THE INTERROGATION OF

ASHALA

WOLF
DAY ONE

THE HALLWAY

He was taking me to the machine.

I’d known they were going to start the interrogation today as soon as a smiling Dr. Wentworth had pronounced me “much better.” She’d sounded pleased. Proud of her work, I guessed. I suppose she had a right to be, because I’d been in bad shape when I arrived—barely conscious, and bleeding from the hole in my stomach where the blade had gone in. I’d caused that wound myself, by flinging my body onto one of their short, sharp swords when I realized I was caught. My desperate escape attempt had almost succeeded, too. I’d come close to death. *Just not quite close enough.*
I still couldn’t believe that Wentworth, of all people, could work in a detention center. Because, like me, the doctor had an ability. She was a Mender, and a powerful one, at that. Otherwise, she’d never have been able to make my gaping flesh knit back together so impossibly fast, leaving me with barely a scar. Only, unlike me, Wentworth had a tattoo on the inside of her wrist: the regular Gull City Citizenship mark of a seagull in a circle, but with a line through the middle. That tattoo meant Wentworth’s ability was considered harmless enough for her to be given an Exemption from the Citizenship Accords. Wentworth still wasn’t quite a Citizen, but she wasn’t technically an Illegal anymore, either. She was an Exempt, and that meant she could use her ability without fear of being hauled off by enforcers. Perhaps she even believed, as most Citizens did, that locking Illegals like me away was a good thing, or at least a necessary thing. But surely she had to realize that Detention Center 3 wasn’t the same as the other centers, not if the whispers about Neville Rose and Miriam Grey were true. And I knew better than to hope that they weren’t. There was no way I was going to be that lucky.

I turned my attention to my surroundings, tuning
in to the feel of the dry air on my skin and the sound of two very different sets of footsteps along the corridor. My feet seemed to be making a muddled, shuffling sort of noise: a pathetic contrast to the clear, measured pace of the guard beside me. I wished, not for the first time, that I had access to my ability, but my Sleepwalking power was blocked. I reached up and slid my hand along the stone band that circled my throat, my fingers lingering over the metal pad at the front, which was set with nine tiny numbered buttons. I had no idea what the combination to the lock was, and as long as the rhondarite was touching my skin, I wouldn’t be able to Sleepwalk. And even if I did manage to get rid of the collar, my troublesome ability wouldn’t be much help. It took time and preparation and, oh yes, actually falling *asleep* to be able to Sleepwalk. Plus, using my ability took a lot more energy than I had right now or was likely to have anytime soon. I was only going to get steadily weaker in this place. Especially once I got to wherever I was being taken and the questions began.

We’d been walking through long white hallways for a while, so we had to be getting closer to our destination, except I didn’t know how close. This entire sprawling complex was made out of composite, a super-tough
building material churned out by the recyclers. Every wall, floor, and ceiling was the same: smooth, pale, and embedded with tiny flecks of color that caught the light. I’d always thought composite was kind of pretty, but being surrounded by so much of it made me feel lost. It was difficult to tell exactly where in the detention center I was. Worse still, I wasn’t even sure I knew who I was anymore.

This morning I’d smiled at a fellow prisoner, a dark-haired, brown-skinned girl dressed in white detainee shirt and pants. She’d seemed so frail, so defeated, that I’d wanted to cheer her up. Then I’d realized I was looking in a mirror. It had been a dreadful shock. How could I have changed so much? They’d only caught me yesterday! Surely I wasn’t—surely I couldn’t be—that sad-eyed girl, at least not where it counted, not on the inside. Because she’d seemed terrifyingly vulnerable. As if she were the kind of girl who might tell secrets to the government. The kind who could be broken by the machine.

I stumbled, tripping over my own feet. My guard put out a hand to steady me, and I jerked away. He let his hand fall, and I gazed at him resentfully, thinking that he was every bit the ideal enforcer—dark hair
brushed precisely into place, black uniform perfectly fitted to his lean, muscled body, and a rhondarite sword in a sheath at his hip. Ever since the two of us had left the hospital, I’d been half expecting him to say something, but he’d remained utterly, emotionlessly silent. Justin Connor, coldly perfect, and perfectly cold. Georgie had been more right than she knew when she had compared him to those old-world sculptures that flanked the entrance to the Gull City Museum.

But even as I thought that, unwelcome memories crowded into my mind, of times when Connor had been something very different from the aloof stranger who walked beside me now. I suddenly felt like crying, and with what was no doubt an enforcer’s instinct for weakness, he chose that exact second to glance down at me. If he notices I’m upset, I really will die. Taking a breath, I blurted out the first thing that came into my head, “Georgie thinks you look like an angel.”

One eyebrow soared upward. “A what?”

“An angel,” I repeated. My voice, to my relief, was steady, and I concentrated on pouring as much scorn as I could into it. “A human with wings, like the old-world statues. But you’re not. In fact, there’s barely anything human about you.”
“They’re not real.”
I glared at him. “What’s not real?”
“Angels.”
“Then why,” I demanded, “does Hoffman say they walked the earth during the Reckoning?”
“I didn’t think you’d read Hoffman’s *Histories of the Reckoning*.”
“Every word of the entire fifteen volumes.” Or at least, I’d had bits of the fifteen volumes recited to me by Ember, which was virtually the same thing.
“Well,” Connor said dryly, “those angels were supposed to be messengers of some kind of god. Since a lot of people thought the Reckoning was a holy judgment on humanity, it’s likely they imagined the angels. Because even if there were any gods, they didn’t cause the Reckoning. Everyone knows it was humanity’s abuse of the environment that made the life-sustaining systems of the earth collapse.”
I fell silent, wondering if he was lying about the angels. If they did still exist, the Bureau of Citizenship probably had them locked up somewhere, since the government wouldn’t be any keener on humans with wings than they were on humans with abilities. On the other hand, it had been over three hundred years since
the Reckoning, so maybe the angels had died out long ago. Or maybe they cut off their wings so they could blend in and survive. Connor would do something like that. Connor would do whatever was necessary; I knew that from personal experience. He’d been so clever and convincing, first exploiting a childhood friendship with one of my Tribe members to make contact with us, and then telling endless lies, the biggest of all being that he was an administrator, a simple clerk. I should have demanded more proof that he was what he claimed to be, and I was miserably conscious of the reason why I hadn’t. Right from the start, there’d been an odd connection between Connor and me, an inexplicable bond that I couldn’t deny or explain. In secret, fanciful moments, lying beneath the night sky with the rest of the Tribe snoozing around me, I’d foolishly imagined that Connor and I might be like those binary star constellations Ember had once told me about, two stars orbiting each other. It seemed ridiculous now, and it was ridiculous. Only I’d felt so strongly that I’d known him—that, even though he was a Citizen, the patterns of his thoughts and emotions were akin to my own. But the truth was that he was nothing like me, and I’d never known who he was.
“So,” I sneered, “I suppose you believe in everything the government says about Illegals? That rubbish about putting the Balance in jeopardy?”

“You don’t think we need to preserve the inherent harmony between all life?”

*Now he’s just trying to provoke me.* “You know I believe in the Balance. What I don’t believe is that having an ability makes me or anyone else a threat to it. How exactly is someone like Georgie supposed to be dangerous? All she can do is predict the weather!”

“Which is why,” he replied calmly, “she probably would have received an Exemption, had she not run off to join your Tribe.”

“Yeah, and spent her whole life having to apologize for being born with an ability. She’s better off with us.”

“Will you still say that when she is so busy staring at the sky that she wanders off the edge of a cliff?”

Inwardly, I flinched. I *did* worry about Georgie, who could be a little odd. But there was no way I was going to admit that to Connor. “Georgie’s fine. The Tribe watches over our own. Not that I’d expect you to understand, since it’s obvious the only person you care about is yourself.”
His blue eyes flicked to me. “You might be surprised by the people I care about.”

“Are you going to tell me that you’ve got a family somewhere? Like your Illegal cousin, for example? The one you wanted to bring to the Tribe?”

He shook his head. “As I’m sure you’ve realized, there is no such cousin. It was a ruse.”

“You mean a lie. Like telling me you were an administrator was a lie. Connor the clerk, who hated the way enforcers pushed Illegals around and was so sympathetic to our cause. What was the point of all that pretending, anyway?”

“What do you think, Ashala?”

“I don’t know, Connor!”

Except I did know. He’d been gathering information about the Tribe, trying to find a way to detain us. To detain me. Which, in the end, was exactly what he had done.

The frustrating thing was, I’d known for the past week that he wasn’t what he seemed. Seven days ago, Daniel, who had been spying on the center from the grasslands, had spotted Connor walking out of the gates dressed in enforcer black instead of administrator beige. But before I’d had the chance to do
something about that information, a piece of spectacularly bad luck put me and an enforcer troop in the same place at the same time. It had been sheer, terrible coincidence that they made an unscheduled supply run into the bustling farming town of Cambergull on the exact same morning I was there to attend a clandestine meeting. They hadn’t even been searching for me, and I might have bluffed my way past them, too, if the troop hadn’t included the one enforcer who could identify me on sight.

“I guess you’ll be getting a big promotion out of this,” I said bitterly.

“I expect I will, yes.”

“You’re awfully smug for someone who caught me by accident.”

“And you are not very grateful.”

I was so astonished, it took me a second to be able to speak. “Grateful?”

“I probably saved your life in Cambergull. Or weren’t you conscious enough to remember?”

“No,” I lied. “All I remember is a bunch of enforcers standing around uselessly while I bled to death.” Which was what the rest of them had done. Every one of them had frozen in horror when they’d realized
that their valuable prisoner was badly hurt. Not Connor, though. He’d taken charge, putting pressure on the wound, sending someone running for a doctor, and finally rushing me to Wentworth once it was clear ordinary medicine wasn’t going to be enough. *If he’s waiting to be thanked, he’ll be waiting a very long time.*

It seemed the last and cruelest betrayal, that he would fight so hard to save me for interrogation instead of allowing me to slip quietly into the safety of oblivion.

“If you had any decency in you,” I said tiredly, “you’d have let me die.”

His face was completely devoid of expression. “That would have defeated the purpose of capturing you.”

Because dead people couldn’t be subjected to the machine.

For a perilous instant, I was on the verge of saying, *Don’t you care at all?* I could feel the words rising up, fighting to be spoken, and before they could escape me, I changed them into something else. “You’ve *never* asked the Question?”

“The what?”

“You know, Connor. The Question. The one that Friends of Detainees keep writing in red paint across
the front of Bureau of Citizenship offices.” The posing of a simple ten-word question was one of the strategies of the growing reform movement, a loose alliance of groups and individuals who were pushing to have the Citizenship Accords dismantled altogether. Enunciating every word distinctly, I put the Question to Connor: “‘Does a person with an ability belong to the Balance?’”

He shrugged dismissively. “I have never asked that.”

“You genuinely believe we’re outside the natural order? That you can treat us however you like without causing disharmony, because we’re simply not part of the Balance in the first place?”

He nodded, and I knew I should leave it alone. But it still seemed unreal to me that he could be this person, that there was no trace left of the Connor I’d thought I’d known. “I guess that explains how you sleep at night,” I snarled. “Because I honestly don’t know how you could live with yourself otherwise.”

“I will do what I must in order to preserve my world.”

“I’m just one Illegal trying to live free! You really think that capturing me, putting a collar around my
neck, and interrogating me is necessary to save your world?”

“Yes.”

There was an unmistakable ring of conviction in his voice. He truly thought I was some kind of unnatural thing, and it hurt, more than I’d expected it to. Focusing on the floor, I tried to breathe past the sudden pain around my heart. Then Connor spoke again. “You’re not ‘just one Illegal.’”

“What?”

“You are the Tribe, Ashala.” I frowned, and he continued. “You were the leader, the glue that held them together. Now that you’re gone, it won’t be long before they start squabbling with one another and leave the safety of the Firstwood. We think it shouldn’t be more than six months until they’re detained. The enforcers here are taking bets on it.”

I inhaled sharply, furious, and not only because of what he’d said. The consuming rage I’d felt at discovering his betrayal rose up, and I wanted to make him feel some of the pain he’d caused me. If I had a sword, or a knife, or a big heavy piece of wood . . . But I didn’t. All I had to strike him with were words. “The Tribe is bigger than me. They’ll go on, and grow
stronger with every Illegal who joins them. Until the day they march on your centers, enforcer.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat, Ashala?”

I bared my teeth at him. “There will come a day when a thousand Illegals descend on your detention centers. Boomers will breach the walls. Sky changers will send lightning to strike you all down from above, and Rumblers will open the earth to swallow you up from below. There will be nowhere to hide, nowhere to run, and no way to stop them from freeing every single Illegal in this center. And when that day comes, Justin Connor, think of me.”

He stopped dead and swiveled around. I hoped I’d finally gotten to him, that he was annoyed, infuriated even. Only whatever emotion was illuminating his features wasn’t anger. I wasn’t sure I could even have described it, except to say it was powerful and deeply felt, transforming him from a distant marble angel to a flesh-and-blood human being. He was so impossibly gorgeous that I almost instinctively reached out to touch his face, seeking confirmation that such living perfection could be real. Then, to my astonishment, he pressed his fist to his heart in an enforcer’s salute, a silent gesture of respect.
I staggered backward. *He’s mocking me.* I waited for him to laugh or make some sarcastic comment, but he just stood there, arm across his chest, body slightly bent toward me, blue eyes intent upon mine. *What is this? Some kind of weird enforcer acknowledgment of a worthy opponent or something?* It didn’t feel like that, though. It felt like he was offering me his allegiance, which was nonsensical. He was an enforcer, a Citizen, and I was a detainee, an Illegal. He was the betrayer, and I the betrayed. Except for the space of a few unsettling seconds, something seemed to pass between us that ignored everything we were and formed our relationship anew. Until he resumed his stride down the hallway and the moment was lost.

Troubled, I fell in beside him. *What was that?* I couldn’t afford to be so shaken, not in this place where all I could rely on was myself. I stole a glance at him under my lashes and found that he was once again an unreachable statue. *What did you think, Ashala?* I asked myself jeeringly. *That he was going to tell you it was all part of some elaborate plan and he didn’t betray you?* Somewhere deep inside, a small, defiant part of me answered *yes.* Right on top of that, I heard a familiar voice saying, “Trust your heart, Ash.”
Georgie? Wide-eyed, I scanned the hallway. But she wasn’t here, and I realized that the voice had been in my head. *I’ve been captured, I’ve almost been killed, and now I’m losing my mind?* It was crazy to hear voices in your head, and crazier still to be comforted by what they told you. I choked back a hysterical giggle and stifled the hope that, despite everything, had flared to life within me. *You are tired,* I told myself, *and injured.* My mind was playing tricks, and all my heart would do was betray me. Again.

Connor stopped suddenly, and I stumbled to an awkward halt, realizing, to my dismay, that we were standing in front of a door. It was white, like every other door in this place, but I knew what was behind it. We had reached the machine.
The Administrator

But I found no machine waiting for me. Just a man dressed in administrator robes, sitting behind a large white desk with an empty chair in front of it. Then I noticed another door, on the far side of the room. Behind that door, I had no doubt, was the machine.

Connor waved me toward the administrator then stepped away and took up a position against the wall at my back. As I moved forward, I sensed his watchful gaze upon me, obviously ready to intervene if I took it into my head to make some futile escape attempt. I ignored him, focusing instead on the elderly man behind the desk. He had a nice face—brown eyes that
twinkled out from behind wire-rimmed glasses, a long inquisitive nose, and a mouth that seemed to curve up at the corners, as if he smiled a lot. I felt ever so slightly reassured—until I reached the chair and he said, “Hello, Ashala. My name is Neville Rose. You can call me Neville, if you like.”

I sat down heavily. It’s him. I should have realized. Not that I’d ever met the man before, but I’d heard the stories that had circulated about Neville Rose during the six years he’d run Detention Center 1, tales that he and a doctor named Miriam Grey had secretly experimented on Illegals and developed some kind of interrogation machine. I’d known, too, that he’d been put in charge of this place, the government’s brand-new detention center for Illegal orphans. So it made perfect sense that he’d be waiting here to ask me questions. I just hadn’t expected him to seem so . . . sweet. Grandfatherly. Harmless.

He wasn’t harmless. Not at all.

I swallowed nervously. Neville continued speaking, in that same pleasant tone. “I’m the Chief Administrator here at Detention Center 3, and I would like it if the two of us could be friends. I almost feel like I know you already.” He reached down, opened one
of the drawers of the desk, and pulled out a thin file. There wasn’t a name on it, just a number, but I knew this had to be my file, my very own entry in the detailed records the government kept on all Illegals and runaways.

It hadn’t taken them long to figure out who I was, or, rather, who I’d been before I ran. Then again, I guessed Connor had been feeding them information about me for weeks now. I comforted myself that I knew a little about Neville, too, and he wouldn’t even realize it. I’d never told Connor that some of the Tribe made runs into the towns and Gull City, picking up gossip where they could. It was surprising how much could be learned by hanging around a Friends of Detainees rally.

Neville tapped the cover with one long finger and said cheerfully, “According to this, Ashala Jane Ambrose, you’re sixteen years old and were born in Gull City. Although you call yourself Ashala Wolf now, don’t you? Why Wolf, may I ask?”

He peered at me over the top of his glasses. I stared back, wondering if he truly expected to lure me into handing over information about myself with the friendly grandpa routine.
Finally, he spoke again. “All right, Ashala. If you don’t want to talk about your name, let me ask you something else. How do you think you ended up here?”

*What is that, some kind of trick question?* “I was captured in Cambergull, and this is the closest detention center. Where else would they bring me?”

“That’s not quite what I meant. It’s your choices that brought you here, Ashala. You see that, don’t you?”

“No,” I said flatly. “I don’t.”

“Let me put it this way. You could have entered this place like any other detainee and lived peacefully among others of your kind. Instead, you’ve come here as a lawbreaker, no longer entitled to the same privileges as the others.” He shook his head at me. “You were twelve when you ran away from Gull City. Old enough to know you were required to undergo a Citizenship Assessment after you reached the age of fourteen. And that you should have asked for an assessment earlier if you suspected you had an ability. You did suspect, didn’t you?”

*Oh, yes.* Ever since I was eight, when I’d had an intense, vivid dream that I was flying over the city and I’d woken up on the roof. After a couple more incidents like that, it hadn’t taken a genius to figure out
I had some kind of power that occasionally let me do the things I was dreaming about. “Yeah, I suspected. That’s why I ran away.”

“So you chose to ignore the Citizenship Accords. What’s more, by living in the Firstwood, you were encouraging others to do the same, and it wasn’t even adults you were influencing. It was innocent children.”

I opened my mouth to tell him that the kids I knew could think for themselves better than most adults could, but then decided against it. I didn’t want to confirm there were no adults in the Tribe, although there weren’t. Most Illegals ran away before they were assessed at age fourteen, and anyone who didn’t was either put in detention or given an Exempt tattoo. Or even a Citizenship tattoo, if they were able to fool an assessor. It wasn’t like the whole system was completely foolproof—I knew that some adult Illegals must escape detention or get tired of living as an Exempt, because I’d heard that there were other groups of Illegals hiding out in the countryside that had people of all ages in them. But no adult had ever yet tried to join the Tribe.

I had no reason to share any of that with Neville, though, so I shrugged and said, “I don’t make anyone
do anything. If people choose to run, it’s because they want to live free.”

The Chief Administrator spread his hands outward in a pleading gesture, giving me a good view of the Gull City seagull on the inside of his wrist. “Can’t you see how irresponsible you’re being? Detention is necessary, Ashala.” He quoted softly, “‘There is an inherent Balance between all life, and the only way to preserve it is to live in harmony with ourselves, with one another, and with the earth.’ Do you know who wrote those words?”

“Alexander Hoffman. It’s from Letter to Those Who Survive.”

He was obviously surprised that I’d know that. “Ah . . . yes. Do you know why he wrote the Letter?”

“He was trying to tell anyone who lived through the Reckoning how to make sure it never happened again. But he never said anything about people with abilities being a threat to the Balance. Not in the Letter, not in the Histories, and not anywhere else.”

I could see he hadn’t expected me to know that, either. A lot of people didn’t. Ember said it was a common misconception that it was Hoffman who’d come
up with the idea for the Citizenship Accords, when really it was the government, or, more specifically, the Council of Primes. I considered telling that to Neville in a superior tone of voice, but he started speaking again before I could get a word in.

“Hoffman was writing during the Reckoning. People didn’t begin to manifest abilities until the end of it, and there were very few who had them. He could not have known what a danger you Illegals would become. We know now, though, don’t we? How many cities are there, Ashala?”

I frowned, realizing where he was going with this. “Seven.”

“That’s right. Seven great cities, as sophisticated as anything in the old world, except without the pollution, the overcrowding, and the terrible disparity between rich and poor. But in the beginning, there weren’t seven cities. There were eight.”

It always annoyed me when people tried to use a 258-year-old tragedy to justify the Citizenship Accords. “All that Skychanger was trying to do was make rain. She couldn’t have known what would happen!”

“One young girl threw the world so far out of
Balance that Vale City now lies beneath the waters of Lake Remembrance. Was the Council of Primes wrong to be afraid?”

I’d been taught all about this back in school, and I hadn’t found it a very convincing argument for the detention of Illegals then, either. “The reason there was such torrential rain was because it happened about forty years after the Reckoning ended, when the weather was still a bit wild. But the ecosystem stabilized two hundred thirty years ago. A Skychanger couldn’t cause a flood that big anymore.”

“And are you going to tell me that a Rumbler couldn’t cause an earthquake? Or that a Firestarter couldn’t start an inferno?” He leaned toward me, his brown eyes drilling into mine. “After what happened to your own family, Ashala?” He reached into the file, drew out a photograph, and tossed it across the desk.

I gasped at the sight of the familiar faces, snatching up the image and scanning it greedily. *I can’t believe they found this! I thought all the photos burned.* My gaze skimmed over the freckled, red-haired woman; the tall, brown-skinned man; and a younger version of myself, to focus on the fourth person in the picture—a plump, happy child with brown curls. Cassie. She must
have been about five years old. She hadn’t grown much older.

“Your parents were the ones who called in the assessor,” Neville said gently. “For your sister, though, not for you. They never knew you had an ability, too, did they?”

“No,” I whispered. “They didn’t.” I hadn’t even said good-bye to Cassie when I’d left for school that morning, and I should have known—somehow I should have known that Mom and Dad had guessed she was a Firestarter.

Neville pulled out another photograph—a picture of the scorched earth that was all that had remained of my house—and laid it flat on the desk. “We can never be sure what happened. Clearly, though, your sister’s assessment was badly handled.”

“Badly handled?” I hissed. “Cassie was murdered.”

He sighed. “I think you know that her death must have been an accident. I realize you have some misguided notions about the government, but I can assure you that we do not set out to slay children. Besides, you must know that no one would ever deliberately kill a Firestarter.”

I gazed down at Cassie’s picture, acknowledging
sourly that he did have a point with that last part. A person would have to be insane or suicidal to murder a Firestarter, because when they die, their bodies release an inferno. It was just such a blaze that had killed my parents, the assessor, and his two enforcer guards. But not Cassie. She had to have been dead before then. Firestarters don’t burn, not while they’re alive.

I’d learned over the years that it did me no good to wonder exactly how Cassie had died. It wasn’t like there was any way I could ever find out for certain. Except now I couldn’t seem to prevent my mind from crowding with all the questions I’d tried to shut out. Did she run away from them and fall and hit her head? Did she do something that made one of the enforcers panic and strike out at her? Was she afraid? Was it quick? And the one that really tormented me: Did she call out for her big sister?

Something splashed onto the photograph; to my deep embarrassment, it was a teardrop. I had a sudden, odd awareness of Connor, almost as if he’d moved closer, but a glance backward told me he was standing exactly where he had been before. I rubbed at my eyes angrily, furious with myself for showing weakness. Get a grip, Ashala! Neville pushed a handkerchief
across the desk, and I picked it up, wiping my face. *I'm tougher than this. I am.* Only I didn’t feel tough. I felt vulnerable and raw, as if someone had gone digging around inside me and left all my old wounds exposed.

“I can see,” Neville told me sympathetically, “why you ran, Ashala. You were grief-stricken and confused. But you’re not twelve years old anymore. You can understand now that our entire society is built on the need to preserve the Balance. That’s why we have accords in the first place. The Necessities-of-Life Accords, which require the governments of the seven cities to provide food, clothing, medicine, and shelter for all. The Benign Technology Accords, to ensure that we never develop the harmful technology that had such disastrous consequences for the old world, such as nuclear power and the genetic modification of crops. And the Citizenship Accords, to prevent Illegals from upsetting the Balance.”

I wanted to argue, but I still felt teary. So I settled for scowling at him as he continued. “Our society strives to ensure that human existence never again puts the earth in jeopardy. Don’t you think a world like that is worth protecting?”
“Of course I do!” I answered huskily. “I have no problem with the Benign Technology Accords and the Necessities-of-Life Accords. Or the Advanced Weaponry Accords or the Collective Transportation Accords or any of the others. But the Citizenship Accords are wrong. People with abilities are not a threat to the Balance.”

“I’m afraid you are. You bring forces into being that are too powerful and unstable to be allowed to exist unchecked. It isn’t your fault, and I don’t blame you for it. I genuinely care about you, Ashala.” Nodding at Cassie’s picture, he added, “I know you miss your sister. Perhaps you’d like to keep that photo?”

I was so muddled with grief that for a second I almost said yes without even thinking about why he’d made the offer. Then I realized what he was doing, and I felt cold all over. He wants to trade for the picture. Despite everything I knew about Neville Rose, I’d almost let myself be taken in by his act. Only I was starting to think that the reason he was so convincing was because it wasn’t an act, not to him. Inside his mind, where Neville kept the story of himself, I was certain he believed he was a good man who’d been forced to do a few bad things for the sake of the Balance.
And it was horrifying how tempted I was to make a deal.

I quashed the wounded and exhausted part of myself that was desperate enough to trade a scrap of information for a scrap of kindness and said, “You say that you care, but you don’t. You don’t care enough, and you don’t care the same.”

“The same as what, Ashala?”

“The same as you would about one of your own.” The smiling face of my lost little sister beamed up at me from the photo, and I rubbed my thumb across her cheek. “If some ordinary kid had died the way Cassie did, there would’ve been an outcry and an investigation. There wasn’t, though, not for a girl killed during an assessment. You set us apart, and you tell yourself it’s for the good of the Balance.”

“It is for the good of the Balance.”

“How can it be,” I demanded, “when Illegals are part of the Balance?”

He stiffened, recognizing where those words came from. “You shouldn’t let yourself be taken in by the ravings of a few dissidents. I know you’d like to believe otherwise, but I’m afraid the answer to the Question is no.”
He seemed a bit nettled, and it occurred to me that the growing strength of the reform movement must get to people like Neville Rose. When I’d left Gull City, there’d been barely a handful of people at each Friends of Detainees rally. Now there were hundreds.

“What makes you so sure Illegals aren’t part of the Balance? A two-hundred-fifty-eight-year-old flood?”

“That flood was a warning. It was a demonstration of the unnatural effect abilities can have on the harmony of the world—”

“That flood,” I interrupted, “was an accident, and one that could never even happen again.” I looked away from him to gaze at Cassie one last time. Then, gathering up every ounce of willpower I possessed, I tossed the photo casually onto the desk and the handkerchief after it. “The answer to the Question is yes. Which means it isn’t going to be people like me who will cause the end of the world, Neville. It’ll be people like you.”

His lips tightened in the first hostile reaction I’d seen from him. Anger. It wasn’t my words or my actions he was responding to—it was the fact that I was smiling. He probably thought I was laughing at him. In truth, I
wasn’t thinking about him at all. In my mind, I was in another place entirely.

About a year ago, Ember and I had sat together on a hillside on a sunny day. We’d just heard that Neville Rose had been appointed as the Chief Administrator of the new detention center that was being built far too close to the Firstwood for my liking. Ember had been running over everything we’d ever heard about Neville—or at least, she’d started out that way, but then she’d rapidly detoured into imparting deep thoughts about the nature of humanity. I guess it’s hard to stay on track when you have an ability that effectively makes you a walking library. Finally, though, she’d come back to Neville again. “There’s a word,” she told me, her pale face serious, “to describe people who believe so fervently that Illegals are a threat to the Balance that they can do the kinds of appalling things to us Neville is supposed to have done.”

“There’re two words,” I said. “Nasty. Bastards.”

She smiled and shook her head. “No. Mad.” Her strange eyes—one brown and one blue—grew shadowed. “It’s even a necessary insanity, for a society like ours. They couldn’t keep the detention system going without it.”
I shrugged, then wiped a patch of ground clean and drew on it with a stick. “Here, tell me what you think of this.” It was my latest idea for how we could attack the new center.

Ember groaned. “Not this again! First, we don’t have enough Illegals with the right kinds of abilities for something like this. Second, even if we did, you know as well as I do that very few of them could control their abilities enough to pull this off. Third, even if you did have your imaginary army, I can still see a dozen problems that you haven’t thought of.”

“So tell me what they are, and I’ll solve them.”

She rubbed out the drawing with her foot, her expression a familiar mixture of affection and exasperation. “It wouldn’t matter if you did solve them, Ash. What do you think would happen to the Tribe if we attacked a detention center? The government would throw every enforcer it had at us. When will you understand? We can’t change the world with violence. Only with ideas.”

I lifted my face up to the sun. “I can’t see how ideas are much use against armed enforcers. Tell you what, though: if Neville Rose ever gets ahold of me, I’ll talk your philosophy to him.”
And Ember had laughed, the pleasant, silvery sound echoing down the hill and through the trees of our forest home.

Neville’s voice brought me back to the present. “Take her through.” For a second, I couldn’t make sense of his words, until I realized he was speaking to Connor.

I rose to my feet, looked down at the gray-haired man behind the desk, and said, “I’ll tell you, if you still want to know.”

He glanced up, his pleasant expression firmly back in place. “Tell me what, Ashala?”

“Why I chose the name Wolf.” I smiled a wide, joyful smile left over from that sunny day on the hillside. “It’s because I always travel in a pack.”

I could feel his puzzled stare following me as Connor escorted me toward the door on the far wall. It was highly unlikely that I was ever going to leave Detention Center 3. So Ember would never know that I’d done what I’d told her I would. But the thought of her and the Tribe filled me with a sense of warmth and love and family that I knew Neville Rose could never understand or touch.

_I walk among my enemies. But I carry my friends with me._
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