



**THE
TRIBE**

**THE INTERROGATION OF
ASHALA
WOLF**



**AMBELIN
KWAYMULLINA**

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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 Doctor 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 realised 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 centre. 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 any more 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. Only surely she *had* to realise that Detention Centre 3 wasn't the same as the other centres, 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. Reaching upwards, I slid my hand along the stone band that circled my throat, my fingers lingering over the metal pad at the front that was set with nine tiny numbered buttons. I had no idea what the combination to the lock was, and for 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 colour 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 centre I was. Worse still, I wasn't even sure I knew *who* I was any more.

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 realised 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 was the kind of girl that 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 upwards. "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. Only 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 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 apologise 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 realised, 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 centre 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 it, 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 realised 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 cruellest 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 keeps 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 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 truth 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 'one' Illegal."

"What?"

"You are the Tribe, Ashala." I frowned, and he continued. "You were the leader, the glue that held them together. Now you're gone, it won't be long before they start squabbling with each other, 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 bit 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 that joins them. Until the day they march on your centres, 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



centres. Boomers will breach the walls. Skychangers will send lightning to strike you all down from above, and Rumlbers 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 centre. And when that day comes, Justin Connor, think of me.”

He stopped dead, and swivelled around. I hoped I’d finally got 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 backwards. *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 towards me, blue eyes intent upon mine. *What is this, some kind of weird enforcer acknowledgement 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 realised 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, realising 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.



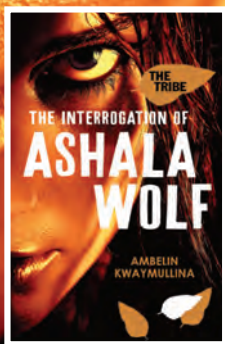
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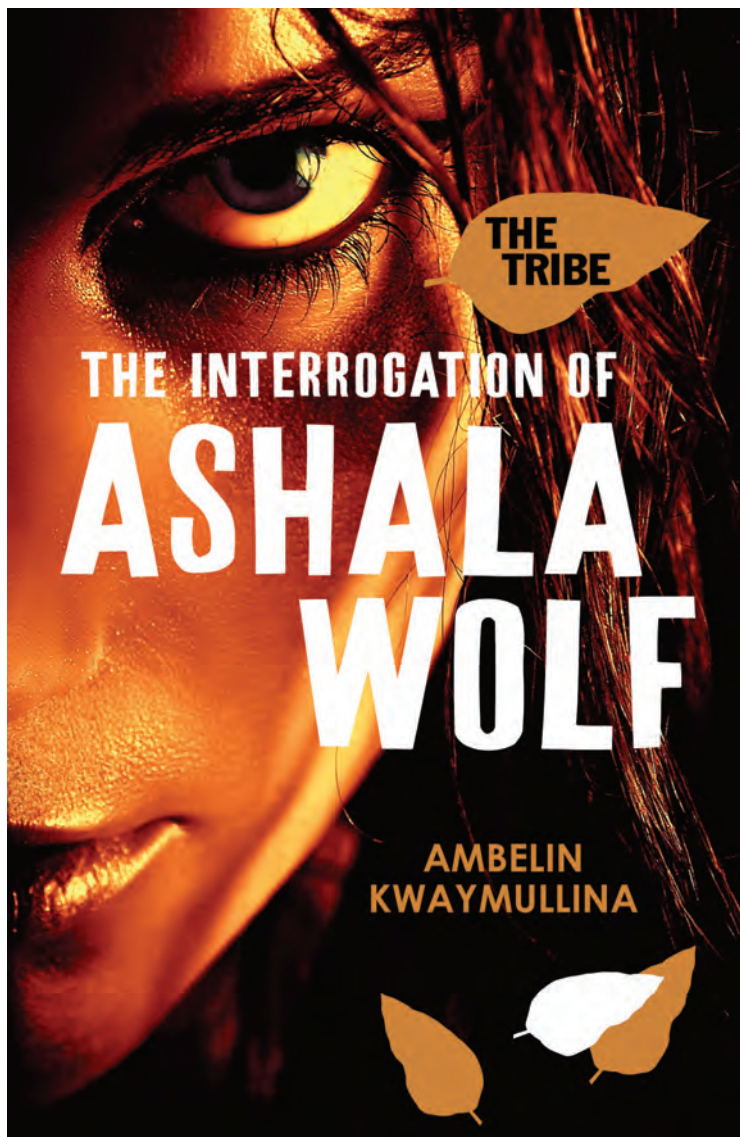
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