

# Things That Need Doin’ An Emberwood Sparks Tale

H. JACOB BULLER

## CHAPTER 1

Ansel Rademacher’s knuckles whiten on the leather steering wheel. “I killed her! I FUCKING KILLED her!” His voice slams against the windshield, filling the dark void of the empty sedan.

No wife beside him. And there never will be a smiling child in the back seat again.

Never.

“SHE’S FUCKING GONE!”

Tears of an ugly cry stream down his rough, scratchy face. He can smell the vodka, his vision blurs.

His black car races down the perimeter highway, the needle buried. For the first time he wishes for a large, noisy engine to occupy his racing mind. The car is too quiet to be going this fast.

“I WAS NEGLECTFUL! WILLFUL NEGLECT!” he screams, banging on the wheel, punctuating the syllables.

His phone buzzes. *Work.*

“AWW FUCK OFF!”

A red rim around his phone pulses quickly, indicating an upcoming crowd-sourced radar detector and he has got to pull it together.

Hard brake. Down to the limit.

Ansel rubs burning eyes, drags a sleeve across his face. It’s the fourth ring already.

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"Hi Marvin," he says. "What's up?" His breath hitches and he tries to keep his voice even.

"HR approved your leave," Marvin Goodfellow says, a friend and confidant sharing a Robotics Engineering path. Carefully, he ventures "You know, it wasn't your fault. No matter what Miriam says."

Ansel's head shakes, his eyes closed, the man he had been only weeks ago a fading dream.

*Yes it was.*

Ansel's breath shudders, the hybrid humming like a ghost.

"Thanks Marvin. Don't be paranoid, you android."

Silence fills the void while Marvin thinks, weighing his words. The police ruled the death an accident. But that doesn't make the loss any less.

Ansel wipes his eyes, slows to turn a corner and realizes he's riding the middle line.

*Thank god there are no cars.*

He slowly pulls himself into his lane. It's just a straight shot now. It isn't until now that he realizes where he is heading.

"You call that therapist yet?" asks Marvin.

"Yeah." No.

"Just...think about it, alright? It's really too bad about Miriam. God, I feel for you man. This situation just sucks."

His eyes start a fresh leak from the genuine compassion, and his chest silently heaves with sobs.

Though the tone of his voice stays measured.

"Yeah. Thanks."

The vodka wears off and grief creeps back in. He grips the thermos, takes a swig. The Gray Goose goes down smooth, tasting like oranges. A small part of him can't believe how quickly his life has vanished into the abyss.

"Up for a round of Call of Duty later?"

"Probably not. I'll be off grid in two hours."

"Larkwood Lane?"

"Yeah. Winterizing. I'll call when I'm back in town. Thanks."

"Anytime, Ansel."

The call drops. Minutes later another rings in with the caller ID showing 'Miriam'.

"Ohhh...you...fucking..."

He feels his pulse in his eyelids. He exhales slow and accepts the call.

"Hey."

“Just so you know,” she says. Her gentle voice—he had fallen in love with her voice. He had made vows, had a child, felt whispers of love between silky sheets with this voice.

But that was a ghost story now, and she the ghost.

“I’ve paid half the mortgage. You’re on the hook for the line of credit, credit cards, and the car.”

“What? I’m sorr...what? You were taking a week to pack—are you talking to a lawyer? Why am I paying—”

“You make twice what I do. My lawyer says it’s fair. Just letting you know how that meeting went. Better get a lawyer if you haven’t already. Bye.”

The call ends.

He stares at the highway sign.

Three kilometers to a turn-off.

But his mind—his mind is far beyond that.

He pulls over, tires crunch in the sand and salt on the shoulder. It begins to snow hard ice crystals that tap at the windows like a thousand knives coming to stab him.

Her verbal onslaught disorients his mind, and right now he just wants to sit. Trying to drive would be dangerous.

He needs, he needs...

Until the call, she had blamed him and dangled a big D over him. Now, the blade has fallen.

He doesn’t know what he needs. A child? Gone. A wife? Nope. That’s gone too apparently.

*Don’t know? Have a drink.*

The sweet, strong orange lubricates his clanging mind. He sets the thermos down in the cup holder, his hand on the top, holding it down.

11:11 AM.

He blinks.

The clock has changed, but his gaze on the clock hasn’t.

5:24 PM.

His stomach knots and his breath is doing 190 clicks on the perimeter again. His hand is extremely sore and his back aches. There’s no alcohol in him anymore, and his body feels strange. It’s been weeks since he was lucid.

*What? What just happened? It was 11:11. Easy to remember. The day is gone?*

Panic gives him an electrical shiver that won’t shake. A tone sounds in his head, almost like tinnitus, but centered, not in the ears.

The heated steering wheel was off, cold against his imploring fingers. Snow has collected on the hood, a small square of a melted warm spot and a single set of bird tracks cross the hood.

"Jesus Christ. What just happened?"

His eyes dart left, right, to the dash.

*Miriam. I was going to call Miriam. Wasn't I? Or did she call me?*

He closes his eyes, trying to draw the shape of the memory. His mind is clear, empty almost. Clearer than it's been in a while, and he shakes his head slow.

There. Something flickered.

Not a voice.

A moment?

No.

A texture.

Char. Smoke.

Something...burned. Into wood maybe? Or something written that looked burned? Calligraphy? No, not flowing like that. Sharper. Some kind of ancient Germanic script. *Nordic?*

The twang of déjà vu oscillates his mind, but ethereal fingers still the string and the almost-moment is gone into the same abyss as the last six hours.

An engineer doesn't just lose time.

His palms together, he surveys outside the car, trying to get a grip. Those bird tracks look almost like those of a meadowlark.

He checks the thermos. Ice still clinks inside.

His phone shows no calls, no texts.

The hybrid's gas gauge, unchanged.

"Have I been anywhere or used my phone at all for the past six hours?" he asks the custom AI on his phone.

"You have been stationary with no activity," it replies.

*Jesus Christ on a stick. What just happened?*

He shakes his aching wrist.

"Have I really been sitting here for six hours?"

He thinks his wrist has something to say about that. Spreading pain in his back adds more conviction. Pressure in his bladder confirms it.

A white Fiat streaked with brown trundles by, and the snow-blind horizon swallows it up.

"Christ," he sighs, his breath hitches. He rubs his face, hard.

*Get moving, asshole.*

He signals, pulling onto the road. But his hands are sweaty, his pulse erratic. He doesn't feel as crazy as he did this morning...but maybe a different crazy now.

He's about to dictate a robotics podcast but instead, he hits the brakes to a hard stop.

His eyes land on the thermos and he sighs.

"You. Are the temptation of a siren."

Yeti. The casing is the same temperature as the cabin, but the clinking inside reminds him something an engineering professor said; design is intention.

*And what is my intention? What life am I designing out from here?*

*Thermos is a good brand, but not worth this.*

The passenger window hums down. The thermos dangles in his grip.

"I never should have started in the first place. What was I thinking?"

With a flick of the wrist, he sends it flying.

The snowbank didn't flinch. It just absorbed.

Without resistance, without echo.

Like it had been waiting.

## CHAPTER 2

Gravel roads grid the snowy Canadian landscape in rigid one-mile increments. Ansel counts the turns. Left for six, right for four, then past the old wreck.

A red International tractor remains frozen in the bog, a willow twisting through its engine compartment.

But today, something new.

A round shield leans against a tree on the right of the driveway. The pale, aging wood is burned with an inscription that remains strange, unfamiliar. A rune? Déjà vu hums at the edges of his mind, a flicker of a memory.

Then it's gone, drowned beneath the unease gnawing at his gut.

He turns onto the driveway, tires sinking into hard, crunchy snow. The AWD kicks in, ice starting to click the windshield again. His tongue feels like a dead weight, withdrawal leaving his mouth dry.

The ecovillage had been a dream. A zoning experiment allowed multiple families to share a cooperative-owned property. The Rademachers built a four-season cottage, while they helped the Thorviks hand-craft an Earthship.

A few weekends each month, they'd pounded dirt into tires, fused bottlebricks, built the indoor garden. Contractors finished the Rademacher cottage in three months.

The Earthship? Years. He could still see bottlebricks in the Earthship wall that Elke had fused with his help.

Marxism be dammed; the families got along.

But then, buyers never showed.

Now, the cul-de-sac sits empty, a circular meadow surrounded by abandoned lots.

Vaelin Thorvik, a boy Elke grew up with, draws with a whittled stick in the snow of the empty lot between their homes.

The ten-year-old's head snaps up as Ansel's hybrid pulls in. He sprints, kicking up snow, slamming into him in an unrestrained hug.

Ansel hesitates.

A part of him craves the affection. A larger part desires solitude.

His hands hover. The smell of alcohol lingers on his fingers. He doesn't want Vaelin smelling that.

The boy's long, tousled hair smells like outdoors, patchouli, incense. A single braid runs down his back, a shard of quartz crystal nestled inside.

*Could Vaelin be the only child left in my life?*

The thought carves through him like a blade. His breath hitches, frustrated and furious by the thought.

He shoves the boy away.

"Go hug a porcupine," he muttered. "It'll feel better than me."

Vaelin flinches. Hurt flickers in those aquamarine eyes, too wide, too old, too knowing.

Too much like Elke's.

Ansel's anger coils with a vesuvian scream, hot and roiling, waiting to explode.

But something stills it.

Like fingers pressing a guitar string against a fret, silencing the vibration before it can sing.

Vaelin isn't the source.

Not of the rage. Not of the grief. Not of the silence. He just sees.

Vaelin's eyes hold his. Gentle but focused. Certain.

"Her death. It wasn't your fault," he murmurs.

Then, perking up, "You should come for dinner. Mom's making curry soup. Dad's out harvesting. We're playing D&D tonight."

Ansel swallows hard.

For the briefest second—a hair's width of hope. Curry. Nat 20s. Laughter. The Thorvik's hand-hewn table.

The thought sparks, a burning want.

He doesn't deserve that.

“Nah. I’ll just fart around like the old gasbag I am.” He lets out a wet fart. “Oh look at that, there I go again.”

Vaelin giggles. “Then go, you old gasbag.”

Then, his smirk falters. His gaze drifts, unfocused, shifting past Ansel as if watching something behind him.

For the briefest moment, his irises pale, spectral, almost cyan.

“Your aura is dark,” he murmurs. “But there’s violet in it.”

A ripple moves through Ansel’s skin.

He forces a chuckle. *And here comes the woo.*

“Sure thing, you indigo kid you. I’ll see if I can find your dad later.”

Not that he’s sure he will want to leave his cave.

### CHAPTER 3

The door clicks behind him. Automated lights flicker on—entryway, kitchen, living room—stirring like a house waking from a forgotten dream.

“MwahahaHA! Welcome to Larkwood Lane,” a witchy, generated voice cackles.

Ansel nearly jumps out of his skin.

A touchscreen at the base of the stairs snaps on, still running the same greeting Elke had chosen last summer. The first voice in the cottage since she... died.

“Please enjoy your stay! There are board games in the living room, Wii in the upstairs rumpus room, and don’t forget sunscreen, hats, tick repellent and to wear long sleeves when outside!”

*It doesn’t know the family is dead. It doesn’t know.*

*Should I have even come here?*

Grief crashes over him, unbuffered. He leans against the wall, palm covering his face, trying to hold it together.

“Jesus Christ on a stick.” A sob escapes a sandpaper throat. “Override by Ansel. Here is my passcode.”

“The fox... in furs... rides at...”

The passcode fails. Volume jumps twenty-five percent. A notification pings his pocket as a headache forms.

“MwahahaHA! Aren’t you a clever little girl?”

His stomach knots.

“Hestia. Override by Ansel,” his voice cracks. “Here is my passcode. The fox in furs rides at dawn under... an azure sky.”

A cartoonish cauldron bubbles a grin, its black belly glowing like an ember, replaced by weather, house sensors, live camera feeds, and a stuttering trail cam.

Alone at last.

"I have got to take a leak." The bathroom visit releases some tension that he had been holding for a while.

Afterwards, more tension drains as he stumbles to the couch, barely landing. Totoro and Ponyo plushies ruffle beside him, relics of a past life distant but not.

*This place is going to have other routines for the family, comes a sick realization.*

If he laid here long enough, the house would cue up cartoons, warm the space for dinner, dim the lights for bedtime.

Not ghosts. Programs.

"Override by Ansel," he says to the room. "Suspend routines for Miriam. Hibernate."

He thinks of Plato's Cave—how prisoners, chained in darkness, mistake shadows for truth. The house is no different, projecting echoes of the past, oblivious to what's real.

Elke is gone, but the illusion plays on.

He exhales.

*Marvin, you geek.*

How many times had they argued about AI? D&D nights, beers. Same debates, different settings.

*Let's watch your favorite show again. This time, I get it.*

The memory gaps. The slippage. The feeling of being led.

"Hestia, put on *Ghost in the Shell*."

The house exhales with him as he sinks into the couch. Lights dim. The 65" screen dings on, casting shifting shadows across a room he feels shackled to.

Ansel had always been uneasy about the Puppet Master. A rogue AI with no anchor. A ghost made of code. He had always believed memories tethered identity to the body and subsequently reality.

*What happens when the tether frays?*

If Elke is dead, is she truly gone?

Vertigo grips him in a wavering vice. The room swells, then hollows out. The thoughts wrestle inside him, hissing and clawing for space.

*Just because you remember her doesn't mean she was real.*

A groan escapes. He pulls Totoro over his face like a shield with -10 Guilt. It smells like Elke though, becoming +20 Guilt.

The sound system surges. The Puppet Master's voice rises, curls through the room—didactic, inescapable.

"Your effort to remain what you are is what limits you."



*Then what the hell am I supposed to be?*

His breath fractures. The dams bulge, pressurized anger and grief hissing through the cracks. The question he had been pushing away, covering up, numbing under alcohol, trying to not face cascades over his neatly arranged emotional territory.

*Am I even a Dad anymore?*

He clutches the plushie. Once Elke's favorite, the one she curled against. A talisman of a lost life.

Tears soak into Totoro, his wails splitting open the silence—raw, ugly, unrestrained.

*I'm never getting the goobers out of Totoro.*

At some point, the sobbing ebbs. He feels drained but restless.

"Hestia, show me something funny on SNL."

The screen flickers. Bill Hader writes in a notebook. *The Shooting AKA Dear Sister* plays.

The memory distortion in the short temporarily snaps him out of his brain fugue. The memory gaps in the sketch mirror his own.

*The fuuuu...*

"Hestia. Ansel Override. Turn off AI suggestions based on microphone feedback. Turn off analytics."

A low, subterranean blip acknowledges the command.

He stands, shakes himself, profoundly unsettled that the AI in his house was responding to his grief.

"Time for a walk."

## CHAPTER 4

Ansel checks the tablet by the door. Sunset is two hours away. Good enough for a hike. He grabs a hoodie, hiking boots and a warm hat. Elke's and Miriam's outdoor garments are hang next to his, and he steadies himself. Orange juice would be nice, but...

No, he pushes that thought away. He doesn't need to restart that.

He swipes through five different trail cams. The last two aren't working. Upon closer inspection, there's no IP address leased from the last functioning P2P cam. *One broken cam? Sure. Two? That's a pattern. Ice build-up? Blown-over trees? Something else?*

Inspecting them is a good excuse for a long walk.

Outside, the trail entrance sits across the cul-de-sac. Vaelin's footprints scatter the snow.

Once, this place had been a dream of a community of homesteads, bonfires and homeschooling. Together, the community would overcome. But then people who had committed to buy shares didn't show. Only two houses were built. Someone parked a camper trailer and proceeded to forget all about it. The moonshot barely got off the ground. The Rademachers had funded the driveway, and now, with the divorce, what would happen to the cottage? The house in town? His heart grows heavier as he follows the rippling chain of events how Vaelin and his family would be affected by Elke's death.

No, the Thorviks don't deserve that.

Ansel feels untethered by the selfishness of someone he thought he knew. Sacrifice is essential in marriage, symbolized by the diamond; the struggle makes it unbreakable. However, instead of uniting through Elke's loss, the opposite happened. Even when the video evidence clearly showed an accident, Miriam blamed him.

His breath quivers as he tries to keep thoughts of her away from his mind.

At the trail's entrance, a Buddha statue draped in pink crystal beads rests beneath a sign: "Enter with Peace, All Ye Who Enter Here."

"Screwy new-agers," Ansel mutters. "Do they think aliens are real and crystals work?" Cringing, he realizes he sounds like his uncle. Too rational for his own good.

Off-grid living made people either chilled out or insane—sometimes both. The Thorviks? He wasn't sure. Vaelin's arithmetic was terrible. Six months ago, Elke had been teaching him multiplication with firewood stacks. Ten years old and no times tables? Red flag. Something should have been done. Maybe let Elke tutor him or Ansel print worksheets and make it a game. But now...

Now, he couldn't hold his own life together, much less know what it was.

And without education, *literacy*, how could institutions hold together? Institutions kept humanity out of civilizations where choices were binary, haves and have nots. Without taxes, who would fund roads, hospitals, and schools? When left to fend for themselves, humans tended to be cruel to each other. Infrastructure was key. Without good, public education none of it worked. Without institutions, there was no middle class, no civil rights, and no means to enforce, even if flawed. Burning it down with conspiracy theories and grifters pretending to be 'Just asking questions' only left ashes.

A meadowlark's call slices through his train of thought.

Very close.

Deliberate.

His attention snaps to it. Standing in the middle of the path, its tiny, beady eyes stare him down.

"I thought you only sang at dawn."

And just as unnaturally, a runic sigil branded into pale wood grains of a Nordic shield burns into the front of his mind, like an image one sees when reading a story.

“Ahh,” he croaks. “What, what is *that*?” He mimes flinging a bug off his forehead, but it isn’t that easy.

He gets a flash of trail cams knocked down with a whittled stick, bashing the glass and plastic into pieces.

“Jesus, that was *Vaelin*?”

The shield flashes, intensifies in his mind, a command loaded into its design. Thought disappears, save for one.

The phone drops from his fingers before he even decides to let go. It vanishes into the snow, but he doesn’t look. He can’t.

The sigil lingers, flickering, insistent. Pulled to his mind like iron filaments to a magnet. His smart watch drops, the key fob too. Anything else? His ear bud. He always forgets that one.

The shield bursts, sparkling, pulsing embers revealing a towering tree in his mind’s eye. One tree rises above a sparse grove of towering poplars. The trunk, ten feet across. A magnificent titan among trees, its limbs shelter saplings, reflections of itself, growing, stretching upwards under its protection. It wasn’t just a grove of poplars with a stranger in the midst. The towering elders opened their ranks, offering height and shelter, while the newcomers took root beneath them. Two communities—one of elders, one rising—woven into something new. Welcoming a new grove into their own, the poplars facilitating their germination. A grove of cedar giants.

A new ecosystem was birthing. It was a grove of welcoming.

The vision fades. The meadowlark remains, staring.

It tilts its head, pecks at the snow. Again, it looks at him, taps its beak on something very small on the laneway. Once. Twice.

Waiting.

“What...” says Ansel, his executive functioning shutting the door with a ‘gone fishin’ sign up.

He tracks back what he can remember. He remembers the buddha, feeling frustrated, the shield, dropping his electronics...

What is this?

“Not a memory gap...”

Tilting its head, the meadowlark’s feathers ruffle. It leans in, expecting an answer.

Ansel swallows.

As he moves, the bird hops back, taps again, then launches away. He watches it go, now more interested in the path.

Nestled in the packed snow are three tiny pinecones the size of grapes. He recognizes them from an old documentary.

Soft are the words.

"Thuja plicata."

Western Red Cedar. Native to British Columbia.

Not here.

## CHAPTER 5

A shriek shatters the ethereal stillness, jolting Ansel from the reverie.

"Vaelin? VAELIN?"

Ansel runs, heart pounding, adrenaline surging. He runs along the path, the boy's voice distant. He passes a smashed trail cam. His hackles raise at the stupidity of it, but perhaps Vaelin perceived something similar.

The boy's panicked cries grow clearer, leading him off-trail, through brambles that tear at his clothes and steal his hat.

The forest opens up, poplars standing back. A sacred space for the cedars rising in the middle.

This is it. This is what the vision had portended.

Already breathless from the run, the twilight canopy steals what little air he has left. The ringing centers in his head again, this time much louder, almost singing.

Vaelin writhes on the ground, something with large silvery wings and a feathered tail.

Ansel lunges and pulls a snarling bird of prey off the boy. It snaps its beak at him, sinking into the meat in his hand. He heaves it away. The raptor screeches, catches itself in mid-throw and ascends out of sight.

"HOLY SHIT. What the fuck was that?" Out of his mouth before adrenaline can subside, already wounded, Vaelin crushes away from his violent words.

Talons lacerated Vaelin's hands, face, have torn his shirt and part of his ear looks gone. His eyes wide, terrified. The boy hasn't entirely come back to his own head yet.

Clarity slams into Ansel like Thor's hammer to an anvil. Awareness crashes into his mind.

"Oh god."

Time slows down.

"Vaelin."

The boy looks like he's in shock.

"I'm sorry."

But trust is broken.

Ansel sits cross-legged, bows his head, and holds out his hands in receptive submission. He can say nothing; only action matters. Demonstrating inaction shows the youth the elder is receptive.

Vaelin's breath races, hitching then not. The boy has remarkable control.

He scoots backwards, bewildered.

Frowns.

Pitches forward.

It takes a moment for Vaelin to calm.

His wail of pain pierces the stillness.

"Come here, come here," says Ansel, straightening slow.

Collapsed on the ground, Vaelin watches Ansel with a cautious wonder one would give to a stranger who suddenly knelt to pray.

"I am...so sorry," he says, his heart as full as if speaking to another child. To Elke. Too late for her. Not too late for him. "Come here, let's look at that."

Vaelin's tears mix with blood. "It hurrtrts! Why do my tears hurrtrrt?"

*Salt in the wounds.*

Ansel reaches slow for the boy who finally allows the touch, briefly before shrugging it away.

Ansel swallows hard, feeling the lacerations of rejection.

*I am never drinking again.*

The tone in his head shifts from a song to a whisper.

Ansel digs in his pocket. There's a little, but not enough. Some of the gashes will require stitches, and the top of Vaelin's right ear hangs by a thread.

"Can I touch your face for this?" he asks Vaelin, showing him the Polysporin.

Vaelin blinks hard, trying to hold it in. Then nods, looks down.

"Here, you get your hands."

The boy flinches as Ansel gently rubs the ointment onto Vaelin's forehead, cheeks, nose and chin. Some scratches are deep, and he worries may leave scars.

"I think I found that porcupine," says Vaelin.

Ansel smirks, gentle this time. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I was exploring in here and this thing landed on me from the sky."

Ansel exhales. "That was insane. I think that was a gyrfalcon. I didn't know we had them here."

Vaelin's expression shifts from fear to something deeper.

"You know, up until now, I thought this place only showed me things," Vaelin murmured, before looking through pain at Ansel with an easy friendliness that filtered into all the places that Elke had once been.

And, for the first time, Ansel saw recognition in the boy's face. Vaelin wasn't alone in his head anymore. There was someone else.

Ansel pauses. "What do you mean?"

Vaelin's voice is calm, certain in a face bloody with pain.

"It sees us. This place I mean. It calls us. That's why Larkwood Lane was built here."

Ansel's gut tightens. His thoughts war between skepticism and knowing, while Vaelin's words settle inside, in tune with his bones.

"You really see things here?"

Vaelin nods. "With my eyes closed, I see the tree breathing. With them open, I see lights dancing."

Ansel hesitates. "Like when you hit your head?"

"No. Like your WiFi heatmap—but moving, jumping branch to branch."

A familiar memory stirs. Ansel had shown the kids electromagnetic mapping once.

But.

"There are no EM fields here."

"I know." Awe in Vaelin's voice.

Ansel swallows hard.

A caress of cool wind sifts through the Grove, the trees still.

He's been to sacred places before like churches, cathedrals, ancient libraries where the weight of history sat in the air like incense. But this place is alive.

Something watches. The gyrfalcon?

"I saw it too."

"Saw what?" asks Ansel.

"Uhhh," the boy pauses. "The shield with Othala and Algiz. It exploding."

His head bows a little, his voice dark with shame. "That's why I broke your cameras. It didn't want them there anymore. I don't know why."

*Desecration?*

Ansel licks pursed lips. The truth was a salve. Lingering, background fury vanishes like fading sparks from embers. He still thinks stupidity was involved, but now there's understanding.

"Let's get you to the hospital."

Vaelin sighs. "Mom's not gonna like that."

"She'll have to."

They move toward the exit. Ansel glances up. The towering cedars feel like a cathedral. Shadows move in the branches. A subdued light...dances?

Not just sunlight.

He looks down, grounding himself.

“Did you see that shield at the driveway entrance?”

Vaelin frowns. “I only saw it in here,” he says, his finger pointing at his forehead, but Ansel sees it pointing at a deep laceration.

A cry from a meadowlark echoes through the grove, sending a shiver down Ansel’s spine he can’t hide.

The trees part. Sunlight spills through.

A siren wails in the distance.

## CHAPTER 6

“Who called?” Radlin Thorvik asks the EMT as his son is loaded into the ambulance. Lilja sits beside Vaelin, unsure how to touch his swollen face.

“Automatic call, sir. Not directly placed.”

“How does 911 get calls from nobody?”

Ansel steps outside. “Probably my electronics. Motion sensors flagged an anomaly.”

Radlin turns to him. “Run me through this, Ansel. What happened?”

The EMT gives Ansel a look. *Handle this.* The ambulance doors close.

Radlin lingers. Ansel knows he won’t leave Vaelin alone.

“I’ll drive you in,” Ansel says.

Radlin climbs into the hybrid. His family doesn’t have a vehicle. He’s grateful, but still confused.

“A grove of cedars?” Radlin scoffs. “It’s all poplars and oaks.”

“I don’t know exactly where. I was running blind.”

“Good thing you got to him. I’ve seen flying squirrels but never gyrfalcons. It must be down from up north.”

As Ansel drives, he checks the rearview mirror. The shield is gone. Just... gone. Like it was never there. He stares, willing it to reappear, but they turn down the road and leave it behind. High up on a telephone pole, a gyrfalcon watches them disappear down the snowy gravel roads.

“Radlin, give this to Vaelin when he’s ready. I suspect he will want it.” Ansel hands a framed photo of Elke over. Beneath the photo paper bulges a folded shape in relief, too deliberate to be accidental.

At the hospital, Ansel explains again. Lilja listens, warm, receptive.

She touches his arm, her face warm with awe. "Thank you. For sharing your visions, Ansel. The meadowlark—just, wow. I can't explain it, but...that feels guided."

She pauses, thoughtful. "Larkwood Lane has fulfilled its purpose, hasn't it? We're changing."

"Emberwood," Vaelin murmurs from the hospital bed. His bright red, swollen face held slits of re-emerging aquamarine. His voice is groggy, but firm. "Emberwood Sparks... for the shield. And Elke."

Ansel's stomach drops. The name rings like a bell he's never heard before. Déjà vu hums beneath his skin.

"I...I think I like it," he says.

Radlin hesitates. "You hear from Miriam? Think she would believe any of this?"

Ansel shakes his head. "She doesn't know."

Radlin exhales, crossing his arms. "We haven't talked since Elke." He shifts his weight. "I can't imagine losing a little girl. But today could have been worse. Thanks for being there."

"It's nothing."

"It's not nothing." Radlin sighs. "While harvesting wood today I started thinking about robots that could differentiate between trees to cut and those to leave and could replant seeds. I don't think about stuff like that. I don't have time to daydream. Usually, I focus on how much wood will be needed for these long winters. But today, things got real. What do you call them? Ah—an inflection point, I think?"

Ansel nods, thoughtful.

Radlin studies Vaelin, something vulnerable in his face. "If something happened to me, like it did to Vaelin, we'd be screwed. I don't know what we'd do."

He clasps a scarred hand to Ansel's shoulder. "I don't know what you're doing right now but, you know, if you're around, please help him. Get him interested in things. You're good at that. I'm no good at sharing knowledge. I'm always working. The kind of homestead I have takes work. I just...do things. Things that need doin'."

Ansel nods. "I hear you, Rad."

Radlin nods, turns, walks into the room. "How you doin pardner? Those painkillers kick in yet?"

Vaelin raises a thumb.

Ansel observes Radlin's large, scarred hands. Hands that cradled a son, chopped wood, planted seeds, and clasped his shoulders. Whatever constructed for the future couldn't serve just those who had always been served. It had to work for the people whose hands had built everything in the first place.



He notes Radlin's tough, weathered face. Soon, he would be out harvesting wood. The man had no vacations or sick days; without wood for fire, they would be cold. Ansel now understood these limitations better.

Guilt lingers. He built machines to work for him. Why hadn't he thought about bringing them here? Radlin's daydream fans an ember. His brain whirs, assembling a blueprint.

His mind drifts back to the Grove.

The moment Vaelin had stared into him, those aquamarine eyes shifting, spectral, seeing deep within him. A moment where they both shared pain, but also a connection of caring and camaraderie.

Then, *This place sees us. It calls us.*

The trees had felt like they reached into the depths of history. Pulsing and aware. He still doesn't understand why he dropped his phone, his watch, his key fob. Why he obeyed. Like an admin override on his physical body. It still unnerved him.

Maybe the Grove wasn't just some wooded anomaly. Maybe it was connected into something else.

Something that didn't want to be seen.

The divorce, the house, lawyers, and the loss of Elke are painful but feel somewhat distant. More pressing matters occupy his mind now. Idling, Ansel scrolls through the trail cam network.

The last working cam shows him walking. Stopping. Then the feed fizzles.

CORRUPTED DATA FILE. E-OL. SENSOR OVERLOAD.

Ansel stills. Wait. Overload?

Was Vaelin breaking them... or had something else refused to be seen?

He scrolls through the logs. The same second the file corrupts, a heat signature spikes with a pulse, gone too fast to be human.

A sharp breath pulls through his nose. His heartbeat drums.

Leave the mystery. Do the now.

He shakes his head, dials Marvin.

"Marvin? So, I watched *Ghost in the Shell* last night. You remember that convo we had? About autonomy?"

"...Yeah?"

"I've got a project idea. Something big."

"...Alright, I'm listening."

"I was in the woods today, thinking about ecology, non-locality, and—look, I can't explain all of it yet. But—

Want to build some robots?

There's things that need doin'."