

Provenance

XIII

Thom and I had a belated breakfast on the road back to Werewolf HQ in Canaan. I had to wrap my donut in a napkin, because I kept getting flashes of hot oil when I touched it with my bare fingers. Fresh food does that to me sometimes. Deep fried foods are the worst.

On the way, I told Thom what I had learned from Neeson's book.

“How does he know all this? Even I didn't know what the lethal dose of 'bane was,” Thom said around a mouthful of chocolate donut.

“You mean that part's true?” I asked around my own mouthful of cake donut.

“Oh, yes. My dad once saw a werewolf poisoned by 'bane. Nasty way to go, he said.”

Good to know, I thought. My opinion of Neeson went up a few more notches. After shoving the rest of the donut into my mouth, I flipped through a few of the other chapters. Vampires, ghosts and revenants, witches, spirits, demons. Things from legends and old stories. Things I didn't recognize but really wanted to look up as soon as I had a chance. They were all here, in all their glory and terror. No pictures—not even a grainy Loch Ness type shot—but Neeson had written detailed descriptions with tips on how to recognize them all. There was always a section about how to kill them or what their weaknesses were. It must have taken the man years to compile all of this information. I looked for a date at the beginning of the book. 1956. Wow. How had Jasper gotten his hands on this useful little volume?

If I was living in a world full of preternatural beasties, I needed to know everything I could about them. Curious, I looked for references to people like me: otherwise normal people who could do things like put their hands on the exact information they needed or who could see the history of where something had been just by touching it. I didn't see anything, unfortunately. I read all the way back to Canaan. As I read, a thought occurred to me. If this book existed, it stood to reason that there were other books out there, too; books that could tell me what other myths were real and how to deal with them. Did Dr. Jasper have some of those books? Probably, it stood to reason. If I got out of this alive, I was going to find a way to look through the books he had left behind. The mental list just kept growing and growing.

This time when we got to the outskirts of Canaan, I tried to spot the turn off to Thom's mother's house. A red newspaper box marked the spot, but I still almost missed it again. Thom barreled around

the turn and charged up the pot-holed drive again. I hurriedly tucked Jasper's book into my conference bag and braced myself as we lurched our way up to Mrs. Vilkas's house.

Geneva wasn't alone on the deck this time. Men and women in plaid and denim and thick wool were clustered around her. All of them had grim looks on their faces. Thom swore when he saw them. He rapidly shut off the motor and climbed out the car. I followed more slowly, wondering what the hell was going on. Thom walked up to the deck, but Geneva's cold voice stopped him before he got to the redwood stairs.

"Thom," she began, her clear alto voice ringing in the quiet. "You have been nothing but a disappointment since you took over the leadership of this pack. You're my son, and it pains me to say it, but I'm taking back control. You are no longer in charge—"

Thom cut her off. "Mother, you gave me control."

"And now I'm taking it back. My God, Thom. Since you took over, our pack has lost a lot of face. You were challenged, and refused to face it like you are supposed to. Our traditions *demand* that you face any and all challenges." There was a mumble of general agreement from the pack members that stood behind Geneva as she said this. She quelled them with a regal gesture. "You have failed to do this, and your challenger has taken to kidnapping and killing pack members in order to force you to act. Do you deny this?"

"No, but—" Thom was starting to look desperate.

"Instead of facing up to your duties as pack leader, you have been running around, chasing after the lost ones and doing everything you can to get them back except what you should have done in the first place. Do you deny this?"

"No."

"Do you intend to accept Wolfram's challenge?"

"I—" Thom began.

"It's a simple yes or no question, Thomas," Geneva said. Her voice was full of the scorn I had felt earlier, when Thom had told me the rest of his story.

"I don't know. Jack isn't even a member of this pack. He was never a member—"

Geneva cut him off. "That doesn't matter. You should be prepared to accept any and all challenges."

"So are you going to accept his challenge?" Thom asked.

"Yes."

"But you'll die."

“You never understood what it meant to lead. You face the hardships that come your way so that your pack doesn't suffer. If you're too weak or too sick or too old to survive a challenge, then you don't deserve to lead anymore. It's the way of things. Your father understood this.”

“But Jack's a psychopath. He'll destroy the pack if he wins.”

“Then it's up to someone else to confront him and kill him. If I die, someone else will step forward and kill Jack. It's the way of things,” Geneva repeated.

I was feeling beyond uncomfortable at this confrontation. I edged back towards Thom's car. Before I reached it, I backed into a brick wall. Or that's what it felt like. I turned around and saw Ralph smiling grimly down at me. His beard had been trimmed back, but I couldn't see any scars on his neck from his injuries. Another notch for Neeson.

“Wait a minute, Ada. I'll take you home with this is done,” Ralph rumbled.

“I have to stay?”

“Do you have a car?” he asked pointedly.

“No.”

“Then I guess you have to stay. Don't worry, though. No one's going to hurt you. We just have to finish up this business first.”

“What's going to happen to Thom? Are you guys going to...?”

“Kill him?” Ralph suggested.

I nodded.

Jeannie appeared at her husband's side. “No, we won't kill him. I don't know what's going to happen for sure, but I think Geneva's going to kick him out.”

“Kick him out?” I repeated.

“Exile him. Banish him. Tell him to go take a long walk off a short pier. *Comprende?*” she said, scowling.

“I understand,” I said numbly.

When I turned back to see what was going on, I noticed that the crowd behind Geneva was starting to thin out. Thom stood with his head bowed. He had accepted whatever his mother had told him at last. Whatever the pack leader had told him, I amended. I had misunderstood her from the beginning, I realized. She had wanted her son to stand up, to accept his duties. She was furious and disappointed that he had failed to live up to what he should be. And now it was over. Geneva was going to send me away with, at most, a gruff thanks, and a sincere *adieu*. I was out. Strangely, I didn't feel as relieved about this as I would have thought. Maybe it was Thom's paranoia, his belief that Jack was

somewhere out there like a bogey man, but I didn't want to go home alone. The time I had already spent in Jack's company had been more than enough for me.

Thom was gone, probably hiking the trail up to his cabin to sit and wait until Geneva and the pack decided what to do with him. Geneva, shadowed by three burly werewolves, came down off the deck and walked in my direction. Here it comes, I thought.

When she spoke, Geneva told me pretty much what I expected to hear. "I'm sorry that my son got you tangled up in this, Ms. Wright. But I don't think we'll be needing your services anymore. I don't know what my son promised you in the way of compensation—"

"I didn't do this for money, Mrs. Vilkas."

"Fair enough."

"I don't know if someone told you, but I accidentally killed Jack's cousin." There, I had said it.

Geneva's eyebrows hit her hairline. "Accidentally?"

"Self-defense. I didn't mean to kill him," I said weakly.

Geneva blew out a sigh. "I don't know if I can spare anyone to watch over you, Ms. Wright. And if I die..." Then she forced herself to finish the sentence. "If I die, Jack is going to come after you."

"I know."

"Do you have a ride home?"

Ralph spoke from somewhere above my head. "We'll take her home, *vedlysa*."

"We have until Friday. Ralph, can you check in from time to time? Just make it known that she's under protection?"

Ralph nodded. Jeannie didn't look very happy about it, though.

"That's the best I can do, Ms. Wright," Geneva told me.

"I appreciate it. You have no idea how much I appreciate it," I said sincerely.

"I suggest you find a way to defend yourself and do it soon. Hurry back, Ralph. I'll need you both when Jack and his pack arrive." With that, she turned sharply on her heel and marched with her entourage back to the house.

I grabbed my bag out of the Thom's car and Ralph and Jeannie led me over to a large green SUV of some kind. Interestingly, there was a Baby on Board sign stuck to one of the back windows. A sun shade was stuck to the window on the other side. There was an empty car seat in the back, and I had to push it over so that I could sit down. There were a few board books and toys on the floor. Thank God nothing had happened to Ralph that he couldn't heal. No wonder Jeannie had been so livid with me

back at the hospital. It certainly was a day for revelations.