

A close-up photograph of a young woman's face, focusing on her blue eyes and red lips. A soft shadow is cast across the right side of her face, partially obscuring her eye and cheek. The text is overlaid on the left side of her face.

The
DISAPPEARANCE
of
EMBER
CROW

AMBELIN
KWAYMULLINA

THE PACK

I was wolf.

I was among the Pack. And everything was as it should be. Mostly. I had no shaggy coat of reddy-brown fur and couldn't run as fast on all fours as the others. I tried to make up for it by moving as quickly as possible on my inadequate two legs and by growing out my hair, which was almost the same as fur. It was the right color, too. Brown, like my skin. Except my skin was covered, hidden beneath the blue jacket, shirt, and pants I needed as protection against the cold. The differences between myself and the rest of the Pack made me want to pace and shake out the fur I didn't

have. But doing that would reveal my worry to the others, and worrying—when our territory was free of other predators and when the Pack was healthy and prey plentiful—wasn't wolf. And I was wolf.

There was a stirring in the warm darkness of the den. Pack Leader raised his head, sniffed once, and rolled to his feet. Ears pricked and noses lifted as everyone waited for instructions. Pack Leader's golden eyes focused on me. The others flopped back into sleep, while I leaped into a half-crouch. I couldn't stand completely, because I would've hit my head on the dirt ceiling of our underground burrow. Besides, standing upright made me tall in an un-wolf-like way. Pack Leader loped out, and I followed, darting under the tree root that arched over the mouth of the den.

Outside, the world was cold and gray with the light that came right after sun-wakes. As I wriggled out, the wind tore through the forest, rushing into my ears, making strange whispering noises that almost seemed to be words. I barked, loud and fierce. The odd breeze went away. I cast a hopeful glance at Pack Leader to see if he'd noticed my victory. All he did was sit down, lift his nose, and sniff again. There was obviously *something* out here, and it wasn't the wind.

I sniffed as deep as I could. Scents raced up my

nose and exploded into my head. I took a single, giddy bound into the forest, then skidded to an undignified halt. How embarrassing. Not daring to look at Pack Leader, I held myself still, doing my very best to make it seem as though I'd been trying to find a better position to smell from. This time I separated out the scents, searching for whatever had made Pack Leader bring me out of the den. Rain, coming later today. The sharp tang of eucalyptus from the leaves of the huge tuart trees, and the lighter, minty smell of the peppermints that grew beneath them. The muskiness of tree cats slumbering in branches high above us, the sweet headiness of waratah flowers, and . . . oh, rabbit! I yipped, bouncing in place. Pack Leader didn't move. He wasn't taking me on a hunt, and my head drooped. He didn't seem to think I was worthy to kill with the other wolves, or even to share in the meat.

He'd see, though. I was a good wolf.

I went back to sniffing, finally catching the scent of something that was not forest, or prey, or wolf. It belonged to the ones that the wolves thought of as the *other* Pack. The human pack. Two were headed this way. They drew closer, near enough for me to make out their individual scents. Pictures flashed into my head, first of a thin, olive-skinned girl with long black

curls. Then of a male, tall and brown, with eyes that were the color of tuart leaves. I knew these humans. I couldn't remember how, but it was well enough to give them wolf names. *Looks Ahead* and *Fleet Foot*. And . . . wait, there was a third, walking behind the others. I knew him, too. Pale skin, blue eyes, black hair. *Flies High*. Limbs quivering with joy, I put my nose to the air, breathing in his smell. I wanted to run through the forest and scamper around Flies High as if I were a silly pup.

Until my joy was swamped by a crashing wave of dread.

I lifted my lip and growled. Pack Leader snapped at me, and I cowered, bewildered. *Flies High isn't a threat?*

Then why did I want to chase him away?

The humans came into view, walking through the trees. They were wearing the same coverings I was, except in different colors. Blue on Looks Ahead and Fleet Foot, greeny-brown on Flies High.

With a wary glance at Pack Leader, I opened my jaws, releasing a low breath that had a tiny rumble at the edges. Pack Leader's ears flicked in my direction, but he let it pass.

The humans stopped. Fleet Foot spoke. "I think we're scaring her."

“You mean *I’m* scaring her,” Flies High said.

Somewhere, a wolf howled, a single, lonely note of distress. I twisted, searching for the hurt wolf. The sound seemed to be everywhere and nowhere, and I realized it was coming from *inside* my head. Bewildered, I whined at Pack Leader, who fixed a golden gaze on me. He didn’t speak, but I understood him. *Be calm. I am your Pack Leader, and I am here.*

Looks Ahead took a step toward me and paused, waiting to see what I would do. I didn’t do anything, because I wasn’t afraid, at least not of her. Pack Leader was here, and besides, Looks Ahead was—a pup? No, that wasn’t quite right. She was full grown and yet somehow pup-like, in need of protection and not a threat. She reached me in five hesitant paces and crouched down. “Ash? We all miss you. Don’t you want to come back to us?”

More pictures flooded into my mind. A fire. Endless caves. And a lot of human faces—brown eyed, blue eyed, dark skinned, light skinned . . . I didn’t like it. It reminded me of a time when I was not wolf, which was impossible. I had always been wolf. I gave my head a furious shake, trying to get rid of the images.

Looks Ahead straightened and spoke to the others. “I think we should tell her.”

“She’s here because she couldn’t cope,” Flies High replied. “Telling her might push her right over the edge.”

“She always comes when we need her!”

“Ordinarily, yes. But I think we can all agree this behavior isn’t normal. She’s running away, Georgie. And I’m not sure she even knows what she’s running from.”

I didn’t understand what the two of them were talking about, and the third one, Fleet Foot, kept staring at me. “Connor, do her eyes seem a little yellow to you?”

For some reason, that made them all stare. I bared my teeth, ready to spring if they attacked. Then Flies High turned away, running a hand through his hair. “They *are* gold. I should have seen it.”

The howling wolf that only I seemed to hear returned, keening in pain. I pawed at my skull as Fleet Foot spoke. “My animal is a hawk, remember? I have better eyesight than anyone else in the Tribe.”

Looks Ahead glanced from them to me and back again. “You think she’s changing into a wolf?”

“I don’t know,” Fleet Foot replied. “We’ve really got no idea what could happen to her. No one in the Tribe has ever lived with their animals the way she’s been living with the wolves.”

“I live with my spiders!” Looks Ahead protested.

“It isn’t the same,” Flies High said. “You aren’t trying to *be* a spider. We have to tell her. And if it doesn’t work—I’m using my ability to drag her out of here.”

I didn’t know what an ability was, and the wailing of the wolf in my head seemed to mean it wasn’t anything good. I lunged, snapping at Flies High.

Looks Ahead shouted, “That’s enough!”

There was a powerful note of command in her voice, and I froze, astonished. She wasn’t a pack leader, but she sounded like one. “You have to listen to me now, Ash. This is important.”

She crouched down again. Then she tilted her head to one side, blinked pale-green eyes, and spoke three words that shattered the world into pieces.

“Ember is missing.”

THE DISAPPEARANCE

Ember is missing.

The words reverberated through my body. Everything split into two as different realities competed for dominance: the world of wolves—fur and den and Pack—and that of humans—clothes and cave and Tribe. I longed to abandon myself to the wolf world. I couldn't.

Because Ember was missing and she was important.

A face appeared in my mind. Round cheeks, red hair, and fair skin. Strange eyes, one blue and one brown.

Ember.

Grabbing hold of the image, I followed it back to the other Pack, the other world. A kaleidoscope of

pictures came together, the same ones I'd seen before, only now I understood them. The fire we cooked our meals on, the caves where Ember had her lab and Georgie made her maps of the future, and where we all slept when the weather was cold. The many faces of the Tribe.

My Tribe.

What was I doing here? I was filthy, covered in dirt, and crouching on the ground. I straightened, and reeled. Too tall, too high! But I forced myself to stay upright, staggering to the nearest tree and waving the others away when they moved closer. I leaned against the trunk and the dizziness eased, the tuart giving me the balance I couldn't find on my own. *My Firstwood.* I dug my fingers into the rough gray bark and pressed my feet into the earth, needing to connect to the forest that had been my home ever since I'd run away from my parents.

When the dizziness was gone, I glanced over at Looks Ahead. No, at *Georgie*. "*Wharrrrr . . .*" I stopped. My words were coming out as growls. Human sounds, I had to make human sounds. At least I couldn't hear the howling anymore, although I didn't like the silence in my mind, either. There was an emptiness where something should have been.

Being a human was already complicated. “What . . . do . . . you . . . mean, missing?”

“She didn’t come back from Gull City. Do you remember, she went to see the Serpent? We don’t know what happened after she got there, of course—”

“Stop!” Images were popping into my head. Buildings and winding streets. Waves pounding on sand. And an enormous glowing snake. “I can’t underrrr . . . understand you.”

I gave up on speaking, directing a forlorn glance at Pack Leader where he lay in the dirt. He turned his head away. I had to deal with this on my own.

Flies High—Connor—broke the silence. “Ashala.”

Hearing him say my name was as shattering as hearing “Ember is missing,” although for a different reason. Connor was the only one who ever said it that way, drawing the word out over three beats. *A-shay-la*. I love you.

Memories of him sparked like lights, a lightning storm of shared laughter and adventure and passion. It became at once easier and harder to find my center as a human instead of a wolf. Easier, because I remembered being a leader, a fighter, a girl. Harder, because I knew what I’d done to Connor, the thing that had sent me fleeing to the wolves to begin with.

My skin heated in shame and I stared miserably into his blue eyes.

His flawless features showed no emotion, which meant nothing. He was good at hiding what he felt. He'd had to be, because he'd spent years living among Citizens, concealing the air-controlling ability that would've got him thrown into detention.

"Five weeks ago," he said, measuring out each word to be sure I'd understand, "Ember went to Gull City. Do you remember that?"

I did. It was almost the last thing that had happened before everything had gone wrong between us, and I'd run to the wolves. "She went to meet someone?" No, that wasn't quite right. She'd gone to *find* someone. "The Serpent?"

Georgie clapped her hands together. "That's right, Ash!"

There were two pictures in my head. A clear one of a huge snake, and a much hazier one of a tall man. My brain was insisting that they were *both* the Serpent. Only how could they be? Then I realized. There really was a giant snake, an ancient spirit who lived in a lake in the forest. But the man . . . the man, Ember had invented. *She made up a rebel, and we called him the Serpent.*

I dredged up the knowledge I needed. Our imaginary rebel was trying to overthrow the Citizenship Accords, the law that made anyone born with an ability an “Illegal.” Our abilities were supposed to make us a threat to the Balance, the harmony of the world. Most Illegals were locked up in detention centers, except for those few whose abilities were considered “benign” enough to be given an Exemption from the accords. Or the ones who ran away, like us. We’d started rumors about the “Serpent” to give the government someone else to chase besides the Tribe.

Recently, though, we’d heard stories that some guy claiming to be the Serpent had started appearing at rallies against the Citizenship Accords. So Ember had gone to Gull City to check it out.

“She was supposed to be back ages ago! Why didn’t anyone go after her?”

“I *did* go after her,” Daniel answered patiently. “When she didn’t come back after a couple of weeks, I Ran to the storage unit.” He paused, eyeing me, and added, “Ah—that is, I used my ability, which lets me run very fast—”

“I know what your ability is,” I informed him with wolfish dignity. Although it did take a moment for the words “storage unit” to mean anything to me. *The one*

that belongs to Daniel's Grandma Bessie, which we use as a place to hide in Gull City. “Ember wasn’t there?”

“No. She left a note saying she was fine and not to go searching for her.”

I muddled my way through that. It was dangerous for Ember to go off alone. Only not as dangerous as it used to be. Because . . . because . . . oh, yes! Things were better for Illegals now. Belle Willis, a reformer, had recently been elected Prime of Gull City, and she’d cut back on all the enforcer patrols and the spot Citizenship checks. Besides which, Ember had an entirely genuine Citizenship tattoo, so even if she got checked, she’d pass. Like Connor, she’d managed to fool an Assessor into thinking she didn’t have an ability.

“She might not really be missing,” I said. “She might be doing, I don’t know, Ember stuff!” I liked that idea. Cheered up, I expanded upon it. “Didn’t she say before she left that she might try to contact some old friends of her dad? People who are involved in the reform movement?”

“We thought that, too,” Georgie chimed in. “Until the dog came.”

“The *what?*”

“The dog. I think he’s a Labrador.”

I was confused again, only this time it wasn’t in an

I-was-a-wolf-and-now-I'm-not kind of way. It was more of a comfortable, familiar kind of way, as if it was usual for Georgie to not make any sense.

She continued, totally unaware that she was confusing me, and that was normal, too. “The dog brought the stone.” She nudged Daniel. “Show her!”

Daniel reached into his pocket and held out a small gray rock. “This was in a canister attached to the dog’s collar.”

I darted over to snatch up the stone before retreating to the tree.

“Do you understand what it is?” Connor asked.

“Yeah. A rock.”

“No, it’s—”

“I’m kidding. I know what it is.”

He gave me a look that was somewhere between exasperation and hurt. *Stupid, Ashala*. Only I didn’t know how to act around him, what to say. It had been easier being a wolf.

I focused on the stone, which was at least something I could deal with. Ember’s ability meant that she could manipulate memories, including sharing them between people by putting a memory into—well, anything. The last time she’d done it, she’d used river stones. Exactly the same as the one I was holding.

I rolled the rock between my fingers. It wasn't giving me one of her memories or anyone else's—not yet. She had locked away whatever fragment of a life the stone held with a password, as she had before.

“Has anyone activated it?”

Georgie shook her head. “We didn't understand the note.”

“What note?”

Daniel reached into his pocket again, pulling out a folded piece of paper. “We figured it was meant for you, Ash.”

I unfolded it eagerly, only to find it was covered in strange scratchings that I couldn't understand. Words. They were words. I'd forgotten how to read. I glared at the note until the scratchings finally made sense. *Do you remember the story of the girl who wanted to die?*

“Do you know what she means?” Georgie asked.

“I think so. Give me a minute, okay?”

I edged back, leaning against the tree and staring at the note. Ember loved her stories. She'd told me, once, about a girl who wanted to die, until someone spoke six words to her that made her want to live instead. I was such an idiot; it had taken me an embarrassingly long time to realize Ember was talking about herself.

When Georgie and I had arrived in the Firstwood four and a half years ago, Ember was already here. A runaway, the same as the rest of us. Only she'd run with her dad, and he'd died on the way to the forest. I thought back to that first conversation, trying to remember exactly what I'd said that had made such a difference to Ember. She'd been heartbroken over losing her dad. And I'd known what it was like to be knocked out by grief, because my little sister had died right before I left Gull City. The difference was that I'd had someone who needed me to get back up again. I'd had Georgie.

And suddenly, I knew the six words that had made Ember want to live.

I needed space to breathe for this. I glanced at the others, my gaze skittering past Connor to rest somewhere between Georgie and Daniel. "Can you all move away a bit?"

Everyone stepped back and then, when I kept staring, stepped back farther still. I slid to the ground, the rock in my hands. The earth was damp, but there was no point in trying to stay on my feet. The memory would be overwhelming; they always were.

Pack Leader padded over and lay down beside me. *I am here.* I wanted to reach out and ruffle his fur. I

didn't. He wasn't a pet. Instead I nodded at him, and he gave me a toothy grin in return.

I held the rock up to my mouth, cupping it between my hands.

“You're not alone,” I whispered. “You've got us.”

Energy emanated from the stone, buzzing into my hands, up my arms, and spreading through my head.

And I was yanked into a moment in Ember's life.

THE MESSAGE

I placed the mirror on the ground and sat cross-legged in front of it. The solar lamp to the right of the glass cast enough light through the gloomy interior of the storage unit for me to see my reflection—short red curls, mismatched eyes, and a worried expression. This was how Ash would see me when she accessed this memory. I attempted a smile, only rather than making me look less anxious, it made me seem slightly crazed.

Giving up on the smile, I spoke instead. “Hi, Ash. This memory is a message. From me to you. I’m going to give it to Nicky—that’s the dog—to take to you, and it’s to show you . . . I mean, to tell you . . .”

My words were tangled, like my emotions and thoughts. I took a moment to unravel some of the knottiness that was twisting my stomach and tried again. “I know you’ve experienced someone else’s memories before, but that was different. The last time you saw small snapshots of Connor’s life. This is . . . more. You’ll understand every second of what I’m thinking and feeling.”

There, that was better. An explanation. I was good at explanations. I went on in a more confident tone, “It’s like this, Ash. You and I both know that there is no rebel Illegal who calls himself the Serpent, except someone claiming to be that person is appearing at rallies against the Citizenship Accords. And from the descriptions we’ve heard of him, I might know who he is.”

Had I said too much? I didn’t think so, but I was walking a very fine line. If I ran into—I jerked my thoughts away from names. If I ran into certain people, I wanted to be able to say that I hadn’t told Ashala anything about them. Because it was difficult to lie to them. Not impossible, but not easy, and I didn’t want to take any chances.

“Ash, if the Serpent is who I think he is, then there could be these other people around him, and some of them are . . . they’re bad people. If he’s alone, I’ll, um, sort some things out with him, and be back before you know it. If he’s not . . .” I stopped speaking, because I

had to. My voice had begun to waver in anticipation of how the sentence ended. I completed it silently instead. *If he's not, I don't know when I'm coming home.* That was why I was saying good-bye.

Reaching out, I pressed my fingers to the cold glass and called up memories, letting them play out in my head. One memory after another, of things I'd experienced since the day I first met Ashala Wolf. Discovering my connection to the huge black crows that stared beadily down from the trees of the Firstwood. The good times Ash and Georgie and I shared, first with the three of us, and then with others when more Illegals came to the Firstwood. Our triumph over Neville Rose, Chief Administrator of Detention Center 3. We'd snatched sixteen detainees out from under his nose and exposed his plan to take over the government of Gull City. That had been six months ago now. After that, it seemed as though the Tribe could do anything. I hoped they could. I hoped they'd be all right, if I was really gone forever.

I smiled, a genuine smile this time, for all that happiness. A smile for the forest. For my crows. For my friends. For Ash.

"Look after Nicky, won't you? And please don't try to find me. If I stay away, it's because I've chosen to." She would try, I knew that, but she wouldn't succeed. At

least, not in locating me, although it was inevitable that she'd discover some of the knowledge I'd hoped never to have to share.

The glass in front of me was growing misty. I blinked back the tears. "However this ends, you're probably going to find out some things about me, and they're not nice things. But, Ash, even after you know, do you think you could remember the good? And whatever you end up discovering—try to think of me kindly. If you can."

THE PLAN

Blackness. Then light. Dirt. Trees.

I am Ashala, and I am in the Firstwood.

That much was clear. Nothing else was.

What did she mean, “not nice things”? And how could she have hidden her suspicions about the man claiming to be the Serpent?

“Ash?”

Georgie’s voice. I stared past Pack Leader to where Connor and Daniel and Georgie stood. Their faces were better than a mirror for showing me a reflection; I could measure exactly how bad I looked by the flare of concern in their eyes, the way Connor took a single

step before stumbling to a halt, uncharacteristically graceless. I'd pushed him away, and now he wasn't sure how I'd react if he came any closer. I was sorry he'd stopped. I stomped on that feeling.

He deserved better than me.

"Ash!" Georgie again. "Has something happened to Ember?"

She was afraid. I couldn't let Georgie be afraid. "She's okay. Or she was when the memory happened. Only . . ." I let one hand fall to the ground, crept my fingers across the earth until I was touching Pack Leader's fur. "I don't think she's coming back. Not anytime soon."

"Why not?" Georgie sounded as bewildered as I'd felt a moment ago.

"I don't know!"

Even I could hear the edge of desperation in my voice. Pack Leader turned his head in my direction and huffed reprovngly. *Get abhold of yourself.* I drew back, a little hurt—and realized that expecting him to coddle me at this moment was a human reaction. Wolves didn't fall to pieces when one of their own was gone. If a Pack member died, that was to be mourned and accepted. But if one was missing . . .

I reached back, gripping the tree, and hauled myself

up. My legs were trembling, made shaky by too many shocks, but I made it all the way upright. Then I stepped away from the tuart and staggered.

Daniel started forward to help.

Connor caught his arm, spoke in a sharp voice. “No. Leave her.”

To anyone else that might have sounded cruel. Not to me. I regained my balance and met Connor’s eyes in a bittersweet moment of understanding.

In my head, a wolf yipped, flinging out a challenge to the world. I understood what I was hearing now. The wolf-voice was Connor’s emotions. He and I were linked, and had been ever since Ember helped us share memories. Sometimes I felt what he was feeling and sometimes he felt what I was. *Maybe that means Em and I are linked now, too?* Except she’d said once that her ability worked differently when it was one of her own memories, and if I could feel what she was feeling, I wasn’t conscious of it. All I was aware of right now was Connor’s emotions and mine.

We both knew that it was time for me to lead my Pack.

“Ember . . .” My voice was hoarse, weak. I frowned and began again. “Ember said in the memory that if

she didn't come back, it would be because she'd chosen to stay away. I think she's trying to protect us."

"Protect us from what?" Georgie asked.

"I'm not exactly sure." I gathered pieces of information together. "People connected with the fake Serpent. And she also said . . ." It was hard to tell them the rest. I fought the ridiculous urge to protect Em from criticism and shoved words out of my mouth. "She said she thought she might know who the guy pretending to be the Serpent is."

Daniel and Connor spoke as one. "Who?"

"She didn't say. She didn't say anything else really."

My chest tightened in a familiar sensation, as if a rock were sitting on my heart. If it got much heavier, I wouldn't be able to breathe.

"Do you know if she met up with the Serpent?" Connor asked.

I shook my head.

"If she's still searching for him, we could try to find her at the next rally," he pointed out. "And even if Ember—or the Serpent—aren't there, there'll be people at that rally who were at the last one. Someone might have seen who she was with, where she went."

An idea. The weight on my chest grew lighter.

“Does anyone know when the next rally is?”

“Just over a month,” Daniel answered. “We haven’t gone through the things in her lab yet, either.”

Two ideas. I scabbled for another and found one. “Have you tried talking to the crows?”

“Not yet.”

I swiveled, scanning the trees. *There!* A big glossy one perched in the distance. A male, I could tell by the red eyes. I focused my attention on the bird and yelled, “Hey, crow!”

The crow didn’t move. He didn’t seem to know I was there at all. Or maybe he couldn’t understand what I was saying. It wasn’t always possible to communicate with someone else’s animal.

I tried again. “Ember’s gone. You must know that she’s left the Firstwood, and wherever she is, I think she might be in trouble. Can you help us find her?”

The crow just sat there, silent and—smug? I got the distinct feeling he was ignoring me on purpose, and he didn’t seem to be a bit concerned about Ember. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Crows weren’t Pack animals the way wolves were. They were independent, contrary creatures, and Ember was part-crow to them, like I was part-wolf to the wolves. They’d assume she was clever enough to take care of herself. Crows

thought they were clever enough to outwit anyone or anything.

“We could get Keiko to talk to them,” Georgie suggested. “Or Coral.”

Those two were Chirpers, bird-speakers. I wasn’t sure they’d have any luck, either. It was still worth a try. “I guess we’ll have to.”

“We could check the storage unit as well,” Daniel said. “I did search it after I found the note, in case there was something else there. But I could go back.”

I considered that. Ember had been inside the unit in the memory, although that had probably been before Daniel had gone through it. She certainly wouldn’t be there now, though, and I doubted she’d have been careless enough to leave something behind.

“We’ll start with the lab,” I said. Where Ember probably hadn’t left any clues, either. “And then the rally.” Which was just over a month away. None of this was a very good plan. But it was all I had. I tried to think if there was anything I’d missed, and remembered something else. “What happened to the dog who brought the message? Is someone looking after him?”

“About ten someones,” Connor replied. “All of the younger kids.”

That was all right, then. Tribe children knew how to take care of an animal.

“Ash?” Georgie touched my arm. “I could try to *See*.”

I glanced at her, and she added brightly, “Because if we knew where she was *going* to be, we could be there before she is.”

It was a nice offer, except I knew the limitations of Georgie’s ability. At any given moment there were thousands of possible futures, and it was hard for her to control which future she Saw into, or for how long. Nor was it easy to interpret her visions.

On the other hand, I wasn’t overwhelmed with options.

“That’s a good idea, Georgie. Any clue might be—”

I sputtered to a halt as a sudden gust of wind blew a leaf into my mouth. The wind grew stronger, and branches waved above me. This time I understood the words made by the rustling leaves.

Granddaughter, Granddaughter . . .

The Serpent. *My* Serpent. The giant snake who lived in the lake and was my many-times grandfather. In the old world, the one that had been destroyed by the Reckoning, the Serpent had created my people, my “race.” It was hard to believe that humans used to care

about things like different-shaped eyes, or different-colored skin. Now all that mattered were the lines between Citizen, Exempt, and Illegal.

Grandpa had been trying to contact me for days, only I hadn't understood. Or maybe I hadn't wanted to understand. He was part of the human life that I'd been trying to leave behind. I was never going to forgive myself if he wanted to tell me something about Ember.

I shouted into the air, "I'm coming."

Daniel eyed me warily, and Georgie with curiosity. They thought I was talking at nothing.

"It's her grandfather," Connor explained. "He wants to see her."

How had he known that? Usually no one else could hear Grandpa. I stared at him, puzzled. He stared back, revealing nothing.

"Georgie and I can go to the caves while you're at the lake," Daniel said. "I'll search the lab."

"And I'll try to find Em. In the future," Georgie put in.

"Go ahead and try," I told her. "But, Daniel, leave the lab to me. I was the one who was in there most, besides Ember. If there's something out of place, I'm more likely to spot it." It was a good reason, only it

wasn't quite the truth. If there were not-nice things about Ember to be discovered, I should be the one to find them. Whatever they were, I'd understand, and I'd explain to everyone else so they understood as well. "Do the rest of the Tribe know she's gone?"

"They know she's away," Daniel replied. "Not that she's missing."

"Then don't ask the Chirpers to talk to the crows yet. It'll panic everybody, and I doubt those birds are going to be much help anyway. I'll go through the lab first."

Daniel nodded. He brushed his hand against Georgie's arm, and the two of them walked away, strolling into the forest together.

I shifted to face Connor. "Can you . . . um . . ."

He folded his arms. "I am coming with you."

I toyed with the idea of sending him back to the caves. *He won't go.* And Ember had once said I should never give an order that I thought might not be obeyed. *Yeah, right. Be honest, Ash. You don't want him to leave.*

My gaze shifted to Pack Leader, who was still lying beneath the tree. He rolled to his feet and came over to butt his head against my leg. Telling me I had to go back to being human. He'd always known that I would, I realized. It was why he'd stopped me from hunting.

The Tribe didn't eat the flesh of animals. We couldn't. It would break the pact I'd made with the trees when I'd first come here, to care for the forest and all the life in it.

I stared down into Pack Leader's yellow eyes. For over a month, I'd run with him. It had been glorious. But it wasn't my world. Reaching out, I brushed my hand lightly over his ears. "In another life."

His jaw dropped into a grin. For a second, I could almost see it, an existence where I'd been born into the clarity of thought and intensity of sensation that was wolf.

Then he turned away from me and loped back to the den.

I turned away from him and strode into the Firstwood.

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Ambelin Kwaymullina

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