

Ember and the Fog

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The trouble began so quietly that no one noticed—which is often how the worst troubles begin.

In the village of Littleroot, tucked beneath the gnarled arms of an old oak and bordered by a stream that sang to itself in all seasons, the creatures began to forget their names. Not all at once, like a candle snuffed, but slowly, the way fog creeps up from the hollows at dusk. First a vole would hesitate when someone called her. Then a hedgehog would answer to any name at all, as if it didn't much matter. And finally, after enough mornings of waking to the clatter and glitter of the Wide Market, they stopped answering to anything but "you there" or "the one with the apron."

The Wide Market had arrived three seasons ago, a traveling fair that set up its colored tents and mirrored stalls and simply never left. It sold clever things—polished acorns that reflected your face twice as handsome, silk scarves that whispered compliments, tiny music boxes that played songs about how important you were. The creatures of Littleroot loved it. They spent their days comparing purchases, admiring their reflections, and wondering why they felt so tired all the time.

No one seemed alarmed by the forgetting. No one except Ember.

Ember was a field mouse, small even by mouse standards, with fur the color of August wheat and a tendency to knock things over when nervous—which was often. She worked in the village bakery, kneading dough before dawn and dusting loaves with flour that sparkled like snow. It was simple work, repetitive work, the kind that left her hands busy and her mind free to wander.

One morning, as she shaped a round of rye, she realized she couldn't remember her name.

She knew she *had* one. Knew it the way you know you have bones—something foundational, beneath the skin of things. But when she reached for it, there was only fog. She tried to recall the last time someone had said it with warmth, the way her grandmother used to, and found... nothing. Just the hum of the market outside, the bright chatter, the clinking of coins.

It terrified her.

She dropped the dough. It landed with a soft, accusing thud.

"Clumsy," muttered the oven, which had opinions about everything.

Ember didn't argue. She wiped her paws on her apron, untied it with shaking fingers, and walked out into the morning.

The market was already roaring to life. Banners snapped in the wind. A trio of starlings sang a jingle about self-improvement. A fox in a waistcoat was selling mirrors—"See yourself as you *truly* are! Or better yet, as you *could* be!"—and creatures lined up six deep to buy them.

Ember walked past it all, head down, heart hammering.

She found the old tortoise at the edge of the village, where the cobblestones gave way to moss and the noise of the market faded to a murmur. His name was Barrel—and she could remember it clearly, which felt odd in a village where names had started slipping like mist. But then, Barrel had never cared much for the market. He was ancient, his shell mapped with cracks like old pottery, and he spent most of his time dozing in a patch of sun by the oak's roots.

But his eyes, when he opened them, were sharp.

"Lost, little one?" His voice was slow, like honey poured in winter.

"I can't remember my name," Ember said, and saying it aloud made her want to cry.

Barrel blinked once, twice. "Ah," he said. "The Fog Sickness."

"Is that what it's called?"

"It's what I call it. Your elders might've had another name, but they've forgotten that too." He shifted his weight, moss crumbling beneath him. "How long has it been since anyone visited the Grove?"

Ember frowned. "The Grove?"

"The Namer's Grove. In the old forest." He tilted his head toward the dark line of trees beyond the fields, where the village paths didn't go. "Your grandmother would've known the way. Before the market came, creatures used to go every spring. To remember."

"Remember what?"

"Who they were." Barrel's gaze was steady, kind, and terribly sad. "Names aren't *earned*, child. They're *given*. Spoken over you before you ever did a thing to deserve them. But if you never go back to the one who named you, if you fill your ears with other voices long enough..." He trailed off, let the silence finish the sentence.

Ember's paws were still shaking. "Can I go? To the Grove?"

"The path is overgrown. No one's walked it in years. And the Namer..." Barrel paused, choosing his words like stones for a wall. "The Namer sees you as you are. All of you. The fumbling and the fear and the flour on your whiskers. Some find that harder than forgetting."

Ember thought of the market, the mirrors, the noise. She thought of waking up each morning to the hollow hum of busyness, the sense that she was fading even as she stood still.

"I'll go," she said.

Barrel smiled—a small, slow smile, like sunrise over distant hills. "Good. Take the old path past the miller's field. Follow the stream until it forks, then take the left branch. The Grove is at the heart of the forest, where the light falls green. And child?"

"Yes?"

"Don't bring anything with you. No mirrors, no coins, no clever trinkets. Just yourself."

The path was overgrown, just as Barrel had said. Brambles snagged her skirt. Roots tried to trip her. The stream sang its old song, but quieter here, as if it knew she was listening.

Ember had left at dawn, before the market woke, before the other creatures stirred. She told no one where she was going—partly because she didn't quite believe it herself, and partly because she suspected they wouldn't care. Everyone was too busy shining their mirrors, too busy proving they mattered.

The forest grew darker as she walked, but not in a way that frightened her. It was the darkness of deep water, of rich earth, of things growing in their own time. The noise of the market faded behind her until all she could hear was her own breathing, the soft pad of her paws, the rustle of leaves overhead.

She realized, with a small jolt, that she hadn't been this *quiet* in months.

The fork in the stream appeared just as Barrel had promised. Ember took the left branch and climbed. The trees here were older, their trunks wide as houses, their roots laced like the fingers of sleeping giants. Sunlight filtered through the canopy in thin, golden threads, and the air smelled of moss and rain and something else—something like bread baking, or candles just lit, or the moment before a song begins.

And then, quite suddenly, she was there.

The Grove was a circle of ancient trees, their branches woven into a roof of leaves that glowed green-gold in the light. At the center stood a single stone, smooth and grey, with water pooling at its base—a spring so clear Ember could see every pebble at the bottom.

And beside the spring, waiting as if he'd always been waiting, was the Namer.

He was not what she expected. Not a great stag or a wise owl or a figure of flame. He was a hare, old and grey, with eyes that held the whole sky. He looked at her, and Ember felt—

Seen.

Not scrutinized. Not judged. Just *seen*, the way a gardener sees a seed and knows exactly what it will become.

"Hello, little one," the Namer said, and his voice was warm as hearthfire, steady as stone.

Ember's throat tightened. She wanted to say something clever, something worthy, but all that came out was, "I've forgotten my name."

"I know."

"I've tried to remember, but I—" Her voice cracked. "I don't know who I am anymore."

The Namer stepped closer, and Ember saw that his paws were scarred, old wounds long healed. "You are who I made you to be," he said gently. "That hasn't changed."

"But I'm clumsy. I knock things over. I'm small, and I—"

"You bake bread that feeds your neighbors. You rise before dawn because the work matters to you. You came here, alone, when everyone else stayed in the noise." The Namer's gaze was impossibly kind. "You think I don't know you, Ember?"

The name landed like light through a window.

Ember.

Not because she'd earned it. Not because she was brave or clever or strong. But because that's who she'd always been—a small, steady warmth in the cold. A glow in the dark.

She started to cry, and it felt like waking up.

The Namer let her weep. When she was finished, he said, "The sickness is not yours alone. The whole village has forgotten. But you've remembered now. Will you help them remember too?"

Ember nodded, though she didn't know how.

The Namer bent and touched the spring. The water rippled, and when it stilled, Ember saw something floating there—a seed, small and golden, glowing faintly.

"Take this," the Namer said. "Plant it in the village square. It will grow slowly, but it will grow. And those who come near it will begin to remember."

Ember cupped the seed in her paws. It was warm, alive, humming like a heartbeat.

"Will they come?" she asked. "To the Grove, I mean?"

"Some will. When the noise becomes unbearable, when the mirrors stop working, when they realize they've forgotten something they can't afford to lose—some will come." The Namer smiled. "And I will be here. I'm always here."

Ember returned to Littleroot at dusk, the seed cradled carefully in her paws. The market was still roaring, lanterns blazing, music pounding. No one noticed her slip past the stalls and kneel in the center of the square, where the old well stood.

She dug a small hole beside the well, pressed the seed into the earth, and covered it gently.

Nothing happened.

She hadn't expected it to. The Namer had said it would grow slowly.

But as she stood and brushed the dirt from her paws, she felt something she hadn't felt in months: *solid*. Like her bones had remembered how to hold her up. Like her name fit her again, snug as a well-worn coat.

A hedgehog hurried past, arms full of ribbons, and paused. "You alright there, you?"

Ember smiled. "My name is Ember."

The hedgehog blinked, confused. "Alright then, Ember." And he said it slowly, as if tasting something half-remembered. "Funny. I used to have a name too. Can't quite... well. Maybe tomorrow."

He wandered off, and Ember watched him go.

The seed would grow. The tree would rise. And one by one, the creatures of Littleroot would come close enough to remember.

Not all at once. Not overnight.

But slowly, the way dawn comes—steady, sure, and warm as breath.

Ember went home, kneaded dough in the dark before dawn, and hummed a song she didn't know she remembered. The oven muttered something about mice who smile too much, but Ember didn't mind.

She knew her name.

And she knew the way back to the Grove.