



THE ROOFTOP
WATCHER
— HAWKE

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The Rooftop Watcher

The rooftop was where I could breathe. Not because the air was cleaner up there, though the evening wind did carry the sharp scent of pine and woodsmoke, but because it was high enough above the courtyard to quiet the restlessness that lived in me.

I climbed the steps slowly, each one groaning with a familiar complaint, and pulled myself onto the small deck just as the last of the light began to drain from the sky. Below me, Bitter Sweet was settling into itself. Lamps glowed in windows one by one, like fireflies caught in jars. Voices softened, laughter giving way to murmured stories, footsteps fading as families tucked themselves into their evening rhythms.

The smell of supper still clung to the air, bread crusts warm from the ovens, broth rich with onion and carrot, the faint tang of herbs steeping in cups long after bowls were cleared. The mastiffs padded behind me, nails scratching faintly against the steps. They shook themselves, tails thudding against the rails, before lying down with the ease of soldiers who knew their post.

I crouched by the chimney, the vantage point that gave me both the courtyard and the treeline. The first thing I always did was check my tools. Bow, strung and ready. Quiver, arrows counted. Knife, oiled and slid back into its sheath at my hip. My hands moved automatically, the same way they had for years, habit, ritual, survival. The motions calmed me as much as they prepared me.

A soft whistle escaped my lips, low and sharp. The mastiffs rose, circling once around the edge of the deck, their paws sure and steady. At another whistle, they sat, chests broad, ears pricked, watching where I watched. I nodded to myself. They would learn more soon, to patrol the perimeter below, to bark a signal when needed, but tonight was only for rhythm. Tonight was for reminding them, and myself, what it means to keep watch.

Peace was never my natural state.

Even here, where the school walls enclosed the laughter of children and the hum of work-song in the gardens, I carried an old instinct like a wound that never fully healed. The instinct to catalog every sound, every movement, every shadow that didn't belong. The instinct to prepare for betrayal, or for sudden violence.

I'd lived too many years where the dark did not protect but concealed. Nights where silence was the herald of attack, not rest. The fragile peace of Bitter Sweet was a kind of ache for me, something too soft to last. My eyes searched the treeline because my body had never learned how to stop searching.

And yet...

Something inside me had begun to shift since coming here. Not softened, not entirely, but widened, like a scar stretching into new skin.

Below, the courtyard flickered with movement. I leaned forward, elbows braced on my knees, watching as children gathered for their evening blessings by the herb beds. Willow stood among them, her voice carrying, low and melodic even from this distance. She was showing them how to bless their hands before tending plants. I couldn't make out every word, but I didn't need to. The rhythm of her voice itself was enough.

The children repeated after her, small voices spilling upward like echoes in the dusk. She touched their palms with sprigs of rosemary, her laughter rippling when one of the younger ones squeezed their eyes shut too tightly. Lyla moved beside her, carrying baskets, her sleeves rolled up and her face flushed with the last heat of the ovens. Willow's hand brushed Lyla's shoulder in thanks, a simple gesture but filled with warmth.

My chest tightened at the sight.

There was something about Willow's presence that unsettled me more than silence in the treeline. She belonged here in a way I couldn't name, rooted, steady, her strength quiet but unshakable. People bent toward her the way plants bend toward light.

And I... watched from above.

I told myself it was safer this way. That my post was on the roof, apart, eyes turned outward while she tended what lay within. That was my place, guard, not gatherer. Shield, not hearth.

But as I sat in the chill air, the smell of rosemary and baking bread drifting faintly upward, I couldn't ignore the ache that stirred beneath the armor of vigilance.

Loneliness had a shape, and I knew it well. It pressed into me even now, sharp as the edge of a blade.

The mastiffs settled near my boots, warm bodies against the cooling tiles. One lifted its head, pressing against my hand until I scratched the thick fur behind its ears. They didn't ask for anything but presence, didn't require words. I envied them that.

I glanced down again, just as Willow tilted her head back in laughter. The lamplight caught the streak of silver in her braid, the curve of her smile, and for one fragile second, my guard slipped.

Not because the perimeter was secure.
Not because danger had passed.

But because, for the first time in years, I wanted to be more than the watchman.

The bells of the parish rang faintly in the distance, signaling the night's close. The children dispersed, baskets of herbs carried indoors. Lyla disappeared into the kitchens, arms laden. Willow lingered in the courtyard, collecting the last sprigs of rosemary left on the ground. She bent, lifted them carefully, and pressed them to her chest as though they, too, needed blessing.

The mastiffs stirred, one paw edging forward as if to follow her. They lay down again at my whistle, but I could see it in them, they'd chosen her already.

I leaned back against the chimney, pulling the bow across my lap. The stars began to pierce the dark, cold and distant, and my watch settled into its long hours.

Below, a single lamp still glowed in Willow's window.

Above, I whispered into the night, a vow that was more prayer than command:

Let me keep them safe.

Ledger Fragment (imagined, unspoken in Hawke's heart)

Safety is not only in the blade, but in the gaze that does not look away.

The Mastiffs' Lesson

Night settled into its true color, a deepened blue that held its breath between stars. The lamps in the windows were fewer now. A last pan clinked in the kitchen, a door latched, the courtyard yawned, and then the school exhaled into quiet. That was my hour. We had done these lessons hundreds of times. These boys were experts now, and could carry on with or without me if the need ever came.

I clicked my tongue once and gave a low whistle that carried along the tiles. Two heads lifted. Two pairs of eyes, ember-bright, fixed on me.

“Come,” I murmured.

They came the way water moves where it's meant to go, sure, unafraid. Bran planted himself at my knee, weight like a small boulder, a steady heat bleeding through his coat. He was slow to start, deliberate in each choice, a thinker in a dog's body. Ash couldn't keep still; he quivered with attention, already reading the angles, already mapping what I hadn't named. Restless, sharp, lightning in muscle and bone.

I laid a palm on each skull. “Good.” My voice barely above the wind. “We work.”

Training is simply conversation, if you know how to listen. I do not shout. I do not repeat myself to fill the dark. I make a shape with sound and trust them to understand it.

I put two fingers to my lips and gave one short note.

Ash stood immediately; the steady one followed a heartbeat later. I pointed to the far corner where the stone wall meets the garden fence, the first anchor. “Perimeter,” I said. Then I drew a circle in the air with my hand, large enough to include all of us, the courtyard, the sleeping rooms, the roofs where a stray ember could catch, the gate where hope and danger both arrive.

“Circle,” I told them.

They moved. Not a sprint, an assessment. I watched their shoulders roll, watched the way their noses skimmed low along the wall, the way their paws learned the wobble in the third flagstone near the water cistern, the puff of dust beneath the old fig where the ground dips. Ash pulled at the curve, eager to finish the loop before the command finished leaving my mouth; Bran touched every edge, north wall, rain barrel, tool shed, gate, like he meant to memorize it under his pads.

When they vanished around the far corner, I stepped down the stairs and dropped to the ground with a soft bend in my knees. I prefer to see lessons from their eyes at least once every time, feel the ground they feel, smell what they smell. The courtyard soil held the day's heat; the tang of rosemary was stronger here. A cold thread of air stitched under the gate, river scent, damp wood, a fox's narrow musk.

I waited where Willow's window threw a square of honeyed light on the path, and I listened. Footfalls. Two distinct cadences. Ash's steps were light and quick: chatter in rhythm. Bran's were even, quiet, like an old drum.

They rounded back to me, noses lifting for confirmation, eyes asking the question a trained animal always asks at the end of a task: *Again? Or different?*

"Good," I said, and let my fingers find the soft place behind each jaw. I keep dried meat in a pocket; I do not purchase obedience with it, but I mark the exact breath when understanding lands. Two small pieces, two quick chews, two tails thumping once against my thigh.

"One note," I said softly, tapping my chest. "Return to me."

I gave it, one short whistle, and stepped back into the shadow of the chimney as I climbed. They watched me climb as if the steps grew out of me, then flicked their ears toward the courtyard, turned as one, and trotted to the base of the roof. Ash bounced, he wanted to be up, to see as I see. Bran sat, placed a paw on the first rung as if to say *this is a human thing*, and looked up expectant. I crouched and offered my hand down into the dark until my knuckles met warm muzzle.

"Good," I said again, because it was.

We repeated the circle from above: I remained on the roofline and sent them by sound. One note to send, one flat palm to slow, a circling hand to widen the arc around the orchard. I changed it each pass, the first time hugging the wall, the second time swinging wide to include the rain barrels and wagon shed, the third time skirting the back of the kitchens where scraps bring feral cats. I threw a pebble into the hedgerow to test reflex; Ash stopped on a blade of air, body pointed, tail a line, and gave a single bark without moving his paws. Bran braced beside him, chest forward, and scanned without sound.

"One bark," I called down, "alert." I let the pebble test pass as a simple lesson and clicked my tongue twice. "Clear."

They relaxed, just a breath, but it was enough. I lowered myself to sit and watched the path unfurl under a moon thin as a reed. I changed the problem.

On the next pass I eased the gate a finger-width open so it would lift and settle, whispering the smallest complaint in the hinge. Not a thing a human would hear from inside a dream. Ash struck the gate first and threw two barks, hard, clipped, decisive. Bran swung to face the sound and added one bark, then shifted to stand between the gap and the sleeping house.

"Two," I said. "Danger." I let the word carry weight. I stood; the dogs' bodies tightened as if the syllable itself were a pull on a lead. "Hold," I told them, palm out, and left the

gate as it was. I want them to learn that not all danger requires teeth; sometimes the right lesson is to keep the space and wait for the hand that knows.

I closed the gate fully and ran my palm over the iron, feeling the chill, the oil I'd worked in that afternoon. The hinges will need grease before the freeze returns. The slat near the bottom will need replacing; a clever child's hand could slip through. I notice these things. I write them in the ledger in my head and do not sleep until I've accounted for each line.

We moved again. I took them down off the path into the orchard rows where fallen fruit skins sour the ground. There is a place at the far edge where the fence is lower, a dip in the earth where spring floods pushed stones aside. I can step over there without swinging my legs. Which means someone else can step in.

I slowed them with a low hum and pointed to the weak point. "Remember," I said, touching the top rail. I tapped my sternum and then laid the same hand on the rail again. "Home." I want that word braided to the wood grain and the soil seam that keeps the border. Ash sniffed, threw his head to check the night, then dropped his shoulder and pressed into my leg as if to say *I understand you mean this place and these people*. Bran put both forepaws up on the rail and leaned his weight against it until it creaked. He looked at me, and I heard the message he could not speak: *I will be the weight here if the wood fails*.

I scratched Bran's chest. "Good weight," I said.

I took a strip of cloth from my pocket, unfamiliar scent rubbed into it earlier with pine pitch and ash, a test for their noses. I tied it on the low fence and walked them twenty paces away, turned them with my shoulder, and dropped my hand. "Find."

Ash found it in three breaths and all but faced the moon with pride. He pawed the fence, gave a single alert, one bark, and waited for my eye. Bran ignored it and quartered the ground, nosing the seam where orchard turns to field, the spot that will go soft when the rains are hard.

Two dogs. Two minds. One perimeter.

I palmed the cloth and stowed it away, then took them the long route past the wagons. The wheels catch splinters of light even in darkness. I imagined, because I must, how quickly we could load them, grain, blankets, poultices, the knives wrapped in oil cloth, the water jugs that live under the lowest bench. I counted the steps from wagon shed to gate, from gate to road. I do not plan to run. I plan in case we have to move with speed and not lose ourselves doing it.

We returned to the courtyard. I set them at the base of Willow's stairs and stepped back. They both sat, flanks to wood, faces to the open space. Ash's ears pricked toward the far roofs and the night birds skimming them. Bran pressed his spine to the step and

put his body where a shadow falls if it's trying to hide. Even beasts know where safety lives. I let them breathe that doorway, let them choose it not just because I told them but because they understood all the blood beats inside those walls.

When we left the stairs, I gave them a new pattern. I want the school held in rings. The first ring is the wall and the fence; the second is the inner yard; the third is the scent line we lay with our bodies whether we mean to or not. I walked them the third ring, hand along the stone, shoulder along the wood, palm against the cold cistern, fingers in the dirt by the gate hinge, the back of my knuckles skimmed across the tool shed door. I do this so the air knows us, so when night presses, it smells like *we live here*, and any other smell reads like a wrong note.

When the pattern had settled into their bodies, I brought them to the center of the yard and faced them. The moon rode higher, a polished sliver. Their breath steamed faintly. They looked at me with the same brazen trust I cannot easily bear.

"One bark," I said, holding up a single finger. "Alert. You do not move your feet. You tell me what you know."

I lowered the finger and pointed to the hedge. They each gave one bark, Ash tight and clean, Bran a bass that vibrated in the boards under us. I nodded, walked them to the fence.

"Two," I said, showing them two fingers. "Danger. You stand between the thing and the door."

I pointed to the weak rail in the orchard fence again; they set their shoulders square, chests forward, two barks together, the sound not loud but decisive. No panic. No frenzy. Information that acts.

"Return," I said. I tapped my chest and whistled once.

They came. That is the relief the body knows when a missing footstep comes back where it should. It's the sound of wariness releasing a small hinge.

I sat with them there in the seam between tiles and sky and let my hands rest against their ribs. Hearts steady. Heat soaking the chill out of my fingers. Ash's ribs moved quick, he is a thing of speed, a cut of muscle drawn taut. Bran breathed slow; even his rest is a kind of ballast.

"They guard without question," I heard myself say into the fur. The night took the words and tucked them behind the chimney, where I keep what I'm not ready to admit in daylight. "I envy them that." I turned my face to the dark, to the windows where lamplight had long gone out. "I've always guarded," I said, softer still, "but never known who I truly serve."

The truth startled me. Not the words, I have been honest with myself in worse places, but the way the saying of them loosened something I did not notice I had cinched tight. The dogs didn't lift their heads, didn't treat confession as a thing that requires response. They simply were. Warm. Present. Absolutely certain of their task, which is to stay and look outward and come when called.

I stood and they stood with me. I sent them once more, a last circle to lay the night down properly. This pass I walked the roof line while they trotted below, and I spoke every hinge and seam by heart: north wall, tight; east fence, low and liable to be a liar in flood; south gate, hinges oiled this afternoon, good; west orchard, dip in earth needs shoring. The dogs wrote my litany into their muscles the way a craftsman learns grain, by touch, by repetition, by breath.

At the gate I paused and set them to sit again. I opened it two finger-widths and waited. The wind made a small throat in the gap. A night moth tangled itself in an unseen cobweb and buzzed once in complaint. Ash flicked his ears but didn't waste a bark; he knows the difference between noise and signal. Bran placed his body so the gap could not be used, should something attempt to shoulder through.

"Good," I said. I shut the gate and slid the small bar into place. It will not stop a determined shoulder. That is what the dogs are for. That is what I am for, until we reinforce the bar with iron, until we drive a second post, until we fit the lock I have already drawn in my head.

A thin cloud dragged its belly across the moon. The school gave a small creak as night air cooled the roof beams. Far off, an owl traded questions with another owl. I listened, counted the beats between the calls, marked that it was the same pair I've heard all week.

I gave one short whistle and watched the dogs' ears flick toward me, then settle back on the deck. I gave two, and their heads rose, bodies gathering themselves. Not a twitch, not a bark, just readiness.

"Stand down," I said. "We hold the night by knowing it."

They dropped their chins to their paws, heavy heads against my boot leather, as if to anchor me to the roof.

From here I could just see the edge of Willow's windowsill. No light now. Only the dark that wraps a room when the last breath before sleep has smoothed the sheets. I felt the shape of the school around me, its edges, its hollows, the way a hand learns a tool until the tool becomes an extension of that hand. Tomorrow I will continue with their larger lessons, routes at dawn and dusk, escorting the wagons to the gate, learning the smell of friend and the smell that means *not-yet-known*. Tomorrow I will mark the orchard dip with stones, grease the south hinge again, reinforce the step by Willow's door so a child's heel won't catch.

Tonight was for first things. For circles. For teaching sound to mean action and action to return to stillness. Even though they knew these things, routine was vital for the training.

Ash thumped his tail once, a soft drum on rails, as if to say he approved of the order of things. Bran sighed a sigh that was too human, tired and content and unafraid.

I leaned back against the wall, and the stone's cool pressed through my shirt like a reminder to stay awake. I do not sleep on watch. I let my eyes move, and my mind do the work it was carved for: plan, test, adjust, plan again. I let the dogs do what they were bred for: hold, listen, commit the borders to body. Between us, the night became a thing with a measured breath.

And in that measured breath, something in me measured itself differently, too, not a blade held in a closed hand, but an open palm fixing a gate, drawing a circle, teaching a dog to speak the difference between *notice* and *danger*.

One bark. Two.

One note. Two.

Return.

The Silence Between Sounds

The night is never still.
Not truly.

It shifts and mutters, a low language you only learn after years of listening. I've lived long enough with my ear pressed to it that the smallest note out of place can jolt me awake from the bone outward.

Tonight was no different.

I sat cross-legged near the chimney, the mastiffs lying heavy on either side, their chests moving in unison like bellows. I closed my eyes, letting the rooftop fade away, and I opened the other sense that has kept me alive: the ear for patterns.

Owls. One to the north, its call sharp and steady, returned by another from deeper in the trees. Good. Owls are anchors. Their rhythm tells me the night is in its proper order.

Wind in the branches. The maples whisper differently than the pines, and I can tell them apart without opening my eyes. Tonight, the maples chattered against one another, restless in the cool air, while the pines held their steady hiss, low and even. Nothing strange there.

Wood beams shifting beneath me. The school has its own vocabulary: the groan when the roof cools, the sigh in the timbers when the hearths below die down. A home alive with its own breath.

I catalogued each sound, placing it where it belonged, filing it in the ledger of my mind. Owls. Trees. Beams. Wind.

And then...
Silence where there should have been sound.

The night fox that circles near the garden usually announces itself by scraping through leaves, by snapping a twig under its small weight. Tonight, nothing. The absence pressed sharp into me, more piercing than any noise could have been.

My eyes opened, slow but certain. The mastiffs lifted their heads before I moved, nostrils flaring, ears pricking forward. They knew, too.

I laid a hand flat against the rails to steady myself, and with the other reached for the bow. The wood was familiar beneath my palm, smooth where countless hours had worn it, string tight and ready. I notched an arrow but did not draw. Not yet.

The dogs stirred at my low whistle, their bodies tense but waiting. I sent the lean one to pace the deck's edge, his paws soft as shadows. The larger dog sat steady at my thigh, his growl rumbling low, vibrating through the tiles into my bones.

There, at the farthest edge of sight, just beyond the orchard. A shape moved. Low, careful, slinking through the grass where the moonlight broke into patches. Too small for a man, too silent for deer.

I raised the bow. Breath held. Every nerve ready.

The figure paused, lifted its head. Eyes glinted briefly like coins caught in the light. A fox. Just a fox.

My arrow lowered. I exhaled, the sound escaping like steam from a kettle.

But the body doesn't care if the threat is false or real. Once alarmed, it carries the heat of battle anyway. My pulse thudded hard in my ears. My shoulders ached with readiness, jaw clenched tight. Even after the fox trotted on, vanishing between hedgerow and shadow, I remained braced for something worse.

The mastiffs circled back, one pawing at the tiles, the other pressing against me until I laid a hand across his back. "Clear," I muttered, my voice gravel low. They settled reluctantly, but their eyes stayed open, watching the dark.

Mine did, too.

I stared at the orchard until the fox's shape was long gone, until the owl resumed its call, until the night rearranged itself into the order I had known before. And still, I did not unclench.

This is what I've become: a man waiting for war even when peace lies heavy all around him.

I tried once, long ago, to live without that edge. To set down the bow, to forget the knife at my hip, to let laughter fill a room without scanning the corners for shadow. It lasted all of three days before the world reminded me: safety is an illusion, and illusions will kill you quicker than a blade.

Even here, in Bitter Sweet, with walls around us, with hands working gardens and children weaving songs, I cannot forget it. My body won't let me.

I envy the mastiffs for their certainty. Their purpose is simple: guard, warn, protect. They never wonder if they are too sharp, too distant, too broken by vigilance. They do not feel the gnaw of loneliness for holding themselves always at the edge of the firelight.

I do.

I leaned back against the wall, bow across my knees, and let my gaze fall into the courtyard below.

The windows glowed faintly with the last light of lamps. A murmur of voices drifted upward, a lullaby sung soft, a pair of women laughing as they folded laundry, the clatter of a spoon against a pot being set aside.

Life happened down there.
The kind of life I had spent years believing no longer existed.

And in the middle of it, her.

Willow.

I had caught her laughter earlier, as she was sharing moments with Resha and Lyla, and it had pierced me sharper than any blade. Now, though the courtyard was quiet, I still felt the echo of it, caught in my ribs. She belonged in the glow of windows, in the circle of voices, in the center of life.

I did not. I stayed in the shadows, up here on the roof, where the world looked like lines of defense and fields of approach.

Part of me told myself it was right this way. She leads, I guard. She blesses, I keep watch. That is the bargain that keeps the school safe.

But some nights, nights like this one, when silence pressed close and adrenaline left me raw, I wanted more.

I wanted to know what it would be to sit at the long table, to share bread and herbs and laughter that was not tinged with wariness. To have a place where my name was not only called when danger loomed.

I wanted to sit near Willow, to hear her speak without watching the door over her shoulder. To let my eyes rest on her face instead of the treeline.

But that is not my place.

So, I catalogued the sounds again, forcing myself back into the habit that keeps me alive. Owl. Wind. Creak of beams. The faint hum of life below. My breath. The mastiffs' breath.

Order restored.
The ledger of night balanced once more.

And yet inside, where no ledger could touch, the imbalance remained.

I whispered into the dark, words I would never say aloud by daylight.

“Even in peace, I am waiting for war.”

The mastiffs shifted closer, as though they had heard. Perhaps they had.

The fox was gone. This night was whole again. But my chest still carried the weight of the bowstring, drawn though never loosed.

And my heart, though I kept it hidden beneath watchman’s armor, still bent toward the sound of Willow’s laughter, echoing in me long after the world had gone quiet.

Ledger Fragment (imagined, Hawke’s inner truth)

A sentinel’s silence holds more than danger. It holds the ache of the life he cannot touch.

Glimpse of Willow

Another night had quieted again; every sound folded back into its place. The owls traded their questions across the treeline. The mastiffs lay on either side of me, breathing steady as if to remind me that not all silence is threat.

And then a light flickered below.

It spilled from a single door, swinging open into the courtyard. Willow stepped through, a lantern balanced in one hand, the other holding a bundle of herbs pressed close to her chest.

I froze, though she could not see me. From this rooftop deck, with the chimney at my back and the dark wrapped close, I was invisible. Only the dogs knew I watched. Their ears flicked, but they did not rise. They seemed to know this moment belonged to quiet.

Willow moved unhurried, her steps soft against the stone path. She bent to lay the herbs on the bench near the well, her lantern casting a circle of gold around her. Rosemary, sage, lavender, I knew the shapes by silhouette, even at this distance. She began to sort them into bundles, fingers deft, shoulders relaxed.

Strength in stillness. That was her gift.

Others carried their power like weight: through command, through noise, through fear. Willow carried hers like water carries reflection, effortless, quiet, unforced. And yet, people bent toward her all the same.

I'd seen it since the first day I came to Bitter Sweet. Children trailing her hem like shadows. Apprentices lifting their heads when she spoke, as if the words themselves rooted them. Even the elders, whose pride I thought unbending, softened when she asked their counsel.

I sat above it all, apart, telling myself it was safer that way. I guard. She leads. That was enough.

But tonight, watching her lantern glow against the courtyard wall, I felt the sharp ache of knowing it was not enough.

She hummed softly as she worked, a tune I didn't recognize. The mastiffs' ears pricked, and even I leaned closer, straining to catch it. A song not meant to carry far, only for the herbs in her hands, for the soil that would receive them come morning.

The smaller bundle slipped from her grasp, scattering across the stone. She knelt to gather it, her braid slipping forward across her shoulder, silver threads catching the lamplight. She laughed softly at herself, a sound so unguarded, so alive, that my chest tightened as if struck.

I gripped the bow across my knees, not because I needed it, but because my hands needed something to hold. Something to keep me tethered while the longing in me rose like tidewater.

She was not for me. I told myself this truth as often as I told myself the perimeter was safe, the wagons ready, the knives sharp. She was leader, healer, mother to all who needed her. And me? I was the shadow that kept the wolves away. Shadows do not belong to the light.

Yet my heart, stubborn traitor, bent toward her anyway.

When she finished her sorting, she lifted the lantern and crossed toward the well. She drew up a bucket, the rope creaking, the water's splash breaking the night. She filled a pitcher and carried it carefully back toward the door. The mastiffs rose at once, slipping from my side to leap down from the low edge of the steps. They trotted across the courtyard and lay down at her feet, as though commanded.

Willow startled, then smiled at them, bending to stroke their heads. "So, it's you again," she murmured, her voice carrying just enough for me to hear. "What sentries you are."

They thumped their tails against the stone, bodies stretched long across her doorway. She stepped over them gently, the way one steps over roots in a path, and disappeared inside. The door closed, lantern light snuffed, but the dogs did not move.

They stayed at her door, keeping their watch there instead of beside me.

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, the bow slack in my hand. Even beasts know where safety lives.

And they had chosen her.

A strange peace settled in me as I watched them, though loneliness pressed close too. The dogs were loyal, yes, but not mine to claim. Their loyalty was to the heartbeat of this place, and Willow was its steady pulse.

Part of me wanted to call them back, to whistle the command I had taught, to remind them that I was the one who set their patterns. But I kept silent. It was not disobedience that held them there. It was understanding. They knew as well as I did who the true center was.

I leaned my head back against the chimney and closed my eyes, letting the night move through me. For a moment I allowed myself the dangerous thought: what if I belonged not just as guard but as one among them? What if my watch was not only for the walls, but for the people inside them, for her?

The thought warmed me and cut me in equal measure.

The school creaked again, beams settling into the weight of sleep. Somewhere far in the woods, a branch snapped under the fox's return. The owls called once more, reassurance that the night held.

Below, two mastiffs breathed steady at Willow's door, sentinels not by training but by choice.

And above, I kept my vigil, bow across my knees, loneliness heavy in my chest, admiration sharper still.

I whispered into the dark, the truth I could not silence:

"She is not for me. Yet still, my heart bends."

The words vanished into the night, but I knew the stars heard them, and the dogs below, and perhaps even the earth itself.

I pressed a hand flat against the tiles, grounding myself as I always did. Guard. Watch. Protect.

And in the silence that followed, I accepted both the distance and the pull, knowing that both would shape me as much as any danger at the gate.

Ledger Fragment (unwritten, in Hawke's heart)

Even beasts know where safety lives. The wise do not fight it, but guard the flame from the dark.

The Midnight Circle

The courtyard stilled again after Willow's lantern winked out, as it did each evening. No sound but the dogs shifting below her door, sighing into the stone, content with their chosen post. The stars wheeled higher, silver scattered across the sky. Time for the long hours. Time for the circles that make a night whole. Time for training and vigilance.

I whistled, low and sharp, one note. The mastiffs lifted their heads in unison. They didn't come right away. They looked at her door, then at me, as if asking *are you sure?*

"I'm sure," I said under my breath. "Work isn't done yet."

Reluctantly, they rose and padded back into the yard, heavy shoulders rolling. Their eyes caught starlight, small amber flames in the dark. I took two steps at a time to meet them on the ground. For this, I wanted my boots in the soil, my steps on the stones, the same way theirs would be.

"Circle," I murmured. I lifted my hand, drew it wide, tracing the outermost ring of Bitter Sweet in the air.

They moved at once, one bounding ahead with eager precision, the other pressing each corner of the yard with slow weight. I followed.

The first ring: the wall.

We walked its length, my hand skimming the stone as though reminding it of its duty. The mortar here was strong, but I marked in memory a crack along the south side that would need Tekren's tools before frost widened it. The mastiffs sniffed each seam, noses brushing the stone, tails stiff. At the gate they paused together, their bodies squaring in perfect mirror. I tapped the latch. "Here," I said. "This is the hinge of all things."

Ash barked once, clipped, alert. Bran pressed against the gate with his chest, as if testing its strength. I nodded. They knew.

The second ring: the sheds and wagons.

We crossed the yard to the wagon shed, moonlight silvering the wheels. I counted each wagon by touch. One, two, three. The tarps were tied down, but the knots would need checking come morning. I opened one wagon quietly, ran my hand along the inside. I pictured the load: sacks of grain at the bottom, herbs packed in baskets between, blankets folded near the top. Water jugs under the bench, knives wrapped in oilcloth against rust. I imagined how quickly we could fill them, how fast we could be gone if the day ever came.

The mastiffs circled the wagons, sniffing the wood, one pawing at a spot where mice had gnawed. "Good," I said. "Mark it. Nothing enters without us knowing."

Preparedness is not panic. It is foresight written into wood, leather, fur, and flesh.

The third ring: the orchard and gardens.

The air smelled sweeter here, soil still damp from yesterday's watering, leaves whispering in the night breeze. The dogs moved with more care, as though they, too, understood this place fed us. They nosed the rows, stepped careful between stems. I stopped at the orchard's weak fence post, running my hand along the dip in the earth. I'd reinforce it tomorrow. Stones first, then a rail, maybe a second post. I'd ask Pike to lend muscle if he wasn't tied up with the goats.

Ash found a fallen apple, nosed it, gave a soft whine. Bran pushed him aside and ate it in a single gulp. I huffed a quiet laugh. "Balance," I said. "One sharp, one slow. Both keep us alive."

The fourth ring: the heart.

We circled back through the courtyard, past the well, past the herb beds. My hand brushed the rosemary, the lavender, the sage. Their scent rose strong, sharper in the cool night. I thought of Willow sorting them earlier, humming her half-song. The mastiffs trotted ahead, and without command, they returned to her steps. They lay across her door again, flanks pressed to wood, eyes watching the yard.

I let them stay. I understood.

I walked alone then, one more ring traced by my boots. Roof to wall, gate to orchard, orchard to wagons, wagons back to the courtyard. My shadow stretched long in the moonlight, a sentinel with no company but the dogs and the stars.

Hypervigilance, they'd call it, if there were doctors of the mind left to name it. I call it what kept me alive. I do not know how to turn it off, and I suspect I never will. Even here, with laughter behind windows and bread cooling on shelves, I plan for siege, for famine, for fire.

I see the school not only as it is but as it could be torn. And so, I imagine drills: a signal to gather, wagons loaded in minutes, children accounted for, herbs secured, gates barred, scouts posted. I imagine the worst so that if it comes, I will not falter.

But tonight, in the quiet, I let another vision rise too. A softer one.

I imagine belonging.

Not only guarding but being among. Sitting at the long table, shoulder to shoulder, sharing bread not because I've kept the wolves away, but because there's bread enough for all. I imagine laughter without scanning the corners, sleep without a bow across my knees. I imagine Willow looking at me not as shadow, but as man.

The vision stings, even as it warms. I shake it off, not because I don't want it, but because I can't afford it. A guard who dreams too long is a danger himself.

Still, the ember of it smolders in my chest.

The mastiffs shifted as I headed back onto the roof. They stretched, then returned to flank me. One leaned into my hip, the other sprawled long, chin on paws, as if claiming the roof as much as I did. Together, we looked out over Bitter Sweet.

The school lay quiet beneath us, windows dark, walls breathing. Beyond, the forest stood like a black wall, watchful. Above, the stars burned ancient and unbothered.

I touched the bow across my knees, fingers resting on the curve of the wood. My voice was no more than a whisper, carried off by the wind, but I said it anyway:

"Let me keep them safe."

It was not a vow to a god, nor a soldier's oath, nor even a promise I knew I could always keep. It was the truth of my being, the only prayer I had.

The mastiffs sighed in answer. The night breathed back.

And the circle was complete.

Ledger Fragment (Hawke's vow, unwritten)

Guarding is not enough. To keep safe is to dream of a future that deserves safety.

Epilogue: From the Rooftop Again

I still climb the roof often. It has become one of my sacred spaces.

Not because I must anymore. Bitter Sweet has grown, fences reinforced, wagons better stocked, gardens heavy with food, children older and louder, a whole circle of guardians who share the night watch. I could lay down the bow if I wanted.

But the rooftop is where I first learned what it meant to guard not only from danger, but for the sake of love. It is where I kept my silence, where I carried my loneliness, where I looked down at a woman blessing children with rosemary and told myself she was not for me.

And now, she is beside me.

Willow sits at my shoulder this night, our legs stretched out along the tiles, her braid silver in the moonlight. The mastiffs are older now, slower to rise, but they still circle once before lying down at her feet. They never stopped choosing her. Neither did I.

The school breathes below us, fuller than it was. More hands, more laughter, more life. What once felt fragile has become enduring. There is still danger, yes. The world beyond our walls has not softened. But inside, something has rooted too deep to be torn.

I think back to those long nights when every sound was a warning and every silence a blade against my neck. I remember the fox at the orchard, the crack in the south wall, the feel of the mastiffs pressed against my boots as though I was their anchor. I remember whispering into the dark, *Let me keep them safe*, and wondering if that vow would break me.

It did not break me. It remade me.

I no longer wait for war even in peace. Peace itself has become the war I fight for, the ground I defend with both hands. And I am not alone in that fight.

Willow leans her head against my shoulder, her warmth steady as the earth itself. "Still counting the owls?" she teases softly, hearing what only she would know.

"Always," I answer. "But I don't keep count alone anymore."

She laughs, that same laugh that once pierced me from a distance, now pressed into my chest where I can hold it. And I know the truth of what I never dared imagine on those nights when loneliness was my only company: belonging is its own kind of watch.

The stars wheel overhead, the same as they did then. The mastiffs sigh into sleep, their weight steady against the roof. Below us, life stirs, full and unafraid.

And above it all, I whisper the vow once more, not as a shadow, not as a sentinel apart, but as a man who has been given a home:

Let me keep them safe. Let me keep her safe. Let me keep this love safe.

And for the first time in my life, I believe safety is possible.

Ledger Fragment (final)

Even the watchman finds rest when love becomes the circle he keeps.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for walking these pages with me. Every book I write is not just words on a page, but a kind of ledger; a place where story, memory, and healing meet. By reading, you've become part of that ledger, carrying its threads into your own life in ways only you can.

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From my heart to yours, thank you for reading.
With gratitude always,

Davilyn Atwood

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