

## *Provenance*

### XIV

Ralph did a quick sweep of my apartment while Jeannie stayed in the car. Nothing was out of place. Everything was secure. So far, so good. Ralph gave me a little hug before he left me alone. I locked up behind him and leaned against the door for a few minutes. I guess that was it. No more werewolves. Geneva had taken over. She would fight Jack and probably die. After that, what would happen? Would Thom suck it up and face his responsibilities? Worse than wondering was the fact that he would come after me for a little revenge. And I was on my own.

I dug through my bag for the Neeson book. The man wasn't a total crank, and I was going to have to learn how to defend myself when that wacko did decide to come after me. I flopped down on the couch and found chapter five again. This time, I read the whole chapter. Then I read it again, making a mental list of everything Neeson mentioned that might hurt a werewolf. Weapons made completely out of silver. Wolfsbane in sufficient quantities. (What did wolfsbane look like anyway?) Decapitation. That was it. They could heal just about anything else eventually. Except for a crushed windpipe, I thought sourly.

Eventually, I unpacked. I spent some time in the bathroom looking at my shoulder, but it looked clean. No signs of infection. I smeared some antibiotic cream from my medicine cabinet on it and pulled Thom's shirt back into place. After I changed into a loose button down blue Oxford shirt, gritting my teeth the whole time, I tidied my apartment up. Did the dishes. I seemed to be having a hard time adjusting to the fact that I was on my own. I had pissed off one of the scariest people I had ever met. I had managed to piss off a psychopathic werewolf. And there wasn't anything I could do to stop him.

That night, I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing footsteps outside or on the wooden porch out front. They were just my imagination, but I couldn't help but picture Jack or his werewolves trying to break in. After a few hours of that, I gave up and climbed back out of bed. I wandered out to the kitchen to get some tea. Maybe some of the herbal tea my mother had sent a while back would help me calm down. I flipped on the lights and saw the Neeson book lying on the counter. The sight of it reminded me of the short list of things that could kill a werewolf. I had the feeling that I was forgetting something important. When it came to me, I smacked myself on the forehead. I had completely forgotten about Dr. Jasper's silver dagger, his foot long knife of silver that had made the SCA blacksmith laugh himself silly when the old librarian had asked him to make it. Where was it now? Had

he left it at home? More importantly, was it somewhere that I could get to it?

I didn't think the police would have it, because Sergeant Cooper would have had a lot more questions for me if Jasper had had it on his person when he died. Maybe he had left it at home. If only he had taken it with him. Another "if only" that didn't bear thinking about now. I got dressed as quickly as I could and headed for the door before I realized that I didn't have a ride to Jasper's house. My car was still in the shop. The librarian had lived on the outskirts of town, up in the hills. It would take me hours to walk there. Could I get a ride? Probably not at one in the morning. And Julia wouldn't give me a ride now no matter what time it was. Shit. I was going to have to wait 'till the morning and take a bus or something. Wait, did Augusta have a taxi service? I found a phone book and opened it up to the business pages.

Augusta was a large enough to support not just one taxi service, but three. I called the first one on the list, Evergreen Executive Taxi, and arranged for them to pick me up. They were at my door in fifteen minutes and I directed them up to Dr. Jasper's house. Thankfully, the driver was content to just drive and didn't try to make conversation. I had the yawning man pull into the drive and wait for me. When I got up to the poured concrete porch, I realized that I had another problem. I didn't have a key. I made a show of checking my pockets for a key before I realized that the cab driver had taken the opportunity to take a quick nap. His Mariners hat was pulled low over his eyes. I pulled my gloves on and went to work.

I checked under the doormat and over the door jamb for the key. No joy. I looked down to the lawn and spotted a suspicious looking rock. I hopped off the porch and picked up. A quick rap of the knuckle told me that the rock was a hollow chunk of plaster. I had to fiddle with it for a minute before I got it open. A little steel key fell out into my hand. I held my breath when I put it in the lock, but it turned easily. Yes! I pushed the door open and walked into the dark house. Right, I thought. If I were a foot long silver knife, where would I be? I searched the house as quickly and quietly as I could. Not in the desk. Not in the living room. I was going to have to check the bedroom. Even though Jasper was dead and obviously didn't care what happened anymore, I still felt like I was invading his privacy as I made my way towards the back of the house.

The bedroom was neat and tidy. It was more tidy than mine was by a long shot. Nothing in the closet. Just orderly rows of trousers and pressed button down shirts. Shoes were laid out on the floor with military precision, all polished to a high shine. I lucked out with the bedside table. The knife was in the (thankfully) otherwise empty drawer. Jasper hadn't had a chance to get a scabbard made for it.

As I walked back through the house, my eye wandered regretfully over the rows and piles of

books. I knew that there was information here that could help me, and I was tempted to go through them right then and there. But I didn't have Jasper's knack of being able to put his hand on the book that could answer all his questions. I really didn't want to get caught here either. I had a feeling that I had only just managed to talk my way out of Sergeant Cooper's office. I dragged myself away from the thousands of potentially useful volumes and left. I locked up carefully and stuffed the key into the pocket of my jeans. I kicked the fake rock back into place and shoved the knife as far as it would go into the big pockets of my Augusta University hoodie. I had to knock a couple of times to get the taxi driver to wake up and unlock the back doors for me. ex

My gloved hand clutched the knife handle in my pocket all through the fifteen minute drive back to my place. As soon as I got in through the door and had locked up again, I pulled the long knife out of my pocket and looked at. True, I had no idea how to use it. But I felt much safer for having it. I wasn't totally helpless anymore.

That night, I went to sleep holding the knife.

By Thursday, two days after Geneva had dismissed me, I was to the point of cleaning out the grout in my shower in an attempt to stave off the worried boredom I was feeling. I was scrubbing away at the tiles with an old toothbrush when I heard someone pounding at the door. I snatched up Jasper's knife and walked slowly towards the door. I peered through the spy hole and tried to decipher whose nose I was looking at.

“Ada, let me in.” It was Thom.

I opened the door slowly. “What do you want?”

“They kicked me out.”

“Can you blame them?”

Thom breathed out a long sigh. “Will you let me in?”

“Fine.” I opened the door and let him in. I didn't put the knife away, though.

Thom had a pair of gym bags slung over his shoulders and accidentally knocked me out of the way as he came in. He gave me a muttered sorry and tossed the bags onto my little couch.

“Are you moving in?” I asked, eyeing the luggage.

“I've been officially exiled. I have to leave Canaan. Can't live within the city limits. You're the only person I know who'll put me up.”

“Oh yeah?”

Thom gave me a look. “Please?”

“Just for a little while. You stay any longer than a few days and I'm going to start charging you

rent.”

“Can I sing in the shower?” He gave me a shy smile.

“No.”

Thom was a wreck. He hadn't shaved in days and he must have lost his comb at some point. His black hair was sticking out all over the place. He was starting to look a bit like that guy who sings for the Cure. A quick sniff told me that he hadn't been bathing regularly either. I felt better about cleaning my grout now. At least my coping behaviors were constructive. And hygienic.

“Is it over?” I asked.

Thom sat down wearily on the arm of my couch. “No. They have to wait for the full moon. Tradition, you know.”

“So, tomorrow, then?”

“Yeah.”

“What about Nikki?”

“They still have her. They're bringing her along tomorrow to keep Mom from getting cold feet. She's okay. All my messes are being cleaned up.” Something about his tone told me that that was another choice phrase from Geneva.

“Do you want to talk about?” I asked unenthusiastically.

“Not really. It's not like there's anything I can do. Mother—Geneva—said that I can come back for the challenge. She wants family there. Just in case. But I have to leave again after.”

“Why didn't they just let you stay until then?”

“Well, my mother didn't want me there. That's the truth. She still thinks I am a disappointment. She only wants me present at the challenge because *tradition* demands it,” he snarled.

I privately agreed with Geneva, but I didn't say it. The mention of the moon reminded me to ask, “Are you sure that I'm not going to turn into a wolf?” It was probably my imagination, but I thought I felt my bite marks tingling at the thought.

“Pretty sure. But we'll know one way or the other after tomorrow.”

Comforting.

“You get the couch,” I said. “I have a blanket you can use.”

I heard him say “Thank you” as I walked down the hall to hide Jasper's knife and clean up my cleaning up in the bathroom. That night was awkward. Thom bought us a pizza and we ate in silence, watching Thursday night TV. We had nothing to say to each other. It had been said, and if we said anything else I knew we'd end up arguing with each other again and I'd lose my werewolf news service.

After my patience wore out, I went to bed early, leaving Thom alone in the dark. For the first time ever, I turned the little lock on my bedroom door. No late night visits for Thom.

I shouldn't have been surprised, but I had trouble getting to sleep. One more night of this and it would officially be a pattern. Instead of trying out the list of insomnia cures I had looked up online earlier, I spent a lot of time thinking and staring up at the ceiling. I no longer wasted time thinking about when this would be all over. Thom's reappearance at my door had shone me how futile that was. Instead, I tried to think about what my options were.

If Geneva managed to kill that son of a bitch, then everything would be okay and I didn't need to worry about the pack. Unless they needed my services again. Yeesh. If Jack won, Thom would finally have to own up to what he should have done in the first place and challenge the bastard as revenge for his mother. Probably. I hoped. Fingers crossed on that one, anyway. The dichotomous key in my mind branched out again. If Thom won, then things would be okay and I wouldn't have to worry. If Jack killed Geneva and Thom...I was tempted to tell myself that I would cross that bridge when I came to it, but I couldn't be sure of what would happen. There was a really good chance that Jack would survive and take over the pack. If that happened, I would have to get the hell out of Dodge before he could track me down. Not an attractive future.

If it turned out that Jack did win, could I leave my job, my home, everything behind?

I guess I didn't really have a choice.

The other thing that bothered me was how wrong I had been about Thom. When I had first met him, Thom had seemed capable, strong. I had been attracted to him. But the last few days had shown me that all the good things about him had been a façade. Underneath that, he was insecure and cowardly. How long had he been in charge of the pack? Not long, I suspected. Jack had cracked Thom without coming near him. Maybe Thom would find some courage and save his pack from that psychopath. I sincerely hoped that he did, and not just for my sake. And there it was again, another wave of guilt and horror at what had happened in the Steppenwolf's parking lot. It didn't seem to matter that it had been self-defense, accidental.

That settled it, I probably wasn't going to get to sleep tonight. At least I could use the time constructively, and learn about werewolves. Maybe I could learn something to my advantage. I carefully pulled on my favorite reading gloves. I knew better than to try and read old books without something on my hands. I took Neeson's paperback, *Fighting the Supernatural*, off my bedside table and flipped it open to chapter five once more. I was especially careful to wear gloves around this book. I had no idea where it had been and I had absolutely no desire to find out.

According to Neeson, werewolves had been around as long as anyone could tell. There were werewolves or something like them on just about every continent, in old and not so old legends. There were harmless werewolves, and there were werewolves that preyed on humans. Most werewolves in North America were descended from the werewolves of Europe, mostly from Eastern Europe. Neeson claimed that there were clans from Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Lithuanian SSR, the Soviet Union, and on and on. As Neeson listed them, I had to mentally translate the old Cold War names into their modern equivalents. It was almost like reading an old textbook. If you could imagine an old textbook about the supernatural, that is.

I moved on to the next section. Werewolf biology. They healed abnormally fast. Knew that one. Lycanthropy could be passed from mother to child. Interesting. In the moment when a werewolf changed forms, they were vulnerable to just about anything. Noted. I could use that little tidbit. Neeson wrote that the process was surprisingly delicate and if anything interfered, the werewolf could be maimed and they would not be able to heal the damage. Unfortunately, Neeson wrote, the process was extremely fast and you had to have good timing. Also, a true werewolf—one born to it—could change at will and could also transform into something between a man and a werewolf. I guess that's what Jack had done to try and scare me. The wolf man form.

Next section. Lycanthropy infection. My attention sharpened and I thought I felt that eerie little tingling from the bites on my shoulder. Apart from being born a werewolf, the lycanthropy germ could be spread by bites. The infection rate was quite high. Damn it. Neeson said that the only people who were bitten and didn't turn fuzzy once a month were people who had something that protected them. Let's hope that I was one of the few exceptions. Usually, it was because they already were preternatural in one way or another. Other kinds of shape shifters. Hereditary witches. (What the hell did that mean?) Selkies. (I didn't even know what they were.) Gargoyles. Or because they were some kind of undead: vampires, zombies, ghosts, ghouls, and all the rest. Jesus, what kind of world was this? Unfortunately, Neeson didn't mention people like Dr. Jasper and I—people with a knack for something out of the ordinary—in his list. But he also wrote that his lists were incomplete because he was still doing research on how many of the old stories were true. On the one hand, this was kind of comforting because it meant that I might be immune. On the other hand, it meant there could be worse things out there and I wouldn't be able to use this book as my guide. Another good reason to pillage Jasper's collection before the Special Collections people got their hands on them.

I read on. I read the section on killing werewolves for a fourth time, but didn't pick up anything new there. But I was sure glad that I had made that late night raid on Jasper's house, even if the one

AM taxi ride had turned out to be a wee bit expensive. Who knew they charged extra after midnight?

I spent a few hours reading through the other chapters. I skipped the chapter on vampires, because I wanted to be able to sleep again sometime this month. I don't know when I fell asleep, but when I woke, the faithful Neeson was resting on my chest and my left hand was still wrapped around the handle of the silver knife.