

WATCHERS & WINDSTORMS

A COZY FANTASY

TALES FROM THE BROKEN CLAW
BOOK 5

DON JONES

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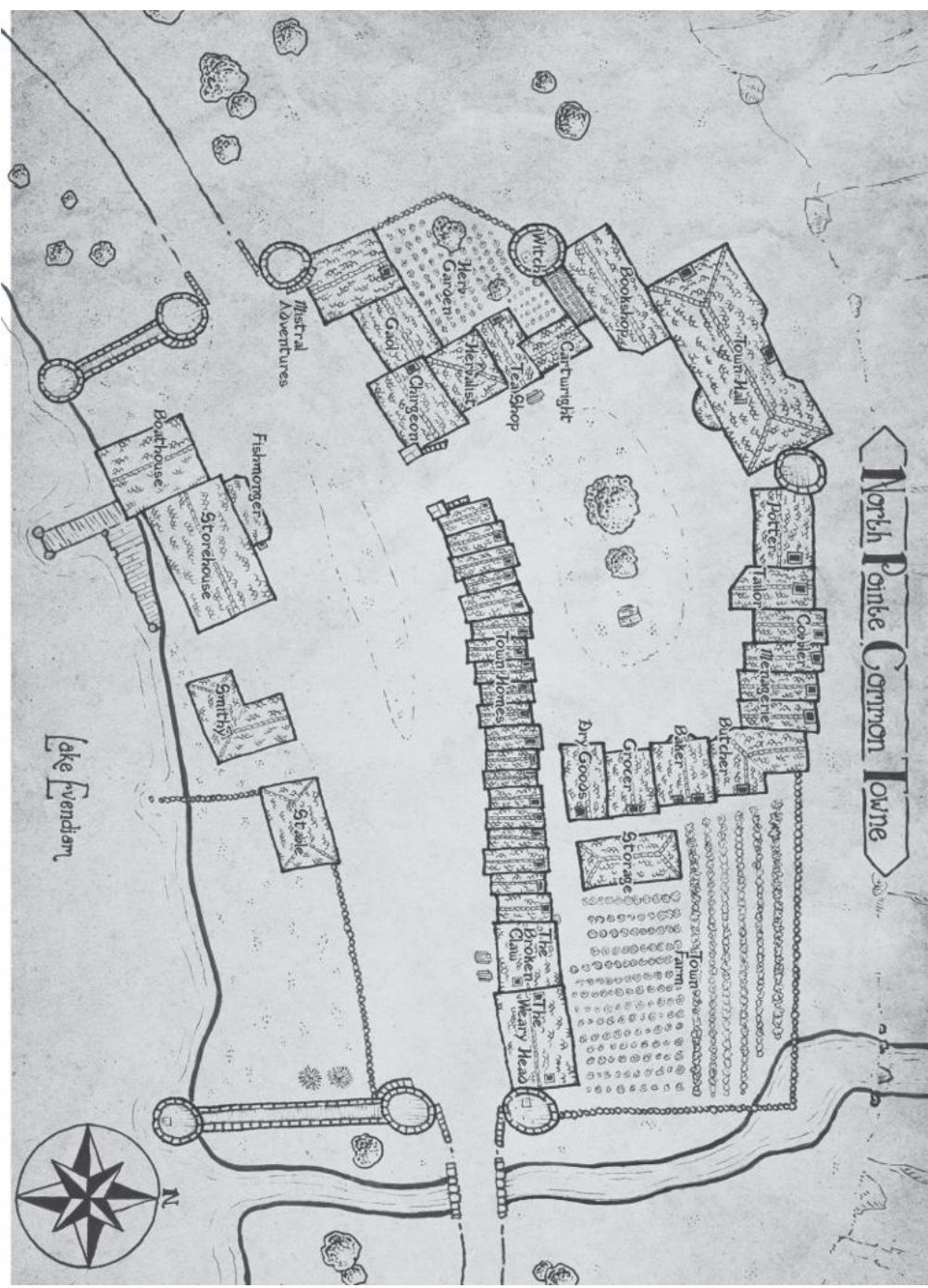
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Urwald



North Pointe Common Towne



Town Hall

Witch

Bookshop

Cartwright

Tea Shop

Herb Garden

Gaol

Changeling

Mistral Adventures

Fishmonger

Storehouse

Butcher

Storehouse

Butcher

Porte

Coat

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Wing

Lake Evendiam



CHAPTER 1

Dawn had only just pulled itself over the Mistral foothills, filtering pale gold and lavender through the ragged tree-line. The light pooled softly in the hollow behind the storehouse, pressing up against its slate walls and painting the dew-damp grass with a sheen that would last precisely twelve ticks of the bell before vanishing forever. Knodalon did not need to measure such things; he'd seen more mornings than all the other souls in North Pointe Common Towne combined, and for him the passage of time was less a current and more a shifting, gentle haze, like smoke rising from the first bakery hearth.

He sat, as he always did, on his bench—*the* bench, really, for it belonged to no one and everyone, worn down at its midpoint and only level if one kept the left leg on the root-strewn path. Knodalon's own left leg, less a limb than a scaffolding of old scars and battered cloth, compensated without complaint. It had endured, as had he, through entire centuries of yesterdays.

His white hair caught the breeze in loose, uneven lengths, most of them falling past his shoulders and some all the way to the small of his back. It would have looked better if he'd bothered to comb it, but there was no one to mind it and precious few in the Towne who'd say so

even if they did. His beard fared little better: a tangle of wire, stained here and there by black tea, campfire smoke, or the general detritus of a life lived with no expectation of grooming.

He wore the same clothing he'd worn the previous day, and the day before that, and perhaps many days before those as well. His shirt—originally gray, but so faded as to become the color of old cheese-cloth—hung loose across his ribs. The trousers he wore were patched in seven different fabrics and shapes, only two of which matched the originals. His boots, if they could be called boots, had been resoled enough times that the only remaining leather was at the top, folded over into a permanent cuff.

And so Knodalon sat, very nearly still, as the sun stretched higher and began to warm the edges of the lake. From his bench he could see the entire length of the trade road as it threaded through North Pointe, snaking between two tall road gates, and he watched as the morning roused itself in careful increments.

First, the baker's kits emerged—always a few moments before the fifth bell, two small, furry figures with lashing tails. They walked quickly, almost a scamper, to the bakery and vanished inside, where Makota and Masaaki would already be kneading and firing and counting out the day's measures of flour.

Next, the old constable made her rounds along the lane, blue jacket buttoned right up to her chin. She carried a thick stick and a little lantern, though it was mostly for show; there hadn't been a need for it in ages. Knodalon noted, with silent approval, that her new boots were polished, and she'd taken care to starch her collar—a rare and therefore admirable discipline.

After that, the stables roused themselves: a shuffle of hooves, the dull thud of feed being dumped into troughs, a brief argument between a donkey and a pair of goats. Knodalon catalogued these sounds as if they were notes in a composition, the sort of music that only truly made sense when played each and every day in exactly the same way.

He did not, as a rule, move. There was nothing to be gained by motion, and everything to be learned by remaining perfectly at rest, letting the events of the Towne unfurl around him like ripples on a

pond. The air still held the night's chill, but Knodalon's own temperature was a private and self-contained thing, never quite matching the world's.

Behind him, the storehouse itself loomed over the road: two stories of heavy, mortared stone, with the roof pitched sharp enough to shed snow all winter and a row of small, glassless windows set high under the eaves. It was a monument to the early days of the settlement, back when every passing wind was a threat and every traveler might be friend or foe. Now, its greatest enemies were moss, rot, and the slow intrusion of spiders into the upper rafters.

Inside, of course, was the other reason Knodalon so rarely left his bench. Every box, every barrel, every sack of grain or crate of preserved lemon or bundle of pickled root existed in a kind of permanent, untouchable suspension. He never needed to count the apples or potatoes, nor track the shifting of the ale barrels as they aged; each item remained precisely as it had been the moment it entered the storehouse, down to the faintest fur on a peach or the exact dusting of flour on a loaf. If anyone in town wondered why their stores never spoiled and their preserves kept forever, they never said so out loud. It was, they all assumed, one of the town's gifts, a gift not unlike the ones their own shops imparted.

Knodalon himself barely remembered the first time he'd made it so. It was a casual, almost thoughtless act, back in those years when acts of godhood were as common as spitting in the dirt. In time, the storehouse had come to match him: a place outside the march of decay and age, invisible to those who walked past, but as real and immutable as the stone that formed its walls.

The mortals think it is their will that holds back the wilds, that keeps their food from spoiling and their dwellings from collapse. How very precious. How very temporary, all of it.

He watched as one of the baker's kits carried a tray of raw dough rolls past his bench. She nodded to him—not with fear, but with the practiced acknowledgment of those who had long since absorbed his presence as a feature of the landscape, like a rock or a standing post. He did not return the gesture. There was no need. He was always watching, always observing.

The first adventurers of the morning appeared just before the sixth bell: a pair of them, judging by the mismatched rhythm of their boots. Knodalon could see them a half-mile down the road, coming in from the lakeside. The man in front wore the battered leathers and scaled shoulderplates of a sword-for-hire, his hair bound back in a tight queue and his jaw already shadowed by two days' beard. The woman behind him moved lightly, favoring her left knee but otherwise poised; she had a staff strapped across her back and a satchel heavy enough to make her walk a touch lopsided.

So it begins again: the daily pageant, the parade of the brief and the hopeful. Why do they come here, always, before they cross into the Northlands? They must sense something, even if they cannot name it.

He studied them with the same distant patience he might use for a flock of birds, or a passing cloud. The woman stopped to adjust her bootlace, shooting a glance up at the storehouse as she did. For a moment, her eyes flickered to Knodalon's, and she started—just a twitch, barely visible. He held her gaze for a second, then let his lids droop to half-mast in the universal signal of disinterest. She exhaled and moved on.

The day stretched open by degrees. Knodalon remained, as ever, unmoving. The rising sun crested over the roofline, casting sharp-edged shadows over the trade road and the low wall opposite. On the lake, small birds began their frantic darting among the reeds, the pale shreds of mist coiling up in answer. Further along, the pub's sign—the Broken Claw—creaked softly as the wind shifted.

It was then that Knodalon noticed it: a ripple, barely discernible, not in the world's air or light, but in the deeper pulse beneath it. The Towne's magic was not so different from the currents of a great lake. It moved quietly, persistent and steady, but sometimes the surface betrayed a turbulence far below. Today, the undercurrent shimmered with a dissonance that did not belong.

He tasted it as a faint, metallic prickle at the back of his tongue, the way a coming storm might reveal itself candlemarks before the clouds arrived. It was an intrusion, but a gentle one—nothing like the blunt, roaring tempests of his past, when the gods made war and each moment thudded with consequence.

There it is. A new hand upon the loom, or else a familiar hand grown reckless. It will resolve itself, or not. The mortals will, as always, survive or perish by their own narrow chances.

He did not shift on his bench, did not even blink. Instead, he followed the anomaly as it drifted along the square, where it caught in the upper boughs of the linden tree inn front of the bakery, then spiraled downward and outward until it vanished, as if it had never been. For the briefest moment, every sound in the square—every boot scrape, every goat bleat, every muttered curse from the direction of the stables—seemed to hang in a glassy stillness.

Then the world resumed.

Another figure emerged from the trade road: the fisherman, Calder Seaherder, bundled in heavy wool despite the warming air. He carried a net and a pair of long, thin oars over one shoulder, his boots squelching in the muddy patch near the storehouse's side door. Knodalon watched him cross the yard, watched the net glint with a dozen tiny droplets that caught and refracted the morning light, watched as Calder paused to set his burden on the ground and flex his hands, each finger gnarled by seasons of cold and wind and wet.

The fisherman looked up, catching Knodalon's eye with the blank, comfortable recognition of a neighbor greeting a neighbor.

"Morning," Calder said, his voice a rasp from years of salt and smoke.

Knodalon offered a slow blink in response, which Calder—like everyone in town—had long since learned to interpret as sufficient.

"Looks like a good day for it," the fisherman continued. "Wind's from the west, but it'll shift to south by midmark, I think."

Knodalon considered, then said, with the deep, fluted timbre of someone unused to speech, "There will be rain. By the bell after noon."

Calder gave a grunt that might have been approval or doubt. "Might help the nets, anyway. Better'n too much sun."

He set about his work, dragging the net and oars down the rutted path to the lakeside dock. Knodalon watched him go, admiring in a purely abstract sense the discipline it took to maintain such a routine,

day after day, knowing how little of it truly mattered in the fullness of things.

Behind him, in the storehouse, a single apple—three years old, picked at the exact moment of ripeness and not a second before—hung suspended in the air between two barrels, where it had been left after someone’s careless handling the previous day. Knodalon could see it through the thin seam of the storehouse’s heavy door. He willed it, without moving, to return to the barrel from which it had been dropped, and in a heartbeat it did, nestling itself among the others with a soundless perfection. Nobody would notice. Only Knodalon.

If only they could see how easily things could be kept, or lost. If only they knew how fine the difference, how gentle the force that holds everything in place.

The sky brightened another notch. Knodalon closed his eyes, just for a moment, letting the noise and light and wind brush over him without resistance.

The world, as always, did not change. But Knodalon felt, just faintly, the presence of something that wished it could.

For a long moment after Calder’s departure, Knodalon simply watched the wake the fisherman left behind. Wet grass re-formed around the prints of his boots, each one deeper than the last as the slope dropped toward the lakeshore. The bench creaked, though he hadn’t moved, and the dawn slipped quietly into full day.

The wind had changed, just as Calder predicted. Knodalon felt it before he smelled it: a damp, sultry air that licked around the corners of the storehouse and fluttered the ragged edges of the market notices nailed to the front post. He tasted, without tasting, the hint of brine and rotted kelp, as if the lake itself were breathing out after a long silence.

He considered the sensation. Not the mere fact of it—southeast wind, warmer than proper for the month, bound to disturb the fisher-folk—but the uncanny specificity of it, the way the air seemed to carry a whisper not meant for human ears.

It was a voice he recognized, though none in the Towne would believe the story if he told it. Winds, like all living things, kept their memories, and Knodalon had once counted himself among their keepers. Now, he only listened.

The residents and shopkeepers of North Pointe Commons were rousing themselves, as they did every day, and Knodalon catalogued their movements with distant, silent fascination. The herbalist (Galhani, who today wore a cap with little blue feathers and always squinted into the sun) unlocked her door, set a cluster of dried roots on the windowsill, and swept her stoop with a precise economy of motion. The tea shop next door, still shuttered, awaited her presence. Even the children, not yet at lessons, began to gather at the edge of the square, their play as predictable as the opening of the day's first ledger.

At some unmeasured interval, Calder returned from the lakeside. The nets were heavier now, each one dragging a slow, symmetrical arc across his back. Fish flapped in the bottom of his carry-basket, a wet and undulating silver that caught the light in thousands of brief, mirrored suns. Calder's hair, slicked to his skull, accentuated the lines of his jaw and the deep grooves at the corners of his mouth.

He stopped directly in front of Knodalon's bench, shifting the weight of the basket from one arm to the other, and considered Knodalon for a moment with a look both skeptical and resigned.

"That wind's coming from the southeast, Knodalon," he said, blunt as a dropped anchor. "It's warmer than it should be for this time of year. Might mess with my catch today."

Knodalon waited a full beat before responding, as if calculating the minimum energy required to acknowledge the statement. He allowed himself the barest tilt of his chin, a gesture that could have meant agreement, or confusion, or nothing at all.

How easily they forget. The wind is a living thing, and it serves no one's convenience. Not even mine.

Aloud, he said, "The warmth is passing, not staying."

Calder sniffed, unconvinced. "Never seen a current like it. Fish come up from the deep, biting at anything. Fools them into thinking it's spring."

"They are not wrong to be fooled," Knodalon replied, voice as soft as the lake's own hush. "The world turns, and so do they."

Calder set the basket on the edge of the bench, then leaned in as if to examine Knodalon more closely. "You see anything strange last night?" he asked. "Any sign of weather, or travelers out of place?"

Knodalon thought of the flicker he'd felt in the Town's magic, the shimmer that had whispered just beneath the surface of things. He thought, also, of the travelers he had watched so many mornings—always the same types, always repeating the old pattern, never realizing how tightly their fates were braided to the Towne and its secret underpinnings.

He could have said many things. Instead, he chose: "Nothing strange. Not yet."

Calder grunted, and the lines around his mouth deepened. "Well. If you see anything, let me know." He hefted the basket and resumed his route, each step scattering a small, shining spray of lake water in his wake.

Knodalon watched him go, then shifted his gaze to the sky. The wind had, indeed, begun to veer. High clouds were blowing fast, whipped into long, shredding filaments. He tracked their motion, counting the seconds between their passage and the change of the scent in the air. Even from his bench, he could sense the entire arc of the weather, as if the sky were an organ and every breeze one note in a complicated melody.

Once, I might have answered that call. Once, I might have bent the wind back to its rightful place, or calmed the water for the mortals who so feared it. Now, it is enough to watch, and to remember.

He let his gaze turn briefly to the storehouse. The windows were still and unbroken, the doors secure. Inside, the apples and the flour and the fish preserves all lingered in their perfect stasis, proof against the whimsy of nature and the decay of years.

He felt the anomaly again, fainter now, a receding echo. Whatever had sent the wind was already moving on. He catalogued the event, stored it in the same quiet library where he kept every other small variation in the Towne's routines, and let it go.

A bell sounded from the Town Hall. Knodalon remained perfectly still.

The world changes. It cannot help itself. But I do not need to change with it. Not yet.

A group of children—one of the baker's, two from the grocer's family, and a third he recognized as belonging to the outfitter—burst into the square, their feet scattering dew and their laughter chasing each other like finches in a hedgerow. Knodalon tracked each one with the idle precision of a naturalist, noting their path and their pace and the way each one's hair caught the light differently.

The wind shifted, and the day moved forward. Knodalon did not.

He watched, and waited, and knew that, sooner or later, whatever was lurking behind that passing wind would reveal itself. It always did, in the end.

CHAPTER 2

The wind did not shift so much as buckle, folding inward on itself with a sly, almost apologetic twist. Knodalon registered the change without moving; the hairs on his arms and the edges of his uncombed beard lifted as if something had drawn a finger down the length of his spine. He watched, hooded eyes focused beyond the obvious, as a figure emerged from the haze where the trade road bent around the linden copse.

At first glance the traveler was unremarkable: a man of indeterminate middle age, slight of build, with the kind of mud-colored tunic and practical boots that could belong to a peddler, a farmer, or a middling confidence artist. He carried a small satchel and nothing else, his pace the measured trudge of one who had long since given up hope of arriving any time soon.

But there, slipping along just behind his left shoulder, was the shimmer. Knodalon saw it as a wavering, the way summer heat warped the horizon. It had no form and needed none; it was presence alone, trailing the man with a loyalty bordering on the parasitic. To any other observer, there would have been nothing, but Knodalon recognized the flicker at once—a minor god, almost certainly a child of

the warmer winds, its identity too insubstantial to resist being carried by any likely host.

He felt the usual irritation at this discovery, the kind he reserved for insects in his porridge and spiders nesting in the storehouse rafters. Tiny gods, the detritus of older ages, always so desperate to cling to the wake of a mortal's passing. There would be mischief, of course; there was always mischief.

The man did not look up as he entered North Pointe, but the shimmer behind him pulsed with a sudden, greedy anticipation. It darted ahead, invisible fingers probing the air. Knodalon watched as it slithered through the first open door it found—the herbalist's, naturally. They always sought warmth, and Galhani's shop was the closest thing to a furnace this side of Makota's bakery.

Within moments, Knodalon noted a subtle uptick in the commotion from the direction of the tea shop. Galhani herself emerged onto the stoop, arms loaded with bundled roots and dried leaves. She paused, sniffed the air, and frowned. Behind her, a thin trail of steam curled out the half-open window, rapidly dispersing in the morning chill.

Galhani wore her confusion openly, her gnome-bright eyes darting between the suspiciously steaming window and the sky overhead. She set the bundles on the windowsill and pushed the window wider, fanning at the hot air with both hands. Her mouth moved, perhaps a string of mild oaths, but the wind carried away the words before they reached Knodalon's bench.

Inside, he could imagine what she would find: teas boiling over, tinctures sweating in their glass vials, every surface dusted with the fine powder of desiccated plants reacting badly to the sudden, unseasonable warmth. There would be a mess—never catastrophic, only ever annoying. It was the signature of these lesser divinities: too weak to conjure true disaster, but gifted enough to disrupt routine in ways both petty and persistent.

Knodalon closed his eyes for half a breath, remembering the first time he had seen such a godling let loose on the world. It was always the same. They rode a mortal until the mortal's faith or luck or ignorance suffocated them, or until they outgrew their hosts and set out,

reckless and alone, to try their mischief on a grander scale. Very few succeeded. The world was no longer hospitable to such ambition.

He opened his eyes again in time to watch Galhani, now wielding a battered tin scoop, chase the shimmer out the door with a series of determined sweeps. The little god, stubborn as spilled oil, recoiled and clung to the eaves, making the shingled roof pop and creak as the warmth settled in. Galhani squinted upward, one hand shading her eyes, and let out a sigh heavy enough to be heard all the way to the trade road.

"Damnable weather," she called, addressing no one in particular.

Knodalon, out of a sense of decorum more than obligation, inclined his head a fraction in acknowledgment.

Galhani, seeing the motion, brightened at once. "Knodalon! You're a student of the elements. Tell me—have you ever seen the likes?" She gestured with her scoop at the rippling air above her shop.

"Many times," Knodalon replied, his voice as dry as old timber. "It will not last."

"I should hope not," she said, fussing at her hair, which had begun to frizz in the sudden humidity. "My teas will be ruined if this keeps up."

"The teas will survive," he said, "but the flowers in your north window will not."

Galhani's eyes widened. She whirled and sprinted back into the shop, leaving the door to bang smartly against the stop as she vanished inside.

The shimmer, for its part, seemed unperturbed. It oozed down the drainpipe and pooled along the road, following the new wind. Knodalon watched it gather itself, then dart in a brief, triumphant arc toward the bakery. Typical, he thought. They never learned by example, only by exhausting every possible venue for trouble.

He leaned back on his bench, exhaled, and let the sun work on the knots in his shoulders. For the first time all morning, he allowed himself the smallest of smiles. The day promised to be more interesting than most.

A candle mark passed, and with it, a slow accumulation of incidents up and down the road. The shimmer, emboldened now, grew less subtle in its provocations. Laundry hung out to dry on the green whipped free of its pins, launching a brief and spectacular chase among the grocer's children. The bellows at the smithy took on a mind of their own, inflating and deflating with enough vigor to scatter live coals onto the stone apron. At one point, a flock of hens from the edge of the Towne gathered in perfect formation on the roof of the gaol, their feathers ruffled into elaborate crests, clucking as though they'd found some higher form of entertainment.

Knodalon saw all of this. He let it unfold without intervention. The mortals would muddle through; they always did.

What intrigued him more was the traveler, who now sat on the steps outside the Weary Head, staring into the distance as though he'd lost the thread of his own journey. The shimmer coiled at his feet, idly tugging at the laces of his boots, then flitting away when he bent to swat at a nonexistent fly. Knodalon regarded the man with a silent, professional interest. So often the hosts of these godlings wore an aura of madness, or at the very least an expression of chronic bewilderment. This one, by contrast, looked merely bored.

He wondered, not for the first time, what it was about this particular place that called the minor gods to it. The wilds beyond the foothills were vast, the mountains beyond that vaster still, and yet, year after year, these tatters of the old pantheon came to North Pointe, each one eager to try its luck against the sturdy inertia of the Towne. Perhaps it was something about the lake, the way its surface promised an infinity that the land could not. Perhaps it was the way the people here had learned to ignore strangeness, or at least to accommodate it with a minimum of fuss.

A commotion from the bakery interrupted his reverie. Makota herself stood at the doorway, arms akimbo, tail lashing with irritation. Her kits darted behind her, each with a tray of pastries, attempting to present them to the clutch of townsfolk that had gathered in the wake of the morning's incidents.

"It will not stop rising!" Makota yelled, brandishing a lump of dough the size of a newborn calf.

"Let it rise, then," someone called from the back of the crowd.

"It's not bread anymore," Makota said, voice climbing in exasperation. "It's a menace! It ate the rolling pin, and it's going for the broom next!"

Knodalon watched as the shimmer infiltrated the shop, causing the display glass to fog with an unnatural warmth. Makota lunged at it with a wooden paddle, her fur standing on end, while the kits squealed and retreated behind a barricade of overturned flour bins.

He considered intervening, if only to prevent property damage, but decided against it. The day was young, and there was still much to be learned from observing the godling's trajectory.

He returned his attention to the traveler, who had begun to doze, chin tucked to chest and arms wrapped around his knees. The shimmer, momentarily bored with the bakery, hovered above his head like a halo of misplaced sunlight. For a brief, comical moment, it shaped itself into the vague outline of a crown, then dissolved into nothingness as the man snored and shifted on the step.

Knodalon allowed himself another small smile.

This was the problem with minor gods: they had all the ambition of the old ones, but none of the patience. The cycle would repeat, and by nightfall the shimmer would either exhaust itself or find a new host willing to tolerate its hunger for attention. Knodalon resolved to keep watch, if only to ensure that no real harm came to the more fragile residents—especially the baker's kits, who, by the sound of things, were moments away from being overtaken by a rogue brioche.

He closed his eyes and listened to the cadence of the Towne, each sound registering as a note in a symphony of contained chaos. The shimmer would move again soon; he could feel it gathering, straining at the edge of perception.

He would be ready.



The bread was the first to suffer.

Knodalon could just see it from his bench: a lumpen, pale army of dough swelling against the bakery's front window, pressing at the

glass as if determined to colonize the rest of the town square. Every few seconds, Makota's silhouette darted through the haze of flour and steam, brandishing a peel or a broom or, on one occasion, what looked like a small, live ferret.

The shimmer had wormed its way into the bakery's innards and was now making a sport of overproofing every batch it could find. Buns ballooned to twice their intended size; loaves emerged from the oven with bellies split open, pale underbellies exposed like the soft flanks of a fish; croissants unfurled into mutant horns, each one oozing butter in an entirely inappropriate fashion. Where the kits had once carried trays of perfect, golden pastries, they now struggled to contain breadstuffs that flopped over the edges and shed clots of sticky crumb with every step.

Knodalon watched as one kit, barely more than a tail and two ears peeking above the tray, staggered out the door and attempted to deliver a single, heroic scone to the grocer's child. The scone, inflated nearly to the size of the child's own head, wobbled precariously as the kit navigated the three steps down to the square, then, with a certain grim inevitability, rolled right off the tray and into the waiting arms of gravity.

The child accepted this new, scone-based reality with admirable equanimity. He tucked the scone under his arm, nodded solemnly to the kit, and resumed his play, leaving a fine, biscuity trail in his wake.

Knodalon smiled again, then, despite himself.

It was harder to enjoy when the shimmer migrated across the street to the Broken Claw.

He could hear the commotion through the pub's open door, and closed his eyes to imagine the accompanying visuals: Sam, former mercenary, present barkeep, and unchallenged master of the withering stare, would have noticed the problem immediately. The morning regulars—three, sometimes four, but never fewer than two—sat in their usual nook by the window, nursing pints of the house ale and trading stories of days when their backs were less prone to betrayal.

This morning, as the shimmer slipped through the pub's half-open transom, the air inside shifted from the familiar damp chill to a strange, oppressive warmth. The condensation on the mugs vanished

in an instant, replaced by an oily film that clung to the glass and made every sip taste faintly of disappointment. Froth flattened with astonishing speed; the ale itself, brewed for the kind of bitterness that could weather a siege, tasted suddenly of nothing at all.

In the eye of Knodalon's mind, Sam scowled at her tap, then at her glass, and finally at her own reflection in the window. She poured a new pint, frowned at the way it settled, and tried again, this time with a different barrel. No luck. The warmth had infested every keg in the place.

She set her jaw, squared her shoulders, and stalked over to the regulars. "Which of you started a fire in the privy?" she demanded, voice low and entirely humorless. Low, but sharp enough to carry out into the trade road.

Through the window, the patrons blinked in unison. One of them—a retired smith, if Knodalon recalled—raised both hands in protest. "We haven't even been yet. Not after last sennight."

Sam glared, weighing the veracity of the statement, then turned on her heel and stomped back behind the bar. She withdrew the blameless hilt of Nailbiter from beneath the counter and brandished it at the tap with the ceremonial gravity of one about to address a personal enemy. There was a faint, audible click as the hilt anticipated violence; Knodalon could almost hear the blade purring in its home dimension.

The shimmer, sensing a challenge, recoiled from the bar and dashed through the common room, knocking over a salt shaker and a bowl of peanuts in its hurry to escape. It darted up the stairs, past a half-awake lodger who yawned and scratched at his beard, then zipped out the far window, where it hovered a moment before descending into the square once more.

Sam stalked it out the door and stood on the front walk, watching it go, hands still gripping Nailbiter, then muttered something distinctly unflattering about the quality of supernatural disturbances these days. She poured herself a shot of last year's brandy, tossed it back, and began cleaning the bar with a vigor that would have put most combat drills to shame.

Knodalon observed the entire sequence without blinking. He admired Sam's decisiveness, though he suspected she would have had

more luck banishing the godling with a good, solid curse than with cold steel. Still, it was a comfort to know that some mortals retained the proper reflexes.

The shimmer, emboldened by its narrow escape, zipped past the grocer's, rattled the windowpanes at the dry goods store, and made a brief, pointless detour into the stables, where it found nothing to haunt except an elderly goat and a single, slightly bewildered horsefly. Knodalon sensed its confusion, its yearning for something to take root in. The little god was hungry for belief, desperate for acknowledgment. In a world that had long since moved past the age of minor spirits, it was an orphaned ember, looking for tinder.

He felt a twinge of sympathy. It passed quickly, replaced by a stronger current of annoyance. If there was one thing Knodalon had never tolerated, it was interference with the proper function of a storehouse. And in its way, North Pointe was a storehouse for all the old, weird things that no other town would shelter.

It was almost offensive, he thought, for a piddling warm wind to come meddling with a system as perfect as this.

A sound—a sort of hollow, fluting laugh—echoed from the direction of the trade road, drawing his attention back to the traveler and his shimmering companion. The man had woken, rubbing at his eyes, and now watched with mild, academic interest as the shimmer danced in loops around his head. He seemed not to recognize the godling for what it was, but he allowed it to settle on his shoulder anyway, as if he'd grown accustomed to being followed by oddities.

Knodalon considered him anew. There was always a risk that the host might come to accept the godling, might even come to rely on it. That path, Knodalon knew, led nowhere good—not for the man, not for the town, and especially not for the godling itself.

He made a mental note to watch them more closely.

Down at the bakery, Makota was still wrestling with her mutinous dough, now attempting to extrude it through the front window in an attempt to vent the worst of the heat. She had flour on her ears, flour on her whiskers, and flour in places that would require considerable effort to clean later. Her eldest kit, in a fit of inspired problem-solving, had begun to stack cooling racks outside on the green, transforming

the overflow of bread into a sort of impromptu playground for the grocer's and baker's children. There was a game now—tag, perhaps, or some local variant—played among the heaps of misbegotten pastry.

Knodalon approved. If you couldn't beat the gods, at least you could eat them.

The wind shifted again, less a change in direction than a reminder of presence. Knodalon felt it swirl against the storehouse walls, probing for a way inside. He sat up a little straighter, lifted his chin, and regarded the shimmer with the ancient, unhurried certainty of someone who knew the pecking order of all things.

For a moment, the shimmer hovered on the edge of the green, uncertain. Then, as if concluding it had reached its limit for the morning, it faded, drawing itself back toward the traveler. The man, feeling the touch of warmth at his neck, shivered and pulled his collar tighter, then continued on his way toward the lake, oblivious to the havoc he trailed behind.

Knodalon watched him go. He allowed himself a single, full breath, the kind he had not taken in years, and tasted the air for the faint, acrid tang of supernatural frustration.

It was there, and it was sweet.

He would keep watch. He always did.

He noticed the shadow before the figure; the sun was at just such an angle. Alred Grasswalker's silhouette elongated itself across the square, crisp and clean-edged, before the actual elf appeared at the crossroad. Knodalon, who missed nothing, made note of the way Alred adjusted his stride at the edge of the storehouse's reach, as if crossing a boundary he could neither see nor name.

"Good day, Knodalon," Alred said, in the manner of someone who had already been up for candlemarks and found the morning mostly adequate.

Knodalon answered with a tilt of his head. Alred took this as invitation to sit, so he perched at the far end of the bench, back ramrod straight, knees together in a posture of self-imposed efficiency. He

wore a dark linen shirt, buttoned to the throat despite the rising heat, and his boots were so polished they reflected the dappling sun from the linden overhead. His hair was tied at the nape, his pointed ears held with a discipline that bordered on self-mockery.

"You've seen it, then," Alred said, not so much a question as an administrative follow-up. "The shimmer?"

Knodalon nodded.

"Makota's in shambles," Alred continued, fingers drumming a pattern on his thigh. "Galhani's lost two full racks of drying angelica, and Sam—well, she's cross, and she's taking it personally. Calder says the lake is skimming warm patches along the rocks. The children are delighted, of course. My Carolijn is already gathering what she calls 'sun bread' for experiments. I suspect it will end in sorrow, but that is the way of childhood."

He let the words hang a moment, eyes on the horizon, before continuing. "Not an accident, in your estimation?"

"Not an accident," Knodalon agreed, his voice a burr of certainty.

Alred nodded, as if this confirmed a spreadsheet's worth of predictions. "It's always this time of year. Just before the wildflowers crest, the small gods come sniffing. Sometimes they bring gifts, but mostly they bring inconvenience." He offered a sidelong glance, calculating the risk of candor. "Any advice?"

Knodalon, ever loath to squander words, said, "Endure."

This earned the faintest of smiles from Alred. "The town's unofficial motto." He shifted, flicked a speck of dust from his trousers. "Do you know which one it is?"

Knodalon watched the shimmer, now reduced to a faint flicker in the air above the traveler's head. "Child of the westerlies. Barely more than a rumor, yet."

"Hm." Alred leaned forward, steeping his fingers. "If it lingers, will it cause harm?"

"To the gods, or to the town?"

"Either. Both."

Knodalon considered this. "It will try. The town will resist. There will be messes."

"Messes we can clean up," Alred said, brisk. "Good." He stood,

dusted the back of his trousers. "Thank you, Knodalon. If anything... escalates, you'll see it first. I trust you'll act."

Knodalon nodded.

Alred smiled again, this time genuine, and walked off at the same measured pace, crossing the green toward his shop. He stopped to greet Calder, who was trundling a pail of smelt up from the lakeside. They exchanged a few words—Knodalon couldn't hear, but knew the shape of such a conversation: weather, children, the likelihood of a shipment arriving on time.

Calder then made his way directly to the bench, settling with a wince and a sigh beside Knodalon. "That wind again," he said, eyes squinting toward the lake. "Nothing's right about it."

Knodalon glanced at him, but said nothing.

Calder shifted, resting his hands on his knees. "Alred says it's some kind of small god. You believe that?"

Knodalon shrugged, which for him was a statement of absolute conviction.

Calder grunted, then lapsed into silence for a time. Together, they watched the wind skitter leaves across the square, push clouds into odd, sharp-edged geometries, stir up a miniature dust devil that chased two squealing children from the green. Calder watched the children, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Reminds me of when I was young. Before the war. Things happened for no reason then, too, but you didn't question it. You just ducked, or ran faster."

Knodalon considered this a statement of philosophy and let it stand.

"Will it last?" Calder asked.

Knodalon squinted at the shimmer, now barely visible except when it reflected a slant of late-morning light. "Not unless it finds something to feed it."

Calder's smile faded, replaced by a line of concern. "Best it doesn't, then."

He rose, joints cracking, and hefted the pail again. "I'll let the others know. If you see it come near the docks, give a holler. Even if you're just thinking it."

Knodalon nodded.

Calder walked away, leaving only the faintest scent of fish and lake water behind. Knodalon watched the square for a time, cataloguing each minor disruption—the children now wrestling in a heap among discarded crusts of bread, Galhani hanging her wilted herbs in the faint hope they might reconstitute, Makota's kits dragging the last of the monstrous dough loaves into the shade. He felt the balance of the Towne tilt and then, slowly, right itself.

The shimmer lingered, indecisive. It hovered for a moment at the edge of the bakery, drawn by the radiant heat, then shuddered and zipped back to the traveler, who by now had begun a slow circuit of the lake's edge, skipping stones and talking to himself, the godling orbiting him like a restless moon.

Knodalon stood, stretching his back until the vertebrae aligned with a satisfying pop. He turned toward the storehouse, where the world's inventory remained perfectly preserved, untouched by wind or whim. He placed a hand on the heavy wooden door and considered, for a brief instant, inviting the shimmer inside—just to see if it would dare trespass in a place so completely outside of time.

He decided against it. The small gods had their patterns. So did he.

He left the door closed and returned to his bench, settling in to watch the next ripple in the day's eventful pond.

There would be more. There always were.

The afternoon unfolded with the slow inevitability of yeast rising in a warm kitchen. The small god, buoyed by its modest victories, continued its expedition through North Pointe Common Towne, though the edge had gone out of its mischief. It seemed to have learned, by some minute accumulation of failures, that here it would meet resistance in the form of dry-goods logic and parental forbearance, and that the cost of chaos was more often ridicule than worship.

Knodalon watched it all, content to let the candlemarks pass without intervention.

The shimmer's next act was to sneak into the town hall, where it

set the blackboard chalks to writing crude, looping messages to the children about the glories of skipping lessons and the futility of arithmetic. The teacher, Vamir the Forest Elf, countered this by assigning double sums and confiscating the offending chalks, then conscripting the children into a search party for the “ghost in the wall.” The search ended with several bruised knees and an impromptu lesson on the dangers of herd mentality.

At the cobbler’s, the shimmer discovered the pleasure of setting buttons and laces spinning on workbenches, and so for the better part of the afternoon, Bartram was kept busy catching things before they could wobble themselves into scattering on the floor. He complained, but only mildly—after all, little could actually break, and nothing he made was so precious it couldn’t be remade tomorrow.

When the sun reached its lazy zenith, the shimmer found its way to the lakeshore, where the traveler had set up an impromptu camp by the dock. Knodalon noted the man’s resigned slouch, the way he watched the water without really seeing it. The shimmer curled around him like a lazy cat, drawing patterns in the air that only children and gods could read.

The traveler ate his midday meal—bread, cheese, a pinch of salt, nothing fancy—and then, as if realizing he’d overstayed his welcome, packed his meager belongings and began the slow walk north, along the trade road toward the woods beyond the lake. The shimmer followed, trailing him at a respectful distance, occasionally darting ahead to test the wind.

As the pair passed through the town’s west gate, Knodalon felt the faintest pressure ease at the back of his mind, like a low storm cell finally lifting off the horizon.

He closed his eyes for a time, letting the ordinary sounds of Towne reassert themselves: the slap of linen at the laundry line, the hush and suck of water at the dock, the rhythmic argument of children inventing new rules for an old game. He listened as Makota and her kits sang a nonsense song while scrubbing dough from the bakery tiles. He heard the creak of the pub’s sign as Sam, having restored order to her taps, called last rounds for the stubborn morning patrons who never left, not really, just rearranged their seating.

The world returned to normal, or as normal as North Pointe ever allowed.

Dusk settled. The air grew soft and gold, the green thick with the smell of trampled grass and sun-warmed bread. Knodalon's bench, no longer in the thick of the day's news, cooled to match the breeze off the lake.

He remained seated, unmoving, until the last light faded from the square and the doors of every shop shut in sequence, one after the next, as if the Towne itself were exhaling into sleep.

Only then did he stand. He stepped once, twice, across the worn path, and with a gesture that was less habit than benediction, touched the storehouse wall. The stones held their chill, and behind them, the world's memory held fast: apples and grain and barrels of ale, each one preserved, each one waiting for its moment to matter again.

He allowed himself a smile—not for the godling or the mortals, but for the enduring fact of a place that could take chaos in stride, then set the world aright before the sun was down.

When he sat again, he felt the smallest flicker of contentment, rare as rain in high summer.

The wind was quiet.

The storehouse kept its silence.

And Knodalon watched the night arrive.

CHAPTER 3

N ight over North Pointe meant true dark, broken only by the uneven glow of lanterns and the thin silvering of lake-light. The day's events remained in the air like flour, settled but not quite at rest, and Knodalon sat on his bench as he always did, unmoved by the passage of time or the slow cooling of the earth beneath him.

He had nearly dozed—a rare thing, and not one he would ever admit to—when the silence cracked open with the staggered approach of a boot on the trade road. The rhythm was wrong: not the sure, measured step of a local, nor the brisk trot of a traveling merchant, but a scuff and drag, scuff and drag, as if one leg had forgotten its purpose. Knodalon's eyes flickered open, adjusting instantly to the gloom.

The figure came into view a dozen paces beyond the linden tree, just outside the reach of the square's last guttering lamp. At first he looked like any trader, packless and travel-stained, but the closer he came, the more his outline betrayed him: his right arm hung dead at the shoulder, and his left clutched his ribs as if to keep them from spilling out. Blood clotted the front of his shirt, glimmered wet at the

edge of his sleeve. His face was a rictus of shock, eyes blank and bright, mouth open in a permanent gasp.

He made it three steps past the linden before his knees failed him, collapsing in a heap just at the foot of Knodalon's bench. For a moment he only knelt there, body quivering in a way that spoke more of animal panic than pain. Then, with effort, he pulled himself up, and fixed his gaze on Knodalon as if the old man alone could bear witness to what he had become.

Knodalon watched him, silent. There was no need for words, yet.

"Help," the traveler managed, voice sandpapered by thirst and terror. "Gods, help me—"

"You're not dead," Knodalon said, without inflection. "Not yet."

The man gave a half-laugh, half-choke. "It got the rest. I ran—" He tried to gesture, but his arm refused. "Bandits, at first, we thought. Goblins, but smart. Organized." He drew a breath that sounded like it might be his last. "They wore colors. Same, all of them. Like a war band."

Knodalon nodded, as if to say, go on.

"They're moving down from Demonbane," the man panted. "Not just raiding. They're clearing the foothills. Every pass, every trail. The Goblin King—there is one, I saw him, I swear—he's got all the tribes under one flag. They're coming through, and nothing stops them."

He retched, doubled over, then righted himself with surprising strength. "We tried to warn people at the last town. They laughed—said goblins don't plan. But these do. These know what they're doing."

His eyes begged for something: assurance, perhaps, or disbelief.

"They do," Knodalon agreed. "You did well to come this far."

The man stared at him for a moment, uncertain if he'd been dismissed or comforted. "It's not just the road," he whispered. "They're pushing everyone out. People, animals, even the wind—"

He stopped, head drooping. Blood pooled beneath him, slow and deliberate.

Knodalon let his senses reach beyond the man, into the fabric of the wound. The smell was wrong: not just iron, not just rot, but the acrid tang of goblin resin, used to coat blades against healing. The gash was

deep, but not fatal if treated; the poison would finish him by morning if left to itself.

"Sit," Knodalon said, and the man obeyed, crumpling onto the bench's far end. There was a silence then, broken only by the hiss of the wind at the lakeshore, and the click of footsteps behind them.

Dexter appeared, as if summoned from the shadows. His presence was always abrupt—he simply occupied space that moments before had been empty, a trick that unsettled most who met him. Tonight he wore his usual black, coat buttoned high at the neck, hands sheathed in thin gloves. His face was unreadable, but his eyes flickered over the traveler's wounds with swift, clinical assessment.

"He won't die here," Knodalon said. "But he'll die if the poison holds."

Dexter nodded, the motion nearly invisible. He knelt beside the bench, peeled back the man's sleeve with a gentleness that bordered on reverence, and exposed the wound beneath. The flesh had already blackened around the edges, the resin working its way along the veins like ink in paper. Dexter touched the wound, then the man's forehead, and finally his own lips, as if tasting the shape of the injury.

He looked up at Knodalon, and in his eyes was a question: Worth saving?

Knodalon considered. In the grand ledger, every mortal loss was as dust—but the man had braved the wild, had survived when his fellows had not, and had brought the only warning North Pointe was likely to receive. That, at least, deserved acknowledgment.

"Yes," Knodalon said. "He's worth it."

Dexter nodded once. He rose, slid his arm under the traveler's good side, and with surprising ease levered him upright. The traveler resisted at first, but Dexter spoke a single word—in audible to Knodalon, but with the power of a commandment—and the man subsided, letting himself be led away. They vanished up the road toward the chirurgeon's shop, the door closing behind them with a soft, inevitable click.

Knodalon was left alone on the bench, the man's blood still darkening the earth at his feet. He stared at it for a long while, thinking.

A storm comes. Not of wind, but of men. The kind that leaves no survivors, only witnesses.

He reached down and pressed a finger into the blood, feeling its warmth, its promise of consequence. The stain spread, as stains always did, but Knodalon made no move to wipe it away.

He sat until the sun rose, and the world—reluctantly, uncertainly—followed.

By the second bell after dawn, North Pointe Common Towne was a different place, though you'd have to know it as Knodalon did to see the difference. It had not changed in the way a village at war changes—no torches, no screams, no line of ragged refugees streaming up the road. Instead, the shift was quiet, incremental: a bar of light moved from one side of the square to the other; a child walked hand-in-hand with her mother, then, halfway across, dropped the hand and ran for the bakery; a stray dog, once content to laze in the mud by the stables, now prowled a pattern of tight, nervous loops along the periphery.

Knodalon watched it all. He had not moved from his bench, nor had he any intention to. His leg had stiffened overnight, and the only comfortable position was to keep it propped straight on the lowest rung, foot balanced on the broad heel. The ache in his knee, constant as the wind, was a useful distraction from the ache in his mind.

He was the first to spot the figures emerging from the Broken Claw. Sam and Jen, both upright and alert, neither looking as though they'd slept. Sam wore her white hair pulled tight, face set in lines that had weathered worse news than this; she had a way of walking that said nothing could surprise her, least of all the prospect of battle. Jen kept her own hair loose, her eyes scanning every corner, even now refusing to turn her back to the open road.

They conferred on the step, close enough to hear the other's breath, and in that moment Knodalon noted the transformation. Jen's bracelet, heavy and inert the night before, was now a sword—Hellsting, knapped edge black against the sun, ready at her side. Sam's own sword, Nailbiter, hadn't materialized yet, but her right hand hovered

always near her hip, fingers flexing in anticipation. They did not look at Knodalon, but he felt their attention anyway, a subtle gravity that pulled every alertness in town toward his bench.

They spoke in low voices. Knodalon heard only fragments: "They'll hit at night—" "Hold fast on the north side—" "No mistakes, not this time." But it was enough. The perimeter would be locked before sunset, watches set, and the children told to sleep with shoes and cloaks close at hand. The language of war, universal and efficient, required no translation.

From the corner of his eye, Knodalon saw Warren and Wilem at the east gate. Warren's massive hands—green, the skin thick as melon rind—tested each wooden beam for rot, then pounded the supports home with a careful force that would have snapped them in two if he hadn't known exactly how much pressure each could bear. Wilem, smaller and shaggier, followed behind with a cask of resin and a crate of spare bolts, checking every hinge and lock. Together, they worked like a pair of giants in a child's story, laboring not out of fear but from the conviction that every wall, every door, every simple thing done right was a shield for all the souls inside.

Nearer to the bench, a contingent from the bakery hurried through the square. Makota led, tail upright, ears twitching with each new sound. The kits, Kene and Sora, trailed her with trays of proofed dough, moving with an urgency that bordered on reverence. They filed into the bakery, and soon the air was thick with the pulse of kneading, the wet thump of fists on dough, the ringing sound of oven doors. From his seat, Knodalon watched the bakery windows fog with heat, the shapes inside growing indistinct as the day brightened. Every now and then a kit darted out, lugging armfuls of bread or packets of dry goods to be sealed in crates lined up under the bakery's awning. Makota herself took charge of packing the flour, tying off each bag with a knot she tested twice before setting it aside. There was no waste, no idle talk, no time for anything but the work of survival.

Down at the lake, Calder loaded his boat. He made three trips from the dock to the shoreline, each time carrying more than a man should be able. Nets, casks, sealed tins, bundles of preserved fish—each piece stowed precisely, the weight balanced fore and aft. When the last load

was aboard, Calder sat on the gunwale, hands folded over his knees, and waited. Knodalon watched as Calder's gaze wandered up the shore, past the edge of the Towne and into the wild country beyond. He sat that way for a long time, utterly still, as if the only defense against disaster was not to move at all.

By midday, the routine had congealed into something almost comforting. Knodalon catalogued it all, as was his habit: every child counted, every bundle inventoried, every watchpost manned. He saw the small dramas play out—the argument over who would ring the bell, the brief scuffle between a grocer's boy and a stablehand, the moment when Jen bent to tie a child's bootlace before moving on. He stored them in his mind, each one a bead on a string, ready for recall when the time came.

At noon, the air itself seemed to tighten. Knodalon felt the pressure in his ears before he heard the sound: a single, high-pitched note, not quite a whistle, not quite a scream, but unmistakable to anyone who'd lived through the old wars. The wind dropped, just for a second. Every person in the square stopped and turned, as if expecting to see the enemy at the very edge of town.

But there was nothing. Only the bakery's smoke, rising in a straight line. Only the glint of sun off the smithy's roof. Only the old, inevitable ache in Knodalon's knee.

He relaxed, just a fraction, and let the world resume.

Order is a trick, a story mortals tell themselves to keep from drowning in the current. But sometimes, the story is enough.

As the sun arced down toward the horizon, the work continued. Sam and Jen walked the trade road, checking with each business, giving instructions, taking none. At the gates, Warren and Wilem finished their work, and with a handshake sealed the day's labor. The bakery's stock now lined the entire west side of the green, loaves and cakes and buns packed in crates that would outlast the siege, if one came. At the lake, Calder closed the last of his barrels, then set about sharpening the pair of harpoons that lived beneath the stern seat.

All day, Knodalon remained at his post. Townsfolk passed him, some nodding, a few with more urgent business never making eye

contact. He neither invited nor discouraged conversation. He watched, and remembered, and waited.

Only once, near dusk, did anyone approach.

It was Sora, the baker's youngest, who sidled up to the bench. She was covered in flour from head to tail, and carried a bundle wrapped in linen. She held it out, face uncertain.

"For you," she said, voice barely above a whisper.

Knodalon regarded the bundle. "Why?"

Sora looked at the ground, then at him. "Mama says, when things are hard, people forget to eat."

He accepted the bread, nodding solemnly. Sora smiled—shy, relieved—and darted back to the bakery, where the window glowed orange against the growing blue of night.

Knodalon sat with the bread in his lap for a long time, turning it in his hands, feeling the warmth seep through the linen.

He would not eat it. He never did. But he admired the gesture, the logic of it. When the world seemed intent on chaos, sometimes the only rebellion left was to break bread and remember you were alive.

The sky deepened, and the wind came up again. In the square, lanterns flickered into life, lighting the edges of doors and windows, casting long, uncertain shadows across the road.

Tomorrow would bring what it brought. For tonight, the town had prepared as best it could, and Knodalon found himself, for the first time in a long while, almost proud.

He leaned back, closed his eyes, and let the day fade out, one quiet breath at a time.



Dusk pressed close to the town, the day's color draining until only the lanterns remained, each a lonely halo along the trade road. Knodalon felt the change before he saw it: a pinching at the edge of his perception, a tightening in the threads of magic that bound the place together. North Pointe's gift was always subtle—a current of stability, a muffling of the world's sharpest hungers—but now the air crackled with a different energy, one brittle and alive.

From the bench, he watched the preparations shift from practical to ceremonial. At the green, a group of the older children, faces set in imitations of adult solemnity, walked the circuit of the square lighting each lantern in turn. They did this not out of fear, but because it had always been done this way, since the time when the woods beyond the lake had been black and deep and filled with every kind of threat. In the flickering light, their shadows joined and parted, joined and parted, like the links of a living chain.

On the porch of the Broken Claw, Sam and Jen stood together. They had changed clothes: Sam now wore a dark vest and heavy boots, her hair loose and wild around her scarred face; Jen had traded her uniform for leather trousers and a thick, patched cloak, Hellsting on her wrist and a second, smaller blade in her opposite hand. They spoke little, but when they did, their voices carried: clipped, unsentimental, but with the kind of steel that let you know a decision had been made and it would be enforced.

A line of townsfolk filed out of the bakery, each carrying a loaf, a round of cheese, or a flask of spirits. They paused at the edge of the square, waiting for a signal, then crossed to the storehouse. Knodalon watched as they set the bundles on the stone steps, each one placed with the care of an offering. No one lingered, but a few glanced his way, eyes lingering just long enough to say: We know you're there. We know you're watching.

He said nothing, but the acknowledgment warmed him in a way he would not have admitted.

A short distance away, Warren and Wilem inspected the completed work at the gate. Satisfied, Warren patted Wilem's shoulder, then walked the perimeter alone, his huge hands dangling at his sides. He checked every wall, every post, every anchor, as if the act itself could conjure security. When he passed close to Knodalon's bench, the ogre paused, looked him in the eye, and gave a single, deliberate nod. Knodalon returned it, just as deliberate.

Down at the lake, Calder rowed a slow patrol along the dock, the oar blades barely making a ripple in the black water. He stopped now and then, letting the boat drift while he scanned the far shore, then rowed on. At one point he lifted a lantern and swept it in an arc over

his head; two others, far up the line, answered with lanterns of their own. Knodalon smiled. Even the fisherman, who claimed to need no one, had built his own system of signals.

He closed his eyes for a moment and let the world's magic move through him. The tension in the air was not just human—it was spiritual, the kind of excitement that called to every would-be deity lurking at the edge of belief. The big gods had gone quiet, chased to their corners by the new world, but the little ones still lingered: spirits of bread and hearth, of luck and loss, of wind and water. They could smell the coming blood, the crack in the routine, and they would be here soon enough, hoping to be fed by the panic, the prayers, the offering of a life lived in crisis.

They always come for the feast, the small gods. Never the famine.

He wondered if any of them remembered him.

The square was almost empty now. The children had finished their circuit and vanished inside, their voices replaced by the occasional bark of a dog or the muted clang of a pot in a kitchen. Sam and Jen had posted themselves at opposite ends of the road, each a solitary point of authority. From the bakery, Makota and her kits worked into the night, baking smaller, denser loaves meant to last. In the glow of the window, Knodalon could see the silhouette of Kene kneading dough, arms moving in a practiced, relentless rhythm.

People moved in and out of the storehouse, never for long, each time emerging with a new burden or a list in hand. Knodalon noted the pattern: every household accounted for, every weapon checked and rechecked, every able body assigned a job. There was no talk of defeat, no panic. If there were tears, they waited until the bearer was alone.

Fear is not the absence of order, but the demand for it. And in that demand, power grows. That is what feeds the gods now.

He sat for a while longer, letting the night fully settle, letting the tension build like a storm at sea.

At last, when the square was still and only the light from the bakery and the Claw remained, Knodalon shifted his weight and stood. His leg ached but held, and he leaned on his cane for the short walk to the storehouse door.

He paused there, one hand on the stone, and looked back at the town. It was small, fragile, but the people had built it to withstand more than weather or hunger. He felt the old pride, buried and hard to reach, stir in his chest.

He opened the storehouse and stepped inside, the air cool and perfect, untouched by the rush of the world outside. The inventory was precise, unchanged: apples, flour, meat, cheese, ale, all waiting in their timeless suspension.

He closed the door behind him, sealing out the dark and the wind and the slow encroachment of whatever storm was brewing.

Tomorrow, the town would wake and find him on his bench, as always.

For tonight, he belonged to the silence.

And the silence belonged to him.

CHAPTER 4

A fortnight passed, and the world turned itself inside out once more. The last traces of winter receded from North Pointe Common Towne, ice weeping away into mud and then, almost overnight, drying to the familiar, comforting dust of the trade road. The linden tree leafed out, chartreuse and trembling, the square's grass grew thick and scraggly, and the morning air had the sharp, green taste of imminent summer. Even the lakeshore, which clung to its chill longer than anywhere else, now woke each day to a shifting congregation of gulls and the slap of oars in the pre-dawn silence.

The bench outside the lakeside storehouse belonged, once again, to Knodalon. He had not left it for any measurable interval—he did not, in truth, remember leaving it at all—but the shape of the town's day now bent gently around him as the old rhythms reasserted themselves. People passed and repassed, children ran errands and played at war in the dandelions, bakers carried armfuls of flour and dough, all of it flowing in a complicated choreography that never touched him directly, yet always orbited his fixed position like the moon around its world.

The threat of the Goblin King, such as it was, had ended with an anticlimax almost cruel in its brevity. No attack came. No banners

appeared on the ridges, no drums, no horns. At dawn, the only evidence of an enemy at all was the nervous vigilance of the watch and the way every dog in the town had spent the night pacing and whining at invisible threats. By the next morning, the tension had evaporated, leaving behind a residue of embarrassment that people wore like sunburn.

News came, as it always did, from the west gate first. A pack of three travelers—two human, one half-elf—arrived just after the third bell, their boots caked in red mud and their faces marked by an exhaustion too deep for performance. The watch at the gate let them through with only a cursory check, and they made their way toward the green at a pace just above a stagger, hands never once straying to the hilts of their swords or the haft of their battered spear.

As they entered the square, Knodalon watched the transformation. The lines of their bodies, drawn tight by days of hard travel, softened instantly; shoulders dropped, eyes widened, and the collective breath they took was so deep it seemed to hollow out their chests. They did not smile—wariness outlived relief by candlemarks, sometimes days—but the way they moved said enough. They had reached a place where one could, briefly, imagine safety.

The taller of the two men headed straight for the Weary Head, pausing only to slap the windowframe as if to test its reality. The half-elf made for the bakery with a focus that bordered on religious. The woman, whose hair was cut short and whose hands bore the faint blue webbing of old wounds, lingered on the green and looked around as though searching for someone she'd left behind.

It was a familiar tableau, played out a hundred times in a hundred seasons. There was a certain breed of person who always ended up here: too canny for the cities, too battered for the wild, their lives defined by the search for a liminal space where trouble never quite caught up. Knodalon watched them with a quiet, impersonal satisfaction.

From his post, he could see the interplay of rumor and relief sweep through the square. Children interrupted their games to huddle near the bakery steps, absorbing every word the travelers could spare. Adults clustered around, not listening directly but adjusting their

bodies to better overhear. The message—passed from voice to voice, refined and distilled with each retelling—was simple, and, by noon, the entire town could recite it as gospel: The Goblin King's forces had withdrawn to the foothills. The main road was open. The towns of Blue Hollow and Driestaff were intact, if cautious. No one had seen an actual goblin in nearly five days.

At the edge of the green, Minnie Trulast appeared with her usual timing, arms folded in a way that suggested both concern and an iron-clad refusal to panic until the bread actually ran out. She cornered the tallest traveler with an efficiency born of years behind a bar, extracted the relevant facts, and then made a slow, deliberate circuit of the square to broadcast the news herself. When she finished, she returned to the inn and hung a bright, freshly laundered banner from the porch—a gesture of optimism so rare it made even Knodalon blink in surprise.

Routine reasserted itself with astonishing speed. The next morning, the bakery opened before dawn and, for the first time in sennights, offered sugared buns alongside the usual rationed loaves. The grocer displayed out-of-season oranges in his window, as if daring the world to contradict him. Even the smithy, which had been shuttered through the scare, reopened with a clangor and a shriek of metal as Warren hammered out horseshoes for a line of waiting travelers.

In all this, Knodalon remained motionless, yet not untouched. He saw every gesture, heard every nuance in the shouts and laughter, read the story behind every look exchanged on the green. The surface of the town was calm, almost idyllic, but beneath it he could sense the same unresolved chord that had hummed through the air before the scare. The gift of North Pointe—its subtle magic, its slow and stubborn inertia—had returned to equilibrium, but the flavor was slightly off. Like a stew that had boiled too long, or water left standing overnight.

He considered the feeling, rolling it in his mind the way one might test a stone for sharp edges. The wind carried fewer secrets than it used to, but sometimes, just at the edge of hearing, Knodalon could detect a faint, metallic resonance, as if a harp string had been plucked and left to vibrate out of sight. The sensation made his skin prickle. It

was not a threat, exactly. Not even a warning. But it was there, and that was enough.

He watched the people move through their morning. The baker's kits—Kene and Sora—hailed sacks of flour from the storehouse, using a two-handed grip and the sort of teamwork that could only be forged by years of sibling rivalry. Minnie, now sweeping the inn porch, paused occasionally to scowl at the dust, then at the travelers slumped on her benches, then back at the dust, as if weighing which she could eradicate first. Warren, sleeves rolled high, had his head down in the forge, sweat darkening the skin around his eyes and the veins standing out on his arms. At the lakeshore, Calder loaded his nets, eyes on the horizon, a long, slow rower's rhythm to his every step.

None of them paid Knodalon any direct heed. He preferred it that way. The less attention paid to the bench, the better it could perform its real function: observation, accumulation, the quiet sifting of the world's truth from its noise.

Yet even in that perfect stillness, Knodalon registered the subtle changes. The way the children's laughter had taken on a sharper edge, less from fear and more from the kind of relief that bordered on giddiness. The way the air in the green tasted faintly of iron, a residue of the collective tension that had, until so recently, threatened to snap the town in two. The way the sun itself seemed to rise a fraction of a candlemark earlier each day, as if hurrying to make up for lost time.

He watched as the travelers made themselves at home. The woman with the blue-woven hands found her way to the smithy, where she exchanged a few words with Warren, then left her battered short sword for repair. The half-elf lingered at the bakery, then migrated to the lakeshore, where he sat in a crouch for nearly a 'mark, skipping stones into the choppy water. The tall man slept through most of the day, then woke near sunset and drank two pints of ale at the Broken Claw without so much as a word to anyone.

As evening fell, the square changed again. Lanterns lit along the bakery and the inn, and the warm, yellow light spilled across the trade road in ragged patches. More townsfolk appeared, emerging from cellars and side streets and the back rooms of shops, converging on the

green as if by some ancient, unspoken agreement. There was no ceremony, no call to gather. It simply happened.

From his bench, Knodalon watched the first attempts at song: a rough, off-key chorus from the grocer's daughter, a less-bad but still uncertain harmony from the herbalist and the cobbler. At the bakery, Makota set out a tray of crusts and sweets, and within minutes the children descended, arms and mouths full, their laughter now pure and unencumbered. At the Claw, Sam presided over her regulars with a mixture of tolerance and dry contempt, pouring drinks with one hand and gesturing threats of violence with the other.

The tension of the past fortnight dissipated, not all at once but in layers, like fog burning off under a determined sun.

Only Knodalon, unmoving, sensed the lingering trace of something unresolved. He watched the lantern light tremble in the breeze, watched the way the shadows moved across the square, watched the way every conversation paused just a moment too long before moving on. It was the kind of unease that even the most gifted bard could not name. A discord in the song, a silence where there should be none.

He let the feeling settle, neither rejecting nor embracing it.

Across the green, Calder appeared, boots mud-caked, carrying a pail of silver fish. He set the pail down near the bakery steps, then stood, stretching his back, looking out over the town with an expression Knodalon recognized: a man calculating, not the risk, but the reward of letting his guard down.

Calder's gaze met Knodalon's, and for a moment, something like recognition passed between them—a nod from one watchman to another. Then Calder turned, gathered his pail, and vanished into the growing blue of dusk.

As the sky darkened, Knodalon closed his eyes. He felt the world settle around him, the routines of the town clicking into place, the slow, stubborn magic of North Pointe threading itself through every street and window. Yet even here, in the center of everything, he sensed the discord, the faint vibration that said: not yet. Not over.

He opened his eyes, adjusted his seat on the bench, and prepared to watch the next day arrive.

It took three days for the little gods to arrive.

In the old times, before even Knodalon had grown tired of keeping score, the small gods of the land had worked their way up the hierarchy with the raw, red ambition of predators. Fire, storm, famine, and flood—those were the names that mattered, the powers that kept mortals running from cave to cave, always glancing over their shoulders. But the millennia had dulled their teeth and drawn down their ranks; now, in the still and orderly world of North Pointe, only the smallest, least dignified divinities ever came calling. Like rats after a battle, Knodalon thought, and was both amused and faintly disgusted at the accuracy.

The first was a god of lost socks.

It started in the Weary Head's laundry, where Minnie—whose patience was said to rival the depths of the lake—began to notice a statistical anomaly in the guest bedding. No matter how carefully she paired and pinned, there were always odd socks at the end of the wash: orphans in stripes and dots, singletons in practical brown or flirtatious pink, sometimes appearing before their owners had even checked in. Minnie kept a basket for them, as innkeepers always did, but soon the basket overflowed, then multiplied. By the sennight's end, it was a laundry crisis.

"Not one of these matches," Minnie said, hands on hips, glaring at the pile as though it had organized itself out of spite. "Not one! Look, Trevor—has anyone ever worn this much orange in their life?"

Her son, arms full of steaming linen, gave a noncommittal shrug. "You could start a trend, Mama. Or make puppets?"

Minnie's voice rose. "We are not a puppet theater! We are a respectable inn, and I will not have people—" She trailed off, snatching a pair of argyle horrors and holding them up to the window. "—I will not have this in my house!"

Upstairs, the situation worsened. Guests complained of waking to cold feet, of perfectly folded socks gone missing, of an unwholesome draft that seemed to target their ankles with vengeful precision. Minnie doubled her efforts: she scoured the rooms, she inspected

every vent and every loose floorboard, she even called Warren's son from the smithy to "test sleep" the beds. Nothing worked. The socks disappeared, only to reappear, with an infuriating lack of pattern, elsewhere in the inn.

Knodalon saw it all, though he was nowhere near the place. It came to him as a series of flickers: the way a sock, recently lost, would tremble on the edge of his awareness, briefly visible before vanishing into the ether; the way Minnie's own white hair seemed to stand on end, not from static but from a kind of metaphysical outrage; the way, at night, the inn's upper windows glowed a fraction brighter than their lamps could account for, as if the building itself were being subtly rewoven by unseen hands.

It was the handiwork of a godling, he knew. Not a power of fear or destruction, but a parasite of inconvenience, a scavenger that fed on exasperation and the slow gnaw of inefficiency. Such beings never lasted long; their sustenance was finite, and the world's attention moved on. But while they lingered, they could unmake entire communities, stitch by stitch, until nobody remembered how life had worked before the irritation arrived.

He marked the sock-god's progress through the sennight, cataloguing its peculiarities the way a taxonomist might: it preferred bright colors, but would accept neutrals in a pinch; it never took more than one sock per pair, and, once separated, rarely reunited them; it had a particular fondness for those knitted by hand, especially if gifted with love or obligation. Most importantly, it had no sense of moderation—by the seventh day, even Minnie's formidable will was tested.

"Trevor, if you bring me another basket of singles, I will throw you and them straight into the lake," she hissed, not quite under her breath, as she wrung out a pair of damp, lemon-yellow numbers and found, to her horror, that both had vanished before her eyes.

Trevor, wise beyond his years, only nodded and retreated, socks and dignity both abandoned.

Meanwhile, across the square, a second godling stirred.

This one favored the Broken Claw, and its domain was tarnish.

It began at the morning rush, when Sam set out trays of utensils for the early travelers setting on their way. The forks and knives, usually

gleaming with the dull honesty of pewter, now showed blotches and streaks of a blackness that no amount of scrubbing could erase. Sam, whose tolerance for nonsense had been measured in minute portions, examined the cutlery with the same suspicion she reserved for travelers who didn't tip.

"Since when do we serve trolls?" she asked, holding up a spoon that looked like it had been dipped in tar. "If I catch anyone getting into the black salt again, they can eat with their hands from now on."

Her clientele, naturally immune to most forms of warning, only grumbled and kept eating.

But the effect was not limited to Sam's silverware. The godling—smaller, meaner, and infinitely more ambitious than its cousin at the inn—darted among the tables, darkening everything it touched. Salt shakers clouded over, mugs lost their gloss, even the windowpanes took on a faint, oily film. By noon, a minor argument had erupted at the communal table when a traveling merchant accused his neighbor of "cursed table manners." The neighbor, a ranger's apprentice, responded by hurling his own spoon out the window, then sulking for a candlemark as it refused to land on the grass below.

Sam's patience lasted exactly until the third incident, when she caught the same pair of forks changing color mid-meal, right in the hands of a pair of off-duty caravan guards.

She stormed over, hands braced on the table. "We run a clean house here," she said. "If you want your forks to look like that, take them to the east side. Or better, get out and never come back."

The guards exchanged a look. "It just happened," one protested, holding up the offending utensil. "We swear—"

Sam snatched it from him and rapped it against the table. "You see any food on this? You think forks just rot out of spite?"

"It was silver a minute ago," the second guard insisted, with the tone of a man whose life had been ruined by lesser things.

Sam glared. "Not my problem. You want new forks, you buy new forks."

She stalked away, leaving the guards to contemplate the existential terror of endless, self-replicating tarnish.

Knodalon, whose senses now moved through every wall and

window of the town, tracked the mischief with the detachment of a scientist. He saw the godling's work as a smudge on the air, a faint distortion that licked around corners and pooled in the cracks of the floor. It was a hungry thing, this tarnish-god: quick to leap to new hosts, reckless in its pursuit of the next small humiliation. Unlike its sock-snatching cousin, it had no patience, no sense of play. It wanted only to be noticed.

And it was. By midday, complaints had spread from the Claw to the grocer's, then to the cobbler's and the dry goods store, where it discolored sewing needles and dulled every display hook in the place. Customers argued. Children cried. Even the ornamental bell at the town hall took on a coating of filth, which three separate officials attempted to polish away before conceding defeat.

From his bench, Knodalon catalogued it all: the arguments, the muttered curses, the silent but palpable uptick in the town's baseline frustration. He felt the dissonance in the air, the way it built and built, never quite resolving, never quite releasing its hold. It was not just a nuisance, but a pressure, a violation of the slow and measured balance that North Pointe depended on.

In the evenings, when the town settled, he sometimes allowed himself to watch directly. He saw, with eyes that could see the weaving of the world, the threadbare socks flitting on the breeze behind the inn, each one animated by the faintest spark of malice; he watched the tarnish-god circle the pub's rafters, gathering every speck of darkness to itself, then launching it outward in a glittering spray of spite.

On the second night, the two godlings met by accident in the space behind the bakery. The sock-god, buoyant and ridiculous, flapped a pennant's worth of hosiery like a banner in the breeze. The tarnish-god, smaller and meaner, zipped around it in circles, trying to darken each sock in turn. For an instant, Knodalon thought they might do battle, but instead they circled one another, shared a moment of perfect, idiotic communion, then dashed away in opposite directions, each leaving a wake of chaos in its path.

He was not alone in noticing the effects. At breakfast, Minnie cornered Sam on the porch of the Broken Claw and, arms full of

miscreant socks, demanded to know if the pub had been the victim of “unseasonable evil.”

Sam, unimpressed, gestured at a basket of blighted cutlery. “Every fork in this place is cursed. I’d trade for your socks if I thought it would help.”

Minnie made a face. “Socks are not supposed to vanish. There’s a system. There’s—order. You don’t just lose a sock and find it in someone else’s soup, Sam.”

Sam shrugged. “That’s what the guests keep telling me. Half the town is eating with their fingers by now, and the other half can’t look at their own hands without seeing stains.”

Minnie stared at the basket, then at Sam, then at the basket again. “It’s not natural,” she said.

Sam snorted. “Nothing in this town is, when you get right down to it. Did you ever find your missing dish towels?”

Minnie shook her head, lips tight.

Sam grunted. “Guess we’re even, then.”

They parted, each burdened by the knowledge that things would probably get worse before they got better.

Through it all, Knodalon remained on his bench, unmoving. But inside, he could feel the ancient, slow churn of irritation. Not the hot, quick annoyance of mortals, but a deeper, more enduring kind—the kind that, in eons past, had reshaped continents and rewritten the rules of the sky.

He watched as the small gods carved their graffiti across the daily routines of the town. He saw every missing sock, every blighted fork, every grimace and groan and defeated sigh. He let it pile up, higher and higher, until the night came and the square was silent.

Then, and only then, did he open his senses fully, and take the measure of the damage.

The air was thick with the signatures of godlings. Not just the two most obvious, but a half-dozen others: a whispering in the pipes that made every pitcher of water taste of old metal; a jitter in the town clock, so the bells always rang a little too early or too late; a nameless anxiety in the bakery, causing dough to overproof and then collapse, again and again, no matter how careful Makota was with her

measures. Each mischief was small, insignificant on its own, but together they wove a net of agitation that prickled every mind in the town.

It would pass, Knodalon knew. But not before the last thread was cut, and not before the town had been reminded—gently, insistently—of the world’s true, unyielding weirdness.

He let the feeling settle in his chest, and prepared himself to watch, and to remember, and, if necessary, to act.

The third day brought the wind, and with it, the first real test.

Calder was the first to feel it: a sour, sideways current that caught the boat’s prow and spun it in circles no matter how he rowed. The usual patterns of the lake—so well known that Calder could read them with his eyes closed—were upended. Minnow shoals scattered in all directions, leaping and writhing in the nets only to slip away at the last instant. The big perch, usually sluggish this time of year, darted just beneath the surface, taunting the bait with bold, predatory flourishes. Even the weeds, thick and matted in the western shallows, seemed to pulse with a mind of their own, snagging Calder’s lines with uncanny accuracy and then releasing them just as he braced to pull.

By midmorning, the boat was empty. Calder’s arms ached, his face was set in the hard, unhappy lines of a man cheated at a game he’d mastered long ago, and the only evidence of his effort was a splash of muddy water up to his knees. He sat for a while, letting the boat drift, then set the oars with a snap and turned for the dock.

The wind did not let up. It pushed from the south, then the west, then spun into a confused spiral that tugged at Calder’s collar and set his hair standing in damp spikes. Even before he reached the shore, he could see the town was off-kilter. Laundry flapped wildly on the green; a dog howled without interruption; the bakery’s oven smoke poured sideways and back down onto the street, making the whole square reek of yeast and char. Calder felt it in his jaw, in the set of his shoulders—this was not a day to waste words.

He tied up at the dock and made for the bench.

Knodalon, who had watched every turn of the boat with the same unblinking attention he applied to all things, registered Calder's approach as a sequence of micro-motions: the way the fisherman squared his shoulders before stepping onto the dock, the clench and release of his fists, the half-second pause before his boots touched dry earth. By the time Calder reached the bench, Knodalon already knew the outcome of the conversation.

Calder stood for a moment, looming, before sitting on the far edge of the bench with a grunt. He said nothing. He stared straight ahead, at the point where the lake met the horizon, and let the silence pool between them.

The wind picked up. Knodalon could see the effect it had on the grass, on the surface of the lake, on the little puffs of dust that spun off the road and whirled in manic spirals before dying in the gutter. He let the silence stretch, knowing Calder would speak when he was ready.

At length, the fisherman exhaled. "Never seen the lake like this," he said, voice low and flat. "Not in spring, not ever."

Knodalon gave the smallest nod, a gesture that could mean anything or nothing at all.

Calder flexed his hands, then let them drop to his knees. "It's the fish, mostly. They don't follow the old routes. They don't even swim the same. I cast the nets and they dive under, or jump over, or slip out sideways. Like they're learning new tricks, all at once."

Another silence. Calder's gaze was fixed, his mouth a single line.

"And the wind," he said. "It doesn't belong to the lake anymore. Feels like it's got somewhere else to be. Like it's just passing through."

Knodalon considered, then spoke: "The wind serves itself. It always has."

Calder gave a dry chuckle. "Ain't that the truth."

For a while, neither spoke. The wind battered the dock, making the boats clatter and groan against their moorings. Knodalon watched the play of muscles in Calder's forearm, the white of his knuckles as he dug his nails into the rough cloth of his trousers.

Then, quietly: "You ever think," Calder said, "that sometimes it's not the big things that break a man? Not war, not famine, not

even loss. Just the little things. A net that won't catch. A wind that won't hold. A boot that doesn't fit the way it used to." He looked down at his hands, turning them over as if the answer might be written on the skin. "It's like the world's gone just a bit... off. Like someone's twisted it a half-turn, and now nothing fits."

Knodalon was silent.

Calder stared at the lake, then back at Knodalon. "It's not the Goblin King that worries me," he said, and now his voice was rough at the edges. "It's these little things gone wrong. Fish that won't be caught. Winds that shift without warning. Makes a man feel the world's gone sideways."

He stopped, suddenly aware he'd said more than intended. He hunched his shoulders, as if bracing for ridicule, but Knodalon only nodded again.

"They are testing you," Knodalon said, his words slow and deliberate. "The small gods. They search for weakness, and in finding it, they dig until the whole thing comes apart."

Calder grunted. "Well, they picked the wrong man, this time. I'll starve before I let a fish make a fool of me."

Knodalon almost smiled.

Another silence, softer now. The wind fell, then gusted again, then fell.

Calder's hands unclenched. He wiped them on his knees, as if cleansing himself of the conversation. "Well. That's enough talk for one day." He stood, his body slow to unfold, every joint creaking like a dock in a storm.

He looked at Knodalon one last time. "You see anything out there," he said, jerking his chin toward the lake, "anything that don't belong, you let me know."

Knodalon nodded. "I will."

Calder gave a satisfied grunt and walked away, boots steady, shoulders no less squared but perhaps carrying a little less of the world with each step.

Knodalon sat, unmoving. But inside, something had shifted, just a fraction. He was still the watcher, the cataloguer, the unmoved mover.

But now, the world's small wrongness was not just a curiosity. It was a problem. One he might, at last, be compelled to solve.

He closed his eyes, and for the first time in a decade, allowed himself to feel the weight of the town pressing in around him—not as a burden, but as a thing worth holding up.

He waited for the wind to change.

When the wind returned, it brought with it a thin, persistent ache that started in the spine and radiated outward. Knodalon had endured worse. He had endured millennia of storms and droughts, the slow attrition of existence, and the hollow, recursive boredom that came with watching the same patterns play out across centuries. But this ache—this particular, small, needling pain—was something new, and it infuriated him.

It was a god of splinters.

He recognized its signature the instant the first child came crying to her mother, finger pricked and red, the sliver so fine it defied even the sharpest needle. He saw it in the way Minnie, tending the breakfast trays, yelped and sucked her thumb after a run-in with a wooden spoon she'd used a hundred times without issue. He heard it in the cursing at the bakery, where even the smoothest dough seemed to conceal a thousand tiny barbs.

By afternoon, the town's energy was brittle as glass. Tempers snapped over nothing. Sam broke three mugs before giving up on dishwashing entirely, declaring the pub closed until someone "sorted out the curse on the crockery." The children's games dissolved into shoving matches, and Calder, no longer able to tolerate the feel of the oar in his hands, sat at the dock and stared at his palms with the helplessness of a man who'd been betrayed by the tools of his own trade.

Knodalon watched it all. He watched, and he calculated, and when the sum of irritation crossed a certain threshold, he did what he had not done in a very long time: he interfered.

It was a small thing. Barely a flex of will, the equivalent of a mortal blinking away a speck of dust. He reached into the fabric of the wind

—not the surface breeze, but the current beneath, the one that remembered how to carry seeds and secrets and the occasional, necessary violence—and with a motion so delicate it could have been mistaken for a tic, he bent the air to his will.

The effect was immediate.

Across the green, every banner and sheet snapped taut, then fell still. The persistent howl at the chimney of the Claw collapsed into a single, disappointed sigh. On the lake, the boats rocked in place, then settled, the water suddenly clear and untroubled. In the air, something screamed: a high, thin wail that only children, dogs, and Knodalon could hear.

The god of splinters tried to hold on. It zipped from eave to eave, trying to burrow into the grain of the town, but the wind was against it now. Knodalon rode the current, guiding it as a fisherman might guide a net, and with a final, effortless flick, sent the godling spinning out over the lake and into the mouth of the Demonbane Range. It would settle there, if it survived at all, gnawing at the bones of old trees and the forgotten wrecks at the edge of the world.

In North Pointe, the silence that followed was absolute. For the span of a breath, nothing moved. Then, as if on cue, life restarted: Minnie opened a window and shook out the tablecloths with a force that left them spotless; the children, momentarily stunned, resumed their games with shouts that bordered on joy; Sam, behind the bar, discovered her broken mugs reassembled in their crates, whole and unblemished, and muttered a curse at “self-fixing nonsense.”

At the dock, Calder flexed his hands. He stood, stretched, and with the slow, deliberate grace of someone reacquainted with his own body, untied his boat and rowed out, the oars biting clean into the unre-sisting water.

Knodalon let the wind die. He leaned back on his bench and closed his eyes, feeling the equilibrium return. The pain receded. The ache dulled, then vanished. In its place was only the faint echo of laughter from the green, the warm hum of commerce, the comfortable, well-earned exhaustion of a town at peace.

He opened his eyes, and for a moment, allowed himself to be

pleased. The world had righted itself. The small gods would remember the lesson, at least for a time.

It had been so easy. Too easy. The knowledge was both comfort and warning.

He would watch again. And, when necessary, act again.

For now, though, Knodalon settled into the old posture, hands folded, face to the sun, and let the day pass by, content in the knowledge that—at least here, at least for now—the world was in its proper place.

CHAPTER 5

The Weary Head's laundry was, on good days, an organized cloud of soap, steam, and white linen. Minnie Trulast took pride in that. She and Trevor could process a full night's bedding, a wagonful of mud-soaked linens, and three changes apiece for any visiting noble with no more than a morning's sweat and a handful of mumbled curses. This, however, was not a good day.

It started at dawn, when Minnie discovered the basket of children's socks—meticulously paired and rolled the night before—upended on the floorboards and scattered as far as the threshold to the kitchen. She'd blamed Trevor, who, in fairness, had a long history of making every household task at least three times harder than necessary. But when the second basket, the one holding the stables' sock collection (washed separately to avoid contamination), also appeared upended and unpaired, the pattern became harder to ignore.

By noon, the laundry room was a disaster zone. The shelves overflowed with singles—stripes, polka dots, fawns, and the impossible pinks that only children's merchants could produce—and the pairs she did manage to unite seemed determined to part ways at the earliest opportunity. Some literally leapt from her grasp, squirming from her

hand just as she twisted the cuff, landing in the soapy rinse with a splash and a hiss that sounded, to Minnie's ear, just a little too gleeful.

She would have asked Trevor to assist, but he'd vanished after breakfast, citing "a list of errands longer than my arm, Mama" and then, as he always did, fleeing before Minnie could demand specifics.

Left alone, she launched into triage mode. This meant three wash-tubs boiling in sequence, two baskets always in flux—one for incoming, one for folding—and a third, the so-called "basket of shame," where she consigned all unmatched singles. By tradition, the basket of shame rarely held more than a dozen or so strays; today, it overflowed, socks forming a slippery, mutinous heap that seemed to rise each time Minnie turned her back.

It was the folding that did her in. She'd just matched a pair of argyles—a minor triumph, given the sennight's losses—when she reached for the next, a sober gray, and watched in horror as its mate dissolved. Not in the sense of "vanished," but literally: the fabric lost its tension, the toe curled in on itself, and the whole thing pulled inward, the color draining as if sucked through a straw. What remained was a limp, unraveling thread, and, in the air above it, a flicker of something like heat haze.

Minnie staggered back, bumping her head on the rack of drying cloths. She blinked. The haze was gone, but the sock was still lost.

"Not today," she muttered. She plucked up a wooden spoon (more for morale than any real threat), and advanced on the basket of shame. "You will not win. I don't care if you're the same ghost that stole our nice table forks last year. I am not losing to laundry."

The basket shuddered. For a moment, Minnie swore the pile bulged upward, as if a mole burrowed beneath it. She poked at the top, only for the socks to settle innocently, the pink and blue stripes glaring up at her in unearned reproach.

She resumed folding. Every so often, she would set a finished pair aside, glance away, and then—three times in a row—the topmost pair would be gone when she looked back. The door to the hallway was shut, the window latched, yet the socks continued to disappear, always when her attention wavered.

It was only after the sixth loss that Minnie's composure cracked.

She seized the basket, brandished it at the heavens, and shrieked, "I am a patient woman, but this is war! If you want my socks, you come here and—" She shook the basket, sending a polychrome rain across the room. "Fight me yourself!"

At that moment, a breeze swept through the sealed window, fluttering the drying sheets and sending the solitary socks into a dervish whirl. Minnie ducked, batting them away as they snapped and popped with static. The air filled with the smell of lightning and singed wool.

Somewhere, in the hallway, a child's voice shouted, "Mama, the socks are ALIVE!" There followed a cacophony of stampeding feet, delighted shrieks, and the frantic patter of little hands smacking at airborne hosiery as if they might catch the phenomenon and wrest it into submission.

Minnie glared into the maelstrom. Her arms were red, hair plastered to her forehead. "You want a fight, you fiend?" she spat. "You just try me. I will staple every last sock to the wall if I have to."

But even as she said it, a white dress sock leapt from her left hand, dove between her legs, and vanished behind the washtub. She heard it snickering. Not literally, but the sound was implied.

Minnie slammed the basket of shame against the wall and stormed to the back room, muttering curses both creative and strictly against house rules.

From his bench, Knodalon did not need to see the inside of the Weary Head to know that chaos reigned. He could hear it in the rising pitch of Minnie's voice, in the yelps and barks of children, in the staccato rhythm of sock against wood as the infestation reached its crescendo.

He saw it, too, in the air above the inn. To ordinary vision, nothing seemed amiss: a laundry line, three bedsheets, a lattice of color as the wind tried and failed to dry them in the late spring chill. But with his true sight, the kind that not even the most stubborn of the small gods could fool, Knodalon witnessed a seethe of motion: a blur that darted from window to window, trailing a contrail of filched wool and

threadbare cotton, occasionally doubling back on itself to hoard some particularly precious specimen.

A god of lost socks, Knodalon thought. Pathetic. Barely a divine flicker. In my day, gods commanded storms that swallowed continents, not pilfered foot coverings from a backwater inn.

He watched as the godling, emboldened by Minnie's escalating rage, grew more substantial. Where once it had been a mere shimmer, now it presented a faint silhouette—still insubstantial, but with hints of shape: an elongated, toe-like appendage, the warped suggestion of a mouth at the midpoint, and two ovoid, lidless eyes that glinted with the light of a thousand misplaced pennies.

The being circled the laundry, then performed a dizzying corkscrew through the baskets before perching, invisible to all but Knodalon, atop the mound of singles. Here, it drew in the air, savoring the spike of mortal exasperation like a sommelier sampling a fine red.

The children, two from the grocer's and one from the fishmonger, now careened through the hallway, giving chase to a trail of animated socks that zigzagged past the kitchen and up the stair to the guest rooms. Trevor, newly returned and breathless, tried to corral the madness but was swiftly overwhelmed. He stood in the doorway, arms up, as a fusillade of singles battered him about the face and neck.

Minnie, undeterred, reappeared with a coil of twine and began lashing the recalcitrant socks together in twos, then threes, then in a full net that she flung over the heap in the corner. This only seemed to excite the godling further: it whipped through the net, unraveling knots with a supernatural dexterity, then danced a victory lap along the ceiling, shedding tiny sparks as it went.

To Knodalon, the spectacle was both an embarrassment and a warning. Small gods, denied real worship and banished from the domains of weather, war, and wealth, now survived on petty humiliations. They went where they could, and did what they must, and in this town—a town that had, until recently, prided itself on immunity to the supernatural—such infestations had become common as dandelions after rain.

He regarded the godling, and the godling, sensing his attention, froze. Its eyes widened, or at least the shadows where eyes should

have been. It regarded Knodalon in return, recognizing—dimly, and with the reflex of a frightened animal—the presence of something older and infinitely less tolerant.

Knodalon met its gaze, and in that moment, communicated a simple, wordless threat. He would tolerate the mischief, for now. But the line was thin, and if crossed, there would be consequences.

The godling quivered. It retreated, pulling its hoard with it, and for a brief second, the socks in the laundry room fell still. Minnie, triumphant but wary, surveyed the silence with suspicion.

From his bench, Knodalon watched as the shimmer shrank to a pinpoint, then winked out. For now, the threat was contained.

But even as he closed his eyes, he knew it would not be the last. Nor the worst.

In his day, gods had teeth. Now they nipped at heels, and called it victory.

He waited for the next one to arrive.

The next morning brought the kind of sun that pretended at summer but couldn't quite shake the dregs of a cold spring. The road dust sparkled in the hard light, and the air held that fresh, herbal tang that always made the locals think they could predict the weather, which, in Knodalon's experience, they never could.

Sam arrived first. She came from the Broken Claw with the look of someone who had not slept and would not be caught admitting it. Her hair—white as a milk-fed kitten—hung loose today, framing the deep scar that bisected her face from brow to chin. She wore her usual black, the kind of fabric that drank in the sun and gave nothing back, and on her right hip the signature hilt: Nailbiter, curled into itself, inert but ready.

Jen followed a minute later, blue uniform coat slung over her arm, the silver badge of office hidden in a pocket rather than displayed. She paused just at the edge of Knodalon's line of sight, where the road shifted from town dust to the hardpack of the north path, then continued, her boots raising tiny clouds with each step. She looked every

inch the constable, except for the softness around her eyes, and the fact that she, too, wore her sword as a lazy spiral of metal at the wrist: Hellsting, quiescent, but alive to anyone who knew the difference.

They met at the midpoint between the bench and the linden tree, as if each had calculated the distance for the best possible privacy. Neither greeted Knodalon. They never did, but he caught the flicker of their eyes in his direction, the half-second pause as if to check for eavesdroppers before conceding that he'd been there long enough to qualify as public furniture.

"Well?" Sam said, voice low and sharp as a file. "You're the one who wanted to walk the circuit. I could have done without."

Jen rolled her shoulder, winced. "Didn't sleep either?"

Sam grunted. "The oven in the Claw stuttered all night. Got up every 'mark to fix it. Brandy didn't help. The only thing worse than a broken oven is a room full of idiots moaning about their breakfast before the sun's up. And I didn't have the heart to ask Minnie for help."

"Could be worse," Jen said. "Could be the bakery. Half the dough rose, half didn't. Makota says it's the yeast, but I think it's the air. She's blaming the water, but you know how cats are about pride."

Sam barked a laugh, short and pointed. "If it's the air, it's the same damn air that's been here for twenty years. We're not at the top of a mountain. This is a civilized place."

Jen looked up at the ridge beyond the lake, the Demonbane Range purple and distant against the morning sky. "Not so civilized on the other side. Goblin King's got the pass all but closed, despite the news he's pulled back. Had three refugees come through last night. Miners, by their smell. Didn't talk much, but the little one said the goblins aren't just raiding. They're holding ground, building walls."

Sam scowled. "Not what we wanted to hear. Any armies standing up yet?"

"Some have the numbers, but no will move. Everyone's waiting for a bigger mess to show up. Or for someone else to solve it."

Sam made a motion, unconsciously, to the sword at her hip, found only her wrist, and grinned without humor. "We could go over and fix it ourselves."

Jen's lips twitched. "You first, Sam. I'll carry your armor home after."

They shared a silence, one that implied a dozen unspoken complaints about the futility of mortal responses to immortal problems.

Then Sam spoke, gesturing with her unadorned hand toward the pass. "I've no love for them, the goblins. Never have. But you can almost see why they're digging in. It was all theirs, once. The humans didn't even settle out here until the rosefruit wars drove them west. Now they're surprised when the locals want the land back."

Jen shrugged. "Doesn't matter. They see it as theirs now, and it's their job to keep it."

Sam's face flickered with something—regret, or maybe just old wounds—but she let it pass. "Still. Would be nice if people could just get along for once."

Jen offered a rare, honest smile. "That's what I keep the badge for. So you don't have to thump their heads."

Sam snorted, brushing her hair out of her face. "You keep the badge because you like being in charge. Always have."

Jen's gaze slid toward Knodalon, sitting as unmoved as a piece of statuary. "If I didn't, nothing in this town would work. Even now, with the quiet, you can feel the waiting. Like there's a shoe about to drop."

Sam eyed her, then glanced back toward the inn. "You hear about the socks?"

Jen raised a brow. "The what?"

"The socks," Sam said, now lowering her voice even further. "Minnie's lost half a season's worth in a sennight. She's tried locking the laundry, tying them in pairs, even sewing them together, but they just vanish. Sometimes she hears something—like giggling, or a popping sound. Then they're gone."

Jen's brow furrowed. "It's not the kids? Trevor would do anything to get out of folding."

Sam shook her head. "She swears it's supernatural. You think...?"

Jen considered, then shrugged. "We've had less plausible curses."

They fell silent again, but this time the silence was crowded:

memories of other strange happenings, other days when the world had leaned too hard against the rules and something had slipped.

Sam shifted her weight. "And the thing with the bakery? And the inn's oven?"

Jen nodded, lips tight.

Sam pressed on. "If it's starting again—"

Jen cut her off, "This is just—bad luck. Maybe someone's out-of-towner is carrying a bug."

Sam looked unconvinced. She ran a finger along her bracelet, the twisted metal shifting under her touch like a living thing. "Luck doesn't do this. Not on this scale. Remember the shiver we had, what, three years ago?"

"Different," Jen said, but her eyes stayed on the linden, where Knodalon still hadn't moved.

After a moment, Sam turned away from the pass and gestured up the road. "I'll walk the circuit with you, then. But if it's just socks, you're buying drinks after."

Jen smiled, genuine this time. "Deal. If it's worse, we'll call in the big guns."

"Meaning?" Sam asked, eyebrow cocked.

Jen let her gaze linger on Knodalon, then shrugged. "Meaning, we do what we've always done. Watch, wait, and outlast."

Sam exhaled, the tension gone from her shoulders. "If you say so."

They started up the road, a slow, measured walk that spoke of more purpose than either would admit. As they passed Knodalon's bench, Jen offered him a nod, formal and almost respectful. Sam just eyed him, then grinned.

"Nice weather," she said. "You keep the sun out for us?"

Knodalon said nothing. He never did, but he gave the faintest impression of an answering smile. The old instincts, perhaps, not yet dead.

The two women disappeared up the road, already arguing about the best way to track a supernatural pest. Knodalon watched them go, and for a moment, he almost felt the warmth of their camaraderie. Almost.

Humans. Always reducing divine chaos to convenient explanations. They sense the wrongness but cannot comprehend its true nature.

He leaned back and let the sun find his face. A god of lost socks. What next?

And where did that tarnish-godlet get to?

He waited, not for the answer, but for the pleasure of being proven right.

The weather that day could not have been more obvious about its intentions if it had put up posters. It began as a thin shimmer over the road, a not-quite-visible ripple that made every straight line squint. By midmorning, the ripple turned to a haze, then to a palpable wall of heat that pressed against the shop fronts and painted every window with condensation. North Pointe, not a fortnight removed from frost and icy sleet, now sweated like a hungover teamster in the farrier's back room.

The townsfolk noticed, of course, but they responded with the stoicism of people who'd seen enough not to be surprised by much. The baker's kits abandoned their post at the delivery cart and staged a water fight, which escalated into a general melee that drew in the grocer's oldest and a constable's apprentice before they were hosed down and sent home to dry. Minnie, who prided herself on the inn's perfect temperature at all seasons, tore open every window at the Weary Head and threatened to start charging by the breath. Even the animals at Dooley's menagerie went listless and flat, fanning themselves with tongues or wings and generally making a show of suffering.

But it was the objects—the stuff of the town—that suffered most.

Metal fixtures on the main green swelled and warped. The bell at the town hall drooped on its bracket and emitted a sad, noncommittal tone when struck. Hinges wept brown rivulets of oil onto the porch steps, and the door handles at the Claw felt hot enough to brand an unsuspecting palm. The windowpanes in the bakery fogged and

cleared in cycles, as if the building itself were having a long argument with its own internal climate.

Knodalon, from his bench, tracked the disturbance as it rolled through the square. He could feel the currents, not just in the air but in the deeper layers—where magic sloshed like pond water, and every upset in the world's balance sent ripples through the mortar of the place. This was not weather, not truly. It was personality. It had direction, and appetite, and the cunning of a thing that knew where it wanted to be.

It was the god of warm breezes, back for another turn.

He watched as the mirage-creature made its way up the main road, visible to no one and nothing except the few who could see beyond the world's dull skin. To others, it was a heatwave, an inconvenience, a topic for complaint. To Knodalon, it was a sinuous, undulating beast, made of glass and sunlight and the echo of old prayers. It stalked between the buildings, nosing at shop doors and peering through the windows, then doubled back to circle the bakery, where the air was thickest with yeast and the memory of comfort.

But it was not alone. The god of lost socks—newly strengthened, greedy from last night's conquest—now hovered above the inn, trailing a pennant of vapor and lint as it darted from one window to the next. The two crossed paths at the square, and for a moment, Knodalon saw a flicker of real competition.

The warm breeze and the sock thief circled each other, warily at first, then with growing aggression. The air pulsed between hot and cold, the fabric of every towel and curtain and tablecloth in a hundred-yard radius standing on end with static. Socks, once content to simply vanish, now exploded from drawers and laundry baskets, caught in tiny cyclones that whirled them across the square before plastering them to shop windows or knotting them around the heads of passersby.

Elsewhere, objects began to migrate. A merchant's balance scales, left on the counter overnight, reappeared in the bottom of Minnie's soup cauldron, perfectly clean but with the faint aftertaste of cabbage. The delivery boy from the dry goods shop found his hat nailed to the rafters of the stables, still warm from the midafternoon sun. Two pairs

of boots, property of a pair of travelers on the upper floor of the Weary Head, materialized on the chandelier of the Broken Claw, where they dangled and spun, dripping water onto the drinkers below.

The travelers, for their part, adapted. Those who had made the journey from the south kept to the shadows, discarding layers as quickly as they could sweat through them. The northerners, who had arrived only the night before and still wore their winter wools, simply blinked and adjusted: sleeves rolled up, collars unfastened, boots unbuckled and laced loosely to allow for the sudden swelling of leather. They took it all in stride, as if this sort of thing happened everywhere, as if the town itself had merely decided to change moods and what could one do but change with it?

The regulars at the Claw made a game of it. Sam set out a row of steins on the rail and bet her patrons she could chill or warm each one by willpower alone. The secret, of course, was that the air did half the work, and the rest was showmanship. She grinned her scarred grin, flipped a stein, caught it, and filled it with ale so cold it frothed over and froze on the rim. Jen, who'd come to investigate, drank hers in three gulps and slammed it on the counter, ice chipping off her mustache.

"Your trick?" she asked, voice hoarse from the cold.

Sam winked. "No trick. Just knowing how to talk to the air."

Jen shook her head, as if to dismiss the idea, but she glanced toward the square with something like suspicion.

Knodalon saw it all, and saw more. The two minor gods were not just feuding, they were staking claims, carving territory out of the town's magic like cats spraying the edge of a fence. Where their powers overlapped, reality buckled—socks turned to icicles, then to steam, then to limp, sodden rags. Where one ruled, the air was stifling and heavy, windows stuck shut with syrupy condensation; in the other's domain, every cloth surface rippled with static, each step a risk for an electric shock.

He watched as the boundaries shifted, as the creatures maneuvered and postured, each seeking an advantage. The gods were feeding, too: on the confusion of the townsfolk, on the mounting frustration, on the giddy bursts of laughter from those who found the whole thing a

novelty worth remembering. Each time a child shrieked in surprise as a sock went airborne, the godling pulsed with new energy. Each time a shopkeeper cursed and slammed a window, the warm breeze shuddered and flexed, expanding its reach another yard.

In the old days, this would have ended in catastrophe. Two gods, no matter how small, could not share the same hunting ground. There would have been a reckoning, a reckoning that left the town in ruins and the survivors to barter with the remains. But North Pointe was not that kind of town. Its magic ran too deep, and its people too stubborn, for disaster to gain a foothold.

Instead, a strange kind of equilibrium took root. The gods sparred, tested the boundaries, but never pushed so far as to draw real blood. The town absorbed the chaos, adapted to it, and moved on. Makota, faced with an oven that alternated between blast-furnace and arctic tomb, learned to proof her dough by the minute, timing her bakes to the pulse of the weather. Minnie, after finding an entire meal ruined by the sudden appearance of the merchant's scales, declared the soup off-menu and instead served cold platters, which proved more popular than anything she'd cooked before.

Children, newly emboldened, made a contest of capturing socks midflight. By afternoon, three teams had formed: one to defend the bakery, one to protect the grocer's, and one—led by Trevor, of course—to raid the other two. The sock god watched with evident delight, savoring the spikes of joy and rivalry as much as the shrieks of exasperated adults.

Only Knodalon felt the weight of the pattern.

These were not random manifestations. The gods were staking claims, feeding on disarray. The town's magic—its balance—was becoming a feeding ground for divine parasites.

He remembered, not fondly, the wars of the gods. The endless cycles of hunger and retreat, of alliance and betrayal. The thrill of power, yes, but also the futility of it—the certainty that no matter how much you consumed, the world would still outlast you, would wait for you to grow tired and fade, then simply reset.

Knodalon observed the town, saw how its people adapted, and felt the irritation build like a splinter beneath his nails. This place, this

bench, was his. The minor gods could tussle all they liked, but if they thought they would overturn the order here, they had another thing coming.

He sat, unmoving, and watched as the sun set behind the lake, the final act of the heatwave painting every window gold and then, in a final gesture, plunging the town into a chill so sudden that every breath steamed in the night air.

For a while, the square was quiet. The socks settled, the windows stopped sweating, and the metal fixtures cooled with a series of small, defeated pings.

But in the dark, Knodalon saw the shapes of the two gods, still circling, still measuring, still not quite finished with each other.

He smiled. If they wanted a fight, they would get one.

And when it was over, he would be here, as always, to count the socks and sweep up the mess.

The animal screams were, at first, only background noise—part of the usual music of the lakeside: the bray of donkeys, the sharp whistle of caged birds, the endless, insomniac babble of the menagerie's smallest residents. Knodalon, who had never wasted attention on Dooley's stock unless the noise threatened to overbalance the day, at first ignored it. But then came a sound like a broomful of marbles poured down a staircase, followed by a shriek from Dooley himself, and he sat up straighter.

The menagerie, a jumble of timber and chicken wire on the edge of the green, was in full revolt. A curtain of blue-and-yellow parakeets flung themselves from the open window, streaming past Knodalon's bench in a panicked spiral. Next came the rodents: guinea pigs, then the odd ferret, then, incredibly, a string of three sugar gliders chained together by the tails, their escape more coordinated than seemed reasonable. The lizards and snakes followed, silent but not invisible; Knodalon could see the subtle displacement in the grass, the flash of a forked tongue in the sunlight.

The townsfolk responded with remarkable composure. The baker's

kits abandoned their patrol of the sock front and instantly joined the chase, hands and arms outstretched in an attempt to corral the parakeets before they reached the inn. Minnie, still in combat with the warm breeze that now alternated between suffocating and glacial, launched a full loaf at a passing rabbit, knocking it senseless but uninjured. The constable's apprentice, caught between the urge to apprehend a fleeing iguana and the duty to maintain order, opted for the latter, attempting to herd the refugees toward the old sheep pen at the edge of the green.

Only Dooley looked to be truly undone. He stood in the center of the chaos, arms outstretched, palms up, as if awaiting absolution from a god who had long ago left him for better company. His balding head shone with sweat; his eyes, normally merry, darted from one empty cage to the next as he counted the losses in real time.

"They've never done this," he said, voice cracking. "Not in all the years. Even the snake respected the rules."

Knodalon watched, and waited. He knew what came next.

The god of succor for oppressed fleas made its entrance not as a form, but as a sensation: the smallest, most insistent itch, beginning at the base of the spine and radiating outward with every heartbeat. It was the itch of ancient wood dust, of old hay, of wool unwashed and never meant to touch human skin. Within moments, Knodalon saw the wave of discomfort pass through the square—first a child scratching her ankle, then a baker's kit scrubbing furiously at his ear, then, in a domino of sudden, embarrassing panic, half the adults in the square were scratching, slapping, or beating at invisible irritants.

The air thickened, alive with tiny, whirling lights. They clustered in swarms, skipping from head to head, trailing behind them a stardust of discomfort that left every man, woman, and beast in visible distress.

Dooley, desperate, rushed back into the shop and emerged with a spray bottle—some concoction of vinegar and lavender, by the smell—and began dousing himself, then the grass, then, in a final gesture of surrender, the open air. It did nothing.

Galhani appeared at the door of her herb shop, already armed with a fistful of dried sage and something that looked like ground pepper.

She surveyed the scene, cocked an eyebrow, and called over her shoulder, "Lara! Get the bowl! The copper one!"

A moment later, her wife Lara appeared with a small bowl, which Galhani filled with her mixture, then struck with a match. A thick, oily smoke poured out, rolling in a low carpet across the green and up toward the benches. The first row of fleas retreated at once, and the second row quivered, uncertain.

"Smells like burning shoes," Dooley moaned.

"Better than what's in your hair," Galhani snapped, then turned to the children: "Keep the birds away from the smoke! If they land in it, we're starting over."

Meanwhile, at the periphery, Leota Harbinger arrived—dressed, as always, in mourning black. She moved with the hesitation of one who hated to be outside in daylight, but she carried herself with the old certainty of her kind. She knelt beside Dooley, fished a pinch of dirt from the ground, and murmured something Knodalon could almost hear, if he cared to.

In her hands, the dirt became a paste. She smeared it on her wrists, then Dooley's. The itching stopped—at least, Knodalon noted, for those in close proximity.

The flea god recoiled from Leota, as all such minor spirits did from anyone with a deeper claim on the fabric of the world. It bunched and pulsed in the air, then split into smaller swarms, targeting the children and the weaker adults, anyone who could not defend themselves with smoke or magic or the simple determination not to give in.

Knodalon, for the first time in centuries, felt the itch on his own skin. He ignored it—gods did not scratch—but he watched with some amusement as the cloud of parasites spiraled in for a closer look, then, sensing the old power beneath his thin veneer, detoured at high speed for the bakery, where the air was sweeter and the hosts more susceptible.

The infestation peaked at noon. By then, the square was a battlefield: smoke in the air, children rolling in the grass to rid themselves of fleas, adults arming themselves with every remedy known to humankind and a few better left to rumor. The menagerie, emptied of its stock, was a ruin of upended cages and trampled straw. Dooley

stood in the wreckage, weeping quietly as he tried to coax the last remaining parakeet from a crevice in the siding.

Galhani and Leota, now working as a team, set up a station at the edge of the square. Any who approached were dusted, dabbed, or briefly blessed, then sent on their way. The line was long, and the grumbling louder, but it was clear who was in charge.

Through it all, Knodalon observed.

This is no coincidence. Three minor deities in one small town? They're drawn to the icosagon's power, feeding on its disruption. If this continues, the town's gifts will falter. These parasites must be addressed.

He saw the pattern: each godling found its niche, fed, and multiplied. Each disruption pushed the town further from equilibrium, and the more the townsfolk struggled, the more the gods thrived. It was a pattern as old as time, as old as the gods themselves, and there was only one remedy.

At the edge of the green, Jen and Sam reappeared, this time with a squad of volunteers armed with brooms, nets, and, in one case, a large and ill-tempered goose. Jen barked orders with the precision of a drill-master; Sam, grinning and unrepentant, went after the parakeets personally, grabbing two at a time and pinning their wings with a gentleness that betrayed long experience with wild things.

"Get the children under the eaves!" Jen called. "Anyone with a net, start at the bakery and drive them toward the water! Dooley, if you see the snake, just let it be—last time we tried to help, it bit three people and ate a mouse the size of my hand."

Dooley, mollified by the attention and still streaked with tears, nodded and resumed his search for the missing birds.

The plan worked, more or less. Within the candlemark, most of the animals had been recaptured or at least accounted for. The parakeets returned to their cage, though a few seemed reluctant to part company with Trevor, who had made himself indispensable by perching a row of them on each shoulder. The iguana, lured by a trail of chopped lettuce, slithered into the sunniest corner of the menagerie and basked, immune to the drama. Even the snake, now sated, retreated to its old nest and ignored all attempts at discipline.

As for the fleas, they fled the smoke and the magic, then, in a last

act of spite, infested the softest, cleanest bed in the Weary Head. Minnie, ever resourceful, responded by emptying the room and hanging a sign on the door: "Cursed. Enter at your own risk." The guests took it as a joke, and one even asked if he could have the room at a discount.

The town recovered. It always did. By nightfall, the green was swept clean, the animals caged, and the fleas (for the most part) banished to the realm of memory. In the pub, the travelers nursed their bites and drank to the fortitude of the locals. In the bakery, Makota served doughnuts with a side of apology, and the children compared scars from their latest adventure. On his bench, Knodalon sat, unmoving, feeling the magic settle back into its grooves.

But he knew it was only a matter of time before the cycle repeated.

Three minor gods in a fortnight. The icosagon drew them, the disruption in its symmetry a beacon for every lost and hungry spirit in the range. North Pointe was now less a town and more a proving ground, a place where the old rules had begun to break and the new ones had not yet written themselves.

He would wait, and watch, and when the time came, he would act. There was, after all, a reason the storehouse had never spoiled an apple or lost a single grain to rot, not in all its years. There was a reason Knodalon had never moved from his bench, and why he had, for so long, preferred to let the world's magic run its own course.

But even the oldest gods knew when to stop waiting.

He opened his eyes, and for the first time in an age, let the power gather.

There would be a reckoning, and he would count the socks, the scales, and the fleas.

And then, perhaps, the world would run right again.

CHAPTER 6

Twilight dropped its curtain across North Pointe with the confidence of a stagehand who knew exactly where each prop belonged. The last of the sunlight, fractured and drawn thin by the foothills, pooled in the ruts of the trade road and caught in the loose, wind-flecked dust that always seemed to hover just above the surface of things. Knodalon sat on his bench, as he always did, and watched the world sift itself from day to night. The line between the two was never clean. It was a slow, deliberate bleed, as if the town itself refused to surrender without first accounting for every possible shade of gray.

He was aware, in the way one is aware of the bones in their foot, that he had been scratching his left ankle for the better part of a 'mark. The itch was not physical—nothing so simple as that—but a kind of spiritual aggravation, the aftermath of a single flea bite that now served as the focal point for every other irritation in the world. He scratched without urgency, his hand moving in a slow, hypnotic rhythm that was equal parts resignation and stubborn resistance. The itch was a message. He just hadn't decided, yet, if he would bother to answer.

The square was quieter now. The children had been called home,

and their absence left an echo that seemed to tug at the corners of every building. The bakery, lights dimmed to a low orange, was a silhouette against the darkening sky. Down the road, the Weary Head's windows glowed with the faint, persistent gold of lanterns—Minnie must have finally found the wick she'd been searching for all sennight, and had likely lit every single lamp out of spite for all the ones that had gone missing.

Knodalon's gaze drifted up and down the trade road, noting the sequence of lights as they winked into life: the dry goods shop, then the grocer, then, after a short pause, the low candle in the window of the surgeon's place, Dexter probably reading himself to sleep with one of the anatomy books he claimed to despise. The rhythm was so familiar it was almost comforting. Almost.

But not quite.

There was an undertone tonight—a buzz, or maybe a thrum—that pulsed just beneath the sounds of the town. It was not audible in the usual sense, but it vibrated in the marrow, a subtle percussion that set every surface slightly on edge. Knodalon had first noticed it in the late afternoon, when the wind changed direction for the third time in as many candlemarks, bringing with it a scent that was at once foreign and yet deeply, uncomfortably familiar. He'd catalogued the sensation, filed it alongside a dozen other oddities in the day's ledger, but it had not left him. Now, as night settled, it seemed to amplify, riding the edge of his consciousness like a high note that refused to resolve.

He let the feeling linger, analyzing it the way a carpenter might run a hand along a warped beam: searching for the source, the origin, the precise moment when something had gone out of true. There was a logic to the wrongness, but it was a logic that danced sideways, always just outside the grasp of language.

The first real interruption of the evening arrived as a silhouette, striding with uncharacteristic haste from the direction of the inner square. Knodalon recognized the outline immediately, even before the details resolved in the gathering dusk. Alred Grasswalker. Plains Elf. Proprietor of the dry goods shop and, more importantly, the single most reliable source of information about anything that happened in

North Pointe, provided you could tolerate his relentless efficiency and his habit of reducing all problems to a set of discussion points.

Alred's walk was precise, each step calibrated for maximum momentum with minimum wasted energy. Yet tonight, Knodalon detected a certain tautness in his posture, a coiled readiness that had nothing to do with physical exertion. The closer Alred came, the more apparent it became: his hands moved in quick, agitated motions; his shoulders, usually relaxed and set back with the natural arrogance of Plains Elf heritage, were hunched slightly forward, as if preparing to duck an unseen blow.

Alred's usual perfection had suffered a minor defeat. His shirt, always crisp and creased at the seams, now bore a smudge of dust on the right sleeve, a mark that looked as if it had been applied deliberately and then, perhaps, forgotten in the rush to address a more pressing concern. His hair, dark and usually bound tight, had escaped its binding at the nape, and a single lock had worked free to dangle in front of his left eye, where it stubbornly refused to be ignored.

Most telling, though, was the object between Alred's thumb and forefinger: a metal nail, no longer than the last joint of a finger, which he examined with the intensity of a jeweler searching for a flaw. He turned it over and over as he walked, the setting sun catching on its surface and flashing in brief, irritated bursts.

Alred stopped exactly two paces from Knodalon's bench, eyes fixed on the nail, then flicked his gaze up and locked onto Knodalon's face. He held the nail out, arm extended, and spoke with the flat, unambiguous tone of a man who had reached the end of his patience.

"Third time today," Alred said. He opened his hand, letting the nail rest on his palm for Knodalon's inspection. "They tarnish within the 'mark. I've tried oil, cloth, and every old trick my grandmother taught me. Even sealed them in wax, once. Same result."

Knodalon tilted his head, regarding the nail. It was, indeed, tarnished—its surface mottled with irregular black patches, the sheen dulled to the color of pewter left to rot in a marsh. More curious, though, was the pattern: not random, not the familiar creep of rust, but an ordered sequence of dots and dashes, like an insect's wing or the script of some long-dead language.

"Third time," Knodalon echoed, not as a question but as an acknowledgement of the data point.

Alred nodded. "The other two I melted down. Thought maybe a bad batch. But this..." He tapped the nail with his index finger. "This is new. They're all doing it, but only after sundown. During the day, nothing."

Knodalon let the silence expand, turning the possibilities over in his mind.

"Any other anomalies?" he asked at last, voice even.

Alred considered, as if reviewing an internal checklist. "Shelves rearranged themselves twice in the last sennight. Items migrate from the display cases to the storage bins with no pattern. Yesterday I found a full case of soap at the bottom of the grain silo. Untouched. No sign of tampering. No footprints in the dust."

He paused, then allowed a hint of skepticism to slip into his voice. "At first, I thought it was the children. Or possibly Sam, looking for a joke. But Sam has better things to do, and children leave chaos, not organization."

Knodalon raised a brow, inviting elaboration.

Alred obliged. "It's deliberate. There's a system, but it's not one I know. The last time we saw this kind of thing..." He let the sentence trail off, unwilling or unable to finish.

Knodalon completed it for him, quietly. "Last time was the year of the missing shovels."

Alred's face twitched in surprise—whether at the memory or at Knodalon's recall, it was difficult to say.

"Exactly," Alred said, voice low. "But that was different. That had a purpose. This..." He gestured at the nail, then at the town in general. "This is chaos. And it's getting worse."

Knodalon accepted the information with a slow nod. He reached out and plucked the nail from Alred's palm, turning it between his fingers. The surface was rough, almost organic, and the pattern of tarnish seemed to pulse under the skin. He ran a thumb across it, then closed his fist around the nail and let the sensation flow through him.

It was like a current—hot, then cold, then hot again—each pulse accompanied by a faint, insistent pressure at the base of his skull. He

recognized the flavor: a small god, hungry for attention, feeding on the uncertainty and the mounting frustration of the town. Not a malicious spirit, not even a particularly clever one, but persistent, and growing more so by the candlemark.

He opened his hand and handed the nail back to Alred. "They're not after the metal," Knodalon said. "They want the process. The work itself."

Alred frowned. "The making of things?"

Knodalon nodded. "The rearrangement, the order. Every change, every correction, gives them energy. They crave it."

Alred absorbed this, his mind already spinning through the implications. "So if we ignore it—"

"They escalate," Knodalon said, finishing the sentence for him.

For a moment, the two sat in silence, broken only by the persistent, low hum that now seemed to fill the entire town. The sun had finally dropped below the horizon, and the darkness brought with it a clarity that the day never offered. The outlines of the buildings sharpened; the lights in the windows grew bolder, more insistent.

As if summoned by the very subject of their discussion, a traveler emerged from the gloom at the far end of the trade road. He was not local—his gait was too cautious, his eyes too busy cataloguing every detail of his surroundings—but he wore the colors of the northern caravan and carried himself with the unflappable calm of a man who had survived worse than a few candlemarks in an unfamiliar town.

The traveler paused near Knodalon's bench, nodded politely at both him and Alred, then set down his pack and bent to inspect his left boot. He rolled up the cuff of his trouser and scratched furiously at the exposed calf, muttering a string of oaths that, while not original, demonstrated a certain inventiveness in combining references to gods, insects, and the questionable habits of local livestock.

"Blasted bugs," the traveler said, looking up. "No offense to your fine town, but whatever's biting tonight deserves to be put in a stew and fed to the next goblin band that tries the pass."

Alred, ever the ambassador, managed a smile that was almost convincing. "We're aware of the issue. If you visit the herbalist's shop,

Galhani has a salve that should help. Costs less than it's worth, and it smells better than blood and regret."

The traveler grunted, then resumed scratching. "I'll do that, then. Nothing ruins a day like fleas in your boots."

He moved on, fading into the twilight, leaving behind only the sound of his footsteps and the lingering sense that the world, on this particular evening, was just a hair's breadth away from spinning entirely out of control.

Alred watched him go, then turned back to Knodalon. "They're getting bolder," he said, voice quiet. "It's not just the shop. It's the inn, the bakery, even the smithy. I had Warren stop by yesterday. Said his bellows keep swelling and shrinking, like they're breathing on their own. And the metal in his forge—weird colors, even after a proper quench."

Knodalon digested this. He flexed his ankle, feeling the residual itch work its way up the leg and into his knee. The sensation was sharper now, more focused.

"Is there a pattern?" he asked.

Alred blinked, surprised by the question. "Not yet," he admitted. "But there will be."

Knodalon nodded, satisfied. "Let me know when you find it."

Alred hesitated, then inclined his head, a gesture of respect more sincere than any spoken word. He turned on his heel and walked back toward the shop, the nail clutched tight in his hand.

Knodalon remained on the bench, motionless. He watched the last traces of day bleed out of the sky, felt the air cool and the vibrations settle into a low, steady hum. He scratched once more at his ankle, then stopped, the urge suddenly gone.

He had heard what he needed to hear. The world was changing, again, and the small gods had noticed. It was only a matter of time before the balance tipped, one way or another.

He would be ready.

He always was.

Alred returned, as Knodalon knew he would, barely twenty minutes after leaving. He approached with less urgency, his stride modulated to a near-military regularity. This time he did not remain standing but sat on the far end of the bench, hands folded precisely in his lap, eyes fixed on the middle distance as though reading from a script only he could see.

For a time, neither spoke. There was the creak of wood beneath their weight, the settling of old stone as the night's first true chill pressed in from the lake. Knodalon let the silence hold, trusting Alred to break it only when ready. He was not disappointed.

"I've thought about it," Alred said, the words clipped and carefully chosen. "About the... infestations. And the patterns."

He leaned forward, elbows to knees, and glanced sideways at Knodalon, who gave the faintest nod.

"It's not just randomness. Not just a series of accidents or a cluster of mischievous spirits." Alred drew a careful breath. "They feed on attention. Not just belief, not the way the old gods did, but the kind of attention that comes from being noticed. Observed. Catalogued." His fingers drummed on his knees, then stopped, and he looked at his hands as if surprised to find them still attached.

"You saw the apples this morning?" he asked.

Knodalon waited. Alred filled the space.

"The merchant's cart, on the main road. She always stacks them in rows of ten. But today—" He paused, brow furrowing. "Today the cart tipped, just as she passed the bakery. And the apples—"

He broke off, then shook his head, annoyed at his own imprecision. "They rolled. Not downhill, not into the gutter, but in a circle. A perfect circle, around the wheel. And when I went to help her, she'd already started counting them, convinced she'd lost one. She hadn't. They were all there. But the pattern had changed."

He let the memory hang, as if expecting it to explain itself. When it didn't, he continued.

"It's deliberate. They're shaping the narrative. They want us to notice, to assign meaning. To talk about it."

He looked at Knodalon, the question implicit. Knodalon did not speak, but allowed his attention to narrow: a subtle gift, one that let

the talker feel the weight of being truly heard. Alred responded to the pressure, sitting up straighter, his tone gaining confidence.

"Yesterday, it was the socks. Today, it's the nails and the apples. The day before, I heard from Leota that a guest at the inn spent all night re-arranging the furniture, only to wake and find it precisely as she'd left it the evening before. She swears someone—or something—is copying her. Mimicking. But only when she isn't looking." He spread his hands, helpless. "They're not just playing with us. They're studying us."

Knodalon's thoughts ticked over like the gears in a well-maintained clock. "Why?"

Alred met his gaze, gray eyes sharp in the failing light. "Because this place is different. Because here, things do not decay. Things do not move unless they're meant to. The storehouses keep their contents fresh forever; the buildings never crumble. Even the people—" He glanced across the square, where a group of old men sat sharing a drink, their laughter unchanged in all the years Knodalon had watched them. "The people stay the same, for longer than they should."

He lowered his voice, as if wary of being overheard. "North Pointe's magic is like honey to them. It's a stasis, a stability, that lets them act out their patterns without interference. In most places, entropy beats them every time. But here—" He gestured, encompassing the bench, the green, the whole of the town. "Here, they can persist. Here, they can multiply."

He was quiet for a moment. Knodalon let the silence stand, then said, "And what do you propose?"

Alred considered, then replied, "We have to break the pattern. Not by fighting them—not by direct opposition, which would only feed them more. But by introducing noise. By making their signals meaningless."

Knodalon watched the road, where a dog nosed through the debris left by the day's commerce, then paused to scratch furiously behind its ear. The motion was familiar, almost comforting in its predictability.

"Chaos," Knodalon said.

Alred smiled, a rare and almost subversive expression. "Not chaos.

Ambiguity. A lack of closure. If we confuse the story, if we refuse to assign meaning to their pranks, they lose their audience. Without an audience, they starve."

He straightened his already-straight collar, then relaxed his shoulders, as if the act of sharing the idea had loosened some internal constraint. "It's the only way. Otherwise, they keep escalating until something gives."

Knodalon nodded, once. He looked at Alred, seeing him not as a merchant but as a fellow observer of systems, a peer in the art of seeing the invisible shape beneath the world's surface.

"Serve all," Knodalon said. "That's the rule here."

Alred's smile vanished, replaced by a mask of professional seriousness. "It is. But even the best hosts know when to cut off a guest."

Knodalon regarded the empty square, the lamplight in the windows, the lines of energy that ran just beneath the skin of the town. He thought about the small gods, the way they circled and nipped, always hungry, always at the edge of attention.

"You'll let the others know?" Knodalon asked.

Alred nodded, already rising from the bench. "I will."

He started to walk away, then paused. "You'll watch for the bigger ones, yes?"

Knodalon smiled, thin and without humor. *Clever elf*. "Always."

Alred accepted this, then strode into the night, his silhouette absorbed by the ordered geometry of the square.

Knodalon remained on the bench, letting the plan settle into place. He would do his part—refuse to notice, refuse to assign blame, refuse to see the shape the gods wanted him to see. If enough people did the same, perhaps the balance would tip back, and the world would remember its proper routine.

Or, failing that, there was always the storehouse.

He closed his eyes, and let the next candlemark pass without a single thought for the gods of socks, or apples, or nails. He did not scratch his ankle, even when the urge returned, sharper than before.

And, as the day faded into night, the town held. For now.

Knodalon watched the square as it emptied, watched the day's residue collapse into silence and dust and the slow march of unseen insects across the earth. To any observer—anyone with eyes limited to flesh and not the deeper, older senses—he appeared as he always did: hunched, gray, unmoving. But inside, his mind spun with a speed that would have left a lesser being reeling.

Alred was right. The small gods—call them parasites, call them opportunists—had found the seam in the weave of North Pointe. The town's sacred obligation, the dictum that all who entered be served, included even these. Their disruptions, irritating as they were, did not rise to the level of violence. They harmed no one. They broke nothing of substance. They violated no rules, and by the town's own charter, they could not simply be cast out.

It was a beautiful trap, and for a moment Knodalon almost admired it. The gods had always been lawyers at heart, more interested in precedent than justice.

He watched the bakery through the town gate. Its windows had gone dark, but a faint silhouette lingered inside—the baker herself, no doubt, conducting the final sweep for errant loaves or unfinished tasks. She moved from counter to counter with feline efficiency, never touching the same surface twice, never backtracking. That, he realized, was the signature of the old world: the refusal to waste even a single motion. The gods respected that kind of discipline. But the small ones—they craved the opposite. They wanted interruption, inefficiency, the moment when a sock or a spoon or a single unaccounted-for nail could derail an entire day.

A child walked past, led by her mother. The girl scratched at her neck, the wound bright and red even in the pale light. The mother, preoccupied, adjusted her own collar, then tugged the girl along, not unkindly but with the weary imprecision of a woman who'd had enough of the world's friction for one evening.

That, too, was a kind of signature. An invitation for something to slip in through the cracks.

The itch returned to his own ankle, more insistent than before. He ignored it.

He thought of the storehouse—his storehouse, though the town

called it theirs. They believed its perfection was the product of the town's gift, the same magic that kept the buildings in line and the children healthy and the winters just a fraction less brutal than the next valley over. But Knodalon knew better. The timelessness inside the walls was not the town's doing, but his own. It was a piece of his former self, the part he could not set aside no matter how many centuries he played at being mortal. He did not age. Neither did his things.

That was the real nature of the power at work here: the refusal to yield. The insistence that nothing ever be truly lost. It was, in a way, the most honest magic in the world.

And yet, even here, the small gods had found a way in.

He watched as a traveler, one of the few who'd stayed up late enough to matter, paused on the road and hailed Alred, now locking up his shop for the night. The traveler spoke in the clipped, efficient dialect of the lowlands, something about needing rope or waxed thread before morning. Alred replied in kind, offering the appropriate courtesies, but even as they talked, both men scratched absently at their arms and necks. The flea god, or perhaps its cousin, was at work. It never let up, not even when the host forgot to notice.

The wind picked up, rattling the banners outside the inn and carrying with it the first hints of wood smoke from the houses on the far side of the green. Knodalon felt the change in pressure, the subtle shift as the air tightened around the heart of the town. It was not a threat, not yet, but it was a warning.

He closed his eyes and let the logic play out. If the town's magic was balance, if its rule was to serve, then the only way to restore order was to serve these gods more thoroughly than they could tolerate. If they were parasites, then overfeeding would bloat them, slow them, perhaps even drive them away.

But there was another option.

Ambiguity.

If the gods depended on pattern, on the recognition of their handiwork, then denying them closure—refusing to assign blame, refusing even to notice—would starve them in a more elegant way. They would lose interest, would migrate to greener, more credulous pastures.

He opened his eyes, resolved.

He would need to speak to Alred, to Minnie, to Makota and even to Sam. He would need the buy-in of every person in the town, perhaps even the children. But it was possible. It could work.

He straightened, just a fraction, on his bench. To the casual observer, it was nothing—a tired old man shifting his weight in the cool of the evening. But for Knodalon, it was a signal. The first move in a game he had been playing, and losing, for centuries.

The gods had always counted on their hosts to break before they did. But North Pointe was not a town that broke.

He would see to that, personally.

The wind died. The itch subsided. The stars appeared, one by one, in their proper places.

Knodalon watched the night, and for the first time in an age, let himself feel the pleasure of anticipation.

There would be an ending, and it would be one of his own making.

CHAPTER 7

He watched the morning die a slow, ugly death at the hands of the petty gods.

That was what he called them now—petty, not for their size, but for the scope of their ambitions. The god of lost socks, the god of tarnish, the god of warm breezes, the god of oppressed fleas, and, most recently, a small, glimmering thing that appeared to have staked its claim on glints of light. The last had been the worst, for Knodalon had always considered the refraction of sunlight off water to be a rare pleasure. Now, every time a sparkle danced across the lake, it carried a subtext of hunger, as if the moment itself had teeth.

The bench outside the lakeside storehouse remained his. Through all the indignities visited upon North Pointe, through the endless parade of minor mischiefs and recurring blights, the bench had not changed. It was more an extension of himself than a piece of the town, and so it bore the morning's developments with the same weary resignation he did.

He tracked the progression of the sock god's aftereffects. At dawn, there were the usual pinwheeling singletons, fluttering from the Weary Head to the bakery and back, always just out of reach. By midmorn-

ing, the situation had escalated. A traveler from the east, proud owner of a new woolen tunic, exited the inn with sleeves mismatched by design and a face contorted in the frustration of the recently fleeced. She had, Knodalon suspected, waged a silent war with the laundry room, only to lose both her original gloves and her temper. He noted, with some satisfaction, the way she stomped down the road, kicking up puffs of dust that momentarily outshone her indignation.

The god of tarnish made its move next. It had colonized not just the utensils in the Broken Claw, but had spread to the ceremonial bell outside the town hall. This was a new development—one that implied either ambition or desperation. Knodalon watched as the morning light caught on the bell, then slid down its side in a sluggish, oily drip. He imagined the bell's toll, when next sounded, would be less than inspiring.

The god of warm breezes was, as always, subtle. Today it contented itself with the rearrangement of the laundry on the green, making a sport of swapping sheets between lines. A pair of children, conscripted by their mother to monitor the drying, had given up entirely and were now wrestling in the grass, the laundry forgotten. Knodalon respected the move. If you couldn't beat the gods, you could at least exhaust them.

The god of oppressed fleas—he could feel it, even now, working its way up his right calf. He ignored the itch. This was war by a thousand pricks, and he'd lived through worse.

He became aware, in the way an old dog senses the presence of a stranger, that the traveler was back. She was now missing a glove and, judging by the way she jabbed her hands into her pockets, the better part of her patience. She paced the square, scanning the ground, as if she could summon the lost item through sheer force of will. She did not look at Knodalon, nor did she seem to register the possibility of the bench as a witness to her defeat. He watched her, watched the godling, watched the space between the two and how it vibrated with intent.

That was the thing about small gods. The big ones, the ancient powers, had learned discretion. They worked through proxies and seasons and the slow grind of weather. The small gods were show-offs,

every one of them. They lived for the moment when someone would look up and say, aloud, "Where did my glove go?" It was worship, of a kind.

He found himself, for the first time in years, losing patience.

The wind was calm, for now. He could have left it that way. He could have continued his observational role, cataloguing each annoyance, waiting for the town to adapt. But there came a point, even for the most retired of gods, when the matter simply needed to be handled.

He extended his hand. Not with any flourish—just a slow, deliberate unfurling of the fingers, palm up, as if requesting the return of something that rightfully belonged to him. The wind obeyed.

It began as a tremor, a gentle stirring at his feet. Dust spiraled up, then sideways, forming a tight ribbon that circled the bench before darting out onto the square. At first, only the lightest things were disturbed: a dry leaf, a loose scrap of paper, the floating dandelion seeds that had somehow survived the kits' predations. But the wind was hungry, and it grew quickly.

It moved with precision, collecting. A mitten from behind the grocer's crate. A handkerchief from the bakery roof. The missing glove from beneath the green, where it had been pressed into the earth by the boot of the defeated traveler. Socks—dozens of them, in every pattern and hue—whipped through the air like startled birds. The wind found them all, as if it could smell the imbalance.

The children noticed first. They stopped their wrestling, eyes wide, as the air filled with a thousand small, spinning objects. Then the adults, drawn by the rising noise: a sound like laughter, if laughter were made of static and the crack of fresh laundry on a line. Heads emerged from shop doors. The square itself became a stage, every onlooker given front-row seats to the spectacle.

The traveler, oblivious at first, soon became the focal point. The wind arranged itself around her, constructing a slow, deliberate spiral that hovered at shoulder height, waiting for acknowledgement. It seemed to have a sense of theater, or perhaps Knodalon did; either way, the effect was undeniable. The traveler froze, eyes darting from

the circling socks to the glove that now spun, tantalizingly, just out of reach.

She reached for it, and the wind drew back, playful. She tried again, this time with both hands, and the glove darted higher, then lower, then abruptly reversed course and slapped her in the face. The children erupted in delighted howls. Even the adults, after a moment's hesitation, joined in the laughter. It was not a cruel laughter, but a communal one—the kind that bound a town together in its own small absurdities.

The wind, satisfied with its performance, changed course. It swept the square clean, gathering the socks, mittens, handkerchiefs, and every other lost item into a single, undulating cloud. The cloud contracted, then funneled itself toward the edge of the green, where, just beside the storehouse, an old shipping chest stood half-buried in weeds. The chest was an artifact of the town's founding days: battered, iron-bound, and, until this morning, presumed empty. Now it became the final destination.

The wind hammered the chest open, crammed its burden inside, then slammed the lid shut with a report that echoed down the lake. For a moment, the air hummed with energy, the way the world does after a thunderclap.

Then, silence.

Knodalon watched as a shimmer, no bigger than a field mouse, attempted to slither out from the crack beneath the chest's lid. He closed his hand into a fist. The wind responded, pressing the shimmer down, then weaving itself into a thin membrane over the chest's surface. The godling rattled the chest, once, twice, then fell still. Across the wood, a faint pattern shimmered—sigils of containment, barely visible to the mortal eye but unmistakable to anything with divine pretensions.

He released the wind, and the world exhaled.

The square remained frozen for a breath, the townsfolk caught between wonder and confusion. Then, as if a spell had been broken, the children sprinted to the chest, prying it open and shrieking with delight at the contents. Socks flew, gloves were reunited, handker-

chiefs claimed. Even the traveler approached, now grinning despite herself, and accepted her glove from the outstretched hand of a child.

No one looked at the bench. Knodalon preferred it that way.

He leaned back, feeling the muscles in his hand unclench, the itch in his leg subside. He surveyed the green. The bell outside the town hall glinted in the sun, the tarnish gone. The laundry on the lines hung still, sheets and shirts and pillowcases content in their designated places. Even the air over the lake seemed brighter, the sparkle unaccompanied by hunger.

He let himself savor the moment. Not victory, exactly. More a brief, hard-won truce.

He closed his eyes and rested his hand on the bench. The small gods would return, he knew. They always did. But for now, the town could breathe again. And so could he.

It was enough.



It took the rest of the morning for the town to comprehend what had happened.

At first, there was just the aftermath: a square carpeted with oddments, every sock and scarf and lost token from a decade of careless hands. The children, finding themselves suddenly rich, sprinted to the chest and fought over the spoils with the logicless urgency of puppies at a feeding trough. Adults circled warily, as if suspecting a trick, then stooped one by one to claim their own: a merchant with his favorite ledger, the grocer's wife with her long-mourned hat, even Dooley, owner of the menagerie, who lifted a battered whistle and turned it over and over as if expecting it to bite.

At the periphery, Minnie stood dumbstruck, arms full of the inn's best tablecloths. She did not move, only blinked, the weight of so much returned order nearly too much for her to process.

"Trevor!" she called, once, then a second time, before her son materialized beside her, hands already full of mismatched linens and with a pair of striped socks around his neck like a scarf.

"Mama, look!" he crowed. "They're all back. Even the ones you said got eaten by the stove."

Minnie clutched the tablecloths to her chest and shook her head, voice thin with disbelief. "Nothing ever comes back in this town. Not like this." She eyed the chest, then the wind-scoured square, then Knodalon, who, having set the world to rights, now watched the proceedings with the equanimity of a man awaiting his tea.

The rest of the square gradually repopulated. Alred, summoned by rumor and the inevitable mathematics of town gossip, paced the circumference of the event with his arms folded, tallying the losses and returns with every pass. He made careful note of which items had reappeared, in what condition, and in whose hands. Every so often, he'd pause to inspect a recovered item—once, to peer at a spool of thread held by the seamstress, once more to test the flexibility of a waxed cord returned to the cobbler—and then, satisfied or not, move on.

Across from him, Calder leaned against a post, watching with the patience of someone accustomed to the eccentricities of lakes and men alike. He had not yet claimed anything from the chest, but he smiled a small, secret smile each time a child shrieked in joy at the sight of a favorite toy, or when a hardened traveler laughed out loud at the recovery of a single, sentimental scrap.

The only real dissent came from Sam, who stood at the door of the Broken Claw, hands on hips, squinting at the sky as if expecting the wind to change its mind and reclaim everything in an instant.

"Well?" she called to the square at large, her voice carrying as always. "Don't just stand there gawking. Find your things and clear out. Some of us have work to do, and I don't need a parade at my doorstep every time the weather gets clever."

A few townsfolk moved to obey, collecting their items and dispersing in small, shell-shocked groups. Most lingered, unwilling to trust the restoration until it had passed a few candlemarks' test.

Sam's gaze eventually settled on Knodalon, who had not left his bench since before sunrise. She stared for a long moment, eyes narrowed, then nodded once—grudging respect, or perhaps the recog-

nitition that some things simply happened, and it was no use arguing with the source.

When Knodalon finally rose, it was with the slow deliberation of a mountain deciding to move. He walked the short path from bench to pub with each step as precise and considered as a syllable in a binding spell. The town watched, or pretended not to, as he crossed the square.

He passed Minnie and Trevor, still inventorying the day's windfall.

"I don't suppose you'd care to explain this?" Minnie asked, half to Knodalon, half to the universe at large.

He paused, considered her, and said, "The world prefers things in pairs. Sometimes it needs a reminder."

Minnie snorted, but there was gratitude in it. "Remind it that I'm still missing three of the white ones. If it finds them, I'll bake it a pie."

He inclined his head, then continued on.

The air inside the Broken Claw was, as always, two degrees cooler than the outside and twice as thick with the scent of old wood, new ale, and the persistent, underlying tang of Sam's temper. A dozen patrons sat at the tables, most with the body language of people who had witnessed something uncanny and were now determined to process it with drink. Conversation was muted, punctuated by the occasional bark of laughter as someone recounted their own peculiar recovery.

Sam was at the bar, polishing a tankard with the same vigor she used for every other problem. She watched Knodalon approach, then slid a mug across the bar with a gesture that was half challenge, half invitation.

"On the house," she said.

He took the mug, nodded thanks. The ale was bitter, but it cleared the dust from his mouth and reminded him, not unpleasantly, of an earlier world. He sipped, then turned his attention to the room.

At a table near the hearth, Alred and Calder sat together, the proximity of their chairs implying either shared concern or a long acquaintance with each other's company.

"...first those winds off the lake, and now this," Calder said, his voice a low, even rumble. "Everything's off-kilter. Nothing moves the way it should."

Alred, who never allowed an argument to go unsolved, countered, "Not everything. Some of the patterns are holding, even as the rest of the world comes unstitched. There's order, still, just not the order we're used to."

Calder shrugged. "Not much comfort, is it? When your catch jumps the net or your boat spins circles, you don't care which god is to blame. You just want it to stop."

Alred considered, then replied, "What I want is for the town to keep. If it has to run sideways a while to get there, so be it. But there's more coming. I can feel it."

Calder nodded, then glanced up at Knodalon, who stood by the door, expression unreadable.

Alred followed Calder's gaze. "You were out there when the wind came, Knodalon," he said, voice neutral. "See anything we missed?"

Knodalon let the silence draw out. He could have spoken in riddles, or offered some half-truth to deflect the question, but he was tired. More tired than usual, today.

"Winds obey something older than any of us," he said, voice carrying just enough for the nearest tables to catch. "Sometimes the old orders break. Sometimes they're broken on purpose."

A few heads turned at that. The idea that someone—or something—might be behind the events was not new, but it was rarely spoken aloud.

Sam leaned forward on her elbows. "You think someone did this?" She said it with the skepticism of one who had seen every kind of trick, but whose mind was always open to a better story.

Knodalon sipped the ale, then met her eyes. "Does it matter? The things that come next are never what you expect."

Sam snorted. "You could have just said no, you know."

He let himself smile, thin as a blade.

The talk at the tables resumed, louder now, as if the acknowledgment of uncertainty was itself a relief.

He found an empty seat near the window, facing the square. He

watched as the townsfolk returned to their routines, now and then stopping to marvel at the neat piles of reclaimed goods or to test the sky for signs of another miracle.

The ale warmed his chest, or maybe that was just the aftereffect of so much effort compressed into a single candlemark. He sat back, letting the sun find him through the warped glass.

For the first time, he let himself consider the Goblin King.

He had not paid it any real mind—too distant, too mortal a threat, not his jurisdiction. But now he felt the echo of it: the fear, the worry, the way the whole town bent itself around the possibility of disaster. The little gods had sensed it, too. That was their talent: to read the tension and manifest it in every lost sock, every upended tray, every minor inconvenience until the townsfolk forgot how to be at peace with their own luck.

He watched Minnie cross the square, arms now empty, face set in the look of a woman who had decided not to be caught off guard again. He watched Calder leave the pub, his stride more measured than usual, head on a swivel as if the weather itself might try something new at any moment. He watched the children dart and chase, each shriek and laugh a staccato prayer to the gods of play and, indirectly, to the gods of order and chaos alike.

He finished his ale. The mug clacked softly on the tabletop as he set it down.

He thought of the chest outside the storehouse, the godling bound inside, pressing itself uselessly against the runes of containment. He thought of the wind, still waiting, just beyond the edge of things, for the next command. He thought of the way the world resisted being put back together, even when the effort was as simple and necessary as closing a door.

Worried people, he reflected, looked for answers. Easy ones, if they could be had. The little gods were only too happy to supply them.

He would have to watch more closely.

He stood, joints creaking in sympathy with the old wood of the floor. He walked to the door, paused in the entryway. Sam caught his eye, and for once, she did not smile.

"You'll let us know if the wind changes again?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Good," she said, and went back to polishing tankards.

Outside, the air was cool and bright. The square was quiet, the worst of the day's strangeness already receding into story. Knodalon made his way back to the bench. He sat, as he always did, and set his gaze on the horizon.

The world was out of joint. But for now, at least, it held.

He would make sure it did.

And if the wind changed, he would be ready. As always.

CHAPTER 8

Dawn was the only honest time in North Pointe. The sun came in hard and flat over the horizon, no hint of subtlety or artifice, just a slab of gold laid down on the lake and the trade road and every flaw in between. Knodalon was already on his bench—he was always on his bench—and so he watched the light catch first on the lintel of the storehouse, then on the roof slates, then on the slow-moving patch of mud that would, by noon, be three times its current size.

It was a small mercy, then, that the morning's first arrivals were not gods, not even the small ones, but a party of four travelers walking with the deliberate, footsore cadence of people who had not slept indoors for three nights straight.

He watched them come up the road, their figures unspooling in the light. They wore the battered armor of professionals, patched and scraped but never neglected. Each carried a weapon: the leader, a sword at her side and a shield slung across her back; her second, a staff taller than himself, runed and warped by years of use; the third, a bow and a bristling quiver, and the fourth, shortest and broadest, a pair of axes slung at his hips and a look that said he'd already made peace with violence as a way of life.

Knodalon recognized the energy that hung around them. It was not the chaos of the small gods—the static hum, the flicker of mischief at the edge of vision—but a denser, more focused field. The air around these four bent slightly, as if making room for the inevitable. He'd seen that signature a thousand times: the aura of a party on a heroic quest, equal parts faith and stubbornness, and in all likelihood headed straight for disappointment.

He watched as they approached the town gate. The wooden arch still bore the scars of last winter's storm, and the guards, such as they were, had long since stopped bothering with formalities. The travelers passed through with only a grunt and a nod, but Knodalon could see the moment each took in the scene: the way their eyes flicked to the watchtower, the empty space where the signpost used to be, the slow, measured sweep of the green and its ring of shops.

The leader—female, with a face like chipped marble and a stride that dared you to argue—scanned the town as if memorizing every angle. She noted the benches, the lamp-posts, the black patch of last night's fire in the square. Her sword never left its scabbard, but the tilt of her hand suggested it would, at the first whiff of trouble.

Her second, the staff-bearer, wore spectacles that caught the light and scattered it in a thousand nervous glints. He was already scribbling something in a notebook, muttering under his breath in a language Knodalon had not heard in a very long time. The archer, tall and thin with a complexion the color of morning fog, moved with a grace that was almost lazy, but never less than alert. The fourth, the dwarf, grinned at the town in general as if daring someone to try and stop him from doing whatever it was he planned to do next.

Knodalon felt the shift ripple through the square. Even without looking, he knew the effect the newcomers had on the routine.

At the Weary Head, Minnie stood on the porch, a rug draped over her shoulder, frozen mid-swing in the act of beating it clean. She eyed the party the way a cook eyes a new cut of meat: assessing value, threat, and how long before the fat rendered down. Her son Trevor, half-hidden behind the porch rail, watched with a different flavor of interest—equal parts hero-worship and the hope that someone might, for once, provide more drama than a misplaced sock.

In the smithy, Warren looked up from his work, the hammer still raised above his head. The morning light caught the dust in his hair and the green of his skin, and for a moment he stood as immobile as a statue, his gaze fixed on the newcomers. It was only when the archer passed within earshot that Warren set his hammer down, wiped his hands on his apron, and squinted at the party with a craftsman's eye. He judged them, Knodalon guessed, not by their weapons but by the way they wore them—how well the sword balanced at the hip, how quickly the bow could be drawn, whether the axes had been sharpened or merely polished to impress.

Dooley, whose day began and ended in a perpetual war with the menagerie, paused in the act of chasing an escaped parakeet around the green. The bird, oblivious to the existential threat posed by the adventurers, made for the safety of the linden tree. Dooley, panting and wild-eyed, glanced at the travelers, then at Knodalon, as if hoping for some kind of cue as to whether he should hide or introduce himself.

The travelers stopped in the road, just in front of the open town gate. The leader pointed down the road at the inn, then through the gate at the bakery, then at the storehouse. Her second nodded, scribbled more notes, and conferred quietly with the archer. The dwarf, seeing Minnie at the Weary Head, gave her a salute and a broad, gap-toothed smile. Minnie rolled her eyes but returned the gesture with a nod, then resumed beating the rug, with perhaps a bit more violence than strictly necessary.

Knodalon let the scene play out. He watched, without moving, as the party debated their options, then made for the Broken Claw. The archer lagged behind, pausing to run a hand along the carved fence-post outside the storehouse, then, after a moment, followed the others into the pub.

With the newcomers inside, the square slowly exhaled. Minnie called Trevor to help with the rugs, her voice sharper than usual. Warren returned to the forge, but with the distraction of a man already working out what commissions he might be asked to fill before the sennight was up. Dooley gave up on the parakeet, slumped down onto a crate, and stared at the inn door as if expecting it to reveal the secret

of why gods, travelers, and wild animals all seemed drawn to this one patch of dirt.

Knodalon remained on the bench, unmoving, but inside he felt the smallest flicker of anticipation. He had spent the better part of a century watching this town, and he knew its moods as well as his own. Heroes never arrived without bringing a story, and stories had a way of upending the careful balance of things.

It took Knodalon the better part of a minute to uncoil from the bench and decide, with the resigned air of someone who has lost a familiar bet, that he'd have to follow the story himself. He pressed his palms to his knees, rose, and shuffled toward the Broken Claw. The movement was slow, but there was intent behind it—a steady, measured gait that signaled to anyone watching that this was not some feeble old man, but an observer who expected to be let through.

He passed the linden tree, its leaves already humming with early bees. He sniffed toward the bakery, where Makota had just opened the window and was testing the air for the first batch of the day. The scent of yeast and heat clung to the square, blending with the richer, sharper aroma of the kitchen Sam shared with Minnie as Knodalon approached the Claw.

Inside, the adventurers had claimed the largest table, and were already negotiating breakfast with Sam. She stood, arms folded, behind the bar, and watched them with a skepticism so pure it could have been bottled. The room held a scattering of regulars: two night-shift dockers finishing their drinks, a merchant repacking his satchel, and, in the corner, Jen, polishing the brasswork on her badge and ignoring everyone with professional focus.

Knodalon slid into the nearest empty seat, which, by design or accident, afforded him a clear view of both the adventurers and the bar. He let his hands rest on the table, fingers splayed, and waited for the world to deliver him an answer.

The leader of the party was the first to notice him. She eyed him with the cold, precise judgment of a career soldier, then nodded once in acknowledgment. Her hair was dark, cut short in the manner of a woman who'd lost patience with vanity a decade ago. The lines of her

face were severe, but not unkind, and her eyes had the weight of someone who'd memorized too many casualty reports.

"We're after eggs and bread," she told Sam, "but anything hot will do."

Sam rolled her eyes. "You get what I've got, same as the rest of us. Coffee, if you want to live. Ale, if you don't."

The dwarf, who sat to the leader's right, grinned wide and thumped the table. "Both, for me. May as well be awake when the end comes."

The scholar, bespectacled and already bent over a battered folio of maps, added, "Fresh water, please. And if you have ink, I'd pay for a bottle."

The archer, last and least invested in the breakfast discussion, lounged with her boots on a spare chair, gaze drifting around the room as if seeking the nearest fire exit. Her fingers drummed a silent rhythm on the table, mirroring Knodalon's.

Sam brought out a tray, set it down with a thump, and poured four mugs with a speed that spoke of the years in her trade. She ignored the archer, who smiled at the slight, and only refilled the dwarf's mug after a long, unsmiling pause.

"So," Sam said, "what brings a knight, a librarian, a squirrel, and a barrel into my town before dawn?"

The leader smiled, thin but genuine. "You know your types."

"Not much changes here," Sam replied, "except the names."

The scholar looked up. "We're seeking passage north. Our map says the road splits here, but no one we asked in the last town would say a word about the northern route. Except that it's bad luck."

"Not luck," Sam said. "Just worse things than goblins, up that way."

The dwarf raised his mug. "That's what they said about the last town. And yet here we are."

Knodalon watched, and listened, and let the air do what it would. The scholar's map was not the newest, but it had been annotated with a care that spoke of long travel and more than one dead companion. The leader's armor bore the crest of an order militant, though the paint was flaked and the sigil all but lost. The archer's gaze, for all its

aimless wandering, missed nothing; her boots, Knodalon noted, were cleanly re-soled within the past sennight, and her hands had the faint scars of an archer who kept her own kit.

He caught Jen's eye, from her station at the bar. She gave him the smallest of nods, then set down her badge and wandered over, casual as anything.

"Morning," Jen said. "You looking for trouble, or just breakfast?"

The leader weighed her answer. "Both, but mostly the second."

Jen slid into the vacant seat beside Knodalon. Her blue uniform coat, cut to show the badge of office, looked freshly brushed. The metal bracelet at her wrist caught the light—a trick of the angle, perhaps, or the suggestion of something much sharper than it seemed.

"The north route's impassable," Jen said. "At least, that's what I tell anyone who asks. It's not true, but it keeps the worst sorts out."

The dwarf snorted. "We're the worst sorts, then?"

Jen's lips twitched. "Not yet. But you look the type who could grow into it."

Sam refilled Jen's mug, then leaned in. "They're after the Goblin King. Or something like it."

The scholar nodded, a bit too eagerly. "We have reason to believe the Goblin King's army has repositioned. Their last known movements were east, but then—" He gestured at the town, at the road beyond. "—nothing. No tracks, no survivors, no rumors except that they bypassed the pass entirely. We suspect they're going north, for some reason."

Jen folded her hands atop the table, the bracelet glinting. "Goblins hate cold. They hate hunger more, but cold is a close second. You think they're after a cache, or just lost?"

The leader shook her head. "They're never lost. Not with a King at the front. The old stories say they're after something in the Range. Maybe a weapon, maybe a secret. We're supposed to get there first."

The archer, who had not yet spoken, let her boots drop to the floor and leaned in, voice low. "Or failing that, we're supposed to make sure they never get it."

Knodalon listened, but he also watched. The scholar's map, for all its creases and ink-stains, bore a series of annotations in three different

hands. Some were new: “here be closed,” “watch for wolves.” The most recent line, written in a faint blue pencil, simply read: “Ask at North Pointe. The wind keeps the truth.” He felt a familiar irritation at the words—prophecies rarely aged well, and the ones that did were usually tricks of memory and wishful thinking.

Sam, who had heard worse, grunted. “The only thing the wind keeps is secrets. If you want answers, you’ll get what we have.”

The dwarf grinned. “We’ve coin. Not much, but enough for a round or two. And after that, we’ll trade stories for supper.”

Sam shook her head, but there was a warmth to her glare. “No charge. We’ll just see if you’re worth your salt.”

The conversation rolled forward, the rhythm of the town absorbing the newcomers and their quest. Jen and the leader compared notes on the lay of the land, the state of the roads, the last five sightings of goblin banners. The scholar grilled Sam on local legends, then tried, unsuccessfully, to get Knodalon to say more than a single syllable. The archer, for her part, kept to the shadows, content to let her companions do the talking while she watched the door, the windows, and the drift of traffic in and out of the square.

When it came time for breakfast, the plates arrived with a clatter. Four eggs apiece, a heel of bread, a slab of bacon that might have been cut from a wild boar, and a pitcher of water cold enough to fog the glass. Sam watched as the party tucked in, then made a show of wiping her hands on her apron and leaning against the bar, eyes fixed on nothing in particular.

It was Jen who broke the silence. “You didn’t say which order you serve.”

The leader finished chewing, wiped her mouth, and said, “Technically, we’re with the Order of the Veiled Dawn. But right now, we serve ourselves.”

Jen’s eyes narrowed, not with suspicion but with the recognition of a fellow professional operating outside the lines. “Long leash,” she said.

“Short,” the leader replied, “but we cut it.”

Sam barked a laugh. “You’ll fit right in, then.”

Knodalon, who had eaten nothing and wanted less, tapped a finger

against the rim of his mug and let the air shift around him. There was a quality to the morning now—a tension that buzzed in the wood of the table, that made the sunlight filtering through the windows pulse a little sharper. He watched the way the party leaned in when they talked, the way their hands hovered near their weapons even in repose. This was not a fool's errand, or the slow-motion calamity of an amateur hero's quest. These people were here to change something, or to die trying.

He recognized, with a mix of pride and dread, that this was the kind of story the world rarely survived without consequence.

The scholar, now emboldened by a full stomach and the promise of new information, leaned across the table and addressed Knodalon directly. "You're the keeper of the storehouse, aren't you? Tales say you never forget a face, or a story."

Knodalon shrugged. "People remember what they want to."

The scholar nodded, as if he'd just received a profound truth. "We're told there's a legend here. Something about an old god in the Range, a weapon or a shield that predates the goblins by centuries. Do you know anything of it?"

Knodalon looked past the scholar, out the window, to where the sun had begun to clear the last scraps of mist from the green. He considered the question, weighed the cost of answering, then said, "Most legends are warnings. The older they are, the more likely they're true."

The leader nodded, as if that settled the matter. "We'll take all the warnings you have."

Jen grinned, showing teeth. "If you make it back, you can buy us a round and tell us which ones were right."

"You know," Sam said quietly, her eyes flicking to the fate-diviner that hung above the pub's front door, "you might be looking for the Enchantress."

Jen nodded, quickly picking up the cue. "Lives high up in the Mistrals. If you find her, she'll set you a task—but if you pass, she'll give you what you need. If there's a weapon or a shield that fits the need, she'll have it."

Knodalon easily suppressed a grin, being unaccustomed to the

expression. The “Enchantress” was another of Nimarith’s tricks, another nod to the importance of quests in the world.

The archer, who had watched the entire exchange in silence, finally smiled. “If we don’t make it back, you can put us in a legend of your own.”

Sam snorted. “You die in this town, you get turned into sausage. Or a cautionary tale.”

The room laughed. Even the scholar managed a nervous chuckle. “These tasks,” he said, his tone growing serious. “Are they difficult?”

“No more than you can handle if you’re deserving of the reward,” Jen said. “From what we’ve heard.”

Knodalon waited for the sound to fade, then pushed back his chair and stood, joints creaking like an old ship’s hull. He left the mug on the table and moved to the door, pausing just long enough to let the leader meet his eyes.

“Good luck,” he said.

The words hung in the air, heavy as a curse.

He stepped into the sunlight, feeling the new day settle onto his shoulders like a promise he hadn’t made.

The wind, for the moment, was steady.



He took his time crossing the square. The air was warmer now, but still carried the crispness that spoke of unfinished business. Knodalon did not hurry; he’d learned long ago that the world delivered its answers only when it had exhausted all other options. Instead, he let his mind drift, watching the interplay of the morning routines as if from a great distance.

At the storehouse steps, Alred was already arranging boxes into two neat rows, muttering to himself about inventory. The merchant’s precision was a comfort, a reminder that some patterns could hold even when everything else was unraveling. But Knodalon saw the tiny tells: a missed step, a misplaced ledger, a moment’s hesitation before each new task. The scholar’s words at breakfast had not left him.

On the green, Dooley was busy corralling a line of miniature

tortoises, his progress hampered by the fact that the tortoises refused to accept the concept of “line.” They scattered in all directions, heedless of Dooley’s increasingly desperate bribes. It was, Knodalon reflected, a perfect metaphor for the town itself—every effort toward order met by a cheerful, stubborn refusal from the universe.

He waited for the wind to rise. When it did, it was not with the force of a storm or the sharpness of a quarrel, but a gentler, more insistent push. It wound around Alred, nudging his elbow just as the merchant reached for a crate. Alred paused, as if listening to something just out of earshot, then stood up straight and glanced toward the bakery. He held the pose a moment, brow furrowing, before shaking his head and returning to work.

A few minutes later, the scholar emerged from the Claw, scrolls under one arm, eyes fixed on the horizon. He spotted Alred and made a beeline for him, dodging a wheelbarrow and a small herd of goats along the way. The conversation began politely—introductions, the ritual comparison of trade routes and supply lists—but Knodalon could see the undercurrents. The scholar wanted information. Alred, despite himself, was ready to share.

They stood at the edge of the green, deep in negotiation, when the wind shifted again. This time, Knodalon gave it the barest suggestion of a nudge, a whisper that barely disturbed the dust. Alred’s expression changed: his eyes narrowed, then widened, and his jaw set with the resolve of a man who had just solved a particularly stubborn riddle.

“You know,” Alred said, voice carrying just enough for Knodalon to catch, “I believe Warren might have what you’re looking for. If it’s metal you need, or even something less conventional, he’s the best you’ll find.”

The scholar looked surprised, then pleased. “We were told as much, but I wasn’t sure if he’d take a commission.”

“Warren takes pride in the work, not the customer,” Alred replied, then added, almost as an afterthought, “He also has a gift for knowing what’s needed before you do. More than once, I’ve gone to him for a hinge or a bolt, and found he’d already made it, just waiting for someone to ask.”

The scholar glanced at his scrolls, then back at Alred. "Has he ever worked with... unusual materials?"

Alred grinned, an expression rare enough to register as a local event. "Ask him about the demon-iron horseshoes, if you want a story."

The two shook hands, and the scholar set off toward the forge with a new spring in his step.

Knodalon allowed himself the luxury of a smile. He watched the wind curl around Alred, a caress rather than a shove, and saw the tension in the merchant's shoulders ease. For all their stubbornness, the people of North Pointe knew when to accept a nudge from the world, even if they never admitted it out loud.

As the scholar passed the menagerie, he nearly collided with Dooley, who had finally managed to corral the tortoises into something resembling a formation. Dooley straightened, wiped his brow, and offered a respectful nod. "You're from out east, aren't you?" he said. "We don't get many who make it this far."

The scholar, caught off guard, nodded. "How did you—?"

"Accent," Dooley said, "and the way you carry your books. No one here takes notes unless it's to settle a bet."

The scholar laughed, genuinely. "We're hoping for something more than a bet. If we find what we're after, it could change things."

Dooley eyed him with the cautious optimism of someone who'd seen too many changes, most of them for the worse. "Well, I wish you luck. And if you need advice on local pests, I'm your man."

The scholar, suitably impressed, made a note in his ledger. "Thank you."

As he continued on, Calder appeared from the direction of the lake, a string of silver fish in one hand and the other hand gesturing in the universal language of "make way, coming through." He spotted the scholar, recognized the type, and offered a grunt of acknowledgment.

"Hunting goblins?" Calder asked, cutting straight to the point.

"Something like that," the scholar replied. "Looking for an edge."

Calder nodded. "If you get one, let me know. Last time, I lost two nets and a boat before I figured out their tricks."

The scholar smiled. "What tipped you off?"

Calder considered, then shrugged. "I dreamed it, actually. Saw the solution in my sleep, clear as day. Next morning, I had the answer." He tapped his temple. "Sometimes you just need to trust what the world's telling you."

The scholar seemed to take this to heart, nodding as he walked away.

Knodalon felt the wind die down, the threads of manipulation curling back into the quiet of the morning. He watched the townsfolk resume their routines, but now there was a sense of momentum—an invisible current, pulling them toward the next part of the story.

He had learned, over long years, that the most powerful interventions were the ones that left no trace. No lightning, no thunder, just a quiet shifting of the scales until the world found its balance again.

He returned to his bench, settled in, and let the sun warm his face.

For the first time that day, he allowed himself to hope that the travelers might just make it through the Range.

The wind, for now, was with them.

Returning to the bench proved more difficult than Knodalon remembered. The sun was higher, and the world's warmth came with it, turning the wood from a comforting chill to a low, steady burn against his spine. He shifted, trying to find a new equilibrium, but the bench had developed a fault—a subtle tilt, maybe, or a misalignment in the slats. He ran his palm along the surface, feeling for the cause, and in that moment, the itch returned.

This time it was less philosophical, more pointed. His ankle burned with the sudden, specific fury of a thousand tiny mandibles. He pulled up his trouser leg, expecting nothing, and was greeted by the sight of three—no, four—fleas making a doomed but valiant assault on the last bastion of his dignity.

He pinched one between his fingers. It squirmed, then burst in a pop of red and black, leaving a faint metallic tang on his skin. He watched the others leap, impossible to follow with mortal eyes, but he

tracked their movement by the signature they left behind—a ripple of irritation, an aftertaste of mischief.

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, and tried to locate the godling responsible.

He found nothing. No shimmer, no pulse, not even the hint of a shadow on the air. The only proof of its existence was the evidence on his ankle and the low, background hum of annoyance that now colored his every thought.

He sighed. The truly great gods, he mused, were visible only in proportion to their ambition. A god of Weevils would have a thousand eyes and a carapace of chitin and brass, and it would stride the town like a conquering general. A god of Repressed Fleas, by contrast, would be invisible by design, its entire purpose being to evade notice and persist until all resistance was ground to powder.

He let the itch spread, refusing to scratch it.

Across the green, Dooley was losing his mind. The man had abandoned all pretense of dignity and was now performing an interpretive dance of self-flagellation, slapping at every exposed inch of skin while simultaneously trying to keep the tortoises in order. His face was red, his hair disheveled, and he swore with the creativity of a poet and the volume of a blacksmith.

Knodalon watched, torn between amusement and sympathy. He considered sending a gust of wind to help, but thought better of it. This was a problem that required a different kind of intervention.

He closed his eyes, drew in a long, slow breath, and imagined the world as a series of concentric circles. At the center: the flea, immortal and indomitable. Around it: the animals, the town, the travelers, each orbiting in their own pattern of hunger and hope. And at the outermost ring: himself, the not-quite-god, the keeper of balance, eternally tasked with keeping the circles from grinding each other to dust.

He exhaled, and with it, let the itch go. The fleas persisted, of course—they always did—but for the moment, their victory was limited to the flesh and not the mind.

From his bench, he watched as the travelers made their way toward the forge, as Alred restocked his shelves with a new sense of purpose, as Dooley at last surrendered and let the tortoises fend for

themselves. He watched the world settle back into its routine, every annoyance and ambition perfectly in balance.

He sat back, hands folded, and prepared to wait for the next disturbance.

There would always be another.

But for now, the world was as it should be: flawed, infested, and quietly, persistently alive.

CHAPTER 9

The sun had not yet decided on a color for the sky when Warren stepped into the street. He did not ease the door shut behind him, but let it swing and thump and settle of its own accord, as if the door—like the world—could be trusted to find its rest eventually. In the darkness, his silhouette loomed over the lintel, each movement refracted through a haze of sleep and intention. He rolled his shoulders twice, worked the stiffness from his arms, then lumbered forward with a stride that had no patience for obstacles, real or imagined.

Knodalon had been on his bench since the first hint of morning, though in truth, he had not slept. There were no more dreams left in him, only the remnants of a hundred thousand dawns, each layered on the last, a sediment of memory that shaped the present whether he wished it or not. From his seat beside the storehouse, he watched the ogre's progress, tracking every microexpression: the adjustment of Warren's posture as he caught sight of the watcher, the brief, ceremonial pause as he acknowledged Knodalon's presence, and the final, almost imperceptible sigh that meant he was ready for the day to begin.

Warren approached the bench and stood, backlit by the uncertain

light, his face unreadable except for the familiar tension along the jawline.

"Good morning," Warren said.

Knodalon nodded, which was all the response he usually gave or needed.

Warren planted his feet wide, as if bracing for an argument with the elements. "It's the gauntlet today. Not the sword. Dream changed on me."

There was a twinge—guilt, or maybe embarrassment—in his tone, as if he had failed at something basic. But Knodalon only watched, waiting for the rest.

Warren let out a slow breath. "Supposed to be for the woman, not the boy. That's what the dream said. It was clear as anything: her arm lit up to the shoulder, lines like gold wire, even a light at the tips of the fingers. Never made anything like it. Wouldn't even know where to start if I hadn't seen the vision v already."

Knodalon could almost see the memory projected on the inside of Warren's skull: the vision, jagged and incomplete, all color and sensation, then the frantic attempt to capture it on paper before it faded. It was the same process, over and over, whether one worked metal or memory.

Warren looked at his hands. "Susan thinks it's a message, not just a job."

Knodalon, who had never doubted Susan's acuity, said nothing.

The ogre squinted toward the far end of the street, where the bakery's first light showed behind steamed-up windows. "She's probably right. Always is." He flexed his fingers, then grinned, abrupt and sheepish. "Just feels strange, changing the plan. Feels like cheating the customer, even if it's what the world wants."

He turned, already losing interest in the debate, and set off toward the forge. The ground shivered under his stride, but there was delicacy in the way he held his arms, as if the mere thought of what he would make today required more care than usual.

Knodalon stayed on the bench, unmoving. It was unnecessary, of course; if he had wanted to observe Warren's work, he could have watched from a thousand miles away. But there was a kind of disci-

pline in holding one's ground, a reminder that not everything needed to be done at a remove. Sometimes, you sat, and you watched, and you remembered.

From the front of the storehouse, Knodalon could see nearly everything: the town's slow uncoiling, the first ripple of conversation as a fisherman greeted his own reflection at the water's edge, the sweep of cats across the bakery porch, the shudder and then calm as a cart's axles found their groove on the hardpack of the trade road. But his attention was fixed on the forge, where Warren had already begun the day's symphony.

It started with the old rituals: shoveling the fuel, breathing life into the fire, then working the bellows with the expertise of a man who knew the wind's thousand personalities. Warren's arms moved with metronomic precision, muscle and memory in perfect accord, and in no time at all the forge was a living thing—orange, yellow, white, with a core so bright it hurt to look at directly. He turned to the bench, selected a bar from the pile, and laid it across the anvil with a tenderness that bordered on reverence.

The first strikes were gentle, exploratory, as if seeking the spirit in the metal. Warren hammered, rotated, checked the angle, and hammered again, each blow a question and an answer in the same instant. The air filled with the smell of burning coke, and the ring of steel on steel echoed across the square, tapping a rhythm that anyone in North Pointe could set their clock by.

Knodalon's perception, when he allowed it to range, could see more than just the surface of the work. He saw the lines of force that twisted through the metal, the way heat and willpower drew out weaknesses and then bound them in new, improbable strengths. He saw the overlay of Warren's dream, projected in ghostly light above the glowing mass, and how the ogre's hands chased after it, reshaping reality to match the impossible.

Above the anvil, Warren had pinned a half-dozen sketches—some in pencil, some in crude ink, one smeared with what was probably flour from a midnight consultation with Susan. The drawings were inconsistent in their details, but each held the same core idea: a gauntlet that was less weapon than device, jointed like a human hand

but reinforced at the knuckles with geometric plates, each inlaid with a single colored stone. The wrist was a spiral of filigree, delicate as spun sugar, while the fingers tapered to tips so fine they seemed almost too small for an ogre's hands to create.

Warren's method was not elegant, but it was effective. He heated, hammered, cooled, and started over, every cycle erasing a flaw and introducing a new one that was, at the very least, more interesting. His hands—enormous, green-skinned, and capable of crushing a pig's skull without effort—moved with a surgeon's restraint. When the gauntlet's outline finally emerged from the chaos, Warren's whole body shifted: he stood up straighter, forgot to wipe his brow, and, for a long minute, simply looked at what he had made so far.

Knodalon felt the satisfaction radiate out from the forge, a heat distinct from the fire. He recognized the moment when a craftsman saw the shape of the future in their own hands, and the pride that came with it.

Inside the forge, Susan made her entrance with less drama, gliding around the edge of the workspace with the practiced eye of someone who knew how to avoid both sparks and bad moods. She carried a battered tin cup and a strip of cloth that doubled as a makeshift potholder. Knodalon could not hear the conversation at this distance, but his other senses filled in the gaps:

"You'll burn yourself out before lunch," Susan said, pressing the cup into Warren's hand. "Even ogres have limits."

Warren grunted, set down his tongs, and took a long swallow. The drink was black and bitter, designed for efficiency rather than pleasure. Susan glanced at the sketches, then at the metal, then back at Warren. "You're overthinking the wrist. Let it bend more, like in the first drawing."

Warren looked at the gauntlet, then at Susan, then at the gauntlet again. He nodded. "You're right. Too stiff. I'll rework it."

Susan smiled, her expression equal parts affection and exasperation, then left as quietly as she'd come.

Knodalon wondered, as he often did, whether Warren would have been as good a smith without her. He doubted it.

The next candlemarks unfolded with the inevitability of sunrise.

The gauntlet grew in detail: first the palm, then the layered backplate, then the intricate webwork that joined the two and allowed for a full range of motion. Warren's breath came faster as the work grew more difficult, the sweat beading on his forehead and running in dark, glistening rivulets down his jaw. He switched between hammers, sometimes mid-blow, using the finer tools to tease out a contour or to correct a misalignment that only he could see. When the excitement got the better of him, the sound of the strike changed—sharper, angrier, with a rebuke that rang through the air long after the metal had cooled.

Between these moments, Knodalon let his gaze wander. The town was waking up: the fisherman's children mending nets by the lake, a cluster of other children rehearsing a complicated game in front of the Weary Head, the grocer's boy running an errand at twice the required speed and three times the noise. North Pointe was not large, but it had a self-sustaining rhythm, each person slotting into place with the precision of a watch movement.

But today, everything seemed to pivot around the forge. Even the small gods—those parasites and pranksters—left Warren to his business, at least for now. The air above the smithy shimmered, but not with mischief; rather, it was the anticipation of a thing about to enter the world, a thing with a purpose that had not yet revealed itself.

By noon, the gauntlet was assembled, though not yet polished. Warren set it on a stand and stepped back, arms crossed, studying it from every angle. He frowned, then grunted, then turned and began the process of selecting jewels for the knuckles. The stones were arrayed in a box, each sorted by color and size, each with a tiny flaw that made it unfit for any other purpose. He tested the fit, holding each in turn against the metal, then set them aside with a growing sense of satisfaction.

It was at this point that Susan reappeared, this time with Darby in tow. The boy—who still looked more human than ogre, though time would tell—watched the proceedings with an expression that mingled awe and calculation. He hovered near the edge of the worktable, hands clasped behind his back, and did not speak until Warren addressed him.

"What do you think?" Warren asked, holding the gauntlet at arm's length.

Darby hesitated, then said, "The stones are good, but the lines need to be sharper. If it's for a hero, it should look sharp, not round."

Warren's face split into a grin, all teeth and pride. "You're right. I was being careful, but it's supposed to stand out."

Susan ruffled Darby's hair, then took a turn at inspecting the gauntlet. She ran her fingers along the filigree, then tapped the wrist with a practiced hand. "It'll need a lock. Otherwise the weight'll twist it off."

Warren nodded, already thinking ahead. "I'll set it inside, so it's hidden. That way, only the wearer knows how to get it off."

Susan gave a nod of approval, then steered Darby out of the forge with a final, "Don't overwork the hand, Warren. Dinner's in two candlemarks."

Left alone, Warren set to the finishing work. He filed and sanded, then heated the gauntlet one last time and plunged it into a barrel of oil, the resulting hiss and plume of smoke drawing the attention of every child within three blocks. He buffed the metal with a cloth, then set the jewels with a touch so delicate it might have belonged to a jeweler or a thief.

When it was done, the gauntlet looked exactly as it had in the dream. The plates flowed together, the filigree glimmered in the forge-light, and the stones at the knuckles caught the sun and broke it into a hundred fractal points. It was not a sword, nor was it the tool of a brute; it was a symbol, a promise, a challenge to the world to see if anyone could wear it and not be changed.

Warren stood for a long time, just looking at it. Then he wiped his hands on his apron and left the forge, heading for the bench where Knodalon waited.

He brought the gauntlet with him, but did not offer it up. Instead, he set it beside himself, resting it on the ground like a pet that might wander off if not supervised.

"They'll be here soon," Warren said, not looking at Knodalon. "You think it'll work?"

Knodalon considered the question, then nodded. "She'll know what to do with it."

Warren relaxed, just a fraction, then allowed himself a smile. "I'm glad it's her, and not the boy. He'd break it in a sennight."

Knodalon almost smiled back. "Maybe. But it would be a memorable sennight."

They sat in silence, watching the square as the day matured. The small gods crept back, nipping at heels and stealing the occasional crumb, but the mood had shifted. Something new had entered the world, and even the parasites seemed to sense it.

Warren rose first, picking up the gauntlet and dusting off his hands. "See you in the morning?"

Knodalon nodded, which meant yes.

Warren lumbered off toward home, the gauntlet tucked under his arm, already the talk of the square before he reached the far corner.

Knodalon remained, as always, on his bench, hands folded, gaze fixed on the horizon. But if one looked closely, there was a lightness in his posture, a settling of the old bones, as if for once the world had surprised him in the right direction.

He waited for the next thing.

By the time the sun had tipped past its zenith, the trade road was alive with the noise of commerce. Knodalon watched as the day's second event unfolded, this time inside the cool shadow of Mistral Adventures. The adventurers—so stiff and wary when they'd entered town—had dissolved into the rhythm of the square, now moving with the hesitancy of people who knew they could be observed at any moment, but had stopped caring what was seen.

The shop's windows had not been cleaned since the last high wind, and sunlight entered only by way of refraction and suggestion, painting everything inside in pale stripes. The air was thick with the scent of paraffin, leather, and a kind of must that, far from being unpleasant, spoke of hidden treasures just waiting to be claimed by the right sort of hand.

Tyran ran the place with the conviction that even if you didn't need anything when you came in, you would by the time you left. He stood behind the counter now, busy with a ball of twine and the intricate wrapping of some canvas-bound mystery. His beard, which would have been a thing of legend in any larger town, was currently tucked under his chin with the same discipline he applied to his merchandise. Every so often, he'd glance up at the party, eyes bright, and bellow a greeting that managed to fill the entire room without actually increasing in volume.

The party's leader, whose name Knodalon had not yet heard, moved with the predatory grace of a cat that had just remembered it was domesticated. She fingered the climbing ropes, testing the fibers between thumb and forefinger, then set the coil back on the shelf with the gentleness reserved for objects that might soon be used to save a life. The dwarf, still bristling from breakfast, was in the corner examining axe handles with a frown that suggested he'd found something alive in one of the knots. The archer had vanished into the aisle of arrows, the only evidence of her presence being the barely perceptible tremor of the fletching as she tested each shaft for straightness and weight. The scholar—spindly, nervous, already out of his depth—stood by the rations, scrutinizing the labels as if expecting them to resolve into meaningful runes if stared at long enough.

Knodalon's bench was just a few feet down, but he hardly needed eyes to track the proceedings. The town's magic, especially when invoked by its chosen custodians, left a trail that was as unmistakable as spilled honey. He followed the sense of it into the outfitter's shop, allowing himself the luxury of a dual perspective: half anchored on the bench, half perched invisible on the high shelf where Tyran kept the out-of-season snowshoes.

Tyran finished his wrapping and set the bundle aside, then clapped his hands together in a gesture that somehow failed to raise any dust. "You lot headed north, then?" he asked, though the answer was as obvious as the pile of winter coats already waiting on the counter.

The party leader did not turn, but her answer was quick and crisp. "If we can get there in one piece."

Tyran grinned. "That's the dream. But the Mistrals don't favor the

unprepared." He gestured, broad and theatrical, at the inventory lining the walls. "Lucky for you, this place is built on preparation."

The dwarf snorted, unimpressed. "I see a lot of rope. Not much in the way of, say, demon-bane or goblin-proof."

"Ah," said Tyran, eyes twinkling. "Here, we believe in the classics. Rope, salt, fire, and the best boots money can buy. Besides, you don't want to advertise your intentions too loudly. Magic has ears, in these parts."

Knodalon watched the interplay, savoring the way the conversation orbited around what was not being said. In most places, the shops existed to drain coin from pockets, but in North Pointe, the shops were more like staging grounds for whatever narrative the day had decided to tell. Tyran's particular gift was to never be out of stock, and never to fail to recommend the one thing you hadn't thought to buy, but would regret not having later.

The archer reappeared, clutching two arrows in either hand. She raised an eyebrow at Tyran, who nodded approval. "Good choice. The blue-fledged ones are true as a priest's promise, and the heads are set with a cold-forged pin. They'll hold, even in a storm."

She tossed one arrow lightly in the air, caught it, and let a smile touch the corner of her mouth. "Do you have any of the oil? For the bowstring."

Tyran didn't even pause. He reached under the counter and produced a small vial, already wrapped for travel. "Always."

Knodalon let his attention drift to the scholar, who had now moved on to the maps. The scholar ran his hands along the ridges of the reliefs, a nervous tic, then looked up at Tyran with a hopeful expression. "Do you have the northern survey? The one from after the last frost?"

Tyran's face grew serious for the first time. "I do," he said. "But it's not much help. The mountains shifts every year—sometimes every season. If you want advice, talk to Vamir at the bookshop. He's got the most recent atlas, and he's not above sharing."

The scholar nodded, tucking the information away as if it might grow into something more useful later.

The party leader gathered her companions with a silent nod. They

assembled at the counter, laying down their selections: the climbing rope, two axes, a sheath of arrows, a folded map, and a bag of rations that, if the label was to be believed, could survive three years in a root cellar without losing flavor or texture. Tyran tallied the lot with his fingers, then named a price that was just a shade under what they'd expected. He accepted coin, but also—Knodalon noted—a charm on a leather thong, which he examined with a craftsman's eye before slipping it into a jar under the counter.

As they bundled their purchases, the party leader lingered. She seemed to be choosing her words with care, then finally said: "We heard a story. About a woman in the peaks. Crafts items that can... bind even the most unified of foes."

Tyran leaned forward, elbows on the countertop. "You heard right. They call her the Enchantress, but that's not her real name. Nobody knows that. She's old as the mountains, maybe older. If you get close enough to see her work, you're already in the kind of trouble rope won't fix."

The leader nodded. "She still there?"

Tyran shrugged. "If the story's true, she never leaves. Not until someone worth her time shows up. You lot seem to fit that bill, for better or worse."

The archer snickered. "We prefer worse."

Tyran laughed, loud and sincere. "Good. The Mistrals will like you better that way."

Knodalon felt the pulse of recognition move through the group, a ripple of certainty in the face of so much else being uncertain. It was enough to anchor their resolve, to turn the possibility of a quest into a reality. He watched as they left the shop, blinking at the sudden sunlight, then making for the north edge of town with the doggedness of people who had decided, finally, on their next move.

Inside the shop, Tyran set about tidying the shelves, humming a tune that had not been popular in thirty years but was still good for the hands. Every so often, he'd glance at the door, as if expecting someone to come running back in with a question or a change of heart. None did. The inventory, still full, seemed to glow in the morning's afterglow.

Knodalon reclined a bit on his bench, but not before lightly checking the inventory of Alred's dry goods store inside the town proper. As ever, the shelves there were fully stocked, each item in its proper place, but even more impressively, Knodalon could sense the subtle nudge of the town's magic: if someone came in searching for a thing, the thing would be there, even if it had not been a minute before. That was how the world worked here, at least when it was working properly.

On the street, the adventurers reconvened, comparing notes and preparing for the next leg of their journey. Their purchases seemed at odds—rope, rations, arrows, and a map that might be more fiction than fact—but Knodalon saw the logic in it. There was no story yet, only the scaffolding for one, but that was often enough.

He let himself feel a twinge of interest. The town's magic had seen fit to outfit these four, and the world was already bending around the path they would take.

For now, though, Knodalon folded his hands and waited. The bench was warm, the day promised more than it could possibly deliver, and there were still two candlemarks before the next small god made its move.

He allowed himself the faintest smile. In this town, even the waiting was worth it.



By afternoon, the world had settled into the lazy undulation that only a spring day in North Pointe could manage. Knodalon, who had never once been bored by repetition, let his senses drift to the herb and tea shop on the west side of the green.

Inside, Galhani was in full command of her universe. She moved like a spark, her hands forever in motion, grinding dried leaves in a stone mortar, dispensing honey with the precision of a jeweler, and never once missing an opportunity to greet a customer by name—even the ones who arrived for the first time.

The air was thick with the scent of basil, marjoram, and something else: a note of bitterness that clung to the back of the throat and

refused to let go. Bundles of herbs hung from the rafters, their roots and stalks braided into intricate patterns that pulsed gently as people brushed past. Every shelf was crowded with glass jars in all colors, each packed with something rarer or more precious than the last. Even the floorspace was claimed by a forest of potted plants, none in bloom yet but all straining toward the window as if in hope of catching a single extra ray of sun.

Today's customers were a cross-section of the afflicted. Two children, twins by the look of them, sat on the low bench near the window, trading glances and trying not to scratch at the angry red welts that covered their ankles. Behind them, a seamstress in a dark dress—Leota Harbinger, Knodalon recognized—gripped the edge of the counter, her nails dug in as she waited for Galhani to finish her current project. A pair of travelers stood just inside the door, uneasy and out of place, but clearly in need of something they couldn't get from any other shop in town.

Galhani was unmoved by the press of demand. She worked at the mortar, head bent, ears twitching in response to every sound. Her eyes—bright as cut glass, even by gnome standards—flicked between her task and her customers with a rhythm that bordered on musical.

"Almost done!" she announced, not looking up. "If you scratch, you'll make it worse. I promise, this is the one."

The children stilled their hands, but the effort was visible in every taut muscle. Leota exhaled through her nose, a sign of deep skepticism.

Galhani swept the powder into a tiny paper envelope, then plucked a copper dish from beneath the counter. With a practiced flourish, she poured a finger's worth of honey into the bowl, added the powder, and struck a match against the wall. The mixture ignited in a whisper, sending a thread of blue-gray smoke curling up and outward.

"Breathe it in," Galhani commanded.

The twins inhaled, and Knodalon saw the effect immediately. The itch retreated—palpably, physically—like a tide reversed. Their faces relaxed, the tension gone, replaced by a wary hope. Leota sniffed the air, then glanced at her wrists, where the skin was already calming.

But then, as quickly as the relief arrived, the bites began to flare again—first on the children, then on Leota, and finally on the travelers, who had barely taken two breaths of the stuff.

Knodalon, watching from his bench, allowed his true perception to cut through the visible. At once, he saw the cause: an iridescent shimmer, so small it barely existed in the realm of light, but real all the same. The god of repressed fleas had not been banished, only angered. It waited until the first blush of comfort, then sent out its counter-offensive—microscopic sparks that reignited each bite, more insistent than before. It was a cycle as old as the contest itself: relief and relapse, hope and despair, all choreographed by the invisible hand of a minor deity with nothing better to do.

Inside the shop, Galhani's eyes narrowed. She lit another bowl, this time adding a pinch of something dark and resinous to the mix. The smoke grew heavier, sweet at first, then acrid. The effect was immediate: the shimmer in the air recoiled, and the room's collective itch subsided once more.

The children cheered, banging their heels on the bench. Even Leota managed a reluctant smile. Galhani basked in the applause, hands on hips, grinning up at her audience.

"See?" she said, triumphant. "Told you it was the one."

But Knodalon saw, even as the smoke did its work, the shimmer regrouping just outside the reach of the vapor. The godling was learning, adapting. Within minutes, it would find a way back in, launching another wave of microscopic torment.

Galhani moved on to the next customer. The travelers, it turned out, had no idea what ailed them, only that their sleep had been broken for three nights running by a sensation that defied description. Galhani produced a jar, labeled only with a single blue dot, and instructed them to rub it on the insides of their collars and the seams of their sleeves.

"Do not eat it," she warned, eyes wide for emphasis. "It smells better than it tastes, and the effect is strictly topical."

The travelers exchanged a look—one of those wordless communications perfected by people who had spent too many nights at the mercy of strange towns—and nodded agreement.

At the window, the children had resumed scratching, but with less vigor. Leota, after a final glance at her wrists, took her envelope of powder and left, shoulders straighter than when she'd arrived.

Throughout, Galhani never lost her cheer. She moved from task to task, always with a kind word or a joke, always quick to suggest a new remedy or a different approach. If she noticed the persistence of the itch, she did not let it show.

Knodalon, from outside, marveled at her optimism. He had seen hundreds of shopkeepers come and go, each developing their own philosophy for survival. Some grew hard, some cynical, but Galhani clung to hope with the tenacity of a weed. It was her own kind of miracle.

He focused again on the godling, now pressed flat against the ceiling of the shop, waiting for its next opportunity. He considered intervening—one sharp gust might be enough to scatter it, at least for a day. But he hesitated. There was a lesson here, and it was not his place to steal it from the world.

Inside, Galhani set about cleaning the shop. She swept the floor, rearranged the jars, and—seeing the children still at the window—set out two tiny cups of mint tea. The twins accepted the gift, hands trembling only slightly as they sipped the steaming liquid.

Knodalon watched as the sun shifted, sending a fresh beam of light through the dusty pane and turning the blue smoke to gold. The cycle would repeat, as it always did. Itch, remedy, relapse, adaptation.

But as the day edged toward evening, he allowed himself the comfort of knowing that, at least for a moment, someone had won.

He settled back, letting the world fill in around him, and prepared for whatever came next.

The sun had dropped low enough that every shadow in North Pointe seemed to lengthen, spilling out across the trade road in lazy, insistent streaks. The light was softer now, filtering through the last of the day's dust and painting the green with that elusive color found only in the moments before true dusk. Knodalon remained on his bench, the

wood beneath him warm but growing cooler with every passing minute.

From the far end of the street came the hollow clang of Warren's hammer—just once, as if to announce the end of labor and the start of something less predictable. The sound carried, reaching even to the upper rooms of the Weary Head, where children's laughter bounced against the windows before being swallowed by the thickening air. A gust of wind found the banners above the town hall, setting them flapping with a nervous energy, then moved on to rustle the leaves along the lake.

Knodalon's gaze drifted, taking in the scene with the calm patience of one who had learned to watch without being seen. The square was nearly empty now, save for a few stragglers loitering outside the Broken Claw. The adventurers had not yet returned from wherever the afternoon had taken them, but their absence was itself a kind of presence: a ripple in the town's usual routine, a sense of things being set in motion far beyond the reach of ordinary hands.

Across the road, Sam leaned against the doorframe of her pub, one foot braced on the stoop, arms folded in a posture of practiced indifference. She barked a laugh—sharp, brief, genuine—at something unseen, then retreated inside, letting the door fall shut behind her with a finality that seemed to echo even after the sound had gone.

At the edge of the water, Calder stood knee-deep in the shallows, working a net that glittered with the sun's last gold. He was alone, but not lonely; Knodalon recognized the set of his shoulders as the mark of a man who found in solitude not emptiness, but a kind of equilibrium. Calder cast his net once, twice, then slung it over his shoulder and waded back to shore, his silhouette cut clean against the reflection of the sky.

The gods of small annoyances—the itch, the tarnish, the lost, and the longing—were silent for the time being. Knodalon could feel them, curled in their corners, watching with a mixture of resentment and awe as the town's true magic flexed its muscles. For all their cleverness, the minor deities had never grasped the depth of North Pointe's stubbornness, the way its people wove their lives together so tightly that even divine mischief had trouble finding a seam.

He let his mind turn over the day's events, linking them in a pattern only he could see. There was the gauntlet in Warren's forge, now complete and waiting for its purpose; the party of four, armed and outfitted with more than just rope and steel, but with the knowledge that somewhere in the Range, a challenge waited just for them; the healing smoke in Galhani's shop, and the persistent itch that refused to be banished; the children, even now racing across the square in a game whose rules changed with every pass but never lost their joy.

The world, Knodalon decided, was not perfect, but it was as close as could be expected given the raw material.

He tilted his head back, letting the breeze find his face. Above, the sky had begun its slow fade from blue to something deeper, a color not yet night but already distant from the ambitions of day. The first of the evening's lamps flickered to life along the porch of the Weary Head, and soon others would follow, a slow cascade of light that would carry the town through to morning.

Knodalon folded his hands, closed his eyes, and allowed himself a rare, honest moment of satisfaction. The mountain winds had shifted, and with them, the whole story.

He waited. There was no rush. Dusk would last as long as it needed to.

And when the next thing happened—because something always did—he would be here, watching, as he always had, always would.

CHAPTER 10

The sunlight arrived not as a suggestion but as a fact, landing on every surface with the authority of a landlord come to call in old debts. The green, dewy at sunrise, burned off into a scrim of vapor by mid-morning; the bakery's bread-sweet air mixed with the sours of livestock and lake.

Knodalon settled onto his bench outside the storehouse, cradling the last of the night's cold in his bones. The world woke in increments: first the cats and birds, then the children, then, begrudgingly, the adults. Today, the air twitched with more than the usual static—there was a current, a shift in the pressure, a not-quite-noise that vibrated just under the threshold of mortal hearing. He attuned to it, as always, and found the signature of adventure doubled and redoubled, as if the town's capacity for disruption had been primed overnight and was now waiting for the trigger.

The trigger, today, was the party of four. They'd arrived footsore and unimpressed, their armor etched with road-dust and last year's stories; now, they were installed in the farthest corner of the Broken Claw, a table mapped and marked, their boots already leaving new impressions in the sawdust. No one in North Pointe pretended not to notice them. The whole town was an engine designed for the

processing of strangers—some as commerce, some as curiosity, some as fodder for cautionary tales.

Inside the Claw, Sam presided over the morning crowd with her usual mix of indifference and predation. She'd chosen a vantage at the end of the bar where she could keep one eye on the door and the other on the adventurers, never letting the two lines of sight cross. She worked a rag over the same glass for nearly three minutes, which was her way of marking time when something interesting was in progress.

Across the threshold, Jen lingered just inside the door, her uniform coat open and her stance wide. She'd positioned herself so that anyone—regular or otherwise—would have to acknowledge her before coming or going. It was not so much a blockade as a reminder that in this town, even the smallest ritual had an enforcer.

Knodalon watched all of this through the warped surface of his greater senses, the world inside refracted and doubled, like watching a memory replayed through water.

At the table, the adventurers performed their own rituals. The leader—still unnamed, but easy to spot by her posture and her habit of making notes on her own palm—dominated the map with her left hand while keeping the right on her mug. The archer sat slightly back, arms folded, but her eyes tracked every movement in the room; she scanned the door every time it opened, a reflex born of too many bad exits. The dwarf, his hair still wet from a morning wash, had a habit of tapping his thumb on the table every time a new plan was suggested. The scholar, last and not least, spent more time copying from one map to another than actually speaking, but when he did, the table went silent, as if everyone was waiting for the necessary flaw to reveal itself.

The energy around them was electric and hungry. They'd started the morning with a single question: what now? But the answer had multiplied into a tree of possibilities, each branch denser and thornier than the last. Knodalon could feel the weight of it in the air, the way it pressed down on the glass and made the bar's conversations ricochet off the walls instead of flowing.

At first, the townsfolk tried to ignore the tension. They drank their coffee, exchanged rumors, made slow work of their breakfast. But the

gravity of the adventurers was too strong, and soon the room's ambient noise ebbed, leaving only the table's voices to fill the gaps.

"I say we skip the pass entirely," the leader said, tapping the map with her middle finger. "If the Enchantress is what they say she is, she'll find us before we're in shouting distance anyway."

The archer nodded, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "What about the lake? We could skirt the range. Avoid the high ground and come in from the north."

"Riskier," the dwarf muttered, his thumb keeping metronomic time. "We'd have to pass through the old orc breeding ground. If there's a trap, it'll be there."

The scholar made a small, thoughtful sound. "History suggests the orc population hasn't used the lakeside for decades. It would be less expected. And the Claw—" He pointed to a symbol on the map that looked like a malformed bird's foot. "—hasn't been active in living memory."

Knodalon tracked the conversation, noting each shift in strategy as a gust or a ripple in the air. The plan was solidifying around the path of least resistance—a hallmark of those who'd survived more than one doomed campaign. He wondered, idly, if this adaptability was born or bred.

Sam, having finished with her glass, leaned on the bar and called over, "If you're looking to go north, best do it before the weather turns. Trail's clear for now, but the range gets less predictable as the thaw moves up."

The leader looked up, her gaze sharp but not unkind. "Appreciate it. Is there someone we should talk to about boats?"

"Calder," Sam said, without hesitation. "But he only rents by the day, and he'll want to know exactly what you're planning." She cocked her head. "Most people just skirt the lake rather than haul even a small boat up. What's the plan?"

"Not much to tell," the dwarf said, his voice low but carrying. "We're just planning for everything."

Jen, from the doorway, snorted. "That's the kind of talk that makes the locals more interested, not less."

The archer grinned, showing the teeth of someone who didn't mind a little trouble. "We'll try to keep the fireworks to a minimum."

The rest of the townsfolk had started to listen openly. Knodalon could feel their attention gather and condense, then fragment again as everyone tried to figure out whether this was a story worth retelling, or just the preamble to another disaster.

Knodalon let the wind bring him the scents and sounds of the place: the tang of spilled ale, the faint medicinal smell from Sam's ever-present bottle of bitters, the scrape of boots on wood. He let his mind drift back, briefly, to the world as it had been before North Pointe became what it was—a place designed for the containment and redirection of chaos. He thought of the old designs, the rules layered into the bedrock by Nimarith and his ilk: every quest must begin in a town, every quest must end with a return, every town must have a watcher.

For centuries, he'd been content to watch. But lately, the world seemed less interested in being observed and more interested in pushing back.

He tuned in to the table again. The adventurers had finished their first round of negotiation and now moved into logistics: gear checks, provisions, the allocation of blame should things go wrong.

"We'll need something for the cold," the scholar said, scanning a list in his notebook. "And firewood. The last pass burned out most of the dry timber, according to the almanac."

The dwarf scoffed. "Fire's easy. It's what comes after that's the problem."

Archer: "If we're heading out, we should see if the gnome has anything for the fleas. I don't fancy another night with half a colony eating through my socks."

The leader agreed, and there was a brief, silent consensus—rare for adventurers, but not unheard of in moments of clarity.

At the bar, Sam shot a glance at Jen. The constable shrugged, as if to say, There's nothing to be done except let them go and hope for the best.

Knodalon took this as a cue and allowed his focus to widen, taking

in the patterns of the day: the way the light now streamed through the Claw's front window, painting everything inside in harsh, honest color; the way the regulars had returned to their own tables, but only in body, their minds still tethered to the orbit of the adventurers. Even the wind itself seemed to be watching, waiting for the next movement.

He closed his eyes and let the memory of the morning recede, replaced by a growing sense that something in the world was about to slip its leash. This, he decided, was the nature of the divine wind: not to command, but to anticipate. To see where the story would go, and to nudge—just slightly—when it started to tangle.

He opened his eyes as the leader rose from the table, her decision made. She swept up the map and said, "We leave at dawn. Anyone who's not ready will have to catch up or stay behind."

Her party stood, and the room's attention broke like a wave. The world returned to its ordinary rhythms: mugs refilled, gossip resumed, chairs scraped on the floor. But the current had changed. Knodalon felt it in his marrow.

He leaned back on his bench, hands folded across his stomach, and watched as the wind moved through the square, touching every open window and door, carrying the promise of the day north and east, toward the mountains and whatever waited there.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, he wondered if maybe his role was not just to watch, but to guide. To place a finger, ever so gently, on the scale.

But that was a question for tomorrow.

For now, he was content to watch as the world turned, and the adventure—like the morning itself—moved from judgment toward inevitability.

The lake did not believe in calm. Even at its gentlest, the water's surface writhed with tiny disturbances, each the echo of a thousand small lives beneath or the aftershock of a wind too stubborn to leave things at rest. From his bench above the lakeshore, Knodalon stretched

his senses along the curve of the wind, letting it snake down to Calder's fish shop where the day's commerce was just gathering itself for the sprint.

Calder ran the shop with the unassailable patience of a man who had survived too many storms to be impressed by trivial disasters. He was hunched over a battered cutting board, hands moving with wet precision as he filleted the morning's catch, barely glancing up as the four adventurers darkened his threshold. The breeze shifted with them, bringing a chill that set the scales on his worktable glinting.

"Fresh or dried?" Calder asked, not pausing the knife.

The leader stepped forward, her posture braced for negotiation. "Both. Enough for four, three days north and return." She leaned in, the map folded into a precise square in her pocket. "We're traveling light."

Calder nodded, still not looking up. "Trail's muddy, you'll want salted. But take a few fresh for the start." He wrapped the fillets in wax paper, wiped his hands on a towel that had seen better decades, and at last gave them a proper look.

It was at this moment that Knodalon let the wind do its work. A whisper, a suggestion: a memory of old advice, half-remembered, rising in Calder's mind just as he reached for a spool of twine.

Calder's fingers stilled. He frowned, then turned to the shelf behind him, pulling down a small amber vial, corked and sealed with black wax.

"You'll need this," he said, pressing it into the leader's hand.

She turned it over, eyebrow raised. "Fish oil?"

"Not just any." Calder's voice softened, as if the words were meant to travel no further than the edge of his counter. "From the golden perch. They swim deeper than the lake's own secrets. Orcs can't stand the scent—keeps them at bay. Or so they say."

The vial caught the morning sun and set loose a cascade of light, gold flecks tumbling through the oil like confetti. The scholar reached for it, curiosity overtaking skepticism, but the leader kept her grip firm.

"Does it work?" she asked.

Calder shrugged, the motion rolling up from his toes. "Not once has an orc crossed my door since I started keeping it. Could be coincidence. Or could be that every little edge matters, when the world's got a taste for your hide."

The archer, standing just behind the leader's right shoulder, grinned. "If nothing else, it'll make us easier to track."

The dwarf let out a dry chuckle. "Or less palatable, which is all I'm after."

They paid in coin and a pouch of dried cherries—Calder accepted both with the same solemnity—and left, the door's bell jangling behind them. The wind slipped inside as they exited, curling around Calder's feet and stirring a sheaf of order slips on the counter. He ignored it, or pretended to, but Knodalon felt the smile that curled at the edge of his thoughts.

He let the wind carry him next to Alred's dry goods store, where the morning sun had only just begun to warm the glass. Inside, the adventurers crowded around the counter, voices lower now, less performative. Alred kept his ledger open, running fingers down lists of inventory with the delicacy of a man for whom every item had a proper, destined place.

"Flour, cheese, hardtack," Alred recited, not looking up from the page. "And the rope?"

"Fifty feet," said the archer, counting out the coin. "Strong enough for climbing."

Alred nodded, finished the tally, and turned to reach under the counter. Here, Knodalon leaned into the wind again, sending a sharp draft across the desk. The ledger fluttered, pages flipping until it landed on a spot marked with a single gray thread, stitched into the paper.

Alred's eyes narrowed. He reached beneath the counter, past the usual spools and bundles, and produced a coil of silvery rope. It shimmered, not with the metallic luster of steel but something subtler, a sheen that seemed to change with every movement of the hand.

"Just got this in," Alred said. "Old Plains Elf work. They say even bear claws can't cut it."

The leader took the coil, weighing it in her palm. It was lighter than expected, almost buoyant.

"Is it true?" the scholar asked, voice quick with hope.

Alred shrugged, lips pressed thin. "It's old. It's clever. That's all anyone can guarantee in this world."

The archer ran her fingers along the length, her expression skeptical but not dismissive. The dwarf snorted. "If nothing else, it's prettier than the hemp."

Alred packed their order with an efficiency bordering on artistry, each item fitting snug against the next in a canvas satchel. He said nothing more about the rope, but Knodalon sensed the small relief that came with its passing from his hands; as if, having served its purpose, it was finally free to play its part in whatever story was about to unfold.

The adventurers left, their arms laden, their path as fixed as any the town had ever seen. Alred watched them go, then closed his ledger and, for a moment, simply stood with his hands flat on the counter, eyes closed, breathing in the dust and the scent of old paper.

Outside, the wind curled around the shop, picked up a stray feather, and sent it drifting down the road after the adventurers. Knodalon let the current linger, satisfied that the nudges had landed as intended.

He let his focus broaden, stretching out along the town's main axis, watching as the four paused at the square, redistributed their new gear, and conferred in low voices. Their preparations were complete—at least, as complete as the world allowed.

Knodalon felt the shift in their energy: the transition from plan to action, from anticipation to the first real step. He recognized the flavor of it, the way it sparked and danced along the nerves of the town, pulling even the laziest housecat into a brief, alert posture.

He watched as the party split, each member tasked with one last errand. The leader headed for the Weary Head to settle accounts; the scholar detoured to the bookshop; the archer and dwarf—unlikely companions—ambled to the edge of the lake, pausing to test the new rope against the old, their laughter sharp in the morning air.

Knodalon leaned back, letting the bench take his weight, and let

the wind scatter into a dozen little eddies, each carrying a piece of his attention to the corners of the town. He watched the mundane and the magical colliding, over and over, until the distinction between the two blurred into the simple fact of life in North Pointe.

He allowed himself a single, private satisfaction: The story had begun, and this time, the town itself was part of the plot.

Tomorrow, the adventure would cross the lake. Today, the world was content to let the wind finish what it had started.

He closed his eyes, letting the warmth of the day bleed through his skin, and waited for the next nudge to make itself known.

It began with a twitch behind the left eye. For the first candlemark, Knodalon wrote it off as fatigue, an artifact of too many years and not enough sleep. But as the day wore on, the sensation multiplied—crawled down his jaw, along the rim of his ear, then erupted in a chorus of pinpricks at the nape of his neck. Within two, the itch had migrated to his wrists, then ankles, then, impossibly, to the inside of his skull.

It was not physical, not really; it was the echo of a godling's presence, a flavor of annoyance so precise that it could only have been custom-built for the purpose. Knodalon recognized the signature immediately: the god of repressed fleas, making another bid for territory. He'd witnessed the pattern before—always at the periphery, always just shy of truly disruptive—but today, the petty divinity was working overtime.

He opened his eyes and scanned the green. Sure enough, half the children were scratching at their legs or wriggling in place. Adults tried to hide it, but every so often a hand darted to the back of a knee, or a sleeve was rolled up to attack a persistent welt. In front of the Weary Head, Minnie beat a rug with more violence than the task required, then stopped mid-swing to pound her own forearm with the heel of her palm, muttering oaths in three languages.

The adventurers, too, were not immune. The leader, who had just finished a loud and thorough argument with the archer about route

planning, now scratched at the inside of her elbow. The scholar blinked furiously, as if the itch had lodged in his eyebrows. Even the dwarf seemed put out, one hand creeping surreptitiously under his chainmail to address an irritation he would never dignify with a name.

Knodalon let the discomfort build, watched the world as it clustered around the problem, and waited for the first real attempt at a solution. It came, as expected, from Galhani.

The gnome's herb shop was a fortress against the mundane. Even from his bench, Knodalon could see the way the windows caught the sun, the panes webbed with the shadow of drying plants. Inside, Galhani moved with the hurried grace of a creature both in and out of time—her feet barely brushing the floor, her hands always in motion, her head cocked as if listening to a secret melody.

This morning, the air inside was thick with the scent of lemon balm and marjoram, but layered under it was the sharp, chemical tang of failure. Galhani had already tried two new remedies in her war of escalation with the petty god, both of which had been met with polite, desperate smiles and then the return of the itch minutes later.

Knodalon sent a current of wind through the shop, subtle enough to escape notice but just strong enough to set the strings of drying wormwood to trembling. Galhani paused, halfway through compounding a salve, her head tilting to follow the motion. She set aside the mortar, wiped her hands on a threadbare apron, and drifted over to the wall. There, she ran her fingers along the stalks, then snapped off a branch, bringing it to her nose.

She frowned, then turned to the opposite shelf, where a bundle of blue-flowering mint hung beside a spray of dried sage. She took both, returned to her worktable, and began to assemble the new mixture. Knodalon felt her concentration gather: a narrowing of will, a pressure that focused the entire shop around the work. She ground the herbs, mixed in a spoonful of honey, and set the whole into a shallow copper dish.

Instead of offering the mixture as a salve or a tea, she struck a match and set fire to it. The smoke, at first reluctant, rose in a thin, wavering line, then blossomed outward, filling the room with a haze that shimmered where the light caught it. Galhani wafted the smoke

with her hands, eyes watering, then propped open the door so the scent spilled out onto the green.

Within minutes, the change was palpable. The twins who had been all but tearing their own skin off now sat on the steps of the shop, docile and quiet, the itch forgotten. Minnie, passing by with her rug slung over her shoulder, stopped, sniffed, then inhaled deeply. She stood, arms limp at her sides, for a good ten seconds before returning to the inn, face blank with relief.

Even the adventurers, gathered at the edge of the square to distribute their new gear, paused as the breeze brought the smoke to them. The leader inhaled, coughed, then looked at her forearm in surprise. The archer smiled, the first genuine smile Knodalon had seen from her all day. The dwarf let out a snort, which he tried to disguise as a sneeze.

For Knodalon, the effect was immediate and total. The itch receded, replaced by a tingling clarity. He could feel the godling's renewed outrage—its presence compressed, forced into a retreat not of defeat but of tactical withdrawal. He tracked the motion as it zipped up the street, out past the bakery, and into the wild beyond the town's edge, where it could regroup and plan its next assault.

He settled into his bench, letting the calm seep into his bones. The air was richer now, thick with the new scent, and everywhere he looked, the tension had bled away. People returned to their business; children resumed games with only the occasional absentminded scratch; even the town's cats, formerly occupied in a synchronized grooming session, now lay sprawled in the sunlight, supremely unbothered.

At Galhani's, the gnome leaned against the doorframe, looking out over the green. She seemed, for a moment, surprised at her own success. She wiped her hands on her apron, then disappeared inside, already scheming the next improvement.

Knodalon watched the adventurers as they made their final rounds—checking straps, weighing packs, reviewing the route with a thoroughness born of too many close calls. They moved with a new energy, a cohesion that was more than the sum of their bodies. He felt the momentum building, the story gathering itself for the first step.

He let his gaze drift up the street to where the wind met the edge of town. The world was, for the moment, in balance. The gods—major and minor—were held at bay. The story would hold, at least until tomorrow.

He leaned back, hands folded, and allowed himself a rare, honest moment of pride.

For too long, he had watched the patterns, content to let them play out. But perhaps, he thought, there was value in a nudge—just enough to keep the threads from tangling.

As the sun dipped toward the horizon, the itch gone, Knodalon let the evening take him. The world, it seemed, was ready for the next thing.

And so was he.



At noon, the day turned electric. The air around North Pointe shivered, as if the entire town had walked through a spider's web and was now trying not to show it. Knodalon recognized the warning: the feeling of a major storm about to break, but with no clouds in sight. The wind carried a new scent—ozone and old fur, copper and spilled sugar—heralding a rush of small gods barreling down the trade road.

They came not singly, but in a tangle: a dozen at least, each more eager than the last, all hungry for attention and, if possible, a foothold in the material world.

First in was the god of Inconvenient Thorns, riding a tremor in the deck boards outside the bakery. Its arrival was marked by a sequence of sharp, synchronized yelps from every shoeless child on the green. Next, the god of Broken Shoelaces, trailing behind the first, left a trail of fraying hemp and defeated knots in its wake, rendering half the town's boots suddenly traitorous.

Behind them shuffled the god of Last Bites, determined to make every meal in North Pointe end in an unsatisfactory mouthful—too little, too much, or missing altogether. Its close cousin, the god of Lukewarm Tea, haunted the windows of the inn and the bakery,

ensuring that every cup cooled to perfect mediocrity just seconds before anyone lifted it.

Trailing after came the god of Forgotten Punchlines (her laughter always came two seconds too late, echoing up and down the street like a poorly timed drum), and the god of Spilled Ink, who left the merchant's ledgers weeping long blue tears over their most important entries.

The list grew as the parade passed Knodalon's bench: the god of Unfinished Sentences; the god of Perpetual Midges; the god of Socks Without Pairs; the god of Parakeets that Escape Their Cages (immediately summoned by Dooley's menagerie); the god of Crooked Pictures; and, somewhere on the periphery, the god of Slightly Squeaky Doors, announcing itself at every opportunity.

They entered the town in a burst, then scattered, each pursuing its private agenda. Most moved through quickly, eager to test the boundaries, to see how much chaos North Pointe could absorb before pushing back.

Knodalon watched them with a mounting irritation, the kind reserved for both children and retired colleagues who refused to respect boundaries. He counted the seconds between their manifestations, tracing the arc of each petty miracle and logging the effect: a dropped tray here, a sudden chorus of yelps from the green there, a spontaneous, irreversible rearrangement of every spoon in the Broken Claw's cutlery drawer.

Most of the gods moved on, content to plant their seeds of discomfort and then vanish to the next town down the road. But a few lingered, circling the green, sizing up the place, looking for any soul bored or unlucky enough to be susceptible to their brand of mischief.

The god of Perpetual Midges proved most persistent, hovering in a cloud over the tea shop's eaves, driving both Galhani and her customers to wild, desperate hand-flapping. The god of Missing Socks, now grown into a god of Socks Without Pairs, made its nest in the laundry lines strung behind the inn, recruiting every available breeze to pluck the smallest, brightest socks from their mates and deposit them in improbable locations—on rooftops, in the crooks of trees, inside the statue at the square's center.

Two of the gods immediately set upon each other. The god of Slightly Squeaky Doors, frustrated by the lack of true violence in the hinges around town, began antagonizing the god of Crooked Pictures, who responded by tilting every portrait and sign in sight, forcing the other to rattle and squeak each door frame as townsfolk tried to correct the misalignment. The battle escalated quickly, reaching a crescendo just after the lunch bell, and then, as if by unspoken agreement, both vanished—perhaps to return another day, perhaps not.

Most interesting was the god of Forgotten Punchlines. She lingered in the Broken Claw, perching invisible on the end of the adventurers' table. Her presence was marked by a rolling, infectious laughter that caught first on the dwarf, then spread to the archer and scholar, even when the jokes shared were neither new nor particularly clever. The god relished in the tension between anticipation and memory, and by the end of the candlemark, every patron in the Claw was convinced they'd just missed the best part of the conversation.

But it was the god of Perpetual Midges who made the greatest impression. Instead of targeting the townsfolk, it set its sights on the god of repressed fleas, which had only just begun to regroup after its earlier defeat. The two minor powers met at the bakery's porch, collided in a whirling, invisible dance, and proceeded to chase each other up and down the street, trading tiny, stinging blows. Their war was fierce but ultimately self-limiting; within half a 'mark, both had tired themselves out, their presences fading until only the faintest tickle lingered in the air.

Knodalon watched all of this, hands folded on his lap, jaw set. He did nothing—there was no need. The small gods were not dangerous, not in any meaningful sense. Their power was in accumulation, in the way a thousand paper cuts could wear down a spirit or make a day go sideways. They were beneath his notice, except for the way their noise threatened to drown out the finer signals—the truly consequential moments—that the world sometimes whispered to those willing to listen.

He supposed, in a way, that he admired their persistence.

But as he watched the town return to its rhythms, the gods' handiwork dissolving back into the churn of ordinary life, he felt something

shift inside him—a restlessness, a mounting urge not just to observe but to act.

Perhaps he was getting old. Or perhaps the world, after so many centuries, was finally starting to change.

He resolved to watch. And to wait.

For now.

CHAPTER 11

Dusk delivered the world to itself in increments, laying the day to rest with the precision of a craftsman who expected to be judged on the neatness of his joinery. The sky bled out behind the Mistral in thin bands—amber, then gray, then the leaden blue that signaled the day's final accounting. Across the emptying green, the last stragglers drifted to their homes, their shadows stretching so long they seemed like threads meant to sew the town shut against the dark.

On the bench outside the storehouse, Knodalon sat as motionless as a monument. The other benches, of which there were many, had each acquired their own patrons over the years: lovers, loafers, the half-drunk and wholly heartbroken. But the lakeside bench was his alone, not by tradition or courtesy, but by the simple fact that nobody else could bear to sit there long.

He watched the sun's last efforts glance off the town gate. From this angle, the battered planks and warped iron bands glowed as if lit from within, and for a moment it looked less like a barrier and more like a wound healing over with new skin. It was an apt metaphor, he decided, for the town itself: a scar, perpetually in the act of healing but never quite sealed.

He did not move. He had mastered the art of stillness, the way an old tree learns to let birds and squirrels and even the wind pass through it without ever ceding its place. But beneath the surface, his thoughts moved with a velocity that would have vaporized a lesser mind.

He called up the memory of the Icosagon, the town's engine and its blessing. There was no one alive, not even in the eastern libraries, who truly understood what it did. Twenty places, set in the oldest part of the town, bound less by geometry than expectation. When all the shops were full and all the debts paid and the right number of strangers had been accounted for, the town's magic held: the winters softened, the harvests fattened, the wolves and worse kept to the hills. But if a single place was unstaffed—if one shop closed, or its keeper failed, or the world simply decided to move on—then the edges began to fray.

He had seen it happen more times than he cared to count. Every few generations, the world forgot itself and allowed the pattern to slip. A butcher died without a successor; a lampmaker drank himself into legend; a seamstress, weary of the blood and the stories, simply walked out one day and never returned. In those years, the town's boundaries thinned. The dysfunction crept in, and so did the cold.

He'd always found the arithmetic of it deeply unsatisfying. Not the elegance of the structure—that was perfect—but the crudeness of the maintenance, the way so much cosmic machinery depended on the persistence of the small, the trivial, the nearly meaningless.

He closed his eyes, let his mind unspool. The storehouse behind him hummed with his quiet nature. Even now, the sacks and crates and sealed amphorae inside were held in a kind of stasis, the grains never weeviling, the oils never turning, the waxes never crumbling into disuse. The town credited the effect to the Icosagon, and this was true, in a way, but it was really him: his presence, his attention, his refusal to allow even entropy a foothold.

He was, in the deepest truth, a god. Or had been, once. A god of wind and storms and the boundaries between. The kind of god that made a mountain range in a fit of pique, or drowned a continent in a single long afternoon. He had been worshipped under many names,

most of them lost now, and for the last few centuries he had tried to live without the burden of any of them. It was meant to be an experiment in humility, in simplicity, in the observation of human and not-so-human affairs without the temptation to intervene.

But the world was not designed to permit retirement.

He let his awareness drift out over the town, touching each building in turn. The bakery, closed and cooling in the night, the last wisps of yeast and flour scent already fading. The inn, its porch hung with lamps and its windows flickering with the shadows of patrons already on their third round. The menagerie, silent for once, its more troublesome residents sedated by whatever mixture of herbs Dooley favored this season. The forge, where the afterimage of Warren's latest work glowed hot even with the fire banked low.

He checked the places of the Icosagon, one by one. They were all accounted for. The shops were full, the debts paid, the right number of strangers had come and gone. For tonight, the town would hold.

He opened his eyes and regarded the square. To the untrained observer, it would seem unchanged from any other night: empty, except for the persistent ticking of insects and the occasional laugh leaking from a poorly latched window. But Knodalon saw it as it truly was: a grid of forces, all in tension, each held in place by the careful equilibrium of need and want and will.

He felt, rather than saw, the approach of a minor godling—one of the petty ones, a spirit of rust or threadbare laundry or unclaimed shoes. It slithered at the edge of perception, testing the wards, probing for a weak seam. He suppressed a laugh. The little gods never learned; or perhaps, he mused, learning was beside the point. They existed to test the boundaries, to pressure the system, to remind the world that maintenance was never finished.

He wondered, for the thousandth time, if the same was true of the bigger gods. Was that all Nimarith had ever been—a test, a pressure, a method for ensuring that the rest of creation didn't go soft and lazy? It would have explained much.

Nimarith, god of the Mistrals, was one of the oldest of them all. Where Knodalon and his kin had always been elemental—driven by cycles and laws and the practical business of keeping the world from

tearing itself to shreds—Nimarith had been something else entirely. He was the architect of adversity, the craftsman of games, the one who believed that the only thing more dangerous than chaos was complacency.

Perhaps, Knodalon mused, Nimarith had set the Icosagon in place himself, back in the days when towns were made not of timber and stone but of willpower and mutual threat. Perhaps he had chosen North Pointe as his playground, then populated it with the most stubborn, infuriating, inventive creatures he could find. Then, he had stepped back and watched, as if daring the town to outlast even him.

If so, it was a beautiful trick, Knodalon conceded. And it had worked. For centuries, the town had survived, outsmarted its own destruction, grown stronger in every way that counted.

Knodalon flexed his fingers, felt the ache in his joints. The body he wore now was old, intentionally so. Every line, every sag of skin, every slow-burn pain was a chosen marker, a way of enforcing discipline on himself. He wanted to remember what it felt like to fade, to erode, to succumb at last to the wear and tear of existence.

But he had to admit: it was getting harder to pretend. Every day, the town needed more from him—even if all it needed was his solitary steadfastness. Every day, the wind grew restless, the tiny gods grew bolder, the game grew more transparent in its design. Every day, he found himself less able to watch and more compelled to act.

He was, perhaps, precisely where Nimarith had wanted him all along.

He exhaled, slowly, and let the breath carry a message into the dark. It was not a prayer, exactly, but something adjacent: an acknowledgment of the inevitability of return.

He had spent so long trying to avoid the world's story, only to find himself more tightly woven into it than ever.

He would not run from it anymore.

He sat, unmoving, as the world darkened around him, and let his thoughts spiral out into the wind.

Somewhere to the east, the petty gods plotted their next assault. Somewhere to the west, the adventurers slept and dreamed of glory

and loss. And here, in the heart of North Pointe, the old god waited, at last ready to play his part again.

This time, he would do it on his own terms.

He watched the sun's last embers gutter out on the rim of the world, then closed his eyes and listened to the silence, which was not silence at all, but the music of a thousand things just waiting to begin.

Dawn arrived on silent feet, tiptoeing over the threshold as if it had second thoughts about what it might find. The air was so still it seemed hung by wires, and even the persistent breeze off the lake had lost its appetite for movement. Knodalon noticed, and so did the rest of the world, though most would have chalked it up to the natural lull before a squall. But the old god knew the real meaning: when the air went static, it was only to provide a sharper contrast for what came next.

The new batch of petty gods made their presence known before breakfast.

It started with the drawers. All at once, in every house and shop and even in the constable's own desk, the drawers rebelled. They jammed, fused, or else opened so readily that their contents poured out like confetti in a parade nobody had asked for. The first victim was the kitchen at the Weary Head, where Minnie's careful system—spoons on the left, knives on the right, ladles nowhere near the sugar—dissolved into anarchy. She yanked at a stuck drawer, only for the faceplate to come off in her hands, revealing a snarl of splinters and a nest of items that, by rights, belonged in three different rooms. Sam, arriving early for the morning's bread delivery, found herself entangled in a tug-of-war with an errant butter knife, which had embedded itself point-first in a block of paraffin and refused to budge.

Elsewhere, the dry goods shop was beset by a frenzy of misplaced ledgers. Alred, who prided himself on the iron discipline of his inventory, stood baffled as his entire system collapsed: the pencil drawer had grown a false bottom, the stamp drawer now doubled as a trapdoor, and a length of twine unspooled itself into every adjacent cubby,

binding the contents in a tangle that would have taken days to unravel.

The god of junk drawers had arrived, and it had ambitions.

Knodalon watched the phenomenon propagate, each incident like a bead of water racing down a window. He was not immune—his own bench had acquired a new compartment overnight, cleverly disguised under the armrest. He examined it, prying the seam with a fingernail, and found inside a collection of splinters, three smooth stones, and a single tooth. The stones, he recognized, were from the lakeshore; the tooth was a mystery, though it was very likely human. He left the compartment open, partly as a warning to the next visitor, and partly out of respect for the craftsmanship.

He traced the spread of the disruption through the town, noting each new outbreak. At the bakery, Makota's flour scoop had vanished, replaced by a clattering mass of bent measuring spoons and a tin whistle that, when blown, produced only the sound of a cat yowling. Dooley's menagerie, already a haven for escaped creatures and unsorted feed, now found its register drawer permanently locked, trapping a sennight's worth of receipts and three angry hamsters inside. Even the town hall, which rarely admitted to any form of disorder, suffered: the ceremonial quill disappeared entirely, only to resurface later embedded in the doorframe of the local shrine.

The townsfolk responded as they always did—first with denial, then with improvised solutions, and finally, with the fatalistic humor of people who had lived too long under the thumb of larger, meaner gods.

Sam, ever the pragmatist, took to carrying a utility knife on her belt, which she used to jimmy stuck drawers or, failing that, to carve new ones into the sides of crates and barrels. Minnie gave up on sorting entirely, instead adopting a policy of "first hand in, best hand out." She found that the children, whose arms were smallest and therefore most suited to fishing lost items from the depths, enjoyed the new arrangement. By midday, they had converted the old flour bin into a game: whoever could retrieve a specific item blindfolded won a coin, or, in the case of Trevor, a slice of day-old cake.

Alred, after a brief and fruitless campaign to subdue the chaos,

surrendered. He locked his entire stockroom and announced that, until further notice, all items would be for sale “as found.” Some customers complained, but most were secretly relieved; it meant, for once, that shopping was as exciting as it sounded in the stories.

Through all of it, Knodalon sat on his bench, hands folded in his lap, and let the air fill with the sound of things being not quite where they ought to be. He felt the pleasure the godling took in its work—a giddy, manic energy that vibrated just under the threshold of hearing. He did not begrudge it. There was a place in the world for mischief, especially when it exposed the soft underbelly of human routine.

But he was less charitable toward the second arrival.

By noon, the god of small, harmless rust spots had established its dominion. The first evidence was the orange bloom along the hinges of the bakery door, which, the previous day, had gleamed like a promise of order. The next was the fine, gritty dust that crept across the latches of the storehouse, then over every fork, spoon, and butter knife in the Weary Head. At first, it seemed a simple nuisance—a bit of extra scrubbing, a need to check the bottom of the pan before cooking. But the rust was persistent, and it did not care for boundaries: it leapt from iron to tin, to the brass scales on the counterweights at the fishmonger’s, even to the chromed buckles on Warren’s forge apron.

Dooley’s cages, which he had spent years maintaining with oil and wire brush, acquired a patina overnight. The animals seemed to enjoy it; the ferrets licked the bars, the birds pecked at them, and the turtles wore their flecks of rust like fashion. But Dooley, proud of his menagerie’s shine, took it as a personal affront. He spent most of the day applying elbow grease and anti-rust tonic, only to find that, by evening, the orange dust had returned—brighter and more insistent than before.

Knodalon watched the spread, amused at first, then less so. Rust had always been one of the world’s true inevitabilities, but this was something else—a divine acceleration, a campaign not of destruction but of universal dinginess. Even the lake, which should have been immune, acquired a faint ring of color where the water lapped at the old iron pilings. It looked, from a distance, like the world had gone slightly out of focus.

The townsfolk complained, but only in the manner of people who had more important things to worry about. They adapted, as they always did. At the Weary Head, Minnie switched to wooden spoons. Sam instructed her regulars to bring their own mugs, or else drink straight from the bottle. Makota began to view the rust as an omen—she claimed it gave the bread a “richer, earthier crust,” and soon had a line of customers at her door, all eager to taste the world’s newest imperfection.

The only real casualty was Warren, who spent the afternoon re-burnishing the handle on a sword for another quartet of adventurers, only to watch as a ring of orange formed under the pommel before he’d even finished the final sharpening. He grunted, ground it off, and pronounced the sword “more authentic this way.” The leader of the adventurers, who had seen worse, accepted it with a shrug.

Meanwhile, the third petty god had achieved something close to celebrity.

The god of lost socks, formerly just a rumor among traveling merchants, had become a fixture. The makeshift shrine at the back of the Weary Head—little more than a nail in the wall and a heap of mismatched hosiery—now boasted an array of offerings: hand-stitched sachets, a knitted effigy, even a crude portrait of a sock rendered in blue chalk. Travelers bowed slightly to the empty air as they passed, and one even left a scrap of bread, “in case the god had feet to feed.”

Knodalon found the shrine oddly touching. The world had never lacked for gods, but few had inspired such gentle, persistent reverence. He watched as a mother, visiting from the south, guided her son up to the pile and instructed him to leave behind his own contribution—a child-sized red sock, more hole than fabric. The boy hesitated, then draped it carefully atop the rest, whispering a secret prayer that no one but a god could hear.

He heard it. It was perfect in its simplicity: please bring my father home, and let him find his other sock.

Knodalon sat back, let the wind off the lake ruffle his beard, and considered the day’s new reality.

There was always a balance, he reflected. For every small act of

order, a counterforce would appear to test it, to fray the edges and remind the world that nothing held forever. The drawers, the rust, the socks—each was a kind of erosion, a wear on the fabric of the town. But each also revealed something essential: the adaptability of the people, their willingness to endure and improvise, their refusal to take even their own inconvenience too seriously.

He looked down at his own hands, at the new stain of rust where the arm of the bench met the post. He scraped at it with his thumb, watched the orange powder flake away, then settle in the lines of his skin.

He smiled.

The petty gods had upped their game, but so had the town. There was a rhythm to the contest, and for the first time in a long time, he was curious to see how it would play out.

He closed his eyes, let the wind circle the green, and waited for the next move.

It would not take long.

The first hints of dusk brought a fresh wind and a fresh set of travelers to the Weary Head, the kinds of people who carried news as much as they carried coin. They trickled in, faces tight with exhaustion and the high color of a road too recently left behind. By the time Knodalon made his usual evening circuit of the square, the inn's main room was already humming—less with laughter and more with the low, urgent drone of rumor being digested and rebroadcast in real time.

He paused at the window, listening. The stories, as always, went around the world three times before anyone could be bothered to verify a detail.

"...caught sight of the banners, but nothing past the ridge. Could've been a trick of the sun..."

"...her uncle said the Goblin King's banners, but no sign of an actual army. Maybe it's just a show, keep the roads empty until spring..."

"...no one's seen a proper warband in a fortnight. The old merchant trail's open, but only if you bribe the first outpost..."

Inside, Sam presided over the bar with both hands, pouring and listening in equal measure. Jen kept watch near the door, feigning disinterest but never missing a shift in the wind. Two travelers held court at the big round table, their meal interrupted every few minutes by a stranger with a theory or a question or just the need to touch a lucky warrior before heading back into the night.

The content of the news was as much comfort as warning. The Goblin King, last seen somewhere southwest of the Ridge, had apparently parked his ambitions for the season. Reports of full regiments moving north had dried up, replaced by sightings of smaller bands: a handful here, a dozen there, always more interested in pillage than conquest. Even these were treated as more inconvenience than terror; the northbound merchants had, by this point, adopted a kind of fatalistic confidence that, if it hadn't killed you yet, it probably wouldn't.

Knodalon tracked the shift in the town's temperature. In the span of a single evening, the sense of emergency relaxed—subtly, but enough for the regulars to return to their habits. The worry didn't vanish, but it thinned, dispersed into its usual place among the day-to-day frictions: late deliveries, weather predictions, whose sheep had vanished and whose barn had collapsed in the last frost. At some level, Knodalon thought, the Goblin King had been useful: a focal point for all the free-floating anxiety that had, until recently, belonged to the world itself.

With the menace gone, the town needed something else to fret about.

The god of minor rust spots obliged, ramping up its campaign of orange dust. The first glass of the evening at the Weary Head arrived sporting a rim of rust, which Minnie tried to pass off as "extra minerals." At the fishmonger, Calder discovered that the night's catch was best eaten raw, as the stove's iron ring had acquired a new, crunchy zest. Alred, who had spent the day trying to repack his inventory into less rebellious drawers, now found his own spectacles discolored and pitted around the bridge.

The god of lost socks, for its part, reveled in the crowds. The shrine

at the inn grew larger by the moment, as travelers swapped stories about the most memorable items ever lost to the road—always a sock, never a shoe, sometimes a favorite handkerchief or a bit of ribbon meant to secure a child's hair. By midnight, the pile was twice its size, and someone had begun a ritual of lighting a stub of candle whenever a new offering was added.

Knodalon considered the way the petty gods responded to gossip. Their behavior mirrored the town's: when the threat was external, they went quiet, laying low until the human noise ebbed. Now, with the danger at arm's length, the little gods had redoubled their mischief.

And then there was the little god of repressed fleas.

Previously content to lurk at the edge of things and sow its discomfort with the subtlety of a master saboteur, had by the following morning transcended its old limitations. It went from nuisance to epidemic in less than a candlemark.

It began in the usual way: a child, late for chores and already in mild disgrace, stopped at the threshold of the bakery to scratch furiously at his shin. His mother, seeing this, barked a command and swatted the hand away, only to succumb herself within seconds, digging at the line where her sleeve met her wrist. By the time they reached the counter, both were performing a synchronized dance of restraint and defeat, each glancing furtively at the other, hoping to find in the other's misery some relief for their own.

The effect compounded by the block. Soon, every errand-runner, bread-buyer, and even the bakery cat was writhing in discomfort, some subtle, some overt. The children, sensing an opportunity for competitive escalation, turned their welts into badges of honor, comparing spots and tallying victories like wounds on a campaign. The adults, with less tolerance for public weakness, pretended not to itch at all, which only made the eventual surrender more embarrassing. Even the cats, usually immune to embarrassment, began to slink with an extra edge of self-consciousness.

By midday, the phenomenon was universal. In the square, the toddler son of the seamstress had abandoned his usual running game and instead tried to invent the most elaborate device for scratching one's own back without using hands. Minnie's kitchen at the Weary

Head fell into chaos. "It's a curse," she announced, with the certainty of one who had seen all that the world had to offer and been unimpressed by most of it.

Sam, not normally given to hyperbole, examined her own arms and declared, "I'm starting to see the logic of burning the town down and starting over." Jen, having already lost the fight for dignity, went out onto the porch and scratched at her ankle with the toe of her opposite boot, working at it with such single-minded violence that the old dog who lived under the steps regarded her with something close to professional respect.

The animals, of course, suffered most. Dogs howled; the bakery's cats turned the morning's cream into a froth of cat hair and spilled milk; birds in the menagerie pecked at themselves so relentlessly that Dooley resorted to draping them in cheesecloth tutus. The rabbits, less inventive, simply convulsed in mutual panic, setting off a chain reaction that nearly upended an entire stack of feed barrels. In a last act of desperation, Dooley stationed himself in the entryway, hands held palm-up as if to summon a peace that had never, in the history of his shop, existed for more than ten minutes at a stretch.

Knodalon observed all this from his bench with a growing sense of disgust—first for the godling, then for himself, and finally for the world's inability to rid itself of the small and stupid in favor of the grand and tragic. He had watched civilizations dissolve in floods, seen valleys salted and cities burned to memory's ash, but never had he witnessed a foe as relentless or as idiotic as the god of repressed fleas.

He tried to will it away. For a while, he focused all his attention on the town, exerting a pressure that should, by rights, have been able to squeeze even the most determined parasite into submission. The godling responded by multiplying its presence, doubling the welts on every exposed forearm, then tripling them for the more obstinate cases. At one point, Knodalon heard a yelp from the green and looked up to see a pair of travelers—grown men, with the constitution of wet rope—abandoning all pretense and rolling in the grass, scratching at themselves with the abandon of feral children.

He pressed his hands together, gripping the bench so tightly that the grain of the wood creaked in protest. A wind, sharp and humor-

less, lanced down from the Mistral and snapped the hats from the heads of every passerby on the square. It sent the godling scattering, briefly, but within moments it was back, stronger and more vindictive than before.

He did not scream—he was not that kind of god, and anyway, it would have been pointless—but for the first time in centuries, he understood the appeal.

He closed his eyes, tried to center himself in the memory of silence, but even there the itch lingered, a constant, sibilant drone in the base of his skull. He thought of the old days, when a word or a gesture could unmake a world or shape a new one from the shards. He remembered the satisfaction of purpose, of contesting the other gods for territory and principle and leaving behind, if not peace, at least a sense of completion. This was not that. This was indignity, pure and undiluted, and he found himself unwilling to bear it any longer.

He rose from the bench, joints protesting, and strode across the square with as much dignity as the current circumstances allowed. His passage went unremarked: the town was too busy contending with its own afflictions to notice the movement of a single old man. He made for the menagerie, drawn by the volume and pitch of the animal commotion inside.

He pushed open the door and was greeted by a rush of feathers, fur, and dander, each with its own accompanying orchestra of whimpers and yelps. Dooley was at the center of it, swatting at a cloud of parakeets that had escaped their cheesecloth and now orbited his head in a frenzied, multicolored halo. The dogs—at least a dozen, of every shape and size—had formed a chorus line along the far wall, each engaged in a private campaign against its own hindquarters. The cats were invisible, but their presence was marked by the toppled jars, the upended water dishes, and the unmistakable sense that, somewhere in the rafters, a council of feline warlords was already drafting its revenge.

Dooley, spotting Knodalon, managed a kind of wave. “Help?” he called, but it was more plea than command.

Knodalon, never one for improvisation, simply stood there. He summoned the wind, more out of habit than hope, and sent it

spiraling through the shop. It swept the birds into a brief, screaming funnel, which deposited them—momentarily subdued—in the empty cages. The wind flattened the dogs against the wall, which stopped their scratching but left them blinking in stunned confusion. The cats, sensing a power play, went utterly still. For a moment, there was peace.

Then the fleas returned.

They came as a mist, a shimmer, a crawling fog that slithered down from the ceiling and onto every living thing in the shop. Dooley howled, a noise that started in the lungs and finished in the soul. The animals joined in, a howl and yowl and cacophony that rattled the glass in the windows and set the bell above the door to chiming.

Knodalon tried, truly, to maintain perspective. In the hierarchy of cosmic problems, this was as low as they came. But he could not ignore the humiliation. He felt the pressure of it—not just in the world, but in himself. The old, vast rage, so long held in check, flickered through him like the memory of lightning.

He looked at Dooley, who had collapsed onto the floor, rolling from side to side and sobbing in a way that would have embarrassed a lesser man. Knodalon regarded the animals, each locked in its own tiny purgatory, unable to escape the prison of its own skin. He considered the cats, who for all their dignity now looked to him with pleading eyes, as if he alone could fix what had gone so wrong.

He acted.

He gathered the wind, this time not as a tool but as a weapon. He let it spiral around him, then sent it outward in a pulse that shook the shelves and knocked every loose item to the floor. The wind circled the room, herded the fleas into a single, writhing ball of brown-black shimmer, then drove it out the door and into the open air, where it hung for a moment like a miniature storm cloud. With a final flick of his will, Knodalon sent the cloud skyward, up and over the rooftops, and into the wild beyond the town's edge.

The silence afterward was thick as wool. The animals stilled, then slumped in exhaustion. Dooley, on his back, stared at the ceiling with the unfocused gaze of one who had just lived through an apocalypse.

The cats, true to their nature, instantly resumed their campaign of passive-aggression, but with noticeably less vigor.

Knodalon stood in the center of the room, hands at his sides, breathing in the smell of victory and wet dog. He glanced at Dooley, who now sat up and tried, with minimal success, to smooth his hair.

"Thank you," Dooley said, voice hoarse but sincere. "I think you saved my life."

Knodalon grunted, which was as close as he ever got to admitting satisfaction. He looked around the room, at the chaos and the ruin and the battered pride of every living thing present, and decided that, while it was not what he had planned for the day, it would do.

He left the shop, the wind at his back, and returned to his bench. He settled in, hands folded, and let the town's relief wash over him like the return of a long-missed ache.

But even as the itch faded, he felt a new tension in the air. This was not the end of things, he realized. The god of repressed fleas had been only the beginning—a prologue, a test, a reminder that the world's patience, like his own, was not infinite.

He looked up at the sky, where the first of the evening stars blinked into view above the lake. The wind off the Mistrals was colder now, and it carried with it a promise of worse to come.

He narrowed his eyes, and waited.

CHAPTER 12

The Broken Claw had always been the town's vent for pressure. It absorbed the stress and outrage of the day, transmuted it through bickering, mugs, and the barked laughter of people who understood that anger, like bread, was best served fresh and shared while still hot. Tonight, however, the air had gone sour, and the commotion drew Knodalon's attention.

Sam knew the taste of disorder, but she'd never felt the pub fight back before.

The first sign came just after the lanterns were trimmed. One of the regulars—a laconic herdsman with a fondness for ale so cold it left ice on his mustache—took his first sip and immediately spat it back into the mug. "Warm," he announced, to no one in particular. "Piss-warm."

At once, an invisible thread snapped. Around the room, other mugs met lips and then table with mounting violence. A chorus of disgust began at the far end of the trestle table and rolled up to the bar like thunder climbing a valley.

"Flat, too!" called a trader, nose crinkling as if he'd been handed vinegar. He upended the mug, watched as the dregs clung to the bottom in a sludge. He looked at Sam with an air of betrayal, as if she had personally urinated into his tankard.

Sam braced her hands on the counter, feeling the grain of the wood under her palms—a comfort, usually, but tonight the surface seemed slick with a residue she'd never noticed before. She scanned the room. The faces were not angry yet, but they were accumulating tension in the way of people who knew there was a proper channel for their outrage and were eager to find it.

By the window, Minnie was performing triage with armfuls of cutlery. She moved from table to table, collecting forks and spoons with the desperate courtesy of someone picking up broken heirlooms after a tornado. Her white cap, freshly laundered just that afternoon, now sported a comet trail of brownish-orange where a tray had upended itself.

"Sorry, sorry, oh dear, so sorry," Minnie chirped as she swooped, always ahead of the hands that reached for fresh utensils, always behind the new wave of complaints.

"Look at this!" bellowed a fisherman, holding up a spoon pocked with iron blight. "Could scrape barnacles with it."

His companion, less poetic, simply threw his fork to the floor. The sound it made was not the usual clang but a muted, self-pitying thunk. The wood beneath seemed softer, or perhaps just resigned.

Sam sidestepped a stampede of napkin-wavers, their cloths already spotted with brown, and addressed the nearest table directly. "First round's on the house," she announced, hoping to ride the crest of grumbling before it became a wave. "We're working on the problem. Sit tight."

But the problem was everywhere. The ale in the glass pitchers, meant to stay frosty for a 'mark or more, was now room temperature before it reached the first glass. The mugs, recently scrubbed, bore stubborn rings of something dark and unnamable. Worse, the pub's latest special was "The Claw Chiller"—ale so cold it could numb the tongue, advertised as the only drink in the territory to come with a warning about brain freeze. Now, when Sam poured it, it barely steamed in the lantern glow.

Patrons attacked their mugs with napkins, some with the technique of old soldiers cleaning rifles. It did no good; for every flake or stain

removed, two more appeared, often in the exact shape of a sneer. The god of tarnished forks, Sam realized, had brought friends.

From his bench down the road, Knodalon perceived that there was a team of them at work, each with its specialty. One, the god of warm ale—no subtlety to that one, just brute force. Another, judging by the sediment at the bottom of every glass, must be the god of Gritty Mouthfuls, or the Spirit of Last Sip Disappointment. The chairs, too, seemed to have gained an adversary: every time a patron shifted their weight, a new nick or ding appeared in the leg, and the resulting scrape was more shrill than usual, as if the wood itself objected to being used for such pedestrian purposes. The god of Dinged Floorboards was making its move.

All this would have been manageable, but the sour smell was new. It crept in slow, then dominated, blending spilled yeast with something sour and burnt—a memory of spilled pickles and the sweat of an anxious crowd. The regulars noticed, but so did the travelers, who had arrived in the last candlemark with their own expectations and were now recalibrating in real time.

By the fire, a quartet of out-of-towners eyed the room with the keen, disbelieving look of mercenaries who'd been promised a hero's welcome and found only crisis. Their leader, a woman with short, cropped hair and the scar of old battles bisecting her lip, motioned for Sam.

She leaned in, arms crossed. "We were told this place was worth the detour."

Sam offered a smile she did not feel. "It usually is."

The woman inclined her head at the mug. "Is this a local custom, or did we offend someone?"

"Neither," said Sam. "We're working the problem."

The woman considered, then offered a thin, not unkind smile. "Let us know if you need help with the root cause."

Sam doubted the woman had ever found a problem in her life that couldn't be solved with steel, but it was nice to be offered. "Will do," she said, then pivoted away.

Behind her, the complaints crescendoed. Minnie had abandoned all attempts at calm, and was now recruiting Trevor to help collect cutlery

faster than it could be ruined. Trevor, red-faced but game, gathered forks in both hands and tried to count as he moved. "Twenty, twenty-one...uh, twenty-three—damn it!"

"Language, dear," hissed Minnie, even as she snapped a knife from under a patron's hand. "Sorry, so sorry, just need to check that one, too."

The herdsman from earlier had now progressed to full-throated lamentation, joined by a small chorus at his table.

"This was a good mug," he insisted, turning it so Sam could see the inside. "Had it since the fire last winter. I want it back how it was."

Sam accepted the mug, then handed him a clean (or at least, less ruined) one. "Try this. Let me know if it's any better."

He sipped, frowned, then shrugged. "Tastes of soap."

Sam offered him a shot of something stronger from under the bar. He accepted with the dignity of a man who knew when he'd been bested.

At the bar's far end, a trio of travelers conferred in low, urgent tones, their glances flicking between the windows and the door. They were not locals, but Sam recognized the type: scouts or runners, the sort who survived by knowing trouble before it arrived. One of them lifted a mug to his lips, sniffed, then set it down untouched.

"Something's wrong here," said the second, fingers drumming on the table.

"Only just noticed?" replied the third, whose eyes kept darting to the windows as if expecting to see the moon peel itself off the sky and come barreling through.

Sam decided to make a show of investigating the kegs. She ducked behind the bar, trailing her hand along the cool surface of the back counter. It was not cool. The refrigeration, an old spell layered over years of incremental improvements, should have kept the wood cold enough to numb her fingers. Instead, it was barely cooler than her skin.

She opened the tap on a keg of the premium. The liquid foamed, but there was no chill to it. She tasted a drop. It was not just warm—it was flabby, listless. The complex bitterness that should have danced along her tongue was replaced by a flat, metallic aftertaste. The keg's

handle, too, bore a fine film of brown, as if it had been dusted in rust and then wiped with an oily rag.

Sam grabbed a fresh glass, rinsed it, held it up to the light. Within seconds, the glass went cloudy. Sediment clung to the walls in patterns that were not random—if she squinted, she could see spirals, wavelets, even what looked like a tiny, obscene sigil at the bottom.

She set the glass down and exhaled. The air, thick and sticky, stuck in her lungs. The feeling was familiar: the world, out of balance.

She watched the pub. Every detail now felt weighted, heavy with intention. The napkins in their holders sagged like exhausted flags; the lanterns sputtered as if the oil had gone rancid. Even the dartboard in the corner had acquired a rash of mold across its bullseye.

Sam re-emerged behind the bar, head high. The noise had become a proper din—laughter, but the mean, unhinged kind; arguments over whether the forks had always been this bad or if the staff had slipped; the wet plop of cutlery being returned to the collection bin.

Minnie passed close, arms full of spoons. “It’s everywhere,” she whispered. “Even the pots in the back.”

“Don’t serve anything in metal,” Sam said. “Go to wood, if we’ve got it. And have Trevor bring up the cider—maybe that batch’s still clean.”

Minnie nodded, then set off, crashing through a pack of children who’d gotten into the habit of slapping forks against the table to see which broke first.

At the center table, a merchant with a silvered beard raised his voice above the fray. “If the ale’s gone off, maybe it’s a sign. Maybe we should all be at the shrine, not at a bar.”

A round of sarcastic cheers greeted this, but more than one person nodded.

By the door, Jen—the town’s constable, never off duty—leaned in. “Want me to clear it?” she asked Sam, sotto voce.

“Give it another round,” said Sam. “It’ll fix itself, or it’ll burn itself out. Worst comes to worst, we lock up early.”

Jen nodded, but Sam saw her slide a hand down to her side, where the nightstick hung.

A crash from the kitchen sent Minnie scurrying. Trevor, in the act of

balancing a pyramid of forks, had lost control. The utensils hit the floor in a fountain of noise and defeat.

"Sorry!" he wailed, hands high.

Minnie shooed him away. "It's not your fault, darling. This is...this is a day, isn't it?"

Sam thought she heard the edge of tears in the woman's voice, but Minnie squared her shoulders and began to collect the cutlery, one by one, with the ceremony of a priestess gathering relics.

Sam watched the door, expecting a fresh disaster with every second, but it held. For now.

She looked at the window. Outside, the moon was up, but the light seemed to bend away from the glass. She tried to make out the old man on the lakeside bench, but the angle was wrong, and the lantern's glare made it hard to see anything past the glass.

She was about to turn away when, for just a moment, she caught the faintest impression—a shimmer of white hair, a glint of reflected light, and the certain knowledge that someone was watching.

She blinked, and it was gone.

In the pub, the complaints continued to multiply, each more inventive than the last. At the corner table, two laborers had started a contest to see whose spoon could be bent into the shape of a fish, with the loser having to drink the rest of his mug in a single go. At the bar, the herdsman had recruited a posse, and together they staged a mock trial for the fork, accusing it of crimes against the town's dignity.

Sam let it all play out. She moved among the tables, refilling mugs with whatever could be poured, switching to wood or stoneware where possible, and fielding the tide of complaints with a mask of steady amusement.

But she kept her real attention on the door, and on the wind that now pressed against it—steady, and waiting, like a great exhale held just at the edge of release.

At the back of the room, the noise grew sharper—less laughter, more bickering. A young merchant, flushed and angry, slammed a mug down so hard the handle snapped. "It's not funny anymore," he said. "Something's actually wrong. This isn't just a bad batch."

His words landed, and the room stilled, just for a moment.

Sam looked at Minnie, who nodded, then set down her tray and wiped her hands on her apron.

Sam stepped out from behind the bar and addressed the room. "We know there's a problem," she said, her voice flat but carrying. "We're doing what we can to fix it. If you're not happy, there's the door and the porch. No one's making you stay."

Silence.

Then, from the window table, the mercenary leader raised her mug. "Here's to the Claw," she said. "May it outlast whatever's trying to kill us tonight."

Some laughed, some cheered. Most just drank, but with a little more patience.

Sam went to the door, braced herself, and opened it a crack. The wind outside hit her with the chill she'd been missing all night. It was clean, honest cold, and she let it fill her lungs before closing the door and returning to her post.

The room felt different now. The tension remained, but it was biding its time.

Sam poured a fresh round for the mercenary table and watched as the leader accepted it, sipped, and—after a moment—nodded in approval.

"Better?" Sam asked.

The woman looked at her. "Maybe. Maybe not. But you didn't flinch, and that counts for something."

Sam shrugged. "You get used to things falling apart."

The woman smiled, for real this time. "That's why I like towns like this."

Sam went back to her station and poured herself a shot of the rough stuff. She let it burn all the way down.

She looked out at the room, at the regulars and the travelers and the mess of a night that should have been nothing but ordinary. She thought, again, of the watcher on the bench, and the patience it must take to observe without ever stepping in.

She wondered how long she could last, if forced to do the same.

She set the empty glass down, wiped the bar clean, and prepared for the next wave.

This was her place, and she would not yield it.

Outside, Knodalon levered himself upright.

He did not slam doors. That was the province of people who wished to be noticed. He preferred to let the world adjust to his presence as if it had no other choice, which, in most cases, it did not.

He entered the Broken Claw quietly. The wind, which had been an irritant all night, slipped in ahead of him and slid up the walls, brushing the napkins from their stands and sending the lantern flames into a brief, synchronized bow. The door swung wide and stayed that way, not with the belligerence of a drunk or the desperation of a brawl, but with the calm authority of a man who had never once found a closed door to be a credible obstacle.

Inside, the pub was at the apex of its discomfort. The laughter had curdled; what conversation remained had contracted into hard, bitter knots. Most of the regulars were still present, though none seemed eager to make the first move toward leaving. At the bar, Sam braced herself against the coming storm, jaw set in the grim line of someone who had already counted the cost and found it wanting.

The newcomers—travelers and mercenaries, mostly—sensed the change before they understood it. The sudden drop in air pressure. The quiet throb of expectation, like the moment before a jury returned with a verdict. Some stood, ready to bolt; others sat, the instinct for spectacle warring with the urge to escape.

Knodalon crossed the threshold, taking stock. The petty gods were everywhere, woven into the fabric of the room as if they'd been sewn in by a blind but enthusiastic seamstress. The god of tarnished forks, in particular, had made itself comfortable; he could taste it in the metallic tang that clung to every surface, could see its fingerprints in the fractal stains on every mug and spoon. The god of Gritty Mouthfuls lurked just behind it, a haze of sullen sediment wafting around the glassware. The god of warm ale, of course, was the loudest, but also the most obvious—Knodalon dismissed it with a thought, already plotting the proper rebuke.

He advanced into the center of the room and let the wind close the door behind him. The effect was instantaneous: the air stilled, and

every eye in the place tracked to him as if he were a magnet drawing nails.

He stopped and folded his hands, letting the ancient rage coil inside him like a serpent. The world, he decided, had given these minor gods too long a leash. It was time to remind them what an actual divinity could do.

He drew a slow breath, savoring the static that built with every inhalation. Then he spoke—not aloud, but through the air itself. The wind became his voice, his will. It started as a low hum, a subsonic vibration that crawled up the legs of every table and into the bones of every living thing present.

The rust on the forks and spoons shivered, then lifted—first as a fine dust, then as visible flakes, spiraling up from the tabletops to hang suspended in the air. The sediment in the mugs did the same, detaching itself in lazy swirls. The god of tarnished forks tried to resist, digging in with spectral talons, but Knodalon flexed his will and the wind peeled it away, flake by flake, until only a glittering corona of rust circled him in a slow, malevolent halo.

The lesser gods panicked. The god of Dinged Floorboards rattled every chair in the room, desperate to trip up the intruder, but Knodalon's step was light and inevitable, and the wind smoothed the floor ahead of him. The god of Gritty Mouthfuls tried to blind him with a stinging dust, but he blinked once and the motes vaporized. The god of warm ale managed a last, furious boil in the nearest pitcher, but Knodalon simply exhaled and the liquid froze—just for a moment—before settling at the perfect, bracing temperature.

He reached the center of the room and turned a slow circle, letting the gathered gods see him, really see him, for the first time.

His hair, white as fresh snow, did not move in the wind. His beard, unkempt and long, remained perfectly still. But his eyes—old, in a way that made the stones of the bar's foundation seem adolescent—glowed with the cold, blue certainty of lightning about to strike.

He did not speak. He did not need to.

The rust flakes, now dense enough to obscure the lantern light, condensed into a cyclone, then collapsed in on themselves. The air

snapped once—hard enough to set every glass ringing—and the room went impossibly still.

The god of tarnished forks, sensing the true shape of its adversary, tried to flee. Knodalon let it. There was no art in the destruction of such things. He simply opened a path through the air, and the god, trailing rust and shame, shot out the chimney like a bat from a burning cave.

The others followed, each in its own flavor of terror. The god of Dinged Floorboards snuck out under the door, not even daring to slam it. The god of Gritty Mouthfuls vanished up the spout of the bar's tap, which immediately ran clear. The god of warm ale evaporated, leaving only a faint echo of regret in the room's temperature.

Knodalon let the silence settle.

He closed his eyes and counted to three.

When he opened them again, the pub had changed. The air was sweet, the haze gone. The rust had vanished from the cutlery, the mugs sparkled, and the ale—when he tasted it—had never been colder, or more alive.

He surveyed the room.

The patrons stared at him, then at their drinks, then at each other. A few, the ones who knew the rules of the world, bowed their heads in quiet gratitude. Most just drank, the memory of the past candlemark already fading, overwritten by the relief of normalcy restored.

At the bar, Sam watched him with an expression of careful, measured surprise. She offered a mug—clean, cold, perfect—across the counter.

Knodalon accepted it, nodded, and took a slow, appreciative sip.

He did not smile, but he allowed himself the comfort of having set one small thing right.

He left the pub as quietly as he'd entered, the wind closing the door behind him.

The gods, he knew, would be back. But not tonight. He turned to go.

For a moment after the old man left, nobody moved. The only sound was the hiss of the lanterns, the faint click of glass against wood as the pub's regulars dared to inspect their mugs.

Sam was first to try. She lifted a fresh glass, held it to the light, and frowned in anticipation of disappointment. The glass was flawless. No sediment, no haze, not even the memory of a stain. She turned to the keg and poured a measure—watched as it foamed, then settled, the color clear and perfect.

She ran a thumb along the rim. Cold. Not just cold—frost rimmed the glass, forming a delicate ring that glistened blue in the lantern glow.

She set it down, then picked it up again, unable to believe. She tasted it. Her eyebrows shot up; she grinned, then scanned the room to see if anyone else had noticed.

They had. At every table, the mood had pivoted. Grumbles gave way to tentative sips; the sips became gulps. Forks and spoons, now clean as new, were lifted and tested, then set down again, the skepticism replaced by a kind of sheepish wonder.

It took less than a minute for the story to begin mutating. “It was the air pressure,” someone theorized. “Had to be.” Another, more poetic, blamed it on “the old man’s glare,” which made half the regulars laugh and the other half look at their mugs with renewed suspicion.

At the bar, the travelers from the window table raised their glasses to Sam. “You fixed it,” the leader said.

Sam shrugged. “Maybe it fixed itself.”

But she knew better. She looked at the door, still gently swinging on its hinges, and knew exactly whose presence had swept the place clean.

Minnie emerged from the kitchen, clutching a battered wooden ladle. “It’s better,” she announced to nobody in particular. “Even the stew tastes right now.”

Trevor, emboldened by the shift in mood, ran from table to table delivering rounds, each more expertly poured than the last. He beamed every time someone thanked him, as if he’d personally banished every god from the premises.

Jen, the constable, made a slow circuit of the room. She paused at Sam’s elbow and murmured, “He’s a force, that one.”

Sam nodded. “The world just remembers itself when he’s around.”

They shared a quiet moment, then each moved on—Sam to the next patron, Jen to the porch, where she could stand and listen for signs that the peace would last.

Knodalon waited outside the Claw, hands deep in his pockets, face turned up to the night. The wind had dropped; for the first time in sennights, the green was silent. Even the god of repressed fleas had retreated to some less ambitious haunt, and the itching that had plagued half the town was only a memory, like the echo of a bad song in an empty room.

He watched the moon, wondered how many centuries it had been since he'd last needed to make a statement. Not many, all things considered.

He was about to move on when the door to the Claw opened again, and a group of travelers stumbled out into the lamplight. They were not the usual adventurers or rowdy outcasts, but merchants, their hands ink-stained and their cloaks heavy with the dust of the road.

One of them—a man with a face like a snapped broom handle—spotted Knodalon and stopped short.

"Were you in there?" he asked, pointing back at the pub.

Knodalon considered. "Briefly."

The merchant leaned in, voice urgent. "There's news, if you're the type to care."

"I'm not," Knodalon said, but the man pressed on.

"They're saying the towns in the east—the ones the Goblin King took—are fighting back. Human settlements, organizing for once. They've held a bridge for nearly a sennight, and there's talk of a real army, not just bandits and heroes."

"More people, more trouble," Knodalon said.

"Maybe," said the merchant. "But maybe it's the start of something better."

Knodalon shrugged, as if he'd seen too many starts and ends to ever believe in one over the other. But he noted the urgency in the

merchant's voice, the way his companions all nodded in silent agreement. The rumor would spread, and with it, the town's sense of its own future would shift.

The merchants moved on, voices low and hopeful as they vanished into the night.

Knodalon waited, just a few moments longer, feeling the new current in the world. It would bring its own crop of minor gods—of hope, of war, of desperation and reckless schemes—but for tonight, it was enough to have silence.

He started home, the wind still at his back.

In the bar behind him, laughter returned—not the mean kind, but the genuine, slow-building kind that always followed a close call with disaster.

Even petty gods, he thought, had their uses. But it was good, every so often, to remind them who was in charge.



The rumor caught like dry brush, snapping through the bar with the heat of a real promise. Where the old stories had felt inert—like scripts rehearsed too many times—this one was different: new, raw, as yet untested by disappointment. In every corner of the Claw, the possibility of a human army, real resistance, was dissected and rebuilt a hundred ways before Knodalon reached the far end of the porch.

He knew what came next. It was always the same. The first wave would be freelancers: lone heroes, disgraced knights, the occasional sorcerer hoping for a redemption arc. Next, the groups—adventurers in twos and threes, each looking to prove themselves smarter or braver or more deserving than the rest. After that, the professional soldiers, a proper company or two, led by captains whose loyalty was a function of pay and personal enmity.

Each would stop at North Pointe, to rest or to boast or to recruit, to resupply or simply to take a breather before diving into history in the making. And with every one of them came a train of new and specialized gods: gods of last-minute equipment repairs, gods of superior tactics, gods of not dying in the first five minutes, gods of victory

speeches and dramatic reversals of fortune. The world never ran short of gods, just as it never ran short of people desperate to believe in them.

Knodalon walked the green, letting the wind return in gentle, restorative puffs. The evening was cool again, but not threatening. The only sign of the recent chaos was a subtle, metallic tang in the air, already fading as the night deepened.

He watched the lights in the Claw, listened to the laughter—real this time, not forced—and felt the world's rotation tilt, just a little, toward a future that was both the same and always new. He let himself enjoy it.

On his way home, he passed the alley behind the Weary Head. There, on a makeshift shelf nailed to the wall, sat the shrine to the god of lost socks: a new pair, a blue and a green, propped together in improbable harmony.

He considered knocking it over. The old reflex, a flicker of the will, could have dissolved the whole edifice in a breath. But he hesitated.

The shrine, he realized, had survived more than a few cleanings, a few rounds of cosmic correction. It was persistent, and it had adapted. People had given it power by needing it, not by being told it was important.

He left it standing. It seemed only fair.

He turned toward the lake, toward the dark line of the storehouse silhouetted against the moon, and let the wind guide him the last few steps home.

There would be more trouble tomorrow. There always was. But tonight, the world was in balance—frail, but holding.

He sat on his bench, folded his hands, and waited.

The night was quiet.

The air, for once, was still.

CHAPTER 13

Knodalon kept his post on the bench. The moon had scrawled a white line down the trade road, and the ripples in the lake picked out each shift in the night's breeze. The town slept with a wariness that reminded him of animals after a near-miss with a predator: heads tucked, but one eye always open, waiting for the next danger.

He let the quiet spool out. In this stillness, he could feel every inch of the boundary between his own will and the town's: a zone of customs and expectations, of old law and older necessity. If you squinted—if you looked at it the way he did, which was less with sight and more with the memory of storms—you could see that the real balance was not in the stone or wood or even the number of open shops. The magic that kept North Pointe upright was bureaucratic to the bone, a ledger kept in the basement of the world where every credit demanded a debit, and every act, no matter how small, was weighed on a cosmic set of scales.

Tonight, those scales were vibrating. Not unbalanced, not yet, but shivering on the edge. He and the small gods had both been warned, in the way that cats warn each other off a disputed fence: a blink, a tail flick, a careful holding of ground.

They were not technically in peace.

And this, as any town constable would tell you, meant they were subject to ejection.

Jen, he thought, would have appreciated it. When a fight threatened to break out in the Claw, she didn't wait for the blood to spill—she knew that disorder was the real crime, not violence itself. So when the world's little gods got too rowdy, it was apparently his job to remind them, as gently as possible, that there was a higher power in residence.

Tonight, he had done job.

He didn't hate it, but he didn't relish it, either. In the hierarchy of interventions, what he'd done was barely more than an authoritative glare. But it was enough. The petty gods were not exiled, merely warned, and the world had returned to its normal friction. A few extra scratches here, a missing sock there, but nothing that couldn't be folded back into the day's routine.

That, he thought, was the real magic: not the absence of friction, but the art of keeping it from going critical. The old injunction—Serve All—was not about serving each individual; it was about serving the whole, the town as organism, the messy, seething mass of needs that never, ever all aligned. Nimarith had built this into the walls, the streets, the rhythm of the seasons, but it was up to people like Jen—and, he supposed, himself—to keep the system from eating its own tail.

He felt the pressure ease as the petty gods slunk away to lick their wounds. They would be back, of course. But not tonight. The air grew less tense, the wind curled itself into a contented hush, and somewhere in the green, a stray dog decided it was safe enough to return to its post.

Knodalon allowed himself a small, private moment of satisfaction. Not victory—never that—but a stay of execution, a reprieve. He had held the line, at least for another night.

He watched the moon's reflection drift and break, each fragment a reminder that nothing ever held for long, not even the illusion of stillness. But for now, that was enough.

He folded his hands in his lap and waited.

The world, for once, was in balance.

But the world always changed first in the shadows.

By the time the moon had passed behind the farthest arm of the Mistrals, Knodalon could feel it: a slippage, not in the wind, but in the glue that held the night to the world. It started with a current in the air, a thread of warmth where there should have been cold, or perhaps the reverse. Nothing that would trouble a human, but for one who'd seen epochs come and go, it was enough.

The small gods had learned a lesson.

They were creatures of habit, usually. They staked out their corners and fought for scraps, never daring to pool resources for fear of losing the tiny dominions they'd eked from the cracks in the town's order. But tonight, some critical mass of shared defeat had changed them. The gods of warm breezes, of socks gone astray, of rust on the nail and itch in the heel—they had begun to merge their domains, a union born not of friendship, but of a shared, mortal dread.

Knodalon tracked the change as it rippled through the metaphysics. What had been a dozen minor annoyances became a single, unified presence: dense, erratic, and more intelligent than the sum of its parts. It hovered at the edge of town, testing the wards, sending out scouts in the form of small, unremarkable phenomena.

The first was a sock, of all things. Blue, with a frayed cuff, it skittered across the cobblestones in the square, propelled by a breeze that moved against the grain of every other wind in the area. The sock paused at the well, circled it twice, and then, as if possessed by the memory of a foot, sprang into the air and landed—perfectly—on the windowsill of the baker's home.

A trail of rust-colored dust marked its path, a breadcrumb line that would have been invisible to most, but not to him. He followed it with his second sight, watched as it wound around the square, leaving a faint red smudge on every door it touched.

And everywhere it went, the air got a little thicker. The greetings between neighbors became a little more reserved, a little more defensive. Where yesterday there had been a dozen open windows and twice as many shouted jokes, now there was only the briefest of nods, the kind reserved for strangers in a border town. The sound of the

world itself seemed dampened, as if a thick blanket had been thrown over every bell and shout and child's laugh.

The first rays of the day peeked over the far horizon.

He watched Alred emerge from the dry goods store, ledger in hand, frowning at the numbers as if they were a personal insult. Alred's pride had always been in the perfect record, the unbroken chain of provenance from field to shelf to table. Now, the numbers refused to settle. Items went missing, then reappeared in the wrong place, or else failed to match the records entirely. Each error was minor, but in aggregate, they gnawed at him.

Just feet away, Calder snapped at his daughter for misplacing a string of perch. Calder, whose patience was legendary, had never before raised his voice to a child, but the sound echoed across the still water like a slap. Ivy, startled and ashamed, burst into tears and bolted up the street. Calder stood frozen for a moment, knife in hand, the usual explanations stranded on his tongue.

Knodalon traced the line of disturbance as it looped the square. It doubled back on itself, making a tangle where before there had been a graceful circuit. This was not random malice—it was strategy, a deliberate effort to confuse and disrupt.

He tasted the flavor of the new coalition in the air: the warmth and grit of rust, the chemical tang of sock dye, the high, nervous tremor of adolescent embarrassment, all braided into a single cord. The individual godlings had ceded their autonomy in favor of something else—a composite, a hivemind, a force that could never have existed in the world that came before.

He let the realization settle.

They'd realized they could not win as individuals.

Clever, if desperate.

He rose from the bench and stretched, feeling the wind's reluctance as it met the new current in the air. There was an intelligence in it now, a pattern that responded to pressure and counterpressure, anticipating his every move.

It would get worse before it got better.

He moved to the edge of the green and watched as the town began its day. The baker, seeing the sock on her windowsill, frowned and left

it there. The fisherman, after a long pause, called for Ivy to return, but the words were slow and uncertain, as if he doubted the rightness of the act even as he performed it.

He watched, and waited, and let the knowledge settle in his chest like a stone.

This was only the beginning.

The real storm had yet to break.

By morning, the air in North Pointe was thick with a sour expectation. The new godling, a coalition of discarded grievances and shared resentments, had grown itself a core. It radiated from the green, spreading outward like a bad smell, leeching into everything that made the town a place and not a collection of shelters.

The first open skirmish broke out at the Weary Head. Minnie, whose patience was usually as bottomless as her tea pots, stalked through the main room with a face set to thunder. She slammed a carafe on a table, the sound echoing through the common area, and glared at Sam, who stood behind the bar in her habitual pose of calculated boredom.

"You watered it," Minnie hissed. "I saw you. You think I can't tell?"

Sam, unflappable even in the face of armed men, set down her cloth with exaggerated care. "If you want to check the tap yourself, be my guest."

Minnie glared, as if daring her to say more, but then just shook her head and stormed back to the kitchen, muttering in a language that had gone out of style before the town itself was built.

Sam watched her go, then turned to the next patron in line and said, without irony, "It's a full moon, I think. People always go odd on the full."

But even Sam, who had trained herself to ignore trouble until it threatened the bottom line, was watching the windows more than usual. There was something in the air—a vibration, a taste, a warning that the world was tilting out of true.

Down at the smithy, Warren and Wilem were in a standoff over a missing shipment of nails. Wilem, whose usual mode was patient acquiescence, had a face like sour cream gone off. Warren, who could have snapped the man in half with one hand, looked close to

tears, or maybe just frustrated enough that tears were the only option left.

"You signed for them," Warren insisted, voice tremulous with something more than anger. "You signed for them, and the cart was empty when it got here."

"I signed what you put in front of me," Wilem spat back, waving the receipt like a bloody shirt. "If you're going to accuse me, do it straight."

"Accuse you? I'm just—" Warren stopped, rubbed at his face with both hands, and looked at the ground as if it might offer up a solution. "I just want to know what happened."

"What happened," Wilem said, voice rising, "is that someone's trying to make me look a fool. And I don't like it."

They glared at each other for a moment longer, then both turned away at the same time, as if coordinated by an invisible conductor.

All up and down the road, similar dramas played out. A mother, passing the bakery, yanked her daughter away from the steps just as another child ran up, as if the two might infect each other with something more than muddy shoes. The bookseller, trying to buy bread for his breakfast, was rebuffed by the baker, who claimed the morning's loaves were "reserved for real customers." The bookseller, flustered, accused her of playing favorites, which led to a long and public argument about whose job was harder, and why some people never had to deal with the chaos that others put up with every single day.

On his bench, Knodalon watched it all. At first, he tried to parse the phenomenon as a puzzle, a logical sequence of cause and effect. But the pattern grew too dense, the ripples too many to follow. Every small annoyance became a point of leverage, every glance a provocation.

He felt the pressure in the town's magic, the way it clamped down on itself like a fist. The Icosagon did not like this. The entire structure was built on the principle of mutual reinforcement, on the idea that even when every person was at cross-purposes, the sum total always bent back toward stability. But now, that calculus was reversed. Every kindness was met with suspicion; every attempt at peacemaking only revealed how deep the wounds had become.

He tried to will it away, to smooth out the turbulence with a surge of his own power, but the coalition god anticipated him, countered every move. He saw now that this was not simple mischief or even the usual bid for attention. This was an existential threat. If the town's unity collapsed, so did the Icosagon. And if that failed, there was no telling what might fill the vacuum.

He rose from the bench, joints crackling with the effort, and let the wind gather at his back. It had a purpose now, not the random spinning of yesterday, but a focused, muscular intent.

He set out for the square, the eye of the storm, and as he walked, the air began to shift. Dust rose from the ground in tiny, swirling eddies, and a low, continuous hum started up at the edge of hearing. Windows closed as he passed, and doors locked themselves, the sound of bolts thrown echoing in the near silence.

He reached the center of the green and stood, letting the storm circle him, studying the shapes it made. For a moment, he thought he saw faces in the dust: angry, pinched, lit by the cold fire of a new intelligence.

He considered what to do next. The town's magic depended on unity. If he could force the people to remember themselves, even for a moment, it might be enough to break the spell.

He stood at the edge of the square, watching as the engine of discord revved itself into a new register. The air in North Pointe, already thick with suspicion and ill will, now pulsed in time to some invisible heart. He saw it in the way people crossed the street to avoid each other, in the sudden silences that filled every shop, in the way the lamps guttered and hissed even though the oil was fresh and the wicks well trimmed.

He gathered the wind in, slow at first, a careful threading of his will into the cracks of the world. He sent it curling around the square, listening for the places where it snagged, where the godling's influence was most entrenched.

It found an easy purchase in the dry goods store. Alred, normally as unshakable as the ledger he balanced every night, now sat at his desk with his hands flat on the wood, staring at the blank page in front of him. The wind lifted the edge of the nearest paper, just enough to

draw Alred's gaze. It nudged the quill in its inkwell, then let it drop, splattering a blot in the center of the page.

Alred frowned, then reached for the quill, but before he could touch it, the wind swept through again, this time flipping to a fresh sheet. The quill rolled in a slow, deliberate circle, then came to rest, its tip pointing directly at the word "Inventory."

He stared at the word, then at the quill, then out the open window, where the wind was still. His mind, logical and orderly, raced through the possibilities, dismissed them, and landed on the only one that fit. He nodded, once, to himself, then stood and began pulling records from the shelves with a speed that bordered on panic.

Knodalon smiled, just a little.

The wind carried next to Calder's fish shop, where the morning catch was already lined up on ice. Calder was at his workbench, knife in hand, but instead of cleaning fish he was staring at the scales, as if waiting for them to reveal a secret. The wind slipped through the cracks in the wall and stirred the air above the bench. The scales, silver and iridescent, lifted in the draft, spun, and settled on the wood in a pattern that looked random—unless you knew what you were looking for.

Calder knew. He studied the arrangement, the way the scales clustered in tight rows, the way the largest ones formed a line that pointed directly to the window facing the storehouse. He sniffed the air, caught the scent of the place where nothing ever spoiled, and understood.

He set the knife down, wiped his hands on his apron, and stepped out into the street.

Knodalon watched both men from the square, feeling their awareness click into place. He could not say it in words, not in any way that would make sense to a mind unaccustomed to the language of wind and chance. But the message was there, encoded in the pressure, the chill, the vibration of the air. It was a call to unity, not a suggestion but a necessity. Stand together, or be swept away.

He let the wind rise, turning it up to a proper gale, not enough to do harm but more than enough to get attention. Shutters banged; signs swung violently on their chains; the loose boards on the bridge to the green clattered as if under siege.

He saw Alred emerge from his shop, clutching a handful of ledgers to his chest. He saw Calder stride up the path from the lakeshore, eyes fixed on the storehouse, every step purposeful.

The wind circled the square once, twice, then settled, waiting for the next move.

Knodalon let himself relax, just a fraction. The message had landed. The first two pieces of the defense were in motion.

He watched as Alred and Calder converged in the center of the green, exchanging a look that was more agreement than greeting. Around them, the rest of the town began to notice. Heads poked out from doors; curtains twitched; the background hum of complaint and suspicion fell away, replaced by a single, focused question:

What now?

Knodalon leaned into the wind, ready for the answer.

It began with a rumor, as all things did. By the time Alred and Calder reached the center of the green, word had already run ahead of them like a child sent to warn of a coming storm. "Town meeting. Now," Calder said to the first cluster of faces he saw, and the command—so rare, so absolute—sent the group scattering in every direction, fetching parents, siblings, the stragglers who'd hidden behind locked doors.

Alred, more methodical, approached the matter like an inventory to be reconciled. He scanned the square, noting who was absent, who lingered at the edge, who looked most in danger of drifting away. "Something's wrong with the town," he said to a knot of travelers near the bakery. "We need everyone here."

The wind helped. Where before it had been a force of division, now it guided the townsfolk in, pressing on their backs, tugging gently at their sleeves. It swept up notes from the ground and dropped them at Alred's feet; it snatched the hat from a dawdling child and sent it rolling straight into Calder's waiting hand.

But the disquiet god was not idle. It fought back with a thousand minor insurrections: Alred's precious ledgers, gathered with such care, exploded from his grasp in a paper blizzard that nearly blinded him. Calder's hands, wet from the morning's gutting, lost grip on a prized trout, which skittered across the green and landed with a splat at the

base of the statue. The inn's porch steps grew inexplicably slick, sending Minnie and her basket of bread into a graceless slide that left crumbs and crusts in her wake.

Yet for every act of sabotage, Knodalon found a counter. He strengthened the wind's resolve, nudging the papers back into Alred's arms before any could blow away for good. He steadied Calder's feet as he scrambled for the fish, let him catch it with the same hands that had, a moment earlier, let it slip. For Minnie, the breeze cushioned her fall, set the bread basket upright, and somehow even managed to keep most of the loaves unbroken.

Within minutes, the square was full. Sam arrived with a tray of mugs—some chipped, some whole, all full and foaming. She made a circuit of the green, doling out the drinks with the efficiency of one who knew how to calm a crowd. Minnie, now upright and flustered, followed with bread and jam, making certain that even the shyest children had something to anchor them to the moment.

Warren came from the forge, sleeves rolled to his elbows and face still dark with coal dust. He carried his hammer—not as a threat, but as a symbol, a reminder that when it mattered, he could be counted on to mend or defend as needed.

Vamir, the bookseller, sheepish from his earlier spat, tucked himself into a corner and waited. The fisherman's daughter, Ivy, returned at Calder's beckoning, her eyes still wet but her hands ready for whatever job might come next.

Knodalon watched as the crowd coalesced, first in nervous knots, then in a tighter, more deliberate circle. He felt the pushback from the coalition god, the way it tested for cracks in the gathering, but the wind around the square grew thicker, sharper, a cordon of solidarity that would not be broken easily.

Alred stepped forward, the ledgers pressed to his chest, and cleared his throat. "There's a sickness in the air," he began. "Not just the usual trouble, but something that wants us apart, wants us at each other's throats. I don't know what it is, but I know we won't beat it by hiding indoors and pretending it's not there."

He looked out over the crowd, met each pair of eyes in turn. "We

need to stand together. Even if it means fighting with ourselves, we have to do it in the open, where everyone can see.”

Calder, always blunt, took the next step. “You all know me. I don’t do speeches. But I know what a rotten net feels like when I see it. This is worse than rot—it’s poison. The only way through is all at once.”

He set the trout down, wiped his hands, and gestured for the others to close the circle. “Let’s get on with it, then.”

The crowd, held by habit and now by fear, inched together. Sam passed the ale; Minnie passed the bread; Warren, unable to speak, simply hefted the hammer and nodded.

Knodalon felt a pulse of pride, strange and foreign in his chest. These were not heroes. They were not built for glory or even for victory. But they were his, and that was enough.

He let the wind die back, just a little, so that the only thing holding the crowd was the will of the people.

For the first time since the discord began, the square was silent, waiting to see what would happen next.

Knodalon took it all in, the faces, the voices, the promise of unity that had been, for a moment, stronger than the thing that wanted them apart.

He braced himself for the next move, certain it would not be gentle. But he was ready.

No more passive observation. These were his people, and he would not fail them.

For one perfect, impossible moment, the green was silent as a held breath. The people of North Pointe, so recently at each other’s throats, stood in a single, uncertain ring, caught between fear and hope. Even the children quieted, sensing that what happened next would matter more than anything that had come before.

It began as a shimmer over the old well at the center of the square. A heat haze, at first, then a twisting plume of color and movement that should not have existed in the world. At its heart, the thing was a swirl of socks—blue and red and yellow, knotted together by static, each one crawling with the tiniest nits of rust. The socks spun faster, weaving in and out of a fog that reeked of burned bread and cold sweat. Warm breezes whipped through the assembly, swirling skirts

and knocking hats askew, but for the first time in living memory, nobody laughed at the sight.

The god of disquiet had found its shape.

It hovered over the well, pulsing, a hollow laugh that echoed without sound. Then it sent out tendrils—ropes of lint and old wool, snaking through the air toward the townsfolk. Where the tendrils touched, they left behind a residue of doubt and old grievance. Sam felt the memory of Minnie's accusation, harsh and fresh as the moment it was spoken. Warren tasted the bitterness of every slight Wilem had ever offered him, each one more cutting than the last. Even Alred, who prided himself on his composure, felt his chest tighten with a secret fear of being exposed, of having his own meticulous failures dragged into the open.

Knodalon saw the effect, and for a single, painful moment, let himself feel the misery behind it. The crowd buckled. Some—Trevor, clutching the basket of bread; the bookseller, white-knuckled and sweating—flinched from the intrusion. Others turned inward, chewing on old betrayals and slights with a bitterness that felt suddenly fresh and earned. The god of disquiet was efficient: it wasted nothing, spun every frayed edge of memory into the binding cord of its own power.

But there was, in the ring of people, an unexpected rigidity—a stubbornness he had underestimated.

It began with Sam, of all people. She stood at the periphery, arms folded, the scar on her face drawn sharp as a knife. For a few seconds, her jaw set, and Knodalon watched as she cycled through anger, then humiliation, then a private, deeper shame. Her gaze flicked to Minnie, still at her side, and something in her expression shifted. The two had spent years in a perpetual cold war over the dividing line between pub and inn—guests poached, casks borrowed, kitchen staff stolen outright. The disquiet god pressed the memory on her: every slight, every rumor spread, every time Minnie had bested her in the market or in the eyes of the townsfolk.

Sam gritted her teeth, looked at Minnie again, and in a voice not quite her own, said, "You always did have a better nose for these things." She forced a crooked smile, and handed Minnie a mug. "Watered or not, it's the best I have. Sorry for last night."

Minnie, caught mid-mutter, blinked as if struck. She accepted the mug, then reached out and squeezed Sam's forearm, just above the scar. "If it comes to it, you'll need someone to watch your back. We'll do it together."

Around the ring, the tension shimmered, then buckled elsewhere. Warren and Wilem, locked in an old enmity over half-forgotten trades and debts, found themselves standing side by side. The god pressed the memory of every lost shipment, every broken promise, into the marrow of their bones. Warren trembled, hands like hams, and for a moment it seemed he might break. Instead, he looked at Wilem, found the man already looking back, and the two began to laugh. Not with mirth, but with the wild, helpless laughter of people who have seen the trap and chosen, just this once, to step around it.

"You know what?" Wilem said, voice shaking, "I'd rather die on my feet next to you, you green bastard, than let that thing have the last word."

Warren clapped him on the back, nearly knocking him over. "I've called you worse," he said, "but never meant it less."

Other pockets in the crowd resisted in their own ways. Alred, confronted with the fear of being exposed, stood up straighter, then, with a muttered curse, held out his ledger for all to see. "If I've made a mistake," he said, "let's count it together."

One by one, the ring of townsfolk tightened, drawing closer to the well at the center. For every ripple of disunity, someone chose—often in pain—to stand with their neighbor. Children clung to their parents, then to each other; old rivals found themselves pressed shoulder to shoulder, and decided it would be better to face the storm as a unit than as prey.

Knodalon, at the edge of the green, felt a jolt of pride, then steeled himself for what he knew was coming.

The god of disquiet, sensing its grip failing, doubled down. The air thickened, sharp with the scent of iron and ozone and the ghost of every meal ever ruined by a word spoken in anger. The socks and lint and rust whirled into a visible cyclone above the well, and the tendrils lashed outward, catching on sleeves, on hair, on the loose fabric of

every soul in the square. It tried, for a last, desperate time, to tear the crowd apart.

But Knodalon was done watching.

He drew himself up. The body he wore was old, bent, and scarred by more years than anyone in the square could name, but now, for the first time since the world had been new, he let the truth of his shape bleed into the present. His shadow stretched, drawing sharp on the grass; his hair, white as the first snows, began to lift in the wind that now rushed toward him from every quarter.

He stepped into the square, and the wind followed, braided tight with intent.

He felt the eyes of the town on him. Even the children stopped, sensing that the rules of the world had changed.

The cyclone at the well shrieked, the socks and lint hardening into the semblance of a face: cruel, mocking, lit from within by the orange spark of pure spite.

Knodalon squared his shoulders and met its gaze.

I am Knodalon, he told it. Once, they called me the Name of the Wind. This town is under my watch.

The god of disquiet, seeing itself recognized, screamed. The cyclone bulged, then split, and from the center came a blast of air so sharp it cut the grass at his feet.

Knodalon did not flinch. He let the wind he'd gathered build, slow at first, then faster, spiraling around his body like the memory of a thousand hurricanes. The socks, the rust, the lint—it was nothing, a child's trick. He'd made mountain ranges from bare dirt; he'd carved river valleys with nothing but breath.

This was not war, not really. This was a reminder.

He let the wind rise to a shriek, then pointed a finger at the thing above the well.

Go, he said, in a voice that was not sound, but pressure and cold and memory itself.

The wind blasted through the square, flattening the grass and setting every sign and shingle rattling on its nail. The cyclone above the well twisted, tried to dig in, but the wind peeled it apart: first the socks, then the lint, then the rust, each element scoured clean and

flung high, into the thin blue where nothing survived but the memory of pain.

It was over in seconds. The silence afterward was deafening.

The crowd stood stunned, caught in the aftershock of the thing they had just seen, or perhaps only imagined.

Knodalon let the wind subside, then turned to face the crowd. He was, suddenly, very tired. But he managed a nod, and then, in a gesture as old as the hills, reached up and smoothed down his hair.

Sam was the first to speak. "Was that—did you—?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes, things get out of hand."

The crowd was silent, then, slowly, began to find itself again. People shuffled, looked at each other, and found that the old hostilities had lost their bite. Alred checked his ledger, then looked up and offered a small, relieved laugh. Warren and Wilem exchanged a wordless nod, then both turned to help Minnie, who had managed to spill her tray again, this time in her excitement.

Sam poured herself a mug, lifted it in a toast, and said, "To stubbornness. May it outlast the world itself."

The crowd murmured agreement, and a few even managed to raise their own glasses.

Knodalon, relieved, made his way back to the bench at the edge of the green. He sat, folded his hands, and let himself rest.

He knew it was only a reprieve. The small gods would return, each in time, each with a new trick. But tonight, the town was safe. For now, that was enough.

He watched as the sun caught the battered planks of the town gate, and thought, for the first time in a long while, that it looked less like a wound and more like a promise.

He closed his eyes and let the wind die away, content to wait for whatever came next.



It took the town the better part of a candlemark to remember how to be itself. First came the awkward silence—nobody quite sure whether to speak, or what to say if they did. Some drifted off in twos and

threes, each pair walking the strange tightrope between suspicion and relief. Others hung back, trying to find a handhold in the new reality.

But soon, the thaw began. A child ran from one side of the green to the other, weaving through the unmoving legs of the crowd, giggling as if nothing had ever happened. The spell was broken. People found their voices. Laughter returned, raw and hesitant, but laughter nonetheless.

In the shadow of the well, Sam and Minnie sat side by side on the lowest rung of the old bucket platform, sharing a cup of cider. "Watered down," Sam said, but she grinned as she drank it. Minnie laughed, a clear bell of a sound, and clinked her own mug against Sam's.

Warren and Wilem, now self-appointed ushers for the shaken, made a game of collecting all the scattered ledgers and crumpled notes from the grass. They found Alred, still staring at his books, and dropped the pile in front of him. "Reckon you'll need these," Wilem said, voice still hoarse from the ordeal. Alred blinked, then managed a wan smile. "They'll be in better order than before, I bet," Warren said, and for once, no one argued.

Calder, once the crowd had dispersed, set to work cleaning the fish that had skittered across the green during the chaos. Ivy, careful to keep her distance but unable to suppress a proud smirk, watched her father with a new kind of awe. Calder, not a man for words, nodded to her, then pointed at the scales she'd already sorted. She beamed, and for a moment the whole world seemed stitched together by the simple act of filleting a trout.

Knodalon watched it all from the bench. He sat, as always, outside the lakeside storehouse, but today the bench felt different beneath him. Where before he had made himself small, an afterthought to the world, now he felt every inch of his frame, every line of age and memory drawn up straight and true. The wind, which had once wandered the town in idle spirals, now patrolled with purpose: testing windows, brushing the dust from thresholds, keeping the horizon clear.

He was still the same old man, still a monument to inertia. But now, he was something else as well.

He let the new shape of the world settle on him. It was heavier, yes, but not unwelcome.

I have chosen sides, he thought, and the truth of it rang out through the wind. After centuries as a watcher—first out of pride, then out of penance—he had joined the ledger of the world. No longer just an observer, but a guardian.

He was not sure how he felt about this. But the decision had been made.

He closed his eyes and listened. The wind, once a squabbling chorus of minor complaints, was now a hum of readiness. There were still petty gods in the world—already, he sensed the god of Mild Hangovers biding its time, and the god of Splinters sharpening its ambitions. But the larger threat was gone, for now. The town was his, and he would not fail it.

A traveler, trudging up the road from the south, paused at the edge of the green. She was nobody Knodalon recognized—a merchant, perhaps, or a messenger. She looked tired, wary, her cloak mended in a dozen places and her boots split along the seams. She hesitated at the boundary of the square, then, as if reassured by the quiet order of the place, continued on.

She caught sight of Knodalon on the bench, and for a moment her expression flickered: uncertainty, then suspicion, then—at last—a tentative smile. She nodded at him as she passed, and he nodded back.

He watched her go. Once, the world would have marked her as a stranger, an intrusion, a possible threat. But today, the town was a net strong enough to catch even the wildest storm.

He found this comforting.

Near noon, Alred and Calder approached the bench, bearing offerings: a mug of ale, cold and clear; a package of bread and fish, still warm from the morning's labor. "Thought you might want a bite," Alred said, setting the parcel beside Knodalon. "On the house," Calder added, his tone gruff but the kindness unmistakable.

"Thank you," Knodalon said, meaning it.

They lingered for a moment, as if searching for the right words, then sat—Alred on the step, Calder on a barrel—forming a quiet triangle of camaraderie.

They did not speak much, but they did not need to. The air was thick with a new kind of silence, one born not of fear, but of peace.

After a while, Alred opened the ledger, scribbled a quick note, and snapped it shut. "It balances," he said, and Knodalon smiled.

Calder took a swig from his own mug, wiped his mouth, and said, "What do you think comes next?"

Knodalon pondered. "Whatever it is, we'll be ready."

They all looked out over the green, at the ordinary miracles of people mending nets, children at play, a pair of lovers pretending not to hold hands under the table at the Claw.

It was not perfection, but it was enough.

The wind, patient and persistent, circled the town and then, satisfied, settled down to wait with them.

Knodalon closed his eyes, not to sleep, but to savor the moment. The horizon was empty. The scales of the world, for now, were in balance.

He let himself believe it would last.

And in the quiet that followed, he thought he heard, just for a second, the laughter of the old gods—wry, approving, and, for once, at peace with the world they had made.

CHAPTER 14

K nodalon watched the world gather itself for evening, the late light lancing the lake in columns of gold that flickered and retreated as clouds advanced across the water. From his bench at the edge of the storehouse, he could see almost the entire town: the patchwork green, the low-roofed shops, the inn's lanterns already testing their glow against the oncoming dusk. The breeze had picked up again—nothing so dramatic as yesterday's confrontation, but enough to stir the hair at his temples, enough to set the reeds swaying along the margin where dirt met water.

For once, the air tasted clean. There was no hint of bitterness, no flavor of the old iron or sock-fuzz or even the faint resin of a brewing grudge. The town, for the moment, was free of major parasites.

He drew a breath, slow and even, and let himself notice the small things. A boy with a stick dragged it behind him on the road, chasing the shadow of a dog that was chasing its own tail. Two girls, arms locked together, circled the bakery, arguing whether the best bread was the one with poppy seeds or the one with the orange rind. On the square, Minnie and Sam arranged tables for a communal supper, the distance between them filled with bread, cider, and the careful, bruised courtesy of people who had decided to try again.

The world was not perfect, but it was holding.

Knodalon's gaze shifted to the small gods that still haunted the place, the ones that had survived the purge. There was the god of errant roots, who lurked in the shadows of the trade road and waited for the hurried or inattentive to trip. A traveling merchant, new to the town, caught her toe on the edge of a root and nearly dropped her load of salt fish. She swore, recovered, and glared back at the ground as if it had personally offended her. The god, invisible to all but the most sensitive, smirked and moved on.

At the gate, the god of awkward goodbyes hovered, a thin, blue shimmer that stretched and elongated every parting. A young couple, neither of whom wanted to be the first to turn away, managed three hugs, a dozen uncertain glances, and a conversation that circled for minutes without ever actually ending. When, at last, they did part, both looked back three times before stepping out of sight. The god, satisfied, blinked itself into the air and drifted to the next target.

And near the cobbler's, the god of forgotten keys perched like a patient crow, waiting for the exact moment when Bartram reached the top step before reminding him of what he'd left on the desk inside. Knodalon watched as the man, satchel in hand, performed the silent dance of pockets, patting his vest, his belt, and then, with a look of crushed disbelief, trudged back down the stairs. The god cackled, then began the process anew for the grocer across the way.

Knodalon felt no particular need to intervene. These were minor deities, more nuisance than menace. Their actions were part of the fabric of the town, and he found he even enjoyed the rhythm they brought—the reminder that perfection, even if attainable, would be a far less interesting condition.

But the god of disquiet was gone, its taint purged from the green and from the hearts of the people. Knodalon traced the perimeter of the square with his mind, searching for any trace, any filament of its essence. There was nothing: not even a hairline fracture in the calm. He let the satisfaction of this settle into his bones.

A shape moved at the edge of his vision: the traveler from the morning, the one with the mended cloak and the uneven gait. She had found a place to sit on the steps of the old shrine, and watched

the green with a hungry, assessing eye. He caught the angle of her shoulders, the way she measured every exit, and made a note to keep her in view. Strangers always carried with them the possibility of disturbance, but they also brought news. He would not have minded either.

The storehouse behind him, as always, was a fortress of stillness. The grains within never shifted, the bins never emptied, and the boards, though weathered, had not bowed an inch in years. The effect was less a spell than a principle; entropy, in this corner of the world, was simply not invited in. The town had credited it to the Icosagon for so long that even Knodalon had started to believe it. But now, having flexed the true shape of his nature, he knew the truth was subtler, stranger, and, in a way, more comforting. The stillness was not imposed; it was earned, maintained by the gentle, ceaseless discipline of his own restraint.

He wondered, sometimes, if the other points of the Icosagon had similar stewards. It would not have surprised him. The old gods had always been partial to symmetry.

He let his thoughts circle back to the bench, to the feeling of wood beneath him and the endless, low susurrus of the lake. He folded his hands, then unfolded them, rolling his shoulders to test the fit of the body he wore. It was a good fit, for all its aches and stutters. It held him to the earth; it reminded him not to let the world slip away entirely.

From the bakery, the smell of yeast and sugar reached him, accompanied by a burst of laughter so pure it startled the birds in the reeds. He watched as Minnie, flushed and panting, brandished a loaf above her head like a trophy. The children gathered around her, open-mouthed, then erupted into a scramble for the bread. There was a joy in the chaos that no god, not even one as old as himself, could have designed.

He let himself enjoy it.

The breeze shifted, a subtle change in pressure that brought with it the first hints of night. As it passed, a single leaf detached from the high branch above his head, tumbled through the air, and came to rest precisely at his feet. Knodalon bent, plucked it up, and turned it

between his fingers. It was yellow at the tip, brown at the base, and inscribed with the fine green lines of its last, unfinished summer.

He set it down on the bench beside him.

A small, private moment, but one that felt like a blessing.

He leaned back, tilted his head, and let the wind run its fingers through his beard. The gesture, unplanned, sent the leaf spinning off the bench and into the current of air, where it danced a slow spiral before vanishing into the dusk.

He watched it go, and for the first time in centuries, did not bother to chase the pattern to its end.

It would land somewhere, eventually.

And so, for now, would he.

He closed his eyes.

It started as a familiar pressure behind his forehead, a pulse just shy of pain. Knodalon let it build, then followed it upward, leaving behind the weight of his limbs, the tight skin and the insistent throb of his joints. His body remained on the bench—eyes half-lidded, mouth slightly parted, hands loose at his sides. But his awareness lifted free, catching the wind like a kite cut loose from its tether.

He ascended.

Not in space, but in domain: up through the mesh of expectation and ritual that defined the town, up through the tangled thicket of history and memory, up until the noise of the mortal world faded to a single, persistent note. Above him, the sky went from blue to black to a silver so bright it felt like being pressed flat between glass. The town vanished, but the pattern of its existence—the twenty-pointed net, the tension of the Icosagon—remained. The higher he rose, the clearer it became: a geometer's dream, all crisp edges and invisible forces, humming with the potential of being either shattered or made perfect.

Here, in the rarefied air where only the oldest gods dared visit, Knodalon paused.

The realm of greater gods was not a place so much as a collision of intentions. He felt them more than saw them—great minds arrayed like planets, their orbits eccentric, each a sun to its own system of vassals and principles. Most were dormant, their attention fixed on projects that would outlast empires. A few, the truly old ones, simply

lay back and let the wind of time erode their edges, content to let the lesser gods do the squabbling.

He drifted, searching for the one mind among them that had ever made sense to him. It took only a moment. Nimarith's signature was unmistakable: a curl of cold logic, threaded through with the stubborn, heavy gravity of a mountain range. He found the other god at the edge of perception, reclining in a fold of spacetime that tasted like old snow and the memory of granite. Knodalon approached, careful as always, and allowed his own presence to resolve into focus.

Nimarith looked exactly as he remembered: hunched, irascible, with a face made of mountain shadow and a voice that broke every few syllables, as if the stone of it were always in the act of crumbling.

"You took your time," said Nimarith, his tone an avalanche waiting for an excuse.

"I was busy," Knodalon replied. "The world won't run itself, apparently."

Nimarith's laugh was a landslide—short, ugly, and as satisfying as a rock through glass. "They never do, these worlds. Leave them alone for a thousand years, and everything sags."

"I thought you liked it that way. Forces us to intervene."

"I don't have to like it," said the mountain god, "but I can admire the craftsmanship. North Pointe is holding, by the way. Almost lost a spoke, but you patched it. How did that feel?"

Knodalon shrugged, though the gesture here was more a ripple of identity than a movement of muscle. "Different. It's easier to blame entropy than to correct it."

Nimarith snorted, sending a fine mist of conceptual debris into the void. "You were always lazy. Even when you were worshipped, you'd rather be invoked by accident than on purpose."

"The world is full of accidents," Knodalon said. "And most prayers are a waste of air."

They regarded each other for a moment, measuring the distance between them. The silence was not awkward; it was heavy, full of everything they both remembered and had no need to say.

Knodalon broke it first. "Why call me up here? I was enjoying retirement."

"You're not retired," Nimarith said, and there was a sliver of fondness in the chisel of his voice. "You just think you are. That's your problem. It always has been."

Knodalon waited.

"The Icosagon," said Nimarith. "Do you know how old it is?"

"Old enough that nobody in the valley can trace it."

"Older," the mountain god said. "Predates my own tenure. I didn't set it up, just took over the management after the old race vanished. The Mistral, you remember them?"

"Not fondly."

"They built the system as a failsafe. It was meant to trap the world's entropy, keep things in order while they worked out the bigger problems. But it's a leaky machine, and now it's all that keeps the valley from fraying into dust. I watched it for a thousand years. Then I found North Pointe."

Knodalon let the name echo. "So the town is a patch."

"A living patch," Nimarith said. "I made it interesting. Layered gifts on it, made each shop a locus of defense. Stole your idea, by the way—the winds off the lake? That's your signature, not mine."

"You always did steal from the best."

Nimarith smiled, a crack opening in a cliff face. "The thing is, it's not enough. The old entropy, it keeps pushing. The gods below, the ones in the cracks, they keep finding ways in. Even now, the best you can do is delay them."

"Which is why you called me here," Knodalon said, more statement than question.

"Yes. I need you to stop watching. I need you to act."

Knodalon considered this. "Why not do it yourself?"

Nimarith looked away, out into the silver, where memories of mountains stretched forever. "I'm not long for this world, Wind. My peaks are eroding. The worship's gone, and the lesser gods are growing clever. I could hold it for a century, maybe two. But after that—"

"You want me to inherit."

Nimarith shook his head, the motion fracturing into a thousand microquakes. "No. I want you to innovate. I've kept the valley alive

with tricks and games and cycles, but you—you can change things. Your kind always did.”

The idea was appalling, but Knodalon let it turn over in his mind. “You mean, interfere?”

Nimarith’s eyes were caverns, lit by the last light of a buried sun. “I mean, build something better. It’s what you’re for.”

Knodalon looked down, saw the fractal pattern of the Icosagon projected beneath him, a snowflake made of glass and razor wire, humming with unresolved tension. It wanted to be solved. It needed someone to care enough to force a solution.

He looked up, met Nimarith’s gaze. “Anything else?”

The mountain god hesitated, then reached into the core of himself and pulled out a shard of pure meaning. “You’re entitled to a gift as well,” he said. “Though you’ll have to work harder than most to discover it. The Mistral left their defenses buried deep. Even I never got past the first lock.”

He offered the shard, and Knodalon took it.

It was cold, and sharp, and heavy as a promise.

Nimarith slumped, the motion barely perceptible, but for a god, it was as good as weeping.

“Don’t waste it,” he said, then faded back into the fold of the world, his presence dissolving into a memory of frost.

Knodalon lingered. He let the winds of the higher realm buffet him, strip away the last remnants of hesitation. He could feel the pressure below, the petty gods already testing the seams of the Icosagon, the old entropy setting its hooks in the town. But he also felt the possibility, the space for something new.

He focused on the shard in his hand.

It was a key, of sorts. Not to a door, but to an idea: a way through the problem, a method for escaping the old traps.

He didn’t know what it would mean for the town, or for himself. But he did know that he would no longer be content to sit on the bench and watch the world rot by inches.

He turned his attention downward, to the waiting body, and felt himself fall, gathering speed and clarity as he plummeted back to earth.

The last thing he heard before the world returned was Nimarith's voice, softer than he'd ever heard it:

"The builders left more than one surprise beneath the dirt. Perhaps you'll find them useful, now that you've decided to stop merely watching."

Then the silence closed over him, and the air below was full of the promise of a thousand unfinished stories, each one waiting for a hand to guide it.

He braced himself, and let the future arrive.

The first sensation was cold.

Not the pleasant, crisp kind that prickled the skin and sharpened the mind, but a damp, marrow-deep chill that turned bones to glass and left teeth on the verge of chattering. Knodalon blinked, expecting to find the bench still beneath him, the reed-choked margin of the lake, the lamps of the green flickering to life one by one. But when his eyes opened, the world was different.

Above the town, the sky had changed. Gone were the delicate golds and blues of twilight. Instead, the horizon was a roil of cloud, the high-altitude kind that moved with the certainty of an invading army. The wind that ran across the water no longer carried the scent of yeast and sugar; it reeked now of iron, sweat, and the acrid aftertaste of hope spent all at once.

At first, Knodalon thought this was a trick of the transition—some artifact of his rapid descent from the higher realm, a fog of perception that would burn off once he was fully settled back into himself. But as he took inventory of his senses, he realized the change was real.

North Pointe was no longer quiet.

Down the road, at the far end of the green, a company of mercenaries advanced in column. They moved with the dogged energy of men who had marched for sennights and expected to march for fortnights more, each step pounding dust into the hollows between the cobbles. Their banners, too bright for the somber sky, snapped and writhed in the wind: gold and red, a hydra's head bisected by the

black line of a sword, the cloth flecked with the road's filth. Armor rattled, boots thudded, and the air filled with the collective exhale of a hundred men and women who had decided to suspend their own disbelief, at least until the next payday.

At their head, a captain rode with the loose, perilous ease of a man who had long ago stopped believing in accidents. He scanned the town with eyes that missed nothing, a smile lurking under his mustache that said he'd already found the three most dangerous people on the green and had filed them away for later. The company moved around him like a body around a spine; nobody needed to be told where to go or what to do. They had done this before.

As they entered the square, Knodalon felt the town's attention fix on them, every window suddenly occupied, every shopkeeper inventing reasons to be near the front of their premises. The air was tight with anticipation: the mercenaries might bring commerce, or trouble, or both. Either way, the equilibrium of the day had been shattered.

But Knodalon was less interested in the mortals than in what trailed behind them.

He saw it immediately—a ripple in the world, a wake of small gods drawn to the chaos like scavengers to a feast. Where before the town had played host to a handful of petty deities, now it swarmed with them. They darted through the air like minnows, each trailing a thin filament of purpose.

He cataloged them:

A god of rusty hinges, which had already affixed itself to the entrance of the Weary Head, intent on rendering every door in the place a musical instrument tuned to the key of complaint.

A god of misplaced underclothes, sly and predatory, prowling the alleys behind the inn and eyeing the laundry lines with a hunger bordering on lechery.

A god of stubbed toes, which bounced along the cobbles in sync with the footsteps of the new arrivals, each bounce calibrated for maximum impact and minimum sympathy.

A god of overcooked eggs, a god of broken shoelaces, a god of sudden but inconsequential nosebleeds.

They came in flocks, their territories overlapping, their ambitions modest but relentless.

And at their center, orchestrating the invasion, was the god of repressed fleas.

It had returned, stronger and less subtle than before. Where once it had contented itself with the odd yelp or frantic scratch, now it moved among the others like a seasoned conductor, coaching, chastising, inspiring. Knodalon could hear its voice, pitched just below the range of mortal hearing, egging its kin on:

“Observe, fledglings. The humans respond best to minor irritations. Don’t waste time with the grand gesture—make it small, make it constant. Make them notice you, but not enough to truly fight back.”

It was an expert, Knodalon realized. And it was teaching its own replacements.

He felt a flicker of professional pride, followed by a surge of annoyance.

Already, the impact was evident. In the space of minutes, the rhythm of the town had shifted from wary optimism to barely suppressed crisis. The god of rusty hinges announced itself with a chorus of shrieks every time a door was opened or shut; within half an ‘mark, the innkeeper threatened to nail the doors open and let the whole world in, just to avoid hearing another note. The god of misplaced underclothes struck with a vengeance, leaving the laundry lines in chaos, their contents redistributed according to a logic known only to deities and very small children. The god of stubbed toes made its mark by doubling the rate of accidents on the trade road, sending three travelers sprawling within the space of a single conversation.

Worse, the minor gods were learning from one another.

He watched as the god of overcooked eggs, initially a passive presence in the kitchens, began to collaborate with the god of sudden nosebleeds, timing its appearances so that a cook, distracted by a drip, would ruin an entire pan. The god of broken shoelaces coordinated with the god of stubbed toes to bring a young messenger to literal tears, forcing her to limp her way up the hill and deliver her message while clutching both her foot and her pride.

The town’s defenses—both magical and mundane—were not

equipped to handle this kind of coordinated attack. The Icosagon had always been designed to resist the large-scale, the dramatic, the existential. It had no answer to the relentless pecking of a thousand small beaks.

Knodalon straightened on his bench, feeling the old, electric itch of responsibility.

He did not want to play the hero. He never had. But the sight of the petty gods swarming the town, setting up their alliances and hierarchies, was enough to make his hands twitch.

The god of repressed fleas, sensing his attention, turned to face him. Its form was a shimmer in the air, more suggestion than substance, but its eyes—hundreds of them, all glinting with the malice of a well-honed grudge—locked onto his.

So, it said, its voice a tickle in his left ear, the lord of the bench returns.

Knodalon ignored the bait. "You're organizing now?"

We're evolving, the god said, and if a ripple of pride could curdle milk, this one would have. The world isn't ruled by the great and terrible anymore. It's ruled by the persistent. By the clever. By the small, sharp things that slip through every crack.

"You'll drive them mad," Knodalon said.

That's the plan.

"And when they notice you? Really notice?"

The god's laughter was a spray of static. *Then we will have won. They'll never go back to being untroubled. They'll remember us in every itch, every misplaced key, every ruined sock.*

Knodalon considered this. It was, in its own way, a kind of immortality.

He stood, smoothing the wrinkles from his coat, and let his own presence expand, just enough to command the attention of every small god in range. It worked; in an instant, the air above the square went silent, every shimmer and twitch stilled by the memory of what real divinity felt like.

He addressed them all at once. "You want to persist? Fine. But you'll do it my way."

He let the wind rise, slow and patient. It moved through the town like a rumor, lifting the petty gods off their perches, spinning them in

gentle circles, then setting them down in new, more interesting configurations. The god of stubbed toes found itself next to the god of patched boots; the god of broken shoelaces was paired with the god of clever knots. Each partnership was a balance, a check and a counterweight.

The god of repressed fleas tried to resist, but Knodalon's wind was inexorable. It plucked the god from the air, spun it once, then deposited it on the windowsill of the inn, where it found itself eye to eye with the god of warm blankets and the god of unscratchable itches. For a moment, they regarded each other as equals, and in that moment, Knodalon saw the possibility of truce.

He released the wind, let the world settle, and surveyed the results.

The town was still chaotic, but now the chaos was cyclical, rhythmic. Each nuisance came with its own antidote: for every rusty hinge, a fresh coat of oil; for every lost sock, a perfectly matched pair waiting on the other end of the line. The gods squabbled, but in their squabbling, they found purpose.

He felt the equilibrium return. Not the old, fragile peace, but a new, lively tension.

The company of mercenaries, oblivious to the metaphysical upheaval, had finished their business in the square and were already packing up. Their captain lingered, exchanging a few words with the barkeep, then mounted his horse and signaled the column forward. The banners snapped in the wind, and the company moved on, taking with them their own special flavor of trouble.

As the dust settled, Knodalon returned to his bench, satisfied.

The world would never be free of minor gods. But he could teach them to play by better rules.

He settled in, hands folded, eyes on the horizon.

The air was full of new stories.

And somewhere above, in the spaces between thought and thunder, the old mountain god smiled.

CHAPTER 15

For a sennight, the town held its strange new shape.

Knodalon watched from his usual bench, the hard seat gradually remembering the contours of his body as days passed, each one a careful reiteration of the last. The memory of the storm, the whirlwind of socks and rust and resentment, faded with a speed that would have impressed even the most fickle of North Pointe's inhabitants. In its place came a tenuous calm, punctuated by only the usual number of accidents and annoyances—no more than a town of this size and history could expect, and perhaps less than it deserved.

The mercenary company, their contract calling, lingered just long enough to empty the cellars, swap a few lies about their heroics, and teach the local children several new words not previously recorded in the town's ledgers. They left at dawn, their banners snapping one last time in the breeze, the line of their march precise and unhurried. By the end of the day, there was no trace they had ever been there, save for a slightly higher concentration of shoe prints in the softer earth near the green, and the residual tang of yeast and sweat in the Weary Head.

In their wake came the next wave—a different breed of trouble entirely.

The town called them the glory-chasers, though Knodalon thought it a poor term. They lacked the discipline of true mercenaries, the self-possession of professional soldiers, even the camaraderie of honest thieves. These were men and women (and more than a few barely-shaven boys) who believed that legend would find them if only they walked into enough trouble with their eyes wide and their swords loose. They arrived singly, or in ragged pairs, faces already hungry for the next story, the next wound. Their packs were lighter, their manners rougher, and their capacity for disruption nearly infinite.

They brought with them their own suite of minor gods.

Knodalon recognized the signatures at once. Where the mercenaries had suffered under the tyranny of flea and hinge and stale bread, the new arrivals cultivated a different breed of adversary. He watched as the god of misplaced keys established itself in the first candlemark, insinuating its presence into every lock and latch in town. Knodalon saw it at work in the Weary Head, where a fallow, jittery swordsman spent a full morning searching for the key to his trunk, only to discover it had, impossibly, migrated to the inside of the locked box itself. At the dry goods shop, the god left Alred blinking in disbelief when the keys to his storeroom vanished between one inventory and the next, then reappeared three days later, sewn into the hem of a traveling merchant's cloak. No malice in it—just a profound, almost artistic disregard for logic.

Next came the god of slightly-too-tight boots, a minor demon with the soul of a cobbler and the ethics of a loan shark. It specialized in discomfort, and its reign began with a single, piercing shriek from the main road: a young adventurer, up from the coast, hobbling on feet already blistered raw. The god was a subtle one, never tightening both boots at once, never enough to draw blood. But it ensured that every stride was a reminder of its presence, every sit-down an agony, every removal a symphony of relief and despair.

The god of burnt toast edges was a quick learner, adapting immediately to the tempo of the inns and the bakery. By its second morning, it had synchronized itself with the flow of breakfast in town: a crisp

ring of black on every slice, just enough to embitter the first bite and darken the mood for a candlemark after. Minnie, who prided herself on a perfect crust, fought valiantly—she adjusted her oven, trimmed her loaves, even tried slicing from the middle instead of the end. Nothing worked. By mid-sennight she had resigned herself to the new regime, and merely shrugged when customers scraped their plates and grumbled about the flavor of the day.

There was also the god of itchy clothing, a modernist among gods, which achieved its apotheosis by waiting until its victims were in the midst of a crowd—ideally in the market, or during the evening's storytelling at the Claw—before unleashing a sudden, blinding need to scratch at the nape of the neck. The afflicted would contort and grimace, clawing at their collars, tearing off layers of scarf or jerkin in a desperate, doomed attempt at relief. Knodalon found it both cruel and ingenious: the mortification was worse than the itch, which always faded the moment you were alone.

For a few days, these gods operated as individuals. Their domains never overlapped, and each took a pride in its unique stamp of misery. But then something changed. Perhaps it was the competitive nature of the glory-chasers, or perhaps the gods themselves had grown bored of working alone. Regardless, the first coalitions began to form before the end of the sennight.

Knodalon felt it, more than saw it: a shift in the wind, a new density in the air around the green. The god of misplaced keys, perhaps seeking companionship or simply new terrain, began to collaborate with the god of lost socks, now resurgent among the new arrivals. Together, they created a phenomenon of unprecedented annoyance: travelers who managed, against all odds, to lose both shoes and the key to their pack in the space of a single night. There was a perverse beauty in it—two gods who, separately, could only inconvenience, but together, could entirely immobilize a victim for days.

The god of burnt toast edges and the god of slightly-too-tight boots followed suit, merging their domains into a composite entity Knodalon privately labeled the god of minor morning irritations. Its handiwork was exquisite: breakfasts ruined by char, followed by a day

spent limping on swollen feet, culminating in the evening's embarrassment when, just as you rose to share a tale or toast a victory, your clothing erupted in a frenzy of phantom itches.

Knodalon watched all this from his bench, hands folded, face impassive. But inside, he seethed.

It was not the mischief that bothered him. If anything, he found it reassuring—a return to the old ways, the natural order of things. But the alliances made him nervous. Minor gods were supposed to be solitary, competitive, fiercely jealous of their own turf. Coalition meant evolution, and evolution meant the end of predictability. It was the kind of behavior that, if left unchecked, could eventually scale up to something more dangerous. He had seen it before, in older worlds. The results were never pretty.

On the seventh day, the Icosagon vibrated at the edge of his perception—not with the warning throb of imminent disaster, but with a higher, more insidious note: the sound of the rules being rewritten, just slightly, beneath his feet.

Knodalon considered his options.

He could ignore it. The town would endure. The shopkeepers and the innkeepers and the children would find a way, as they always did. But the itch in his mind would not go away: the certainty that, left to their own devices, the minor gods would one day outgrow their current hosts and start looking for something bigger, or meaner, or less tolerant of the old bargains.

Or he could intervene, as Nimarith had asked him to do. Not with storms or the open flexing of his will, but with the careful, patient administration of rules.

He mulled it over as he watched a trio of adventurers—two women and a man, all three limping—argue over whose turn it was to retrieve the lost key from the bakery's privy, where the god of misplaced keys had chosen to retire for the afternoon. He watched as Minnie, hearing the commotion, appeared with a broom and a loaf of day-old bread, offering both in equal parts help and threat. The three, recognizing defeat, accepted her terms, and within minutes the key was recovered, the boots were back on, and all three headed for the market, already bickering over the best route.

It would not end, Knodalon thought. It would only multiply.

He sighed, let the wind off the lake dry the sweat on his forehead, and made his decision.

The petty gods could stay. They could scheme, and jockey, and even form alliances if it pleased them. But they would do it by his rules, or not at all.

He closed his eyes, summoned the memory of the old names, and sent a ripple through the air—not the kind that toppled trees or summoned rain, but the kind that whispered in the spaces between breaths, in the shadow of a thought.

You may dwell here, he told the minor gods, but only as guests.

You may vex, but not destroy.

You may irritate, but you may not escalate.

And if you dare coalition again, you will do so in the open, with my witness and my word as law.

He let the message hang, sharp as the first frost, and waited to see if the small gods would listen.

I will suggest, he added almost as an afterthought, you reinvent yourselves as allies. The gods of things found, not lost. The gods of things done well, not poorly. Gods of comfort, not irritation.

Think upon it.

For a long time, the town was very still.

Then, from the cobbles near the green, he heard it: the unmistakable, world-weary sigh of the god of slightly-too-tight boots, followed by the nervous titter of the god of lost socks. There was a shuffling, a rearrangement of priorities, and then, one by one, the minor gods retreated to their stations.

Balance restored, at least for a day.

Knodalon opened his eyes. The sun had dipped below the first rise of the Mistral, casting long, blue shadows over the town. The air smelled of bread and the promise of rain.

He let himself smile, just a little, and folded his hands on his lap, content for the moment to be the watcher again.

Tomorrow, there would be new problems. But tonight, the world was—if not at peace—then at least at rest.

That, for now, was enough.

The morning brought a kind of uneasy truce. The gods, having spent the night digesting Knodalon's edict, made their choices accordingly.

Some of them adapted instantly. It was not, Knodalon reflected, entirely surprising; the most successful minor gods were the ones who could reinvent themselves on demand. By sunrise, the god of found socks was already at work, operating out of the narrow alleys and hedges that lined the town's northern edge. Children who had wept themselves to sleep over a missing boot or a favorite mitten awoke to find their possessions neatly lined up at the foot of their beds, or in some cases tucked under their pillows with a sense of ceremony. The parents, less credulous, suspected a trick, but when the pattern repeated day after day, they accepted it as a new law of nature.

Similarly, the god of untarnished metal made its debut in the smithy. Where Warren's hammers and tongs had once acquired a layer of orange fuzz within moments, now the tools gleamed, each one polished as if by invisible hand. Warren, suspicious of the sudden improvement, took to testing the effect by leaving tools out in the rain or submerging them in barrels of brine. The next morning, the implements would be as bright as ever, and eventually he was forced to admit—grudgingly—that some power in the town had decided to be helpful.

Even the god of returned spoons, a recent transplant from the market towns further south, found its niche. It specialized in reuniting stolen or misplaced cutlery with its rightful owner, and within days, the Weary Head's motley collection of eating implements was restored to near-perfection. Minnie, who had lost more spoons to sticky-fingered guests than she could count, was so moved by the phenomenon that she set up a shrine in the form of a bent, pewter teaspoon nailed to the wall near the hearth. The travelers found it hilarious, but the regulars understood: in a world governed by tiny gods, sometimes you had to show a little gratitude.

But for every god that played by the rules, there were two that refused.

By mid-morning, the coalitions began to escalate. The god of

mislaid keys, which had previously limited itself to swapping the contents of pockets and packs, joined forces with the god of mysterious drafts. The result was chaos: every time someone set down a key, a sudden gust would send it spinning under a table, or out an open window, or into a completely different building. At first, the townsfolk were amused—Wilem at the smithy even started timing himself, turning the search into a contest with his apprentice. But by the third day, the novelty wore off, replaced by a simmering rage that threatened to boil over at the slightest provocation.

The god of itchy clothing, sensing an opportunity, merged with the god of ill-timed sneezes. The combination was devastating. Just as a merchant reached for a handshake, or a baker leaned in to inspect a loaf, the victim would be struck by an irresistible need to scratch, followed immediately by a sneeze that scattered flour, soot, or, in one memorable incident, a mouthful of pickled fish across a crowded room. The effect was humiliating, and the damage cumulative: reputations frayed, patience wore thin, and the old grievances—so recently put to bed—began to stir once more.

Worse, the new arrivals took it as a challenge. Where the townsfolk had learned to accommodate the whims of their local gods, the glory-chasers and wanderers viewed each inconvenience as a puzzle to be solved, or a rival to be bested. They countered the gods' tricks with their own strategies: hiding keys in secret pockets, pinning clothing tags flat with safety pins, even coating the edges of their boots in tallow to keep them from tightening overnight. It worked for a time, but the gods adapted just as quickly, and soon the game became an arms race of sabotage and escalation.

Knodalon tracked the progression with a growing sense of dread. Each new coalition of gods brought with it a sharper edge, a more creative form of sabotage. It was not simply that the gods were clever; it was that they seemed to be learning from their failures, iterating on each attempt until the outcome was optimal, or at least maximally disruptive.

He felt the Icosagon tremble. Not the dull, background hum of ordinary trouble, but a high-pitched vibration, the kind that set the teeth on edge and made the hairs along his forearms stand up. The

system was under strain, and the gods—those that could feel it—were drawn to the tension like moths to a lamp.

He watched as the god of minor morning irritations made its first public appearance in the bakery. Makota was preparing the dough when, in the space of a single minute, her toast caught fire, her shoe came untied, and a rogue fleck of flour landed directly in her left eye. She cursed, wiped her face, and tried to soldier on, but the gods were relentless. Within the 'mark, the entire bakery staff was infected: a sneeze here, a cramp there, and a series of escalating mishaps that ended with a tray of hot rolls dropped squarely onto the tiled floor.

Customers waiting for their orders tried to stifle their laughter, but the effect was contagious—soon, half the line was sneezing, and the other half was scratching at collars and sleeves with an intensity usually reserved for infestations of lice. The bakery was forced to close for a candlemark while Makota and her family recovered, and by the time it reopened, the only thing on offer was yesterday's bread and a handful of cookies with the consistency of river rocks.

At the Broken Claw and Weary Head, things were little better. Sam, never one to let a minor god disrupt her evening, had developed a counter-offensive: she started serving drinks in odd-sized glasses, each with its own unique flaw or quirk. The regulars caught on immediately; they found the game amusing, and quickly learned to identify their drinks by weight, color, or the distinctive chip in the rim. But the travelers—already off-balance from the town's other peculiarities—were less amused. They grumbled, muttered darkly about sabotage, and in one case accused Sam of witchcraft to her face.

She responded with her trademark deadpan: "If I were a witch, you'd be drinking hemlock, not ale." The remark, delivered with just enough menace to be plausible, kept most of the complaints at bay. But Knodalon saw the truth: the gods were winning, at least for now.

The pressure built over the next two days. Alred's ledgers, once a model of perfection, devolved into chaos; the numbers refused to add up, and even when he wrote them in ink, the sums would morph overnight, as if the paper itself had chosen to conspire against him. He confronted Knodalon on the second day, eyes wild, voice barely above a whisper.

"It's not just the keys, you know," Alred said. "It's the math. The math is lying to me."

Knodalon nodded. "I know. I'm working on it."

Alred looked unconvinced, but lacked the energy to press the point. He shuffled away, muttering to himself and casting suspicious glances at every passing breeze.

In the smithy, Warren was forced to abandon all but the most basic repairs. The god of untarnished metal had apparently developed a feud with the god of hairline fractures, and every attempt at forging a new blade or mending an old one ended in frustration: a crack, a chip, a flaw so small it defied explanation. Warren raged at the air, bellowing threats and promises, but the gods paid him no mind.

Even the children, usually immune to the subtler forms of divine mischief, were afflicted. The god of lost marbles, dormant for years, reawakened with a vengeance, stealing not just marbles but anything small and precious: buttons, beads, even the tiny seeds used in the springtime games on the green. The older children tried to fight back—one clever girl trained her pet mouse to fetch lost items from impossible hiding places—but it was a losing battle. The gods were always one step ahead.

From his bench, Knodalon monitored the situation. Every few bells, he sent out a pulse of intent—a nudge, a warning, a reminder that he was watching. The good gods, those who had adapted to the new order, responded instantly, redoubling their efforts to help. The god of found socks staged a dramatic return of a lost mitten, presenting it with the flourish of a conjurer. The god of untarnished metal left a perfectly polished horseshoe at the foot of the town's shrine, where it was quickly snapped up by a superstitious traveler. Even the god of returned spoons managed to engineer a public reunion between a beloved soup ladle and its long-grieving owner, a moment so moving that it reduced the woman to tears.

But the troublemakers were less pliable.

They responded to pressure with counter-pressure, evolving their tactics, merging into larger and more chaotic coalitions. The god of misplaced keys absorbed the god of stuck drawers, which in turn formed an alliance with the god of stubborn jars. By the third day, it

was almost impossible to open a container in North Pointe without a struggle, and the sound of cursing echoed through the alleys from dawn till dusk.

The Icosagon, straining under the weight of so many minor calamities, began to pulse at the edge of Knodalon's perception. He could see it now, not just as a pattern in the world, but as a physical presence: a flicker of geometry in the air above the green, a series of shifting lines and angles that threatened to snap with every new act of mischief. He knew the warning signs. If it broke, the town would not collapse all at once, but it would unravel—slowly at first, then with a momentum that no power on earth could halt.

He considered intervention, true intervention. The kind that left a mark, the kind that rewrote the rules for generations. But that was not his way, and besides, Nimarith had asked for something better. Something lasting.

He waited.

The town, battered and bruised, endured.

There was a day of reprieve, just before the breaking point. A calm, an absence of malice, a stillness so profound it seemed almost orchestrated. Knodalon knew what it meant: the gods were gathering, consolidating, preparing for a final move. He braced himself, marshalling his own power, but remained on the bench, still and silent, determined to let the world show its hand first.

The first sign was a ripple in the wind, followed by a sudden, collective sneeze from the assembled townsfolk on the green. The second sign was a rain of laundry, every item perfectly dry and folded, descending from the sky with the grace of falling leaves. The third was the arrival of the god of synchronized inconvenience, a new entity born of the old coalitions, which managed in a single instant to lock every door in town, jam every window, and entangle every shoelace within a three-block radius.

The effect was total. For a full minute, nobody in North Pointe could move, speak, or even breathe without encountering resistance. The town stood frozen, caught in the crossfire of dozens of petty deities, each vying for dominance.

Knodalon smiled, just a little. This, he thought, was their last stand.

He stood up, dusted off his coat, and prepared to make his move.

The Icosagon hummed in anticipation.

The gods waited.

And the world, balanced on the knife-edge between chaos and order, dared him to act.

The first tremor was so faint it might have been nothing—a trick of memory, a misfire of the nerves. But Knodalon felt it, deep in the struts and wires of the Icosagon, and knew the time had come.

He stood up.

It was an unremarkable thing, the rising of an old man from his bench. His coat crackled with dust; his knees creaked with the memory of too many winters. But as he straightened, the air around him shifted—slowly at first, like a pond remembering the shape of a pebble, then with an urgency that rippled out in every direction. The minor gods felt it instantly; so did the children playing in the dirt by the well, and the merchant counting coins at the edge of the square, and Sam, who paused mid-pour to stare out the window with a foreboding she could not name.

Knodalon walked.

He made no effort to disguise the purpose in his step. The path to the green was well-worn, every cobble memorized by years of passing feet. As he crossed the threshold from storehouse to square, the wind met him—at first as a greeting, then as a supplicant, the reeds on the lake bowing low and the flags at the bakery snapping to rigid attention.

He did not hurry. The minor gods, caught by his movement, froze in place. The god of ill-timed sneezes, halfway through a bout of mischief, let its host linger at the edge of a tickle, unable to complete the act. The god of stuck drawers and the god of misplaced keys, having just set their latest trap, hovered by the town hall door and watched with a kind of helpless fascination. Even the children, immune to most forms of cosmic consequence, sensed the change and drew together in a silent, self-protective cluster.

In the center of the green, Knodalon stopped.

He raised his arms—not in anger, not in threat, but as a parent might, calling a room to order. The sleeves of his coat flapped once,

twice, then settled. Around him, the pressure built, the wind twisting in lazy circles, brushing dust from the stones and lifting stray hair from every scalp within a dozen yards.

The gods watched. So did the people.

He did not speak. He did not need to. Instead, he drew in a breath, held it until the world seemed to shrink to the point of his focus, and then exhaled.

The wind came.

It started as a ring—a slow, patient circling, tugging at cuffs and collars and the frayed edge of the world. Then it thickened, condensed, until the center of the green was a vortex of dust and light, swirling at waist height and gathering speed with every heartbeat. The children gasped, the merchants fell back, and even the most oblivious travelers found themselves pinned to the margins, their eyes wide with the kind of awe that cannot be faked.

Within the vortex, the minor gods tumbled.

They had no true bodies, no shapes to the human eye, but to Knodalon they were as distinct as faces in a crowd: the god of burnt toast edges, the god of stuck jars, the god of itchy clothing tags—all of them caught in the spiral, protesting in a language of static and interference. The vortex spun faster, and with it, the collective mischief of a thousand petty deities was flung into the open, visible for the first time as a froth of bad intentions and desperate self-preservation.

Knodalon waited, letting the storm build until the gods understood—really understood—that resistance was useless.

Then, gently, he brought his hands together.

The vortex snapped tight, condensing into a column of air shot through with sparks and flashes of impossible color. At its heart, the minor gods squabbled and pleaded, trying in vain to merge into a single force, but Knodalon's will was absolute. He separated them, strand by strand, pulling the coalitions apart with the care of a craftsman unweaving a tapestry gone to rot.

The crowd watched in silence.

For the first time, Knodalon let his voice carry—not with sound, but with the pressure and presence that was his alone. It filled the green, vibrating in the bones of everyone present.

I am Knodalon, he said, and his name echoed in every head, human or otherwise.

Once, they called me the Name of the Wind. You are guests here, not rulers. I remind you again, this place is under my watch.

The minor gods shrank back, their collective pride reduced to a quiver of static. Some tried to flee, but the vortex held them fast; others attempted new alliances, hoping for safety in numbers, but each attempt was met with the cold, inexorable pressure of Knodalon's intent.

He scanned the column, searching for the source of the trouble—the one god clever enough to have orchestrated the coalitions, but reckless enough to have believed it could win. He found it near the top: the god of repressed fleas, smug in its old wounds, stubborn as only a survivor can be.

He reached out, caught it in the net of his attention, and brought it forward.

You may persist, he told it, but only in the forms I allow. Your time as a tyrant is over.

He released it, and the god of repressed fleas, chastened but unbroken, dissolved into the breeze, taking with it the memory of its brief reign.

One by one, he addressed the rest.

To the god of burnt toast edges: *There is beauty in char, if you do it right. Take pride in your work.*

To the god of stuck jars: *Every seal must break, eventually. Do not make your task pointless.*

To the god of lost socks: *Find something worth losing, and lose it only once.*

Each god, thus admonished, found itself diminished but also, in a way, relieved. The pressure of the coalition fell away, and the minor gods resumed their solitary orbits, each now on notice that the rules had changed, and that enforcement would be both swift and merciless.

The vortex slowed, then stopped. The air cleared. The dust settled.

Knodalon lowered his arms.

He looked out over the green, saw the faces—awed, frightened, a few already trying to reshape the story for later retelling. He saw the

gods, now quieter, each returning to its proper domain. He saw the Icosagon, no longer trembling, but holding itself together with a steadiness that promised at least another season of peace.

He nodded, just once, to himself.

And with the final echo of his will, he let the world return to normal.

The crowd broke first. The children, unsure whether to laugh or run, scattered in all directions. The merchants resumed their counting, the barman his pouring, the travelers their endless litany of complaints and questions. But now, there was a difference: a respect, or at least a caution, in the way they moved, an understanding that the boundaries of the world were, in fact, guarded.

Knodalon turned, walked back to his bench, and sat.

He felt the fatigue in his bones, the old ache multiplied by the act of true assertion. But he also felt the quiet satisfaction of a job done well, or at least well enough.

The minor gods, cowed but unbroken, settled into their new hierarchy. The world, for a little while, was safe.

He closed his eyes, and let the wind comb his hair.

Above, the sun caught the angles of the Icosagon, sending a brief, perfect flash of light across the lake.

For now, order had been restored.

But Knodalon knew: in the games of gods, order was always temporary.

He would watch.

He would wait.

And when the world dared him to act again, he would be ready.

The world, to a flea, was always motion.

It was the jounce of muscle beneath fur, the rolling sea of scalp and shirt and the faint vibration of voices overhead. A life was measured in the milliseconds between one step and the next, and any change—a scratch, a slap, a dip in temperature—was the only warning a flea ever received that the universe could end, and end quick.

But this—this was different.

It began with a tremor, a high note in the background hiss that every flea could feel in its bones. The note grew, became a pressure that squeezed the very blood from their tiny bodies, and then—without any warning at all—they were airborne.

Thousands of them, all at once.

For a moment, the wind was just another host: invisible, unpredictable, full of crevices and pockets and the sweet, sickening scent of possibility. The fleas kicked and spun and clawed at the emptiness, their legs cycling in frantic, hopeless circles. Those who were lucky managed to latch onto another body—fur, hair, fabric, anything with enough friction to keep them from spinning off into oblivion. The unlucky tumbled, pinwheeling, their compound eyes registering nothing but a blur of color and light.

But in the center of the vortex, something new took hold.

A feeling.

Not the usual hunger, or the itching want for blood, but a unity—a sense that every flea was now a part of something larger, an organism made of noise and fear and furious, collective will. The fleas recognized each other—not just as rivals or mates, but as kin, drawn into a single mind by the press of the hurricane.

At the center of it all was their god.

They did not see the god the way humans saw gods, did not worship it with shrines or sacrifices. But they knew its presence: a voice in the static, a will that pressed them ever onward, that promised a future of warmth and feast and proliferation. The god of repressed fleas was here, too, caught in the storm, shrunken and cowed but still immense, a gravity well pulling every flea toward it.

The god was afraid.

The fleas felt the fear, tasted it in the ozone and the tiny sparks that leapt from antenna to antenna. The god had overreached, and the old wind that now cradled them was stronger, more patient, more absolute.

The hurricane tightened.

The fleas screamed in their own way, a chorus of needle-sharp signals, a call to arms that begged their god to save them. Some waited

for rescue; some simply surrendered, clutching at whatever fragment of the old world they could remember. But others—small in number, but loud in presence—turned, in the instant of greatest panic, to the force that held them.

They recognized the Wind.

It was older than their god, older than any god. It did not hate, did not even notice them as individuals, but it offered something their own god never had: a boundary, a purpose, a place to settle and be.

Some of the fleas prayed to it. Others simply accepted the new master, switching allegiance in the way of survivors everywhere.

The god of repressed fleas, sensing the defection, howled.

The Wind answered by sorting.

With a gentleness that none had expected, the hurricane began to sift its contents. The fleas who held to chaos, to hunger and itch and unchecked ambition, were ejected—flung from the town in a high arc that scattered them to the wild grass, to the distant woods, to the places where even dogs did not linger. The others—the loyal, the meek, the ones content to live in the margin and not draw too much attention—were set down softly, each one placed exactly where it belonged: in the collar of a favorite dog, in the hatband of a sleeping merchant, or between the pages of a book, where the only thing to suck was time.

The hurricane slowed. The pressure eased.

The world, for the fleas, came to a sudden, bewildering halt.

They found themselves at rest, more or less intact, in the spots they had always known: behind an ear, under a sleeve, in the warm darkness of a crowded pillow. The Wind was still there, watching, but it did not press. It simply waited, patient and eternal.

The god of repressed fleas limped off, diminished, no longer the tyrant but merely one god among many. The others, newly minted or freshly submissive, took their places and got on with the business of living.

For the fleas, nothing had changed.

But the world had grown a new edge, and they knew—somehow, in the shiver of their tiny bodies—that the old boundaries were back, and that crossing them would never end well.

The storm was over.
But the lesson was not forgotten.

It was always in the moment of aftermath that the world decided its next move.

The wind had barely settled, the last motes of dust spiraling to the earth, when the four adventurers reappeared at the edge of the square. They looked nothing like the conquerors who had departed so many nights past: their cloaks were in tatters, faces split with the gray lines of exhaustion, and the swords at their belts were battered, edge-blunted, as if every day on the road had been a war against the world itself.

They stopped in the shadow of the old well, staring at the green. The traces of Knodalon's storm still glimmered in the air—a tangle of floating lint, the odd black speck of a stray flea, the brief, shimmering after-image of something immense and nameless. The adventurers watched, unsure, as the townsfolk gradually resumed their lives, each person moving with a caution that said: We have witnessed a power, and it is not ours.

Knodalon saw them, but did not rise.

He let the four watch the world for a while, let them measure the town's changed mood, the new wariness in every step. He saw the uncertainty in their eyes, the haunted look of people who had glimpsed the end of things and were not sure whether to be grateful or afraid. He saw the blue-haired woman glance at the inn, the tall swordsman scan the rooftops, the two younger companions nudge each other with the nervous energy of siblings returned from a long, bad dream.

At last, they approached.

They did not walk straight to him, but circled the green in a slow spiral, as if unsure whether to disturb the silence he had left in his wake. When they reached the bench, they stood in a tight knot, four against the universe, and looked down at the old man with the white hair and the steady hands.

"Are you..." the blue-haired woman began, then stopped. "Is it over?"

Knodalon considered the question.

"For now," he said. "The world is as it should be. Or as close as it gets."

The leader nodded, satisfied—or at least unwilling to argue the point. She reached into the pouch at her side and drew out a crystal, small as an egg, humming with a faint, persistent glow.

"We found what we were looking for," she said. "Or, rather, she found us."

Knodalon took the crystal, rolling it between his palms. It was warm, pulsing with a rhythm that matched the throb of the Icosagon overhead. He recognized the pattern at once: a message, encoded in light and density, meant not for the world at large but for those who could feel the boundaries between things.

"Where?" he asked.

The swordsman answered. "In the high tower, on the ice. She said she'd been waiting for us."

"She knew our names," the younger boy blurted, voice cracked and thin. "She told us to bring that crystal here, to the center of the green, and to give it to you, if we found you."

Knodalon nodded. "You found me."

The adventurers exchanged a glance, the kind that meant: We have done the impossible, and now what? But the blue-haired woman pressed on.

"She told us to tell you something," she said, fumbling for the words. "That it wasn't a weapon. That it was a fence."

Knodalon's hands stilled.

He closed his eyes, let the message in the crystal seep into the marrow of his mind.

Not a weapon, but a fence. Not a line of attack, but a boundary. Not the end of the world, but a way to keep the world from ending.

He laughed, soft and genuine, the sound creaking out through lips unused to joy.

"Good fences make good neighbors," he said, more to himself than to them.

The leader smiled, the first real smile since she had stepped onto the green. "She said you'd understand."

He did.

He looked past the adventurers to the edge of the square, where the other townsfolk had gathered—drawn by curiosity, by fear, by the animal certainty that something was about to change. He saw the expectation in their faces, the way even the minor gods hovered in the margins, waiting for the old man to declare the next rules of the world.

He held up the crystal, letting the blue light scatter across the grass.

"This is what we needed," he said. "Not a sword, but a line. Not to destroy the other side, but to keep them where they belong."

The adventurers did not understand, but the townsfolk did. They nodded, slowly at first, then all at once, as the meaning filtered through the collective memory of a hundred generations: boundaries, honored and maintained, were the only real magic that lasted.

Knodalon looked at the blue-haired woman, saw the question she dared not ask.

"Will it be enough?" she said.

He weighed the crystal in his palm, considered the old wars and the new ones, the endless cycle of gods and men and everything that refused to be tamed. He saw, in a single flash, the whole future of the town—its narrow escapes, its betrayals and reconciliations, the slow, stubborn accumulation of peace.

"It's never enough," he said, "but it will hold."

The four relaxed, as if a spell had lifted. The swordsman sat, legs splayed, and laughed a long, hopeless laugh. The younger companions grinned, then slumped to the grass, staring up at the sky as if they expected another miracle to drop from it at any second.

The blue-haired woman lingered, searching Knodalon's face for something that might help her sleep when the night came. She found it, eventually—a kindness in the wrinkles, a promise that, no matter how many times the world turned itself inside out, someone would always be there to set it right again.

Knodalon watched the sun drift lower, painting the green with a light so clear it hurt to look at.

He placed the crystal on the bench beside him, felt the subtle hum

as it resonated with the pattern of the Icosagon overhead. Already, the boundaries were mending, the wounds closing, the world learning—however slowly—how to keep itself from falling apart.

He let himself rest, just for a moment.

In the stillness, the minor gods resumed their bickering, their small wars fought at the edges of sight. The children returned to their games, the bakers to their ovens, the travelers to their never-ending search for something new to believe in.

And above it all, the old god sat on his bench, hands folded, eyes half-closed, watching the world remember itself.

Good fences, he mused.

CHAPTER 16

Knodalon let himself enjoy the anticipation for a moment. The Enchantress had done her work well; the design was elegant, almost lazy in its confidence. Not a weapon, but a fence. Not a wall to keep things out, but a net to keep things in. The genius was in the implication: with the right hand at the helm, the whole mess of wind and intent and petty divinity could be channeled into something useful, something durable. Knodalon's fingers twitched with the urge to examine the thing up close.

But there were forms to observe.

The scholar spoke. "We were told to bring it here, and to leave it in your hands. 'The watcher of winds will know what to do,' is what she said."

"Did she say how?" Knodalon asked, eyes fixed on the crystal.

"She said you'd figure it out," said the archer.

Knodalon picked up the crystal with the care one might grant a feral animal or an untrusted favor. The artifact was heavier than it looked, its weight a compaction of futures not yet written. Up close, the blue light was less a glow and more a persistent blur; the surface of the orb seemed to shift, the skin of it crawling with runes that formed

and dissolved at random. It thrummed in his palm, the resonance attuned perfectly to his pulse.

He set it on the bench beside him, then turned his full attention to the adventurers. "Did you look inside?" he asked.

The blue-haired woman shook her head, but the youngest hesitated, then shrugged. "We tried. She said it would open for you, and that if we broke it, we'd wish we'd left it be."

Knodalon allowed himself the briefest smile. It was a warning tailored for professionals.

He gestured to the bench. "Rest, if you want. Or stand, if you don't trust the ground."

The four exchanged glances, then settled around him, making a loose perimeter that suggested either deference or a readiness for disaster. The townsfolk in the square, emboldened by the adventurers' calm, drifted closer. Minnie arrived with a tray of tea and a basket of unburnt bread, which she offered to the four with a mother's deliberate formality. Even Sam, who prided herself on neutrality in matters of magic, edged forward, mug in hand, pretending not to stare.

Knodalon ran his thumb over the crystal's surface. The runes tingled at his touch, each one flaring to life as he passed. He felt the structure of the thing—the way it pulled at the ambient magic, the way it repelled the old, feral gods that still circled the town's edges. There was a place for every troublemaker in the design, a slot or groove or hidden hinge, and the whole contraption was powered by intent. The only trick would be in setting the intent correctly.

He looked up at the blue-haired woman. "Did she say what would happen when it was done?"

"She said it would help end the conflict," she replied, voice flat. "But that if it was misused, it would just create a cage."

"A good fence is both," Knodalon said.

The swordsman flinched, as if the words had teeth. "You're not worried?"

Knodalon shrugged. "Worry is for those who can be surprised. I prefer curiosity."

The crowd pressed closer, but no one crossed the unspoken boundary around the bench. Even the minor gods kept their distance,

their usual tricks—snapped twigs, flung dust, the odd tumble of a pebble—now stilled by the blue crystal's gravity.

Knodalon turned to the townsfolk, voice quiet but pitched to carry. "This is not the old way, but as I said, it will hold. When it is placed, the world will resist, but only for a while. The trick is to let the world think it's won."

A murmur of understanding, or perhaps just resignation, ran through the audience.

The four adventurers waited, uncertain.

Knodalon patted the crystal. "It's a good design," he said, mostly to himself. "It'll hold."

The blue-haired woman nodded, slow and careful. "She said you'd like it."

"I do," Knodalon replied. "I also know it's just the start."

A silence hung, but it was the comfortable kind, the pause before a stone was set and the next row of wall begun.

Knodalon leaned back, closed his eyes, and let his senses roam. He could feel the potential in the crystal, the urge to snap into alignment, the hunger for an edge or a boundary to define. It would be easy to activate, but harder to aim. The Enchantress had left that part to him, and to the town.

He thought of Nimarith, the last conversation in the rarefied air above the world. "Build something better," the mountain god had said. "It's what you're for." Innovation, yes, but not without secrets.

He opened his eyes.

The four adventurers waited, their journey for the moment complete.

The townsfolk watched, half-hopeful, half-braced for disappointment.

Knodalon rested his hand on the crystal, felt the soft hum through his bones, and prepared to draw the first line.



The formalities were brief, but the ritual demanded witnesses. Knodalon strode slowly into the town square, treading softly across

the thick green grass. He called for Calder first, trusting the fisherman's sense for boundaries both practical and metaphysical. Calder arrived from the lakeshore with his usual briskness, hands raw from netting but clean, carrying a cushion woven from the reeds that lined the north bank. He nodded at Knodalon, then at the four adventurers, eyes lingering on the crystal with the wary appraisal of a man who had once trusted the promise of glass and found it wanting.

Vamir, the bookseller, hurried up from his shop, holding a parchment carefully rolled and tied with a bit of twine. The map, when unspooled, revealed itself as a hasty but accurate sketch of the green's underlying geometry: a tangle of circles and crossing lines that, to most eyes, would have seemed an idle doodle. To Knodalon, it was a schematic, a blueprint for the ancient engine that hummed below the earth.

"The ley lines converge here," Vamir announced, tapping the parchment with a finger stained blue by his own ink. He pointed to a spot at the green's exact center, where a ring of faint, weathered stones lay flush with the grass, unnoticed by the casual passerby. "If the theory holds, the crystal's resonance should—" He stopped himself, offering a thin, apologetic smile. "Well. It should help."

Calder grunted, not unkindly, and set the reed cushion at the appointed mark. The square around them emptied as the townsfolk caught the scent of significance and receded to the safety of doorways and stoops. Even the gods of petty annoyance—who had, moments earlier, been toying with the market scales and the latches on the bakery's back door—fell still, watching with the shrewd patience of predators who knew a feeding opportunity when they saw one.

Knodalon gestured for the adventurers to bring the crystal forward. The youngest did so, cradling it as if it were an egg from a dragon known for taking offense. Together, they set it in the middle of the reed cushion, aligning its axis as Vamir instructed.

Calder stepped back and studied the arrangement. "Lake's been unsettled for days," he said, voice low, as if afraid of waking something best left sleeping. "Wind cuts different, and even the water's got a memory of it. You think this will calm things?"

Knodalon didn't answer with words. He simply gave Calder a look—a brief, solid nod, the kind that said: if not, then nothing will.

The four adventurers hovered at edge of the gathering, their faces lined with exhaustion and with the need for something—anything—to justify their ordeal. Vamir made a show of straightening his map, but his eyes never left the crystal. Even Calder, who had once sworn off the high drama of magic, couldn't keep from glancing back every other second.

The crystal sat in silence for a long moment.

Then, as the sun reached its zenith, the blue glow inside the orb brightened to a clear, slicing white. The pulse grew sharper, not in intensity but in definition: every thrum, every increment of power, now visible as a ripple that ran from the stone markers outward in concentric circles.

The grass around the cushion began to move. Not in response to any breeze—there was none, and the flags at the bakery hung slack—but as if compelled from below, each blade bending first toward the crystal, then away, a slow, deliberate flexion like the breath of a giant sleeping somewhere in the dirt.

Vamir let out a long, low exhale. "That's... new," he said, voice breaking on the edge of reverence.

Calder reached out, as if to steady himself, but found nothing to hold onto. "So it starts," he said, half question, half prayer.

Knodalon watched the ring of moving grass, the pattern of light on the crystal, the way the very air trembled in anticipation. He felt the subtle shift as the green accepted the new order, the old lines redrawn, the boundaries reset.

He turned to the crowd—now a dozen yards farther off, but still intent—and gave them a second nod, just as firm as the first.

It was happening. The world was learning its new limits.

As the crystal's pulse intensified, Knodalon felt the familiar tug behind his eyes—the gentle but insistent hand that, on rare occasions, pulled him from the world's surface and dropped him into the blue-print beneath. This time, the transition was instantaneous. One blink: midday sun on the green, the shimmer of heat and the buzz of small, mortal lives. The next: an impossible elevation, as if the entire town

had been peeled from its moorings and stretched flat for his inspection.

From above, the green was no longer a patch of grass and meeting place but a heart in a network of branching arteries. The ley lines glowed, not blue but a color that hurt to name, a living braid of magic that ran out from the stone ring, through the roots of the hill, and down into the depths of the old earth. Where the lines crossed, they pooled—forming nodes that pulsed with a slow, dignified certainty, like the tide filling a series of interconnected basins.

He followed the first line east, saw it dip under the bakery, curl around the old well, and emerge in the cellar of the Weary Head, where it split into a dozen smaller threads that ran through the walls and under the threshold, tangling in the feet of travelers as they came and went. The next line ran to the lakeshore, plunging beneath the reeds and the silt before knotting itself in the ancient stones of the boat dock. There were more—dozens, in fact—each mapped with a precision that made even Knodalon's eyes water.

Deep below the town, he found the caches of power. Some were contained, shaped into perfect spheres of light that pulsed in time with the crystal's beat. Others sprawled, undisciplined, their energies sloshing out along the lines and setting up tremors in the fabric of the world above. In these places, he recognized the fingerprints of antiquity, the faded signature of the vanished Mistrals, a lattice of symbols so intricate that even now, with all the advantage of hindsight, he could not parse their complete meaning.

He saw, too, the scars left by entropy. There were gaps in the network, places where the lines had been gnawed or torn, where the memory of what should have been was all that remained. Around these holes, the petty gods clustered, scavenging the loose magic, weaving it into their own domains of itch and hunger and spite. It was ugly work, but necessary; without their interference, the wounds would have simply bled away, the whole pattern dissolving into dullness.

But above all, he saw the fence.

It was not yet complete, but the crystal's magic had begun the work. From the center of the green, a net of light expanded, following

the old lines but braiding them anew, binding them tighter, drawing the boundaries of the town with a clarity that had not existed since the first settlers built their ring of stones. The fence was not a wall but a suggestion, a persistent argument that the inside and the outside were different, that what belonged here must remain, and what did not would be politely, inexorably repelled.

Knodalon let himself drift, studying the pattern, memorizing the places where the new net would need shoring up, where the old wounds might try to reopen. He was, for the first time in memory, moved—not by the power, which was as natural to him as air, but by the elegance of the design, by the sheer stubborn brilliance of the builders who had made the Icosagon not as a prison but as a promise.

It would hold, he decided. Maybe not forever, but for as long as anyone here remembered why the fence was needed.

He let the vision recede. The world returned in a rush: the heat of the sun, the sound of the crystal's pulse, the tension of every eye on the green fixed, now, on him.

He knew what came next.

He stepped to the center of the ring, careful not to disturb the reed cushion or the crystal poised atop it. The sunlight, refracted through the orb, painted his hands a translucent blue. For a moment, he hesitated, savoring the possibility of error—then set his palms above the crystal and drew a breath.

The air responded, at first with reluctance, then with a kind of greedy anticipation. A breeze circled the green, mild enough to raise only the lightest dust from the path but insistent, a finger tracing the perimeter of the world. The spiral gathered speed, pulling in motes of pollen, dandelion fluff, the errant leaves that marked the boundary between summer and autumn.

With a soundless pop, the breeze thickened. The spiral tightened, raising a ring of fine dust that glowed in the crystal's reflected light. Knodalon kept his hands steady, guiding the wind, drawing it closer until the currents ran in tight, obedient bands around the cushion.

At the edge of the green, a lost sock—pale blue, damp from the morning's dew—tumbled into view, driven by the wind's new purpose. It caught in the spiral and whipped around the ring before

vanishing in a flicker of static. Next came a fork, tines blackened by old rust and the residue of a thousand communal meals, skittering across the flagstones in perfect, centrifugal arcs. The god of tarnished forks, sensing its domain under siege, mounted a last, desperate resistance—Knodalon felt it shudder through the current—but the breeze was merciless, stripping the fork of its charm and flinging it into the vortex.

The wind found other targets. A sheaf of ledgers from Alred's shop, abandoned in the confusion, lifted from the stoop and sailed into the spiral. Each page fluttered, shed its weight of error, then snapped back into place, bound tighter than before. A child's kite, orphaned on the green, rose up and hovered just out of reach, its tail snapping in the current before the wind coaxed it, gently, into the center of the ring. Even the god of lost marbles, never one to miss an opportunity, sent its collection into the fray: glassy orbs, each with a different memory trapped inside, bounced and spun and then dissolved into the dust.

As the spiral thickened, the crystal absorbed the chaos, converting the motion into energy. The light inside the orb changed: blue to violet, violet to a sharp, clear white, then down to the soft gold of sunset. The pressure in the air rose, not as a threat but as a promise—a declaration that the world, for once, was about to settle its own score.

The townsfolk at the edge of the green watched with a silence so complete it became another kind of noise. The minor gods, never far from the action, crowded behind the windows and doorframes, their outlines visible in the momentary condensation on glass. Some tried to flee—one god of overcooked eggs made a dash for the bakery chimney, only to be caught and pulled into the wind—but most simply watched, mesmerized.

With a final surge, the spiral reversed direction, collapsing inward with a sound like a wet sigh. The entire mass of wind, dust, and intention funneled into the crystal, which drank it all and then—after a pregnant pause—released a pulse of gold light that shot up and out, splitting into twenty distinct rays.

Each beam arced above the rooftops, traced the outline of the green, and alighted on the peaks of the twenty most significant build-

ings in North Pointe: the smithy, the Weary Head, the bakery, the bookseller's shop, and on around the ring, a circuit of purpose and history. At the end of each line, a point of radiance flared, then settled into a steady glow, floating a foot above the eaves.

Knodalon looked up and saw the geometry of it: the twenty lights forming a perfect icosagon, their connections visible only if you knew where to look. The lines were not straight—they curved gently, following the lay of the land and the grain of the old ley lines—but together they formed a net that held the town in its center, snug and true.

The effect on the green was immediate. The grass, still matted from sennights of disorder, straightened and greened. The stone markers, long faded into the dirt, rose and brightened, their runes re-etched by the spillover of magic. The air, which had carried the flavor of old iron and disquiet for so long, tasted suddenly of bread, of woodsmoke, of the memory of rain. Even the minor gods—those that survived—seemed to relax, their hunger for chaos sated for the time being.

At the town's edge, Minnie was the first to break the silence. She stepped onto the green, hands on hips, and gave Knodalon a look that said: Well? Is that it?

Knodalon nodded. "For now."

The four adventurers, still clustered near the stone ring, let out a collective breath. The blue-haired woman looked up at the lattice of light, then at Knodalon, and gave a smile so thin it threatened to break. "It worked," she said, almost in disbelief.

"It did," Knodalon agreed. He lowered his hands, feeling the ache in his bones, the slight tremor of exertion that came from working in concert with the world rather than against it.

All around the green, the townsfolk emerged from their hiding places. They ventured forward in small groups, eyes wide, mouths open. Children ran onto the grass, testing the new order, finding their games restored to their proper gravity. The god of found socks—emboldened by the win—launched a small campaign of recovery, returning lost items to owners with unnecessary ceremony.

The icosagon of light held steady, its points of brilliance visible even in the afternoon sun. The fence was not a physical thing, but

everyone felt it: a firmness in the air, a gentle correction that nudged the world toward stability.

North Pointe was whole.

Knodalon stepped back from the stone ring, satisfaction visible in the set of his shoulders if not in his expression. He looked up at the sky, saw the web of light still humming, and allowed himself the smallest smile.

The world, for now, had learned its lesson.

Knodalon returned to his bench. It was, as always, in the precise position to watch the entire green, but the view had changed. The air, stripped of its burden, sparkled with the clear, unambiguous joy of a system finally humming at the right frequency. Children ran in the grass, the color in their faces restored; shopkeepers stood in their doorways, taking in the light with the wary satisfaction of farmers watching a long-delayed rain. Even the sky, which had threatened gray for days, now held a blue so unblemished it seemed, for once, to be making an effort.

He settled in, folding his hands and letting the ache in his bones fade to a pleasant hum. There was no immediate crisis, no whisper of impending doom—just the low, ongoing burble of a town learning to live with its own ambitions.

At first, the minor gods tiptoed around the new boundaries, uncertain if the invitation would hold. The god of found socks, emboldened by its role in the ritual, began a campaign of relentless service. Every morning, a new crop of reunited pairs appeared in the bakery's entryway or the space beneath the Weary Head's long table. Minnie, amused by the attention, gave the god a name—Blessed Patchwork—and left an offering of darning thread and a shot of honeyed brandy each sennight. The god responded with even greater zeal, raiding the north end of the green and importing lost mittens from as far as the stables.

The god of returned spoons, newly self-aware, started a discreet courier service. It operated on a tight schedule, favoring the rhythm of

breakfast and supper, and quickly became a legend among the local children. They began to stage deliberate losses, turning the game into a challenge: would the god be able to return a spoon hidden under a rock? In a tree? In the pockets of a passing stranger? Each time, the answer was yes. The god had a flair for the dramatic; more than once, a spoon would materialize in the middle of the green, balanced perfectly on the tip of a blade of grass, left there for the finder to marvel over.

The god of untarnished metal, a practical soul, turned its attention to the smithy. Warren's tools gleamed with impossible clarity. His apprentice, skeptical at first, spent candlemarks testing the edge of each blade, expecting to find some hidden fault, but never did. The work went faster. The shop grew busier. At first, Warren resented the idea of divine interference in a craftsman's trade, but after a sennight he began to leave a coin at the foot of the anvil each night—a private acknowledgment, not of worship, but of partnership.

The more troublesome gods—those that had earned exile—hovered at the margins of the world, peering through the new fence with a mixture of envy and bafflement. Knodalon saw them, of course; he watched as the god of stubborn jars tried, unsuccessfully, to breach the town's edge by launching a campaign against the hinges of the east gate. It failed, but not for lack of creativity. The gate simply shrugged off the sabotage, its ironwork gleaming brighter in response to the challenge.

Yet even here, there was room for redemption.

On the third morning, Knodalon saw a wagon pass along the trade road, heading north with a load of early apples and three children hanging off its back. The children argued, as siblings do, but their voices were bright and free of the old, grinding complaint. As the wagon reached the midpoint between the lake and the green, Knodalon caught a glimmer—a familiar shimmer in the air. The god of repressed fleas, which had spent days sulking in the weeds, perched now on the wagon's rear axle, following the family as if drawn by the promise of a better job.

He watched as the god hovered, then reoriented, feeling its way along the new current. It lingered, uncertain. Then, with a visible

shiver, it shifted—no longer a god of repressed fleas, but something cleaner, leaner, and infinitely more ambitious: the god of pest-free journeys. It shed its old tricks, the itch and hunger, and instead set about protecting the children from gnats, from burrs, from the invisible devils that plagued every traveler. By the time the wagon reached the next town, its legend would be growing.

Knodalon smiled, not outwardly, but in the set of his shoulders, the way he allowed himself a moment of pure, unalloyed pride. The fence worked, but it was also merciful. The door was always open to those who wanted in.

He sat, and watched, and listened to the rhythms of the day.

The green hummed with activity. Minnie held court on the bakery's stoop, spinning new stories of the miracle on the green for an eager audience. Sam, ever the skeptic, hosted a table of travelers at the Claw, taking bets on how long the peace would last, but the mugs stayed full and the laughter was real. Even the adventurers, their work done, lingered for a sennight longer than planned, taking turns at the bakery and the lakeside, marveling at a world that, for once, ran smoother than its legend.

The minor gods continued their games, some with old grudges, others with new ambitions. But the energy was different now: less desperate, more playful. The boundary held, but within it, the world thrived.

And Knodalon, on his bench, folded his hands and waited.

He knew the next challenge would come—there was always a new trick, a new god, a new hole in the fence. But for now, the world was balanced, and he was content to let it be.

At the edge of the green, a boy tripped on a root and fell, but instead of tears, he laughed, brushed the dirt from his knees, and went on. The god of errant roots grumbled, but in the end, it let him pass.

Knodalon watched, and kept the memory. For a time, at least, the town was at peace.

He closed his eyes, and let the world keep its own watch.

CHAPTER 17

Knodalon preferred the old bench by the storehouse, not for comfort—no one with a spine or a history would call it that—but for the way it anchored him to the skin of the world. He sat with his elbows on his knees, hands steepled, and let the wind off the lake press at his back, gentle but insistent, as if to remind him: There is always a current beneath the surface.

It was early, or late; the sun hung so low behind the hill that the air on the green was blue-shadowed, but the lakeshore shivered gold where the wind kept the mist away. Someone was splitting kindling by the inn, and the rhythm of axe on wood kept time with the sharper crack of ice at the water's edge. Out past the bakery, a dog barked, then a child shrieked with the careless joy of someone not yet taught about consequences. Overhead, a flight of geese broke formation, then re-formed, correcting itself with a minimum of complaint.

He liked the pattern of it all. There was a time when he would have interfered—tuned the weather, adjusted the angle of the sun, drawn the birds into a more efficient wedge. But now he was content to let the town run on its own, correcting only when things threatened to slide beyond the ordinary. For all his experience, he found he was better at prevention than cure.

Today, though, the prevention felt like a losing game. He could taste it in the air: a tension, faint but growing, that threaded through the green and along the trade road. The storm had passed, the minor gods pacified for now, but the underlying pressure remained—an ache, as if the world's joints were about to give out all at once.

He let himself relax into the bench, exhaled, and allowed his perception to drift.

It was not an easy thing, this detachment. The body wanted to keep its place on the timeline, wanted to feel the sun rise and the bones age by the candlemark. But Knodalon had never been just a body, and the trick—learned back before the old gods learned to fear boredom—was to let the world slow or speed around him, to let each moment draw out until it was no longer a point, but a ribbon, a thread stretching in both directions.

He watched the wind slow, then nearly still. On the green, the children's game froze mid-arc, a ball hanging in the air like the memory of a better summer. The dog became a blur of intent, its mouth just shy of closing on the ball, its paws a ghost above the trampled grass. He could see the exhaust from the bakery chimney, each plume layered over the last in slow, deliberate ripples. The sound of the axe and the crack of the ice drew out, each impact ringing clear and endless.

He let his attention unspool, first outward, then down. Under the green, the ley lines hummed with a tension that was both anticipation and complaint. The icosagon—the old, stubborn geometry that gave the town its magic—pulsed at the edge of perception, its twenty vertices marked not by stone or post but by the presence of will: a shop, a threshold, a memory that refused to die. He traced the net, feeling for weakness, for any spot where the world threatened to come unstitched.

It was not a surprise that the first trouble was at the south point.

Jen, the constable, stood in front of the livery stable, arms folded, jaw set. Her hair, long and mostly gray, was tied back in a tail, the loose ends fraying in the wind. She faced two travelers—fresh off the north road, by the look of the mud and the way their packs bulged with more ambition than sense. They argued, but even from a distance Knodalon could tell they weren't truly angry. The travelers gestured,

voices rising and falling, but their eyes slid away from Jen's whenever she held their gaze. She said little, but each word hit with the certainty of a hammer. After a few sentences, the pair fell silent, then shuffled toward the inn, arguing only with their boots.

Jen waited a moment, then let her arms drop. For a breath, she closed her eyes. In that instant, Knodalon saw it: a subtle glow, not light but something thicker—a kind of gravity that radiated out from her and pressed the world into order. The effect was temporary, but it left an imprint. The travelers' anger was gone, replaced by a dull fatigue. Even the horse at the hitching rail, which had been working itself into a state, lowered its head and stopped testing the knot on the post.

Knodalon admired the economy of her gift. No violence, no spectacle. Just the absolute conviction that, in her presence, people would be decent, or they would leave.

He'd seen that effect before, years back, in the wars. Then it had been a general on the eve of a siege, talking down a mutiny with nothing but a glance and a voice pitched just above whisper. Before that, it had been a mother, soothing a field of screaming children with the song she sang at every sundown, a song that even the village wolves had learned to respect.

He envied it, a little. All his power, and he still found it easier to correct the world than to persuade it.

Maybe that's the difference, he thought. Maybe that's why the town needs a Jen and not just a wind.

He let his attention drift further, following the lines to the west. There, the bakery throbbed with an energy that was almost palpable—each loaf a small act of resistance against the entropy that chewed at the world's edge. Makota, the baker, flitted from oven to counter, her hands a blur. He watched as she palmed a lump of dough, pressed it flat, then, with a snap of her wrist, flung it onto the rising pile. Each motion was perfect, and each left a ripple in the air—a pleasant one, fragrant with yeast and the stubborn refusal to accept mediocrity.

That was not where the net was weakest.

He found the real problem near the menagerie.

Dooley Dokkten's shop, always a locus of strange and insistent

life, now pulsed with a note of distress. Knodalon felt it even before he focused on the place: a sour hum, the psychic equivalent of a splinter caught deep under a nail. The animals inside were loud in the morning—nothing unusual in that—but today the noise had a fevered edge. He tuned out the sharper complaints and listened for the base note, the sound that never changed no matter how many generations of foxes or lizards or mutt-dogs passed through the cages.

It was panic, and it was spreading.

Dooley himself was not visible, but Knodalon could feel his presence, a slow and bitter gravity leaking out from the rear of the shop. He shifted his focus, passing through the clutter of cages and bins, and found Dooley seated on a crate in the storeroom, head in his hands. His spine was curled in on itself, and his breath came in shallow, uncertain puffs. His thoughts—never subtle, but always direct—now ran in circles: a litany of loss and helplessness, the memory of the flea god's rampage burning through every attempt at calm.

Knodalon watched as Dooley raised his head and blinked at the far wall, as if expecting it to answer for him. In that moment, a mouse escaped its pen, streaked across the sawdust floor, and disappeared under a shelf. Dooley didn't react. He seemed not to notice at all.

Knodalon had seen that look before. It was the gaze of a man already halfway gone, his body still present but his will ceding ground by the heartbeat.

Outside, the animals felt it too. The god of strange birds, who had until now contented itself with turning up rare plumage for the occasional passing scholar, had grown restless. Its domain had once stretched only to the aviary and the trees above, but now it reached out, scavenging for attention, rattling every cage and stirring up fights among the roosting crows. The dogs in the yard, normally a model of patient indifference, circled their posts and snapped at the air. Even the lizards—old, dry, and half-blind—twitched in their terraria, seeking something they couldn't name.

Knodalon understood. The menagerie was unraveling, and with it, a point of the icosagon.

He traced the current back to Dooley, felt the ragged edge of his

resolve, and knew: the man would not last. Not unless something changed. The tumult with the fleas had been too much.

He let the wind out a little, not enough to stir the grass, but enough to shift the air inside the menagerie. The animals, sensing the change, quieted for a second, then resumed their chorus. It would not be enough.

Knodalon returned his attention to the green. He watched Jen, now talking quietly to a child whose arms were scraped raw from some playground dispute. He saw the way Jen listened—really listened—and how the child's anger, which had seemed permanent, now drained away in a matter of seconds.

He wondered, not for the first time, what would have happened if he'd learned to do the same.

Maybe it's not too late, he thought. Maybe watching was only half the job.

A shudder ran through the icosagon's net. He felt the tremor in his chest, as if a great machine somewhere under the hill had just thrown a gear. He saw, in his mind's eye, the points of the icosagon—some burning steady, some flickering, a few threatening to wink out entirely.

He counted them, one by one. The forge. The bakery. The inn. The constable's post. Each was held by a person, a mind, a soul. Each was as strong or as brittle as its keeper.

Even gods needed anchors, he thought.

He opened his eyes. The world resumed its pace, the wind at his back snapping back to its usual, restless self. The children on the green unfroze, the ball landing with a thud and the dog executing a triumphant, slobbery victory lap.

Knodalon remained on the bench, staring at the menagerie across the green, and made his decision.

If the world wanted a guardian, it would have one.

For now, he let the wind run its fingers through his beard, and began to think about how to keep Dooley—and the town—whole.

He decided.

He let the decision settle for a moment, to see how it felt. He rolled his shoulders back, letting the weight of it find a home between bone and memory. The bench groaned beneath him—an honest, uncom-

plaining sound—and the wind at his back swelled, then circled his head like a pair of unseen hands.

He drew in a breath and extended his attention, not as a watcher now, but as a participant.

The technique was old, older than anything else he remembered. There was no spell to it, no words to shape the world; just the gentle assertion of will, the quiet redirection of currents that would, left alone, drift toward entropy. He found the thread that tied him to Dooley's shop—tenuous, stretched thin over sennights of chaos and the man's own surrender—and wrapped it around his finger, slow and deliberate.

The air around the storehouse thickened. For a moment, every hair along Knodalon's arms stood in a shivering salute, and the reeds at the lakeside flattened as if cowed. The wind off the water, which had spent the morning dallying with the geese and the flotsam, now shot due west, picking up bits of dandelion and sawdust as it crossed the green.

He let the current build, careful not to snap the thread. He could feel the resistance—Dooley's fear, the animals' nervous energy, the memory of the old trauma. The menagerie didn't want help, not at first. But Knodalon was patient. He fed the wind in increments, each one measured, each one calibrated to reinforce the lattice at the heart of the shop.

Inside, the effect was immediate.

Dooley, still hunched on his crate, stiffened as if someone had tugged a string in his spine. His hands, which had trembled in their stillness, unclenched and found something to do: they reached for a tin of grain, then for a battered scoop. He stood, not suddenly but with the hesitant logic of a body remembering its old patterns, and crossed the floor to the largest cage at the back of the room.

Inside, a bird—a parrot, one of the newer arrivals—paced the branch, its feathers a garish confusion of red, blue, and yellow. It watched Dooley with a predatory focus, head cocked, beak half-open, as if waiting for a misstep. Knodalon felt the exchange of power: the bird asserting its domain, Dooley reclaiming his. The man poured a

careful measure of seed into the dish, never taking his eyes off the bird, then reached through the bars to clean the perch.

The parrot made its move, a lightning-fast dart at Dooley's hand. But this time, Dooley was ready. He flicked his wrist, deflecting the beak, then smoothed the bird's crest with a practiced thumb. The parrot, affronted but not displeased, let out a piercing squawk, then set to eating.

The other animals responded in kind. The dogs stopped their anxious circling and flopped onto the straw, tongues lolling. The lizards, sensing the tension had broken, arranged themselves in a contented heap under the sun lamp. Even the mice, whose escape artist had been minutes from freedom, paused to groom each other, their panic replaced by a wary curiosity.

Knodalon eased the current, letting the wind settle into a steady, nourishing flow. The menagerie's sour note faded, replaced by a low, humming stability. Not perfect, but enough.

He felt the cost at once.

His hands, always steady, now gripped the bench with a force that surprised him. The wood beneath his fingers dented, just a little, and the old scars along his knuckles flared with heat. A shimmer ran through the air—less a glow than a brief distortion, like heat off stone—and for an instant, the world doubled at the edges, the green splitting into two, then three, then snapping back into place.

He closed his eyes, let the sensation run its course. When he opened them again, nothing had changed, except that his body felt a year older and the wind at his back had lost its playful edge.

He accepted the trade. This was the job, after all.

He watched Dooley make a circuit of the room, checking on each animal with a focus that bordered on ritual. The man moved with the careful grace of someone who'd just woken from a long illness—weak, but steady, determined not to show the world where the wounds still lived. Dooley made notes in a battered ledger, then ducked into the side yard to see to the dogs. A minute later, Knodalon heard the first, hesitant whistle of a tune, thin but true.

The animals responded in chorus.

Knodalon sat back, folding his hands in his lap, and let the world

resume its pace. He checked the net of the icosagon, felt the new line running clean through the menagerie, strong enough to hold for another sennight, maybe more. There were still weaknesses—he could sense at least two points where the old gods circled, waiting for their next chance—but the immediate crisis was past.

He let himself relax, just a little. The effort was a drain, but nothing he couldn't recover from. Not yet.

Dooley will leave soon. Knowledge, not a guess. He felt it in his bones. Another departure, which means the town would seek to balance it with a new arrival. A money changer, perhaps. A cooker of stews. A lumberjack, to sell firewood to the travelers passing through.

He studied his hands, the way they lay now on his knees, and noted the faint tremor in the right. It annoyed him, but not enough to provoke a correction. If the world wanted to remind him he was old, he would let it.

He watched the green for a while, tracking the play of wind and light across the surface of the lake. The children had gone, replaced by a pair of women carrying a basket between them, their voices lost in the air. A dog trotted past, a scrap of blue cloth trailing from its jaws—the god of found socks still hard at work.

He thought about Dooley, about Jen, about the rest of the town. He considered the old habit of hiding his nature, of letting the world run its own course, and wondered how much good that had actually done.

Not enough, he decided.

The town didn't need his absence. It needed his presence.

He watched the sun crawl higher, felt the angle of the light shift, and let himself wonder how long the balance would hold.

Long enough.

Knodalon nodded to himself, satisfied. He flexed his hands, waited for the tremor to subside, and let the wind find its old, familiar course around the lake.

If there was a cost, it was worth it.

For now, that was enough.

A fortnight slid by, each day a careful repetition of the last, and for the first time in memory, Knodalon found himself restless.

He spent the mornings on his bench, eyes on the green, the wind off the lake gentler now, as if it too had tired of conflict. The children's games had resumed their normal cycles—stick wars and muddy tag and the endless barter of marbles and insults. Jen walked the edges of the square with her constable's gait, all business until a child or a dog came into range, at which point she would kneel or crouch and let herself be caught in the moment. The bakery kept the air heavy with yeast and cinnamon, the lines as long as ever, though Minnie's stories about the Miracle on the Green were now two embellishments removed from anything that had actually happened.

Knodalon noted these things, not with a god's detachment, but as a man trying to memorize the flavor of a world he had nearly lost. He found the urge to interfere fading, replaced by something he could not name: a hunger, maybe, or the slow return of an appetite for surprise.

He let himself drift—sometimes literally, letting his awareness slip along the ley lines, peering into corners, tracing the edges of the new fence that encircled the town. The icosagon was holding, stronger than it had in years. The minor gods had accepted their revised job descriptions, and the troublemakers, though not gone, operated with a new respect for the rules. He watched a god of clever knots tie a bundle of firewood so tight the owner nearly gave up and used it for kindling; he watched the god of found socks deliver a lost stocking in the dead of night, then linger for the reward of a bowl of milk left on the stoop.

It was peaceful, but not dull.

He was on the bench one afternoon, counting the slow, stubborn progress of a snail along the stone at his feet, when the world changed again.

The four adventurers appeared at the north end of the green, coming in along the trade road. At first, Knodalon didn't recognize them. They walked in silence, their clothes faded by rain and sun, the two younger ones now leaner, their faces angled by hunger and fatigue. The swordsman, who had once moved like he was about to cut the world in half, now limped, his right arm strapped to his chest with a sling made of torn shirt. The blue-haired woman was

unscarred, but the set of her jaw had gone from challenge to endurance.

They walked with the caution of people returning from a place no one comes back from. The crystal was gone.

They reached the edge of the square and paused, uncertain. For a long moment, no one on the green seemed to notice them. Then a child, perhaps sensing something unusual in their posture, broke from the game and ran to them, her small hand outstretched in unselfconscious greeting. The blue-haired woman knelt, met the child at eye level, and said something lost to distance.

That was enough. The dam broke. Makota appeared from the bakery with a tray of fresh rolls, followed by Sam from the Claw, her arms crossed but her face softening as she took in the state of the travelers. Jen made her way over, not with the urgency of a constable, but the easy stride of someone ready to help before being asked. Dardrad ambled behind them, with Alred close behind.

The green filled in, the space between the four and the town closing with a slow, gathering tide of bodies. Knodalon watched as the crowd swelled, everyone wanting to hear the story, or to touch the hem of a sleeve, or to verify with their own eyes that these, indeed, were the ones who had gone and come back.

The blue-haired woman did most of the talking, her voice even and factual. She explained how the journey had gone, how they had found the fence line and circled it in the dark, how the crystal had pulsed and grown hot as they neared the border of the Goblin Lands. How, at the last, the fence became a wall of wind and blue fire, and the Goblin King—more curious than furious, she said—had stepped up to the threshold and offered them a bargain. No one crossed, no one fought, and the boundary would hold. The crystal, once the pact was struck, dissolved to dust, and the King withdrew. The blue-haired woman shrugged, as if to say: It was less exciting than we feared.

The townsfolk didn't mind. The relief was audible, a collective sigh that ran through the crowd and loosened every jaw and set every hand in motion. Someone cheered; someone else wept, but quietly. Even Sam, hard to the end, wiped at her eye and pretended it was the wind.

Then the real celebration began.

Sam rolled out barrels from the Claw, the old black-and-brass tap hissing as she filled mugs and handed them off, one after another, until the green was thick with the smell of good beer and the rising hum of a hundred conversations. Makota brought bread and cakes, and Drdrad roasted a side of ham on a spit. Lanterns appeared, hung in a rough zigzag along the trade road, the colored paper bleeding light onto the faces of children and travelers alike.

Knodalon watched from his bench, as always. He saw the blue-haired woman smile, a real smile this time, and saw her pour a mug of ale for the swordsman, who tried to lift it with his bad arm, then settled for cradling it in his lap and laughing. He saw Jen shepherd the youngest of the party to a seat, then sit beside him and listen, not asking questions, just letting the story find its own way out.

The festival built in layers, each one louder and warmer than the last. The god of clever knots tied a string of sausages into an impossible loop and hung it from the bakery's sign, where it became a target for the older children. The god of found socks hosted a scavenger hunt, leaving colored scraps in the grass, each one redeemable for a penny at the inn. A new god, barely fledged—a god of second chances, perhaps—hovered above the green, unseen but felt, making every spilled drink land upright and every harsh word soften before it reached its mark.

For a long time, Knodalon was content to watch. He mapped the edges of the celebration, noting how the laughter spilled beyond the green and into the alleys, how even the menagerie's animals caught the mood and added their own noise to the night. He felt the web of the icosagon, humming now at a pitch that was less tension and more song.

Then something odd happened. He felt it first as a pull, gentle but insistent, like a hand on the sleeve or the whisper of a remembered promise.

He ignored it. Then the wind changed—only for a moment, but enough to bring the scent of roasting ham and yeast and the sweat of honest bodies right to his nose. He saw, across the green, Minnie look up and meet his gaze. She nodded, once, then went back to ladling soup into a chipped bowl.

He realized, with a start, that he wanted to join.

It was not a simple thing. Every instinct argued for distance: old habits, old wounds, the old certainty that the world would rather he not leave a trace. But the bench felt smaller than usual, the air colder, and the celebration across the green warmer than any memory he still owned.

He rose, slowly. His legs ached, but less than he expected. He crossed the margin of the green, one foot in front of the other, ignoring the curious glances that followed him. At the edge of the lantern light, he paused—out of habit, or nerves, or respect for the old boundaries.

Then Minnie was there, soup in hand. She pressed it into his palm and said, "You look hungry, Knodalon," with no trace of irony or mockery. He managed a thanks, then, finding nowhere to sit, simply stood with the bowl, savoring the heat.

People noticed. Some stared, but most just nodded, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Even Jen, catching his eye, gave a brief salute before returning to her post by the fire.

He watched the green, the lines of lanterns, the children chasing scraps of colored cloth. He listened to the music—someone had a fiddle, and someone else a drum, and together they made a sound that was rough but better than silence.

He sipped the soup, found it perfect, and let himself smile.

I've watched this town for so long, he thought. Maybe it's time I lived in it, too.

He finished the soup, set the bowl on a barrel, and drifted toward the center of the green.

The wind at his back was not the old, restive thing, but something gentler, a current that nudged him forward, out of habit and into company.

It was enough.

CHAPTER 18

By the time Knodalon ducked into the Broken Claw, the celebration had been whittled down to its core: a ring of regulars at the bar, two knots of late lingerers deep in their stories, and the four adventurers at a back table, backs hunched around a rough parchment illuminated by the uncertain glow of oil lamps. The storm of the day's revels had spent itself; the laughter hung in the rafters, the floor was sticky with spilled beer and sweet cider, and Sam moved among the wreckage with a mop and a will, her movements more precise than the chaos around her.

Knodalon took his ale at the bar. From here he could see the whole room, the vantage framed by the gleam of copper mugs and the honest scratch of wood on wood. The four adventurers had started out tight with victory, but the candlemarks and the drink had turned them inward, their voices now muffled and urgent as they conspired over the map.

He saw Sam catch his eye in the bar mirror, her good brow raised in question. He nodded—just a tilt of the chin—and she poured him another, the gesture so practiced it was less an offer and more an understanding: You're going to need it, old man.

He watched her work, watched the way she handled the regulars

and the glory-chasers who clung to the fringes, desperate for a scrap of adventure to take home. Sam had always had a knack for keeping the peace. Now, the peace had grown teeth and a purpose, and the only ones who didn't know it yet were the last few mercenaries at the far table, their faces pinched with a bitterness that would need more than beer to dissolve.

"Look," the blue-haired leader said, and spread the map with a flourish that sent two mugs tilting. She'd worn the same jacket every day of the campaign—now it looked more like a flag of surrender than armor. Her fingers traced the inked line that split the parchment, the boundary freshly scribed in midnight blue.

The swordsman, one arm in a sling, leaned over the map. "Here's the demarcation," he said, the word as awkward as a boot on the wrong foot. "The Enchantress fixed it. Crystal's gone, but the fence holds."

He ran a stubby finger along the curve of the border, knocking crumbs onto the newly drawn kingdom. "That's the new edge of goblin country. No one passes without leave. On either side."

A scatter of applause from the table nearest, where the baker's daughter and two of her friends had set up a kind of private parliament. Someone whistled; someone else raised a mug and downed it in tribute. But the sound was more question than celebration, and the blue-haired leader saw it.

"We didn't fight," she said. "That's what you want to know. Nobody fought. We talked. We argued. Then we put the stone down and let it do the talking."

The youngest of the party—a red-faced boy with a voice not yet settled—grinned, "The goblins were pissed at first. But then they realized they got more land than if we'd fought. Less dead, too."

Sam, polishing the bar with a rag, smirked at the word "pissed." The comment had an edge, but also a pride, like a child showing off a scraped knee. She looked at Knodalon in the glass again, then at the blue-haired woman. "You make it sound so easy," Sam said, loud enough to carry. "Was it?"

The table stilled. The blue-haired leader shook her head, her hair casting shadows on the map. "No. But it was right."

The swordsman tried to lift his mug and failed; the blue-haired woman poured him a fresh one. "Humans who wanted to stay, stayed. Goblins who wanted their home, got it. The rest moved on. No razing, no razzle-dazzle. Just... boundaries."

One of the mercenaries, a brawler with too much shoulder for his own shirt, grunted from across the room. "You're telling me we lost the war to a fence?"

"You didn't lose anything," the blue-haired woman said, not unkindly. "No one did. That's the point."

The mercenary slumped, then snorted and threw back his drink, but didn't press further.

Knodalon found himself smiling, the old tension in his jaw eased for the first time in fortnights. He sipped his beer and let the words roll over him. The blue-haired leader's voice was thin but true, the kind that could cut through the static of ego and tradition and leave only the sinew of fact. He had known her type before: not a hero by design, but a fixer. The world ran on their quiet, stubborn will.

He glanced around the Claw. The townsfolk had come for the story, but they stayed for the validation: that peace was cleverer than violence, and that history could be rewritten if you cared to try.

Sam drifted closer, topping off Knodalon's mug with a practiced tip. "You like how it turned out?" she said, keeping her eyes on the adventure table.

He shrugged, then remembered to answer with words. "It was the only way it could end, if you didn't want it to start again tomorrow."

Sam nodded, finished wiping the rim of the glass, and set it in front of him. "You're a good watcher, Knodalon. But it's better when you talk."

He let the compliment stand. Sam had earned the right to deliver them.

The map had become the main attraction now. The blue-haired woman walked the regulars and the skeptics through the changes: Here, the trade road would stand open, policed by both sides. Here, the lake's rights would be shared—fishing for the goblins, boating for the humans, with neither allowed to arm themselves in the other's

waters. Here, the old ruins would serve as a border post, a neutral zone. Anyone could cross, if they followed the law.

It was simple, almost ridiculous. But as she explained, Knodalon saw the logic unspool in the faces around her. Even the mercenaries, who had come for glory, now tilted their heads, running the math of risk and reward.

"What about the holdouts?" asked one of the local farmers, a thin man with frostbitten ears and a voice that cut like a spade.

"There were a few," the blue-haired leader admitted. "But not as many as you'd think. Most folks don't care about who rules them, as long as it's not a monster."

A ripple of agreement passed through the room. The barman, silent until now, broke in: "And the Goblin King? What did he think?"

The blue-haired woman sat back, balancing on two legs of her chair. "He thought he was being cheated. Then he counted his subjects, counted his land, and realized he'd doubled both without losing a single fight. He called us thieves, but I think he liked the outcome."

One of her companions—the archer, still picking bread from his teeth—chuckled. "He wanted us to name the boundary after him."

That drew a laugh from the room, the kind that reset the mood and let the Claw settle back into its old, comfortable rut. Someone put a coin on the bar for another round. Someone else called out for a song, but nobody obliged; it was a night for talk, not music.

Knodalon watched the map, watched the way it drew people in. He liked the idea of a world defined by lines that bent but did not break. He liked that the heroes had become civil servants, and that the true drama was now the negotiation of markets and marriages, not the spilling of blood.

He sipped his beer and let the feeling blossom in his chest.

At the far end of the table, the blue-haired woman caught his eye. She nodded—once, barely perceptible—and he nodded back. It was a conversation, and it was enough.

"Good fences make good neighbors," he said, softly, but the words carried.

Sam looked up from the bar, met his gaze, and grinned. "Was that you or the beer?"

He tipped his mug in salute. "At this time, there's not much difference."

The blue-haired woman was folding up the map now, showing the others how to crease the lines so they'd open in the right places, so the next town could see what was possible. The townsfolk, their skepticism dissolved in the shared relief, came up one by one to ask questions, to point out the old feuds, to test the logic of the thing. And every time, the blue-haired woman answered, patient as rain, her voice quiet but unyielding.

Knodalon let himself lean back, his spine pressed against the cool stone of the bar. He watched the way the Claw absorbed the story, the way even the diehards at the edge of the room found themselves drifting closer, unable to resist the gravity of something new and true.

He remembered Nimarith's words, somewhere far above the world: Build something better.

He looked at the map, then at the people gathered around it, and thought: Maybe we just did.

He drained the last of his beer, set the mug down with care, and let himself listen to the murmur of peace. It was not the quiet he had known before; it was richer, layered with the voices of a hundred small ambitions, each now free to chase its own end without fear of erasure.

The blue-haired woman wrapped the map, tied it with a bit of twine from Sam's own stash, and handed it to the archer, who tucked it away like a secret. The swordsman, his arm still useless, rolled his shoulders and said, "We head south tomorrow. Word is the dwarves have their own mess brewing."

The red-faced boy laughed. "We'll fix it, too. Or at least we'll make them mad enough to try."

Knodalon watched them file out, the four of them moving as one, each step lighter than the last. He felt a strange pang at their departure, but also a satisfaction: the job was done, and the next job would be waiting, as it always was.

He looked up. The bar was nearly empty now. Sam was stacking chairs with the ferocity of a woman who knew every minute past

midnight would come due in the morning. She saw him lingering and waved him off.

"Go on, Knodalon. Get some rest. You're not as young as you pretend."

He smiled, then realized he had been smiling for some time.

He stood, joints popping, and made his way to the door. The last thing he saw before stepping into the night was the map, lying on the table where the blue-haired woman had left it. A single lamp burned beside it, casting the border in shadow and gold.

He stepped outside.

The air outside the Broken Claw was cold enough to sting. The contrast made Knodalon pause on the step, pulling the door closed behind him with a precision that stifled the celebration's last echo. For a moment he stood in the negative space between warmth and world, letting his eyes adjust to the midnight blue and the hush that followed it.

He started home. The trade road was empty, but not abandoned; puddles shivered in the moonlight, their surfaces patched with the dark signatures of passing boots and cartwheels. He let his feet find the old rhythm. With every stride, the pulse of the Claw faded, replaced by a quieter energy that threaded through the road.

The night had its own version of ceremony. Banners of mist rose and fell along the water's edge, gathering at the margin of dock and shore like reluctant witnesses to the day's end. Above, a slice of moon painted the lake in a ragged, silver scar. The lights from the town's windows shimmered in the reflection, each one duplicated, made fragile by the faintest touch of wind.

Knodalon's storehouse sat at the farthest reach of the trade road, its black silhouette cut sharp against the sky. He noted the perfection of its lines—how, even in moonlight, the wood gave off a muted luster, the hinges never rusted, the door never off its plumb. No one had ever painted it, but it wore the years better than any home in the valley.

He crossed the packed earth of the yard, boots silent on the frozen ground. At the threshold he hesitated, then made a small show of brushing the dust from his coat, as if the wind alone deserved the satisfaction of seeing him a little rumpled.

The bench was there, as always, to the left of the door. He lowered himself onto it, expecting the usual creak of protest, but the bench had learned his shape; it accepted him without judgment, only the faintest pop as his weight settled.

He sat for a while, not thinking, just being. It was a new feeling, this refusal to retreat behind the old routines of watchfulness and calculation. He let his head rest against the wood. With his left hand, he traced the grain of the seat, the line worn smooth by his own habit. It was not ownership—he'd never cared for the idea—but it was belonging, and the distinction made all the difference.

The lake was so calm tonight that it doubled the moon, a trick Knodalon admired. In the distance, a bird tested the darkness with a single note, then went silent again. From the town came the dull, even rhythm of someone splitting kindling, prepping for the morning bake. It would be Makota, no doubt, unable to sleep, measuring out tomorrow with the same stubborn efficiency as she measured flour.

He closed his eyes. The world didn't vanish—if anything, it grew clearer. The ley lines that underpinned the town still hummed, but there was no urgency, no edge. The fence held. The minor gods, cowed by the events on the green, nursed their grievances in private, but none dared try the old tricks. He could sense them at the boundaries, pacing, waiting for a sign of weakness. It made him smile.

He thought of the night's words, the way the blue-haired leader had made the map into a living thing, a future that could bend and flex instead of just shattering under pressure. He thought of Sam's laughter, of the swordman's quiet pain, of the way even the mercenaries had found peace in the clarity of their loss. It was all the world he had ever asked for, and it was his.

But the biggest change was in the way he watched it. For the first time, he was not waiting for the world to fail; he was watching to see how well it could succeed.

He let the wind run its fingers through his beard, the gesture familiar, but now an invitation rather than a challenge. He wondered if this was what Nimarith had meant by innovation: not the invention of new gods or new magics, but the simple, stubborn willingness to stay.

Behind him, the storehouse radiated its own perfection, a small,

contained miracle. Within, every grain of rice, every barrel of fish, every seed and spool and length of twine waited in a suspended moment, untouched by rot or worry. The magic that kept it so had not faded, and would not; it was a constant in the world, a promise kept without effort.

But Knodalon himself was changed. He felt the cost of caring in his bones, but it was an ache he chose, and would choose again.

The night deepened. He listened to the small sounds: the tick of cooling wood, the liquid hush of water against the dock, the far-off scuffle of a dog patrolling for scraps. The world, settling in for the long candlemarks before dawn.

He drew in a breath, and when he exhaled, it was not a sigh, but a statement.

He would watch. He would wait.

And when the world called for him, he would answer—not as a stranger, but as one of its own.

The horizon was empty, but for the first time in centuries, he looked at it with hope.

He closed his eyes, not to escape, but to hold the moment inside him a little longer.

In the distance, someone—maybe a child, maybe a minor god newly shamed into virtue—laughed in their sleep, and the sound carried all the way across the lake.

Knodalon smiled. The bench remembered, and so did he.

It was enough.

EPILOGUE

The first light slid over the lake's surface in such a way that it made every ripple, every grain of silt, complicit in the illusion of perfection. The water, for a rare and precious moment, was a sheet of glass—utterly still, utterly blue, punctuated only by the lazy drift of mist and the dark, twin outlines of two men standing near the edge. The world reflected so exactly that even the men's movements seemed choreographed, their gestures synchronized across the boundary between sky and water.

Alred was the first to break the spell. He stooped, grunted, and straightened a barrel that had toppled sometime in the night. The sound was not loud, but in the morning hush it rang like a challenge, and Alred, unwilling to let the moment pass, thumped the side of the barrel as if daring it to misbehave again.

"You know," he said, not looking up, "I think the world's finally remembered how to keep itself together."

Calder did not answer at once. He was kneeling at the bow of a small boat, a tangle of net on his lap and the thin knife of sunlight at his back. His hands moved slow and sure, teasing knots apart, splicing frayed ends, finding the logic in the chaos by touch alone. Calder's beard was short and neat; his hair, what was left of it, lay flat against

his skull, as if it too had been pressed into shape by years of wind and salt. He gave the net one last tug, then set it down and dusted his palms on his trousers.

"It's about time," he said. His voice was rougher than Alred's, but warmer, the sound of driftwood on stone. "Felt like every day was a trick for a while there."

Alred straightened, stretched his back, and regarded the barrel with a satisfaction that bordered on paternal. "Three days now," he said. "Three days and nothing's gone missing, nothing's grown legs. Even the ledgers add up."

He tapped the rim of the barrel, then set about inspecting the others in the row, nudging each one into precise alignment. "Never had this happen before. I can leave a sack of flour on the stoop and it'll still be there when I come back. It's unnatural, is what it is."

Calder grunted, but it was a companionable sound. He gathered the net and tucked it under his arm, then climbed out of the boat and onto the narrow spit of packed earth between the water and the storehouse. The ground was cold, but he stood with his bare feet braced and solid, as if he had always belonged there.

"Maybe it's natural for things to run right, once in a while," Calder said. "Not everything needs a hand pushing it off the rail."

Alred made a show of considering this. He pulled a small ledger from the pocket of his apron, flipped it open with the practiced flick of his thumb, and ran a finger down the page. "I suppose," he said. "But I'd gotten used to the madness. You notice how the children haven't once complained about missing shoes?"

Calder smiled, the lines at the corners of his eyes deepening. "My Ivy lost a boot last sennight. It turned up in the firewood pile, clean and dry."

"Exactly," said Alred, and snapped the ledger closed. "It's like the town's decided to behave."

Calder's gaze slid up the slope to where Knodalon's bench waited, the wood still dark with dew and the old man himself barely more than a smudge against the morning. "Maybe it's not the town," he said. "Maybe it's him."

Alred followed the line of Calder's sight. He pursed his lips, as if

weighing a grain of salt on his tongue. "Maybe," he allowed, but his voice was soft, almost reverent. "If it is, I'm grateful."

They stood like that for a moment, not speaking, just letting the sun push the night out of the water and the chill out of their bones. Alred's hands drifted to his hips, then folded across his chest; Calder's found the old scars on his knuckles and worried them, a habit from years of hauling nets and wrangling lines.

Alred cleared his throat. "You got a catch this morning?"

"Enough for the Claw and the Weary Head," said Calder. "And a bit extra for the bakery, if Makota wants to try her luck with those fish pies again."

Alred winced. "Brave woman."

"Braver man, eating them." Calder chuckled, then tilted his chin at the storehouse. "You expecting your shipment today?"

"Supposedly." Alred checked the sun, as if it might confirm the rumors of a delivery. "Drier came up from Crestport last night, said the wagons were on time for once. Never thought I'd see that."

Calder hefted the net and set it on a low rack to dry. "We're getting soft, is what's happening."

Alred grinned. "I could get used to it."

The conversation lapsed into a silence that was not empty, but full—layered with the ease of men who had known one another long enough to speak without speaking. They watched the lake, the storehouse, the neat rows of barrels and the tidy bundles of rope. Above, a flock of ducks skimmed the surface, their wings hissing as they cut through the wet air.

After a while, Calder spoke again, but quieter. "You really think he did it? The old man?"

Alred shrugged, but there was a carefulness to the gesture. "I don't know. But when things went sideways, it was always him you saw on the edge of it. Not causing trouble, but... noticing it."

Calder nodded. "My wife says he's a god."

"Hah! I say he's a ghost."

They both laughed, the sound low and private.

Calder glanced at the bench one last time. "Whatever he is, it's working. I say we leave him to it."

Alred echoed the sentiment with a small, deliberate bow of the head. "Agreed."

The men gathered their tools—Alred with his ledger and his new sense of order, Calder with the net and a fresh memory of the lake's morning peace. They walked together up the slope, trading the last bits of news and rumor, then parted at the path that split for the bakery and the fish shop.

Neither looked back, but each left with the certainty that the day would proceed as planned, and that if it didn't, someone would be there to set it right again.

On the bench, Knodalon watched the whole exchange, the words and the silences, the way each man carried the weight of routine like a badge or a shield. He did not move. He did not need to. The world, for once, was running as it should.

He let himself savor the moment, the soft, invisible boundary between chaos and comfort, and thought: This is why I stayed.

Then he closed his eyes, and listened as the wind played at the surface of the water, whispering the promise of another day well-spent.



By the time the day dimmed to the color of cooling coals, the Broken Claw was alive with the peculiar ease that only comes when a town's troubles have been thoroughly, comprehensively solved. The pub's lamps, trimmed at sunset and now burning in earnest, cast honey-colored circles across the wooden tables, and the glow made even the most battered of mugs and faces seem gilded, a little more complete than they had been at noon.

Sam had claimed her place behind the bar, a long scar catching the light along her cheek but otherwise betraying nothing of the old worries. She polished glasses with a diligence that would have made the most obsessive shopkeeper jealous, but it was not the neurotic polish of the anxious—it was the careful, deliberate motion of a woman who now had the luxury of taking her time.

The floorboards, worn smooth by generations of boots, remembered every footfall; they creaked and shivered as patrons filtered in and out, but the music of wood on wood was part of the Claw's soul. The trestle tables—each with a history older than some of the regulars—hosted their usual constellation of stories: a party of merchants from down-river, a pair of drovers arguing over some inscrutable matter of herd management, and, at the far end, a family celebrating the tenth birthday of their oldest son with a pie so enormous it barely fit the table.

The windows, which had once whistled with drafts and rumors of worse, now offered only the dull thump of evening wind. The fire in the hearth was real, and enough; it flickered against the stone and made the shadows dance, but tonight they danced in rhythm, content to stay put.

Sam ran her cloth along the rim of a pewter stein, holding it up to the light with a craftsman's satisfaction. The glass was clear, the metal unpitted. She nodded, as if the world had finally come around to her way of thinking, and set the stein with a solid thunk on the shelf behind her.

At the bar, three locals—two regulars and a man who wanted to be—leaned in close, their shoulders touching as they dissected the day's news. The man in the middle, with a patch of white hair above his ear, raised his voice so that it carried to Sam.

"—and then, I swear, the keys were right where I'd left them. Not a single one missing."

Sam rolled her eyes, but there was no malice in it. "It's a miracle, Oles. Next you'll tell me you found your own ledger without help."

Oles beamed, pleased to have an audience. "I did! I did, Sam. First time in six years."

"Maybe you're just getting old," said the woman to his left, elbowing him. Her accent placed her from the southern counties, but her hands—broad and strong—were pure North Pointe. "Or maybe the gods finally learned to mind their business."

Sam topped off the woman's mug. "That'll be the day," she said. "They're just biding their time. Waiting for someone to get lazy."

The third man, younger, dressed in the muted colors of a traveling

scribe, smiled into his drink. "I think it's the fence. People respect a good boundary."

Sam poured herself a splash of the house's private barrel, then leaned forward, elbows on the bar. "It's not the fence. It's people who know how to live together." She took a slow sip, savoring the warmth. "We just needed a chance to remember how."

At the birthday table, the boy—pale hair sticking up in all directions—held a slice of pie aloft as if presenting it to an invisible court. He tried to blow out the lone candle, failed twice, then succeeded on the third, drawing a ragged cheer from his parents and the other children pressed in around the table. The mother dabbed his chin with a napkin, the gesture so practiced and gentle that it must have come from years of similar rituals.

In the back corner, the merchants had turned to maps and ledger books, the clink of coins and the scritch of pencils making a steady counterpoint to the buzz of conversation. They argued, but only in the friendly, competitive way of men who wanted the same things and saw no harm in wrangling over the details. Every so often, one would look up, scan the room, then return to the debate with a half-smile.

At intervals, Sam's eyes flicked to the door, then the windows, then the bar's perimeter, as if keeping inventory on the happiness of her patrons. Nothing amiss; the world inside the Claw was as it should be, and Sam, for the first time in months, found herself smiling for no reason at all.

A group of travelers entered, the wind peeling in with them for a heartbeat before the door thumped closed. They stamped off the dust of the road, unshouldered packs, and eased themselves onto stools with the loose-limbed relief of people who had gone far and were glad to have stopped. Sam sized them up with a glance, then poured a round without waiting for the order.

"First drink's on the house tonight," she called, voice carrying easy over the chatter.

One of the travelers, a woman with the rough hands and gentle manner of a farmer, raised her mug in salute. "Heard there was trouble here last sennight," she said, pitching her voice to the general company. "Doesn't look like a place that's seen trouble."

Sam grinned, drying her hands on a towel. "We had a scare, is all. But North Pointe bounces back."

"Bounced back stronger," added someone, not to be left out.

The birthday boy, emboldened by pie and candle smoke, scampered up to the bar and pointed at Sam's private drink. "Can I have one?"

"Not for another eight years, darling," Sam said, tousling his hair. She poured him a glass of the tavern's best berry cordial, slid it across the bar, and winked. "This'll do for now."

The boy's mother caught Sam's eye, nodded thanks, then shepherded her son back to his seat.

As the evening stretched, the sounds in the Claw braided together—laughter, the thump of mugs on wood, the scrape of chairs, the hum of old songs half-remembered and carried on by those with a head for drink. The candles on the tables guttered, then flared, but not once did a draft threaten their flame. The cutlery, set out in neat rows, stayed put. And when a sock came loose from a traveler's boot, it was because the traveler had loosened it himself, not some impish god or errant wind.

Sam leaned against the bar, arms folded, and surveyed her domain. She watched as the scribe traded jokes with the drovers, as the merchants closed their books and clinked glasses in a private toast, as the birthday family packed up to leave, the boy's face sticky with the last of the pie. She watched and listened, and with every passing minute felt a little more certain that this—this—was what a town was supposed to be.

At closing, as the last regulars drifted out into the night, Sam polished the bar to a high shine, then stood in the center of the room, arms crossed, and inhaled the silence. She looked around at the empty tables, the chairs upended, the floor swept clean of every crumb and secret, and smiled.

Then she blew out the last lamp, the smoke trailing upward like a benediction, and slipped out the door, locking it behind her with a final, satisfying click.

Outside, the night was cold, but the lights from the other shops

and houses glimmered across the green, little islands of warmth in the darkness.

Sam glanced up toward the storehouse, where a single candle burned in the window, then started home, her boots striking sparks from the cobbles.

All was right with her world.

Knodalon resumed his bench in the time between orange and blue, when the last of the sun fell like gold dust across the water and the air seemed thick with the promise of a simple, quiet night. He sat as he always had—shoulders slightly hunched, legs drawn up under him, hands resting in a gentle clasp—but something in the angle of his posture, in the way his eyes lingered on the ordinary motions of the town, had shifted. The world was no longer a stage; it was a hearth, and he, at long last, was sitting close enough to feel the heat.

The storehouse, behind him, was silent and sure. Its timbers, black with age and weather, caught the sunset in streaks and slivers, a hundred tiny mirrors for the last light. The stones at his feet were cold, but the memory of the day's warmth lingered, and Knodalon let himself lean back, content to let his weight be carried by the old, familiar bench.

He watched as the town moved toward evening in slow, deliberate steps. The bakery's windows glowed, the haze of flour and sugar dusting the glass from within; a child ran out with a loaf under one arm and a handful of crumbs streaming behind, pursued by a terrier and the shriek of a younger sibling. Across the green, someone hammered a loose board back into place, the rhythm steady, unhurried.

Knodalon watched it all, and where once he would have catalogued every inefficiency, every potential for improvement, now he noticed only the care that went into each act. The baker wiping her hands on a floury apron, the constable—Jen—pausing to listen to a story from a passing merchant, the children arranging sticks and

stones into a fortress on the edge of the green. Not a perfect world, but one perfectly content to be itself.

He let his attention settle on the path that wound from the lakeshore up to the main road. Alred was there, arranging crates in a tidy column, double-checking each lid and mark, then scribbling in his ledger with the concentration of a man for whom the logic of numbers was the highest comfort. The shopkeeper's lips moved as he counted, perhaps out of habit, perhaps because the voice in his head was no longer enough to keep the world in balance.

On the dock, Calder stood with his son—Dayr, barely six, stubborn as a root and twice as likely to trip over his own feet. Calder had a length of net stretched between his hands, and was showing the boy how to find a weak spot, how to mend with patience rather than force. Dayr squinted in the fading light, tongue poking from the corner of his mouth, but his hands were steady and sure, and when he'd made the last knot, Calder ruffled his hair and offered the kind of one-armed hug that said more than words could ever manage.

It was a small thing, and Knodalon knew that, but he felt it as an echo in his own chest—a recognition, maybe, or a longing for a lesson he'd never learned.

A voice called from the road. Alred and Calder, finished with their work, met at the midpoint, and for a moment their conversation was lost to the sigh of the breeze and the thrum of the lake. Knodalon watched as they compared notes, hands gesturing in the shorthand of old friends. They laughed—he could see it in the way their heads tipped back, in the soft collapse of shoulders—and then they both turned to look at him, as if they knew he was watching.

He returned their gaze, and for the first time in memory, he did not look away.

Alred raised a hand, the motion casual but deliberate. Calder nodded, then motioned to Dayr, who waved with both arms, reckless and exuberant. Knodalon surprised himself by raising a hand in reply, a small, open-palmed gesture that felt strange but not unpleasant.

The two men smiled—genuine, not the polite masks of before—then made their way home, shoes quiet on the path.

A child, one of the bakery twins, detoured from her fortress and

skidded to a halt in front of the bench. She hesitated, eyes darting between the white beard and the ancient hands, then offered a shy, crumb-dusted smile.

"Good night, sir," she said, voice high and clear.

Knodalon considered her, considered the hundreds of years he'd lived by refusing every invitation to belong. He managed a smile—just a flicker, but enough.

"Good night," he replied, and his voice, for once, held no echo of wind or storm. Just the warmth of the bench, and the cool certainty of a world restored.

The girl skipped off, humming to herself, and Knodalon settled in, content to let the last of the daylight fade into memory.

Above, the stars pricked through the blue in a slow, deliberate cadence. The moon, not yet risen, held off just long enough to let the town remember the shape of darkness, to remember that the night could be friend as easily as foe.

Knodalon sat, hands folded on his lap, and watched as the magic of the place—real, human magic—ran its course. The air was full of the smell of bread and woodsmoke and the river's slow decay; the sound of laughter drifted from the open windows of the Claw, carried down by the wind and softened by distance.

He let himself feel it, the belonging, and was surprised to find it pleasant. Not the fierce pride of ownership, but the easy, forgiving comfort of a watcher who has finally learned that the watching, itself, can be enough.

I am no longer retired, he thought, and the words felt true in a way nothing else ever had.

The stars gathered, the world grew quiet, and Knodalon watched, eyes half-lidded, as the town wrapped itself in peace.

There would be new stories tomorrow.

Tonight, there was only the certainty of a place in the world, and the memory of a child's wave.

Knodalon closed his eyes and let the darkness carry him home.

AFTERWORD

This was a very unusual book for the *Tales from the Broken Claw* series—in a lot of ways. For one, I really wanted to explore Knodalon's story, but I knew it needed to happen mainly from his own perspective—a somewhat more limited view than the previous novels have taken. I knew the tone and language would need to be different, to account for his ancient and immortal perspective. *That* took a lot of time, and I'm pretty pleased with the end result.

But writing this book also happened during the eve of my own retirement after close to 40-odd years of gainful employment. *What do I do now?* has been on my mind a lot. Sit back and watch the world go by? Mmm. Relaxing, but boring. Travel? Sure, although I've done enough of that to prefer a break. Write? Certainly <grin>. But *stay involved* is the answer I've come to—much as Knodalon has realized.

As I write this, I'm wrapping up outlining on *Stitches & Snake Oil*, the sixth of what I hope will be *twenty* installments in *Tales from the Broken Claw*. Book six will focus on Prudence, a young, single mother from a devastatingly conservative community, who has escaped into the world but very much keeps her past in close reach. She believes her shop's gift is to help her make perfectly fitted clothes for every customer, every time. But... surely that's just her own skill, not an

actual magical gift, right? Like Knodalon, Prudence may need to dig a little deeper to find her true calling in North Pointe.

I'd love to know which of the shopkeepers you'd like to learn about next! Drop by DonJones.com and click or tap the "HMU" page for instructions on how to contact me, and know that I deeply look forward to hearing from you. You'll also find buttons on the main page for "following" me on Amazon, GoodReads, and BookBub, enabling them to notify you when new novels are released. And, if you're a fan of getting behind the curtain and ahead of the crowd, I offer a newsletter where you can become a beta reader of new novels before they're released.

If you're also a fan of science fiction, I'm about a quarter way through *Imperium Galactica*, an epic, galaxy-spanning tale in the vein of *Dune* or the *Foundation* series. It's shaping up to be *huge*, and I hope you'll consider checking it out when it's released!

Until next time, may your bread be fresh and the wind be always at your back.

Don Jones

10th October, 2025 • Duck Creek Village, UT

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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.

Connect, get free novels and short stories, and learn about upcoming releases by visiting Don's author website at DonJones.com.

