sunstone pendants, bands of platinum, and one dazzlingly ugly tiara made of what looked like bottle glass and brass wire. The staff moved in

constant formation, polishing, dusting, checking inventory. None of them so much as glanced at Jen, which was a statement in itself.

"Is that real platinum?" Makota called, trying to wedge her head past Jen's shoulder.

"Only the finest, so!" the Púca grinned, giving them a friendly wave away. "But sure didn't I just tell ye, we're not open yet. Come back later an' ye'll see for yerselves, so ye will."

Jen withdrew, and the door clicked shut behind them, sealing off the hive once more.

On the stoop, the crowd loitered. Nobody wanted to be the first to leave, and nobody wanted to admit how much they cared about what was inside. Galhani, who had more self-control than the rest, turned away first.

"I'll be back after the bell," she said, brushing dust off her tunic. "Let's see if they can outdo the herbalist for grand opening drama."

Makota lingered, as did the kits, who argued in quiet whispers about whether "riddle" meant a literal puzzle or some Púca trick. Jen watched them for a while, arms folded, mind sorting through the implications.

It wasn't lost on her that the menagerie had never lasted a full season without trouble—an escaped stoat, a rabid ferret, the one time a family of newts turned the front windows into a slime disaster. That the new tenants had made it through a single night, undisturbed, was itself suspicious.

She sidled back to the window, watched the Púca at work. They moved too quickly for the eye to follow, and yet not a single gesture was wasted. At one point, two of them collided, and without breaking stride, swapped trays and continued on as if that had always been the plan.

Jen felt a tug at her sleeve. One of the kits, eyes huge, whispered, "Do you think they're real, or just a trick of the glass?"

"They're real," Jen said. "But they're better at this than most people are at breathing."

The kit nodded, solemn, as if this explained everything.

When the crowd finally gave up and dispersed, Jen remained. She crossed to the other side of the road, watched the sign sway in the

breeze, and tried to remember if she'd ever known a town where the shops grew so fast you couldn't keep up with them. North Pointe had always been a place where news outpaced sense, but this was different. It felt... deliberate.

She made a note in her logbook to check the shop again at midday, but doubted they'd see her coming.

At the edge of the square, Knodalon watched from his bench, face blank as a wall. If he'd noticed the Púca's new shop, he gave no sign, but when Jen passed him, he said, "Busy little bees, aren't they?"

"Never seen a bee set gold that fast," Jen replied.

Knodalon grunted. "They're not bees. More like termites."

"Termites don't polish their work," Jen said, and walked on.

Behind her, the Púcagems sign glinted, bright and sharp in the slant of morning. In a few 'marks, the whole town would be talking about it.

But for now, Jen had other business, and a sennight's worth of questions for the next shopkeeper unlucky enough to open their doors.

Most of the town took a half day to recover from the Púca's morning spectacle, but Jen found herself with a surplus of energy and a deficit of explanations. She made her way toward the new restaurant, which sat at the opposite end of the green, ignoring the sideways looks from the bakery kits and the speculative whispers of the traveling merchants.

From the outside, the restaurant looked like a chunk of the mountains had dropped straight onto the trade road and decided to stay. Black stone facade, pale windows so clear they gave back your reflection, and a door that stood open even when the wind picked up. No name on the sign—just a deep, precise carving that hinted at a word Jen couldn't pronounce.

Inside, the shift was immediate: cool air, scented with resin and something faintly mineral, a hush like the inside of a temple. The space was laid out with military precision: every table equidistant, every chair aligned. A single long window ran the length of one wall,

letting in slats of light that picked up the white and silver of the table settings.

Two tables were occupied.

At one, a pair of travelers—an older couple, their boots still dusted from the road—sat across from each other, eating in total silence. The dishes looked like art: tiny towers of cheese and meat, grains layered in patterns that Jen could never reproduce. The woman smiled at her food; the man stared at the Mountain Elf, who glided from table to table with the steady confidence of a master at work.

Llewel was a study in control: hair bound in a loose silver tail, eyes unblinking and endlessly blue, coat the color of melting snow. He paused to refill a water glass, then turned toward the entrance, catching Jen's gaze with an acknowledgment just shy of warmth.

"Constable," he said, the word carrying more gravity than necessary. "Welcome." Then he frowned slightly. "Although not exactly."

Jen stepped fully inside, let the door click behind her. "Looks like business is steady," she said, eyeing the empty tables.

"We are selective," Llewel replied, lips barely moving. "There is value in giving each guest full attention."

She watched as he whisked a tray of glassware to the back, his movements so smooth they verged on rehearsed. "You plan to fill the place, or is it invitation only?"

Llewel set the tray down, then folded his hands. "We accommodate those who need accommodation."

Jen considered this, then shrugged. "I suppose that's one way to run a shop. Most people want to make money, though."

Llewel's eyes flickered, just a moment of chill. "Money is a means. Not an end."

She moved closer, letting her boots ring on the stone floor. "You know, the old menagerie couldn't survive a single sennight without drama. You think you'll last longer than that?"

He regarded her as if she'd asked the world's most obvious question. "Mountain Elves do not fear short seasons. We thrive in them."

Jen found herself caught between irritation and respect. She changed tack. "You see the new Púca shop? They've got the whole square talking."

"I saw." He didn't elaborate.

"You have a plan to keep up?"

He offered a smile, precise and almost sad. "Constable, I have no interest in keeping up. This place is not a race. It is a point of arrival."

Before Jen could decide if she liked the sound of that, Llewel's attention flicked past her shoulder. Outside, on the green, the old couple from the inn stood, peering through the glass, their hands entwined like two lengths of rope left out to weather.

Llewel moved past Jen, opened the door with a gentle sweep. "Good day to you both," he called, the words cutting through the hush. "Would you care to enjoy a complimentary meal? I believe I have something that would suit your palates perfectly."

The couple exchanged glances, wary at first, then nodded. Llewel gestured them in, and they followed, unsure but willing.

Jen, suddenly aware of her own awkwardness, stepped aside as the couple entered. Llewel directed them to a table, drew out their chairs, and disappeared to fetch a fresh carafe.

"Is this a private event now?" Jen asked, voice lowered.

Llewel, returning with water and a plate of bread, shrugged with a grace that would have shamed a dancer. "It is an experiment. All are welcome, provided they have appetite and curiosity." He tilted his head slightly. "And need."

Jen wanted to press him, to find the edge, but something in his posture—the absolute calm, the absence of show—made her hesitate. She took a seat at the nearest empty table and watched as Llewel served the couple: a soup so clear it looked like liquid glass, a salad arranged like a miniature garden, slices of meat so thin they curled under their own weight.

Every motion was ritual. Llewel poured, sliced, folded, retreated. He made no small talk, but when the couple murmured thanks, he bowed with a formality that made the moment feel historic.

After the first round, the couple relaxed. The man asked about the dishes, and Llewel described each one in perfect, unaccented common, never lingering on his own prowess. The woman laughed at something, and for the first time since entering, the restaurant felt alive.

Jen watched, the questions lining up in her mind. She wondered

what the elf wanted—if anything. If this was just another shop, or a statement, or a warning to the rest of the world.

As the meal wound down, Llewel approached her table. “Constable. Will you join them?”

Jen weighed the offer, then shook her head. “I’m working.”

He nodded, as if he’d expected no less. “Should you ever wish to dine, there will be a place for you.” He left her with that, no sales pitch, no pressure. Another inscrutable toilet of the head. “Although you recently did decide, so perhaps another time.”

Confused but unwilling to admit it, she lingered for a few more minutes, watching as the couple lingered over the final course—small cups of something bright and steaming, probably herbal. Llewel stood at the window, watching the road, his face unreadable.

Jen rose, stepped outside, and let the door close behind her. The cold hit her in the face, waking her up to the fact she’d learned nothing. The shop was what it looked like: a restaurant, run by a Mountain Elf, open to all but welcoming only those who needed it.

She wondered if it would last the sennight. She wondered if the town would let it.

Either way, she’d be back to check.

She always was.



Jen spent the end of the day exactly where she liked best: on the hard, splintery bench that ran along the east side of the town green. She shared it with Knodalon, who didn’t so much sit as merge with the structure, his body radiating the same imperturbable energy as a weathered boulder. In front of them, the green sloped down toward the road, and beyond that, the shops—old and new—waited for their night’s business.

The sunset bled slow and deliberate behind the bakery, painting everything in colors that made Jen’s eyes ache. The bakery itself was already dark, the kits packed off to bed and Makota sweeping the porch with the efficiency of someone who’d done it ten thousand times before. The Púca shop, right on cue, had shuttered itself at the

precise toll of the dusk bell. The windows went black, and not a single sound escaped the former menagerie: not a shuffle, not a snore, not even the telltale clink of midnight snacking.

Across the green, the Mountain Elf's restaurant did the opposite. Lights snapped on, every one a warm, deliberate candle. The tables glowed, the glassware shimmered, and even the stones of the facade seemed to catch the light and hold it. From their vantage, Jen and Knodalon could see into the dining room, where the older couple from earlier lingered over a final course, cheeks flushed and eyes bright. Llewel hovered near them, patient as a priest, hands folded behind his back.

"I don't understand why a restaurant would open with only two guests," Jen said, mostly to herself.

"Some things taste better if you savor them," Knodalon offered.

Jen grunted. "You ever see a Mountain Elf before?"

Knodalon's lips twitched. "I saw three, once. But never like that."

They watched in silence until Sam arrived, a pair of mugs clutched in one hand and a bottle swinging from the other. She plopped herself onto the bench with an athletic huff, handed Jen a mug, then poured a generous measure for Knodalon. "This sennight's batch," Sam announced, "and I made sure there's no memory tea in it. Unless you want some. I could get more."

"I'll pass," Jen said, but her voice softened with gratitude.

Sam leaned back, stretching her boots out. "So, what's the score? Did the jewelry shop explode yet?"

"Not even a squeak after the bell," Jen said. "I think they're afraid of getting caught by the town witch."

Sam made a show of shivering. "Can you blame them? If I ever get on Leota's bad side, I'm running straight for the next county."

Knodalon sipped his ale and watched the restaurant, where Llewel now poured wine for his guests. "Two new shops, one day," he mused. "The Icosagon's going to have to bend."

Sam grinned. "Maybe it'll just snap. Then we can finally open a bakery that serves breakfast all day."

Jen laughed, then let her gaze drift back to the green. "I think the

Icosagon's already bent. The rules keep changing, even when we're not looking."

Sam considered this, swirling the dregs in her mug. "Do you think that's a bad thing?"

Jen wanted to say yes, but the truth was less clear. "It's just... new. I don't know if the town's ready for it."

Behind them, the green had filled up with small clusters of people—Vamir and Alred in a quiet huddle, their voices pitched low and urgent; Makota and Galhani, sharing a sticky bun and talking with their hands; Minnie, standing arms folded on the Weary Head's porch, glowering at the restaurant as if it had personally insulted her kitchen.

"It's like a fairground," Sam said, nodding at the square. "Everyone waiting to see what happens next."

Knodalon drained his mug, set it down, and closed his eyes. "They think it's about the shops," he said. "But it's not. It's about the story."

Jen didn't bother to ask which story; in North Pointe, there were always a dozen running at once. "You ever think maybe we're the story?" she said, watching the restaurant.

Sam leaned in, her voice playful. "I hope not. I don't want anyone writing my ending."

On the far side of the green, the couple at the restaurant rose from their table. Llewel escorted them to the door, exchanged a few quiet words, and bowed them out with a formality that made Jen's spine tingle. The couple lingered a moment on the stoop, then strolled into the night, arms linked and faces glowing with the memory of good food and better company.

Jen watched them go, feeling a weird twist of satisfaction and jealousy all at once. Then she frowned. Had the man been limping earlier? She shook her head, unable to remember.

"Cute couple," Sam observed.

"Yeah."

In the hush that followed, the shops seemed to settle deeper into themselves, as if absorbing the uncertainty of the day and making room for tomorrow.

Sam finished her drink, wiped her mouth with the back of her

hand, and said, "I give it a fortnight before one of them goes up in smoke. Any bets?"

Knodalon grinned, just a little. "I'd bet on the jewelry shop. Those Púca have trouble written all over them."

Jen raised her mug, the last of the ale gone warm in her hand. "I'll take the restaurant. Mountain Elves never stay put for long."

Sam winked at her, and for a second, all three of them were just people on a bench, sharing the peace of a job well done and a town still holding together.

But Jen knew it wouldn't last. Nothing ever did.

She watched the light in the restaurant windows flicker, then fade as Llewel closed up for the night. She watched the empty green, and the dark shapes moving in the distance, and the old man on the bench beside her, who had seen more stories than anyone dared count.

"Tomorrow?" Sam asked, rising to her feet.

Jen nodded. "Tomorrow."

They left the bench, the mugs, and the memories behind, and walked together toward the warm light of the Claw.

For a little while longer, at least, the story belonged to them.

fourteen

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THE MORNING after the Sithe incident started as quiet as a pond, but by the time Jen finished her second circuit of the green, North Pointe's peace was already fracturing.

It started with the travelers. Two men, both broad in the shoulders and sour in the face, came up the trade road just after first bell, their strides so long and fast Jen wondered if they meant to outwalk their own shadows. She pegged them as riverfolk from the cut of their coats—heavy canvas, waterstained at the hems, every stitch a subtle boast of a city more important than this one.

They were yelling before they'd reached the bakery, hurling words back and forth with such intensity that even Makota's kits, usually glued to the morning dough, stopped kneading and pressed their noses to the glass.

"...said you'd pay at Forla's!" one bellowed, jabbing a finger into the other's chest.

"And you said you wouldn't back out at the next bridge, but here we are!" the other replied, voice tight with rage and something else Jen couldn't place. Desperation, maybe. Or heartbreak.

By the time they reached the square, their voices had gone from angry to dangerous: the kind of argument that draws knives or worse

in the big cities. Jen was there before the first punch, boots hitting the trade road hard enough to send up a warning shot of dust. She'd left Hellsting curled at her wrist, not wanting to escalate, but her hand rested on the hilt anyway.

"Problem?" she called, tone flat.

The two men snapped to her like a whip, but neither backed down. The first—a red-bearded man with hands as big as bread paddles—spat on the ground. "He's a cheat and a coward," he said, eyes never leaving the other.

"Don't care," said the second, "just want what's mine." He wore a deep blue scarf and a cut over one cheekbone, fresh and shining.

Jen scanned the green: no one else around, not close enough to intervene. The bakery's front door was half-open, but Makota was keeping the kits behind her with a sweep of her tail, eyes round.

Jen took a breath and felt for the gaol's magic. Usually, it was a soft presence at the edge of her awareness—a gentle hand pushing back against any whiff of violence. Now, she called it up, envisioning the blue glow that lived in the walls of the cell, and tried to project it outward. The air shivered. The men's anger cooled by a fraction, but they kept circling each other, two dogs testing a chain.

She raised her voice, pitched it for command. "You're in North Pointe. We don't do brawls in the street. Either sort it out civil, or take it to the next town."

The red-bearded man squared to her. "What if it's too late for civil?" His hand twitched toward his belt, where a pouch bulged with something hard-edged.

The other laughed, bitter as willowbark. "You always did prefer fists to words."

Jen saw it happen in the angle of his shoulder: the punch coming a full second before the arm moved. She willed the gaol's magic harder, felt the effort like pulling a rope against a giant's hand. The air between the men thickened, shimmered, and the fist slowed—but not enough.

The blow landed. The blue-scarf man reeled, stumbled back, then launched himself forward, catching his foe around the middle. The

two tumbled, hit the ground in a cloud of dirt and shouted curses, rolling toward the bakery's step.

Jen ran, closing the gap as they traded elbows and knees, both grunting with effort. She didn't bother shouting—words were wasted on men in that state.

She grabbed the red-beard by the collar, hauling him up and off the other. He spun, hand flashing for his belt pouch, and Jen moved on instinct, twisting his wrist and pinning his arm behind his back. It was a cheap trick, but it worked: the man yelped and went still.

The blue-scarf man scrambled up, blood trickling from his nose. For a moment, Jen thought he might charge her too, but then he caught sight of Warren.

The ogre blacksmith loomed in the gap between bakery and green, his green skin slicked with the morning's sweat, the white of his hair tied back in a tail thick as a horse's. He held a blackened forging hammer in one hand, and his expression was equal parts irritation and curiosity.

He strode over, each step leaving a crater in the road. "What dis, den?" His voice rumbled like thunder stuck in a barrel.

The red-beard tried to pull free, but Jen held fast. "Dispute over a debt," she said. "And a lack of patience."

Warren's lip curled. "They want to settle it with knuckles, let them. Elsewise, I'll knock their heads together until the debt forgets them both."

Jen almost laughed. Instead, she looked at the blue-scarf. "You want to talk, or you want to take your lumps?"

The man wiped his face with the back of his hand. "He owes me half a season's coin. Swore on his own mother."

Warren snorted. "Nobody swears on mothers here. Makes it too likely they'll show up to collect."

The red-beard barked a laugh, then grunted as Jen adjusted her grip. "All right, all right. I'll pay. Just... let go."

Jen did, but kept herself ready. "You settle, or I throw you both in the gaol and bring that Sithe back to lecture you for a bell."

That did the trick. Both men glanced at each other, then away, then at the ground. The anger drained out of them, replaced by the familiar

misery of people who'd burned every bridge but the one they were standing on.

Warren planted his hammer in the dirt and leaned on it. "If you're done, I've got a batch of horseshoes to finish. If you're not, let me know so I can start heating the big anvil."

Neither man replied.

Jen jerked her chin at the edge of the green. "Go. Now. Next time, it's the gaol."

They slunk away, muttering, and Jen waited until they'd disappeared around the bakery's corner before letting herself breathe.

Warren grinned, wide and tusky. "You handled that better than last time."

Jen shot him a look. "Last time, they brought knives."

He shrugged. "I liked it better when you used Hellsting as punctuation."

She grinned. "I'm trying to go low drama this sennight. See how long it lasts."

He clapped her on the back, nearly knocking her off her feet. "I give you till third bell."

She snorted, then nodded toward the bakery. "Thanks for the backup."

He gave a two-fingered salute, then lumbered off toward his forge.

As Jen walked back to the gaol, she felt the blue magic settle around her again, soft and warm, like the town was giving her a quiet nod of approval.

She wondered how long it would be before the next fools thought they could break the rules.

If she had to guess, she'd say before the next bell.

And by the time that bell rang, the two travelers were back on the green, yelling even louder than before.

This time, they had knives.

Jen didn't even sigh. She just walked up, let Hellsting unspool from her wrist, and dropped its tip into the dirt between them.

The effect was instant: both men froze, eyes fixed on the blade. Jen didn't have to say a word—the sword did the talking.

She picked up the blade, wiped the dirt from its edge, and said,

"You want to be remembered as the idiots who bled out over a two-moon debt? Or do you want to leave town with your guts inside your shirts?"

The red-beard looked at the blue-scarf. Blue-scarf shrugged. In perfect sync, they pocketed their knives and walked away.

Jen watched them go, then rolled her eyes to the sky. "Two less customers for the Claw," she muttered. "Sam's not going to like that."

She put Hellsting away, the weight of it settling her nerves, and went back to her rounds.

She had a feeling the next problem would be waiting before she finished her tea.

The bell had barely faded from the air when Jen spotted the two elves standing outside the restaurant, locked in a conference so private it drew attention like a campfire on a dark night.

Alred looked every inch the Plains Elf, his broad frame and careless posture at odds with the razor-precise cut of his coat and the way he braced his feet as if expecting a sudden wind. Facing him was Llewel, posture straight as a fencing blade, silver hair glowing in the dawn. They stood less than a foot apart, arms at their sides, backs so rigid they might snap.

Their voices didn't reach Jen, but the mood was written clear enough in their faces. Alred's mouth was a hard line, eyes narrowed to chips of flint. Llewel's face was still, but not unreadable: a cold patience, like a glacier waiting to crush a valley.

Jen paused, tucked herself behind a rain barrel, and watched. Eavesdropping on elves was usually futile—they could outwait even the most stubborn constable—but body language said more than words ever did.

For a long while, neither spoke. Alred's fingers twitched, brushing the hem of his tunic, then curling into a fist. Llewel watched, his own hands unmoving, until the moment passed and Alred finally spoke.

The words were too soft to catch, but the effect was visible: Llewel dipped his chin, just barely, then responded with a single phrase, lips

barely parting. Alred's jaw clenched. Another volley—this time, Alred pressed the point, voice rising but not loud enough to break the air. Llewel remained motionless, and when Alred finished, Llewel replied with what looked like the same word, over and over, until Alred's shoulders drooped and the fight bled out of him.

A long silence. Then, with a jerk, Alred turned and stalked off toward the east gate, leaving Llewel alone on the stoop. The Mountain Elf didn't move. He stayed there, eyes fixed on the horizon, until the other elf was long gone.

Jen waited another two counts, then stepped out from her hiding place and marched up to the restaurant. No sense pretending she hadn't watched.

Llewel turned at her approach, eyes cool as morning frost. "Constable," he said, not a question.

She met his gaze, refused to be impressed by the color of his irises, which were so deep a blue they seemed to drink the world. "You making friends already?" she asked, nodding toward the gate.

Llewel didn't bother with sarcasm. "He wanted to know why I am here."

Jen crossed her arms. "So does everyone else."

A flicker of amusement, gone before it finished. "You do not trust me."

"Should I?"

He considered, then said, "If you wish."

That nearly made her laugh, but the memory of Alred's defeated posture stuck in her throat. She gestured at the restaurant's door, propped open with a chunk of obsidian so black it seemed to have gravity. "You planning to put anyone out of business, or just keep playing at mystery?"

Llewel shrugged, the movement so slight it might have been a tick. "I serve meals. Nothing more."

Jen eyed the empty tables, the perfectly aligned chairs, the window glass so clean it seemed to erase the world beyond. "Yeah, but not to very many people."

He looked past her, to the empty square. "Few are hungry enough," he said, and the words landed in her chest like a snowball.

He didn't explain, didn't soften the implication. "You came for something?"

Jen gritted her teeth. "I want to know if you're a problem, or just another tourist with expensive taste."

He smiled, not unkindly. "I am not a tourist."

"Then what are you?" she pressed.

He blinked, slow, as if bored with her impatience. "I am Mountain Elf. We are what we do."

That was the end of it. He turned, stepped inside, and closed the door with a sound like the punctuation at the end of a conversation.

Jen stared at the door, jaw slack, unsure if she'd won or lost.

She was still standing there when Piotr arrived, boots crunching on the frost.

"Constable," he said, voice soft.

Jen turned. The mercenary—no, former mercenary, she realized—looked different in the morning light. His coat was patched, but neat; his hair cut short, cheeks still red from a hasty wash. A pack sat on his shoulders, bulging with the kind of supplies you only pack if you're leaving somewhere for good.

Piotr nodded at the door. "He's not so bad," he said. "Just... different."

"You ate there."

He shrugged, as if the prospect of dying by elf food was just another Tuesday. "It was... not what I expected. Not what anyone expected."

"Poison?" she said, half-joking.

He shook his head. "No. Just... a meal. But it felt like the last one I needed to eat as a mercenary. Like..." He searched for words, then gave up. "Never mind."

She frowned. "Are you leaving?"

He nodded, eyes on the east gate. "Leeta and the others are going north. Olt wants to work the big rivers, says it's safer. They've already gone ahead."

Jen felt the old ache, the one she'd hoped was gone for good. "You could stay."

He smiled, shy. "Maybe someday. But not until I figure out who I am without them."

She watched as he started toward the gate. "Piotr," she called, and he paused. "Was it worth it? The meal?"

He looked back, face bright for the first time in days. "More than you know."

Then he was gone, and Jen was alone outside the world's loneliest restaurant, thinking that maybe, just maybe, the Mountain Elf knew exactly what he was doing.

She wondered who would be next to try the food.

She wondered, despite herself, what it would taste like.

By midday, the green was empty, save for the bakery's kits chasing each other through the grass, and a single Púca who sat on the jewelry shop's stoop, whittling a stick to the size of a match.

Jen circled the square, looking for trouble, but found only silence. She wondered if the world was holding its breath, waiting for the next thing to break.

It usually was.



Jen was halfway back to the gaol before she remembered she'd promised herself a tea from Galhani's, something ordinary and black to banish the weirdness from her head. The morning had worn her thin—violence, elf riddles, the sense that her own hands couldn't keep up with the town's magic. What she needed, more than caffeine, was a moment to sit somewhere quiet and pretend that North Pointe wasn't always on the verge of being rewritten.

She turned the corner by the green, expecting the usual quiet, and instead found a carnival.

Banners stretched across the square, each one painted in the aggressive script that only the Púca could produce. The shop, once a menagerie, now gleamed with new glass and gold trim, every inch of the facade shining in the midday sun. In front of the door stood a small wooden podium, upon which rested a gavel sized for a mouse

and a sign that read: GRAND OPENING TODAY, COME AND SEE THE WONDERS INSIDE.

A silk ribbon, blue as the sky, stretched across the stoop. Behind it, the Shopkeeper Púca—white beard, shiny shoes, spectacles balanced on his nose—waited with both hands raised as if commanding the ocean to part.

Jen approached with a sense of inevitability.

"Top o' the mornin' to ye, miss!" the Púca called out, bendin' so low his hat nearly took a dive into the drain. "Ye're just in time fer the openin', but not in time fer the start, if ye catch me drift."

She didn't. "The sign says open," she pointed out.

"Och, sure the sign's tellin' no lies," he said, a grin spreading wide enough for her to see the lines where his teeth met the wax. "But there's a way of doin' things, y'know. There's always a way."

Before Jen could reply, a second Púca popped out of the doorway, this one in a jacket striped like a caution sign and dragging behind him a scroll of parchment long enough to carpet the trade road. He unrolled it with a flourish, then cleared his throat.

"In line with Section Seven, Subsection Niner-Four-Alpha, of the North Pointe Commercial Activities Charter, which we're workin' on, no new business can kick off unless the ribbon's been cut, the bell's rung, an' the right paperwork's signed by at least three witnesses who aren't kin to the folks involved." He peered up, glasses makin' his eyes look as big as dinner plates. "Are ye kin to any Púca, miss?"

Jen blinked. "No," she said.

The Advocate Púca grinned. "Perfect! If you'd kindly take this pen —" He produced one from his sleeve, dipped in fresh blue ink, "—and sign here, here, and here, we can get on with the festivities."

Shopkeeper Púca nodded, solemn. "It's a fine pen, that. Family heirloom. Don't chew the end, if you can help it."

Jen took the pen, scanning the page for anything familiar. Most of it was gibberish: references to the Town Founders, "pursuant to the First Law of Equitable Trade," a clause about proper storage of "sentient gemstones," and a promise to "never knowingly slander the quality of Púca wares, even under duress or at knife-point." The lines for her signature were underlined in bold.

She signed, as quickly as possible. The Púca exchanged glances, then let out a cheer loud enough to rattle the shop's new glass.

"In you go!" Shopkeeper Púca said, unhooking the ribbon and holding the door wide.

Inside, the shop was a miracle of architecture and misdirection: display cases lined every surface, each more overloaded than the last, with rows of glittering trinkets, pendants, rings, and objects so beautifully pointless they might have been invented just for the pleasure of showing them off. At the back of the shop, a ladder rose to a second level that hadn't existed yesterday.

The Advocate followed Jen inside, beaming with pride. "We've the largest selection of gems this side of the river, and if it's not gems you're after, we can set you up with clocks, lockets, or a timepiece so accurate it tells the future."

Shopkeeper Púca reappeared behind the counter, already polishing a monocle. "You're our very first customer," he said, "so everything's half off, except the things that aren't."

Jen wandered the cases, letting the colors and the light overload her eyes. She was less interested in the jewelry than in the feeling of the place: it had a heartbeat, a pulse, as if every bauble and chain vibrated with its own tiny magic.

At the end of the counter, she spotted a brooch shaped like a star, inlaid with a chip of stone the color of midnight. She picked it up, feeling its weight and the odd tingle that ran up her fingers.

"That's a good one," the Shopkeeper said. "Lapis from the mountains. No two are alike."

Jen nodded, then set it down. "Thanks. I was just looking."

The Advocate Púca laughed. "No one ever leaves with just a look, miss. Not in this shop."

She left a minute later, nothing in her pockets but the memory of the star and the faint scent of new wood and ink. Outside, the green was brighter than before, the sky so blue it almost hurt.

As she walked back toward the Claw, Jen realized that, for the first time all day, her mind was quiet.

No violence, no riddles, no mysteries she had to solve right this minute.

Just a shop, a star, and a town that—against all reason—kept growing.

The Broken Claw was half-empty, the regulars sleeping off last night's beer. Sam leaned on the bar, reading a paper so old the news was mostly history, but she looked up when Jen came in.

"Did you try the new jewelry shop?" Sam asked, eyes twinkling.

Jen smiled, a real one. "Maybe."

Sam poured her a mug, set it down with a nod. "Here's to surviving another sennight."

Jen raised the mug. "And to next time, when the Púca open a bank or a bakery."

Sam laughed. "Gods help us all."

They drank in silence, the world outside turning quietly on its axis, and for the first time in days, Jen believed that maybe, just maybe, the town would hold.

Even if she didn't understand how.

She was fine with that.

fifteen

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THERE WERE mornings in North Pointe when the only thing you could hear was the sound of your own heart, and for Jen, those were the best kind. This particular morning was one of them—a hush had wrapped the town so tight you’d think every shop and street had promised to let her have a little peace for once.

The sky was already brightening when Jen stepped onto the green, the last tatters of night barely hanging on in the gutters and behind the eaves. The air was cold and dry and sharp enough to clear the fog from a hangover, not that Jen needed it; she’d slept well, for the first time in a good long while. The square was empty, the doors of the shops still shut, no windows leaking lamplight or the smell of breakfast. Most remarkably, the morning was free of the hammering, sawing, and cheerful cursing that usually heralded the Púca’s start-of-day mayhem.

She listened for it—just to be sure—but there was nothing. Not even the usual grumble from Makota’s bakery, where the kits would by now be rolling dough and plotting their escape from kitchen chores. No clatter from the Púca’s jewelry shop, no clinks or shouts from the smithy. The town felt asleep, not just in body, but in spirit—a hibernation.

Jen let the silence wash over her. She looked down at her boots, noting how the dew made dark ovals on the toes, then at the lines her steps left in the grass. She'd done her rounds already, but today she was in no rush to finish. The quiet felt earned.

There had been victories lately. The Sìthe thief—gone, banished by the oldest rules. The mercenaries she'd once called friends had taken their next path, neither as soldiers nor as vagrants but as people with some purpose beyond breaking things. The Púca had slipped into their shopkeeper roles with alarming speed, and—so far—no one had woken to find their socks stolen, their hair dyed, or their pockets picked.

Most important, the town still stood. Some days, that felt like more than enough.

She paused at the edge of the green, hands in her jacket pockets, and took a long, deep breath. The air held the faintest hint of wood smoke, but mostly it tasted of cold and stone and the memory of river water. She let it fill her, then exhaled slow. No need to hurry.

On the far side of the green, Knodalon sat on his usual bench, as still and unbothered as the moss that grew beneath it. His hair and beard seemed to gather the sun, so bright they nearly hurt to look at in the new light. He watched the square with the patience of a glacier, eyes as unreadable as ever.

Jen nodded in his direction. He gave a single blink—less than a nod, more than a nothing. She could never tell if he was amused, or just letting the world flow around him. Maybe both.

She walked the perimeter of the square, tracing the route she'd worn into the earth over the years. Every door still closed, every window dark, not a sound but the distant cough of a waterbird from the lake. If there were travelers stirring, they were doing so with respect for the quiet, and for that, Jen was grateful.

As she reached the midpoint, she let herself dwell on the only thing left undone. The town had healed, more or less, but one piece of business stuck in her mind like a splinter: the Mountain Elf and his restaurant.

She'd tried to ignore it, hoping he'd fade into the background like so many of the oddballs that passed through North Pointe. But Llewel

was not the fading kind. He was a stone in the river, and the current bent around him. The stories that swirled about his place—the way travelers went in and came out changed, or didn't come out at all—had grown louder, not softer, since the Sìthe had been dealt with.

It didn't help that she couldn't pin down why it bothered her. Maybe it was the way he looked at people, like he already knew the measure of them. Or maybe it was the way he never seemed surprised, not even by the town's oddest happenings. Or maybe, she thought, it was that he reminded her of herself: hard to impress, harder to fool, and impossible to move unless you wanted to be.

Jen scuffed the toe of her boot against a stone and glanced up at the sky. The sunrise had hit its stride, turning the pale east into a kind of gold that made every surface shine. A fresh wind skimmed across the green, ruffling her hair and slicing through her coat.

She stopped, squared her stance, and let her gaze drift to the restaurant's sign, which—true to form—caught the sunlight like it had been waiting for this exact moment. She could see her reflection in it, small and a little tired, but standing straight and not about to quit.

"Fine," she said aloud, startling a bird from the eaves above. "Let's get this over with."

She straightened her badge, flicked a smudge from its edge, and squared her shoulders. She'd face the Mountain Elf, and if it turned out he was up to no good, she'd deal with it like everything else: directly, and with as much mercy as the law allowed.

On her way, she passed Knodalon, who, for once, spoke first. "It will be a good day," he said, voice like a slow river. "If you let it."

Jen grinned. "That's the plan."

He nodded, closed his eyes again, and let the sunlight soak in.

Jen took another breath, filled her lungs with the morning, and headed toward the one puzzle she still didn't have a solution for.

The day, she decided, could start now.

She marched herself up to the restaurant's threshold, braced for a duel of words or wits, whichever Llewel fancied. The sign above the lintel

still had no name, only a deep-carved glyph that caught the morning's sun and split it in two.

The glass door was so clean she nearly walked straight through it. She rapped once, sharp and decisive, then squared her boots and waited.

The Mountain Elf opened the door before the echo faded, as if he'd been standing just on the other side. He filled the frame with a kind of stillness she'd never seen in a living thing. He stood tall and straight, but his presence wasn't heavy; it was cold, like a wind off the ridge. The light poured over his skin, making it glow faintly, and his eyes—so dark a blue they seemed black—fixed on her with polite, almost clinical interest.

"Constable," he said, and she didn't miss the tiny emphasis he gave the word. She realized, suddenly, that he knew exactly why she'd come.

"Llewel," she replied, voice even. "I have a concern."

He gestured her in, and she stepped past him, keeping her posture loose but ready. Inside, the restaurant was stripped of all pretense: every surface was white or gray, the tables set with nothing but a single glass and a folded napkin. The room felt wider than it was, as if the world's noise had been shut out and only the essentials remained.

He walked ahead, beckoning her to a table, but she shook her head. "I'd rather stand."

Llewel regarded her for a moment, then let the silence settle. When he spoke, the words fell into the quiet like stones in a well.

"Speak your concern."

Jen took a breath. "People come here, and some of them don't come out. Or if they do, they're... not the same. The stories are running ahead of the facts, and that's never good for a town like this."

He waited. He did not interrupt, or fidget, or do any of the things that usually gave people away.

She pushed on. "I'm not here to ask if you're dangerous. I'm here to ask what you are. Because I won't have people afraid to walk the green, or to eat a meal in peace."

He dipped his chin, an acknowledgement. "Understood."

She eyed him, weighing the next part. "I'm not after a grand

confession. But I would like to know what you intend, so I can answer when the questions come."

Llewel did not smile, but there was a faint softening around his mouth. "I do not intend to harm."

Jen waited. She'd spent enough years running men at arms and chasing off trouble to know that everyone thought harm was something you did on purpose. Sometimes, it was just something you left in your wake.

He seemed to read the thought off her face. "I intend to offer what I have. Nothing more."

She snorted. "And what is that, exactly?"

He considered. "A place between."

She squinted. "Between what?"

"Between where you were and where you might be. Some guests leave as they arrived. Some... do not."

She folded her arms, feeling the weight of the conversation settle in her ribs. "People like a safe place to stand, Llewel. Not a trapdoor."

He nodded again. "I will make that clear. If you wish, I will post a sign."

Jen almost laughed, but it wasn't funny. "That would help. This town likes its warnings in plain sight."

He inclined his head, and for a moment, the silence stretched too far. Then he moved, so fast and silent she barely saw it, into the back room. She heard the scratch of pen on paper, the click of a stamp, then the door swung open and Llewel stepped out, a parchment in hand.

He walked past her, opened the front door, and affixed the notice to the wall beside the entryway. Then he stood back, arms folded, and regarded his own handiwork.

Jen read it from the threshold. The handwriting was precise, the language formal:

DINERS BE ADVISED: THIS ESTABLISHMENT SERVES ONLY THOSE WHO REQUIRE A FINAL MEAL. ENTRY AT OWN RISK. FAREWELLS ARE FINAL.

It was the kind of thing that, in another town, would have been a threat or a joke. Here, it was just another warning on another door.

Before she could respond, a voice rang across the square.

"Is this a funeral, or did I miss the brawl?" Sam, hair still wet from a hurried wash, strode toward them with her usual air of rough authority. Behind her, Vamir drifted in the same direction, eyes bright with curiosity and worry.

Sam sized up the situation, then planted herself next to Jen, eyeing the sign. "That's... direct," she said, lips curling. "Care to explain, Mountain Elf?"

Vamir peered at the notice, then at Llewel. "Final meal, you say?" His voice was polite, but the question was razor-sharp.

Llewel didn't blink. "Yes."

Sam looked to Jen, then back to Llewel. "Is this about Piotr?" Her voice dropped lower, barely more than a whisper. "Because if you've done something to that boy, you're in for a world of pain."

Llewel's face didn't move, but his eyes did—down, then up again. "He is well. He spoke to you before her left, did he not?"

Vamir shook his head. "He was not the same, though."

"No," Llewel agreed. "He left different."

Sam's hand hovered near her belt, where Nailbiter's hilt rode invisible and blameless. "Different how?"

Llewel glanced at her, then at Jen. "As yourself, Constable, different from the soldier who once rode to burn down a city, so is he different from the boy who came to my table."

Vamir made a small noise, like he'd swallowed a laugh. "It's a threshold."

Llewel nodded.

Sam chewed the inside of her cheek, then said, "And if someone wants to cross back?"

He met her gaze. "That's not my work. Besides, do any of us ever truly turn back?"

Jen watched the exchange, feeling the ice in her chest thaw by a degree. "So you're not keeping people. You're... changing them?"

Llewel's voice was almost kind. "Only if they choose it. I do not persuade. Truthfully... they change themselves. I merely help them commemorate the decision."

Sam let out a breath, long and low. "That's a weird sort of restaurant you're running."

Llewl said nothing.

Vamir, ever the scholar, leaned in. "How many will you serve?"

Llewl considered. "Not many. It is a rare hunger."

Jen felt herself relax, just a little. She eyed Llewl, trying to read the man behind the legend. There was nothing there but the certainty of someone who'd found his purpose and would not budge.

She nodded, then offered her hand. "If you do anything else—if anyone vanishes, if you start serving more than you say—I'll be back."

He took her hand, grip cool and firm. "Understood."

Sam and Vamir looked at each other, then at the sign.

"Want to get breakfast?" Sam said, a note of forced cheer in her voice.

Jen nodded, glancing at Llewl. "Do you eat your own food?"

He tilted his head, faint amusement glinting in his eyes. "No."

She grinned. "I'll stick to Makota's, then."

As the three of them walked away, Jen looked over her shoulder. Llewl stood in his doorway, hands behind his back, watching the sunrise creep over the roofs. He seemed at ease, as if this outcome had been inevitable from the start.

"Constable," he said suddenly. His tone was still soft and level, but it carried easily.

Jen turned.

"I was wondering if I might... do business, here. Meats, vegetables. Pastries."

"Where *does* your food come from?" Sam asked.

The elf shrugged. "It seems to appear in the larder."

Sam grinned. "That fits."

"But you need more?" Jen asked.

Llewl nodded slowly. "I sense that I might. It is... difficult to explain. But also... if I am to be here, I would like to *be* here."

Jen stared into the elf's cool blue eyes, and nodded. "Agreed. And I think we would like that as well. And, of course. Dardrad's the butcher. Makota runs the bakery. Cole has the grocery, and you've met Alred, if you need any dry goods. And... do you ever cook non-final meals?"

A whisper of a smile played at the elf's lips. "I might bend myself to it."

"Let me know."

"Thank you. I shall." Llewel stepped back into his restaurant, but he left the door open.

Vamir caught her look. "Do you believe him?"

Jen shrugged. "For now. But I'll keep an eye on the door."

Sam grinned. "That's my girl."

They reached the bakery, and the world warmed a little with the smell of fresh bread and the chatter of Makota's kits. For the first time in a long while, Jen felt like the morning might go on without disaster.

The sign on Llewel's restaurant caught the sun, throwing a clean, blue light across the square. No secrets, just the truth—if you cared to read it.

Jen decided she liked that just fine.

They hung around outside the bakery for a while, Sam leaning into the shade of a porch post, Vamir standing off to one side, hands folded and eyes unreadable behind a wall of elven calm. Across the green, the restaurant's warning sign still glinted, but nobody seemed in a hurry to approach it. The tension of the morning had bled away, leaving in its place the dull thrum of business as usual.

"Glad you're not making trouble, Jen," Sam said, reaching for a sticky bun the size of her fist. "I was worried I'd have to break up a real fight for once." She chomped down, then continued, mouth half full. "So that place isn't going to put Minnie out of business? Feels like a win."

Jen snorted. "Not unless people start lining up to change their whole lives over soup. Minnie's safe."

Sam finished her bun, licked her fingers, and said, "Still. A town with a real Mountain Elf. Means you'll be written up in the travel books for sure."

Vamir, who'd stayed quiet, finally spoke. "I've lived through six towns and three wars. Never seen a Mountain Elf in a market square

before." He stroked his chin, then added, "Let alone serving as a... what, a gatekeeper? An officiant of change?"

Jen considered that. "If he's making sure people leave different, maybe he's more therapist than chef."

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "You think the food is just a... a prop?"

Vamir smiled, eyes shining. "In the old traditions, a meal marks the border between what was and what will be. Even the bread and salt of an inn's table says: you're not who you were when you sat down."

Jen thought about Piotr—how the man had left looking lighter, like he'd shrugged off a pack he'd carried for years. "He's not a bad sort," she said. "Just... makes you honest with yourself."

Sam gave a low whistle. "That would ruin half the travelers coming through here."

"Maybe that's the point," Vamir mused. "Some places prepare you for the road. Others, for what waits at the end of it."

Jen laughed. "Now who's the philosopher?"

Vamir inclined his head. "Every shop in this town has a story. We just got a new one, is all."

They drifted to silence, watching as the first travelers of the day wandered the green: a pair of fishmongers, a woman with three children in tow, a cloaked stranger trailing dust and rumors behind her. No one gave more than a glance at the restaurant's sign. Most just walked past, on their way to the next safe place.

It was Llewel who broke the spell. He crossed the green, gliding with that mountain-bred grace, and stopped a respectful distance away. "May I speak?" he said, voice pitched for diplomacy.

Sam shrugged. "Why not? You've already unsettled us once today."

Llewel nodded, accepting the jab, and faced Jen. "I would like to order some of those supplies."

Jen blinked. "Food?"

"From all who provide," he said, and produced a thin sheet of paper—white as fresh snow, covered in neat script. "Butcher, baker, grocer, brewer. I pay in advance. Nothing is wasted."

Sam grinned. "So you *are* trying to fit in. Smart. Although... we

don't generally exchange coin, between us. And we all pool our money for what we can't supply ourselves."

Vamir took the list, scanned it, and raised a brow. "Nothing unusual here. I can vouch for Galhani's teas."

Llewel gave a half-bow. "Thank you. And... I am agreeable to sharing in the town's finances. As I told you before, Constable, money is not my end here." He started to leave, then paused. "I will not take customers from any other house. My own tradition forbids it."

Jen felt a smile tug at her mouth. "You know that's going to make people want it more."

Llewel's lips curled in what might have been a smile. "Only those who need it will come. That is enough."

He left then, melting back into the pale light of midmorning, and the square seemed to fill up with life again: children chasing each other, merchants bickering, Makota's kits rolling hoops in the dust.

Sam watched the elf's retreat, then cocked her head at Jen. "Still want to keep watch on him?"

Jen shrugged. "Maybe. But I think he's more warning than threat."

Vamir folded his hands, thoughtful. "Sometimes the warning is the gift."

They stood together for a minute, letting the day settle into its ordinary shape. Sam, growing restless, made her excuses and went back to the Claw. Vamir, after a few words about ancient customs and the futility of fighting change, wandered off toward the bookshop.

Jen crossed to the edge of the green, where Knodalon still held his bench. He looked up as she approached, eyes bright beneath his thatch of white hair.

"You see all that?" she asked, nodding at the restaurant.

He shrugged, a motion so minimal it barely disturbed the air. "Nothing new. Towns change. People change. The wind changes."

Jen grinned, then dropped onto the bench beside him, boots stretched out before her. "Still don't know which one closes the icosagon, do you?"

Knodalon shook his head. "Nope."

They sat in companionable silence, watching the town breathe and shift as the sun crawled higher. The only noise was the faint music of a

lute from somewhere on the far side of the square and the occasional bark of a vendor haggling over turnips.

For a little while, there was nothing to solve, nothing to fix. Just a town doing what it did best: preparing people for the next leg of their journey, whether they knew it or not.

Jen let herself enjoy it. Not forever—nothing was—but for now, it was enough.

And when the next puzzle came, she'd be ready.

sixteen

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THE NEXT MORNING, the noise remained gone.

Jen found it amusing: the construction noise had gone on less than a fortnight, but it had become almost a citizen of the town, notable for its absence. The usual dawn chorus—wood pigeons, bakery clatter, a far-off dog—echoed louder than ever, as if all of North Pointe was recalibrating to the absence of a familiar, persistent racket. The town's new jewelry shop, lately the source of so much hammering, had lapsed into a hush so complete that even the bakery kits stopped mid-hoop to stare at its polished windows.

Sam met Jen by the water trough, face set and jaw determined. She wore her hair tied up in the "intimidate at first glance" style, and her stride had the careful precision of someone determined not to lose an argument—no matter the opponent's height.

"I suppose we just knock?" Sam said, after a moment's mutual glare at the shop's facade.

Jen shrugged, straightening her badge. "Better than breaking the door down. And whichever one it was I spoke to last *did* say it'd be today. I think."

"You think?"

"He said a *lot*."

They crossed the green together, boots loud on the flagstones. The sign above the door—Púcagems—gleamed, the glass below it so spotless Jen caught a glimpse of her own skeptical face as she approached.

She rapped three times, sharp and official.

There was a delay, then a scuffle behind the door. The lock disengaged with a metallic flourish, and the door opened to a slit, revealing the world's most serious Púca. His white beard was trimmed military-short, and his ears stuck out at such an aggressive angle it looked like he was built for aerodynamic stonewalling.

"Top of the morning to ye," he said, but there was no twinkle in his voice.

Jen inclined her head. "Constable Darne. I need to inspect the premises for compliance with market regulations."

The Púca braced his feet, all six inches of them, and leveled a gaze so hard it nearly stopped Sam's scowl in its tracks. "I regret to inform ye, Miss Constable, that we're not accepting visitors at this time. Shop's still in shakedown, y'see, and the insurance policy doesn't cover accidents prior to the ceremonial ribbon-cutting, as specified in the Founders' Charter, Section Eight, Clause Niner-Three."

Sam leaned in. "You built a jewelry shop in under a fortnight, and now you're worried about accidents?"

"We don't have a Founders' Charter," Jen said in nearly the same breath.

"Not worried, per se," the Púca said. "Just... diligent. Risk management is the root of all prosperity." He gave Jen a piercing glare. "And ye really *ought*, you know."

He started to close the door, but Jen wedged her boot in the gap. "We're not visitors, we're the inspection team. Mandatory for all new businesses. Especially the ones that used to house wild animals."

"Aye, we signed that form. Yesterday." The Púca produced a parchment, initialed and dated in five colors of ink, from an interior pocket.

Sam snatched it. "Inspection's scheduled for today." She handed the paper to Jen.

"I've never even seen this form. We don't even *have* forms."

"Aye, but only after noon bell," said the Púca, a smile flickering at the corners of his mouth. "Can't violate the Statute of Early Bells. Page

two, second paragraph.” He glared at Jen again. “And ye really *ought*,” he added reproachfully.

Jen flipped to the page. Sure enough, the clause was there, highlighted in yellow and footnoted with a citation of a previous incident involving a bakery and a mold outbreak. She handed it back, defeated for now. “We’ll be back.”

“Grand,” the Púca said, “and thank ye for yer civic-mindedness. See you at the bell.”

He closed the door with a gentle click.

Sam chuckled under her breath.

“Can’t argue with bureaucracy,” Jen grinned. “That’s why they invented swords.”

“Sure, but they *invented* this bureaucracy.”

They retreated to the bakery, where Makota was pulling cinnamon rolls from the oven, each as big as a Púca’s head and twice as aromatic. She plopped a pan on the counter and eyed them both.

“Inspection fail?” Makota asked, tongue poking out as she slid rolls onto a cooling rack.

Jen explained the situation. Makota’s tail lashed the air with indignation. “This is ridiculous. My kits are terrified to even walk past that door. The first one who opens it is going to get a face full of glitter and a sales pitch.”

Sam, already devouring a roll, muttered, “We should just smoke them out. Like stoats in a woodpile.”

Makota grinned. “Or lure them out with pastries. I’ll bet they can’t resist baked goods any more than the last batch of shopkeepers.”

“Worth a try,” Jen said. “But be subtle.”

Makota was not, by temperament, a subtle woman. She loaded a basket with a dozen assorted rolls, then crossed the square like a siege engineer advancing a battering ram. Sam and Jen followed at a distance, careful to look casual.

Makota rapped on the shop door. There was a shuffle and a pause, then the top half of the door swung open—revealing a new Púca, this one with round spectacles and a shock of white hair that stood straight up, as if he’d stuck his finger in a live wire.

"Good morning to you, neighbor!" Makota said, holding the basket high. "Fresh from the oven. Housewarming gift."

The Púca inhaled, nostrils flaring. "That's kind of ya, miss. But I must point ya to Dietician Púca for all things food-related. Regulations, y'know."

A third Púca appeared, even smaller than the others, with a clipboard nearly as tall as himself and a badge stitched to his lapel: DIETICIAN PÚCA. He eyed the rolls, then drew a magnifying lens from his vest and peered through it.

"These are pastries," he said, pronouncing each syllable with surgical precision.

"Best in town," Makota beamed.

"High glycemic index, so it is," Dietician Púca noted, scribbling something on his clipboard. "Not the best for gettin' a good start to the mornin'. But fair play to ya for tryin'. We'll pass along the donation to the staff members who aren't as fussed about that sorta thing."

He handed the basket back, untouched.

Makota blinked. "I've been rejected by a food critic no taller than my kneecap."

"Don't take it personal," Jen said. "He didn't even eat the sample."

Sam studied the door, then shrugged. "If this keeps up, I'm going to open a competing shop selling nothing but pastries and elbows."

They retreated to the bakery porch, rolls in hand, to regroup.

Across the square, Vamir glided up, bright-eyed and curious. "How fares the jewelry negotiation?" he asked.

"Stonewalled," Jen said.

Makota grunted. "With literal stones."

Vamir smiled, undeterred. "Mind if I try a scholarly approach? Sometimes a gentle word unlocks more than a hammer."

"Knock yourself out," Jen said.

Vamir approached the door, smoothing his tunic, and knocked softly. The door opened just enough to reveal a Púca with a long, thin mustache and a set of academic robes stitched from piebald velvet. He wore a pince-nez, which he polished as Vamir introduced himself.

"Forest Elf Scholar, first order," Vamir said, with a gracious tilt of

the head. "I wondered if I might observe your operations for academic purposes."

The Púca's eyes lit up. "Ye'll be wanting Scholar Púca, then. One moment."

The academic Púca vanished, replaced in seconds by another, nearly identical except for the color of his sash, which was now a deep blue. "Scholar Púca, at your service."

Vamir nodded. "A pleasure. I was curious about the construction techniques you used to transform the menagerie overnight. I have theories, but would love to hear yours."

Scholar Púca adjusted his pince-nez. "Ah sure, 'tis a fascinatin' subject. The answer's plain enough, though: modular tessellation of composite beams, interlocked with me own Púca adhesives, and naturally, the knack of squishin' down temporal labor into handy wee bits with dimensionality reduction."

Vamir's brow furrowed, but he pressed on. "So the walls are... laminated?"

"In a way, so," Scholar Púca said. "But the real secret is in how the subfloor's held together with resonance. Without that, even the finest work would give way by the third sennight. Would ya like a bit of a report on it?"

Vamir hesitated, then nodded. Scholar Púca produced a stack of documents nearly as tall as himself and passed it through the door, accompanied by a small ink pot and a feathered quill.

Jen watched as Vamir took the papers, a stunned look on his face.

"Anything useful?" Sam called.

Vamir shuffled the top page. "It's written in triplicate, in three different dialects. And I think two of them are made up."

"Points for thoroughness," Makota said.

The shop door closed with a final, confident click, leaving the square in absolute silence.

"Huh." Still holding a pastry, Jen wandered out the town gate, Sam in tow. It was then that she noticed the real oddity of the morning. Across the square, Llewel's restaurant gleamed, clean and open. But in the entire morning, not a single customer had entered or exited that

she had seen. She watched the glass, waiting for a sign of movement, but saw nothing.

Sam followed her gaze. "Think he's still in there?"

Jen nodded. "Probably reorganizing the silverware. Or summoning up a fresh batch of ice. He said he wouldn't get much custom."

A traveler walked up the road—a young woman, coat caked with road dust, boots laced to the knee. She made straight for the restaurant, glancing neither left nor right, and let herself in without hesitation.

"Maybe she's looking for a final meal," Makota said.

They watched. For a long time, nothing happened. Then, just as the sun rose above the green, the door opened again. The woman was gone, but the sign in the window—DINERS BE ADVISED—gleamed with fresh ink.

Vamir, returning with his arms full of Púca literature, sat beside Jen. "Which do you think it will be?" he asked. "The jewelry shop, or the restaurant?"

"What?" Jen said.

"Which will be the next Icosagon shop? That's the only reason either would open so fast, with so much secrecy. The town's waiting."

Jen thought about the way both shops operated: the Púca, all polish and procedure, and the restaurant, all silence and waiting. She wasn't sure which made her more nervous.

Sam voiced it first. "It'll be the jewelry shop. I bet the Icosagon loves a new business that runs on paperwork and arguments."

Makota snorted. "But the restaurant's got the mountain pedigree. Plus, rumor is he does his own dishes."

"Doesn't matter," Jen said. "Town will pick what it needs, not what makes sense."

They watched the shops, the sky, the green. The entire place seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for someone—anyone—to make the next move.

For the rest of the morning, nothing did.

But Jen had a feeling it wouldn't stay that way for long.

At precisely midday, the bells on the green tolled in unison, but nobody heard them. The whole town was too busy recoiling from the sonic assault that exploded out of the Púca's jewelry shop.

It started with a trumpet—a real trumpet, or at least an instrument that convincingly impersonated one, complete with the wheezing of old leather and a half-step slide that threatened to spill into a drinking song at any second. Then came the drums, which Jen could swear were being played with spoons, and a choir of at least a dozen Púca, all singing the same note but in different octaves, so it sounded less like music and more like a flock of migratory geese in a hurry.

The fanfare lasted just long enough for every head in town to poke out of every window, and then, at the peak of its volume, it stopped dead. The silence after was so total, Jen thought her ears might have broken.

The effect was immediate: every shopkeeper on the square dropped what they were doing, every child and every loaf of bread froze in midair, and even the geese overhead dipped their wings to get a better look.

Then the door to the jewelry shop burst open and out strode a full honor guard of Púca, six strong. They wore matching sashes of gold and green, with hats feathered to such a height that Jen wondered how they hadn't toppled over. At their center walked Papa Púca himself, all grandeur and confidence, a pair of golden scissors as long as his own leg cradled in both hands.

A red ribbon—no one had seen it there before—spanned the entryway. The Púca lined up on either side, hats at a salute, and Papa Púca hopped onto a stool placed exactly at center stage.

He cleared his throat, and the hush that settled over the green could have blanketed a much larger city.

"Ladies and Gentlefolk, an' all who pass through North Pointe," he intoned, projecting like a man born for podiums, "on behalf of the whole Púca Guild and the generous spirits of our new home, we declare the Grand Openin' of Púcagems! Finest jewels, treasures, and oddments this side of the Far Blue! May your hearts be light, your fortunes grand, and your purses—" here he paused, raising the scissors to the sky "—never empty!"

He snipped the ribbon with a single, authoritative snap. The crowd cheered, the Púca hats flung skyward and landed with uncanny precision back on the owners' heads, and the doors of the shop yawned open in welcome.

Jen looked at Sam. Sam looked at Jen. Both nodded, and then the crowd surged forward, propelled by a decade's worth of pent-up curiosity and, in Sam's case, a deep and abiding need to see what a Púca considered valuable.

Inside, the shop glowed. Not glowed like a bakery at dawn, or a tavern on payday, but glowed like a jewelry shop designed by people who'd only read about jewelry shops in picture books. Every case sparkled, every shelf gleamed. There were gold chains in every thickness, rings set with stones in every hue and size, brooches shaped like frogs, birds, stars, and even—Jen spotted with a mixture of horror and respect—a perfect miniature of Mayor Simonsdotter's head.

Magical artifacts pulsed gently beneath glass domes: a pocket-watch whose hands spun backward, a comb that braided hair on its own, a single glove that wiggled its fingers when anyone got too close. None of it was dusty. None of it looked remotely affordable.

The floor was polished wood, the walls lined with velvet, and the ceiling hung with a network of tiny glass beads that refracted the light into dizzying little galaxies. It was, objectively, the finest shop the town had ever seen.

The small crowd oohed and aaahed and—once the shock wore off—immediately began haggling. The Púca staff was ready: Assistant Shopkeeper Púca (shorter than the rest, with a nervous tic in his left ear) managed the front counter, cataloging every transaction with a tiny abacus. General Manager Púca (distinguished by a monocle and a tendency to yell “Efficient! Efficient!” at random) handled crowd control. Stockboy Púca zoomed between customers, arms full of velvet trays, never dropping a single ring. Marketer Púca (“You look like a jewelry person!”) had a stack of flyers and a voice that could be heard through stone.

Sam, already two steps ahead, cornered the Marketer. “Are you really keeping this pace up every day?” she said, arms folded, voice skeptical.

Marketer Púca grinned. “Ah sure, even more so, ma’am! We’re havin’ the grand openin’ today, but we’ll be on regular times from tomorrow. We never miss a chime, not even the ones they’ve yet to dream up.”

Sam blinked, impressed despite herself. “You got enough staff?”

A gleam in the Púca’s eye. “If we ever don’t, we’ll just make more!”

Jen’s attention drifted to a display case at the back, where a handful of the town’s elder citizens had gathered, pointing and whispering. Inside were several familiar pieces—old locket, a battered signet ring, even a pair of spectacles Jen recognized from a long-gone town librarian. The plaque read: HISTORICAL ARCHIVE—ON LOAN FROM NORTH POINTE RESIDENTS.

She smiled. Whatever else could be said about the Púca, they knew how to make themselves indispensable.

Near the window, Makota and her kits huddled around a display of animal-shaped pins. One kit pointed at a tiny silver badger and immediately burst into tears. Makota scooped the kit up, muttering, “Not everything needs to be so shiny. You’ll blind yourself.”

Vamir stood at a central case, examining a gem the size of a robin’s egg. Scholar Púca, who’d stumped him earlier, hovered at his elbow, spooling off a lecture about refraction and magical resonance that left Vamir visibly cross-eyed.

At the center of it all, Papa Púca strolled the aisles, greeting customers, shaking hands, occasionally demonstrating a product with such flourish that the entire room would stop to watch. At one point, he set a tiara on Jen’s head, pronounced her “Queen of the Square” for the next two minutes, and then whisked the crown away again before she could object.

After a while, the energy of the crowd shifted from riotous to festive. The townsfolk mingled, the Púca worked their magic, and a constant ribbon of travelers and curiosity-seekers flowed in and out of the door. The place was, by all measures, a hit.

Jen retreated to the edge of the shop, where Sam joined her with a glass of punch from the refreshment table. “Well?” Sam said. “Still worried?”

Jen shook her head. "It's better than I thought. Not dangerous, just... fast."

Sam smirked. "You saying you can't keep up with a Púca?"

Jen grinned. "No one can. That's half the fun."

They watched as the shop continued its opening, the flow of people never quite thinning, the Púca never quite running out of enthusiasm.

Outside, the sun had moved past its zenith, and the town green shimmered with reflected light. Jen looked at the new shop, at the people streaming in and out, and felt the deep, satisfying click of a puzzle piece sliding into place.

The Icosagon was whole again.

She didn't know what the future would bring, but for now, North Pointe was safe. As safe as it ever got, anyway.

And that, she decided, was worth celebrating.

By evening, the Broken Claw was a cathedral of relief. Lamps glowed behind fogged glass, the air thick with the scent of yeast, charred oak, and the unmistakable tang of new money. The din was all laughter, retelling, and the clatter of mugs on wood. Every table on the main floor was crowded, each group reliving the events of the day from a dozen angles, but the one nearest the hearth hosted the highest concentration of authority North Pointe had ever managed to assemble.

Sam and Jen arrived last, finding Leota already parked at the head of the table, a tiny glass of clear liquid set before her, the color of which dared anyone to guess its origins. Alred and Vamir were in mid-argument about the acceptable ratio of gold to silver in a brooch, and both paused only long enough to wave them over.

"There she is," said Alred, half-standing in the way Plains Elves did when feeling particularly hospitable. He gestured to the seat at his right. "Come, sit. We're only up to the third retelling."

Vamir, ever the academic, was less interested in repetition than in accuracy. "I'm trying to reconstruct the shop's interior from memory,

and Alred insists there were at least nine different types of display case."

"Ten," Alred corrected. "You missed the tall case in the back."

"Counting the one with the frog brooches?" Vamir asked.

"Obviously," Alred replied, as if there was no greater certainty in the world.

Leota sipped her drink, eyes bright and unreadable. "The frog was good," she said. "But the hair-combing one? That'll sell out by the fortnight."

Sam slid into the far seat, poured herself a mug of the house's second-best and took a long pull. "The whole town's obsessed," she said. "I saw three travelers turn around at the green just so they could try on tiaras."

Jen accepted her own mug from Sam, then glanced at Leota. "You feel it?"

Leota nodded, slow. "The circuit is closed. The jewelry shop fills the space left by the old menagerie, but does the job better. No noise, no smell. The whole town's magic is balanced again."

She picked up a toothpick, drew an invisible pattern in a spill of ale, and said, "It's like losing a tooth as a child. The gap's strange for a while, but when the new one grows in, everything fits."

Vamir considered that, then turned to Alred. "You agree?"

Alred's gaze shifted, his face still open and friendly, but his eyes tracking something through the window, beyond the glass. "Yes," he said, "the magic's steady. Travelers can feel it, too. Watch: tomorrow the road'll be busy again, like nothing ever happened."

Sam grinned. "You make it sound like the shops run the town, not us."

"Who says they don't?" Alred replied.

Jen propped her boots on a crossbar, feeling the warmth from the fire soak through her shins. "What about the restaurant?" she asked. "Everyone keeps talking about the jewelry shop, but the Mountain Elf's place is still open."

Leota's smile was thin but real. "That's different. The Icosagon needs twenty shops for the full circuit—no more, no less. The restaurant is... an extra. A bonus. A luxury, not a necessity."

"Like a spare tooth," Vamir offered, deadpan.

Sam choked on her drink.

They all laughed, even Leota, and for a moment the world felt smaller, safer, and less likely to tip over from any single new arrival.

Jen watched the hearth for a while, letting the conversation float around her. Makota's kits ran through the tables, refilling mugs and scattering crumbs; the sound of the Púca's trumpets still lingered in the air, and every so often a regular would stagger in, glitter on their shirt, a new story to tell.

She caught Alred's eye as he glanced again at the window, and she leaned close enough that only he could hear her. "What are you looking for?"

Alred shook his head. "Nothing. Or... maybe I'm just not used to everything being quiet. It's good, though. It's better."

He raised his mug in silent toast, and Jen mirrored the gesture.

Leota waited for a lull, then addressed the whole table. "You all know the story, now," she said. "It's done. There won't be any more—" she searched for a word, "—adjustments, for a while. The Icosagon is happy. So am I."

Sam rolled her eyes, but there was affection behind it. "What about the next time the Púca decide to open a shop in the middle of the night?"

Leota grinned. "We'll let the circuit sort it out."

Vamir nodded. "Or we can just let Sam try to break down the door again."

Sam clinked her mug to his. "I will. Don't doubt it."

From the window, the light of the new shop glowed like a beacon, and even at this late 'mark, the silhouette of Papa Púca could be seen on the stoop, gesturing wildly as he ushered in a group of travelers. The shop's windows caught the moonlight and threw it back in a hundred colors.

At their table, the conversation drifted, softer now, more about who had bought what and less about how or why it worked. At one point, Vamir pulled a slip of paper from his sleeve and, with great solemnity, read aloud the first five items from Llewel's latest supply order: root

vegetables, salt, lamp oil, two pounds of yeast, and “whatever tea Makota recommends for digestion.”

Sam listened, then shrugged. “That’s the least exciting shopping list I’ve ever heard.”

Jen smiled. “Maybe he’s trying to fit in.”

“Or maybe,” Leota said, “he just wants to be left alone.”

They pondered that in companionable silence.

As the Claw’s fire burned low, and the last of the bread gave up its steam, Jen looked around the table and felt a kind of certainty settle into her bones.

North Pointe was whole again. Strange and sometimes inconvenient, but always whole.

She leaned back, eyes half-closed, and let the comfort of it carry her toward the end of the night.

When the first bell of morning sounded, Jen was still at the table, half-listening to Sam and Makota plot out tomorrow’s breakfast specials. She watched as the jewelry shop’s lights dimmed, and the green outside returned to its usual peace.

She thought, briefly, of the Mountain Elf, and wondered if he ever felt like he belonged anywhere.

But then the warmth of the Claw, and the sound of friends, made the question feel less urgent.

For the moment, everything fit.

Even the extra tooth.

seventeen

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AT THE TOLL of the second bell, North Pointe's west gate rattled in its frame, and the air outside it vibrated with a show of force so deliberate it nearly passed for parody. Ten men and women in crisp livery—dark blue with silver piping and identical brass buttons—marched in a double file behind a man whose wig alone looked heavy enough to earn him an extra set of shoulders. The Trade Commissioner had returned, and he'd brought an army. Or, at least, the closest thing the world's most inconsequential bureaucracy could muster.

Jen watched the procession from next to Knodalon's bench. Hellsting rode her wrist in bracelet form, its band cool and smooth against her skin. She'd been enjoying a late breakfast—a hard-boiled egg and a heel of bread, neither of which quite lived up to Makota's standards—when the commotion started up the road. She took her time finishing both, then wiped her fingers on her jacket and walked toward them to catch the first volley of insults and self-importance that usually preceded a diplomatic incident.

The guards were young and, by Jen's reckoning, a day out of training. They moved in lockstep, but the fear in their eyes was naked. They'd never seen an ogre up close, let alone tried to cuff one, and

there was one now, leaning on the door frame of the smithy, watching them with an amused expression. Still, orders were orders.

At the town gate, the Commissioner himself made a dramatic sweep of his arm and presented a scroll so thickly sealed in wax and ribbon it looked more like a torch than a letter. "Open in the name of the Freehold!" he bellowed, as if the walls themselves would part out of pure deference.

Jen smirked. "It's not even close. It almost never is."

He looked at her, annoyed to find the town constable already on post. "We're here on official business," he shouted, but the wind ate half his words and flung the rest into the weeds.

"Of course," Jen said, forcing her politest smile. "But you can quit yelling. It's not even noon, yet." She gestured to the gate. "Step right in."

The Commissioner took the lead, chin high, eyes on the town proper. He wore a coat so new the cuffs still bled dye onto his wrists, and his hat sat perfectly level even as his mouth pinched tighter with every step. Behind him, the guards split: half kept formation, the others scanned the perimeter for threats, clearly baffled when no one so much as glared at them from the bakery or smithy.

"Constable Darne," the Commissioner said, stopping just shy of the green. "You're aware of the delinquency in your midst?"

Jen considered. "Which one? We get a lot of that. Is it the fishing license issue, or the sign-painting thing?" She let her eyes drift to the scroll in his hand. "Or something new?"

His face reddened, but he composed himself. "The Púca are in violation of lease and contract. They fled their previous obligations and set up shop in your town. I have here—" he shook the scroll, and several ribbons slapped a guard in the face, "—the writ to demand satisfaction, and if necessary, seize their goods for auction."

Jen inspected the guards. Not a one carried more than a truncheon. "You're going to seize a jewelry shop staffed by Púca. With this lot?"

"They are trained," the Commissioner hissed.

"Are they, though?" Jen asked, raising her voice just enough for the guards to hear. "No offense, but the last trained squad that came

through here lost half their gear to a bakery kit and the other half to a stoat."

A few of the guards glanced at each other. One coughed.

She gave the Commissioner her best "let's be civil" face. "Look, I'll take you to them. But if you want a fight, it won't be with me. This town keeps its peace, and that includes the Púca."

He considered objecting, but Jen's tone had the flat finality of a locked door. He sniffed, squared his shoulders, and nodded once.

"Very good," Jen said, and set off across the green. The grass was still wet from the night, and her boots left dark crescents in the sward. The townsfolk had noticed, of course. You couldn't move ten feet in North Pointe without being observed by at least two shopkeepers, a pair of children, and a witch who appeared only when you thought you'd shaken her. The seamstress put down her needle to stare through her shop window. Makota leaned out the bakery door, flour streaking her nose. Even Knodalon, who'd made an art of ignoring the world, swiveled his head to track the line of uniformed strangers.

The Púca shop gleamed at the far side of the green, its windows so clean they shone like a second sun. A sign on the door read: "OPEN. ALL ARGUMENTS ACCEPTED AFTER FIRST BELL." Inside, a pair of Púca stood on matching stools, polishing the day's display. One wore a monocle and a tiny bow tie; the other sported a pair of suspenders that held up nothing, as far as Jen could tell.

She paused at the stoop, turned to the Commissioner. "You want to go in first? Or should I announce you?"

He flapped a hand. "Protocol dictates the aggrieved party make the first approach. I will observe." He straightened his hat.

Jen shrugged, and rapped smartly on the door. The monocled Púca answered, eyeing the Commissioner's retinue with theatrical suspicion. "Ah, Constable! Is it trouble, or is it just the new mornin' already?"

"Bit of both," she said. "You have guests."

The Púca peered past her at the Commissioner. "And what can I do for yer grand self, sir?"

The Commissioner, mustering his best oratory, unscrolled his writ and read: "Be it known, by the authority of the Guild of Urban and

Rural Settlements, that the persons known as Púca—" he glanced at the Púca, unsure whether to pluralize, "—are herewith required to resolve the lease dispute arising in the jurisdiction of Stallingford, and to remit all owed rents and penalties, or surrender their property for lawful seizure."

There was a long silence.

The Púca with the suspenders put a finger to his chin. "Is that all?"

"For now," the Commissioner said, deflating a bit.

The Púca's gaze flickered over the Commissioner, instantly reading his type. "Ah, bureaucracy!" he said, with all the reverence of a man asked to judge a pie-eating contest. "Let me fetch Advocate Púca. It's his passion, y'see."

Jen looked at the guards. A few had begun to shuffle. One stared at a gold-plated frog in the display, transfixed.

From within, a new Púca emerged, this one with spectacles, a robe, and a sheaf of paper nearly as long as himself. "Advocate Púca, at your service. What's the statute?"

The Commissioner gestured with his writ. "Section Four, paragraph seven. Breach of—"

"Ah, now," said Advocate Púca, "that's a fine section, but ye're overlooking the exception in Four-Seven-B, which is invoked any time the offending party acts in service of a greater good, or under the terms of a preexisting curse."

The monocled Púca reappeared, now holding a tray of tiny pastries. "Would you care for a roll?" he asked the nearest guard, who instinctively accepted.

The Commissioner spluttered. "A curse? That's ridiculous."

Advocate Púca clicked his tongue. "Not at all, sir. We have the documentation." He turned to Jen. "Constable, may I present the cursed lease, for the record?"

Jen nodded gravely. "Please do."

The Púca withdrew a single sheet of paper, stamped in three colors and stitched to a page of what looked like actual curse script. "As you can see," he said, holding it up to the light, "the lease was, from inception, doomed to fail under the rule of Seven, which states that no shop can prosper where the landlord is an incorrigible eejit."

The monocled Púca tsked in sympathy. “All too common a problem, these days.”

The Commissioner, cornered, attempted a last stand. “This is a mockery of law. If you do not comply, we will be forced to detain—”

“Ye’ll be wanting General Counsel Púca then.”

Manager Púca zipped away, returning in moments with yet another, even smaller Púca, this one with a leather-bound ledger clutched to his chest. He set it down on a windowsill, climbed onto an upturned crate, and greeted the Commissioner with a nod of supreme self-regard.

“General Counsel Púca, at your disposal,” he intoned, voice deeper than his size allowed. “Are we discussing the Stallingford Case, or has a new action been filed?”

The Commissioner, now less sure of his materials, started to untie the first of the three ribbons binding his writ. “This document—”

But the words vanished in the din. All three Púca—Manager, Advocate, and Counsel—began to volley sentences at him, passing the conversational lead with such speed that it seemed less like an argument and more like the spinning of a single, many-headed mind. Each time the Commissioner tried to interrupt, his words were parried, then incorporated into the next sentence.

“Of course, per the terms of the relocation waiver—”

“—which you’ll note was filed in triplicate and signed by two notaries—”

“—not to mention the extenuating circumstances of the leasehold’s magical instability—”

“—a matter still under review by the regional Arbitration Board, as is our right—”

Jen leaned against the doorframe, arms folded, letting the breeze and the absurdity wash over her. The Civil Guards, arrayed on the stoop and sidewalk, seemed to shrink with every round of legal jargon. Two of them peered into the display window, presumably hoping for a distraction in the form of something shiny or breakable.

The Commissioner, seeing his attack blunted by the sheer force of words, decided to escalate. He finally broke the wax seal with an angry flourish, unrolling the writ for all to see. “This is a valid docu-

ment, authorized by the Guild of Urban and Rural Settlements," he announced, pointing a trembling finger at the crest atop the parchment. "You are compelled to answer these charges and remit all owed rents immediately, or face summary confiscation."

General Counsel Púca squinted at the scroll, then beckoned to a fourth Púca who'd been lurking near the window, dusting glass. "Negotiator Púca, if you'd be so kind?"

Negotiator Púca wore a sash and a small quill behind his ear, and radiated the air of a man who'd settled more bar fights than the Claw had poured beers. "I see what you're getting at, Commissioner, sir," he said, voice so soothing it nearly undid the tension in the whole argument. "But as you can see from the precedent set in *Farley v. The Shifting Shop Collective*, any lease signed under duress—magical or otherwise—can be suspended pending a full moon's worth of local arbitration."

Advocate Púca picked up, without a beat: "Not to mention, as per the Northmark Writ of Safe Passage, Article Eleven, subsection—"

"—which in turn references the still-active Abeyance Treaty, as negotiated by—" added Manager Púca.

"—and which, if memory serves, your own office ratified not six months ago," General Counsel finished, snapping his ledger shut with finality.

The Commissioner's jaw worked soundlessly for several seconds. Jen caught the eye of one of the guards, who gave her a look that said: "Is this real? Do we have to do this?"

Jen shrugged. North Pointe was a town of rules, and the rules did not always favor the loudest voice.

The Commissioner attempted a desperate flank. "None of that is germane. The fact remains: you fled your lease, and you owe restitution. If you refuse, we will repossess your goods by force."

Negotiator Púca grinned, but not unkindly. "That would be a shame, sir. The last time someone tried, it set off a chain of litigation that still hasn't resolved, and that's ten years running. Plus, the insurance premiums go up every time there's an 'incident'."

Advocate Púca nodded solemnly. "We'd hate to see your office

dragged through another set of hearings. The paperwork alone would bankrupt your stationery fund."

The guards looked at each other again, clearly less excited about the prospect of paperwork than violence, but also less excited about violence than lunch.

Jen allowed herself the tiniest smile, the sort that never reached her mouth but curled the edge of her eyes. She watched the Commissioner scan the crowd for support, find none, and then turn back to the Púca with a new strategy.

"We're not leaving without satisfaction," he said, but the words sounded hollow, even to himself.

Advocate Púca reached into his robe and produced a pocket-sized contract. "We are happy to entertain mediation, if you'd prefer. We've a wizard on retainer, and there's a retired judge in town who's very fair."

Jen coughed politely. "I believe mediation is the custom in North Pointe, Commissioner. If you'd like, I can set it up in the gaol's antechamber. Neutral ground."

The Púca nodded, in perfect unison.

The Commissioner looked as if he might faint. He rolled up the writ, then promptly dropped it, scrambled to recover it, and stared at the scroll as if it might bite him.

"I'll... consult my scrying crystal," he muttered, then turned on his heel and stalked off, leaving his guards to sort themselves. One or two lingered to stare at the Púca, who beamed back, then melted back into the shop to resume their business as if nothing at all had transpired.

Jen waited until the Commissioner was out of earshot, then said, "You enjoy that a little too much."

Manager Púca adjusted his spectacles. "We do what we must, Constable. The law is our armor."

"Sometimes, you could just say no."

He considered. "But where would be the fun in that?"

Jen shook her head, but she couldn't stop grinning. "Don't get too cocky. He'll be back, and next time he might bring someone who reads faster than you do."

Manager Púca tutted. "Doubt it."

They shared a companionable silence, broken only when the Civil Guards finally shuffled off, their morale trailing behind like old confetti.

Jen fell in behind them. "Consulting the home office?" she called to the Commissioner.

"Indeed," he said sullenly. Then he stopped and turned. "They... seem to have found a loophole," he said. The words were aimed at the ground, as if he hoped the grass might absorb his shame. "I'll need to consult my superiors."

Jen nodded. "Take your time."

He shuddered, then seemed to remember the dignity that came with his coat. He pulled it straight, dusted his lapel, and summoned the dregs of command. "Civil Guard! Dismissed to barracks and await further orders."

The guards, who had spent the last fifteen minutes wishing themselves elsewhere, executed a departure so prompt and disciplined that Jen felt a pinch of pride on their behalf. She watched as they broke rank just past the bakery, then drifted off in twos and threes toward the west gate, muttering in low tones. One peeled off, paused at the edge of the green, and waved to a kit watching from the shade of a poplar. The kit waved back, then scurried inside to relay the news.

The Commissioner, left without an audience, hovered a moment at the intersection of Main and Market, then turned to Jen with the resignation of a man who'd just remembered how far he was from home.

"Does your town have an inn?" he asked. All the bravado was gone. Just a tired, practical voice, as plain as a salt loaf.

"Weary Head, across from the Claw," Jen said, jerking her chin. "Minnie will sort you out. Just mention my name. I promise the sheets are clean."

He nodded, but made no move to go. Instead, he squinted at the jewelry shop, where the Púca had already closed up and drawn the curtains. "They're... very efficient," he said.

"That's North Pointe," she replied, deadpan.

He started toward the inn, shoes making little puffs of dust in the road. Jen let him go ahead, then followed at a slower pace, taking in the shift in the town's mood. The green was settling into its midday

pattern: two old men with matching pipes rehashing the events on their bench, Galhani putting up a fresh pot of herbal in her shop, Makota's kits resuming their hoop race with double the energy. Across the square, Knodalon met her gaze, then flicked a finger in salute, as if to say: Well done.

She nodded back, and let her stride relax. She could feel the peace, not just in the way people walked or talked, but in the way the very air seemed to breathe easier. North Pointe had survived another crisis, and not a drop of blood, ink, or self-respect had been wasted—unless you counted the Commissioner's, which was never in abundant supply anyway.

At the door of the Weary Head, Minnie herself stood, arms folded, appraising the approaching guest with the critical eye of a master housekeeper. She ushered the Commissioner inside without a word, and from the street, Jen could hear the clink of a key and the promise of a hot meal. Order, restored.

Jen lingered in the sunlight a little longer, letting it soak her bones and ease the tightness in her shoulders. The world, at least for now, was simple: people wanted what they wanted, and it was her job to keep them from ruining it for everyone else. Sometimes that meant a sword. Sometimes it meant a smile. And sometimes, as today, it just meant knowing when to step back and let the experts argue themselves into a truce.

At the far end of the green, she caught the flash of white hair as the first Púca emerged from the shop, looked left and right, and—finding nothing urgent to litigate—tucked himself into the shadow of the stoop with a book. The moment was as peaceful as any she could recall.

She turned back toward her rounds, boots light on the path, and considered whether to reward herself with a cup of tea or a fresh cinnamon roll.

She decided: both.

Behind her, the bells tolled the next 'mark, crisp and clear, echoing through the green.

eighteen

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THE NEXT DAY, North Pointe awoke to the sound of legal paperwork slapping the flagstones. At least, that's how it sounded to Jen, who stood with hands jammed in her pockets and watched the second coming of the Trade Commissioner play out in grim, parodic slow motion.

He'd returned at the break of first bell, and not alone. The Civil Guard detachment was back, same as before, but this time they looked as if they'd spent the night in their uniforms, camped in a damp tent on the edge of the world. *Not far from the probable truth*, she thought with amusement. Their coats were creased, brass buttons dulled by dew and dust, faces rough and eyes hollow from too little sleep and too much self-importance.

The Commissioner himself looked no better, but if he noticed, it didn't slow him. He marched up the trade road, a leather portfolio tucked beneath one arm as though he were about to purchase the entire green for a discount rate. The Guards followed, out of formation but together in the sheepish way of people who'd resigned themselves to being part of the scenery.

Jen met them halfway across the green, squinting into the new sun.

She'd guessed they'd be back, but not this soon. She tipped her head and let the Commissioner have the first word.

"Constable Darne," he said, voice clipped, "I am returned with new instructions, and I would appreciate your assistance in executing them."

She nodded. "Of course. Standard procedure is to give notice before dragging people from their beds, but I suppose the Púca never seem to sleep, so you're in luck."

He ignored her and strode for the jewelry shop, expecting the rest to fall in. Jen followed, amused at how his urgency failed to infect the Guards, who trailed behind at a respectful—almost safe—distance.

The Púcagems shop glimmered in the morning, the sign catching every angle of sunlight. As they reached the stoop, the door swung open. General Manager Púca was there, small hands folded, jacket pressed, white beard oiled and trimmed for business.

"Ah, good morning to you, Commissioner," he said, beaming. "And yourself, Constable. We're expecting you, so we are. Please, step inside." His voice rolled with the accent, every word smooth as butter in a pan.

The Commissioner squared his shoulders and stepped over the threshold. Jen followed, trying not to smile.

Inside, the shop had changed again. The main counter was flanked by two side tables, each with a Púca standing at the ready. The display cases gleamed, their contents freshly rearranged; behind the main counter, a velvet curtain hid the back room, but the top of a white head and the edge of a ledger hinted at life beyond.

"Business is brisk, I hope?" Jen said, half to be polite.

"Never busier, miss," General Manager replied, and then turned to the Commissioner. "How can we serve you today, sir?"

The Commissioner set down his leather case with a thump, unfastened the buckle, and withdrew a roll of papers so thick it could have doubled as a weapon.

"I have been authorized to present revised charges," he began, unrolling the writ across the counter. The parchment unfurled with a snap, nearly toppling a tray of silver rings.

Manager Púca peered over the top, spectacles catching the light.

"Ah, more of the same, is it? Very well. I'll fetch Advocate Púca." He clapped his hands twice.

Advocate Púca appeared from the back, face long and grave, tiny spectacles perched low on his nose. He took up a position to the right of the Commissioner and regarded the papers with a solemn nod. "Which article, then?"

"Multiple articles," the Commissioner replied, stabbing at the text with an ink-stained finger. "Lease fraud, contract violation, and a new one: illegal use of magical adhesives." He sounded proud of this addition.

Advocate Púca's brow rose. "Illegal adhesives, you say? That's a rare charge, that. I'll need General Counsel Púca." He snapped his fingers.

General Counsel Púca entered, trailed by a Recordkeeper Púca who carried a stack of ledgers so high it blocked his face. The General Counsel wore a black robe (or something made to look like a black robe—at this scale, it might have been a dyed napkin), and nodded once at the assembly.

"What's the statute?" he asked, voice pitched lower than seemed possible.

"Section Seven," said Advocate Púca. "But they're referencing the urban adhesives clause."

"Classic overreach," General Counsel muttered, then gestured to Recordkeeper Púca. "Fetch the precedent."

While the Púca legal team assembled, the Civil Guard crowded into the tiny shop's vestibule, their armor and uniforms clashing with the delicate glass and velvet. A few pressed closer, feigning interest, but Jen caught them sharing yawns behind cupped hands. One Guard studied a ring display with the air of a man trying to memorize escape routes.

The volley began. The Commissioner started reading from his writ, his voice thickening with every clause, but the Púca volleyed back—one, then another, then all at once, voices weaving a kind of spoken cord that left no gap for interruption.

"Per section four, you're obligated—"

“Only if the adhesive was acquired after the implementation of the city’s own binding regulations—”

“Which, as you’ll see, predates the foundation of your Guild by at least a decade—”

“And as such, the adhesives are not only legal, but mandated under the Preservation Act, see subsection ten, right there—”

Jen watched as the Commissioner’s face cycled through disbelief, irritation, and outright panic. His lips moved, but it was all he could do to keep up with the fusillade.

General Manager Púca leaned across the counter, voice suddenly gentle. “Would you care for a cup of tea, sir? It’s from Galhani’s, best in the square.”

The Commissioner ignored him, moving to recapture the conversational lead, but Advocate Púca and General Counsel had already advanced to the next argument. The Recordkeeper began handing up small slips of paper—citations, perhaps, or counter-charges—each one signed and dated in three colors of ink.

In the background, Papa Púca emerged, beard flowing like a river, and glared with grand paternal disappointment at the Commissioner. “If it’s satisfaction you want, sir,” he said, “we could always cut the shop in half, as per the old compromise.” He said this with such utter sincerity that Jen nearly lost her composure.

The Guards shuffled. One risked a glance at Jen, clearly seeking backup.

Jen lifted her hands, palms out. “I’m just here to witness,” she said, and it was the truth.

The Púca legal team closed ranks and shifted strategy, now addressing the Commissioner as a unit. “If you’d prefer mediation,” said Advocate Púca, “we’ll settle for arbitration by third-party, provided the arbitrator is not in the employ of the Guild or any subsidiary thereof—”

“And not related by blood to any present party,” General Counsel added.

“And can pass the standard literacy test,” said Papa Púca.

The Commissioner groped for control, but every time he found a foothold, the Púca kicked it out from under him. The arguments grew

more esoteric: references to ancient town charters, case law from the other side of Lake Evendiam, even a passing mention of an arcane doctrine about “jewelers’ right-of-way” that might or might not have been made up on the spot.

The shop filled with the rolling cadence of debate, the air gone electric with the scent of ink, hot tea, and legal combat.

By the end of the third volley, the Civil Guard had checked out entirely. Two leaned against the wall, staring at the ceiling. One sat on the step outside, feeding bits of pastry to the birds.

Jen watched the Commissioner’s cheeks redden, his voice wobbling as he tried to match the pace. He glanced at her, desperate, and she could only shrug. She had seen full riots start and finish with less energy than this.

At last, the Commissioner slammed his writ down on the counter. “Enough!” he barked, voice shaking. “You’re all talking in circles!”

Advocate Púca beamed. “That’s what arbitration is, sir.”

“Would you care to try again?” Papa Púca said, voice soothing as a bedtime story. “Or perhaps you’d rather file a complaint with the arbitration board in the next town?”

The Commissioner blinked. He looked at his writ, then at the wall, then at his own hands, as if unsure how they’d come to be attached to his body.

“I need... to confer,” he muttered, then gathered his papers and made for the door, trailed by the remnant of his dignity and the Civil Guard, who looked grateful for the excuse to escape.

Jen followed.

The late-morning light painted everything rose-gold, including Jen’s patience, which felt thin and brittle as old parchment. She watched the Commissioner pace outside the shop, his face pinched and red, while the Civil Guards wilted on the porch, picking at their boots and daring each other not to look bored. Even the air seemed tired.

She almost missed Llewel’s arrival. He moved with such soundless economy that she half-believed he’d stepped from a shadow, not the trade road. He wore his formal black jacket, the kind with high collar

and no decoration, and the sunlight made his silver hair look like spun metal.

He stopped beside her without so much as a greeting, and studied the tableau: the exhausted Guards, the Commissioner fuming, the shop windows reflecting it all back like a funhouse mirror.

"Is this the way of things here?" Llewel said, quietly. His tone was not unkind, but Jen caught the glint of dry humor in the words.

"You get used to it," Jen said, with a sigh. "Or you leave."

He watched the Commissioner a while longer, then said, "He's in over his head."

"You could say that."

Llewel nodded. "Perhaps I might be of assistance."

Jen threw up her hands. "Be my guest. I've got nothing."

Llewel inclined his head and stepped forward, gliding past the Guards with such delicate grace that one of them almost tripped trying to stand at attention. He came to rest a pace from the Commissioner, hands folded behind his back, and waited.

It took the Commissioner a moment to notice him, but when he did, he blinked twice, as if uncertain whether he was facing a ghost or an apparition from too many sleepless nights.

"Can I help you?" the Commissioner asked, voice hoarse.

Llewel smiled, faint as a rumor. "You are the Trade Commissioner?"

"I am."

"I understand you are having trouble with our jewelry merchants."

"That is an understatement," the Commissioner muttered.

Llewel considered him, head tilted. Then, as if reaching a decision, he said: "Might I interest you in a complimentary brunch, Commissioner? Alone, if you please."

The Commissioner goggled, uncertain what part of the question to object to first. "You wish... to feed me?"

Llewel nodded. "I wish to resolve your matter. I believe it will be easier to do so away from the crowd." He glanced at the shop, where at least two Púca faces now peered from the window, and then at Jen, who gave a thumbs up.

The Commissioner hesitated, but the prospect of food—and more

importantly, a respite from the endless verbal tangle—proved irresistible. “Very well. Lead on.”

Llewel gave a small, impeccable bow, then started toward his restaurant. The Commissioner followed, clutching his leather case to his chest like a life preserver. The two vanished down the road, into the shadowed cool of the restaurant’s doorway.

Jen waited until they’d disappeared, then turned to the Civil Guard.

“Based on what I’ve seen here,” she said, “you might as well head home. This will be resolved... one way or another.”

The Guards looked at each other, relief blooming on their faces like sunrise over a glacier. The tallest, a rangy man with a scar across his chin, said, “You’re sure?”

Jen grinned. “Trust me. Besides, the inn doesn’t have enough rooms for all of you, and I can’t imagine you’re eager for another night on the ground.”

The Guards didn’t need to be told twice. They shuffled, then marched, then outright jogged toward the town gate, eager to be rid of the whole business.

Jen lingered a moment longer, just to be sure no one would double back, then turned and started a slow circuit of the green. She let the calm settle, listening to the echoes of the morning’s drama fade away into the afternoon.

She wondered what, exactly, Llewel planned to do with the Commissioner.

She found herself almost hoping to be invited to the meal.

But for now, she settled for quiet, and the certainty that North Pointe’s peace would hold for at least a few more ‘marks.

The world spun on, and Jen let it, content to walk the edge of its small, ridiculous orbit.



By the time Jen finished her lap of the green, the world had resumed its natural, lazy spin. The bakery window steamed with new loaves. A pair of children played at rolling hoops, their laughter louder than the

day before. For a moment, Jen could almost believe the morning's mess had been just a vivid, overcaffeinated dream.

But then, as she rounded the corner, she saw them: a cluster of Púca, standing on the stoop of their shop. Their faces were arranged in an almost comical display of concern, disappointment, and—was that embarrassment? She grinned; nothing got to the Púca quite like a botched performance.

General Manager Púca straightened his waistcoat, smoothed his beard, and cleared his throat as she approached. "Constable Darne," he said, voice grave, "if you have a moment?"

She stopped at the bottom step. "Always."

The others fanned out behind him: Advocate Púca, spectacles gleaming; General Counsel, hands folded like a judge ready to pass sentence; Recordkeeper, clutching his bundle of ledgers; and, at the rear, Papa Púca, who radiated grandfatherly disappointment at the world in general.

Advocate Púca, who was barely the size of Jen's forearm, piped up: "We're most grateful for your assistance this morning, Constable."

General Counsel took over without missing a beat. "...though perhaps..."

Recordkeeper chimed in: "...we might suggest..."

Papa Púca, stroking his beard, finished: "...a more appropriate badge of office, to commemorate the event?"

Jen glanced down at her chest. Her badge was the same plain tin star she'd been issued a decade ago—scuffed, functional, nothing more. She'd never cared. She had Hellsting if she needed to prove a point.

She looked up. "A badge?"

The Púca exchanged knowing looks, then vanished in a flurry of coordinated motion. It took them less than a minute to return: Shopkeeper Púca emerged, holding a velvet cushion with both hands. On it sat a badge unlike any Jen had ever seen. It was wrought of fine silver, filigreed and inlaid with a scatter of gemstones—some so small she doubted even Vamir's eyes could count them. The surface shimmered as she looked at it, catching and bending the sun in ways that seemed to defy physics.

She tried not to gape. "That's... a bit much."

Advocate Púca beamed. "We do not believe in half-measures."

General Manager Púca offered the cushion with both hands, as if bestowing a crown.

Jen lifted the badge. It weighed next to nothing. She turned it over; on the back, someone had engraved "NORTH POINTE CONSTABLE" in letters so neat they looked printed, not cut.

She pinned it to her vest, right above the old tin star. It settled there with a magnetic click, and Hellsting coiled a little tighter around her wrist, as if in approval.

"I suppose this makes it official then," Jen said, voice dry.

The Púca bowed, all at once. Shopkeeper Púca made a small, formal curtsy, which set the others off into a brief, disorganized bowing contest.

"Thank you," Jen said, and meant it. "I'll try not to let the power go to my head."

Papa Púca grinned. "We are sure you will wield it wisely, Miss Darne."

The cluster retreated into their shop, the door shutting with a gentle click that somehow sounded like the punctuation at the end of a very long sentence.

Jen looked at the new badge, then at the sky, and felt—just for a moment—a little bit proud.

She glanced around, half-expecting a new emergency to come barreling over the green. But there was nothing but sunlight and the easy, unhurried life of a town that knew how to survive itself.

She headed back toward the Claw, the badge flashing whenever she moved, and let herself savor the stillness.

For now, at least, North Pointe was safe. And that was enough.

nineteen

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PÚCAGEMS HAD ONLY BEEN open three days and already had the look of a shop that had never not existed. By the time Jen made her first deliberate inspection, the place thrummed with the quiet industry of commerce: the subtle chime of the bell as customers entered, the low sussuration of buyers and browsers, the discreet clearing of throats from those whose purses—and self-esteem—were not quite equal to the inventory.

Inside, the shop was brighter than a scribe's dream. Brass lanterns lined the walls, casting fine shadows and a deliberate sense of security; each case of jewelry glowed with a magic both literal and metaphorical, and the glass counters were so well-polished Jen could see the furrows of her own brow reflected back to her from every angle.

General Manager Púca—stiff of back, crisp in his indigo frock, and equipped with a monocle so finely wrought it made his left eye twice the size of his right—kept vigil behind the main counter. Not far from him, Shopkeeper Púca—different only in subtlety: his beard was less oiled, and his vest had a tiny shamrock stitched above the heart—greeted every customer with a honeyed “Top o’ the mornin’” and a bow so low Jen feared he might never return upright. The third,

Assistant Shop Clerk Púca, hovered in the vicinity, hands fluttering toward but never quite touching any object of value, eager to help yet always a quarter-beat behind the transaction.

Jen stepped inside, letting the door's bell announce her. Immediately, the air thickened with expectation: the regulars, North Pointe's merchants and craftsfolk, recognized her instantly and resumed their low chatter, but the out-of-towners—travelers by their boots and the strain in their eyes—gave her and Hellsting's bracelet more than a passing glance.

Shopkeeper Púca bowed again, his smile catching the light just so. "Constable Darne! A rare treat. Might we interest ye in a trinket for your wrist? Perhaps a brooch for the badge?"

Jen managed her politest noncommittal grunt. "Just observing the market, thanks."

General Manager Púca straightened, his monocle flashing. "Welcome, miss," he said, voice clipped, and then, to the nearest traveler: "As I was sayin', the pin is fireproof, waterproof, and in most cases, pickpocket-proof. We guarantee satisfaction or triple your money back, as per the Charter."

Jen suppressed a grin.

The customer, a thin man with the look of a traveling tea merchant, fingered the brooch nervously. "It's a bit dear," he mumbled, eyes never leaving the piece.

General Manager Púca drew himself to full height, which did not even reach the countertop, but the effect was formidable. "Quality costs, friend. If ye'd like a discount, we recommend the secondhand stall two towns east. Their wares shine like promises and last about as long."

A ripple of laughter. The merchant, cowed but charmed, counted out his coin and took the brooch, leaving with a muttered thanks.

Assistant Shop Clerk Púca, sensing a gap, hustled to tidy the counter, nearly toppling a velvet display tray but righting it with a last-second flourish. "They say you can never be too careful with the stock," he whispered to Jen, as if confiding in a fellow conspirator.

"Seems that way," she replied.

Jen moved among the cases, watching the ebb and flow of negotiation. Some customers bought, others only looked, but all left with the same half-dazzled, half-defeated expression: a combination of wonder at the display and rue at the price. General Manager Púca's discipline was absolute, and no one left without either parting with coin or being out-argued by a creature a third their height.

At the far end of the shop, a young couple—barely more than teenagers, hands knit together so tight it looked as if neither would ever let go—stood transfixed before a pendant on a raised blue cushion. It was a simple stone, pale pink, set in a web of silver wires so fine the whole thing seemed to hover above the cloth. The stone glimmered from within, as if remembering every sunrise it had ever seen.

Shopkeeper Púca approached, voice pitched low and gentle. "Ah, you've the eye for the rare one," he said. "That there's a soulstone, found only on the western shore of the lake. It's said to strengthen bonds between those who share it, and, should they ever part, helps them find one another—no matter how far, or how long."

The couple looked at each other, something tremulous in their faces. The young man's hand trembled as he traced the chain's length with a fingertip, then turned to the young woman and whispered, "If I'm ever lost..."

She nodded, unshed tears brightening her gaze. Shopkeeper Púca, seeing this, stepped back with a nod of approval and left them to their council.

After a moment, the young man fumbled out a purse, counted coins with painful care. The sum fell short, and for a second, disappointment wavered on their faces—but then the Shopkeeper, in a move as smooth as oil, leaned in and whispered, "If you're together, we can call it square." He winked, then wrapped the pendant in a square of soft cloth and placed it in the woman's hands.

"Blessings of the road, and may you never need it," he said.

Jen felt a whisper run up her spine, and raised an eyebrow as she recognized the town's magic at work. *So they really do fill the Icosagon*, she mused.

The couple thanked him in a rush, then hurried from the shop, the

girl's fingers wrapped around her new treasure and her companion's arm.

Jen watched the scene, an odd warmth prickling in her ribs. The transaction had all the hallmarks of a scam, yet it was the purest magic she'd seen in days.

General Manager Púca, watching from his station, caught her eye and gave a tight, satisfied smile. "We know our market," he said. "And the market knows us."

She inclined her head, acknowledging the truth of it.

Outside, the sun was climbing higher, and through the clean glass she could see the regular churn of the town square: Makota's kits dashing from bakery to green, the grocer setting out boxes of early fruit, and a cluster of travelers pausing to argue over a handbill pasted to the community board.

Jen turned to leave. Shopkeeper Púca caught her at the door. "If you're ever in need of a parting gift, or something to remember a soul by, you know where to find us," he said, eyes glinting.

"I'll remember," she said, and stepped back into the world.

The door closed with a gentle chime, and behind her, the three Púca set about preparing for the next volley of customers, their movements seamless as a well-practiced sleight of hand. The shop was a stage, and the performance would continue as long as there was coin and longing in the world.

Jen crossed the square, hands in her pockets, feeling the pulse of North Pointe beat steady beneath her boots.

The town, she thought, was learning how to keep itself whole—and even its newest arrivals seemed to understand the rhythm.

The door's chime had barely faded behind her when Jen heard the familiar patter of Darby's feet pounding across the square. The boy was gaining speed as he approached adolescence, but the rest of his body hadn't caught up: arms and legs too long for his coat, an unbroken voice that still carried as far as the town crier's bell.

"Constable!" he yelled, waving a pale envelope over his head. "Post for you, urgent!" He wove through a knot of bakery kits and stopped short, breathing hard but grinning.

Jen took the letter. The wax was unbroken, the address penned in a hand she didn't recognize. "Where'd you get it?"

"Makota says it came with the flour delivery," Darby replied. "She says to tell you it's from the north."

Jen nodded her thanks and sent him off with a pat on the shoulder. He took off again, this time racing a kit twice his size, already forgetting the errand.

She turned the letter over in her hand. It had the weight of something important, but not the dire urgency Darby had claimed. Still, it was as good an excuse as any for a tea break, and she had promised herself one after the Púca inspection.

She crossed to Galhani's shop, where the windows steamed and the inside air was fragrant with honey, orange peel, and the sharp cut of mint. Prudence was already at her favorite table near the window, folding a length of pale blue cloth into what looked like the beginnings of a child's tunic.

Prudence smiled as Jen entered. "Good morning, Jen."

"Morning. Mind if I join?"

"Not at all," Prudence replied, smoothing the fabric and gesturing at the opposite chair.

Galhani herself materialized a moment later, eyes bright and hair askew from a recent struggle with a recalcitrant tea caddy. "Constable! Prudence! What can I tempt you with?"

"Just the black today," Jen said, holding up a hand. "Nothing magical. Not Memberry."

Galhani's mouth twitched. "Your word is law," she said, but her tone made it clear she thought this was a waste.

As Galhani drifted back to the counter, Jen produced the envelope and broke the seal. "Came in the morning flour delivery," she said, holding the letter where Prudence could see it. "I'm guessing it's from Piotr or one of his lot."

Prudence's eyes brightened. "Have you heard from them?"

"Not since they left, no," Jen said. She unfolded the sheet and began to read, lips moving silently for a moment before she started aloud:

“To the Honorable Constable Darne of North Pointe, and to all who keep its peace. We write in gratitude for the mercy shown us, and to send news of our fates. Piotr, Leeta, Olt, and myself have arrived in the North. We found work in Farling, where the river runs wide. Leeta is now a scribe, and her memory serves better for ink than for arms. Olt joined the caravan guard, but says it’s quieter than mercenary work. I—” Jen squinted. “I can’t read this next bit. Something about grain silos.”

Prudence took the letter, her fingers deft despite their delicacy. She read ahead, then smiled. “He’s become a clerk. They keep the silos’ records.”

“Ha,” Jen said. “Mercenary to bookkeeper. There’s a career change for you.”

Galhani returned, setting two steaming cups on the table. She peered at the letter. “Good news, I hope?”

Prudence nodded, still reading. “Very good.” She looked up, her face momentarily suffused with quiet pride. “They say the clothing I made for them is lasting well. Piotr calls it ‘destiny-fit’.”

Galhani grinned. “That’s the shop’s magic, I suppose. Knodalon says every shop here has its story.”

Jen sipped her tea. It was black, strong, and as comforting as the first fire of the morning. “Better than Memberry, I’d bet,” she said.

Prudence laughed, a rare clear sound. “I don’t know. The Memberry stories are the best kind.”

They drank in companionable silence for a moment, the letter on the table between them. The town outside went on as always: travelers came and went, the bakery kits darted, and in the jewelry shop window, a new display was being assembled—tiny frogs, possibly, or small, ridiculous crowns.

Jen finished her cup and was about to stand when a voice called from the doorway.

“Excuse me,” said a man, tall and angular, the hood of his cloak thrown back to reveal a face lined with worry. “I hear you’re the one to see for... specialty teas.”

Galhani straightened. “Of course. What do you need?”

The man hesitated, then said: “It’s for my wife. She’s having

trouble with her memory. Names, faces, even the days of the sennight."

Galhani's eyes lit with purpose. "Memberry Tea is exactly what you need," she said, darting to a shelf and plucking down a jar of dried berries. "It won't fix everything, but it brings the important things closer to the front. Especially the happy ones."

She began measuring leaves into a sachet, her hands careful and precise. The man watched, hope and skepticism mingling in his eyes.

Jen exchanged a glance with Prudence, who smiled behind her hand. "See?" Prudence whispered, "It always comes back around."

"Some things do," Jen agreed. She watched as the man left, sachet in hand and a little lightness in his step.

"Maybe I was too hard on the Memberry," she said, with a soft laugh.

Galhani overheard, and from the counter she called out: "Magic's only a shortcut. The rest is up to us."

Jen raised her empty cup in salute. "Good advice."

And for the first time in a long while, she let herself sit a minute longer, just to savor the taste.



That afternoon, Jen made her rounds along the trade road, where the traffic always told more about a town than any census or registry. Early summer meant wagons groaning under bolts of cloth or crates of root vegetables; it meant muddy boots at every stoop and travelers' disputes that simmered like stew over a slow fire.

Sure enough, she found her first headache of the day just past the green's edge. Two wagons, nose to nose, neither driver willing to back down and both shouting loud enough to wake the dead. The first—a red-faced man in a patched vest—claimed the other had "spoiled his right-of-way with reckless maneuvering." The second, a woman with an arm like a smith's and a jaw to match, declared she'd been there first and wasn't about to let "some fancy-boy teamster" crowd her into the ditch.

They'd already drawn a crowd: two kits, three loafers, and an old-timer who'd seen enough brawls to know this one had barely begun.

Jen wedged herself into the standoff, boots braced on the hardpack. "No one's going anywhere till you both shut it," she said, calm but unyielding. "Which of you wants to pay the bakery's repair bill if those wheels go sideways?"

Both drivers glared at her, then at each other, then at the gap barely wide enough for a stray cat. The truth was neither wagon could squeeze past without a scrape, but pride was thicker than the axle grease on their rigs.

"Here's what we do," Jen said, hands up like a referee. "You," she pointed at the woman, "ease your wagon back a length. You," she jabbed a finger at the man, "angle your team and swing wide, just shy of the ditch. The rest of us will help spot."

The woman scoffed. "And if the mud grabs my wheel?"

"Then we push," Jen said, making it clear she'd be the first to do so.

She motioned for the loafers to get in position, and with a few sharp words and some hand signals, they orchestrated the retreat. The woman's team took a coaxing but finally relented, and the man swung his wagon around with a dramatic flourish, nearly toppling a crate but missing the ditch by a finger's width.

It took less than a minute, but by the end, both drivers were grumbling thanks and moving on, the crisis dissolved like salt in soup. The crowd melted away, and even the old-timer gave Jen a respectful nod as he shuffled off.

She dusted her hands and checked the road for stray bits. Satisfied, she turned back toward town, only to find herself nearly face-to-face with Llewel Magcaryn, standing in the shadow of his restaurant's awning.

He was easy to spot, even at a distance: the pale, almost translucent skin, the hair shining like a spill of ice, and those impossibly deep blue eyes. He regarded her with the quiet interest of someone observing a particularly delicate insect.

He wasn't alone. Before him stood a couple—middle-aged, travel-

worn but tidy—accompanied by a boy of perhaps fourteen. The boy tried not to stare at Llewel, but failed every few seconds.

"Welcome to North Pointe," Llewel said, bowing in that mountain-elf way that looked more like a controlled fall than a human gesture. "May I offer you the best luncheon you will have this side of Lake Evendiam?"

The woman nodded, her mouth set in a straight line. The man looked ready to decline, but Llewel's voice was like a velvet rope: hard to argue with and even harder to ignore.

Inside, the restaurant glowed. Jen watched from the road as the family stepped into the cool shade, the door closing softly behind them. She wondered, as she always did, what fate awaited them inside. Few travelers ever lingered in town after a meal at Llewel's. Most moved on, but always changed. Sometimes lighter, sometimes heavier, but always changed.

She made a note to check back later, then continued along the trade road, boots sending up small puffs of dust.

Not five paces on, the restaurant's door opened again. Out stepped a man Jen recognized instantly: the former Trade Commissioner, now dressed in a shirt the color of dark moss and trousers cut for climbing, not counting, trees. His once-pristine boots were scuffed, his hands calloused, and his face wore a look of the deepest, most peaceful relief.

He paused on the stoop, inhaled deeply, and then turned back to Llewel—who had followed him outside—and offered a small, grateful bow.

"Thank you," he said, loud enough for Jen to catch it. "For everything."

Llewel smiled, serene as a pond in still air. "May your trails always lead home," he replied.

The Commissioner—no, not that, not anymore—caught Jen's eye and nodded. Not with embarrassment or defeat, but with the quiet pride of someone who had, at last, found his own right-of-way.

He walked off down the road, straight to Tyran's outfitter shop, where a new life of mud and weather and wilderness waited.

Jen watched him go, then shook her head, amazed at the transformation.

She wasn't sure what, exactly, Llewel served at that restaurant. But she knew it was never the same meal twice.

And she wondered, not for the first time, what would happen if she ever went in and ordered the house special.

The Broken Claw was full before the sun had even kissed the tops of the birch trees. The air inside glowed gold with lamplight, and the low ceiling was alive with the warm breath of townsfolk and the perfume of honey-brown ale, hot bread, and the day's spiced rabbit pie. Every bench and trestle table held its knot of regulars: artisans and traders and a handful of travelers, all knitting the business of their sennight into the fabric of North Pointe.

Jen arrived to find Sam already deep in conversation with Dardrad Pebbleblade, who nursed a pint like it was the only thing standing between him and complete collapse. Sam's laugh carried above the crowd, and her hair—loose tonight, wild and white as whipped cream—caught the lamp beams like a net. Dardrad, less voluble, grunted and snorted in just the right cadence to let you know he was, against his own wishes, enjoying himself.

Jen wedged herself onto the bench, nodding her greetings. "You two start early, or did the bakery run out of things to burn?"

Sam grinned. "Started when the Claw opened. Dardrad says it's not proper to drink before the noon bell, but I countered that it's always noon bell somewhere. He folded."

Dardrad shrugged, then leaned over the table to Jen. "You seen the new Púca yet?"

"Today? Three times," Jen replied. "They're running the jewelry shop like it's the only gold in town."

Sam's eyes glimmered. "There's another one now. Socialite Púca. He's at the bar, holding court."

Jen followed her gaze. At the far end of the room, perched on a high stool, sat a Púca unlike the others. His vest was blue velvet, cut to the quick and fitted with gold buttons. A silk ascot glowed at his

throat. A monocle, smaller than a thumbnail, clung to his nose with a determination Jen could only admire.

He held a glass of something sharp and clear, and with every sip, he seemed to grow more at home in the room. When he spotted Makota across the bar, he hopped from his stool and made a beeline, dodging knees and boots with feline grace.

"Madame Makota!" he announced, voice rich as buttered toast. "Your cherry-glazed tarts are the talk of every court I've frequented, and I've frequented quite a few. My only regret is that my whiskers are too short to do them justice."

Makota's ears flattened, then perked. "That's because you don't have a real cat's tongue," she said, pushing a plate of tarts his way. "If you eat too many, you'll have nothing left to say."

"On the contrary," Socialite Púca said, selecting a tart and biting with a flourish. "I always have something left to say. It's a curse, really."

He finished the tart in three neat bites, dabbed his mouth with a square of blue silk, and spun on his heel to address the room.

"Drinks for all!" he called, waving a coin purse over his head. "And may the Claw never run dry!"

A cheer went up, and Sam pounded the table. "I like this one."

Dardrad grunted. "Better than the lawyer."

Socialite Púca made his way through the room, stopping at every table. He had a compliment for everyone—praising the wedge of a garnet here, the shine of an antler button there, the way Dardrad's beard "could anchor a bridge in a hurricane." When he reached Jen and her company, he bowed low, monocle flashing.

"Constable Darne," he said, "your reputation precedes you. I am told you once negotiated an entire day's truce between the bakers and the butchers, using nothing but a loaf of day-old rye and a pickled cucumber."

Sam burst out laughing. "She did. Dardrad almost broke a tooth on that loaf."

Dardrad scowled, but the edge was gone. "Soft bread is for kits," he said. "But the point stands. Jen's good in a crisis."

Socialite Púca nodded, as if this confirmed something critical. He

turned to Sam. "And you must be Samantha Godsdotter, owner of this fine establishment and, by my estimation, the strongest left hook in the Icosagon. I am honored to meet you."

Sam tipped her head and grinned. "You're the first Púca who's ever offered to buy me a drink instead of reading me laws that don't exist."

He rolled back his shoulders and laughed. "I may be small, but I'm not reckless. Consider this a down payment on future peace."

He signaled for a tankard, which arrived promptly. Sam clinked it to his glass, and they drank together.

"To Constable Darne!" Socialite Púca proclaimed, standing on tiptoe to be heard. "May her steadiness always rival the founding stones of North Pointe!"

Another cheer, louder this time. Jen flushed, but smiled. "Careful," she warned. "You keep that up and you'll be mayor by next sennight."

Socialite Púca bowed again. "Perish the thought. I am far too fond of sleeping in."

He drifted off to another table, leaving behind the scent of blue-tinged tobacco and the impression that he'd been everywhere, seen everything, and remembered every word.

Dardrad leaned over to Jen. "You think the Púca are up to something?"

"Always," Jen said. "But it's mostly harmless. For now."

Sam grinned. "They just want to be part of the story."

Jen nodded, looking around the room. It was hard to argue. The Claw had never felt more alive, the laughter and voices weaving together in a way that made you forget, for a moment, the cold outside or the memory of harder times.

Sam drained her tankard and launched into a story about the time she'd tracked a thief all the way to the icefields north of the lake. Dardrad listened with the patience of stone, occasionally grumbling corrections or grunts of admiration.

Jen let the words flow over her. She watched the crowd—Makota, whiskers twitching as she talked with Prudence; the forest-elf Vamir, arguing with the baker over the proper way to slice a nut loaf; the old-timer from the trade road, already asleep in his chair.

It was, she realized, exactly the evening North Pointe deserved. Maybe even the one it needed.

She lifted her mug—softly, so as not to draw attention—and offered a silent toast to the room.

To peace, and to the stories that kept it.

And, as she sipped, she felt a deep certainty in her bones: whatever the Púca had brought to North Pointe, it had made the town stronger. More itself.

She hoped it would last forever.

epilogue

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SCENE 1 - from Jennifer Darne's point of view

The dawn bell caught on a patch of mist and echoed three times before the sound faded into the roots of the oaks. Jen counted the strokes in her head, her boots already planting hard on the clay bricks that circled the green. It was still early enough that dew clung to the grass and shivered on her cuffs, but the air held a warmth that meant the day would turn fine, if not hot.

This was her favorite part of the sennight—before the shops opened, before Makota's kits could be heard arguing about who got to eat the first ruined tart of the day, before anyone had decided what sort of trouble was on tap for the rest of them. On mornings like this, North Pointe felt like a town still in the act of inventing itself, as if the past could be wiped clean with a cloth and the future would show up in the next pot of coffee.

Jen made her patrol in a slow orbit, first around the green and then along the trade road, keeping a careful eye on the few travelers already up. She liked to think her mere presence helped keep things smooth, but she also liked to confirm that suspicion in person. The travelers, for their part, seemed to have gotten the message: the ones lingering at the Weary Head's porch stayed politely on their benches,

boots lined up and hats in hand. The family in from the north, still rubbing the sleep from their eyes, kept their voices low as they herded their children toward the bakery.

As she walked, Jen took stock of the world as it reset itself for the day. The green was mowed close, tidy in the way that made townsfolk proud. The new Púca jewelry shop had just raised its canvas shade, letting the early sunlight catch on the display cases, and already a trio of old men could be seen squinting through the glass at something bright enough to draw a crowd by midday. Makota's bakery windows had begun to fog, proof that the ovens were already burning, and if Jen caught a hint of sweet roll in the air, she allowed herself a private smile. Even the town's black dog, usually the first to sound the alarm when anything changed, was dozing beside the post with one paw twitching in a dream.

She wore her new badge high on her chest, just above the old tin star she'd never gotten around to discarding. The Púca had made the new one out of silver and deep-blue enamel, and it flashed with a different kind of authority—showier, maybe, but also unmistakable. The townsfolk had not failed to notice. The baker's eldest daughter had called her "Constable Fancy" for three days running, and Jen had pretended not to be pleased about it.

Hellsting, her sword, stayed wrapped in bracelet form around her left wrist, cool and silent and perfectly content to remain dormant for the foreseeable future. If the gaol's magic was still working, and it was, then there was no reason to unsling it. Jen savored the thought.

She paused beside the bakery, letting the soft noise of rising dough and the mutter of Makota's voice—half command, half bedtime story—soak into her bones. The bakery had always been the heartbeat of North Pointe, and it thumped a little stronger now that the town had grown used to its rhythms.

It was here, at the intersection of shop and sidewalk, that Jen spotted her first potential crisis of the morning. A traveler, new to town by the look of the worn boots and the oversized pack, had managed to snap the clasp on his shoulder satchel, sending its contents—shirts, books, a leaking bottle of something violet—into the dust. He was on his knees, trying to catch a runaway jar with one

hand and gather a sheaf of loose papers with the other, and the effect was that of a man performing three acts at once and failing them all in succession.

Jen strolled over and knelt without fanfare, catching the jar before it could tip and righting it next to the man's boots.

"Easy, there," she said, steadying the papers with the back of her hand. "Nothing here's in such a hurry it won't wait for you."

The traveler looked up, startled. "Sorry, miss. I just—didn't want to block the way."

She handed him the jar, uncorked it, sniffed, and corked it again. "Strong stuff," she said. "You plan to drink this or dissolve the flagstones?"

He laughed, grateful. "Just for a friend, actually. Sorry to be a bother."

Jen began stacking the papers, making quick work of the loose mess. "You'll get used to it. Or you'll learn to walk slower, which comes to the same thing. Next time, try packing the heavy stuff at the bottom."

He nodded, red-faced but less flustered. "Thanks, Constable."

"Name's Jen. And you're welcome." She tucked the last of the papers into the satchel and handed it over. "Enjoy your stay, and listen for the noon bell—sometimes it sounds early."

He grinned, shouldered the pack, and set off with a lighter step. Jen watched him go, feeling the old satisfaction that came from solving a problem without any paperwork or bloodshed.

She resumed her patrol, circling the green, past the bakery and the shop, past the tailor's—where Prudence was already sweeping her stoop, pausing to wave at Jen with her free hand—and up the slight rise toward the far end of the green. There, in the shadow of the oaks, the children of the town had gathered for their usual morning mischief. A few staged a mock brawl with sticks, each playing at being a bandit or a lawkeeper. Jen watched as the smallest, one of Cole's girls and more energy than sense, managed to trip herself and go tumbling. The older kids rushed in, helped her up, dusted her off, and immediately resumed the game.

“Good form,” Jen called out, and the lot of them saluted her in the haphazard way of youth.

The day stretched before her, not empty but perfectly balanced. She watched as the town woke in increments: a window slid open, a cart rolled onto the road, the smithy’s furnace coughed its first puff of smoke. Even the green itself seemed to lean into the promise of the morning, the grass brighter, the birds in the oaks louder and more sure of their place.

It was hard to imagine that, just a few fortnights ago, the town had teetered on the edge of something darker—rivalries, old wounds, and the threat of outside interference always a half-step away. Now, peace settled over North Pointe not as an accident, but as a habit. Jen liked to think she’d had something to do with that, but she also knew better than to take all the credit. The shops, the townsfolk, the odd magic that ran through the green—they’d all grown together, knitting the edges tight.

She finished her circuit with a lap back past the bakery, where Makota herself was now on the porch, arms folded and a lopsided grin on her face.

“You could at least wait for the pastries to cool,” Makota called out, tail flicking behind her.

Jen shrugged, caught. “Blame the morning air. It’s hungry work, keeping peace.”

Makota tossed her a bun, still warm, and Jen caught it one-handed. “And what’s the verdict today?”

“Town’s in good shape,” Jen said, breaking the bun and popping a piece in her mouth. “I’d say the only danger is to anyone with a sugar allergy.”

Makota laughed, the sound rolling out and mixing with the clang of a distant hammer from the smithy. “Let me know if you need backup. I’ve got at least two kits who owe me favors.”

Jen grinned, raised the bun in salute, and moved off at a slow, even pace, letting the sun climb and the world settle around her.

By the time she’d finished the last bite, the green was alive with the noise of a town at work, and Jen felt a rare sense of contentment settle deep in her chest.

The day could bring whatever it liked.
She was ready.

By second bell, the jewelry shop on the square buzzed like a hive in spring. Where once there'd been the sour whiff of animals and the constant racket of hammers, now the air shimmered with the tang of polish and the quiet, insistent clink of gemstones being lined up for inspection. Jen hovered at the doorway, one boot resting on the smooth threshold, and watched the whole thing unfold like a well-oiled magic trick.

Marketer Púca had a customer pinned in the crossfire of his enthusiasm, and that customer was Makota herself, arms folded, tail flicking in a tempo of bemused annoyance. The Púca, resplendent in a double-breasted vest that must have taken six people a full fortnight to tailor, held up a sliver of crystal to the sunbeam angling through the front window. It was no larger than a lentil, but the way he spun it between his fingers made it throw flashes that lit the ceiling, the counter, and a passing customer's forehead in rapid succession.

"Guaranteed to reveal your future in pastry crumbs, it is!" Marketer Púca announced, voice tripping through its syllables with the speed of a fish escaping a net. "You sprinkle but a pinch atop your buns or loaves, and the next person what eats it—" here he dropped his voice to a stage whisper, "—well, they'll see exactly what fortune the day has baked up for them."

Makota unsheathed a single claw and snagged the gem from the air mid-spin. She held it up, eyes narrowing in that slow, deliberate way only Felis could manage, and turned it side to side. "My pastries already show the future," she said, the words stretching into a purr. "But perhaps this might... enhance the effect?"

Marketer Púca grinned, bowing so low his ears nearly swept the floor. "That's the spirit, madame. The first one's free, on account of your being such a regular."

Makota slid the gem into a hidden pocket, then flicked her tail in a way that meant "nice try, but I know where you sleep." She padded

from the counter, and as she passed Jen in the doorway, she tossed her a smile. "If I see your future in the crumbs tomorrow, you'll be the first to know."

"Better than seeing it in tea leaves," Jen replied. "But not by much."

Makota disappeared up the street, her steps as silent as the pause after a punchline. The Púca, undaunted, already eyed his next target—a young mother with a kit in tow, both gazing at a pyramid of quartz chips by the display.

Inside, the shop's transformation was complete. The cages had been replaced by polished glass cases, each arranged with such precision that Jen suspected a tape measure had been involved. Every tray of rings, every row of necklaces, every brooch and oddment was set out to catch the light and multiply it back in every direction. The walls were painted a fresh, calm blue, and here and there, Púca with dusters and tiny brushes moved like clockwork, keeping the inventory spotless.

Behind the main counter, General Manager Púca stood sentinel, arms folded over a ledge that had been raised to meet him at exactly chest height. He wore his signature monocle, the lens so clear it magnified his left eye to twice the size of the right, and when he spoke, it was in the careful cadence of a man who knew that every word might end up on a customer review.

"Welcome, miss," he said as Jen stepped over the threshold. "Care for a browse? We've a new collection in, just this morning. Finest stuff, and I'll wager none of it's cursed."

Jen raised an eyebrow. "That's a concern?"

Manager Púca allowed a tiny smile. "We're refining our sourcing. Only the best for North Pointe."

To his left, Assistant Shop Clerk Púca sorted a tray of rings, each ring no bigger than the end of Jen's thumb. His tongue poked from the corner of his mouth in concentration, and every time he set a ring down, he adjusted its position three times. The effect was mesmerizing, and Jen found herself standing for a full minute just watching the parade of small, perfect circles.

A pair of travelers entered, the man ducking his head to avoid the doorframe, the woman glancing sideways as if expecting to be

charged an entry fee. Marketer Púca materialized beside them, hands folded behind his back, and in less than a dozen words had them both smiling and leaning over the nearest display. Jen had never seen a shop run with such cheerful inevitability; it was as if the staff had mapped out every possible way a customer could enter, wander, and leave, and had rehearsed each option until it became second nature.

It was strange to think that, only a short while ago, this building had been the noisiest, messiest place in town. Jen remembered the first day the Púca took possession, the noise like a flock of crows in a barrel and the scent of varnish so thick it had given half the street a headache. Now, the noise had settled to a steady hum: the glass-clink of beads, the hush of velvet, the low, polite banter of Púca and patrons. It was a different kind of magic, but magic all the same.

Jen drifted past the cases, letting her eyes wander over the baubles and stones. A brooch shaped like a fox caught her attention—copper, with tiny chips of green glass for the eyes—and she paused to admire the way it seemed ready to leap from its stand. She didn't need a brooch, but she liked the thought that if she ever did, it would be right here, waiting.

She moved to the counter, where Manager Púca was dusting the rim of a display dome with a brush smaller than Jen's pinky. He looked up, monocle gleaming.

"Anything we can tempt you with today, Constable?"

"Just looking," Jen said, voice soft.

He nodded. "That's what it's here for."

Jen stood for a moment, breathing in the scent of polish and—underneath it all—a faint, lingering note of sawdust from the renovations. She looked at the shop, at the way the Púca had made it theirs without erasing what had come before. The old menagerie, for all its noise and chaos, had never really belonged. This place fit the town the way a favorite jacket fit the wearer: snug, a little fancy, but perfectly tuned to its purpose.

The morning passed, and Jen watched as the town's new heart kept its steady beat. Children pressed their faces to the glass, travelers bartered over trinkets, shopkeepers came and went, each leaving with a new story and, sometimes, a little more sparkle in their pocket.

When the bell over the door rang to signal the next customer, Jen stepped aside, nodding to the Púca. She left the shop behind, the sound of Marketer Púca's sales pitch fading as she moved back into the sunlight. Outside, the world resumed its normal size.

She headed up the green, the badge on her vest catching the morning light, and wondered—just for a moment—what her future would look like if someone baked her a bun dusted with that strange crystal. Then she laughed to herself, dismissed the thought, and strode on, ready for whatever the rest of the day would bring.

By the time the dusk bell rang, the world had folded itself into the warm, golden space of the Broken Claw. Jen pushed through the pub's heavy door, let her eyes adjust, and found Sam in their usual spot—a corner table close enough to the hearth to feel the heat, far enough from the door to avoid the worst drafts. The room was loud with laughter and the clack of mugs, but Sam sat alone, turning a small black hilt over in her hands and watching the fire with a look Jen couldn't quite parse.

"Thought you'd be halfway through supper by now," Jen said as she sat, slinging her jacket over the back of the bench. Hellsting, still in bracelet form, glinted on her wrist in the firelight.

Sam grinned, the deep scar on her face folding in on itself and then vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. "Waited for you. It's not as fun without a witness." She set the hilt on the table—Nailbiter, blameless as ever when not called into action—then waved to the bar. "Samantha, two more over here when you've got a minute!"

From behind the counter, Makota's eldest nodded, already loading a tray with mugs of something dark and foamy.

The Claw was in full voice tonight. The regulars had packed the tables, their stories and boasts rolling over one another in a way that felt more like a group effort than a contest. At the far end of the room, a trio of Púca huddled together on a stool, swapping tales about gemstones or perhaps, from the hand gestures, the proper way to set a snare. Jen didn't even bother trying to listen. She was content just to

sit, to watch, and to let the edges of her day soften in the glow of fire and lamp.

Sam picked up Nailbiter's hilt again and ran her thumb along the curve, as if remembering the way it used to feel with a blade attached. "You see the new ring display over at the shop?" she asked.

Jen nodded. "Stopped by this morning. The Marketer nearly sold me a brooch shaped like a fox."

Sam's laugh came out low and hoarse. "You should've bought it. Would've looked good on you." She set the hilt down, then turned the conversation with her usual abruptness. "Did you hear about the Commissioner?"

Jen arched an eyebrow. "The old one, or the new one?"

"Old one. The one who came in here with his fancy coat and a platoon of Civil Guard, swearing he'd have every Púca in chains."

Jen smirked. "What about him?"

Sam leaned in, voice dropping. "He's a forester, now. Got a new post outside Farling. Spends his days counting trees and warning travelers about the local owlbears. Whole squad of Civil Guard followed him, too. They say he's got them patrolling the woods like it's the Palace Green."

Jen barked a laugh. "A better use of his talent, honestly."

Sam nodded, eyes bright. "Best part? You know who recommended him for the job? Llewel. Wrote a reference himself, said the man had an 'instinct for order in untamed spaces.'"

Jen shook her head, impressed. "He's not wrong."

The mugs arrived, clacking onto the table and frothing over the rim. Sam slid one toward Jen. "To new orders," she said, raising her own.

Jen lifted her mug and clinked it gently. "And to not having to break up a single brawl this sennight."

Sam raised her eyebrows. "Is that a challenge?"

Jen grinned. "It's a hope."

They drank in companionable silence. The ale was nutty and strong, with a sweetness that lingered just long enough to make the next sip necessary. Jen let herself relax into the warmth of the moment, the fire, the hum of voices, and the sense that—at least for

one night—the world required nothing more from her than to be present.

Sam broke the silence, her tone gone contemplative. “You ever think we’d get here? A town where the worst thing you had to deal with was a spilled jar or an overeager Púca?”

Jen considered. “I thought about it,” she said. “But I never thought it’d stick.”

“Why not?”

Jen shrugged. “People don’t really change. Not all at once. There’s always someone who wants to be louder, tougher, smarter than the next. Sometimes it’s me.” She paused, then added, “But it’s different now. Feels like the town finally knows what it wants to be.”

Sam nodded, then drew a cloth from her belt and began to polish Nailbiter’s hilt with slow, practiced strokes. “You know why it works?” she said, voice steady and calm. “It’s because you’re here. Because you keep the peace, even when it’s boring, and because the kids on the green know you’ll give them a fair shake if they screw up.” She glanced up, eyes sharp. “You ever leave, this place would go back to the stone age.”

Jen snorted, but the words landed somewhere deep. “It’d last a day without me. Maybe two.”

Sam smiled, the old warmth returning. “Not a chance.”

Jen took another sip, savoring it. “You’re one to talk. I saw you knock two heads together last month before breakfast.”

Sam grinned. “Old habits.” She reached across the table and tapped Jen’s new badge, the silver star bright against her vest. “But this means something. Not just the magic of the gaol, but the person wearing it. That’s what keeps the lines from getting crossed.”

Jen ran her thumb over the badge, then looked up, embarrassed by the attention. “I’m just doing my job.”

Sam’s voice softened. “And that’s exactly the point.”

They let the fire fill the silence between them. Jen watched as a group of travelers filed into the Claw, their faces flush with the pink of a long road and the relief of a place that welcomed them. She recognized one or two from earlier in the day—the overpacked traveler, the woman with the bundle of letters—and each seemed to have shed a

layer of tension, as if the town's magic had stripped off their old worries at the door.

The dusk bell rang out, a soft note that hung in the rafters before fading into the steady hush of evening. Jen stood, stretched, and put on her jacket. "I'll do one more lap before I call it. Just to be sure."

Sam gave her a mock salute, Nailbiter's hilt glinting in the lamp-light. "You do that. I'll keep the ale warm in case you change your mind."

Jen made her way to the door, pausing only to nod at Makota, who was already closing up the till for the night.

Outside, the air was cool and smelled of woodsmoke and river. The green was quiet now, the children long gone and the last of the travelers finding their places for the night. The shops had darkened, but faint lights glowed in a few windows, promising early starts and strong coffee for whoever woke first.

Jen crossed to the porch, leaned on the rail, and let herself breathe. The stars overhead blinked to life, one by one, and for a moment Jen stood perfectly still, listening to the town's heartbeat and feeling the way it echoed in her own chest.

She thought about Sam's words, about the gift and the badge and the slow, stubborn work of making peace. She didn't know if it would last forever, but for now, it was enough.

She turned back to the door, ready to join the world inside, her steps sure and steady on the old wooden boards.

Behind her, the green glowed softly in the night, safe and whole.

And at its center, the town's magic held firm.

afterword

I'm so delighted to have Jen's story out there! It was truly a bit of a struggle to come up with a worthy plot while keeping the story cozy, and it came to me in a roundabout way. I have a track in my Music app of Brown University's a cappella group, "The Brown Derbies," doing a cover of the theme song from Disney's "The Gummi Bears" cartoon. You have to be an Eighties kid to get that, I think. *But* it led me to thinking about some of the other weekday afternoon cartoons of the time, including the Smurfs... and if you know of them, then you'll hopefully see the resemblance to the Púca!

I'm eager for the Púca to participate in upcoming books as well, by the way, and they'll definitely get their own book in due course.

Huge cheers to my Marcie, who created the covers for both *Watchers & Windstorms*, *Stitches & Snake Oil*, and this novel. She works in a very photorealistic style that I love for these books that are really about just one character. I'm back to my regular artist, Howard, for the next novel—which will focus on Dardrad and his wife. It's called *Cuts & Catastrophes*, and I hope you've already added it to your wish list!

By the time you read this I will have crossed the bridge from the gainfully employed to the fully retired, and *Tales from the Broken Claw* is very much helping me stay centered. I hope you're enjoying the

Afterword

novels, and that you've taken a moment to offer a review on your favorite bookstore's website. Those reviews mean more than you can possibly know in terms of a series like this actually making it in front of readers.

Now... go enjoy a pastry, with or without Memberry tea!

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about the author

Don Jones spent two decades writing tech books before he finally penned his first sci-fi novella, *A History of the Galactic War*. His well-reviewed and award-winning novels span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters.

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