# D.I.M.A

OLUSEYE OBITOLA

OLUSEYE OBITOLA

# D.I.M.A

*Every anchor is holding something down.*

*First edition*

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.*
*Find out more at reedsy.com*

*For the ones who are willing to lose themselves for what they stand for.*

D.I.M.A The devil in me awakens.

— Oluseye Obitola

# Contents

# 1

# The One Who Runs

Morning in Alleygates never waited for anyone. Before the sun fully showed its face, the place was already awake. Wooden doors creaked open, one after the other. Women swept dust from their fronts, pushing yesterday away with short brooms and tired arms. The air carried the smell of damp earth and smoke from early fires. Somewhere, a radio spoke louder than needed, fighting with the crowing of a stubborn rooster that refused to keep quiet.

Down in the lower realm, as Alleygates called its lowest streets, the market stretched itself like a body just rising from sleep. Mats were spread on the ground. Tables were dragged out and set straight. Baskets opened their mouths to show pepper, tomatoes, onions. Some fresh, some already soft from yesterday's heat. Traders argued with the sun as they arranged their goods, turning items this way and that, hoping today would be better than the last. Coins clinked early, small sounds, but full of promise.

People passed through like a slow-moving river. Some walked fast, chasing time. Others moved gently, greeting everyone as if greeting was part of their job. Bare feet slapped the ground. Sandals dragged lazily. A child ran past with bread under one arm, laughing for no reason. In

Alleygates, mornings did not ask questions. They simply happened: busy, noisy, and alive, setting the rules for how the rest of the day would behave.

And there was a young man who lived just close enough to the lower realm to hear it wake every morning. Before his eyes opened, Alleygates had already started talking—metal knocking metal, voices bargaining too early, feet dragging across dust. The sounds found him before the sun did. He never complained. Noise felt honest. Silence asked questions he didn't always have answers for.

His room was small and plain. No tricks. No decorations trying to be more than they were. A mattress on the floor, a wooden stool with one leg slightly shorter than the others, a cracked mirror leaning against the wall. He washed his face from a plastic bowl, staring at his reflection longer than necessary. Not out of pride. Out of checking. As if every morning he needed to confirm that he was still himself. Same eyes. Same calm that looked like nothing but was actually full of effort.

On normal days, he moved through Alleygates like someone who knew the rules but refused to rush them. He liked walking. Not to get anywhere quickly, but to notice things people ignored when they were in a hurry. A woman arguing with her scale, insisting it was cheating her. Two boys fighting over who would carry a bucket, even though neither wanted to. An old man sitting by the roadside, not selling anything, just watching people pass like it was his full-time job. These things stayed with him. He remembered them. He always remembered small details, even when they served no clear purpose.

He loved fixing things that were not completely broken. A loose hinge. A chair that only needed balance, not replacement. People often said he was wasting his time, that such skills would not carry him far. He never argued. He just smiled and continued. There was something satisfying about restoring order quietly, without praise. About leaving a place better than he met it and walking away before anyone noticed.

Once, he returned a wallet he found near the market gutter. The owner was shocked, almost suspicious, counting the money twice like he expected it to be lighter. When asked why he did it, he only shrugged. "It's not mine." That was all. Another time, he stood between a shouting trader and a boy accused of stealing oranges. He did not raise his voice. He did not threaten. He simply stayed there, calm and unmoving, until the shouting lost its strength and turned into embarrassment. The boy ran. The trader muttered. The crowd moved on. No one thanked him. He did not wait for it.

But there were moments—quiet ones—when his stillness cracked. When he watched cruelty pass as normal. When he saw how easily people stepped on others just to stand taller for a moment. In those moments, something stirred in him. Not anger exactly. Something colder. Sharper. A thought that came and went quickly, like a shadow passing over the sun. He always pushed it away. He believed restraint was strength. He believed patience solved more problems than force ever could.

By evening, when Alleygates slowed and the lower realm began to fold itself back into rest, he often sat alone, hands resting on his knees, eyes on the sky darkening little by little. He liked that time best. When the city softened. When even the loudest people were tired of hearing themselves talk. He felt useful. Balanced. Like a man exactly where he was meant to be.

What he did not know—what he could not see yet—was that Alleygates noticed him too. The city watched how he moved, what he ignored, what he chose to fix and what he chose to endure. Cause always looked for effect. And in a place like Alleygates, patience was never invisible. It was only being measured.

* * *

The noise started before the young man saw what caused it. A sharp voice, stretched thin by anger, cut through the market hum. People slowed. Heads turned. Someone laughed, the way people laugh when trouble is not yet theirs.

Near a pepper stall, a woman stood with her wrapper loose at the waist. One hand held a small nylon bag, the other stayed raised, as if it could block words. The pepper trader stood opposite her, chest forward, voice loud enough to gather witnesses. He pointed at the ground, at the baskets, at her hands. "She put hand there," the trader said again and again. "I saw am. Don't pretend."

The woman shook her head. Not in drama. Just tired. "I no take anything," she said. Her voice stayed low, almost swallowed by the market. "Check me. abeg, check me." No one stepped forward. Watching was easier.

The young man stopped at the edge of the crowd. He did not push in. He listened first. The trader spoke like someone used to being believed. The woman spoke like someone used to explaining herself even when she was right. Same words. Different weights.

"Make we no waste time," a man in the crowd said. "If she thief am, make she return am." Another voice replied, "Even if she no thief am, who go fight for her?" Soft agreement followed. The market wanted peace, not truth.

The young man stepped forward, slow enough not to feel like a challenge. "What is missing?" he asked.

"Pepper," the trader replied. "Small one. She put am for bag."

The young man turned to the woman. "Can I see your bag?"

The woman held it out immediately. Her hands were steady—too steady. The young man opened the bag, shook it gently. Bread. Salt. Nothing else. He turned the bag upside down. Still nothing. A small murmur moved through the crowd.

"She hide am," the trader said quickly. "These people sabi trick."

The young man nodded, like the thought deserved consideration. Then he bent down and looked at the stall without touching anything.He studied the arrangement: what was fresh, what was soft, what had space between it. He reached under the table—on the trader's own side, where the woman had never stood—and pulled out a pepper crushed flat by a passing foot.

"This one?" the young man asked.

The trader paused. Just a breath too long.

"This pepper fall before you arrange," the young man said, standing. "If she take am, e for dey her bag or her hand." He pointed at the ground. "But e dey here, for your own side, under your own foot. Person step on am. That's all."

Silence followed. The kind that arrives when anger loses its footing.

The trader laughed, forced. "So you be expert now?"

"No," the young man said. "Just looking."

The crowd began to loosen. Interest faded. Problem solved. The woman took her bag back, murmured thanks that barely reached the young man, and slipped into the moving bodies. No one stopped her. No one followed.

A man beside the young man shook his head. "You too like stress," the man said, half-smiling. "Market no be court."

The young man smiled back and said nothing.

The trader returned to arranging peppers, slower now. The trader and the young man shared a brief look. No anger remained. Only memory.

As the young man walked away, the crushed pepper stayed on the ground. No one picked it up. The stall reopened. Money changed hands. The market healed itself the way it always did—by forgetting.

The young man paused once, then continued walking. The city swallowed the moment whole. But something stayed behind, quiet

and heavy.

Doing the right thing had taken time, effort, and explanation—and still left most things exactly the way they were before.

As he moved away from the market, a voice followed him, careless and unafraid of being heard. “That one,” the voice said, not calling him, just pointing him out, “e no go last for this place.” There was soft laughter. Not cruel. Not kind. Just certain. He did not stop walking. The sound of it stayed with him longer than the market noise, longer than the smell of pepper and dust. By the time he reached home, the city had already moved on. But the words did not. They sat with him in the quiet, asking nothing, promising nothing. Only reminding him that in Alleygates, being good was noticed the same way weakness was.

# 2

# The Right Path

Order in Alleygates wore a uniform.

Not a clean one. Not an impressive one either. The guards moved through the streets in faded colors, boots scuffed from years of use, whistles hanging loose around their necks. They were not feared. They were not admired. But when they stood somewhere long enough, noise lowered its voice.

The young man noticed this.

He noticed how people argued less when a guard leaned against a post nearby. How hands behaved themselves when a badge caught the light. Nothing magical. Just structure. Just rules given a body.

It made sense to him.

If chaos was loud and impatient, then discipline was quiet and stubborn. And quiet things, he believed, lasted longer.

He joined the district guard without ceremony. No speech. No calling. Just a line, a form, and a nod from a man who looked like he had seen many hopeful faces before and had stopped caring which ones stayed. Training was simple and repetitive. Stand straight. Speak clearly. Move only when told. Restraint before reaction. Always.

He liked it.

There was comfort in knowing where he ended and where authority began. Comfort in not having to decide alone. The rules were clear: de-escalate, detain if necessary, report everything. Violence was the last option, and even then, it had shape and limit.

The first time he wore the uniform, it felt heavier than expected. Not because of the cloth, but because of what it represented. People looked at him differently. Some with relief. Some with disappointments. A few with quiet hope.

He tried to deserve all of it.

On patrol, he spoke softly. He separated quarrels before they hardened into fights. He listened longer than his fellow guards, letting anger exhaust itself before stepping in. When insults were thrown, he absorbed them. When stones were raised, he stepped closer instead of backing away.

"Control yourself," he told others—and himself.

Once, during a dispute over space in the market, another guard raised his baton too quickly. The young man placed a hand on his arm, steady and firm. "Not yet," he said. The baton lowered. Words followed instead. The situation ended without blood.

That night, he slept well.

Days turned into weeks. He became known for patience. For fairness. For never rushing to punish when warning would do. Superiors noticed. "You have discipline," one told him. "That's rare."

He believed it.

Discipline meant choosing the harder path. It meant enduring insult so others would not suffer harm. It meant trusting that order, properly applied, would shape the city into something better. He saw himself as a wall—not stopping the storm, but slowing it enough for people to breathe.

There were moments of doubt, but he buried them beneath procedure. If the rules were followed, then the outcome would be right. If everyone

acted within the system, then cruelty would have no room to grow.

That was the belief.

One evening, after a long patrol, he stood watching the lower realm settle into rest. The market quieted. Fires dimmed. The city folded in on itself, tired but intact. He felt proud, not loud pride, but the steady kind that did not need witnesses.

He had chosen the right path.

Order over chaos.

Restraint over force.

Discipline over impulse.

Alleygates still breathed heavily, still strained at its seams—but now, he believed, it had hands steady enough to hold itself together.

He walked home in uniform, boots echoing softly against the ground. The guard kept bunks at the barracks for men on long shifts, and he would learn to sleep there too, but he had not given up his small room near the lower realm. He liked having a door that belonged to him. For the first time since the words had followed him from the market, he felt certain. Goodness was not weakness.

Goodness was control.

And control, given time, would fix everything. That was what he believed.

# 3

# Lessons in Control

Training—those first months, before the patrols and the quiet reputation—had not broken people quickly. It wore them down slowly.

They were woken before the city stirred, when the air was still undecided between night and morning. Boots were pulled on in silence. Belts fastened tight. Anyone too slow was not shouted at. They were simply noted. Notes, the instructors taught them, were worse than punishment. Punishment ended. Notes stayed.

They stood for long stretches doing nothing at all. No drills. No movement. Just standing. Backs straight. Eyes forward. Arms at their sides. If someone shifted weight, the line restarted. If someone sighed, the time doubled.

The young man learned how to make his body disappear.

He found ways to rest without relaxing, to breathe without being noticed. He counted heartbeats when his legs burned. He focused on the smallest details to ignore the agony of a locked knee—the way a single ant struggled through the dust, or the rhythmic *thwack* of a distant rug being beaten clean. The lesson came early and often: discomfort was not an emergency.

Rules came next. Thick, dry rules that seemed endless. Where to stand. How close was too close. Which words were allowed and which ones turned a situation from controlled to dangerous. They were tested on the rules until the answers came without thought.

"What do you do if you're insulted?"

"Nothing."

"What if they insult your family?"

"Nothing."

"What if they spit?"

"Record it."

The instructors watched closely when they answered. Anyone too eager was corrected. Anyone too slow was corrected harder. The young man answered evenly every time. Not proud. Not afraid. He understood something others did not: rules were not there to protect the public. They were there to protect the person enforcing them.

Physical training followed, but even that was about restraint. They were taught how to subdue without striking, how to hold without hurting, how to apply pressure just enough to stop movement and no more. Strength was measured, not unleashed. During sparring, larger men tried to overwhelm him. They rushed, expecting resistance. He stepped aside instead. Let momentum betray them. Let anger exhaust itself.

"You wait," one instructor said, circling him after a drill. "That waiting will save your life."

On patrol, the lessons became flesh. Alleygates tested him daily. He became a sponge for the city's friction. When a drunk man swung wild accusations, he was a wall. When a group of boys dared him to react, laughing louder each time he didn't, he was a shadow.

His fellow guards noticed. "You no dey feel shame?" one asked after a long afternoon of insults. He thought about it. "Shame dey pass," he

said. "Wahala dey stay."

But the discipline went deeper than ignoring insults; it meant ignoring justice when the rules demanded it.

He remembered one morning on Market Road. The rain had turned the dust into a thick, clinging paste. He stood as a physical barrier between a woman and a doorway. She held a plastic basin containing three damp blankets and a small, rusted charcoal stove.

"Officer, look at the paper," she pleaded, holding out a tattered slip of yellow carbon. The ink had blurred in the rain. "The month is not finished. I paid for thirty days. Today is the twenty-eighth. He threw my things out while I was at the tap."

Behind him, the landlord stood with his arms crossed—a man with heavy jowls and the quiet confidence of someone who had already shaken the right hands.

"The agreement changed," the landlord said simply. "New rates. She couldn't pay the difference."

"I have a receipt!" the woman cried. She turned to the young man, her hand reaching out to touch his sleeve before she caught herself and pulled back. "Please. Just tell him he must wait two days. Where do I sleep tonight?"

He looked at the yellow paper. He saw the dates. The math was simple; she was right. But the manual in his head flipped to Section Twelve: Property Disputes and Civil Unrest.

"Without a filed dispute from the district office, this is a civil matter," he said. His voice was flat, a tool used for measurement, not comfort. "Procedure requires you to file a complaint at the station during morning hours. I cannot intervene in a private contract on-site."

"But he is locking the door now!" she screamed.

"Move your basin from the thoroughfare, Ma'am," he replied.

He didn't look at her eyes. He looked at the bridge of her nose—a trick to maintain authority without making a connection. He stood

there for two hours. He watched the landlord padlock the door. He watched the woman sit in the mud until the rain soaked through her head wrap. He did not move. He was a pillar of the law, and a pillar does not feel pity for the things that lean against it.

When his shift ended, his report was perfect. *14:00 – Civil dispute, Market Road. Advised parties on proper filing procedure. Situation contained.*

Clean. Solid. Reassuring.

At night, he sat alone, uniform folded neatly nearby, replaying nothing. He practiced stillness even in his thoughts. Holding back had become natural. Effortless.

Being good meant enduring.

Being good meant absorbing.

Being good meant knowing you could act—and choosing not to.

And he was very good.

So good that Alleygates began to trust him with more restraint, more silence, more weight. So good that control no longer felt like something he used. It felt like something he was becoming.

And somewhere beneath that calm, something waited patiently. It was learning the same lessons and storing them away, understanding exactly how tight a man could hold himself before the pressure became too much to bear. It was waiting for the moment he would finally stop fighting the silt and simply let go.

# 4

# First Recognition

Recognition in the city did not arrive with trumpets. It arrived sideways, like a slow leak that eventually floods a room.

The incident began on a Tuesday near the eastern canal. In that part of the city, the air was always heavy with the smell of damp earth, diesel from the water pumps, and the sweet rot of discarded fruit. The traders there shared space that was never meant for them. They pushed their wooden stalls right to the edge of the water, leaving a path so narrow that two people could barely pass without brushing shoulders.

By midday, the heat had made everyone's skin feel too tight. A dispute broke out between a fabric seller and a man hawking plastic wares. It started with a tripped foot and a knocked-over display of basins. Shouting drew a crowd within seconds. In these streets, a crowd was like dry tinder; it only took one spark to set the whole neighborhood on fire.

A shove followed. Then the sound of a body hitting the hard, sun-baked earth. The mood shifted instantly. The idle chatter of the market died away, replaced by the low, hungry murmur of people expecting a fight.

The first guards on the scene did exactly what they were trained to do, but they did it with fear in their hearts. Three of them arrived in a rush, their boots thumping loudly on the wooden slats of the canal bridge. They led with their voices, screaming for the crowd to disperse, their batons held at the ready.

"Move back! All of you, move back now!" one guard yelled, his voice cracking under the strain.

Instead of clearing, the crowd bloomed with defiance. People talked back. A woman hissed a curse about the guards' mothers. A young man in the back laughed, a sharp, jagged sound that dared the men in uniform to do something about it. Then a stone was thrown. It missed the guards, splashing harmlessly into the oily water of the canal, but it was enough. The guards tightened their grip on their sticks. The air was thick, vibrating with the possibility of blood.

The young man arrived last.

He did not raise his voice and he did not hurry. He walked into the center of the chaos as if he were walking through an empty field. He stepped into the gap between the fabric seller and the man with the basins. He did not look at the crowd. He did not look at the other guards. He simply stood there.

He became a pause that the crowd had not asked for but could not avoid. His stillness was so absolute that it acted like a physical wall. He waited. He waited until the shouting guards realized nobody was listening to them. He waited until the traders stopped screaming to look at this man who was not moving.

"Everybody relax!" the first guard shouted again, but even he sounded uncertain now.

The young man said nothing. He looked at the man on the ground first. He reached down, gripped the man's forearm, and pulled him up. It was a firm, steady movement. No ceremony. He brushed a patch of dust from the man's shoulder with a single, slow swipe of his hand.

Then he turned to the traders. He did not sweep his gaze over them like he was looking for a fight. He looked at them as if he were counting them. He spoke evenly, his voice low enough that people had to lean in to hear him.

"The path is for walking," he said. "The stalls are for selling. If the path is blocked, no one walks and no one sells. Pick up the basins."

The man with the plastic wares started to protest, his face red and sweating. "But he pushed me! He said my father was a—"

The young man did not interrupt. He just watched the man. He let the anger pour out until the trader ran out of breath and realized he was shouting at a statue. When the silence returned, the young man pointed at the ground.

"The basins," he repeated.

It took time, but time worked. Slowly, the trader bent down. He began to gather his blue and red plastics. The fabric seller, seeing the lack of a fight, turned back to his own table. The stone-thrower in the back disappeared into the shadows of the stalls. The tension did not vanish, but it folded back into the daily hum of the market. The canal path cleared.

Someone clapped.

It was a solitary sound at first: a woman sitting behind a pile of peppers. Then a few others joined in. It was not a cheer for a hero. It was the sound of people who were tired of trouble and were glad it had passed them by.

A superior arrived when the dust had already settled. He looked at the orderly line of people moving past the canal and then at the three guards who were still breathing hard, their faces flushed. Finally, he looked at the young man, who was standing at the edge of the bridge, watching the water.

"Who settled this?" the superior asked.

The traders did not speak, but several of them pointed.

That evening, back at the barracks, the atmosphere had shifted. The barracks was a place of iron bunks and the smell of boot polish and old sweat. Usually, the young man was ignored, a ghost in a tan uniform. But tonight, the eyes followed him.

He was sitting on his bunk, cleaning the hem of his trousers, when an older guard sat down nearby. This man had a face mapped by years of small bribes and missed promotions. He lit a cigarette and watched the young man for a long time before speaking.

"They are talking about you at the front desk," the older guard said. "A note was written. Exceptional restraint. That is what they called it."

The young man did not look up. "The crowd was just hot. They needed to cool down."

"Crowds do not cool down on their own," the man spat, a cloud of smoke escaping his nose. "They burn until someone puts them out or they run out of things to break. You have a gift for making people feel small without hitting them. Be careful with that. People do not like feeling small for too long."

The young man did not answer. He did not know how to tell the man that he was not trying to make anyone feel small. He was just trying to keep the world from shaking.

The next day, the recognition became official. During the morning assembly, under the harsh white light of the courtyard, the Commander stood before the ranks. He was a man who spoke in short, brutal sentences.

"Order is not just about the baton," the Commander said, his eyes scanning the faces. "Order is about the man holding it. Yesterday, at the canal, we saw how order is kept without a single blow being struck. This is the standard."

He looked directly at the young man. The other guards shifted. Some looked at him with a new kind of respect, the kind given to a man who has proven he can do the job. But others, the ones who liked the weight

of the baton in their hands, looked at him with a cold, quiet calculation. To them, his restraint looked like a judgment on their own violence.

He felt the weight of it settle into his bones. It was not pride. It was a different kind of pressure. The city was leaning on him now. The traders expected him to be fair. The commanders expected him to be perfect. The other guards expected him to fail.

He walked home that night through the narrow streets of his neighborhood. He passed a group of boys playing football with a bundled-up rag. Usually, they would shout insults at a guard. Today, they went quiet as he passed, and he walked on slowly, waiting for the familiar sting of mockery that never came. The silence followed him instead, thick and careful. Then one of the boys nodded, and he felt something loosen in his chest—not pride, not relief, but something quieter and more dangerous.

For the first time, it occurred to him that this might be what stability felt like.

Not happiness. Not purpose. Just the absence of resistance. The world, briefly aligned. People stepping aside instead of pushing back. He told himself that this was what came from choosing correctly, standing on the right side of rules, holding his hands still when others clenched theirs.

If he kept doing this, he thought, if he stayed measured and unmoving, then maybe nothing would need to change again. Maybe this version of him could last.

The thought settled comfortably, like a stone placed to hold something down.

He did not yet realize that in this city, the rules were like the canal water—cloudy, deep, and full of things that could pull you under if you stood in one place for too long. He did not know that by becoming the man everyone leaned on, he was simply making sure that when he eventually broke, the collapse would be felt by everyone.

# 5

# The Return

The canal did not change.

It smelled the same as it always did—wet earth, old fuel, and fruit skins pressed flat into the mud until they turned to slime. The water still moved slow and brown, carrying things that nobody claimed ownership of. The stalls still leaned too far into the path, daring passersby to complain. Alleygates woke the way it always did, not with intention but with habit.

By the time the sun climbed high enough to hurt the eyes, the argument had already started.

It was almost identical to the last one. A blocked walkway. A man late for somewhere important. A trader who refused to shift even an inch because he believed this spot was his birthright—the same man with the plastic wares from the week before. Voices rose, not sharp yet, just tired. People gathered, not to help, but because trouble was a kind of entertainment that did not cost money.

Someone in the crowd sighed. "Na always here wahala dey start."

Someone else laughed, a dry sound that had no joy in it. When the first shove happened, it felt less like violence and more like routine. It was as if the city was replaying an old scene to see if anyone would

notice the repetition.

He noticed.

He arrived before the other guards this time. The uniform still fit him the same, but the way people reacted was different. Heads turned. A small space opened. A woman pulled her child closer to her hip. Someone whispered, not loudly, but enough for the sound to travel through the humidity. They recognized the guard who did not shout.

He stepped into the narrow gap just as he had before. His feet were planted. His shoulders were loose. His hands were open and visible. He waited for the silence to form around him like a protective bubble. He waited for the weight of his presence to pull the air out of the argument.

But the pause did not come.

The shouting continued, only now it bent around him instead of stopping. It was like water flowing past a stone in a stream. The trader complained louder than before, pointing aggressively at the man with the heavy load. The other man refused to step back, his jaw tight with a pride that looked like it would rather break than bend. The crowd leaned in closer, curious rather than cautious. They were waiting for the trick he had performed last time.

He spoke, his voice calm and low. "Clear the path. Same rule for everyone."

The words fell flat. They did not carry the authority they had held a week ago.

The trader scoffed and wiped sweat from his forehead. "You again? Last time you embarrassed me in front of everyone. Today it will not work like that. Move from my front."

The young man blinked once. He was unsure if he had heard correctly. He looked at the path, at the plastic basins pushed too far out, and at the people waiting to pass. Everything was exactly as it had been before. The solution was still obvious. The rules had not changed by a single letter.

So why was it not working?

The other guards arrived moments later. They were breathless and already irritated by the heat. One of them glanced at him, hesitated for a second, and then took charge the only way he knew how. He led with his shout and followed with his baton.

The crowd responded with the same familiar defiance. A stone hit the ground, close enough to the young man's boot to splash mud onto his trousers.

He felt it then. It was not anger or fear. It was a cold, hollow confusion.

He stepped back, just slightly, as if the ground beneath him had shifted without warning. He had done everything right. He had followed the manual, used the correct tone, and chosen restraint over force. This was the part where the city was supposed to cooperate. This was the part where his "goodness" was supposed to be rewarded with order.

Instead, the city pressed forward.

The guards moved in. They did not wait for understanding. They used their sticks to create space. The trader cursed. Someone fell into the mud. The crowd scattered like a school of fish and then re-formed a few meters away, buzzing with a dark energy. Order returned to the canal, but it was loud and ugly. It left bruises behind and broken basins in the dirt.

Nobody thanked him. Nobody clapped.

As the canal path cleared and people began to shuffle past again, a woman muttered to her friend, "Na force these people understand. All that standing still is just play-play."

He stood there longer than he needed to. He watched the brown water ripple as if the reflection might explain where he had gone wrong. The city had not remembered him. It had not stored his patience like credit in a bank. Whatever calm he had created the week before had evaporated the moment he turned his back.

That evening, as he walked home, the boys were playing football in

the street again. This time, they did not nod. They did not insult him either. They simply kept playing, the rag-ball skidding past his feet as if he were a lamp post or a tree. He was a ghost in a tan uniform.

Inside his room, the mirror showed the same man. Same uniform, neatly pressed. Same eyes, clear and steady.

But something had shifted in the way he saw himself.

Goodness, he realized, did not stack up neatly like bricks. It did not wait for you. It did not return the favor. Every day demanded itself fresh, and the city was careless of yesterday's effort.

He sat on his bed and rested his hands on his knees. For the first time since he had pulled on the boots of a guard, he wondered—not with bitterness, but with a quiet, tired curiosity—how long a man was expected to keep holding the world together with empty hands.

# 6

# The Promise

The promise did not arrive quietly this time. It came with noise, with heat, and with a kind of restlessness that refused to sit down.

That morning, Alleygates felt wrong. It was not broken, it was just impatient. The market opened too fast, as if everyone were running behind a clock they could not see. Voices were already raised before the first full row of stalls had settled into place. A woman shouted at a passerby over a bumped shoulder. A cart scraped a wall hard enough to chip the plaster, and the driver did not even pause to look at the damage. Somewhere, glass shattered, and the sound disappeared into the hum of the city without a single person turning their head.

He noticed all of it. He saw the frayed edges of the day before the sun had even cleared the rooftops.

At the barracks, the air was thick with sweat and the sharp irritation of men who had not slept well. Training began before the light was proper, and it did not stop when it should have. The Commander was in a foul mood, running them harder than the manual required. He demanded longer holds and slower movements. He made them stand in the high sun until the salt from their sweat crusted white on their tan

uniforms.

"Again," the Commander said every time a man's arms began to tremble.

"Again," when a back bent under the strain.

"Again," when he saw patience running thin in their eyes.

The others groaned. A man standing behind the young man cursed under his breath, a low string of words directed at the Commander's ancestors. One guard eventually lost his balance, his knees buckling, and as he fell, he shoved the man beside him out of pure frustration. It was a small thing, a momentary lapse, but it earned both of them a double shift of guard duty.

The young man did not react. He adjusted his stance, shifted his weight by a fraction of an inch, and held.

The pain in his thighs became background noise, like the sound of distant traffic. His muscles burned, then they went numb, then they seemed to disappear entirely. His breath turned shallow, then steady, then rhythmic. Somewhere in the repetition, something inside him sharpened. His body was complaining, but his mind had stopped listening.

Control, he told himself. This is what control feels like. It is the ability to stay still while the world tries to shake you apart.

When the training finally ended, the others collapsed where they stood, seeking the thin shade of the barracks wall. He did not join them. He stayed in the center of the courtyard, repeating the drills alone. Hold. Step. Turn. Release. Each movement was cleaner than the last. Each pause was longer. Each breath was measured as if it were the only thing that mattered.

A guard passing by with a bucket of water shook his head. "You dey try prove something? The sun no get joy today, my friend. Rest."

He did not answer. He was busy correcting a mistake in his footwork that only he could see. He did not want rest. Rest felt like a leak in his

discipline.

The day dragged him through the city like a test that kept changing its questions. At the canal, he found two boys arguing over territory that belonged to neither of them. He separated them with words that were firm and calm. He watched them walk away in opposite directions. But an hour later, when his patrol looped back, the same boys were there again. They were louder this time, angrier, their hands balled into fists. He handled it again. And an hour after that, he handled it a third time.

By the afternoon, he realized something unsettling. The city was not improving. It was simply resetting.

Every problem he solved seemed to return wearing a different face. He saw a woman accused of cheating on her weights in the morning, only to find her arguing with a different customer over the same trick by noon. He removed a drunk man from the middle of the road, only to find the same man swinging fists near the motor park by evening. The traders who nodded respectfully when he passed would cut corners the moment his back was turned.

It was not malice. It was not even defiance. It was just habit. It was the way the dust always settled back into the cracks of the pavement no matter how hard you swept.

The thought followed him like a mosquito he could not swat. *Maybe I am not doing enough.*

By sunset, his uniform clung to him, stiff with dried salt and the grey dust of the road. He stopped once at a roadside stall and bought a sachet of water. He bit the corner open with his teeth and drank it down in three long gulps. It tasted warm and faintly of plastic, but he bought another one and poured it over his neck.

On his way home, he passed a familiar alleyway near the edge of his neighborhood. A small crowd had formed. It was nothing dramatic, just the usual friction of people living too close together. He recognized the shape of the trouble before he even saw the faces. Same posture.

Same tension. Different people.

Someone in the crowd saw his tan shirt and called out. They did not shout for help; they spoke as if they were expecting him to appear.

He stepped in. He spoke the words. He stood there until the noise shrank back into embarrassment and muttering. People dispersed, looking relieved, but he could see in their eyes that they were unchanged. They would be back here tomorrow, or somewhere just like it.

As he walked away, a woman standing by a doorway sighed. It was not a sigh of gratitude. It was the sound of someone who was exhausted by the world.

"Thank God you came," she said, wiping her hands on her wrapper. "If not, e for don spoil."

He kept walking, but those words lodged somewhere deep in his chest. *If not.* The city was a leaning wall, and he was one of the few bricks trying to hold it up. If he was not there, it spoiled. If he was not there, it broke. The responsibility was not a gift; it was a sentence.

In his room that night, he did not sit down immediately. He stood in the doorway with his uniform half-unbuttoned and his boots still caked in the mud of the canal. The cracked mirror caught his reflection at an angle. His eyes looked sharper than he remembered. His jaw was set so tight it made his head ache. He looked like a man bracing for an impact that was already happening.

He sat eventually, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped tight. The room felt smaller than usual. The silence of the night pressed close against his ears.

He replayed the day. He replayed the week. He thought of all the returns, all the near-misses, and all the people who only behaved when they felt his eyes on them. The thought that had been circling his mind finally landed.

Maybe goodness does not spread like a scent on the wind. Maybe it has to be enforced like a debt.

The idea scared him just enough to feel important. It felt like a discovery.

He leaned forward and spoke softly, as if the city itself were listening through the thin walls of his room.

"I will do more."

The words tasted solid in his mouth. They had weight.

More shifts. More presence. More discipline. He would cut out the rest. He would eliminate the doubt. If restraint was not enough to change the people, he would refine his restraint until it felt like a cage they could not escape. If his patience was being wasted, he would extend it until there was nothing left of him but the law.

If the city wanted to lean on him, he would not step aside. He would become dependable. He would become unavoidable. He would become permanent.

The promise settled into him like a heavy stone. It was a weight he was choosing to carry, and while it was heavy, it felt righteous. It felt necessary.

Outside, Alleygates continued its noise. It was uncaring and alive, a beast that never truly slept. Somewhere, problems were already forming in the dark. Voices were already rising over a stolen coin or a spilled drink.

He stood up and reached for his uniform again, smoothing out the wrinkles with a flat palm.

Tomorrow would need him. And he would be there, standing exactly where the rules said he should be, waiting for the city to break itself against his stillness.

# 7

# A Hero, Named

The name did not come from the Commander or the inspectors. It did not come from the official reports that sat in neat piles on the mahogany desks at headquarters. It came from the street, rising up like the dust that coated every window and every throat in the district.

At first, it was a joke. Then it was a description. Finally, it became a fact.

They called him *The Anchor.*

It started because of the way he stood. In a city where everything was in motion—where people were always running, dodging, or falling—he was the only thing that remained fixed. If there was a riot at the motor park, he was there, a tan-colored pillar in the middle of the storm. If there was a fire in the timber sheds, he was the one standing at the edge of the heat, directing the panic with a voice that never broke.

He had fulfilled his promise. He was doing more.

He began taking double shifts without being asked. He would finish his patrol at the canal and, instead of heading to the barracks, he would walk to the northern gate to stand watch until the first light of dawn. His face grew thinner, the skin pulling tight over his cheekbones, making

his eyes seem larger and more watchful. He ate little and spoke less. He had become a man who lived entirely within the narrow margins of the rules.

In the barracks, the other guards no longer mocked him. The calculation in their eyes had turned into a strange kind of distance. They treated him like a piece of heavy machinery: useful, powerful, but something you did not want to stand too close to for fear of being caught in the gears.

One afternoon, as he was preparing for a third consecutive shift, a senior sergeant stopped him near the equipment lockers. The sergeant was a man who had seen thirty years of service and had the tired eyes to prove it.

"The Anchor," the sergeant said, testing the weight of the name. "That is what the market women are calling you now. They say as long as you are on the corner, the world will not drift away."

The young man buckled his belt, his fingers moving with a precision that was almost robotic. "The corner is supposed to be kept clear. That is the regulation."

"Regulations are for the books," the sergeant said, leaning against the locker. "But the people… they are looking for a savior. They have pinned their peace to your shirt. You think you can carry the weight of three thousand people in this market on one set of shoulders?"

The young man looked at the sergeant. His expression did not flicker. "If I do not carry it, who will?"

The sergeant sighed and looked at the floor. "Just remember, an anchor doesn't stop the ocean. It just sits in the mud while the ship pulls against it. Eventually, the chain snaps, or the anchor just drags through the dirt. Either way, the ship goes where the current takes it, and the anchor is left behind, buried in the dark."

He did not listen. He could not afford to. If he allowed himself to think about the mud, the whole structure he had built inside himself

would collapse.

The official recognition arrived two days later. It was the morning of the monthly review, a day when the high-ranking officers from the central district came to Alleygates to inspect the ranks. The air was thick with the scent of floor wax and starch.

The Commander stood on the raised dais, flanked by men whose uniforms were covered in gold braid and medals. The ranks stood in perfect lines, but even in the middle of a hundred men, the young man stood out. He was so still he looked like he had been carved from the very air.

"Step forward," the Commander ordered.

The young man marched. Every step was the same length. Every swing of his arm was measured. He stopped exactly three paces from the dais and saluted.

"In three months," the Commander began, his voice echoing off the concrete walls, "we have seen a shift in the eastern sectors. Disciplinary incidents are down. Market disputes have been cut in half. Civil compliance is at an all-time high."

The Commander turned to the officers beside him. "And it is largely due to the conduct of this officer. He has demonstrated that the law is not just a set of words, but a presence. He has become a symbol of the stability we intend to bring to every corner of this city."

One of the high-ranking officers stepped forward. He reached out and pinned a small, silver bar to the young man's chest. It was a citation for "Commendable Steadfastness."

"You have a reputation," the officer whispered, leaning in close. "The people trust you. Do not waste that trust. A man like you is worth ten battalions."

"Yes, sir," the young man replied.

The words were hollow. He did not care about the silver bar or the praise of the officers. What he felt was the lock. He felt his identity

snapping into place, as final as a prison door. He was no longer a man who could choose to be tired. He was no longer a man who could choose to look away. He was *The Anchor*. He was the symbol.

When the assembly was dismissed, he did not celebrate. He went straight to his post at the canal.

The city felt different under the weight of his new name. As he walked through the market, the whispers followed him. "The Anchor is here." "Look, the Anchor is coming."

The traders straightened their stalls before he even reached them. The beggars moved their bowls. The noise of the market dropped as he passed. It was exactly what he had wanted. It was the order he had promised to create.

But as the sun began to set, casting long, blood-red shadows across the water of the canal, he felt a strange sensation. He felt as though he were disappearing. The more the people looked at the Anchor, the less they saw the man inside the uniform. He was becoming a landmark, a fixed point, a thing to be used.

He stood at the edge of the bridge and looked down at his reflection in the water. The silver bar on his chest caught the last of the light, shining with a cold, hard brilliance.

He thought about the sergeant's words. About the ship going wherever it wanted while the anchor stayed in the mud.

For a brief moment, he felt a flicker of the old confusion. He looked at the people passing by—the woman with the peppers, the boy with the rag-ball, the man with the basins. They were all moving. They were all alive, messy, and changing. And he was the only thing that was not allowed to move.

He tightened his grip on his belt. The feeling passed.

He had made a promise to the city, and the city had accepted it. He was the hero they wanted. He was the order they needed. He would stand here until his boots became part of the pavement. He would absorb

every insult, every shove, and every crime until the city was clean.

He was very good. He was the best they had ever seen.

And as he stood there in the deepening dark, a single thought remained, buried deep beneath the discipline and the silver bar: *If I ever let go, there will be nothing left of me at all.*

# 8

# The City Adjusts

The city did not fight the young man. It did not rise up in a wave to break him. Instead, Alleygates did something far more dangerous: it adjusted.

It was like the water in the eastern canal. If you dropped a heavy stone into the flow, the water did not stop moving. It simply swirled around the obstacle, found a new path, and continued its journey. The stone remained at the bottom, cold and stationary, while the river remained exactly as deep and as muddy as it had ever been.

He felt the shift before he saw it. At first, it seemed like a victory. The usual spots for trouble—the narrow alleyways behind the timber sheds, the crowded junctions of the market—became eerily quiet when he was on duty. The shouting matches over short-changed coins died out the moment his tan uniform appeared at the end of the street.

He had become a master of the "quiet shift." He would walk for hours, his boots hitting the pavement in a steady, hypnotic rhythm, and find nothing but bowed heads and lowered voices.

But the peace was a thin skin stretched over a wound.

He began to notice that while the visible crimes were vanishing, the city was becoming more efficient in the dark. The trouble had moved.

It had learned his schedule, his pace, and the exact reach of his eyes.

One evening, he stood at his post near the canal. It was a perfect evening by the standards of his training. The path was clear. The traders were arranged in neat, compliant rows. Not a single basin was out of place. It was the order he had bled for.

But then he looked at the faces.

A young boy who usually sold cold water sachets was standing by a pillar, his eyes fixed on the young man. The boy wasn't selling. He was watching. Every time the young man turned his head, the boy would make a small, sharp gesture with his hand. A moment later, a man on a motorcycle would rev his engine twice and disappear down a side street.

They were using him as a signal. His presence, which was supposed to stop crime, had become the very thing that timed it. As long as "The Anchor" was fixed in one spot, the rest of the city knew exactly where it was safe to be lawless.

He walked toward the boy. The child didn't run. He just picked up his plastic bucket and smiled a wide, toothy smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Officer, you stay long today o," the boy said, his voice cheerful and empty. "The market is very peaceful when you are here."

The young man looked past the boy into the shadows of the alley. He knew that just thirty meters away, behind the rusted zinc sheets of a warehouse, something was happening. A bribe was being taken, or a crate was being emptied. He could feel the vibration of the city's true life—the one that happened just out of his sight.

"Move along," the young man said. His voice sounded heavy, even to his own ears.

The boy nodded and stepped away, but he didn't stop watching.

The realization began to eat at him. His "goodness" was being mapped. His restraint was being measured and used as a tool by the very people

he was trying to contain. They knew he wouldn't strike without cause. They knew he wouldn't break the rules to chase a shadow. And because they knew exactly what he would do, they no longer feared him. They simply worked around him.

The other guards saw it too. One night in the barracks, the older guard who had warned him before sat across from him. The man was sharpening a small pocketknife, the rasp of the stone against the blade the only sound in the quiet room.

"You have made the city very clever," the older guard said without looking up. "Before you, they were messy. They fought in the open like animals. Now? Now they are like ghosts. They have learned to hold their breath until you pass."

The young man didn't stop polishing his belt buckle. "The streets are quieter. That is what was asked of us."

"Quiet is not the same as safe," the older guard spat. "You are a light in a dark room. All you have done is show the cockroaches where the shadows are. Look at the reports. The canal is clean, yes. But the backstreets? The places where you cannot stand for twenty hours a day? The blood there is fresh every morning."

The young man felt a cold prickle of doubt. He thought of the silver bar on his chest. He thought of the name *The Anchor*.

He doubled his efforts. He began to change his routes. He doubled back on his own tracks, hoping to catch the city in a lie. He stayed out until his eyes were bloodshot and his legs shook with fatigue. He pushed himself to the very edge of human endurance, trying to be everywhere at once.

But the city was faster.

He would turn a corner and find a group of men standing perfectly still, their hands empty, their expressions blank. They would wait for him to pass, and the moment he was gone, the air would fill with the low, buzzing sound of their business resuming. He was no longer a

man; he was a weather pattern they had learned to predict.

He found a body one morning. It was in a small drainage ditch behind the market, far from his usual post. It was a man he recognized—a trader whose dispute he had once settled. The man had been beaten, but the violence had been precise, quiet.

There had been no shouting. No crowd. No stones thrown. The city had learned that loud trouble brought the Anchor. So the city had become silent in its cruelty.

The young man stood over the ditch, his shadow falling across the dead man's face. He felt a sudden, sharp urge to kick something, to scream, to break the stillness that he had worked so hard to create. He wanted the city to be loud again. He wanted the chaos he could understand.

Instead, he pulled out his notebook. He recorded the time. He recorded the location. He noted the state of the clothing and the position of the limbs.

His hand was steady, but the pen felt like it weighed a hundred pounds.

He was doing everything right. He was being better than any guard Alleygates had ever seen. He was the perfect soldier of the law. And yet, as he looked at the body in the mud, he realized that his presence hadn't saved this man. It had only changed the way he died.

The opposition had evolved. They had traded their anger for calculation. They had looked at the man who would not bend, and they had decided to simply walk around him.

As he walked back to the station to file the report, he passed the woman who sold peppers. On better days she would press a small bundle on him, and he would refuse, and she would insist, and he would walk away holding it anyway. Today she only looked at him, with a gaze that was no longer full of relief. It was a look of pity.

"Officer," she whispered as he passed. "You are tired. Why are you still standing?"

He did not answer. He could not answer. He was the anchor, and he had already reached the bottom. He was terrified that if he admitted he was tired, the mud of Alleygates would finally close over his head and bury him for good.

He had become the perfect barrier. And behind him, the city was thriving in the dark.

# 9

# Clean Victories

The victories were beautiful. They were silent, precise, and entirely hollow.

The system had recognized the young man's utility. He was no longer just a patrolman; he was the one they sent when a situation required a surgical touch. If a prominent merchant was being harassed by a gang of youths, they sent him. If a warehouse was being drained of its stock by ghosts in the night, they sent him.

He arrived, he stood, and the problem vanished. On paper, it was a miracle of policing. In reality, it was just the city holding its breath until he left.

His missions were technically flawless. He remembered a raid on a suspected gambling den near the waterfront. Usually, such an operation would involve smashed doors, shouting, and blood on the floorboards. The Commander had watched from the shadows as the young man approached the entrance alone.

He did not kick the door. He knocked once, firmly.

When the lookout opened the small wooden slat, the young man did not shout. He simply looked the man in the eye. He did not say a word about the law or the batons waiting in the dark. He just stood there, the

silver bar on his chest catching the dim light of the streetlamp.

The lookout recognized him. He didn't open the door out of respect; he opened it out of a tired kind of calculation. He knew that the Anchor would not leave. He knew that if he didn't open the door, the Anchor would stand there until the sun bleached his uniform white, and the guard reinforcements would eventually turn the street into a war zone.

"You again," the lookout muttered, pulling the bolt. "You don't get tired?"

The young man didn't answer. He just waited for the silence to do the work. The men walked out not because they were repentant, but because the Anchor had made the gamble "bad for business." It was easier to surrender to a man who didn't move than to fight a man who wouldn't go away.

The young man filed his report before the sun was up. *Location cleared. Zero casualties. Zero force used.*

"A clean victory," the Inspector had said, patting the young man's shoulder. "If we had ten more like you, this city would be a paradise."

But the young man knew what the Inspector did not. He knew that the gambling den would move three streets over by the following night. He knew the men who had walked out free would be back at the tables within the week. He had cleared the room, but he had not changed the hearts of the people inside it. He was a broom sweeping dust from one corner of the house to another.

The success had no consequence.

He began to feel like a performer in a play that never ended. Every night was a new stage, and every mission was a repeat of the last. He would step into a crisis, his presence would act as a temporary sedative, and the crisis would go into a deep sleep. But it always woke up the moment he returned to his barracks.

He noticed it most at the barracks during the quiet hours. The other guards were beginning to treat him with a reverence that felt like a wall.

They no longer invited him to sit with them for their evening meals of jollof rice and fried fish. They did not share jokes about the local politicians or the quality of the beer at the corner bar.

He was a hero. And a hero is a lonely thing to be.

"You are looking for a result that does not exist," the older guard said one night. He was sitting on the edge of his bunk, nursing a sore foot. "You want the city to be different because you are good. But the city is older than your goodness. It has survived better men than you by simply outwaiting them."

The young man looked at his own hands. They were steady. Not a single tremor. "The reports say we are winning. The crime rates are dropping."

"The crime rates are hiding," the older guard corrected. "They are hiding because they respect the Anchor. But respect is not the same as change. You are winning every battle, my friend. But you are losing the city."

He went back to his work with a renewed, desperate focus. He looked for the one victory that would stick. He looked for the one mission that would leave a lasting mark on the streets of Alleygates.

He was sent to handle a dispute at the central market involving a powerful woman who owned half the stalls in the textile section. She was accused of extorting the smaller traders, squeezing them until they had nothing left for their families. It was a delicate matter—she had friends in high places and a tongue that could skin a man alive.

The young man arrived at her stall. She began to scream the moment she saw him, a high-pitched torrent of abuse designed to draw a crowd and embarrass the guard. She called him a lapdog. She called him a tool of the big men.

He did not flinch. He did not answer. He simply stood in front of her stall, blocking the entrance. He stayed there for six hours. He did not eat. He did not drink. He did not move even when the afternoon rain

began to soak through his uniform.

By the end of the day, the woman was silent. She was exhausted by his lack of reaction. She agreed to the new terms, signed the restitution papers a district clerk had been holding all afternoon, and retreated into the shadows of her shop.

The traders cheered. They called his name. They told him he had saved them.

But three days later, as he walked past the same row of stalls, he saw the woman. She was smiling. She was leaning over the counter of a smaller trader, her hand held out for a "gift" that was not on the paper. When she saw the young man, her smile did not falter. She simply lowered her hand and waited for him to pass.

He felt a sudden, sharp pain in his chest. It was a victory. It was clean. It was flawless.

And it meant absolutely nothing.

He had enforced the law, but the law was a thin garment that the city wore for show. Underneath, the old skin was still there—rough, scarred, and indifferent to his efforts. He was successful, but his success left no mark on the world. It was like writing on water.

He returned to his room that night and sat in the dark. He did not unbutton his uniform. He did not take off his boots. He felt the silver bar on his chest, a cold weight that seemed to be pulling him down into the floor.

He had become a hero, but he was a hero of the surface. He was a master of the clean victory, and he was beginning to realize that a clean victory was just another way of saying that nothing had really happened at all.

Outside, the noise of Alleygates rose up to meet the moon. It was a sound of life, of struggle, and of people who knew exactly how to wait out a man like him.

# 10

# The Man Who Doesn't Wait

The young man was used to being the most effective force in the district. He was the one the system relied on because he was predictable. But there was another kind of effectiveness in the city, one that did not ask for permission and did not care for the "clean victories" of the barracks.

He first saw the man during a standard patrol near the old tannery. The tannery was a place of deep, biting smells—raw hide and chemical vats that made the eyes water. It was a haven for the "small-boy" gangs who specialized in stripping the copper wiring from the machinery.

The young man arrived at the gates, his notebook in hand, ready to follow the protocol. He intended to speak to the foreman, record the losses, and then stand guard at the entrance to discourage the thieves from returning. It was his way. The way of the Anchor.

But as he reached the gate, the air was already vibrating with a different energy.

There was no standing. There was no waiting.

A man was coming out of the tannery, dragging a youth by the collar of his shirt. This man did not wear the tan uniform of the guard. He wore a simple, dark kaftan, and his movements were so fast they seemed

to blur against the grey walls of the factory. He didn't look like a hero; he looked like a predator that had finished its hunt.

The young man stopped. "The district office handles the processing of suspects. Hand him over."

The man in the dark kaftan didn't stop walking. He didn't even look up. He shoved the youth toward the canal—not with the measured pressure the young man had been taught, but with a brutal, efficient force that sent the boy sprawling into the mud.

"He was stealing," the man said. His voice was not calm like the young man's; it was sharp, like the crack of a whip. "Now he is wet and he is afraid. He will not come back tonight."

"There is a procedure for this," the young man said, his hand moving toward his belt. "We record the incident. We file the statement. We ensure the law is followed."

The man in the kaftan finally stopped. He turned, and for the first time, the young man saw his face. It was a face built for speed—thin, scarred, and impatient. His eyes didn't look for the "bridge of the nose" to maintain authority. They looked straight into the young man and found him wanting.

"You are the one they call the Anchor," the man said. It wasn't a compliment. It sounded like a diagnosis. "You stand in the sun and wait for the city to be good. While you are standing, the city is eating itself."

"I maintain order," the young man replied, his jaw tightening.

"You maintain a statue," the man spat. He stepped closer, his presence pushing against the young man's stillness. "I saw you at the textile stalls. You stood for six hours while that woman drained the life out of the market. I would have finished it in six minutes. One word in the right ear, one broken crate, and she would have learned the cost of greed."

"That is not the law," the young man said.

"The law is a slow boat," the man replied. "And I am a man who doesn't wait for the tide."

Before the young man could respond, the man in the kaftan was already moving again. He didn't walk; he darted. He disappeared into the maze of the tannery's back alleys before the young man could even open his notebook.

He had handled the situation, cleared the thief, and disappeared while the Anchor was still calculating the *correct* way to greet him.

The young man stood by the tannery gate for a long time. For the first time, his stillness felt less like power and more like a weight. He looked at his notebook. The pages were white and clean, ready for a report that now felt irrelevant. The thief was gone. The crime was stopped. But the "rules" had been bypassed entirely.

The man in the kaftan was not a hero. He was effective, but he was messy. He didn't care about the long-term or the *notes* or the silver bar on a chest. He cared about the *now*.

Later that night, the young man found himself thinking about the speed of the man. He thought about the youth in the mud. The youth hadn't been "contained" or "restrained." He had been terrified.

He realized that while he was being "very good," the city was starting to prefer the man who was "very fast." The people were tired of the slow crawl of justice. They were tired of waiting for the Anchor to bring a peace that never seemed to stick.

In the barracks, he asked the older guard about the man in the dark kaftan.

"Ah," the older guard said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "You met the Shadow. He is not a guard. He is what happens when the guards are too slow. He doesn't file reports. He doesn't stand in the sun. He just solves the problem and moves to the next one."

"He breaks the rules," the young man said.

"He does," the older guard agreed. "But look at the streets where he walks. They are not just quiet. They are empty of trouble. People fear the Anchor because he is a pillar. But they fear the Shadow because he

is the blade that falls before you even hear it whistling."

The young man sat on his bed, the weight of his uniform feeling heavier than ever. He looked at the silver bar on his chest. It represented everything he had worked for: the discipline, the patience, the commitment to the system.

But the image of the man in the kaftan wouldn't leave him. Speed beats permission. It was a simple, brutal truth that the manual hadn't covered.

He had spent his whole life learning how to hold himself together. Now, for the first time, he was looking at a man who had decided to let go—and the city was rewarding him for it.

The Anchor stayed in the mud. But the Shadow was already miles away, and he was winning.

# 11

# Damage Control

The contrast with the man in the kaftan stayed with him, but the city did not give him time to dwell on it. Alleygates was shifting again. The air was thick with a new kind of heat—not just the sun, but the friction of a district that had grown tired of waiting.

The crisis broke at the northern depot. It was a fuel strike, and within hours, the queue of yellow buses and private cars had stretched three kilometers, clogging the arteries of the neighborhood. By noon, the patience of the drivers had evaporated. A minor collision between two vehicles triggered a roar of anger that could be heard from the barracks.

When the young man arrived, the scene was on the verge of a riot.

The other guards were already there, and they were failing. One guard had tried to use the kind of speed the Shadow was famous for—he had swung his baton at a driver who refused to move. The result was not order. It was an explosion. The crowd had surged forward, and now the guards were pinned against a concrete wall, stones raining down on them while they flailed blindly with their sticks.

The young man did not join the fight. He did not run in with a raised hand.

He stepped into the middle of the road, fifty meters away from the

center of the violence. He stood exactly where the sun hit the pavement hardest. He didn't shout. He didn't look at the stone-throwers. He began to direct the traffic that was *not* part of the fight.

He moved his arms with the slow, deliberate grace of a man who had all the time in the world. He ignored the glass shattering behind him. He ignored the screams. He simply created a small, quiet island of function in the middle of the dysfunction.

One by one, the people on the edges of the crowd stopped looking at the fight and started looking at him.

His stillness was contagious. It was a visible reminder that the world had not ended, that the rules were still there. The drivers who had been leaning on their horns let go. The men who had been reaching for stones paused, their arms mid-swing, mesmerized by the guard who acted as if nothing were wrong.

It took two hours. He stood until his boots felt like they had melted into the asphalt.

Slowly, the violence bled out. The men who had been fighting with the guards stepped back, embarrassed by their own noise in the face of his silence. The "speed" that had caused the flare-up was gone, replaced by the heavy, suffocating weight of the Anchor's presence.

By sunset, the road was moving. The buses were in line, though the pumps stayed dry. The blood had been washed away by a sudden, brief rain.

His superior arrived to survey the scene. He looked at the bruised faces of the other guards and then at the young man, who was still standing in the center of the junction, his uniform soaked but his posture perfect.

"You saved the depot," the superior said, a look of genuine relief on his face. "If you had joined the fray, they would have burned the pumps to the ground. Your restraint held the line."

Later that evening, the reports were filed. Again, the notes were

glowing. *Disaster averted. Minimal force. Stability maintained.*

But as he sat in the barracks, the young man felt a familiar ache. He had prevented chaos, yes. But he had not solved the strike. He had not fixed the fuel shortage. He had not punished the men who threw the first stones or the guard who had struck the first blow.

He had chosen stability over justice.

He looked at his hands, which were red and swollen from the heat. He realized that the city loved him because he was a sedative. He made the pain manageable, but he did not cure the disease. The *clean victory* at the depot was just another way of saying that the status quo had survived one more day.

"They are singing your name again," the older guard said, sitting on the bunk across from him. "They say the Anchor is the only thing keeping the roof from falling in."

"The roof is still rotting," the young man said quietly.

"True," the older guard replied, lighting a cigarette. "But people would rather live under a rotting roof than no roof at all. You give them the feeling that things are okay. In this city, that is worth more than the truth."

The young man lay back on his thin mattress. He thought about the man in the kaftan—the blade that cut through the rot. That man would have found the person hoarding the fuel and broken his warehouse doors. He would have caused a mess, but the buses would be full.

Instead, the young man had stood still, and the buses idled in their lines, tanks still empty. But the streets were quiet.

The city praised his restraint because it allowed everyone to go back to their comfortable, quiet suffering. He was the master of damage control. He was the hero of the "almost."

As he closed his eyes, he realized that he had become exactly what the system needed: a man who could watch the world burn and only worry about keeping the smoke in a straight line.

Stability felt like a triumph to everyone else. To him, it was starting to feel like a cage.

# 12

# Numbers

The change did not happen in his heart. It happened in his head. He began to see the city as a series of equations. Alleygates was no longer a collection of voices, smells, and stories; it was a vast, shifting grid of probabilities. If he stood at Point A, the chance of violence at Point B dropped by fifteen percent. If he allowed a small theft to occur in the western market, he could prevent a larger riot in the southern terminal.

He began to think in scale.

The individual no longer mattered. A single person's suffering was just a rounding error in the larger quest for stability. He had become a man of the ledger, even if he still carried a baton.

The realization crystallized during a Tuesday afternoon patrol. He found himself at a crossroads where a group of youths had cornered a shopkeeper. They were demanding "protection tax," a common enough occurrence. In the past, he would have stepped in immediately. He would have used his presence to dissolve the tension.

But today, he stopped and watched from the shadows of an awning.

He looked at the crowd. He looked at the traffic flow. He looked at the sun's position. He calculated that if he intervened now, the youths

would scatter into the nearby residential blocks, where they would likely vent their frustration by smashing windows or harassing women at the water pumps. If he let them take the money, they would leave quietly, satisfied for the day.

One man's loss against the peace of an entire block.

He stayed in the shadows. He watched the shopkeeper hand over a wad of crumpled notes. He watched the youths walk away laughing. When the street was quiet again, he stepped out and continued his patrol. He did not file a report. In the grand tally of the city, the shopkeeper's money was a small price to pay for a quiet afternoon.

He had traded a piece of justice for a gallon of stability. The math was perfect.

At the barracks, he began to spend more time looking at the district maps and the crime ledgers than talking to the other men. He looked for patterns. He looked for the "acceptable loss."

"You are becoming very quiet," the older guard said one night, watching him move pins across a map of the waterfront. "Even for you. You look like a man who is counting his sins."

"I am counting the cost," the young man replied without looking back. "We try to save everyone, and we end up saving no one. The city is too big for mercy."

"Mercy is not about the city," the man said, blowing a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "Mercy is about the person in front of you. If you lose that, you are just a census taker in a uniform."

The young man ignored him. He was looking at the northern sector. There had been a series of small, violent outbursts between rival transport unions. Usually, the guard would send a massive force to crush both sides. But the young man proposed a different plan to the Inspector.

"Let them fight," he had said, his voice as cold as a stone in a well.

The Inspector had blinked in surprise. "Let them? There will be blood

in the streets."

"Yes," the young man replied. "But if we intervene, they will unite against us. If we let them exhaust each other in the back alleys, the winner will be too weak to cause trouble for the rest of the year. We lose five men in the unions to save a hundred civilians from a year of constant friction. It is the better outcome."

The Inspector had looked at him for a long time, perhaps seeing for the first time the monster that discipline had created. But the logic was undeniable. The order was given.

The young man stood watch at the perimeter of the conflict that night. He heard the screams. He heard the sound of iron pipes hitting bone. He saw the flashes of fire from petrol bombs. His fellow guards were restless, their hands itching for their weapons, waiting for the command to move in.

He held them back.

"Wait," he said.

"They are killing each other!" a younger guard hissed, his face pale in the firelight.

"Thirty people are involved in that fight," the young man said, his eyes fixed on his watch. "There are twelve thousand people sleeping in the blocks behind us. If we move, the fire spreads to them. We stay here. We hold the line. Thirty is less than twelve thousand."

He said it as if he were explaining a simple sum to a child.

The fight ended an hour later. The streets were a mess of glass and blood, but the fire had stayed contained. The city woke up the next morning to a quiet district. The unions were broken, their leaders either dead or in hiding. The clean victory was his most successful one yet.

He walked home that night feeling the weight of the silver bar on his chest. It felt different now. It no longer felt like a reward for being good. It felt like a badge of office for a judge who had stopped caring about the law and started caring only about the balance sheet.

He looked at himself in the cracked mirror. He tried to remember the woman with the basins at the canal, or the woman who had begged for her room back. He tried to find the part of him that had felt the "heaviness" of his control.

It was gone.

He saw only the Anchor. He saw a man who had successfully reduced the city to a set of numbers. He saw a man who was willing to sacrifice the few to protect the many, and who no longer felt the need to apologize for it.

He was a hero. He was a savior. And he was becoming the most dangerous thing in Alleygates: a man who believed that peace was worth any price, as long as he wasn't the one paying it.

The city was quiet. The math was right. And somewhere deep inside, the man who had joined the guard to be *good* was buried under the weight of his own calculations.

# 13

# The Limit

The math had always been clean until tonight.

The investigation had taken him three weeks. It was not a mission given by the Commander; it was a rot he had followed on his own time, tracing the threads of a child-trafficking ring that operated out of the back of a legitimate-looking cold-room near the docks. He had seen the numbers. He had seen the vans moving in the dead of night when the patrols were thin. He had calculated the cost of silence, and for the first time, the cost was too high.

He did not wait for a squad. He went alone, a shadow in a tan uniform, moving with a purpose that felt sharper than any drill he had ever performed.

He found them in the warehouse. The air was freezing, mist rising from the open freezer doors. There were crates stacked to the ceiling, but they weren't filled with fish. He saw the children—six of them, huddled together in the dark, their eyes wide with a terror that no rulebook could ever describe.

Standing over them was the man in the dark kaftan. The man who didn't wait.

The "Shadow" was already there, his hands stained with the blood of

the merchant's hired men—the ones he had gone through to get inside. He had a blade in his hand, and he was moving toward the man who ran the operation: a wealthy merchant who sat trembling in a velvet chair, clutching a briefcase full of money.

"Stop," the young man said.

His voice was a habit. It was the Anchor speaking, even here, in the cold and the dark.

The man in the kaftan turned. He looked at the young man, then at the children, then back at the merchant. "He is selling them like meat, Anchor. I am going to end it. Right now."

"He is a suspect," the young man said, stepping into the light. "He must be processed. He must stand trial. That is the procedure."

"Trial?" the man in the kaftan laughed, a jagged, ugly sound. "He has friends in the ministry. He has money for the judges. If you take him in, he will be back on the street by Friday, and these children will disappear again. Move aside."

The young man felt the logic of the Shadow pulling at him. He knew the man was right. He had seen the "Clean Victories" that led to nothing. He knew the system was a sieve. But he also knew that if he let the blade fall, the Anchor was dead. Everything he had built—the discipline, the stillness, the rules—would be a lie.

"I cannot let you do it," the young man said.

He stepped between the blade and the merchant. He was not protecting the criminal; he was protecting the boundary. He was protecting the idea that the law was the only thing that kept the city from turning into a slaughterhouse.

"The limit of your goodness is a joke," the man in the kaftan spat. He lunged.

The young man met him. It was a fight of two different philosophies. The Shadow was fast, erratic, fueled by a righteous rage. The Anchor was a machine. He used the techniques he had practiced ten thousand

times in the barracks courtyard. He subdued without striking. He held without hurting. He applied pressure just enough to stop movement.

He pinned the man in the kaftan to the floor, his knee in the small of the man's back.

"Call it in," the young man commanded the trembling merchant. "Call the station."

The merchant scrambled for his phone, his face lit with a sickening relief. He saw the guard as his savior. He saw the law as his shield.

Suddenly, the warehouse doors burst open. It was not a rescue. It was another hero.

A senior guard, a man whose judgment he had respected since his first weeks in uniform, stepped into the room. He took in the scene: the children, the merchant, the pinned man in the kaftan. He saw the briefcase of money spilled on the floor.

"Let him go," the senior guard said.

The young man looked up, his grip tightening on the man in the kaftan. "He tried to kill a suspect. He is a vigilante. I have secured the scene."

"I said let him go," the senior guard repeated. His voice was not the voice of a mentor. It was the voice of a man enforcing a different kind of rule. He walked over to the merchant and helped him up. He picked up the briefcase and handed it back.

"The merchant is a friend of the district," the senior guard said, his eyes meeting the young man's. "The children… there has been a mistake. These are his relatives. He was moving them for their safety."

The young man felt a coldness deeper than the air of the freezer. "I have the logs. I have the witness statements. He is selling them."

"The logs are incorrect," the senior guard said, his tone as flat as a report. "And your presence here is unauthorized. You have crossed the line, Anchor. You are acting outside of your patrol zone."

The young man looked at the children. They were still shivering. He

looked at the man in the kaftan, who was laughing silently into the floorboards.

"See?" the man in the kaftan whispered. "Your rules are not a cage for the bad men. They are a cage for you."

The senior guard stepped forward and unpinned the silver bar from the young man's chest. "You are relieved of duty. Return to the barracks. Now."

The young man eased his knee off the man's back and stood up. He felt light. He felt empty. He watched the merchant walk out the back door, flanked by guards who were supposed to be his brothers. He watched the man in the kaftan slip away into the shadows while the senior guard was busy with the briefcase.

He had followed the rule. He had protected the suspect. He had maintained the order.

And the result was a horror.

He walked out of the warehouse and into the humid night of Alleygates. He did not look back. He realized then that goodness was not a path to a better world. It was just a boundary. It was a fence that kept the sheep in the field while the wolves were given the keys to the gate.

He had been the perfect guard. He had been the Anchor. And in being perfect, he had ensured that nothing would ever truly change.

The limit of his goodness had been reached. And on the other side of that limit, the city was exactly as dark as it had always been.

# 14

# Quiet Envy

He was a man without a post.

The senior guard had told him to return to the barracks, but the barracks felt like a tomb designed for a version of himself that had died in the cold-room. Instead, he walked. He kept his uniform on, though the silver bar was gone, leaving a small, dark puncture wound in the fabric over his heart.

He moved through the night markets of Alleygates, watching the city not as a guardian, but as a ghost.

He found himself standing at the edge of a drinking spot: a collection of plastic chairs and low tables tucked into a space between two collapsing buildings. It was a place where the "tough men" of the district gathered to spend the money they had squeezed from the day.

Usually, when he appeared here, the air would turn polite. Men would lower their voices and hide their bottles under the table. They would wait for the Anchor to pass, offering him the silent, resentful respect he had spent years earning.

But tonight, he stayed in the shadows, unmoving.

He watched a group of men arguing over a gambling debt. The tension was high; one man had a broken bottle in his hand, his eyes bloodshot

and wide. A few weeks ago, the young man would have stepped in. He would have used his stillness to cool the room. He would have waited for the clean victory.

Before he could move, a figure slipped into the light of the kerosene lamp. It was the man in the dark kaftan.

The Shadow did not use words. He did not wait for a pause. He simply walked to the table and placed a hand on the shoulder of the man with the bottle. The man froze. He didn't turn around to check who it was. He didn't argue. He didn't claim his rights.

The man with the bottle began to tremble. His hand opened, and the glass shattered on the dirt floor. Without a single command being given, the man reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of notes, and placed them on the table. He stood up, bowed his head, and walked away into the dark, his legs shaking.

The Shadow watched him go, then disappeared as quickly as he had arrived.

The young man felt a sharp, cold pang in his chest. It was envy. Not the envy of a man wanting another's wealth or status, but a quiet, professional envy.

He realized that the fear the Shadow commanded was more honest than the "order" the Anchor enforced. When the Shadow appeared, the problem did not just go to sleep; it was eradicated. The man with the bottle would not come back tomorrow to try again. The fear had reached deep into him and changed his behavior in a way that the young man's patience never could.

He walked further into the district, his mind a hive of new calculations.

He passed a shop where the owner was being harassed by a group of local "area boys" for a late payment. He saw a guard he recognized standing across the street. The guard saw the harassment, but he did nothing. He was waiting for a "note" to be filed. He was waiting for a superior's order. He was being good according to the manual.

The shopkeeper looked at the guard with a gaze of pure, concentrated hatred. It was the look of a person who realized the law was a bystander.

The young man watched this and felt a bitterness rise in his throat. Trust was a slow, heavy thing. It took years to build and seconds to break. But fear? Fear was instant. Fear was a universal language that required no translation and no paperwork.

He stood in an alleyway and watched his own hands. They were still the hands of a guard. They were trained for restraint. They were trained to hold, not to break. But the more he watched the city, the more he saw that his restraint was a form of permission. By refusing to be the blade, he had allowed the predators to grow bold.

He remembered the children in the cold-room. The senior guard had used the "rules" to protect the merchant. The system had used the young man's own discipline against him.

He began to envy the man in the kaftan's freedom. To be able to act without a report. To be able to settle a debt without a witness. To be able to see a horror and end it before the "proper channels" could turn it into a bribe.

"You are still walking," a voice said from the darkness behind him.

He didn't turn. He knew the voice. It was the older guard from the barracks.

"I have no post," the young man said.

"The post is in your head," the older man said, stepping into the light. He looked at the empty space where the silver bar had been. "I heard what happened at the warehouse. You did what you were told. You followed the limit."

"The limit is a lie," the young man said.

"It is," the older man agreed. "But it is a comfortable lie. Most men spend their whole lives tucked inside it. You, though… you look like a man who has finally seen the fence."

The young man looked at the street. A man was being beaten in the

distance, just out of the reach of the streetlamp. Nobody was coming to help. The "Anchor" was supposed to be there, but the Anchor was a ghost.

"I used to think that being good was about standing still," the young man said.

"And now?"

"Now I think standing still is just a way of letting the bad things happen with a clean conscience."

The envy was no longer quiet. It was a roar. He saw the city for what it was—a place that did not want a hero who waited. It wanted a man who understood that sometimes, the only way to hold the world together was to break the hands that were trying to pull it apart.

He didn't act. Not yet. He just stood there, watching the shadows, learning how they moved. He was no longer counting heartbeats to stay calm. He was counting the seconds until he could finally stop being the Anchor and become the storm.

And as he walked back toward his room, the young man was changing with every step he took.

# 15

# The Cost of Waiting

The night air was thick, smelling of charcoal smoke and the metallic tang of an approaching storm. He found himself near the northern boundary, an area of the district where the houses were built of corrugated zinc and hope. It was a place where the law rarely ventured unless it was looking for a bribe.

He had been watching a specific house for three nights. It was a small, one-room structure where a young woman lived with her daughter. For three nights, he had seen a man—a cousin of a local politician—hanging around the door. He had seen the man's hand reach out to touch the girl's face. He had seen the mother's eyes, wide with a terror that she tried to hide behind a forced smile.

The "Anchor" in him had told him to wait.

*Record the movement,* the manual had said. *Observe the patterns. File a suspicion report. Wait for a superior to verify the connection to the politician. Do not act without a witness.*

So, he had waited. He had stood in the shadows of an abandoned kiosk, twenty meters away, as still as a grave. He had watched the man enter the house tonight. He had heard the door latch click shut.

*Wait for a cry,* he told himself. *Wait for the distress signal. If you break*

*the door now, you are trespassing on private property. You have no warrant. You have no post.*

He stood there for forty-five minutes. The silence from the house was absolute. The city hummed around him, indifferent. He counted his heartbeats. One thousand. Two thousand. He leaned on his patience like it was a staff that would never break.

Then, the door opened.

The man walked out. He was adjusting his belt. He looked around the street, saw nothing in the shadows, and walked away with the casual gait of a man who had just finished a meal. He whistled a low, tuneless song as he disappeared into the darkness of the main road.

The young man stayed still for five more minutes. The discipline was a lead weight in his stomach. Finally, the silence from the house became too heavy to bear.

He walked to the door. It was unlocked.

He did not kick it. He did not shout. He pushed it open with the tip of his finger.

There was no villain waiting to explain his motives. There was no struggle to record. There was only the aftermath. The room was small, lit by a single, guttering candle. The mother was sitting in the corner, her wrapper torn, her eyes fixed on a point on the wall that didn't exist. She didn't look at him. She didn't ask for help. She was already gone, somewhere deep inside herself where the Anchor could never reach her.

The girl was on the floor. She was too small for the violence that had visited her. She wasn't crying. She was just shivering, a rhythmic, mechanical tremor that shook her entire frame. The floor was stained with dark, wet patches that looked black in the candlelight.

He stood in the center of the room. He did not pull out his notebook. He did not count heartbeats.

He looked at his hands. They were clean. They were steady. He had

followed every rule. He had exercised the "Exceptional Restraint" that the Commander had praised. He had waited for the correct moment, the legal moment, the safe moment.

And because he had waited, the world was broken.

He realized then that patience was not always a virtue. Sometimes, patience was a weapon. By standing still, he had held the door shut for the predator. By choosing to be a "good guard," he had become an accomplice to a nightmare.

His restraint was not peace. It was violence in slow motion.

He walked over to the girl and reached out to touch her shoulder, but he stopped an inch away. He realized that his hand, the hand of the law, would be just another terror to her. He pulled his hand back.

He walked out of the house. He did not call it in. He did not wait for the sirens or the "statements" that would eventually be buried in a politician's desk. He didn't even close the door.

The storm finally broke. The rain came down in a sudden, violent sheet, washing the dust from the street but doing nothing for the filth inside the houses. He stood in the middle of the road, letting the water soak through his tan shirt.

The "Anchor" was dead.

The man who believed that rules could save a city was gone, drowned in the silence of that one-room house. He saw the face of the man who had walked out whistling. He remembered the turn of his shoulder, the color of his sandals, the way he had adjusted his belt.

For the first time in his life, the young man did not want a report. He did not want a Clean Victory. He did not want a note in a file.

He wanted blood.

He began to walk. He did not walk with the measured pace of a patrol. He walked with the speed of the Shadow. He walked toward the main road, his eyes no longer looking for the "bridge of the nose" but searching the darkness for a specific whistling tune.

The cost of waiting had been paid by a child. Now, he was going to make sure the debt was settled in full.

Goodness had reached its boundary, and he had stepped over it into the dark.

# 16

# A Shortcut

The man who had been whistling was not hard to find. He had the confidence of a person who believed the world was built for his pleasure. He was at a roadside stall near the northern motor park, leaning against a wooden pillar and eating a bowl of pepper soup. He looked relaxed. He looked like a man who had done nothing more taxing than a day's work.

The young man approached him from the side. He did not call out. He did not identify himself as a guard. He did not place his hand on his belt to signal authority.

He simply arrived.

The man looked up, his mouth full of meat. He saw the tan uniform and the wet fabric sticking to the young man's chest. He saw the empty space where the silver bar had once been. He didn't look afraid; he looked annoyed.

"Officer," the man said, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "You people don't sleep? I already told your sergeant that I am a friend of the party. Go and find some small thieves to disturb."

The young man did not speak. He did not pull out his notebook to record the man's connection to the politician. He didn't even look at

the man's eyes.

He looked at the man's right hand—the hand that had touched the girl.

The young man moved. It was the first time in his life he had ever moved with the intention to harm. There was no "measured pressure." There was no "subduing without striking." He bypassed the ten thousand hours of training and took the shortcut.

He grabbed the man's wrist and drove him backward, slamming his head against the wooden pillar. The sound of the impact was dull and heavy. The man gasped, his eyes rolling back, but the young man did not let go. He did not wait for a pause. He did not give the man a chance to surrender.

He dragged the man into the darkness behind the stall, where the sound of the rain hitting the zinc roof drowned out the scuffle.

"What… what are you doing?" the man wheezed, his voice bubbling with sudden, sharp terror. "I will have your job! I will have you in a cell by morning!"

The young man looked at him. For the first time, he didn't feel the "heaviness" of his control. He felt light. He felt like a blade that had finally been drawn from a rusted scabbard.

"The law says I must process you," the young man said. His voice was as flat as a report, but the words were different. "The law says I must wait for a warrant. The law says I must protect your rights while the girl in that house forgets how to speak."

He tightened his grip on the man's throat.

"The law is a very long road," the young man whispered. "I have decided to take a shortcut."

He did not kill the man. That would have been too easy, a mercy the man had not earned. Instead, he did what the Shadow would have done. He applied the pressure he had been taught—but he applied it to the joints, to the places where the pain would be permanent, where the

body would never forget the lesson. He broke the hand. He broke the knee. He ensured that for the rest of his life, every step this man took would be a reminder of the night the Anchor stopped waiting.

There was no guilt. There was no spiral of regret as he stood over the man, who was now weeping into the mud. The young man did not feel like a monster. He felt like a man who had finally finished a job.

He walked away. He did not look back to see if anyone had noticed. He did not care if there were witnesses. The city was full of witnesses who saw nothing, and for once, that suited him perfectly.

He walked back to his room. He took off the tan uniform. He folded it neatly, out of habit, but he didn't put it in the locker. He left it on the chair. He looked at the cracked mirror one last time.

He saw a man who was no longer good, but who was finally useful.

The city of Alleygates was still loud. The rain was still falling. Somewhere, a bribe was being taken. Somewhere, a child was being sold. But in one small house near the northern boundary, there would be no whistling tonight.

He sat on his bed and closed his eyes. He didn't count heartbeats. He didn't practice stillness. He just slept.

In the morning, the city would wake up. The reports would be filed. The "Anchor" would be officially listed as a deserter. But as he drifted off, the young man realized that the rules had never been the point. The order had never been the point.

Practical mercy was the point. And if he had to become a shadow to deliver it, then the shadows were where he belonged.

The Anchor had fallen to the bottom of the mud. And for the first time in his life, he felt free.

# 17

# Silence

The barracks did not come for him, and the city did not scream. The morning after he took the shortcut, Alleygates woke with a strange, heavy hush. Usually, the dawn was a cacophony of grievances: traders shouting over stolen space, the shrill cries of a woman finding her stall ransacked, the predictable roar of a drunk being dragged into the gutter.

But as he sat in his room, listening through the thin walls, the air felt scrubbed clean. There were no sirens. There was no whistle of a guard calling for backup. There was only the sound of a city going about its business with a new, cautious efficiency.

He did not put on the tan uniform. He left it on the chair, a pile of empty fabric that looked like a monument to a dead man. Instead, he dressed in the dark clothes of a laborer and stepped out.

He walked to the northern boundary first. He expected to see a crime scene: a rope barrier, an inspector with a clipboard, a crowd of gawkers. There was nothing. The roadside stall where he had cornered the man was open. The owner was busy stirring a pot of soup, his eyes focused entirely on the steam. The wooden pillar was clean. The mud had been smoothed over by the morning rain.

The man he had broken was gone. No one spoke his name. No one asked where the politician's cousin had disappeared to. In a place where "big men" usually demanded an immediate investigation, there was only a vast, deliberate amnesia.

Order had arrived, and it was terrifyingly quiet.

He walked further, into the heart of the textile market. He saw the woman who had extorted the smaller traders. She was behind her counter, but she was not shouting. She was moving with a frantic, jerky politeness, her eyes constantly darting to the shadows of the alleyways. When he passed—even in his plain clothes—she stiffened. Her eyes did not place his face, but her body remembered the stillness. She saw the ghost of the authority he had once carried, now sharpened into something more lethal.

She lowered her prices before anyone asked. She did not reach for her "gift."

The change was moving through the district like a cold front. It wasn't the "respect" he had worked for as a guard. It wasn't the "cooperation" the Commander had lectured about. It was something deeper.

People weren't being good because they believed in the law. They were being good because they didn't know where the limit was anymore.

As long as he had been the Anchor, they knew the rules. They knew he would wait. They knew he would follow the manual. They could calculate the risk of their crimes because the law was a known quantity. But now? Now there was a man who took shortcuts. There was a spirit that broke bones in the rain and left no report.

The unknown was a far more effective cage than the tan uniform.

By afternoon, he found himself sitting at a small buka, eating a plate of beans. The men around him were talking in low voices.

"The northern side is too quiet," one man whispered, tearing a piece of bread. "Even the area boys have moved to the western sector. They say something is walking the streets at night that does not use a whistle."

"Let it walk," another replied. "For the first time in years, my daughter walked to the tap and came back with her bucket full and her clothes clean. I am not asking who is responsible. I am just thanking God for the silence."

The young man listened, his spoon paused mid-air.

He realized that this was what he had always wanted. He had wanted the Clean Victory. He had wanted the streets to be safe. But the irony was bitter: he had achieved more in one night of lawless violence than he had in months of perfect service.

The city did not want a hero who followed the rules. It wanted a shadow that kept the monsters in their holes. And as long as the streets were quiet, the city would not ask how the silence was bought. They didn't want the truth; they wanted the absence of trouble.

He looked at his hands. They were still steady. He didn't feel the weight of the notes anymore. He didn't feel the pressure of the system. He felt a strange, cold freedom.

He was no longer a guard protecting a rotting roof. He was the rot-remover.

That evening, he walked back to his room. He passed a junior guard on patrol—a boy who looked exactly like he had a year ago, eyes bright with the hope of being "good." The boy was standing by a stall, politely asking a trader to move a crate. The trader was ignoring him, a smirk on his face, knowing the boy wouldn't do a thing.

The young man stopped. He didn't say a word. He just looked at the trader.

The smirk vanished. The trader's hands began to shake as he reached for the crate. He moved it so fast he nearly tripped over his own feet. The junior guard looked confused, wondering what magic had suddenly made the man compliant.

The young man kept walking.

Order was quiet. It didn't need a baton. It didn't need a silver bar. It

only needed the knowledge that somewhere in the dark, the Anchor had let go, and there was nothing left to stop the fall.

He reached his room and looked at the uniform on the chair.

The Anchor stayed in the mud. But the silence—the silence belonged to him.

# 18

# Precedent

The first time he took a shortcut, it was a crisis. The second time, it was a decision. By the third time, it was simply the way he worked.

Consistency began to replace hesitation. The old habit of pausing—of checking the manual in his mind or counting heartbeats to ensure restraint—evaporated. He realized that the city did not respond to the occasional burst of justice; it responded to a pattern. It needed to know that the consequence was as inevitable as the sunrise.

He found his next target near the eastern motor park. It was a man who operated a small "loan" business out of a metal shipping container. This man did not use banks; he used a heavy wooden club and a group of three cousins who enjoyed their work. They targeted the women who sold smoked fish, lending them money for stock and then doubling the interest overnight.

In his old life, the young man would have spent weeks gathering statements. He would have looked for a paper trail that did not exist. He would have waited for a victim brave enough to stand in a brightly lit office and sign a name.

Tonight, he did none of that.

He watched from the roof of an opposite building. He watched the man in the container count a stack of blood-stained notes. He watched the three cousins laughing as they wiped a smear of red from the wooden club.

He didn't feel the "heaviness" of his control anymore. He felt a sharp, clean clarity. He knew exactly what the math required.

He waited until the cousins went to find food. He descended from the roof, not with the heavy thud of a guard's boots, but with the silence of someone who had learned to move through the city's gaps. He entered the container.

The man behind the desk didn't even have time to reach for his drawer.

The young man didn't use his baton. He used a piece of heavy iron pipe he had found in the yard. He didn't shout a warning. He didn't read any rights. He moved with a rhythm that was almost beautiful in its precision.

Strike. Step. Turn.

It was over in less than a minute. The man was not dead—the young man was too disciplined for that—but he would not be holding a club or counting money for a very long time. The young man wiped the pipe clean and kept it. Then he took the stack of notes, walked out of the container, and dropped them into the basket of a woman he knew had lost her stall the day before.

He didn't stay to watch her find it. He didn't need the "thank you." He didn't need the Clean Victory recorded in a file.

The precedent was set.

By the end of the week, the method had become his new manual. He handled a warehouse thief, a corrupt landlord—the same heavy-jowled man from that rainy morning on Market Road—and a junior guard who was caught extorting money from a child. Each time, the process was the same: observation, intervention, disappearance.

No noise. No crowd. No notes.

In the barracks—where he still kept a bunk, though he no longer reported for duty—the atmosphere had turned cold. He was a ghost walking among them. He still folded his clothes. He still cleaned his room. But the other guards wouldn't look him in the eye. They had heard the stories. They saw the silence in the northern and eastern sectors, and they knew it was a silence he had manufactured.

One evening, the older guard stopped him in the hallway. The man looked tired, his eyes shadowed with a worry that went deeper than usual.

"You have stopped waiting," the older man said.

"Waiting was a waste of time," the young man replied. He was polishing a small knife, his movements steady and rhythmic.

"Maybe," the man agreed. "But when you wait, you are still a man. When you stop… you are just a force. Like the rain or the hunger. People can't plead with the rain, and they can't negotiate with the hunger."

"They don't need to negotiate," the young man said, looking up. "They just need to stop stealing. They just need to stop hurting people. It is a very simple equation."

"Equations don't have hearts," the older man whispered. "And the city… the city has a way of turning forces into monsters."

The young man didn't answer. He didn't feel like a monster. He felt effective. For the first time in his life, he wasn't just "containing" the rot; he was cutting it out. He saw the way the market women walked with their heads up. He saw the way the bullies stayed in their holes.

The city was adjusting again, but this time, it was adjusting to him.

He realized that his new life required a different kind of discipline. It wasn't the discipline of following a rule; it was the discipline of being the rule. He had to be consistent. He had to be unavoidable. If he failed even once, the fear would evaporate and the chaos would return.

He had traded his soul for a set of results. And as he walked out into the humid night, looking for the next problem to solve, he found that

he didn't miss it at all.

Effectiveness had become a habit. The shortcut was now the only road he knew.

He was no longer the Anchor, holding the ship in the mud. He was the current, deciding exactly where the ship was allowed to go—and what happened to it if it strayed.

The city was quiet. The math was right. And the young man was very, very busy.

# 19

# The Argument

He met the "true" hero in the same place where he had once learned to stand still.

The eastern canal was quiet tonight, save for the rhythmic lapping of the brown water against the concrete. The young man sat on a wooden crate, his dark clothes blending into the shadows. He was watching the road that led to the merchant's house—the merchant from the cold-room, the one whose briefcase had walked him past the law. The children were still behind those walls. He intended to correct that before midnight.

He heard the boots first. They weren't the quiet, cat-like steps of the Shadow, nor were they the heavy, careless thuds of a drunk. They were rhythmic, disciplined, and familiar.

A guard stepped into the pool of yellow light under the bridge lamp. He was young, his tan uniform crisp, and on his chest a silver bar of his own gleamed with a fresh polish—a citation freshly earned. The system had already found its replacement. He looked exactly like the young man had looked a year ago. He held his baton with a loose, practiced grip, and his eyes were full of a terrifying, earnest light.

The "New Anchor."

"You shouldn't be here," the guard said. He didn't sound angry; he sounded disappointed, like a son speaking to a father who had fallen from grace.

The young man didn't move. "I am working. Go back to your patrol."

"This isn't work," the guard replied, stepping closer. "I've seen what you've been doing. I've seen the men in the clinics with their hands crushed. I've seen the fear in the eyes of people who used to trust us. You're turning the district into a graveyard of silence."

The young man stood up slowly. He was taller than the guard, or perhaps he just felt larger because of the darkness he carried. "The district is safe. The women walk the canal at night. The traders keep their money. Isn't that what we were trained for?"

"We were trained to protect the law," the guard countered, his voice rising with the heat of his conviction. "The law is a process. It is a promise that every man, even a bad one, has a right to be heard. If you take that away, you aren't a guard anymore. You're just a bully with a better excuse."

The young man took a step into the light. The two men stood face to face—the ideal and the outcome.

"The process is a sieve," the young man said, his voice flat and cold. "I watched a merchant sell children because of the 'process.' I watched a girl lose her mind because I waited for a warrant. Your laws are just words on a page, and the predators use them as a shield. I am the only thing that actually stops them."

"And who stops you?" the guard asked. "Who decides when you've gone too far? Today it's a child-seller. Tomorrow it's a man who speaks too loudly. Next week it's anyone who makes the 'math' look bad. You think you're being effective, but you're just killing the city's soul so you can keep the streets tidy."

"The city's soul is a luxury for people who aren't hungry," the young man spat. "The person being beaten in the alley does not care about the

'integrity of the process.' They want the beating to stop. I make it stop. You just take notes while it happens."

The guard gripped his baton tighter. "I would rather fail while doing what is right than succeed by becoming what I hate. There has to be a way to be good without being cruel."

"Then find it," the young man said, turning back toward the shadows. "But stay out of my way. While you are busy being 'good,' I have a city to hold together."

"I can't let you do it," the guard said. He stepped forward, blocking the path. "If I let you pass, I am as bad as the ones who took the bribes. I have to stand my ground. That is the rule."

The young man looked at the boy. He saw the fire in him, the same fire that had once burned in his own chest. It was beautiful. It was noble. And in a place like Alleygates, it was a death sentence.

"You are right," the young man whispered. "Everything you said is right. Your ideals are perfect. Your heart is clean."

The young man moved so fast the guard did not even have time to raise his baton.

He used the grip he had learned in the very first weeks of his training—the one designed to turn an opponent's weight into a cage. It was a movement he had practiced ten thousand times in the dust of the barracks courtyard, back when he still believed that holding a man was a form of mercy.

He didn't break the boy. He didn't even bruise him. He simply used that old, familiar pressure to disarm him and push him back into the yellow circle of the lamp. He held him there for a moment, looking into those bright, hopeful eyes.

"Go home," the young man said. His voice was a rasp, like dry leaves on pavement. "Keep your clean heart. Let me be the one who does the dirt. The city needs people like you to dream, but it only *survives* because of people like me."

The guard stood there, his chest heaving, his baton lying in the mud between them. He did not shout. He did not chase. He just watched as the young man disappeared into the darkness of the canal, his dark clothes swallowed by the shadows until only the sound of his footsteps remained.

The argument was over. Both men were right. But as the young man moved toward the merchant's house, he knew that only one of them would actually get the children back.

He had traded the "right" thing for the "effective" thing, and the price was the respect of the only person who still reminded him of who he used to be. It was a heavy cost, but as he reached for his iron pipe, he didn't hesitate.

The math was still right. The outcome was all that mattered.

# 20

# Acceptance

The young man stopped correcting people's assumptions. He stopped trying to tell the market women that he was no longer a guard, and he stopped trying to explain to the other men that his violence had a purpose. He realized that it didn't matter what he intended; it only mattered what they believed.

Reputation had replaced intention.

He was at the northern motor park, sitting on a low concrete wall. He was dressed in a faded black shirt, his face partially obscured by the bill of a cap. He wasn't on duty, but the air around him was cleared of its usual friction.

A man was being accused of stealing a phone from a passenger. A small, angry circle began to form. In the old days, the shouts would have escalated into a beating within minutes. But someone in the crowd looked over their shoulder and saw the young man sitting on the wall.

They didn't see a "hero." They didn't see the "Anchor." They saw the man who had broken the politician's cousin. They saw the silence that walked on two legs.

The shouting stopped instantly. The man who was holding the accused thief by the collar let go as if the fabric had turned into hot coal.

The accused man dropped the phone into the dust, put his hands up, and backed away.

No one called for a guard. No one looked for a badge. The mere possibility of the young man's intervention was enough to enforce a peace that the law had never achieved.

He watched it all without moving a muscle. He didn't nod in approval. He didn't step in to *process* the thief. He just sat there, accepting the weight of their fear.

Fear had spread, but so had safety.

He walked through a neighborhood that had once been a "bad corner"—a place where the shadows always seemed to hold a blade. Now, the doors were left cracked open to let in the breeze. Children played in the street long after the sun had dipped below the horizon. They didn't play because the world had become "good." They played because they knew that the thing in the dark was, for now, on their side.

It was a strange, cold comfort.

He sat in a small canteen later that evening, eating a bowl of soup. Two men at the next table were talking about him, unaware that the ghost they were describing was sitting three feet away.

"They say he doesn't eat," one man whispered. "They say he is a spirit the ancestors sent because the guards are too corrupt."

"Spirit or not," the other replied, "my sister can sell her charcoal until midnight now. Before, she had to close at six or lose her money to the boys. I don't care if he is a devil, as long as he is *our* devil."

The young man listened and felt nothing. Not pride, not shame. He accepted the title. If they needed him to be a devil to feel safe, he would be a devil. If they needed him to be a spirit, he would be a spirit. He had surrendered his name and his history to the city's need for an ending to the chaos.

He returned to his room and looked at the tan uniform still folded on the chair. It was covered in a fine layer of dust now. He realized he

didn't hate it anymore. He felt a distant, quiet pity for the man who had worn it—the man who thought that notes and "reports" and "restraint" were the tools of change.

He looked at his hands. They were scarred now, the knuckles thickened by the shortcuts he had taken. These were the real tools.

He realized that by accepting his reputation, he had gained a power that the barracks could never grant. He didn't need a silver bar to command the room. He didn't need a manual to know what was right. He had become the standard, the judge, and the executioner, all wrapped in a dark shirt and a heavy silence.

He lay down on his bed. The city outside was quiet—a silence he had built, brick by brick, blow by blow.

He no longer wondered if he was a hero. He no longer wondered if he was a villain. He was simply the one who stayed awake so the others could sleep. He was the Anchor that had finally found the bottom, and he was not going to move again.

Reputation was his new uniform. And in the quiet streets of Alleygates, it was the only law that still mattered.

# 21

# Order

Alleygates had finally become what the young man once dreamed it could be. It was a place of clockwork movements and quiet transactions. But the peace did not feel like a celebration. It felt like a long-held breath that no one was quite ready to let go.

The morning rush at the northern motor park was no longer a battle of wills. The buses pulled into their lanes with a discipline that looked mechanical. The drivers did not scream at one another. The passengers did not jostle or fight for a seat. They moved in lines that were straight and silent, their eyes fixed on the ground or the horizon, never lingering on the shadows.

He walked through the market, and the effect was the same. The "Order" he had enforced was now a self-sustaining thing. A trader dropped a crate of oranges, and instead of the usual scramble of hands trying to steal the fruit, the people nearby simply stepped around it. They waited for the owner to gather his goods. They did not look for an opportunity because they knew the cost of a shortcut was no longer theirs to take.

There was no applause for this.

The city functioned smoothly, but it functioned with a cold, heavy caution. It was the peace of a classroom where the teacher has left a cane on the desk and walked out of the room. The authority was present even in its absence.

He sat at the eastern canal, the place where his journey had truly begun. The water was still brown, still slow, but the path was wider now. The traders had pushed their stalls back of their own accord, leaving a clear thoroughfare that the rules had demanded for years but had never achieved.

He saw a junior guard on patrol—a boy with a clean uniform and a confused expression. The boy was walking the path, his hands behind his back, looking for trouble that simply wasn't there. He looked bored. He looked unnecessary.

The young man felt a flicker of something like satisfaction. He had made the law irrelevant by becoming the consequence. The system could send out its "New Anchors" to march in the sun, but they were only decorations. They were walking on ground he had cleared with his own bloodied knuckles.

"It is too quiet," a voice said.

He didn't turn. He knew the voice of the older guard. The man sat down on the crate beside him, smelling of cheap tobacco and the weariness of thirty years.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" the young man asked. "No riots. No bribes. The buses running on time."

"It is," the older man said, looking out at the water. "But it is a heavy kind of quiet. People aren't being good because they want to be. They are being good because they are afraid of the ghost. A city that runs on fear is a city that has stopped growing. It is just… staying still."

"Staying still is better than burning," the young man replied.

"Maybe for the ones who are alive," the man said. He looked at the young man, his eyes full of a strange, distant grief. "But look at you.

You have given them order, but you have no place in it. You are the only thing in this city that doesn't fit anymore. You are the wolf that killed the other wolves, and now the sheep don't want to look at you either."

The young man didn't answer. He looked at his hands. They were steady. They were clean. He didn't feel like a wolf. He felt like a tool that had finished its work.

He stood up and began to walk. He passed the woman who sold peppers. She didn't offer him a bundle today. She didn't even look up. She was busy counting her coins, her movements efficient and hurried. He was no longer a hero to her. He was just the silence she had to live with.

He reached the northern boundary. The house where the girl lived was still there. The door was closed. He didn't go inside. He didn't need to. He could hear the sound of a radio playing music from within, a light, popular song that had nothing to do with pain.

He had bought that music with his own soul. He had traded his "goodness" for her safety, and the exchange was final. There would be no thank you. There would be no recognition. There was only the order.

He walked back to his room. The tan uniform was still there, but it was a relic now, a piece of a past life that no longer held any meaning. He realized that peace, real peace, was not a thing of trumpets and medals. It was a thing of empty streets and quiet nights. It was the absence of the notes he had once feared.

He lay down and listened to the city. It was a smooth, humming machine. No celebration. No chaos. Just the steady, indifferent pulse of a world that had been saved from itself.

He had become the Anchor. He had held the ship until the storm passed. And now that the water was still, he realized that he was the only one still underwater.

Peace without applause. It was the most honest victory he had ever

known.

# 22

# Memory

He sat in the small, dim room that had become his entire world. On the chair sat the tan uniform, the fabric now stiff and grey with a layer of dust that no brush could truly remove. He looked at it and remembered the day he had first pulled it on. He remembered the pride he had felt in the weight of the belt, the way he had checked the mirror to see if he looked like a man who could hold the world together.

He remembered the first time he had stood still at the canal.

In his memory, that moment had felt monumental. He recalled the way the crowd had paused, the way the silence had bloomed around him, and the singular, startling sound of the woman clapping. At the time, he had thought he had achieved something holy. He had thought that by simply existing, he had changed the nature of Alleygates.

Now, that memory felt small. It felt like a thin paper mask held up against a gale.

He realized now that the woman hadn't been clapping for him. She had been clapping for the *idea* of him. She had been celebrating a temporary reprieve, a fleeting moment where the law looked like it might actually work. It was a victory of theater, not of substance. He

had stood still while a woman lost her home. He had stood still while a merchant bought his freedom.

The city had named his stillness, never the thing the stillness was holding down. His "goodness" back then had been a form of vanity. He had been more concerned with the cleanliness of his report than the safety of the streets.

He thought of the commendation from the Commander. *"This is how order is kept."* The words echoed in his mind, but they sounded hollow, like a bell with a crack in it. The Commander had praised his restraint because restraint was cheap. Restraint didn't require the system to change; it only required the guard to suffer. The system had loved him as the Anchor because he was a shield that didn't hit back, a sponge that absorbed the city's filth so the men in the gold-braided uniforms didn't have to get their hands wet.

He looked at his hands now. They were not clean, but the city was.

The recontextualization was absolute. He saw his younger self as a man walking through a forest fire with a cup of water, convinced that if he just poured it carefully enough, the trees would stop burning. He had been so careful not to break the rules that he had allowed the rules to break the people.

He remembered the Clean Victory at the gambling den. He had been so proud of the fact that no one was hurt. He had filed the report with a steady hand, believing he had won.

Now, he knew better. He knew that the men had walked out of that door and into another, worse darkness. He knew that by being "perfect," he had accomplished nothing but a ten-minute delay. The only real victory he had ever won was the one that left him a deserter—the one that started with a broken hand and ended with a child's silence being replaced by a radio's song.

He stood up and walked to the window.

The city was humming. The order was there, visible in the way the

traffic flowed and the way the market stalls were arranged. It was a masterpiece of stability. But as he looked out at the streets, he saw the ghost ranks— young boys in the tan uniforms, walking with their backs straight and their eyes full of that old, dangerous hope.

He felt a sudden, sharp pang of pity for them. They were living in the memory of the man he used to be. They were trying to be good in a world that he had already decided required him to be "bad."

He reached out and touched the tan sleeve of his old uniform. The fabric was rough. It felt like a shroud.

He understood now that he could never go back. Not because the system wouldn't have him, but because he could no longer fit into the small, narrow skin of a "true hero." He had grown too large for the manual. He had seen the limit, and he had stepped over it, and in doing so, he had rendered his own past life a fairy tale.

The memories didn't belong to him anymore. They belonged to the city, to be told as legends to children who needed to believe that a man could stand still and make the world stop.

He turned away from the window and the uniform. He picked up his dark shirt.

The Anchor was a story. The Shadow was a necessity. And he was the man caught between the two, living in the silence of the aftermath.

He stepped out of the room and into the heat of Alleygates. He didn't look back at the mirror. He didn't need to see his reflection to know who he was. He was the consequence. He was the shortcut. He was the one who remembered what the others chose to forget.

The city moved on, careless of its history, but he carried every heartbeat of it with him into the dark.

# 23

# The Same Problem

Morning in Alleygates did not care that he had changed. It arrived with the same creak of wooden doors and the same short brooms pushing yesterday's dust into the gutters. The sun hit the lower realm with the same indifferent heat, and the market stretched itself awake, noisy and alive, as if the last year had been nothing more than a fever dream.

The dispute began near the eastern edge, not far from where the canal water moved slow and brown. It was the same sound that had started it all—a sharp voice, stretched thin by a familiar anger.

A crowd had already formed. In the center stood a pepper trader, his chest puffed out like a bantam rooster, and a woman whose wrapper was frayed at the edges. She was holding a small nylon bag, her face set in that tired, practiced mask of someone who had spent her life explaining things to people who were not listening.

"She take am," the trader shouted, his finger stabbing at the air. "I see her hand. One moment the basket full, next moment she dey comot. Thief no dey shame again!"

"I no take anything" the woman said. Her voice was low, nearly drowned out by the horns of the passing buses. "You fit check me,

I no get anything."

The young man stood at the edge of the crowd. He was dressed in his dark shirt, his face shadowed by the bill of his cap. He looked at the scene and felt a sickening sense of repetition. It was a mirror held up to his first day: the same accusations, the same bystanders waiting for the entertainment of a beating, the same air of a city looking for a scapegoat.

In his memory, the younger version of himself stepped forward with a smile. He remembered how he had looked for the crushed pepper on the ground. He remembered how he had used logic and patience to dissolve the anger. He remembered thinking that "just looking" was enough to heal the world.

He looked at the ground now. He saw a pepper crushed under a heavy boot, just like before—on the trader's own side of the stall, where the woman had never stood. The solution was right there, waiting for a *good man* to point it out.

He did not move.

He watched as the trader reached out and grabbed the woman's arm, shaking her. The crowd surged forward, the low murmur of "thief" beginning to ripple through the ranks. This was the moment where the Anchor would have intervened. This was the moment where the manual required a calm voice and a steady hand.

The young man felt the old urge to fix it—to be the one who restored order quietly, without praise. But then he remembered the warehouse. He remembered the girl in the northern house. He remembered the way the city "reset" itself every morning, careless of his effort.

If he stepped in now and "saved" her with logic, what would happen tomorrow? The trader would still be a bully. The crowd would still be hungry for a spectacle. The woman would still be a target. The "goodness" would be a temporary sedative that cured nothing.

The trader raised his hand to strike.

The young man moved. He did not step into the center to explain the crushed pepper. He did not look for the truth. He looked for the outcome.

He pushed through the crowd, not with the measured grace of a guard, but with the cold, hard efficiency of a shadow. He didn't speak to the crowd. He walked straight to the trader and gripped the man's raised wrist. He didn't use the gentle, disarming pressure he had once prided himself on. He used the shortcut.

He twisted the wrist just far enough to hear the joint protest. The trader let out a sharp yelp of pain and dropped the woman's arm. The crowd went silent. This wasn't the patience they had seen before. This wasn't a man looking for a compromise.

"The pepper is on the ground," the young man said. His voice was not the calm, inviting tone of the boy who used to fix hinges and return wallets. It was the rasp of a man who had seen too much. "You saw it fall. You tried to steal her dignity because you were too lazy to bend your back."

"I… I thought…" the trader stammered, his face turning grey.

"You didn't think," the young man said, leaning in close so only the trader could hear him. "You calculated that no one would stop you. You calculated wrong. If I see you touch a woman in this market again, I won't look for the pepper. I will look for you."

He let go of the wrist. The trader backed away, clutching his hand, his bravado evaporated. The crowd began to disperse, but they didn't move with the bored indifference of the past. They moved with a hurried, glancing fear. They didn't thank him. They didn't clap. They just fled.

The woman stood there, clutching her nylon bag. She looked at him, and for a second, he saw a flash of recognition in her eyes—the ghost of the man who had once been called *The Anchor*. But then she saw the hardness in his face, the way his jaw was set, the way he didn't smile. She saw that the man who had once stood between a boy and a beating

was no longer interested in words.

"Thank you," she whispered, but she was backing away as she said it.

"Go home," he said.

He stayed in the market square long after she was gone. He looked at the crushed pepper in the dust. In the early days, he would have felt a sense of balance. He would have felt useful.

Now, he felt only the weight.

He realized that the structure of Alleygates would always repeat. There would always be a trader, a victim, and a crowd. The city would always try to break itself. The only thing that had changed was the man standing in the middle.

He had started as a man who believed that being good was enough. He ended as a man who knew that being good was a luxury the city could not afford. He had traded his patience for power, and his logic for a blade.

The voice from a year ago came back to him—the one that had laughed and said he wouldn't last.

The voice had been right. The boy who loved to fix things had not lasted. Alleygates had swallowed him whole and spat out something else—something harder, quieter, and far more effective.

He crouched, picked the crushed pepper out of the dust, and slipped it into his pocket. Then he turned and walked away from the market. He didn't pause. He didn't look at the sky. He just moved through the noise, a ghost in a dark shirt, a shortcut in a city of long, winding roads.

The problem was the same. But he had finally stopped trying to fix the world. He was busy holding it together, one broken wrist at a time.

# 24

# A Better Outcome

The politician's cousin did not return to the northern boundary. He did not go to a cell, and he did not stand before a judge who could be bought with a briefcase. He simply ceased to be a factor in the lives of the people there.

Neither did the merchant from the cold-room. The young man had kept the promise he made at the canal that night. The children were back where they had been taken from, and the merchant's friends in the ministry had quietly stopped asking where he was. The briefcase had not saved him.

This was the better outcome.

The young man sat in the darkness of a half-finished building overlooking the depot. From here, he could see the entire district laid out like a map. The lights of the market were steady. The noise of the motor park was rhythmic, devoid of the jagged spikes of violence that used to punctuate the nights.

He remembered a time, a version of himself that felt like a character in a children's story, when he would have been horrified by what he had done. That boy would have looked at the broken bones and the bypassed rules and called it a failure. He would have agonized over the

"sanctity of the soul" and the "integrity of the uniform."

But that boy had lived in a world of theories. This man lived in a world of results.

He looked down at the street where the girl and her mother lived. The radio was still playing. The door was still closed. In the boy's world, the mother would still be filling out forms, the merchant would be out on bail, and the girl would be staring at the wall in a room that smelled of fear. In this man's world, the predator was gone, and the silence was full of music.

The math was brutal, but it was correct.

There was no label for what he had become. The city called him a ghost, the guards called him a deserter, and the criminals called him a curse. He accepted none of it. Labels were for people who needed to feel comfortable with what they saw. He didn't need to be comfortable. He only needed the city to stand.

He saw the senior guard—the one who had taken his silver bar—walking through the square below. The man looked old. He looked like someone trying to hold back the tide with a sieve. He was surrounded by *true heroes* in tan uniforms, all of them marching in perfect lines, all of them fundamentally useless against the rot that didn't care about their polish.

The young man didn't feel anger toward them. He felt a cold, distant clarity. They were the stage dressing. They were the lie the city told itself so it could pretend it was civilized. He was the reality. He was the dark foundation that allowed the lie to exist.

He stood up and stepped back from the ledge.

He had no post. He had no rank. He had no promise of a Clean Victory or a retirement with a pension. He had only the next problem, the next shortcut, and the next silence.

As he descended the concrete stairs, his movements were fluid and certain. He didn't check his reflection in the shards of glass on the floor.

He didn't need to confirm who he was anymore. He was the thing that happened when the law was not enough.

He stepped out into the humid air of Alleygates. A man was shouting at a woman near the water tap, his hand raised. The young man didn't pause to listen. He didn't look for a crushed pepper. He didn't wait for a cry.

He simply moved toward them, a dark shape in a city of fading lights.

The city stood. It was not perfect. It was not holy. It was not just. But it was functioning. The buses were moving, the children were sleeping, and the blood was not flowing in the gutters.

His younger self would have called it a tragedy. This man called it a success. Practical mercy, paid in full.

He walked into the shadows, and the shadows welcomed him home. The manual was gone. The Anchor was at the bottom. But the city was quiet, and for the first time, that was enough.

# Epilogue

The meeting did not happen in a warehouse or a dark alley. It happened on a rooftop in the center of the district, where the air was high enough to escape the smell of the canal but low enough to hear the city breathing.

The Shadow was already there. He was leaning against a water tank, peeling an orange with a small, wicked-looking knife. He didn't look like a predator tonight; he looked like a man who had finished a long day of work and was waiting for the sun to give up.

The young man stepped onto the roof. He didn't hide his footsteps. There was no need for stealth between two people who already knew exactly where the other was at all times.

"You're late," the Shadow said, tossing a piece of peel over the edge. "The 'Anchor' I knew was always on time. Precise. Like a clock."

"The Anchor is dead," the young man said, walking to the ledge. He didn't look at the other man. He looked at the lights of Alleygates. "You know that better than anyone."

The Shadow laughed, a dry sound that was swallowed by the wind. "He's not dead. He just sank. You still stand like him. You still move like you're trying not to break the air. You've just traded your silver bar for a different kind of weight."

"I did what worked," the young man said.

"Is that what you call it?" The Shadow stood up and walked over, standing a few feet away. He held out a slice of orange. The young man ignored it. "You call it 'working.' I call it finally admitting the truth. You spent a year trying to be a pillar. Now you're just the ground. People

walk on you, but at least they don't fall through."

"The guard—the boy I met at the canal," the young man said, his voice tightening. "He thinks I've become you."

"And have you?" The Shadow turned his head, his eyes reflecting the dull orange glow of the streetlamps below. "I do this because I like the look in a bad man's eyes when he realizes the rules won't save him. But you… you do it because you think you *have* to. You're still a guard, Anchor. You're just patrolling a beat that has no borders."

"It's more effective," the young man insisted.

"It is," the Shadow agreed. "But don't lie to yourself. Effectiveness is a hungry god. It'll take everything. It'll take the way you look at a woman. It'll take the way you taste your food. Eventually, you won't even remember why you started. You'll just be a machine that breaks hands to keep the silence."

The young man finally looked at him. "And you? Why are you still here? If the city is quiet, why do you still walk?"

The Shadow smiled, and for a moment, he looked old—older than the barracks, older than the city itself. "Because the silence is never permanent. You know that. Alleygates is a wound that keeps reopening. You and I, we are just the stitches. We hold it together until it tears again."

He tucked his knife into his waistband and began to walk toward the rooftop door.

"The boy you met," the Shadow said, pausing at the entrance. "The New Anchor. He'll be looking for you. Not to arrest you. To ask you how it's done. When he comes, tell him the truth."

"What truth?"

"Tell him that the cost of saving the city is that you can no longer live in it."

The Shadow disappeared into the darkness of the stairwell.

The young man stayed on the roof. He looked down at the streets. He

saw a yellow bus pull into the depot. He saw a woman closing her stall. He saw the junior guards marching in their neat, tan lines.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, crushed pepper he had picked up from the market floor that morning. He looked at it for a long time, then let it fall from his fingers.

He didn't watch it hit the ground. He just turned and walked into the dark, his footsteps echoing the steady, lonely rhythm of a city that was finally, perfectly quiet.

# About the Author

**About the Author**

Oluseye Obitola is sometimes writer and a software developer from Ibadan, Nigeria. His work moves between personal essay and philosophical fiction, returning often to questions of belief, systems, and what they make of the people inside them. *D.I.M.A* is his first novel.

He writes regularly at *Out of the Ether* — thoughts, fiction, and the magic between them.

**You can connect with me on:**

https://x.com/oluseye_obitola

**Subscribe to my newsletter:**

https://outoftheether.substack.com