

The Eight

An Elendor Novella

Joshua Sprinks

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For Lisa and Matthew, thank you for helping me keep
going when life became heavy.



Prologue

The skies were clear — a rare kindness in a world that had begun to feel uncertain even in daylight. Sunlight poured over Harmony in warm sheets. It caught on new timber, fresh stone, and the pale dust of construction that never truly settled. The Hold stood proud at the heart of it all. Still rough-edged, still young, but no longer a cluster of desperate tents clinging to a fire. A settlement now. A promise built from splinters and willpower.

Above the courtyard, a lone bird circled high, wings outstretched and effortless. It glided on the wind as though the world had no weight at all. Then it folded, dove, and struck the ground with a sharp flutter of feathers. Near the Hold's courtyard, it fixed its eye on movement in the earth — a worm surfacing after morning rain — and snapped it up in a clean, decisive peck before lifting again, vanishing into the bright blue like nothing had ever been wrong with the world.

Beneath it, Harmony stirred. Boots on packed dirt, the scrape of wood. The murmur of voices as Watchers traded shifts and labourers carried timber along the palisade line. A hammer rang somewhere near the forge. Smoke rose from cookfires, thin and steady, smelling faintly of oats and salt and the last of yesterday's stew. Life. Normal, in the way it could be normal now.

The heavy doors of the Hold shut with a firm, echoing thud. Rian stepped into the great hall. He was shorter than most men, broad through the shoulders and built like something the wild had tried to break and failed to. His beastkin blood sat in the structure of him — not in some dramatic spectacle, but in the practical things. The thick strength in his limbs, the restless alertness in his posture, the way his gaze and long ears tracked corners and exits out of habit. Captain of the Watchers, they called him now. He rolled his shoulders once as if shaking off the outside air, then crossed the hall with purposeful steps. “Jonas,” he called, voice low but carrying. “You sent for me?”

At the far end of the chamber stood a large table that hadn't existed in the early days — not when Harmony had been mud and panic, when their “plans” had been whatever kept them breathing to morning. Now the table was scarred with knife marks and ink stains, the surface crowded with scraps of parchment and crude sketches. Maps. Standing over them were two men.

One was Jonas Hargrove — taller, younger, and still wearing discomfort like an ill-fitting cloak. It was strange how quickly the world could decide what a man was, and how little it cared whether he agreed.

He looked tired. Not the tiredness of a poor night's sleep — the deeper kind that lived in the eyes and behind the face. A tiredness carved by responsibility, by decisions that could not be undone. He had the look of someone who had been sitting at this table far too long.

Beside him stood Caelren. Shorter. Older. Almost ancient, in truth — a badgerfolk elder with grey-flecked fur and whiskers that framed his face like a living crown. His presence was quiet, but it had weight. The sort of weight that didn't demand attention, yet always drew it anyway. Wisdom wasn't something he flaunted it simply hung on him like a cloak that had never once slipped.

Caelren looked up first, meeting Rian's eyes. "Thank you for coming," he said, voice gentle but firm. "It seems Jonas has been spending all his hours staring at maps and refusing to remember he is human." Rian's mouth twitched — not quite a smile, but close enough that the edge of humour softened the hall. Caelren nodded faintly toward Jonas. "He's come to a conclusion."

Jonas blinked, as if only now noticing they weren't alone. His gaze had been fixed on the table, but it was a hollow focus. A man staring at lines and ink because the alternative was staring at reality. When Caelren's words landed, Jonas inhaled sharply and straightened. "Right," Jonas said, clearing his throat. His voice carried that familiar note of uncertain inexperience. "Yes. Sorry." He rubbed a hand over his face once, dragging himself back to the room. "We were speaking with Seris," he continued, and there was a slight shift in his expression at the mention of her name — a flicker of something softer in the

tiredness. “About Cresmere. About trade. About... stability.”

He glanced down again at the map, tapping the parchment with a finger that was ink-stained at the nail. “We’re in desperate need of supplies we simply can’t get here yet. Not properly. Not without risking half the settlement just to obtain them.” His finger traced a route. “A direct route would cut the travel time almost in half,” Jonas said, eyes narrowing. “Straight through the western forest and past the borderlands into Cresmere’s reach.” He paused. Looked up at Rian — and the question that followed carried the weight of a man who already knew the answer, but needed to hear it spoken aloud anyway. “However,” Jonas said, “the most direct route is avoided. Everyone’s gone around it since we arrived. Do you know why?”

Rian’s gaze dropped to the table. He didn’t need time to think. He didn’t need to squint at the parchment and pretend he wasn’t already carrying the truth in his bones. He pointed to a marked region on the map, a rough circle shaded darker than the rest. “It’s too dangerous,” Rian said simply. His finger pressed against the edge of the ink-blackened area, and for a moment the hall felt colder. “This is Ashwood.”

Jonas exhaled slowly through his nose, jaw tightening as the name settled between them. Rian continued, voice steady — professional in the way only someone used to giving bad news could be. “As you’ve seen first-hand,” he said, and his gaze flicked briefly to Jonas, “unnatural creatures have taken over that region. It used to be a normal forest. Game trails. Old growth. Thick canopy. You could pass through it in a day if you moved fast.” He

swallowed once, the smallest pause. “Then it started changing about a year ago,” Rian said. “And nobody knows why. The trees went grey. The underbrush died off. The air was... wrong.” He frowned as if the word wasn’t enough. “And then the ashbeasts started appearing. Not one or two. Packs.”

Jonas stared down at the map again. The crude ink lines didn’t show any of that — didn’t show the way the forest swallowed sound, didn’t show the smell of burned earth that lingered even on the windless days. Didn’t show the feeling of being watched by something that did not have eyes. But Jonas knew. He’d seen enough when he first came to Harmony, back when he hadn’t even understood what Harmony was yet. When he’d been nothing but a stranger thrown into a world that wanted to test him. His fingers curled at the edge of the table.

“So what can we do about it?” Jonas asked, voice quieter now. More serious. He lifted his eyes to Rian again. “Those monsters have been coming closer,” Jonas said. “They pose a danger to us, and if we can find a clear path through Ashwood... even a narrow one...” He tapped the map again. “It halves the travel time between us and Cresmere’s border.” A pause. His voice sharpened slightly, the leadership in him pushing forward. “That isn’t just convenient — it’s survival. Trade is the only way we stabilise this place. If we stay cut off, we stay desperate.”

Caelren watched him with that quiet badgerfolk steadiness, reading the young man the way he read everything — like truth could be found in the spaces between words. “And desperation,” Caelren murmured, “makes people foolish.”

Rian nodded once, slow. “Aye,” he said. “It does.” And the map lay between them like a warning made of ink.

Rian studied the map in silence. For a moment, he did not look like a captain or a commander, but like a man weighing something far heavier than ink and parchment. His gaze lingered on the shaded expanse marked Ashwood, tracing its edges as though he could feel the rot creeping beneath his fingers. Life was finite. Especially now. That truth had never left him — not since the wilds had taken more than they ever gave back. Every choice meant something. Every loss echoed longer than it should have.

Rian straightened, squaring his shoulders. “Right,” he said at last. “That means we send out a scouting party. Not a full expedition — not yet. We need to know how deep the rot goes, what’s causing it, and whether it’s spreading as fast as the rumours say.” The words settled over the table like a stone dropped into still water. For a heartbeat, no one spoke. Then Jonas did — immediately, without hesitation. “I’ll go,” he said. “With a couple of Watchers who know the terrain. I don’t want anyone risking themselves unnecessarily.”

Caelren’s whiskers twitched as he looked at Jonas. There was no pride in the old badgerfolk’s expression — no admiration for bravery or resolve. Instead, there was something gentler ... and sadder. Naivety.

Rian was not so kind and burst out laughing. It came out sharp and sudden, echoing off the stone walls of the hall. He tried to rein it in and failed, one hand bracing against the table as he shook his head, breath hitching between

amused disbelief and outright incredulity. Jonas stiffened. He turned toward Rian, confusion flashing across his face before embarrassment followed close behind — hot and unwelcome. “What’s so funny?” Jonas demanded. “Rian.”

The laughter tapered, but didn’t fully stop. Rian wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, still grinning as he straightened. “Are you serious?” Rian said, breathless. “You wouldn’t last half a day out in the wilds — let alone in Ashwood.”

Jonas opened his mouth, ready to defend himself, but Rian pressed on, the humour bleeding quickly into blunt honesty. “Right now, you can barely defend yourself,” Rian said. “You’re clever, Jonas. You’ve got instincts. And yes — that earth magic of yours is impressive.” He shrugged. “But Ashwood doesn’t care how smart you are. It chews through people who think preparation makes them untouchable.”

Jonas’s jaw tightened. “You think I don’t know that?” he snapped. “You think I haven’t—”

“Enough.”

Caelren’s voice cut cleanly through the tension. Both men fell silent. The badgerfolk elder stepped closer to the table, his presence grounding in a way few things were anymore. He looked at Jonas first, his gaze steady and unyielding. “Rian is right,” Caelren said gently. “You must remain here. The people are starting to trust you — truly trust you. Harmony is still fragile. You are more valuable building it than risking yourself on a scouting mission.”

Jonas’s shoulders sagged a fraction, frustration battling reason behind his eyes. Caelren turned then, fixing Rian

with a look sharp enough to stop the last traces of laughter dead. “Rian,” he said. “What would you suggest?”

Rian straightened immediately. The mirth vanished. The grin faded. In its place was respect — deep and unquestioned. Caelren had brought him into the camp at his lowest point. Had offered him purpose when the world had given him nothing but teeth and fire. Rian owed him more than obedience.

He reached for the table and pushed the map aside, revealing a thick ledger beneath it — worn at the edges, pages marked with ink and fingerprints. The Watchers’ register. Rian opened it and scanned the names, jaw set, eyes narrowing as he made his choices. After a moment, he picked up a quill and began to write. One name. Then another. Seven in total.

“These,” Rian said, tapping the page once. “These Watchers are the strongest we have. The most experienced. They know how to move, how to listen, how to survive when things go wrong.” He hesitated, just briefly. “I don’t like stretching our numbers,” he added. “But if this is as important as you believe it is, Jonas...” He met his gaze. “Then these are the ones I’d trust with it.”

Jonas leaned forward, studying the list. His brow furrowed. “Forgive me,” he said slowly, “only seven?”

Rian’s mouth curved into a knowing smile. “There will be ten,” he said. “For a mission like this, seven won’t be enough.”

Jonas glanced up, puzzled. “Then who are the other three?”

Rian capped the quill and tucked it behind his ear. “Let’s just say,” he replied, “they’re three I’ve had my eye on for a while. And this feels like the right excuse to finally bring them in.”

Silence followed — not uncertain, but heavy with understanding. Caelren nodded once. Jonas did the same. They stood together over the table — over inked lines and names that, for now, were just marks on parchment.

Ten of their best, and they did not yet know it. Ten people about to step into Ashwood. Ten people who would be forged into something more — or destroyed entirely.

The bird outside cried once as it vanished into the distance. And Harmony went on breathing, unaware of what it had just set in motion.



Chapter One

Ten at Dawn

Marcus woke to the shift change before the horn sounded. It wasn't the sound that stirred him — it was the rhythm. The subtle alteration in movement beyond the thin wooden walls. Boots trading places. A murmur cut short. The change in breathing patterns of men who had stood too long in the dark. Old instincts did not fade. They burrowed in.

He lay still for a moment, staring at the beams above him, letting awareness settle fully into his limbs. The campaigns in Valdaren had taught him that waking too quickly was as dangerous as waking too slowly. You listened first. You counted. You measured the world before you stepped into it. Harmony was quieter than a war camp. But his body never forgot. He exhaled once and pushed himself upright.

The bed beneath him was little more than a cot — rope-strung frame, thin padding, one wool blanket folded at the foot. “Makeshift” was generous. But it was dry, and it was

inside walls that did not belong to Valdaren, and that was enough. A small chuckle escaped him as he swung his legs over the edge. Luxury, he thought. He reached for his boots first. Always boots.

Marcus had fought in the Valdaren campaigns albeit mostly on guard duty or patrolling. He had served that king long before Harmony had a name. He had marched beneath banners that did not forgive hesitation. He had followed orders that were written in blood before they were written in ink. And he had been expelled for breaking one of them. Not for cowardice. For mercy.

The king's decree had been clear — beastfolk were to be purged from contested territories, root and branch. No quarter. No exceptions.

Marcus had watched villages burn. He had watched soldiers cheer. He had felt something inside him twist into something he did not recognise. And when he'd helped three Catkin escape under cover of smoke and chaos — when he'd chosen humanity over obedience — the empire had made its choice in return. Stripped of rank. Branded traitor. Cast out. He did not regret it. But the exile had followed him like a shadow ever since.

Marcus rose fully and crossed the room to where his equipment rested against the wall. His shortsword lay across a small wooden chest, wrapped loosely in cloth. He lifted it with familiar care. It had been with him through hard times. He'd maintained it as best he could — oiling the blade, grinding the edge smooth whenever he found a proper stone. But time had worn its patience thin. The once-clean line of the steel now bore chips and small

fractures near the edge. The surface held faint scratches that polishing could no longer hide. It was not a ceremonial blade. It was a survivor.

He ran his thumb lightly along the flat — not the edge — and nodded once. “Still with me,” he murmured. He strapped it at his hip and reached for the rest of his gear — a leather harness, bracers and belt knife. The small habits of preparation grounded him. Each buckle tightened. Each strap secured. Each piece checked twice.

He was one of the fortunate ones among the Watchers. He shared a room with only one other — a senior Watcher who rose before dawn most mornings and rarely spoke more than necessary. The barracks were new, still smelling faintly of cut timber and fresh mortar. Not complete — but solid enough to feel like something permanent. Half the structure remained unfinished, beams exposed and roofing incomplete along the far side. Some of the Watchers still chose tents near the training field rather than trust the roof during heavy rain. Marcus didn’t blame them. Harmony was young. It was still learning how to be shelter.

A knock struck the door — quick, firm. “Marcus,” came a voice through the wood. “You’re required on the training field immediately. Rian wants a word. He sounds serious.” Marcus stilled. Rian did not summon people lightly. “I’m coming,” Marcus called back.

He snatched up his cloak, fastening it as he moved, and crossed the hallway at a brisk pace. The corridor was narrow, lined with doors and hooks for gear that would one day belong to a hundred Watchers. Right now, the

rooms were only half filled. Hammering still echoed faintly from the unfinished end of the building.

Outside, the light hit him like a blade. He lowered his head instinctively, blinking hard as his eyes adjusted from dim timber-shadow to open sky. The morning was clear — too clear. Sunlight poured over the yard in broad gold sheets, catching on the packed earth of the training field. Voices murmured low. Steel clinked softly. Marcus straightened fully as the glare faded from his vision. Six Watchers already stood in formation. Not loose. Not casual. Lined.

Rian stood before them, arms folded across his chest, expression unreadable. The beastkin captain's eyes shifted toward Marcus as soon as he emerged — sharp, assessing, impatient in that quiet way that meant time was already being wasted. Marcus stepped forward without hesitation and took his place at the end of the line. He didn't ask why he'd been called. He didn't need to. When Rian gathered Watchers at dawn, it was never for something small. And the air carried a tension that did not belong to drills.

Rian began pacing immediately. He moved slowly at first, hands clasped behind his back, eyes sweeping over the gathered Watchers one by one. "Well then," he began, voice carrying easily across the field. "Lads and ladies, I do hope you all had a lovely night's sleep." He paused. "And I am terribly sorry if I woke you from a dream."

The sarcasm was thick enough to cut. Rian stopped directly in front of Marcus. Held his gaze. For a fraction too long. Marcus didn't flinch. Didn't shift. Didn't react.

But he knew what the look meant. You're not here by accident. Rian moved on down the line.

At the far end, a voice chimed in far too cheerfully. "Actually, Captain, I had a wonderful dream. I was fishing, and I snagged something, thinking it was a succulent fish, but attached to it was a lovely woman, and—" Marcus closed his eyes briefly and rubbed a hand across his forehead. Of course. Garrin.

Rian crossed the distance in three strides. "What in the bloody hells was that, Garrin?" he roared, voice exploding across the yard. "By the gods, you are as thick as a rock."

Garrin blinked, looking mildly wounded but not particularly ashamed. He was younger than most of them, lean, quick, and far more dangerous with a shortsword than his mouth suggested. His hair was perpetually in need of cutting, and there was always a trace of flour or ash somewhere on him, as if the kitchen clung to his soul even after Rian had dragged him onto the training field. He had originally come to Harmony to cook. And he was exceptional at it. Too exceptional, perhaps. Rian had seen more in him — speed, coordination, instinct — and had "persuaded" him to join the Watchers. Garrin still grumbled about it whenever he was scrubbing armour instead of stirring stew.

Rian stepped back, inhaled sharply through his nose, and recomposed himself. "Right," he said curtly. "With that stupidity out of the way..." He clasped his hands behind his back again and began pacing once more. "I've called you here for a..." He paused deliberately, the corner of his mouth twitching. "...voluntary mission." A collective

groan rippled down the line. Everyone knew what that meant. “Voluntary” under Rian’s command meant you technically had a choice. In the same way a man technically had a choice about whether to eat or not. Marcus didn’t react. Neither did the man standing beside him.

“What is the mission, sir?” the man asked evenly.

Cornelius. Rian glanced at him and gave a small nod of approval. Cornelius stood a little straighter than the others — not out of arrogance, but habit. His movements were economical. Controlled. He wore his years like armour. A soldier once of Cresmere, he had arrived with Lady Seris and had proven himself quickly among the Watchers. He was formidable still, even if age had taken the sharpest edge from his speed. Past his prime, perhaps. But not past his worth. Marcus respected him.

Rian came to a stop before them all. “You are being asked to venture into Ashwood,” he said plainly. The word seemed to settle heavier than the others. “To scout a safe route through it. I am not asking you to seek battle. I am not asking you to cleanse it. This is reconnaissance.” His gaze hardened. “There are two objectives. One: find a viable path that can be used for trade or travel. Two: gather any information on what is causing the spread of the ashbeasts.”

He drew a slow breath before continuing, and Marcus caught it — that slight shift in tone. Worry. “I don’t think I need to tell you this,” Rian said quietly now, “but this mission is important.” He stopped pacing. From where Marcus stood, he could see it clearly — the tension coiled in the Captain’s shoulders. “Traders report the Ashwood

spreads by the day. Tree by tree. Clearing by clearing.” His jaw tightened. “If it reaches Harmony’s borders, we will not have time to prepare.”

He looked along the line, meeting each pair of eyes. “In that case,” he said, voice steady but firm, “we either flee... or we fight.”

Silence fell. “And either choice,” Rian finished, “will cost us dearly.”

The humour had drained completely from the field. Marcus felt it in the shift of posture beside him — shoulders stiffening, breaths growing shallower. Several of the Watchers who had laughed moments ago now stood rigid. A few looked pale. One swallowed visibly. Training was one thing. Real danger was another. Most of them had never faced a true battlefield. Never watched a line break. Never heard the sound a man makes when he realises he is going to die. Marcus had. Cornelius had. The others had skill. Talent. Strength. But not experience. And Ashwood did not forgive inexperience.

A few down the line exchanged uneasy glances, as though on the verge of speaking. Rian saw it. Marcus saw it too. Fear was there now — not loud, not panicked, but present. And for the first time that morning, Marcus understood that this was not simply a scouting assignment. The whispering had just begun — low, uncertain — when another presence stepped onto the field. Jonas. He moved without armour, without blade, without the physical assurance of a seasoned warrior — and yet the shift in the air was immediate. Not dramatic. Not theatrical. But noticeable. He had proven himself a

good man. Not because he was the strongest, or the fastest, or the most lethal — but because he showed up. Because he listened. Because he carried risk like it belonged to him.

“We all know Rian,” Jonas said lightly, a half-smile tugging at his mouth as he approached the line. “When he says this is your choice, what he usually means is ‘do it, or the stubborn goat will give you a kick.’”

A ripple of laughter ran through the Watchers. Even Garrin snorted. Rian turned sharply, ears almost seeming to burn. “Stubborn goat?” he began, bristling. “I’ll show you—” Jonas stepped closer and placed a hand on his shoulder. Not to restrain him. Just to ground him. The gesture alone quieted the moment.

Marcus watched it closely. There was something remarkable about Jonas in moments like this. He had no battlefield presence. No hardened edge. His stance was not that of a commander carved by war. And yet... He could shift the mood of a room with a sentence. He could steady men who had not yet faced death.

Marcus found himself in quiet awe of it. Jonas doubted himself constantly — that much was obvious to anyone paying attention. Praise slid off him as though it burned. He carried uncertainty like a second skin. But he was steady. And steadiness was rarer than strength.

“However,” Jonas continued, the humour fading from his voice, “this time he truly means it.” The field grew still. “We truly mean it.” His eyes moved along the line — not over them, but to them. Meeting each gaze in turn. “If you feel this mission is too dangerous — and I will not insult you by pretending it is not — step forward now.” His

voice did not waver. “There will be no reprisal. No shame. No stain upon your name.”

He drew in a breath. “I respect every one of you. I am grateful for what you do for Harmony every day. Some of you have people who depend on you.” His expression softened. “A mission like this... being away from them... I understand if that is a step too far.” Marcus felt something tighten in his chest. This was not how commanders spoke in Valdaren. There, refusal meant weakness. Here, it meant choice.

Jonas continued, quieter now. “But this must be done. Ashwood will not ignore us forever.” He glanced briefly at Rian, then back to the Watchers. “And if it makes it easier, I am willing to join you.”

The words hung in the morning air. Absolute silence followed. Marcus saw it then — the flicker of conflict across several faces. Fear. Calculation. Duty. Pride.

Cornelius was the first to move. He stepped forward without hesitation. “Jonas,” he said, voice firm but respectful, “with all due respect, allow us to handle this.” He did not puff himself up. Did not boast. He simply stood there — solid as stone. “We will discover what festers in those woods,” Cornelius continued. “And I believe I speak for all of us when I say... we owe you.” He gestured faintly toward the Hold, toward the rising walls of Harmony. “You gave us a place where our families can live in relative peace. That alone is worth the risk.”

Marcus felt the words settle deep. One by one, the others stepped forward. Garrin — still grinning, though less foolishly now. Others followed — boots pressing into the

dust in quiet succession. Each step was small. Each step was final. Marcus stepped forward as well, not because of loyalty, not because of obligation — but because this was the kind of mission that shaped men. Because if Ashwood was spreading, it would not be stopped by hesitation. Because some part of him — the soldier, the exile, the man who had already chosen once between obedience and conscience — knew that running from rot only allowed it to grow.

When the line had fully advanced, Rian looked over them. Seven. For now. His expression did not soften. But there was approval there. “Very well,” he said quietly.

The Watchers broke apart slowly, talking in low voices as they headed toward the barracks. Some laughed too loudly. Some didn’t speak at all. Marcus turned to follow. “Marcus. Cornelius. Here.”

Rian’s voice cut across the field. Marcus stopped mid-step. For half a second he thought he might get chewed out for being late to assembly, he took a deep breath. He and Cornelius walked back together and halted in front of Rian and Jonas. They saluted out of instinct more than ceremony.

Rian didn’t waste time. “Cornelius,” he said. “You’ve got the most experience out of the Watchers selected.” Cornelius didn’t move. “Therefore you’ll take command of the mission.” There was no flourish to it. No build-up. Just fact. “They’re capable,” Rian went on. “But most of them haven’t seen real field work. I need someone who can keep them together when it stops feeling like training.”

Cornelius nodded once. "Understood." No pride. No hesitation. Just acceptance.

Rian turned to Marcus. "As for you, sleepyhead..." Marcus felt it before the words landed. "You'll be Cornelius's second."

The world narrowed slightly. "Sir?" Marcus looked puzzled. "You've seen combat," Rian said.

Marcus almost shook his head. "I've been in it once," he said carefully. "That doesn't make me experienced." It had been chaos. Smoke. Screaming. Orders shouted too late. He hadn't distinguished himself. He'd survived. Jonas stepped forward a little. Not dramatically. Just enough. "I've seen you train the others," Jonas said. "They listen to you. Even when you don't realise it."

Marcus didn't know what to say to that. He hadn't trained them to impress anyone. He'd shown them how to clean blades properly. How to keep their stance balanced. How not to argue with Rian unless they enjoyed extra drills. He'd taught them because someone had once taught him.

Rian cleared his throat. "There's one more thing." Marcus straightened. "You're friendly with the Catkin camped in the outer forest."

"Yes, sir." "I've tried to recruit them," Rian said flatly. "They don't respond well to my demeanour." Jonas gave him a look at that. "They know the woods better than we do," Rian continued. "If Ashwood's changing, they'll see signs we won't. Convince them to join."

Marcus hesitated. “Convince.” Jonas spoke quickly. “Only if they want to.” He didn’t raise his voice, but there was steel in it.

Rian didn’t look at him. “Voluntarily,” he said. Marcus understood the balance in that word. He nodded slowly. Second in command. Responsible for Watchers who had never seen battle. Responsible for bringing Catkin who didn’t trust Harmony into something dangerous. The morning felt sharper now. “Understood,” he said.

Rian gave a single nod. “Good. You leave at first light tomorrow. Try to convince the Catkin to join by then.” Just like that. The mission was no longer an idea. It was his.

By the time the sun had climbed properly into the sky, Marcus had eaten what Garrin insisted on calling breakfast. It had been some kind of fried mash wrapped in flatbread. Too much salt. Not enough sense. Marcus hadn’t really tasted it. His thoughts were elsewhere.

He left Harmony through the half-built gates — timber beams still rough, iron hinges not yet fitted properly. The settlement was growing, but it still felt temporary in places. As if a strong enough wind might remind them how fragile they were. He didn’t look back. The forest swallowed sound quickly once he passed beyond the clearing fields. Undergrowth brushed at his boots. Branches caught at his cloak. The air felt cooler here — cleaner. He knew the path. The birds sang in their beautiful variety of sounds, some almost like an instrument that had been tuned perfectly.

After a short walk, the trees opened into a clearing. The pond sat at its centre like polished glass. Clear water. Blue enough to reflect the sky without distortion. Small, bright fish moved beneath the surface in slow, lazy arcs. Too thin to eat. Too delicate to bother catching. The place always felt wrong in how peaceful it was. Like something held its breath here.

Marcus shaded his eyes and scanned the trees. There. High in one of the thicker trunks, half-hidden among branches, sat the structure he was looking for. Rough timber. Rope lashings. Uneven boards. It wasn't elegant. It wasn't meant to be. It was shelter. He took a step forward.

A sharp whistle cut the air. Something struck the ground in front of him with a dull thud. Marcus froze. The arrow had landed less than a foot from his boot. Crude shaft. Rough fletching. Close enough to be deliberate.

"Who goes there?" a voice called. Calm. Controlled. Not shouting. "This is our land. You would do well to leave."

Marcus exhaled slowly and turned. Selka stood half-shadowed behind a tree, bow already lowered but still in hand. Her posture was relaxed in a way that told him she hadn't missed by accident. "By all the gods, Selka," he muttered. "You could've killed me."

She tilted her head slightly, ears flicking. "Oh, Marcus," she said, and there was a hint of amusement there. "I only saw your back. You know we think all you humans look the same."

He snorted despite himself, heart still pounding harder than he would admit. Selka lifted two fingers to her lips and let out a bird call — sharp, layered, almost melodic. It

carried through the trees and returned in soft echoes. A signal. She stepped forward fully then, slinging the bow across her back. They closed the distance and clasped forearms — not formal, not cautious. Familiar. “It’s been a while,” Marcus said. “It has,” she agreed.

Marcus had met Selka and the others on the outskirts of Valdaren. Before Harmony. Before banners. Before hope felt possible. He remembered the smoke. He remembered the decree. Non-humans to be purged. No exceptions. He had disobeyed and helped them escape through a treeline while his unit searched the village square. Three Catkin had survived that night because he’d looked the other way at the right moment. The empire had not appreciated his mercy.

They fled south with Marcus marked as a traitor. They were hunted. Eventually, Harmony had taken him in. The Catkin had not joined, they’d stayed apart wanting nothing more to do with humans. They stayed close enough to survive but far enough not to trust.

“Come,” Selka said now. “Join us for dinner. Tarn and Kael will be glad to see you.” Marcus followed her toward the treehouse. He already knew this would not be simple. Asking them to join Harmony had been difficult the first time. Asking them to walk into Ashwood would be worse.

Selka poured the tea without ceremony. It was bitter and strong, brewed from leaves Marcus didn’t recognise. Steam curled between them in the small shelter, rising toward the rough beams above. She smiled at him over the rim of her cup. “So,” she said lightly. “What brings you to this neck of the woods?” Marcus stared into the steam for a

moment. "I'd rather wait for the others," he said. "If that's alright."

Selka studied him. She'd always been good at that — watching without appearing to. "You look troubled," she said quietly. He tried to shrug it off. It didn't work. He wasn't worried they would say no. He was worried they would say yes. That frightened him more.

While they waited, silence settled naturally between them. Not awkward. Just shared. He thought back to the road south. To smoke behind them and uncertainty ahead. To nights where the Catkin had told stories of old hunts and extended families, of winters survived together, of laughter around fires that had existed long before kingdoms drew borders. Marcus had listened more than he spoke. He had never really had a family. Not one that waited for him.

The sound of a bird call cut through the trees. Selka tilted her head and smiled faintly. "They're back," she said. "And it sounds like they've done well." Marcus stepped out with her. Tarn and Kael emerged through the brush, carrying a Targo boar strung between them. Their movements were efficient, practised. They waved up at him with their free hands, grinning as if nothing in the world weighed heavily. For a moment, Marcus wished it didn't.

By the time the sun began to sink, they were gathered around the fire. The boar roasted slowly, herbs crackling in the fat. The smell was rich and earthy, far better than Garrin's earlier experiment. Marcus ate more than he meant to. He might not get food like this for a while.

After the meal, Selka stretched and leaned back against a log. "So," Tarn said bluntly, picking at his teeth with a

splinter of bone. "Selka tells me you didn't walk all this way just to see us." Marcus swallowed. "No." The fire popped. "I have a mission," he said. "For Harmony. I was asked to speak to you."

Kael's expression hardened almost immediately. "As you know," Kael said, voice flat, "that short, stubborn beastman tried recruiting us before. We said no." He leaned forward slightly. "So what makes you think we'd say yes now? What is so important that even you would come asking?" Marcus felt the weight of their eyes on him. He chose his words carefully. "This comes from Jonas," he said. "The mission affects more than Harmony."

That made them pause.

"To the west," he continued, "Ashwood is spreading. You've seen it. It grows day by day. If we can't discover what's causing it, it won't stop at borders." He gestured faintly toward the tree line. "It will consume whatever stands in its path." Silence.

"We need your knowledge," Marcus said. "Your eyes. Your understanding of these forests. We're not going in to conquer it. We're scouting. Learning. Trying to find a safe path and understand the source." He didn't beg. He didn't soften it. "I know I'm asking a lot," he said quietly. "And I know you owe Harmony nothing."

Tarn spat into the dirt. "How dare you come here and try to make us feel guilty," he snapped. "We've lost everything. We've bled enough for your kingdoms and humankind." Selka rose slowly. "That's enough," she said. Tarn glared at her. "He saved our lives," she continued. "If you can untangle that from your anger for one moment."

The firelight flickered between them. Marcus stood. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have put this on you."

Selka looked at him, and there it was — the disappointment. Not in him. In the situation. "You know we'd do almost anything for you," she said. "But this... this feels like walking toward another purge. Another mistake." Marcus nodded slowly. He looked at each of them. "I care about you," he said. "More than I've ever cared about anyone." The words surprised even him. "You are the closest thing I've ever had to family."

The fire cracked softly. "I'll do this mission," he said. "So that you don't have to." He let that settle. "Stay safe. That's all I want."

He turned before they could see too much in his face. The walk back felt longer. The forest darkened quickly as night settled. By the time he reached Harmony's gates, the stars had begun to pierce through the sky. Tomorrow, they would journey towards the Ashwood. And he would carry command... and the weight of leaving family behind.