

The Door That Forgot the Street

BOOK 1 OF THE WAYWARD DINERS



Emoji Soup in 6 Languages

NORTHSTAR PRIME

WAYWARD DINERS • NORTHSTAR PRIME

THE DOOR THAT FORGOT THE STREET

Wayward Diners • Book One

NORTHSTAR PRIME

The Door That Forgot the Street

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This is an original work of speculative comic fiction.

*Names, characters, restaurants, institutions, menus, receipts, and events are
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Prologue: The Guide That Wasn't a Guide

In which an instructional object declines to instruct, a map behaves like a menu, and a receipt becomes more honest than the person reading it.

There are books which tell a person where to go, which is helpful if the person in question is capable of going there and the place in question has agreed to be a place.

The menu of Emoji Soup was not one of those books.

It did not tell anyone where to go. It told them what they were trying not to need. This made it unpopular with the sort of people who preferred maps, ratings, and lists titled *Ten Life-Changing Dumplings Under Twelve Dollars*, which had the advantage of being both optimistic and nearly always wrong.

Flocc found the menu folded into a takeout bag that had never contained takeout. The bag was warm. This was the first problem. The second problem was that the bag had his name on it, written in a hand he recognized from school forms he had never completed.

Inside was a receipt.

EMOJI SOUP PRELIMINARY RECEIPT

Bread: paid before arrival. Soup: pending comprehension. Sauce: waiver recommended. Subtotal: one apology, unsent. Tip: call your mother, or equivalent living witness.

The receipt was itemized, which offended him. If the universe insisted on humiliating a man, it could at least have the courage to do it in paragraph form.

He turned the receipt over. On the back was a map of Southeast Portland drawn by someone who had either never been there or had been there so thoroughly that normal geography felt like an insulting simplification. Hawthorne bent into a question mark. Division divided itself. A small arrow pointed toward a block labeled:

EVERYWHERE / NOWHERE

Under that, in smaller letters:

Do not park in the loading zone unless you are willing to become cargo.

Flocc considered ignoring it, which is the traditional first step in any meaningful spiritual education.

Then he smelled bread.

The smell was not strong. Strong smells sell candles and betray garlic. This smell simply arrived and made the rest of the room seem underqualified.

Flocc picked up his keys.

The receipt warmed in his hand.

Somewhere a hostess wrote down his name, crossed it out, wrote it again more accurately, and set one place at a table that had been waiting since before the city learned how to pronounce itself.

Chapter 1: The Door That Forgot the Street

In which Flocch finds a restaurant that has no right to be where it is, receives bread he did not order, and learns that menus are not lists when they are old enough to know better.

The first mistake was assuming the restaurant was located somewhere.

This is a natural mistake, and it is made every day by people who have never had to find an address while hungry. Hunger changes geography. A sandwich can make a gas station visible from three blocks away. A good bakery can bend morning traffic around itself. A late-night taco truck can turn a parking lot into a place of pilgrimage, provided the salsa is honest and the folding chairs are only slightly damp.

Flocch was not, in the strict medical sense, starving. He had eaten a protein bar at 11:17 in the morning, three stale crackers at 1:04, and half a banana at 2:30, because the other half had developed an expression. But there is a difference between having introduced calories into the body and being fed. Calories are accounting. Being fed is recognition.

By 6:12 that evening, Flocch was walking down Southeast Hawthorne with the particular expression of a man whose phone had 8 percent battery, whose socks were wet in one small but spiritually significant place, and whose dinner plans had collapsed because the person he was supposed to meet had texted, "rain check?" without specifying which rain, which check, or whether punctuation had survived the relationship.

That was when he saw the sign.

EMOJI SOUP OPEN WHEN NEEDED

The door under the sign was painted the yellow of butter under good light. It had a brass handle shaped like a spoon, or possibly a question mark that had gained weight. In the window was a card printed in six columns. The first column contained emoji. The second contained English. The third contained marks that looked like a mathematician had tried to draw herbs. The fourth appeared to be prices. The fifth was blank. The sixth was not blank, but Flocch's eyes refused to agree about what it said.

He leaned closer. The first line showed a bowl, a loaf of bread, a small spiral, and a dot.

THE BREAD Price: already paid

Flocc checked the street behind him. People were walking past in the ordinary manner, which is to say they were all pretending not to be private disasters with bags. Nobody else seemed to notice the sign. A cyclist swerved around a pothole and shouted at a car. A bus sighed at the curb. Somewhere a dog barked with the conviction of a public commentator.

The door opened inward.

No bell rang. Bells are for establishments that wish to announce arrivals. Emoji Soup did not announce arrivals. It absorbed them.

Inside, the restaurant was larger than the storefront and smaller than the idea of restaurants in general. There were twelve tables, or nine, or possibly one table viewed from twelve angles. The walls were tiled in dark green and white. The floor had the slightly uneven dignity of old Portland buildings, the sort that imply the city was assembled by people with excellent intentions and unreliable levels.

A hostess stood by a wooden lectern. She wore a black apron and had a pencil behind one ear. She looked up from a book that was not the reservation book. It was too thick to be the reservation book and too amused to be any book that had ever been used for reservations.

"One?" she asked.

"I think so," said Flocc.

"That's enough."

She led him to a table near the window and placed a menu before him.

The menu was warm.

This was not a metaphor. It had the gentle heat of bread wrapped in a towel, of a mug held in both hands, of a sleeping laptop that had been doing something more complicated than it was designed to do. Flocc almost pulled his fingers back, then didn't. The warmth was not uncomfortable. It was intimate, which was worse.

"Water?" asked the hostess.

"Yes, please."

"Flat, sparkling, remembered, or necessary?"

Flocc looked up.

"Tap?"

The hostess nodded as if this were a brave compromise. "Tap is a kind of necessary."

She disappeared through a swinging door. Flocc looked at the menu.

It had six columns.

The first column was emoji: bowls, moons, breads, keys, leaves, hands, doors, clocks, knives, clouds, fish, eyes, and once, disturbingly, a small fax machine.

The second column was English, but not the comforting kind. The words were clear. The sentences were grammatical. The meanings stood just out of reach, like a cat that had decided affection was a theory.

The third column seemed culinary: simmer, fold, char, rest, rinse, bloom, steep, forgive.

The fourth column contained prices.

The fifth column contained what Flocc first thought were allergens, until he saw that one item listed "regret, fluorescent lighting, Thursdays."

The sixth column was Vorthaic.

He did not know that yet. At that moment he only knew that the marks looked like a hexagon had learned handwriting from a river. The symbols did not translate. They aligned. Every time he focused on one, it seemed to rotate slightly, not in space but in confidence.

The bread arrived.

Flocc had not ordered it. The bread did not care.

It was a small round loaf, torn open at the top, steam lifting from the center. Beside it was a dish of butter with a line of gold salt across it. The plate had no logo. The bread smelled like the first kitchen he could remember and one kitchen he had never been inside but missed anyway.

The hostess returned with water.

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

"No," she said. "You received it."

"Is there a difference?"

"There had better be."

He broke off a piece. The crust crackled. The inside pulled apart in shining threads. He put butter on it because civilization, for all its crimes, had produced butter knives, and one should honor the rare occasions when civilization gets something right.

He ate.

For three seconds, nothing happened.

This disappointed him, which embarrassed him, which made the bread taste better.

Then he remembered being seven years old and standing in his grandmother's kitchen while rain moved down the window in crooked lanes. He remembered a plastic cup with orange juice in it. He remembered a radio playing in another room. He remembered not

understanding that adults could be lonely. He remembered the smell of toast. He remembered being too small to reach the drawer where the good spoons lived.

The memory did not arrive like a flashback. It arrived like a waiter: quietly, with the correct plate.

Flocc swallowed.

The menu changed.

*THE FIRST THING YOU WERE GIVEN WITHOUT EARNING IT Price:
notice*

RECEIPT FRAGMENT 001

Item: The Bread. Need: first gift. Price tendered: notice, partial. Balance due: one act of attention in public. Storage instruction: do not refrigerate gratitude.

Flocc put both hands on the table.

Outside, Hawthorne continued being Hawthorne. Inside, the restaurant waited with the practiced patience of a place that had been waiting long before streets had names.

"I think," said Flocc to nobody in particular, "I may need a minute."

From somewhere in the kitchen, a voice called back:

"That's fine. We serve those."

Chapter 2: A Menu Is Not a List

In which Flocc attempts to order dinner, dinner refuses the chain of command, and a sauce bottle explains the importance of readable warnings.

Flocc gave himself a minute.

It arrived in a small ceramic cup.

This was unreasonable, but it was also useful, which made it difficult to object to on philosophical grounds. The cup had no handle. Steam rose from it in a shape that briefly resembled a calendar being erased. It smelled faintly of mint, rain, and the inside of a new notebook.

"Is this the minute?" he asked.

The hostess looked down at the cup as if checking the order. "Most of it."

"What happened to the rest?"

"You spent it asking that."

Flocc took a sip. The tea tasted exactly like the silence after someone finally tells the truth and before anyone decides what to do with it.

He looked back at the menu. The six columns had not become less impossible while he was distracted. If anything, they had become more professionally typeset.

"I would like to order," he said, putting the confidence on the sentence the way a person puts a chair under a doorknob.

"That is a popular misunderstanding," said the hostess.

"Ordering?"

"Liking."

Flocc blinked at her.

"You may ask for dinner," she said. "Ordering is too managerial."

"Fine. I would like to ask for dinner."

"Better."

She produced a pencil from behind her ear and held it above a pad that had not been in her hand a moment earlier. The pad was labeled Statements Made Under Mild Hunger.

"What do you want?" she asked.

This question was simple in the way a trapdoor is simple. Flocc studied the menu, searching for a dish that behaved like a dish. There was

soup. There was bread. There were noodles. There was a theorem involving mushrooms, a pudding involving a word too long to trust, and something called Permit Pickles, which sounded like the kind of thing Portland would accidentally require for a food cart and then defend in committee.

"Soup," he said.

The hostess wrote nothing.

"Could you be less specific?"

"Isn't soup already general?"

"Not here."

He pointed to the menu. "It says The Soup."

"Yes."

"Then I want The Soup."

"No," she said, not unkindly. "You want to stop having to choose."

Flocc felt himself prepare a defense, then noticed the preparation. It was an intricate little machine, built out of irritation and embarrassment, with a small bell on top that rang whenever anyone came too close to accuracy.

"Maybe," he said.

The pencil touched the pad.

"Maybe is edible," said the hostess. "Barely."

The menu changed again. The prices slid sideways, rearranging themselves with the soft confidence of objects that had unionized. One line became brighter.

 + Ø :: THE SOUP :: simmer/wait :: origin :: nothing :: contains everything but explains nothing

"What does that mean?" asked Flocc.

"Which column?"

"All of them."

"Good. You're reading across."

She turned the menu gently, not enough to change the words, only enough to change his confidence.

"A menu is not a list," she said. "A list is what a person makes when they wish the world would stop speaking back. A menu is a negotiation."

"Between me and the kitchen?"

"Between appetite and accuracy."

Flocc looked down at the table. The bread sat there looking innocent, which was suspicious in bread.

A small tray appeared beside it. On the tray were ten tiny bottles of sauce, each no taller than his thumb. Their labels were black, green, red, and gold. The lettering was dramatic enough to suggest danger but legible enough to suggest liability insurance.

The first bottle read:

VORATH SAUCE LAB Fire, fruit, acid, witness.

Under that, in much plainer type:

KEEP REFRIGERATED. SMALL-BATCH EXPERIMENTAL SAUCE. NOT SHELF-STABLE UNLESS VALIDATED.

"That is oddly practical," said Flocc.

"The impossible is not excused from labeling requirements."

He picked up a bottle called Black Orchard Adobo. A dark sauce moved inside it like a storm considering a career in fruit. The Vorthaic line on the back read:

 +  +  :: char/blend/log :: courage in shadow :: gloves and honesty :: smoke must not hide the fruit

"Am I supposed to put this on the bread?"

"You are supposed to understand why you asked."

"I asked because it was there."

"That is how most disasters begin, and several useful sandwiches."

Flocc set the bottle down. Another one caught his eye: Gold Pheasant Peach. The label showed a bright bird rendered in a style that somehow looked both ancient and ready for a business card. The sauce inside was gold-orange, with little flecks suspended in it like sparks that had agreed to behave.

"That one looks friendly," he said.

"Auspicious does not mean mild."

"Is that a warning?"

"It's a law."

The hostess placed a small spoon beside the tray. It had a handle shaped like a key.

"Choose one sauce," she said.

"I thought I wasn't ordering."

"You're practicing consequence."

Flocc considered the ten bottles. There were safer choices and louder choices and one bottle so dark it seemed to be remembering the absence of light personally. He selected Green Chapel Serrano-Lime because it looked like it might forgive him faster.

He touched a drop to the bread.

The sauce was bright, immediate, and green in the way spring is green when it has not yet made promises about the rest of the year. Heat followed, not as an attack, but as a correction. His mouth watered. His eyes did too, but only one of those facts was culinary.

"Well?" asked the hostess.

"It tastes like I should clean my apartment."

"That's a common pairing."

The pad in her hand filled itself in.

RECEIPT FRAGMENT 002

Item: A Menu Is Not a List. Need: humility before options. Price tendered: one wrong assumption, surrendered reluctantly. Sauce selected: Green Chapel Serrano-Lime. Balance due: ask a better question before the soup arrives. Label note: warnings are a form of kindness.

Flocc read the receipt twice.

"What is the better question?" he asked.

The hostess smiled, and for the first time it seemed less like customer service and more like weather clearing over a road he had already missed once.

"Not what do I want," she said. "What is still hungry?"

From the kitchen came the sound of a ladle striking the side of a pot.

The soup had heard him.

Chapter 3: The Receipt That Knew Too Much

In which Flocc disputes a charge, the charge becomes more accurate, and the soup demonstrates that warmth is not the same as comfort.

The soup arrived in a bowl that had clearly been practicing understatement.

It was white ceramic, chipped once on the rim, and otherwise so ordinary that Flocc distrusted it immediately. The soup inside was amber, or green, or the brown of a paper bag after rain. It depended on how directly he looked at it. Steam rose in careful loops. The smell was not one smell but a committee of smells that had somehow reached agreement: onion, mushroom, pepper, toasted bread, old rain, new apology, and something that might have been chicken if chickens had ever understood regret.

The spoon was missing.

Flocc noticed this with relief. A missing spoon was a normal restaurant problem. A man could complain about a missing spoon without being forced to examine the structural defects in his personality.

"Excuse me," he said.

The hostess appeared with the timing of a sentence completing itself.

"Yes?"

"I don't have a spoon."

"No."

"Could I have one?"

"Could you?"

Flocc closed his eyes briefly. "May I have one?"

"That depends on the dispute."

"What dispute?"

She placed a narrow slip of paper beside the bowl. It was the receipt from earlier, except now it had grown longer, as receipts do when restaurants discover printers and accountants discover revenge.

INTERIM RECEIPT: DISPUTED TENDER

Bread: received. Notice: partial. Soup: ready. Spoon: held pending acknowledgment. Outstanding charge: one apology, unsent. Late fee: three years of explaining why it was complicated.

"This is not accurate," said Flocc, which was the traditional opening statement of people who feared that something was accurate.

"You may dispute the charge."

"Good."

The hostess set a form on the table. The top read:

CUSTOMER DENIAL, TEMPORARY For use when a diner disagrees with a bill because the bill has noticed something first.

Below that were three lines.

Name of person not apologized to:

Reason apology was delayed:

Reason delay was mistaken for wisdom:

Flocc stared at the form. The soup steamed. The missing spoon remained missing in a way that seemed organized.

"This is intrusive," he said.

"So is hunger."

"Hunger happens to me."

"Yes," said the hostess. "That is why it is so informative."

He picked up the pencil. It was short, yellow, and judgmental. He wrote the first letter of a name, then stopped. The letter sat there looking less like handwriting than evidence.

The soup changed color.

It became the color of a living room he had not visited in three years. Not a dramatic living room. No one had thrown anything there. No one had said the unforgivable thing loudly enough to make it easy. The damage had been quieter, which meant everyone could pretend it was scheduling.

There are arguments that end because they are resolved. There are arguments that end because one person leaves. There are arguments that end because everyone gets tired and grows a polite little garden over the crater. Flocc's had been the third kind.

"I was also hurt," he said.

The hostess nodded. "That may be entered under additions."

"Additions?"

"The menu is not asking you to lie."

This was worse than accusation. Accusation would have given him something to push against. Fairness simply stood there, inconvenient and clean.

He wrote two words on the form.

I left.

The soup settled.

A spoon appeared beside the bowl.

It did not appear in a flash. It appeared the way a thing appears when it has been there all along and reality has only just finished admitting it. The handle was plain. The bowl of the spoon was deep enough to hold a serious amount of weather.

"That is not an apology," said the hostess.

"I know."

"It is a usable start."

Flocc lifted the spoon. The soup was hot, but not punishing. It tasted first of mushrooms, then roasted onion, then pepper heat so restrained it seemed to be observing professional boundaries. Underneath all of it was something like bread, not as an ingredient, but as a promise kept in liquid form.

He took another spoonful.

The restaurant got quieter. Or perhaps he got less loud inside it.

Across the room a man in a raincoat was quietly losing an argument with a salad. At another table, a woman was laughing at a dessert that had clearly told her something private. The sauce bottles stood in their tray like tiny witnesses with excellent typography.

Flocc looked at the receipt again.

The late fee had changed.

RECEIPT FRAGMENT 003

Item: The Soup. Need: origin without excuse. Price tendered: two true words. Outstanding charge: one apology, not yet sent. Late fee adjusted: three years, less one spoon. Instruction: do not confuse a usable start with payment in full.

"Do I have to call now?" he asked.

"No."

"Good."

"Now would be theatrical."

He looked up.

"The menu dislikes theater?"

"The menu dislikes unpaid acting."

Flocc kept eating. The soup did not solve him. It did not forgive him. It did not make a better person of him by force, which he appreciated, because forced betterment is just bullying with incense.

It did something more alarming.

It made the better question feel possible.

When the bowl was empty, the bottom revealed a mark he had not seen before: a small rectangle with three circles, a line, and a stamped number.

CASE: ES-1987-NEEDED Status: filed incorrectly enough to function.

"What is this?" he asked.

The hostess glanced at it.

"That," she said, "is Steve's fault."

Chapter 4: Steve Files the Wrong Thing Correctly

In which a municipal record accepts an impossible input, a clerk respects the ritual of form fields, and a restaurant becomes inspectable by accident.

Steve believed in forms.

He did not believe in them romantically. He did not write poems to triplicate paper or light candles before the copier, although certain coworkers had accused him of both during budget season. Steve believed in forms the way a bridge engineer believes in bolts. Not because bolts are exciting, but because excitement is what happens when bolts are missing.

In 1987, Steve worked for the Multnomah County Department of Records, Addressing, Minor Civic Corrections, and Miscellaneous Findings. The title had been shortened twice and remained too long for the office door, which was why the door simply read RECORDS and hoped the public would bring a sense of proportion.

Steve's desk was beige. His phone was beige. His inbox was beige by policy and gray by temperament. He kept three pens in a ceramic mug that said OREGON COAST 1979 and one pencil sharpened to a point that suggested moral clarity.

At 9:14 on a wet Tuesday, a file appeared in his incoming tray.

This was not unusual.

The fact that the tray had been empty at 9:13 was also not unusual, because Steve worked in records and records reproduced in captivity.

The unusual part was the file itself.

It was a business license application for a restaurant called Emoji Soup. The application was printed on the correct form, which Steve respected. It contained the applicant name, or something pretending to be one. It contained a description of services: soup, bread, correction of hunger, limited sauce waivers. It contained a proposed address: Corner of Everywhere and Nowhere, Southeast Hawthorne-adjacent, Portland, Oregon, when needed.

Steve rejected it immediately.

He used the red stamp.

RETURNED: ADDRESS INSUFFICIENT FOR MAILING, TAXATION, INSPECTION, EMERGENCY RESPONSE, AND COMMON SENSE.

He placed the file in the outgoing tray and felt the clean satisfaction of a ritual performed properly.

At 9:17, the file was back in his incoming tray.

Steve looked at the outgoing tray. It was empty. He looked at the incoming tray. It contained the file. He looked at his coffee, because one must examine the most likely culprit first.

The form had changed.

In the blank marked PHYSICAL ADDRESS, someone had typed:

NEEDED

This was not an address. It was, however, in the field.

Steve rejected it again.

RETURNED: FIELD COMPLETED BUT SEMANTICALLY UNHELPFUL.

At 9:22, it returned.

This time the attachment included a map. The map showed Hawthorne Boulevard, a never-built copy shop, a construction trench, a ceramic tablet, three sewer lines, one line that should have been a sewer line but was labeled BROTH, and a small arrow pointing to a yellow door.

Steve considered calling someone. Then he remembered that calling someone produced conversation, and conversation produced clarifying questions, and clarifying questions were notoriously poor at handling maps labeled BROTH.

He inspected the application again.

Applicant: present.

Business type: food service, unusual but not blank.

Address: contested, but persistent.

Signature: a mark resembling a spoon, a spiral, and a municipal seal that had gone through something educational.

Fee: paid.

This last item troubled him most. A fee could be waived, missing, pending, attached, incorrectly coded, or paid in the wrong amount. This fee had been paid in exact change. Not dollars. Exact change. The receipt line read:

Tender received: one future inspection, one clerical hesitation, bread.

Steve opened a new case number because this is what civilization was for.

DEPARTMENT OF RECORDS CASE STUB

Case: ES-1987-NEEDED. Subject: Emoji Soup. Location: contested but recurring. Action: provisional entry pending inspection. Clerk note: impossible documents are still documents.

He did not approve the restaurant. Steve was very clear about this later, to himself and to anyone whose subpoena tone suggested otherwise. He merely created a provisional entry so that the rejection, appeal, correction, inspection, and eventual closure of the matter could be tracked in an orderly fashion.

The database accepted the entry.

This was the moment the building became older than the city.

Not historically. Historically, the city was still older, and anyone saying otherwise would have been corrected by several local societies, two retired planners, and a man who wrote letters to newspapers about sidewalk widths. But administratively, the restaurant now existed in a records system that many departments trusted more than memory.

A thing entered in the database could be inspected.

A thing inspected could be cited.

A thing cited could appeal.

A thing that could appeal had rights, or at least paperwork adjacent to rights, which in a municipal setting is often the same thing until lunch.

Steve printed the case stub and placed it in a folder. The folder felt warm.

He removed his hand.

The folder smelled faintly of bread.

At 9:31, the phone rang.

"Department of Records," said Steve.

There was silence on the line, followed by the sound of a kitchen in the distance: a pot lid, a knife on a board, someone saying "behind" with the authority of a person carrying hot stock.

Then a voice said, "We need an inspection."

Steve looked at the case stub.

"You need an address."

"We have one when needed."

"That is not how addresses work."

"It is how hunger works."

Steve wrote that down, not because he agreed with it, but because it was a statement made during a call regarding an active case.

"I can refer this to Environmental Health," he said.

"Thank you."

"This does not constitute approval."

"Of course not."

"Nor does it constitute recognition that your premises exist."

"Recognition is served separately."

Steve paused.

"Do you validate parking?"

"Only emotionally."

He hung up and completed the referral.

When he returned from lunch, there was a small loaf of bread on his desk. No note. No crumbs. No explanation. It sat beside the mug from the Oregon Coast and steamed gently in the beige light.

Steve did not eat food from unknown sources at work.

He labeled it.

EVIDENCE LABEL

Item: bread, warm. Received: unrequested. Case relation: probable. Risk: aromatic influence on judgment. Disposition: held pending common sense.

At 3:42, he ate one piece.

At 3:43, he amended the disposition.

RECEIPT FRAGMENT 004

Item: official impossibility. Need: order without denial. Price tendered: one provisional case number. Balance due: inspection. Clerk note: the form is wrong, but it is wrong in the correct boxes.

By the end of the day, a referral had been routed to Gerald Park.

By the end of the week, a health inspector would stand in a restaurant that was not supposed to be there and ask, very reasonably, where they kept the sanitizer test strips.

Chapter 5: Bob Delivers the Mushrooms

In which produce arrives by a route that resents maps, mushrooms demonstrate practical mysticism, and Bob refuses to be impressed by the metaphysical properties of a loading dock.

Bob did not believe in shortcuts.

He believed in roads, weather, invoices, brakes, and the moral importance of not stacking crates of mushrooms under anything that dripped. He believed that a person who said a route would "save time" had usually failed to account for railroad crossings, school zones, passive-aggressive left turns, and the mysterious tendency of small vans to become larger when reversing near decorative planters.

Bob delivered mushrooms because mushrooms were honest in ways people were not. Mushrooms did not pretend to be fruit. They did not brighten a salad in order to become popular. They grew quietly in the dark on what remained after other things had finished bragging. Bob respected this.

His invoice that morning was not respectable.

DELIVERY INVOICE: FUNGAL GOODS

Vendor: Bob. Recipient: Emoji Soup. Address: rear entrance, when needed. Items: oyster mushrooms, shiitake, lion's mane, theorem-grade mixed box. Special instruction: avoid the front door unless you are prepared to enter as a customer.

Bob read the invoice twice, not because he was confused, but because he had learned that paperwork often became less stupid if stared at with sufficient patience. This invoice did not. It remained stupid with confidence.

He loaded the van anyway.

The morning was Portland-gray, a color made by mixing rain with old concrete and the expression of someone waiting for coffee. Bob drove past storefronts that had been three other businesses in recent memory, past a mural of a heron wearing sunglasses, past the construction fence around the lot where a copy shop had once been promised with great certainty and then not built at all.

He remembered the dig. Everyone in the delivery radius remembered the dig. In 1987 the crew had broken through asphalt expecting pipes, gravel, and possibly the archaeological remains of a bad parking decision.

Instead they found a ceramic tablet, a stamped case marker, and a small rectangular depression in the dirt that smelled, according to three witnesses and one dog, like soup.

Bob had been younger then and still under the impression that strange facts required strange reactions. Age had taught him that most strange facts only required better labeling.

The map on the invoice did not match any road he knew.

That was fine. Many maps were aspirational.

He turned left where Hawthorne appeared to be considering becoming a question, then right behind a building that had no back according to its tax lot, then through an alley that smelled of rainwater, fryer oil, wet cardboard, and basil. The van's GPS displayed a spinning icon and the words recalculating emotionally.

"You and me both," said Bob.

The alley ended at a yellow service door.

The door had a sign:

*DELIVERIES PRODUCE, QUESTIONS, AND CORRECTLY LABELED
SAUCE ONLY*

Bob parked, set the brake, and checked the crates. The mushrooms looked calm. This was normal. Mushrooms had excellent crisis discipline.

The yellow door opened before he knocked.

A woman in a black apron looked at the crates, then at Bob.

"You're late," she said.

Bob checked his watch. "I'm early."

"Exactly."

He considered this, then decided it was not worth wasting a perfectly good argument on someone who worked near soup.

"Where do you want them?"

"The walk-in that remembers winter."

"Do you have one that doesn't?"

"Not anymore."

Bob carried the first crate inside.

The kitchen looked like a kitchen, which was a relief. Stainless tables, cutting boards, labeled containers, a hand sink, stacked towels, a pot large enough to suggest either catering or theology. There were oddities, certainly. A sauce shelf hummed in six colors. A clipboard hung from a nail and filled itself out when no one touched it. A line cook was chopping onions while quietly apologizing to a calendar.

But the floor was clean. The knives were sharp. Raw and cooked foods appeared to have accepted separate jurisdictions. Bob had delivered to stranger places with fewer excuses.

He set the crate down.

"Sign here," he said, offering the invoice.

The hostess took the pen. The signature she made looked like a spoon, a spiral, and a road choosing to be river.

"That your legal signature?" asked Bob.

"Among other things."

Bob glanced at the invoice. A new line had appeared beneath the signature.

DELIVERY AMENDMENT

Witness: Bob. Goods received: mushrooms, practical. Goods implied: proof that generosity scales poorly but feeds well. Route: completed through common sense, with damage. Driver note requested: no nonsense before noon.

"I didn't write that."

"No."

"I would have capitalized Noon."

"The menu has opinions about emphasis."

Bob opened the second crate. Inside, one lion's mane mushroom had bruised in the shape of a question mark.

The hostess leaned closer.

"Interesting."

"It's not interesting. It's delicate."

"It is both."

"Interesting doesn't pay invoices."

"Not directly."

Bob liked her less for this answer and respected her more, which was inconvenient but not uncommon in his line of work.

From the dining room came the sound of someone asking for a better question and a ladle answering in metal.

The hostess looked toward the door. "He's early too."

"Who?"

"Floc."

"Customer?"

"Reader."

"Those are worse."

"Only at first."

Bob signed the delivery log under DRIVER. The pen warmed in his hand. He ignored this because tools were allowed to have feelings as long as they completed their function.

On the sauce shelf, a black-purple bottle shifted slightly. Its label read Voidberry Fatalii. Beneath the dramatic lettering was a plain warning that would have made any reasonable farmer happy: superhot accent, grams only, keep refrigerated, not shelf-stable unless validated.

"Good label," said Bob.

The hostess smiled. "Gerald insists."

"Health inspector?"

"Eventually."

Bob looked around the kitchen. "You inspected already?"

"Not in order."

"Order matters."

"Yes," she said. "That's why we keep misplacing it."

Bob stacked the empty dolly, kept the copy of the invoice that looked least likely to testify against him, and stepped back into the alley. The yellow door closed without a click. The smell of soup remained in the van.

He checked the invoice one more time.

RECEIPT FRAGMENT 005

Item: Bob's Mushroom Theorem. Need: practical mysticism. Price tendered: one delivery made without overexplaining it. Balance due: keep the cold chain honest. Driver note: generosity is not efficient, but it is mathematically difficult to replace.

Bob folded the paper and put it in the glove box with the other documents he had decided not to discuss.

The GPS had recovered. It displayed one instruction:

Proceed to ordinary road.

Bob did.

Chapter 6: The Health Inspector Washes His Hands

In which Gerald Park enters an impossible restaurant, verifies the hand sink, and discovers that a miracle with illegible labels is still a violation.

Gerald Park believed in soap.

Not exclusively. He also believed in thermometers, sanitizer test strips, cleanable surfaces, hair restraints, date labels, pest exclusion, and the quiet dignity of a refrigerator that knew exactly how cold it was. But soap was the beginning. Soap was civilization made slippery. Soap was the difference between hospitality and wishful thinking.

He arrived at Emoji Soup with a clipboard, a pen, a digital thermometer, and the expression of a man who had been lied to by restaurants in every architectural style the city could offer.

The address on the referral was not an address.

This did not surprise him as much as it might have surprised a less experienced inspector. Food establishments had a gift for becoming ambiguous at the exact moment clarity would be useful. A mobile unit claimed to be stationary. A shared kitchen claimed to be private. A basement prep room claimed to be "mostly storage" while containing six rice cookers and the spiritual residue of a catering company.

Corner of Everywhere and Nowhere, when needed was new, but not spiritually new.

Gerald found the yellow door by following three signs, one alley, and the smell of bread. He did not consider smell a valid navigational tool, but he had learned not to reject data merely because it was delicious.

The hostess met him at the entrance.

"Gerald Park," he said, showing his identification.

"Yes."

"Environmental Health."

"Also yes."

"I am here for a preliminary inspection connected to a provisional records entry."

"We have been expecting you eventually."

"Eventually is not an appointment window."

"It is here."

Gerald made a note.

Management uses nonstandard time language. Clarify for operational purposes.

"First," he said, "hand sink."

The hostess led him to the kitchen.

Gerald did not gasp. Inspectors who gasped did not last. He observed.

There was a hand sink. It was accessible. It had hot water, cold water, soap, disposable towels, and a waste bin placed at a reasonable distance. The sign above it read:

WASH HANDS BEFORE HANDLING FOOD, FATE, OR SOMEONE ELSE'S EXCUSE.

Gerald stared at the sign.

"The first clause is acceptable."

"Thank you."

"The remainder is not part of code."

"No."

"But it is legible."

"We try."

He washed his hands. This was not strictly necessary before beginning the inspection, but Gerald believed in setting the tone, and the tone of this establishment required soap immediately.

Next came cold holding. The walk-in was labeled Winter, Practical. Gerald opened it and found mushrooms, dairy, washed herbs, sauce bases, and containers labeled with product names, dates, and storage rules. The labels were unusually clear, which made him suspicious in a positive direction.

He checked temperatures.

They were acceptable.

"Who maintains your logs?"

"The kitchen."

"Which person?"

"Usually the one who lies least creatively."

Gerald wrote: Assign named person to logs.

Then he saw the sauce shelf.

Ten bottles stood in ordered rows: Black Orchard Adobo, Mango Habanero Afterfire, Green Chapel, Gold Pheasant Peach, Voidberry Fatalii, Tamarind Datil Engine, Smoke Plum Morita, Pineapple Thai Basil Lightning, Citrus Aji Rain, and Red Meridian. Their labels were ornate,

dramatic, and almost certainly designed by someone who believed typography could intimidate spoilage.

Gerald picked up the darkest bottle.

"Voidberry Fatalii."

"Superhot accent lane," said the hostess.

"I am reading."

She folded her hands.

The front label was theatrical. The back label was plain.

KEEP REFRIGERATED. SMALL-BATCH EXPERIMENTAL SAUCE. CONTAINS PEPPERS, BLACKBERRY, VINEGAR. HEAT LEVEL: 5. MADE: TODAY. USE CLEAN SPOON. DISCARD IF MOLD, GAS PRESSURE, OFF ODOR, OR UNUSUAL TEXTURE DEVELOPS. NOT SHELF-STABLE UNLESS VALIDATED.

Gerald read it twice.

"This is unusually responsible."

"Thank you."

"Responsibility does not make a product approved."

"Of course not."

"Do not sell shelf-stable sealed sauce without the required process support."

"We refrigerate the omen."

Gerald wrote that down, then crossed out omen and wrote product, because notes could be subpoenaed by people with no appreciation for context.

He inspected dry storage, wiping cloths, sanitizer concentration, pest control, lighting, and the ceiling above the prep sink. The ceiling appeared normal except for one tile that had a tiny moon painted in the corner. He made no note of this because the tile was intact.

In the dining room, Flocc sat with an empty soup bowl and the expression of a man who had been improved against his schedule.

"Customer?" asked Gerald.

"Reader," said the hostess.

"Customer," said Gerald, and wrote it down.

At the host stand, he reviewed the permit file. The case number was ES-1987-NEEDED. The business license entry was provisional. The address remained offensive to several categories of administrative reality.

"I cannot certify this establishment as normal," Gerald said.

"We understand."

"I can document observed conditions."

"That sounds useful."

"Useful is not approval."

"No one here trusts approval that much."

Gerald filled out the inspection note with careful block letters.

PRELIMINARY INSPECTION NOTE

Case: ES-1987-NEEDED. Observed: hand sink stocked and accessible. Observed: cold holding acceptable at time of inspection. Observed: experimental sauces labeled refrigerated / not shelf-stable. Required: named log responsibility and ordinary appointment language. Conclusion: not normal; not currently unsafe in the observed ways.

He signed it.

The paper warmed under his hand.

"No," he said.

"No?" asked the hostess.

"The form will remain room temperature."

The paper cooled.

Gerald appreciated compliance.

As he packed his thermometer, the hostess placed a small loaf of bread in a paper bag and set it on the counter.

"No gifts," he said.

"Sample retained for inspector evaluation."

"That is worse."

"It is labeled."

The bag had a sticker:

BREAD SAMPLE Ingredients: flour, water, salt, yeast, first mercy.

Storage: share before it becomes evidence.

Gerald stared at it for a long moment.

"Remove 'first mercy' from any public ingredient statement."

"Yes, inspector."

He did not take the bread.

He got as far as the yellow door.

Then he returned, took the bread, wrote voluntary sample retained on his clipboard, and left before anyone could make eye contact with the part of him that had wanted it.

RECEIPT FRAGMENT 006

Item: The Health Inspector Washes His Hands. Need: order that does not kill wonder. Price tendered: one clean surface in an unclean universe. Balance due: named logs, ordinary time language, and better ingredient phrasing. Inspector note: impossible does not exempt anyone from sanitizer.

Outside, Gerald checked the address one more time.

The yellow door was gone.

The bread was still warm.

Chapter 7: The First Language Is Hunger

By the time Flocc had finished the bread, the menu had changed.

It had not changed dramatically. Menus that change dramatically are usually trying to sell desserts with names like Chocolate Situation or Seasonal Collapse. This menu changed with the quiet authority of a person correcting a date on a form that everyone else had been too embarrassed to read.

The first column still contained small pictures: bread, bowl, spoon, key, leaf, clock, door, cloud, hand. The second column still contained English. The third column still behaved like a kitchen had been asked to summarize a life in verbs.

But the fourth column, which Flocc had assumed was price, had become worse.

It had become accurate.

He leaned over the menu and read the line nearest his thumb.

Bread with Mercy Butter tear / rest need: first gift price: notice law: arrives before permission

The butter had left a shine on the knife. The bread had left a warmth under his ribs that was either comfort or a very polite diagnostic error.

"Excuse me," he said.

The hostess appeared with the timing of someone who had not been waiting, because waiting implies uncertainty.

"Yes?"

"The menu says the bread costs notice."

"Yes."

"I noticed it."

"You noticed that it was bread."

Flocc looked at the loaf, which had the nerve to continue being itself.

"That seems relevant."

"It is a start."

"What else was I supposed to notice?"

The hostess tilted her head, not unkindly. "What did it remember?"

Flocc did not answer immediately. The restaurant made room for the silence. Ordinary restaurants do this badly. They fill silence with forks,

chairs, ice machines, the panic of a server pretending not to hear a breakup. Emoji Soup allowed silence to sit down and remove its coat.

"A kitchen," Flocc said.

"Whose?"

"My grandmother's."

"Good."

"Is this therapy?"

"No. Therapy keeps better records."

She tapped the menu with the pencil from behind her ear.

"You are reading the second language."

"English?"

"That is the easiest mistake. English is the label. Hunger is the first language."

Flocc had disliked the word hunger since he was old enough to misunderstand discipline. Hunger sounded like failure. It sounded like poor planning. It sounded like the body submitting a complaint to management. He preferred appetite, which had better shoes. He preferred craving, which could be blamed on advertising. Need was unacceptable. Need had no decorative border.

"I ate," he said.

"Calories," said the hostess.

"Yes."

"That is accounting."

Flocc looked down at the menu. The line beneath the bread shimmered into focus.

Apology Aioli crush / whisk / call need: repair price: one call law: garlic remembers what pride tried to hide

"I am not ordering that," he said.

"You have not been offered it."

"It is on the menu."

"Lots of things are on maps," said the hostess. "That does not mean you are ready for the bridge."

At the table beside him, a woman in a raincoat was eating something from a shallow bowl. She was crying so politely that the tears seemed to have made reservations. Her bowl contained noodles, or possibly weather. A small receipt lay beside her water glass.

Flocc tried not to read it.

The receipt turned slightly toward him.

Noodles of Later price: patience balance due: one answer not required today

He looked away quickly.

"Is that allowed?" he asked.

"Reading another customer's receipt?"

"No. The receipt moving."

"It is discouraged."

"By whom?"

"The receipt, usually."

The hostess collected the woman's empty bread plate and moved away.

Flocc returned to his own menu. The six columns were beginning to separate.

The first was not decoration. It was the visible seed of the dish: the picture before words. Bread and spiral. Bowl and empty set. Garlic and telephone. A spoon and a key.

The second was the name that let a human ask for the thing without becoming too frightened.

The third was action. Tear. Rest. Simmer. Steep. Fold. Forgive.

The fourth was need.

The fifth was price.

The sixth was still unreadable.

Not illegible. That would have been easier. Illegible writing is writing that has failed at being writing. The sixth column had not failed. It was succeeding at something Flocc did not yet have the organs to receive.

He tried to look directly at it.

The marks arranged themselves into the shape of nearly understanding, then became marks again.

His water arrived.

"Tap," said the hostess.

The glass was ordinary. That was suspicious. In a restaurant where the bread remembered kitchens, an ordinary glass of water was either a trap or a kindness.

He drank.

It tasted like water.

Then it tasted like being thirsty and not knowing it.

"Oh," he said.

"Yes."

"That is unfair."

"Most accurate things are."

The menu shifted again. A line rose to the top as if it had been waiting underneath the others, which of course it had.

The Table That Seats You set / serve need: belonging price: no performance law: the chair knows your correct weight

Flocc put both hands flat on the table. The table did not react. It did not glow. It did not whisper. It simply held him at the correct distance from everything he was pretending not to want.

"No performance," he said.

"That is one of the common prices."

"What if I cannot pay it?"

"Then you keep ordering things that look cheaper."

This struck him as rude, mainly because it was useful.

He looked around the room. A man near the back was reading a permit while eating pickles. A teenager in a gray hoodie was staring at a cup of tea as if the tea had asked a question that could not be answered by sarcasm. An older couple shared a bowl of soup in complete silence, but the silence between them was not empty. It had vegetables in it.

Everyone had a menu.

No two menus were the same size.

"How many languages are there?" Flocc asked.

"On the menu?"

"Yes."

"Six."

"I only see five."

"You see five and resist one."

"That is not the same as six."

"It is, for beginners."

She took the pencil from behind her ear and drew a small grid on the back of his preliminary receipt. Six boxes. She filled them in with quick, plain words.

glyph name action need price law

"The glyph is what appears. The name is what you can say. The action is what the kitchen does. The need is what brought you here. The price is what must change. The law is what the dish will not lie about."

"And the sixth language is law?"

"Vorthaic service law."

"Is that a real language?"

"You are sitting in a restaurant at the corner of Everywhere and Nowhere, reading a menu that charged you notice for bread. You may need to sharpen your definition of real."

Flocc looked at the sixth column again. This time he did not try to translate it. He let it exist beside the other five. The symbols did not become English. They became steadier.

One line clicked into place without words.

The bread arrives before permission.

He understood that. Not because he could parse the marks. Because he had eaten the bread.

"So you learn it by eating."

"By being fed," said the hostess.

"That sounds expensive."

"Only when you confuse price with money."

The menu produced a new line. He was sure produced was the right word. It did not reveal the line, or print it, or update it. It produced it, the way a plant produces a leaf.

Customer Denial, Temporary file / delay need: protection price: interest law: denial preserves the debt but increases the subtotal

"Absolutely not," said Flocc.

"That is a form, not a dish."

"Why is it on the menu?"

"Because you keep ordering it."

He laughed once, sharply, before he could stop himself.

The laugh surprised him. It was not happy, but it was clean. It knocked something loose without breaking it.

"What happens if I do not fill it out?"

"Then you may be ready for food."

"I thought the bread was food."

"The bread was welcome."

The hostess set down a small card beside the menu. It was the size of a business card and had no business being one.

TRANSLATION CARD - BEGINNER

want: the story you brought need: the story that brought you price:
the part that must move law: the part the dish protects

On the back, in smaller print:

If confused, eat slowly.

The next dish arrived in a bowl the color of rain on slate.

It was soup, but not The Soup. Flocch knew this immediately in the same way a person can tell the difference between a weather report and weather. This was a smaller soup, a practice soup, a soup with training wheels if the wheels had been carved from moonlight and legally inspected.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Permit Pickle Broth."

"That sounds punitive."

"Only if you have been avoiding permission."

The bowl smelled of dill, garlic, warm vinegar, and something green enough to make the room sit up straighter. Thin slices of cucumber floated with herbs and tiny squares of potato. The broth was clear. Nothing about it looked cosmic. This was a relief until he tasted it.

It tasted like being allowed to start.

Not forgiven. Not absolved. Not transformed. Allowed.

He took another spoonful.

The menu line appeared beneath the bowl.

Permit Pickle Broth brine / file need: permission price: one honest
form law: sourness becomes official when witnessed

Flocch swallowed.

"What form?"

The hostess placed a paper in front of him.

It was titled:

CUSTOMER FORM 1A APPLICATION TO ADMIT A NEED
WITHOUT ORDERING A PERSONALITY AROUND IT

The first question read:

What did you think you wanted?

Flocch picked up the pencil.

He wrote:

dinner

The letters stayed on the page.

The second question read:

What did you need?

He waited for the menu to answer for him.

It did not.

This was its own answer.

He looked at the bread plate, the water glass, the translation card, the soup. He thought of the kitchen the bread had remembered. He thought of the text message with its lazy rain check. He thought of the call he had not made, the apology he had not sent, and the way he had been treating hunger as if it were an accusation instead of evidence that he was still alive.

He wrote:

to stop pretending that not needing anything is the same as being fine

The pencil grew warmer in his hand.

The soup brightened, just slightly.

The hostess did not smile. Smiling would have made the moment smaller. She only nodded.

"Now you are reading the first language."

Flocc looked at the menu.

The sixth column remained unreadable.

But it no longer looked hostile.

It looked patient, which was worse, because hostility can be dismissed and patience has excellent posture.

He ate slowly.

For once, this was not because the food was strange.

It was because the food was correct.

Chapter 8: The Sixth Language Refuses Translation

Flocc spent several minutes trying not to look at the sixth column.

This was difficult, because the sixth column had begun behaving like a person in the room who was not speaking because it knew it did not need to. The marks stayed where they were. They did not glow, twitch, rearrange themselves, or perform any of the little theatrical habits by which mysterious things announce that they are mysterious. They simply refused to become easier.

Flocc found this rude.

"I think I understand the first five," he said.

The hostess was wiping the next table with a white cloth that looked ordinary enough to have passed several inspections.

"That is how the sixth one gets people."

"By being last?"

"By letting them think the list is nearly finished."

The menu lay warm under his hands. The line for Permit Pickle Broth remained visible, but a new line had appeared beneath it. The first five columns were clear.

The Shared Spoon carry / return need: witness price: one accurate sentence law: [untranslated]

The sixth column was a row of compact black marks, angled like kitchen knives seen from above, or like a flock of birds that had attended law school.

Flocc squinted.

The marks did not improve.

"Can I get a translation?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you asked for a substitution."

"Translation is not substitution."

"It is when you want the new words to do the old work."

This sounded meaningful enough to be annoying.

The hostess placed four small slips of paper beside his bowl. Each looked like it had come from a different institution, because it had.

The first was a city records stub, squared off and pale blue, stamped with a case number:

CITY RECORDS READING Item: The Shared Spoon Observed law: file the impossible where it can be found again Reader: Steve Status: accepted under protest by reality

The second was a delivery invoice, smudged at one corner with clean soil:

DELIVERY READING Item: The Shared Spoon Observed law: what you carry also carries you Reader: Bob Status: do not stack under onions

The third was an inspection note, written in block capitals so legible that the handwriting had moral authority:

HEALTH INSPECTION READING Item: The Shared Spoon Observed law: shared does not mean unwashed Reader: Gerald Park Status: approved if cleaned between uses

The fourth slip was blank.

"That one is yours," said the hostess.

Flocc stared at it.

"They all read the same line?"

"Correct."

"Those are not the same meaning."

"Correct enough to be dangerous."

He picked up Steve's slip first. The paper had the faint smell of old toner and a basement office where every drawer had been labeled by someone who believed in civilization as an act of defiance. Steve's reading made sense in the way filing cabinets make sense: not because they explain reality, but because they keep reality from being swept into piles.

He picked up Bob's invoice. There was a small note on the back:

Mushrooms bruise where pressure lies. People also. Do not argue with Bob.

Flocc did not know Bob well enough yet to argue with him, which was fortunate, because the note gave the impression that Bob had already won.

Gerald Park's inspection note was worst of all because it was impossible to dismiss. It did not care whether the restaurant was metaphysically astonishing. It cared whether the shared spoon was clean. This made the metaphysics seem more serious, not less.

"Why do they get readings?" Flocc asked.

"Because they paid different prices."

"Steve filed something?"

"Correctly, yes."

"Bob carried something?"

"Without bruising it."

"Gerald washed something?"

"He observed that washing is not a metaphor."

The hostess pointed at the blank slip.

"And you?"

Flocc looked at the untranslated law. The marks pressed against meaning without crossing into English. They seemed less like words and more like the shape a rule made when it had not yet decided whether he deserved its convenience.

"I paid notice," he said.

"For bread."

"I filled out the form."

"For permission."

"I admitted a need."

"On paper."

"That counts."

"It counts as writing."

The restaurant continued around him. Forks touched plates. A chair creaked. Rain moved down the window in thin, undecided lines. Somewhere in the kitchen, a pan made the soft metallic sound of a decision becoming dinner.

Flocc's bowl had cooled but not gone cold. The broth remained clear. He could see a slice of cucumber at the bottom and, beside it, his own reflection broken by the spoon.

"What is the price again?" he asked.

The menu answered before the hostess did.

price: one accurate sentence

"Out loud?" he asked.

"The line did not say silently."

"To whom?"

"That is part of the price."

There are many sentences a person can say about himself that are accurate and useless. Flocc knew several. He could say he was tired. He could say he was hungry. He could say he was doing his best, which had

the advantage of being mostly true and the disadvantage of being a locked door with a welcome mat.

The blank slip waited.

The sixth column waited.

The hostess waited, but professionally.

Flocc looked at the table beside him. The woman in the raincoat had finished her noodles. Her receipt was folded under her glass now, as if privacy had been restored by dessert. The teenager with the tea was still staring into the cup. The older couple had begun arguing quietly about whether to order a second bowl, but their hands remained linked under the table, which made the argument more ceremonial than dangerous.

He could say something to the hostess. That would be easiest, because she already knew too much.

He could say something to the restaurant. That would be safest, because restaurants do not repeat things unless they are trying to become reviews.

Or he could say something to another customer, which was terrible because it involved being a person in public.

The menu made no suggestion.

This, Flocc was beginning to understand, was one of its cruelties and one of its mercies.

He turned slightly toward the teenager with the tea.

"Excuse me," he said.

The teenager looked up with the alarm of someone who had been interrupted while trying to look unimpressed by enlightenment.

"What?"

Flocc held the spoon without lifting it.

"I am pretending I came here for dinner because that sounds less embarrassing than saying I did not know who else would notice if I disappeared for a while."

The teenager blinked.

The restaurant did not stop.

This was important.

If the restaurant had gone silent, the sentence would have become a performance. If the lights had dimmed, it would have become a ritual. If the menu had applauded, Flocc would have left immediately and possibly joined a gym out of spite.

Instead, the room continued to be a room. Rain continued to rain. The kitchen continued to believe in onions.

The teenager considered him with the unsentimental mercy of the young.

"Yeah," the teenager said. "That is dinner sometimes."

Then he returned to his tea.

The blank slip filled itself in.

CUSTOMER READING Item: The Shared Spoon Observed law: what is named honestly can be carried briefly by more than one person Reader: Flocc Status: sentence accepted

Flocc looked at the sixth column.

The Vorthaic marks did not become English.

They became readable.

This was not the same thing.

He could not have copied them into a notebook. He could not have pronounced them. He could not have taught them to anyone at a party, which was good, because parties had suffered enough. But he could feel the rule they made in the same way he could feel the chair holding him, the spoon cooling in his hand, and the sentence he had said continuing to exist without destroying him.

The law was not a hidden phrase.

It was a condition.

"It does not translate," he said.

"No," said the hostess.

"It aligns."

"When allowed."

He read the line again, if reading was the right word.

Steve's version remained true. The impossible had to be filed where it could be found again.

Bob's version remained true. What you carried also carried you.

Gerald's version remained true. Shared did not mean unwashed.

Flocc's version remained true. What was named honestly could be carried briefly by more than one person.

None of the readings canceled the others. None completed the others. They stood around the same law like chairs around a table, each placed for a different body.

"That is inconvenient," said Flocc.

"Yes."

"I wanted the sixth language to be more efficient."

"That is why it refused you."

The hostess took the four slips and aligned them at the top edge with one precise tap.

"Vorthaic service law is not there to help you win meaning. It is there to keep meaning from being stolen by the fastest reader."

Flocc looked toward the window. The street outside was still Southeast Hawthorne, or doing a persuasive local impression of it. A bus passed. A cyclist shouted at a puddle. The world had the nerve to continue.

On the menu, a line he had not noticed before began to steady itself.

Call Someone Tea steep / speak need: repair price: one call law:
[waiting]

"Absolutely not," he said.

The hostess did not look at the line.

"Of course not."

"I mean it."

"Most people do, before the tea."

He pushed the menu a little farther away.

"I am not ordering that."

"You are not ready for it."

"Good."

"Good," she agreed.

This was worse than an argument. An argument could be won. Agreement had no handles.

The Shared Spoon arrived with no ceremony.

It was a plain spoon, slightly heavier than the one beside his bowl. Its handle was worn smooth. It sat on a small white plate with a folded napkin underneath it.

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Nothing alone."

The hostess set the spoon between Flocc and the teenager with the tea.

The teenager looked at the spoon.

"Is that sanitary?"

Gerald Park's inspection note brightened slightly.

The hostess produced a second identical spoon from her apron pocket.

"It is symbolic," she said. "We still use clean utensils."

The teenager nodded. "Good. I was about to believe in the health department."

"You should," said the hostess. "They are one of the load-bearing myths."

Flocc laughed. So did the teenager. Not much. Just enough to prove that the sentence had not killed anyone.

The sixth column softened into patience again.

Flocc understood, dimly, that he had not learned Vorthaic. He had learned how to stop preventing one line of it from being true near him.

This was humiliating.

It was also useful.

The receipt arrived before dessert.

EMOJI SOUP INTERIM RECEIPT

Bread: notice received. Permit Pickle Broth: form accepted. The Shared Spoon: one accurate sentence, paid aloud. Translation: denied. Alignment: provisional. Call Someone Tea: not yet ordered.

Subtotal: less impossible than before.

Flocc read the receipt twice.

"Less impossible than before is not a number."

"It is in this restaurant."

"Does it accrue interest?"

"Only when ignored."

He folded the receipt and put it in his pocket, then took it out immediately. Something about pocketing it felt like trying to hide a smoke alarm.

He left it on the table.

The menu approved by doing nothing.

Outside, the rain intensified, which is how Portland participates in conversations it has not been invited to.

Flocc looked at the line for Call Someone Tea.

The law still waited.

For the first time that evening, he did not mistake waiting for emptiness.

Chapter 9: The Customer Leaves Hungry in the Correct Direction

The tea arrived in a cup that looked too normal to trust.

It was white, thick-walled, and slightly chipped near the handle. It had the unglamorous dignity of a cup that had survived restaurants, roommates, moves, dish racks, and several people who believed washing dishes was a personality trait instead of a chore.

There was no steam.

Flocc found this suspicious.

"Is it cold?" he asked.

"No," said the hostess.

"It is not steaming."

"Some things stop performing once they are ready."

The tea sat in the center of the table beside the interim receipt, the translation card, the empty broth bowl, and the Shared Spoon that was symbolic but, according to the hostess and possibly the county, sanitary. The cup contained amber liquid so clear that he could see the bottom.

The menu line had completed itself.

Call Someone Tea steep / speak need: repair price: one call law: tea cools while pride burns off

Flocc read it three times in the hope that repetition would reveal a loophole.

It did not.

"Does it have to be a phone call?"

"The line says call."

"Could call be metaphorical?"

"It often is, until a person owns a phone."

He looked at his phone. The battery was at 4 percent. This was either fate, negligence, or a collaboration between the two. He had been meaning to replace the charging cable in his bag for three weeks. The old cable worked only if bent at an angle normally associated with municipal corruption.

"I might not have enough battery."

"Then you will have to be brief."

"That seems unfair."

"It seems merciful."

He picked up the cup.

The tea was warm. Not hot. Not dramatic. Warm enough to hold. Warm enough to make his hands feel as if they had been pretending not to be cold.

He did not drink.

"Who am I supposed to call?"

The hostess looked at the receipt.

The receipt looked at Flocc.

The line on the preliminary receipt returned in memory:

Tip: call your mother, or equivalent living witness.

"Equivalent living witness," he said.

"Yes."

"That is a terrible phrase."

"It is a generous one."

This was true, and therefore unhelpful.

His mother was alive. They were not estranged in the operative sense. There had been no slammed door, no Thanksgiving catastrophe, no single sentence everyone agreed had broken the family in half. Their distance had been built more efficiently than that. It had been built from postponed calls, missed birthdays disguised as busy weeks, the steady bureaucratic filing of tenderness under Later.

Later was a large department. Flocc had worked there for years.

He stared at the phone.

"What if she does not answer?"

"Then you will have called."

"That counts?"

"Not as much as speaking. More than not calling."

"Your accounting is inconsistent."

"No," said the hostess. "It is exact."

The teenager with the tea, who had become impossible to pretend was not part of the evening, leaned slightly over his own cup.

"Put it on speaker and I will leave," he said.

"That is not better."

"I was not trying to make it better. I was trying to make it possible."

This was, unfortunately, kind.

Flocc unlocked his phone. The screen flared too bright and showed him a photograph he did not remember setting as his background: rain on a window, blurred streetlights, a color somewhere between apology and soup. He opened the contacts.

His thumb hovered.

The tea cooled.

This was not a metaphor. He could feel it in the cup. The warmth was leaving with disciplined patience, as if pride were a small fire and the tea had been assigned to monitor it until it stopped endangering the building.

He tapped the number.

The phone rang once.

Twice.

He looked at the hostess with the panic of someone who had expected grace to be busy.

Three times.

On the fourth ring, his mother answered.

"Hello?"

There are few sounds as dangerous as the voice of a person who has known you since before you had any defenses worth naming.

"Hi," said Flocc.

There was a pause.

Not a bad pause. A sorting pause. A woman picking up the sound of her adult child and placing it carefully among all the versions she had stored.

"Hi," she said. "Are you okay?"

He had planned to say yes.

The restaurant did not interfere.

The menu did not glow.

The tea cooled.

The truth, inconvenienced by the available time, took a smaller shape.

"Not exactly," he said.

The line landed between them with no decoration.

He heard something shift on the other end of the call. A chair, maybe. A television lowering in volume. A room making room.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," he said. Then stopped. "That is not true. Nothing happened loudly."

"Okay."

"I had dinner."

"That sounds serious."

He laughed once, because she had always been faster than he remembered.

"It was a strange dinner."

"Are you safe?"

He looked around the restaurant. At the Hostess. At the teenager. At the shared spoon. At the menu older than he could tolerate. At the receipt that had itemized his avoidance with better formatting than most banks.

"Yes."

"Good."

He could have stopped there. The call had been made. The line had been paid in the narrowest possible sense. But narrow payments, he was learning, accrued interest.

"I am sorry I have not called."

The restaurant did not stop.

This was still important.

His mother inhaled.

"I missed you," she said.

It was not an accusation. That made it harder to bear.

"I know."

"Do you?"

He closed his eyes.

"I am starting to."

The tea was nearly cool now.

On the table, the receipt shifted.

He opened his eyes.

A new line appeared.

Call Someone Tea: one call placed. Repair: initiated, not completed. Interest: suspended pending effort.

His mother said, "Where are you?"

Flocc looked toward the window. The sign outside was visible in reverse from where he sat. EMOJI SOUP, yellowed by rain and streetlight. OPEN WHEN NEEDED.

"A restaurant."

"What kind?"

"I do not know yet."

"Was the food good?"

He looked at the bread plate.

"Yes."

"Then bring me there sometime."

The statement struck the table with the soft force of a future.

"I think," Flocc said carefully, "you have to find it when you need it."

"Everyone needs dinner."

"That is what I thought."

She laughed. Not because she understood. Because she was willing not to yet.

His phone vibrated once against his palm: low battery.

"I should go before my phone dies."

"Call again before it takes a magic restaurant."

He looked at the hostess.

The hostess raised one eyebrow, which was not a menu language but should have been.

"I will," he said.

The words did not become a vow. Vows are large and often decorative. The words became an appointment. Appointments are humbler and therefore harder to evade.

"Good," said his mother.

"Good night."

"Good night, honey."

The call ended.

His phone dropped to 1 percent and went black, which felt less like failure than applause from a machine too tired to stand.

Flocc set it on the table.

The tea was cool.

He drank it.

It tasted like tea.

Then it tasted like the moment after saying something true, when the room has not collapsed and the body must decide what to do with all the evidence that catastrophe was not inevitable.

It was not sweet. It was not bitter. It was not especially profound. It was warm in memory, cool in the mouth, and gone quickly.

"That was it?" he asked.

"That was enough."

"It does not feel fixed."

"It was not a repair service. It was tea."

The final receipt arrived folded in thirds.

It was printed on paper so thin that light seemed to be considering passing through it, then deciding to respect privacy.

EMOJI SOUP FINAL RECEIPT

Bread: notice received. Water: thirst acknowledged. Permit Pickle Broth: one honest form accepted. The Shared Spoon: one accurate sentence paid aloud. Call Someone Tea: one call placed.

Translation: denied. Alignment: provisional. Repair: initiated, not completed.

Subtotal: partial payment accepted. Balance: return when hungry.

Under that, in handwriting that was neither the hostess's nor his own:

The menu is older than the restaurant.

Flocc read the line.

The menu on the table looked smaller suddenly, which made it more frightening. A large impossible thing is easy to categorize as spectacle. A small impossible thing can fit in a hand, a pocket, a city file, a lunch break. It can become part of the day.

"Older than the restaurant," he said.

"Yes."

"How much older?"

The hostess took the receipt, turned it over, and showed him the back.

There was a return invitation printed in six columns. The first contained a small bowl, a page, a door, and a question mark. The second read:

The Menu That Shouldn't Exist

The third column read:

read / return

The fourth:

origin

The fifth:

third visit

The sixth column was Vorthaic.

He could not translate it.

He could feel it waiting.

"I have to come back?"

"No."

"The receipt says return."

"It says return when hungry."

"I will be hungry."

"Yes."

"That seems coercive."

"No," said the hostess. "That is biology."

He put on his coat. It was still damp in the sleeves. He had forgotten that it was possible for a coat to feel personal.

The teenager lifted his cup slightly.

"Good luck with your mother or equivalent witness."

"Good luck with your tea."

"It is just tea," said the teenager.

Flocc paused.

"Careful."

The teenager considered this, then nodded gravely, as if accepting a warning label.

At the door, Flocc turned back.

The restaurant looked almost ordinary from this angle. A few tables. A counter. A swinging door to the kitchen. Tile. Rain-dark windows. People eating carefully because something in the room had taught them food was not an interruption to life but one of the ways life kept asking whether you were present.

The hostess stood by the lectern. The book before her was still too thick to be a reservation book and too amused to be safe.

"Which way is home?" Flocc asked.

"Same street," she said.

The door opened.

Outside was Southeast Hawthorne.

At least, it had the decency to look like Southeast Hawthorne: wet pavement, bus shelter, record shop, wellness storefront currently between identities, the smell of rain working through exhaust and old leaves. The sign behind him did not glow. It did not need to.

Flocc stepped onto the sidewalk.

For a moment he expected the city to rearrange itself. Buildings folding into symbols. Streets spelling his debts. Puddles reflecting old kitchens and future apologies.

None of that happened.

The route home was the same.

There was only one difference.

He could see where the excuses had been.

They lay over the city like a bad map: the coffee shop he had used as a reason to be late, the bus stop where he had drafted apologies and sent none, the corner where he had told himself distance was maturity, the convenience store where dinner had often meant purchasing enough calories to keep from becoming honest.

The route had fewer excuses now because the restaurant had not removed them.

It had labeled them.

He walked.

At the first intersection, the receipt warmed in his pocket.

He took it out, expecting another charge.

Instead, the final line had changed.

Return invitation active. Next course pending: The Menu That Shouldn't Exist.

Below that:

Do not confuse leaving with being finished.

Flocc looked back.

The restaurant was still there.

Then a bus passed between them, and when it was gone the storefront was a dark window between the record shop and the wellness concept that had, apparently, become a Pilates studio while he was inside.

He was not surprised.

This surprised him.

He folded the receipt and put it carefully in his wallet, not to hide it but to keep it with the other documents by which society pretended a person could prove who he was.

His phone was dead. His socks were still wet. He had not understood the menu. He had not repaired his life. He had not become the sort of person who glowed faintly after soup.

But he had called.

And he was hungry.

Not empty.

Hungry.

The distinction walked beside him all the way home.