

## Wandering Path

[Gwyn]

After Heather went to sleep, I stayed on the beach until it was fully dark. I was careful crossing the freeway. The later it was at night, the fewer vehicles there were. It made it much easier to get as far from the coast as possible without being seen or hurt.

I was amazed that she was so strong. She trusted me so fully and she listened to me. By the time I'd saved a third child, she stopped giving her weak protests.

They needed us. Human pups were more fragile than wolf pups. I couldn't stand to see a child hurt or upset and I knew Heather was ghting her own protective urges every time she told me not to go.

She was really a good person. The dedication she had to serve her pack was amazing. Heather would've been the best Gamma female and the best mate. So would I. Michael was an idiot if he thought Wendy would be what he needed.

While Heather was resting, I followed our wandering path. I headed south when it got cold and north when it got hot. When I started feeling her closer to the surface, I would get tired. At that point, I would head back to our beach. Though, I did occasionally visit it at other times of the year.

When she was close to the surface, it meant we were close to our birthday. I spent each birthday on our beach trying to get Heather to wake up. It was the only way I could think of.

She lost so much hope and light when she found out about Michael and Wendy. I knew it hurt, but it hurt her so much more than just being rejected. He took what little condence she had in herself and destroyed it.

In the last couple of years, whenever I tried to get her up, she would murmur that there was no point. She didn't have anything or any reason to exist. She said I had more purpose than she did.

We needed a new mate. I knew that would wake her up. She needed something to give her life meaning. I needed to gure out how to do that.

Heather needed a pack and someone to take care of. Someone needed to depend on her. Heather was made to care for others.

That was evident in the fact that I was born a large, white wolf. Arctic wolves are rarely born into wolf packs south of a certain point. We tend to be born into packs in the far north, where the natural Arctic wolves live. The fact that I was bigger than almost any other wolf, had to mean I was meant to care for more than just a family.

I knew I wasn't an Alpha, but maybe I was something new. In the meantime, I continued my wandering. Sometimes, I would catch the scent of something incredible when I was headed through the large collective's territory. It never led anywhere, or, if it did, it would lead into a pack's land and I'd turn away. Soon, I cut a huge portion of that territory out of my travels.

While I was wandering, trying to gure out how to nd a purpose for Heather, I would nd lost human pups. Sometimes, I would even try to help adult humans, but they would scream and run away more than their pups did. Pups would just stop and start crying or would freeze or curl up in a ball. It gave me a chance to show them I wouldn't hurt them.

Helping human pups made me feel better. I may not be able to help Heather, but I could help someone. They were always so sweet. It made me sad that I didn't have any pups of my own to take care of.

Life grew lonely over the years of wandering. I would wander close to human towns from time to time. I'd seek out natural wolf packs to join for a while. Sometimes, I was tempted when rogue werewolves would see me and try to talk to me.

-

It was the spring after our birthday, several years later, when I nally gave in to that urge. I wanted to see what they had to say to me. They never seemed violent.

I found a cabin in the woods that smelled of marked territory. Some rogues would mark their territory to keep other predators away. I remembered that from Heather's rogue classes. All her knowledge was mine as soon as I manifested.

Carefully, I made my way to the tree line that surrounded the cabin and I sat there. I wouldn't do anything to make them think I was threatening them. It only took a few minutes before the door opened.

A tall, dark-haired man came out. He was followed by a shorter, blonde woman. They were both lithely built and moved like they were gliding. My habit of running away over the last few years made my stomach twist. I dgeted, making them stop.

"Hello, white wolf. I'm Vaughn, this is my mate, Sunny. We have some food. Would you like to have some?" The man said gently.

His mate showed me a bowl of meat. It didn't smell like there was anything in the meat. It would be nice to have food I didn't have to hunt. I loved hunting, but I sometimes wanted the ease other werewolves had in nding food.

I nodded and sank to lay down. They came close. He took the bowl from his mate and brought it close to me, setting it down a couple of feet in front of me, then backing off.

Staying low, I slunk to the bowl. If he didn't perceive me as a threat to his mate, he wouldn't attack. I knew my large size often made males more protective of their females. Gingerly, I ate some of the meat.

"We're members of the Eaten Heart Collective. You're pretty famous, even among humans. Did you know that?" Sunny said.

With a huff, I focused on the food. I didn't care if I was famous. No one from my old pack ever came looking for me, so I gured they didn't know it was me. Did our parents actually keep the secret of my wolf form from the Alpha? It was the least they could do.

The Eaten Heart was a collective in Oregon. The Queen was rumored to be deadly back when Heather was still in her pack. I could imagine she'd grown even more fearsome. All that was reported in the class was that she was one of the shortest adult werewolves in the country, she started her collective before she got her wolf, and she would eat the hearts of her enemies.

"They call you the Ghost Wolf. All the little kids you helped kept telling the story about a huge white wolf who took care of them and led them to safety. Queen Bellamy is impressed. She told everyone in the collective to take care of you if they found you. You're an honorary member of our collective." She continued.

I looked up at her. An honorary member of a collective? That meant I was safe in the collective's territory. It was a relief because the territory seemed to grow larger every year. It was hard to stay outside the border without heading farther east than I wanted.

Sunny smiled at me and leaned forward, holding out her hand. I moved closer carefully and sniffed before putting my paw on it. My paw was much bigger than her hand. Sunny jumped up and threw her arms around my neck.

Her mate was on his feet immediately, in case I attacked. I wasn't offended. I was a strange ex-pack rogue. Vaughn was just making sure he could protect his mate. I didn't move, just letting her hug me. At my size, she was like a child with a large dog.

"Will you shift and come inside? You can take a shower. We have extra clothes. Our couch folds out into a bed." Sunny offered as she pulled away.

I stood and turned back to the forest. If that was all they had to say to me, then I didn't need to stick around. Heather wouldn't wake up for a hot shower and a warm bed. There was nothing there for me.

"We'll tell Queen Bellamy that we were able to talk to you. Come back sometime and we'll give you more food!" Sunny called out.

They seemed nice. It was good to know I was safe. It meant we'd be able to relax around other rogues in the territory and I wouldn't have to worry about being hunted down by the collective for taking their resources.

Maybe Heather would wake up on our next birthday if I told her we were honorary members of the collective. We could join them and nd a job. It would give her purpose.

I was glad I made the decision to go listen to the rogues. Maybe I'd stop by before I headed north. For now, I was just wandering the forest. It wasn't a constant trek. I'd stay here until it was hotter, then move north. Most of my life was spent like any other wolf, hunting, playing, investigating, rolling around in things.

-

When I came back south, after the res died down, I noticed the collective's border was much further north than it had been before. Queen Bellamy was growing her territory by leaps and bounds. I would add it to my report to Heather on our birthday.

I was sad to see that one of my favorite patches of forest was wiped out by the res this year. I'd have to change my route to my mid-autumn hunting ground. It couldn't be helped. I couldn't change the path of the re any more now than I could when it was burning.

Finding a safe way across the Columbia River, without having to swim it, was dicult. Going too far east was dangerous. I couldn't go back to eastern Washington. I was happy when I found a way and only had to wait until the middle of the night to run across a human-made bridge.

The forests were familiar. I remembered them from when we rst started wandering on our own. We'd been very careful of the packs and the collective, staying as far from them as possible.

Now, it was impossible to stay away from the collective. I'd still be careful to give the packs a wide berth. There was no way to know how they'd react to me, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't get as warm a welcome as I'd gotten from the rogues back in the spring.

A lot had changed over the years. Animal trails were different. There was actually a more peaceful quality to the air. Maybe it was my imagination.

I was pretty lonely if I thought something like land and air was friendly. I'd have to join another natural wolf pack for the winter. It would help.

The forest thickened around me. The scent of pine was heavy, there were a few trees that weren't some type of tree with needles. No leaf scent. That wasn't accurate, there was a faint leaf scent.

There were leafy trees somewhere. I wanted to see them. It was starting to grow closer to sunset. I wanted to sleep near the scents that Heather loved. Maybe it would help make her want to wake up. I could feel her fading inside me.

She wasn't meant to stay inside me like this. Even we wolf spirits came out often. No one kept their other self tucked away for years. Sometimes, I forgot what it was like to be human. I could almost imagine I'd always been a wolf.

If Heather faded, it wouldn't be long before I lost my humanity. We couldn't exist like this much longer. Maybe a few more years, then she'd be too weak to shift and would be stuck inside me until she faded entirely and died. Then, my life would revert to that of a natural wolf and I'd only have eight or nine years myself before I died.

I'd lose the ability to heal like a werewolf. We needed both of us for the magic to work. I didn't want that. I wanted to have a life as a werewolf, not a natural wolf.

Some feral habits crept in over the years. I acted more like a natural wolf than a werewolf. If someone didn't know from my scent, they would think I was just an oversized natural wolf. If I wasn't with humans, I was almost entirely wolf.

Stopping, I looked around. There were the leafy trees. I hadn't even realized how I'd gotten there. That was happening more and more often. Where I'd just stop thinking about things with more than my senses and instincts.

I laid down on a pile of leaves under a tree and put my head on my paws. I didn't want to die. Heather needed to wake up or we'd both die and there was nothing I could do about it.

-

My ears perked up as the forest around me went all but completely silent. I breathed quietly. There was the sound again. A faint child's scream. I jumped onto my paws and started tracking the scream.

That wasn't a play scream and it wasn't the sound a child made when they tripped. It was the sound of fear. Something could be attacking the child. I needed to nd it before it was too late. I needed to save that pup.