

Ghost Pack

By: A.K. Child

It began with a dream, as most things do. A dream of walking through fog filled forests, lit only by the dim glow of a full moon. Tylla knew this place, though she had never been there before. At least not physically. No, but she had been here many times in her mind, floating along the bracken covered path and being led by...someone.

Tylla could see her outstretched gray-white paw, and could feel the grip of another paw around it, but she couldn't see who walked before her. The touch on her fur was warm and heavy. It held an urgency she couldn't begin to guess at. Wherever it wanted to lead her, it wanted to get there quickly. Something important lay on the other side of the forest, but no matter how long she traveled the path, she never drew any nearer the goal.

She had a million questions to ask. Where were they going? What would they find? Why was it so important that she continued to have the same dream, night after night? But no answers ever came to her unvoiced questions. Indeed, she could hear no sounds at all in the dark forest. She had often tried to strain her ears, swiveling the pointed tips this way and that, trying to pick up any sound at all, but there was nothing.

And each night, when the dream came to her, it ended the same way. The touch on her paw would begin to grow cold, and then feint. She would come to a stop somewhere in the middle of the woods, and realize that she was alone. So very alone. What had been a pleasant midnight walk, turned into nothing but the chilled grip of darkness, and she would begin to shutter.

And then a voice. "Wait." It would whisper to her, and she wasn't entirely certain it wasn't just inside her head. After all, no matter how she tried, she could hear nothing else. She could see nothing but mist-shrouded trees and an odd pale glow somewhere above. She could smell nothing, despite the sensitive black nose perched at the end of her furred snout. There was no one there to whisper to her. Could she have whispered to herself?

But what was she supposed to wait for? How could anything good come out of the nothing that surrounded her? How could there be anything worth waiting for when she felt so alone? And it was this very thought; the feeling of lonely desperation that caused her to stir from the dream. She wanted nothing more than to escape that feeling. She couldn't wait. She couldn't bear the thought of what waiting would mean.

Tylla awoke, panting and shivering at the same time. Her amber eyes stared straight up at the ceiling above her, caught by the fan that slowly turned over head. She lay like this for a moment, feeling her heart pounding as she adjusted to reality. Just a dream, she would tell herself in moments like these. Nothing but a dream. She didn't know why it came to her every night, or why it was always the same. She never believed that dreams meant anything more than the mind's desire to entertain itself while the body rested. Any yet this dream, which had been haunting her for the better part of a month, seemed important.

She shook her head, knowing it wouldn't do to lie in bed too long. The dream just wasn't worth getting upset over, after all. She pushed herself out of bed and stumbled toward the bathroom to get ready for the day. At least the dream had the convenience of allowing her to wake up in the morning instead of at some random time during the night. She hadn't actually lost any sleep to the nonsense.

Tylla flicked on the lights, and gazed at herself in the mirror. What looked back was a wolf with a serious case of bed-head. She frowned, and licked a paw to smooth back the spiky fur between her ears. It took several tries before her fur gave up the fight, and behaved the way she wanted it too. "Ha," she snorted at the reflection. "That'll teach you." Then she glanced around, slightly embarrassed, though there was no one there to hear her.

She sighed and shook her head. The dream did get one thing right. She was very much alone, and she hated to be reminded of that. She was an odd wolf. She had been alone most of her life. When she was just a pup, she somehow managed to get lost from her pack, and ended up being adopted by a well meaning, but definitely not wolf-like, couple of boars. Interspecies adoptions were tricky business, and she had first-hand experience of why that was. Her adoptive parents simply had no idea what it was like to have a pack mentality.

Now that Tylla was an adult and on her own, she had trouble getting back to her roots, so she ended up alone more often than not. She had a few friends who did their best to get her out and meeting new people, but she always ended up feeling awkward. After awhile, she decided maybe she was just meant to be the stereotypical lone wolf, and she gave up trying for anything else.

Tylla returned her attention to the mirror and stuck her tongue out at herself. She tried to have a little sense of humor about her situation. Without it, she may not have gotten as far as she had. If anyone asked her, she would say she was satisfied with her life. Though, it was a good thing no one ever asked her. She hated to lie.

Tylla reached up to smooth down her fur once more for good measure, when a knock came to the front door. She paused, looking in the direction of the foyer. Who would be knocking this early in the

morning? She sighed, and started for the door to see who was there. She wasn't exactly ready for visitors, but she didn't really care either. They had come to her home after all. They would just have to deal with what they get.

As she approached the door, she spotted a piece of paper laying just under the edge. Tylla grunted and shook her head. Some kind of advertising. The only thing that ever got slipped under the door of her apartment was menus, moving and maid services, and the occasional bit of important news from the apartment management. She had seen other residents put notices on their doors asking not to receive advertising junk, but she had never been bothered to do that herself. Still, she wasn't sure why someone would knock before pushing something through.

She leaned down and grabbed the piece of paper, ready to crush it up into a ball, when she noticed there was very little printed on it. If it had been an advertisement, there would have been heavy text and cheesy graphics all over it. She turned the piece of paper over, and saw only one thing written by hand in the center of the paper. "N 48° 43.069 W 120° 45.668"

"Huh?" she grunted to herself. What in the world was this? It definitely wasn't a phone number. Directions maybe? She generally looked at a map when she wanted to know where she was going, but she knew there were other ways to find locations, and this looked almost as if it was pointing to a specific location. The real question was whether it was astronomical or terrestrial.

Tylla's curiosity was peaked now and there was only one way to find answers. "Go, go gadget interwebs," she muttered to herself. If she couldn't find anything there, then it probably wasn't worth figuring out. Of course, she still wondered why someone would put such a thing under her door. Maybe they thought she was someone else.

It wasn't every day that a mystery was slipped under the door, so Tylla flicked on her computer, excited to see what she could discover. As the computer booted, she stared at the paper, as if looking at it long enough would give her the answers. The numbers merely stared back, unmoving and unchanging in their secrecy. "Hum, where to start?" she pondered to herself.

She decided the easiest assumption to make was that the numbers were indeed directions of a terrestrial nature. That would mean plugging them into a mapping program should point her somewhere. Of course, there was no guarantee she was right, even if she got a reasonable answer back, but it would be somewhere to start.

Once the computer had fully awoken, she pulled up a mapping program on the internet and carefully entered the string of letters and numbers. She felt a nervous energy crackle through her claw as she hit the enter button, sending the data on its way. The screen blanked for a moment as the site thought about her request, then a field of green appeared, crossed by small white squiggled lines.

Tylla blinked, unsure what she was looking at. Then she realized there really wasn't much to see at all. A pointer sat in the middle of the screen, showing a location, which appeared to be out in the middle of nowhere. That nowhere was deep in the wilderness filled with mountains and forest. The small white lines were nothing but country roads, probably used by forest rangers, and maybe the occasional hunter.

"What? That can't be right," she muttered to herself. Tylla scrolled out to see where this forested area was located in the world. As she scrolled out, she realized the forest was only a short distance north of her, though she still had no idea what it meant, or even if she had found any kind of sensible answer.

As she sat and thought about it, a brief flash of her dream floated through her mind. The flash was nothing more than the mist-filled woods at night, which under any other circumstance she may have disregarded as simply being there because she wasn't quite awake yet. But how strange was it that she would think of the dream while finding what seemed to be geodesic coordinates to some random place in the forest?

Tylla drew her long tongue across her furred lips. It was her weekend, and she really had no plans for the day beyond tinkering around the apartment and watching far too much TV. Maybe it was time for an adventure, even if the strange note hadn't been meant for her or pointed to the spot her computer had given her. How long had it been since she had played around in the woods after all? Her life had become boring and sedentary for the most part, and this was a chance for a bit of change.

She grinned to herself and nodded, deciding it was time to go for a drive. She plugged information to get directions then printed out the results. Getting to the location was going to be complicated, with several small, potentially unmarked roads winding their way into the wilderness, but she was up for the challenge. Tylla gone on few camping trips and had spent even less time in the woods, so she grabbed a few blankets and threw some food into an old cooler, deciding that would be enough for what she assumed would be just a day trip up and back. Before she could think better of the plan, she was on her way.

Most of the drive northward had been unremarkable. Tylla howled along with the radio until she had lost all reliable signals, and was left with just the sights of the massive forests and her own thoughts. She was surprised just how expansive the forests of the state were. They rolled on for miles and miles, broken occasionally by tall, perpetually snow-covered mountains. And civilization was a rarity that felt like a shock when she came randomly planted woodland villages. She wondered how anyone sustained themselves out here away from easy shopping and any kind of normal work situations. It was little wonder that hermits had the reputation for being a little bit insane.

After awhile, even the villages dwindled away to nearly nothing, and the only breaks in the wilderness she found were random clear cuts. The road narrowed down to an ill-maintained strip of gravel and tar pavement, and she began seeing small "National Forest Road" signs marking dirt roads that shot off the main path and disappeared into the trees. Eventually, she would be turning off onto one or more of these roads, and she hoped her car could handle them.

As she turned off onto the first of several national forest roads, and her car bumped along the rutted dirt, she finally started to question why in the world she had decided to come out here. There was no one around for miles if she got in any kind of trouble, and undoubtedly her cell phone wouldn't work in such a remote place.

The road wasn't so bad at first. Being just off the main road, it was still vaguely maintained by the Forest Service so rangers and natural resource personnel would have access into the woods. But after awhile, the road began to climb higher into mountains and become more rough and uneven. Tylla hit a large bump, which made her head crunch into the roof and she cursed loudly into the interior of the car. "Damn it! This is stupid. I'm so stupid for driving out here."

There's no turning back. Tylla brought the car to a stop, and looked around. Had she just heard someone's voice? She sniffed the air, wondering if someone had been hiding in her car the entire time. If there had been a stranger's scent in the car, she would have picked it up hours ago, but that didn't stop her from checking. There was nothing. She even looked back over her shoulder as if she thought her keen sense of smell had somehow failed her. The backseat was empty.

"No," she shook her head, snapping herself out of her paranoia. "It was nothing. Just some rocks hitting my car." She sighed, happy with her own level of denial. It was easy to dismiss sounds, which came and went with such rapidity. Tylla looked ahead, frowning at the state of the road. It definitely wasn't going to get any better going forward. "This is just dumb. I should go home before it starts getting dark." It was a shame to have come all this way for nothing, but at least the drive had been mostly pleasant.

Tylla shifted the car into reverse, hoping she had enough room to turn around on the narrow trail. As she lifted her foot off the break, the car lurched and the engine sputtered and died. She gasped, slamming her foot back down on the break to keep the car from rolling backward, and she shifted the gear quickly into park.

"What in the," she grumbled at the car. "What are you doing now?" If anyone had heard her, they probably would have thought her a little nuts as she questioned the car, which made her glad there was no one around to hear her. She tried the ignition once more, but the car merely growled and shook. Trying a few more times, she began to growl back at the car as it refused to start.

"AH!" She finally yelled out in frustration. Tylla threw open the car door and jumped out, slamming it closed once again. "DAMN IT!" She kicked the car door, sending a shot of pain through her foot. "OW!" Grabbing her foot, she danced around a moment, howling in pain until she fell against a tree and began to pant in exhaustion.

"Great," she mumbled, rubbing her foot. "Now I'm stuck." It was sometime in the late afternoon by now, and she knew the autumn night would start falling in a couple hours. Maybe that would give her enough time to walk back down to the main road, where she thought she would have a better chance of flagging down some other driver. What she had thought would be a fun adventure was quickly turning into something she vowed never to tell anyone about.

Tylla grabbed the map out of the car and a sandwich from her cooler, then locked up the car and started back down the road. She had gone quite a few miles up into the wilderness, but she figured as long as she stuck to the road she would get back to the main road before too long. She wondered how expensive it would be to get a tow truck up here to pick up her car and find a mechanic. It certainly wasn't going to be cheap or easy, no matter how she looked at it. It might just be easier to borrow or rent a car, come back to get her stuff, and just abandon her own car out in the woods.

Tylla made her way down the feeble road, munching on the sandwich as she went. The air was cool, but pleasant for late autumn. There wasn't any snow yet, at least at this elevation, and she was glad for that. It would have made the going even more difficult, and she really wasn't in the mood for that. Thoughts swirled around in her mind as she continued to question why she had thought this was a good idea.

After nearly an hour of walking, Tylla looked out into the trees. She had been on the same road for some time, and everything had blended together to look much the same. Had she even gotten

anywhere? She paused, and looked at the map. Surely by now she should have come to the last forest road she had turned off of, but she had seen no signs or even spurs off the road she walked on. She looked back up the hill. The car was no longer in sight, so she had to have been making some kind of progress.

Perhaps she had just gotten further up the road than she had thought. She rolled up the fairly useless map and continued to walk. As she got further along the rutted ground, a panic began to swell in her stomach. Had she managed to lose herself? Was that even possible with such an easy path to follow? As long as she stayed on the road, it had to lead somewhere, and that was the only small vein of hope she had to cling to.

Time passed rapidly, and the road continued on ahead of her. It was as if it had no end. Just like that dream, Tylla thought to herself. A shiver filled her at that thought and made her walk even faster. There had to be an end to this road. Above her, the sky was starting to grow dark as the evening grew closer. She would have to find that end soon or she really would be lost once the darkness set in.

And there were wild people out here. She had heard stories of other animals like herself getting lost in the wilderness and prayed upon by the wild humans that roamed through the trees. Having grown up in a much more urban area, the only humans she had ever seen were at the zoo, and they struck her as brutish, uncontrollable beasts. The last she wanted was to end up as their dinner.

As if thinking about the worst made it come true, she heard something moving through the undergrowth to her right. Tylla stopped and swiveled her ears, listening carefully. SNAP! A twig broke somewhere within the trees. Her heart began to pound even faster. Had she been found by humans? Then a strange, guttural sound echoed out of the trees and Tylla's eyes widened. There was definitely something there.

She broke into a run, thinking that she would find her way to the next road sooner rather than later. Whatever was lurking back there might lose interest in her, if she can just run fast enough. As she made her mad dash away from there, she dropped the map, and the pages scattered across the ground behind her. It didn't matter to her now anyway. As long as she kept moving back down the mountainside, she assumed she would hit another road eventually.

Tylla ran so quickly, she couldn't hear whether anything was following her. She wasn't sure she wanted to know if anything was there or not. It was safer to just keep going. Under her feet, the road remained rough and was marked by jutting rocks and deep ruts. How she had managed to drive so far up it was a mystery to her, and not worth thinking about at the moment. Had she thought about it, she

may have realized that it was impossible for her to have gotten so far in the short amount of time she had been on that road.

No, there was something else going on here. As she ran, the road slowly started to level out, then angle upward. Tylla didn't remember going down any hills to get to this point. It had all been up the side of a mountain as far as she could tell. But the panic in her heart overruled the logic in her mind, and she continued to running, given it barely a thought.

After awhile, the road began to narrow and the trees pressed in around her. Tylla trotted to a stop, and looked around, straining her ears once more to pick up any sign of someone following her. Nothing but silence came back to her, and she sniffed the air, detecting nothing. She was panting now, tired from the long run, but beyond the sound of her own puffs, the woods was completely still. Just like my dream, she thought once more. Too much like my dream.

A cold chill ruffled Tylla's fur, and she curled her arms around herself. It had grown much darker now, and a light fog had danced around the trees. Her first thought was perhaps she had fallen down and knocked herself out. Maybe she really was dreaming. But if that had been true, she wouldn't have thought about it. This was reality and that thought alone was more frightening to her than all the humans in woods. She turned around slowly to look back up the path, but there was no sign of the wider road beyond it. She was surrounded by trees on all sides. She hadn't run that far beyond where the last traces of road were, and she found it odd she couldn't see it at all. Nothing about this made any sense to her.

The silence of the forest was overwhelming, making Tylla call out, just to hear something. "Hello?! Anyone there?!" She ran her long tongue over her muzzle, wicking away the moisture that had built up from her panting, and trying to get a hold of herself.

No response came back to her, and that might have been a good thing, if she didn't have the sense that someone, or something was there. Why she couldn't smell, hear, or see anything, she wasn't sure, but she knew there were eyes on her, watching from the depths of the forest.

Tylla was about to call out again, when she felt a warm touch on her shoulder. She jumped and yipped in surprise, her head turning left then right as she looked for the person responsible. No one was there. She started to back away, thinking maybe someone was playing a trick on her. Whoever had sent the note to begin with was a likely candidate. How foolish she had been to walk right into whatever they had in mind.

"This isn't funny!" she called out, hoping it was just someone trying to play a prank on her. Maybe if they knew just how unfunny it was, they would end this. "It's getting dark, and I'm cold...and...I just want to go home. Okay?"

Home. The word touched her mind as the warmth came again, this time enveloping her shoulders as if someone had put a blanket around her. Tylla yipped once more, but stood frozen to the spot, unable to understand what was happening. The warmth turned into a calming influence, and she felt her breathing slow. Home is this way.

Tylla blinked as the warmth spread down her right arm and into her paw. Her paw rose up on its own as if held by some invisible force. Just like her dream. She took a tentative step forward, pulled by something she couldn't see. As she started to walk, the full image of the dream returned to her, and she shook her head. "Wait...I...I don't want to be alone," she whimpered, thinking of how the dreams always ended.

You were never alone. She drew in a breath, startled by the softly spoken words. Never? All those years she had spent feeling lonely she had never really been alone? Tylla found that hard to believe, but it was even more difficult to argue with something she couldn't even see. If it had always been with her and she hadn't known, perhaps she really hadn't been alone.

But now Tylla was being drawn through the forest, moving past endless trees and further into the misty darkness. Whatever was leading her, was warm on her paw despite having no physical presence, but it radiated a calmness that made her worry less about the destination with each step. After awhile, she almost forgot everything that had happened earlier in the day, as if that had been the dream, and now this was the only reality that she had ever known.

Tylla was walking in a daze, her eyes fixed on the glow of the rising moon just beyond the trees, when her feet stopped. The warm touch left her paw, which dropped back to her side, and she looked around slowly as if she had just been woken. She found herself standing in a clearing, surrounded by a near perfect circle of trees. The sky above was completely dark now, with a full moon shining down through the center. "Wh...?" she tried to ask where she was, but the words failed to come out.

Wait, said the voice, as it had said so many times before. Then the presence faded away, leaving Tylla standing there. She closed her eyes, thinking the overwhelming sense of loneliness would come next and then she would need to force herself to truly wake.

Instead, another voice spoke to her. "Tylla." It was a strong voice; much more than the whisper she had heard in her mind before. It seemed real and solid.

Tylla opened her eyes once more, and saw a figure standing before her. He was a large black wolf with shining white eyes, and though she could see him clearly, she also realized she could see through him to the trees on the other side of the clearing. The edges of his dark fur waved slightly in an unfelt breeze, making him seem almost part of the foggy mist that filled the rest of the world. "Who...are you?" she asked timidly.

He stepped forward, raising a paw toward her. "My name is Garon. I am the alpha of our pack. We have summoned you here to join us."

Tylla looked down at the dark paw held out before her. "Join you?" she asked. "I don't understand. Why me? What's going on here?"

Garon smiled, his nearly transparent teeth gleaming with the moonlight. He reached over, placing his paws on her shoulders. His touch was as warm as her guide's had been, sending another flash of calmness through her. "We are the Ghost Wolves of the Pasayten. We welcome those who are lost and searching. You belong with us, Tylla, and your time has come."

A shiver ran through Tylla's body. Garon seemed so warm and inviting, yet she had a sense what he was asking of her meant much more than she could fathom. Was he really a ghost? Were there more like him? Did that mean she would have to become a ghost as well? The only way she knew for that to happen would be to die. Then again, after all this strangeness, maybe she already was dead. She looked down at her own paws. The gray-white fur was still opaque. "What about my life? Back home?"

"What do you have back in that world?" Garon shifted, turning slightly so he had one arm around Tylla's shoulders as he motioned to the forest with his other paw. "We are many here. We are friends. We are family." Other figures began to move out of the woods, materializing from the shadows in the shape of a variety of wolves. "All of us were once where you were, Tylla. We were brought here for the same reason. We had no place in the other world. Here we have a home."

As Garon spoke, Tylla knew the truth of it. She really had nothing; few friends, few belongings of any importance, and a job that meant little to her. Still, she hesitated. Was she really ready to give up everything so easily? "I...would have to die. Right? I could never go back?"

Garon nodded, releasing her once more as he walked back toward the waiting shades. "It is never easy to leave the physical world, but know that you will have no regrets." He turned back, his face somber now. "You will feel no pain in leaving your body. This I promise. But there is no going back once the choice is made."

"Then...I do have a choice?" Tylla asked, having assumed that since she was here, they would likely not let her go again. That above all else had caused her the most hesitation. While she might have felt very alone a majority of the time, she liked even less being pressured into doing anything.

"Of course," Garon nodded. "If you choose to go back, you may go freely. You will not remember our meeting and will know nothing of our existence. Your life will pick up where you left it." He turned back to her, tucking his hands behind his back. "Some have returned, and they all felt the regret of that choice. Imagine that, Tylla. Feeling regret for something you cannot even remember."

He was giving her the hard sell, which made her freeze for a moment. Why would he try so hard? "What's in it for you?"

Garon's smile returned and he shook his head. "Absolutely nothing. This is not for me, or anyone other than you. I have merely given you the facts so you may make an informed decision." He looked up toward the moon, which was no nearing the edge of the tree line. "We must retreat soon. Now is the time to make your decision."

Tylla followed his gaze to the sky. There was no more time for questions, though she had many more she could have asked. The simple truth was she really had nothing to go back to. She wasn't sure what the ghost pack had to offer her beyond companionship, but really, wasn't that the only thing she yearned for? She took a slow breath, and brought her head down once more, nodding. "I'll join you."

Garon walked back to her, and held out his paw once more. This time, Tylla reached up, laying her paw in his, feeling the warmth radiate from him once more. She had always thought ghosts were supposed to be cold, but then again, most recollections of ghosts were nothing but stories. Reality very rarely held up to mythology. "We welcome you, Tylla," he said quietly, stepping back as he held her paw.

Tylla stepped with him, feeling a strange sensation run through her. Where the cool evening wind had been chilling her fur, she felt a warmth, like stepping into a tub of hot water. Soon the warmth covered her entire body as Garon led her back toward other waiting wolves.

She glanced back over her shoulder to see her physical body standing there, waving back and forth slightly. Then her body toppled over, crumpling to the ground. She gasped slightly, and stopped. She hadn't expected to see something like that, and she suddenly began to second guess her decision.

Then pale figures emerged from the woods on the other side of the clearing. They were strange, hunched over beasts covered in long strange of stringy hair. Humans. Tylla pulled away from Garon as the wild humans lurched toward her fallen body, intent on devouring what had been left behind. "NO!" she yelled at them. "GET AWAY!"

"It's all right," Garon said, catching hold of her arm. Tylla jerked to a stop, and looked back at him, her amber eyes pained by what was happening to her body. "Worry not of the past. There is so much more for you ahead. Feel joy that your last act in the physical world was to give life to the wild creatures of its land."

Tylla relaxed back, watching as the humans tore into what was left of her. There was nothing she could do about it now. The sight made her nauseous, but Garon had been right. This was her existence now, and at least her other life wasn't a total waste. She nodded, and turned to move back to the waiting ghost wolves with Garon.

Overhead, the moon slipped behind the tree tops, and Tylla moved into the embrace of the others. Behind them, the wild humans dragged her carcass into the woods. She looked back once more to see them disappear as she and the wolves began to faded into the shadows. "Goodbye," she whispered to her old life. After a moment, they were gone, leaving the clearing once more to the silence of night.