

Provenance

XV

I woke to the sound of an insistent pounding on my bedroom door. When I couldn't ignore it anymore, I whipped the blankets off and padded to the door in my bare feet.

“What is it, Thom?”

“It's morning.”

“I know that, Captain Obvious. What do you want?”

“Breakfast?” He sounded a bit like a begging puppy. Had he always done that? Because it was annoying as hell to me now.

“I have some corn flakes in the cupboard. Help yourself.”

I heard Thom troop off down the hall and start clattering dishes around in the kitchen. Once I had gotten dressed, I unlocked my door and joined the exiled prince. Thom was sitting at my dining table, hunched over a mixing bowl of corn flakes. A night's sleep hadn't done much for him. If he had managed to sleep at all. And it looked like he hadn't bothered to pack a razor. It wasn't much of a stretch to believe he was a werewolf with the beard he had going. I started up the coffeemaker.

“What's the plan, then?” I asked.

Thom meditatively crunched a big bite of corn flakes and thought about the question.

“You do realize that's a mixing spoon, right?” I asked, feeling my eyebrows rise towards my hairline.

“Is it? Sorry.” Thom took another gigantic bite.

“Do you have a plan?”

“There's nothing much we can do. It's all set. We have an invitation, but we're not allowed to interfere,” he said, trying not to spit bits of corn flake around.

“We?”

“Yes, *we*. No one is allowed in to interfere.”

“Or else?”

“You don't want to know.”

“I don't want to go. If I get anywhere near Jack, I'm dead,” I pointed out.

Thom guzzled down the milk and pushed his bowl away. “But you're invited.”

“So?”

“You don't seem to understand the nature of this invitation,” Thom said, giving me a bland look.

“Tell me, then.”

“If you don't show up on your own, someone will be sent to collect you.”

“Why do I have to be there? I'm no werewolf.”

“Jack wants you there.”

“Christ.”

“And his guys'll come to get you if you don't show,” Thom said.

I grunted and started looking around for a clean mug. I fished one out of the drying rack and poured it full of coffee and dumped a couple of packets of sugar into it. As I stirred, I felt like I had to do something. I ignored Thom and sipped my coffee, leaning against the counter. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw something through the kitchen window. I was running for the bedroom before the mug hit the floor.

Jasper's knife was lying on the bed, partially buried under the blankets. I grabbed the knife without thinking and almost blacked out at the feeling of raw, white heat. Oh shit, I had forgotten. I hadn't had this long enough for the metal to forget what the blacksmith had done to the metal. My fingers somehow managed to peel themselves off the handle. I scrambled for my gloves and pulled them on. Dignity impaired, I came out of the bedroom with the knife clenched in my hand. Thom was looking at me, brows knit.

“What's wrong?”

“I saw something. Outside.”

At least Thom didn't cower when I said it. The lean man rushed to the front door and cracked it open. He stuck his long nose out and sniffed, sucking in air and whatever scents might be floating around. There was a thin window next to the door and I pressed my face against it. I wasn't even tempted to say the “too quiet” line as my breath fogged up the window. I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary outside. Not so much as a paw print on the porch.

“I don't see anything, but I'll do a walk around. Lock the door behind me, all right? Don't open up unless it's me.” Thom said. He ducked out the door, slamming it shut with an inordinately loud thump.

My heart was pounding in my chest as I peered through the thin window. I couldn't get much of a view, just a narrow piece of the porch and lawn. I couldn't hear anything either. I would have hoped that the dead golden leaves on the lawn would have made it impossible for anyone to sneak around

silently. Except werewolves, apparently. I focused my ears but I couldn't hear so much as a scuffle.

A loud crash at the back of the old Edwardian almost made me jump out of my skin. I ripped the door open and jumped off the porch, sprinting around to the back of the house. I skidded around the corner, knife held out defensively even though I had no idea how to actually use it. Thom was holding a fiercely wriggling man up against the wall, his forearm pressed hard into the man's throat. Thom could be aggressive when he put his mind to it, I'll give him that. When I got closer, I could hear a huge, rumbling growl pouring out of Thom's throat. His teeth were elongated, and he was quivering with tension.

“Who are you? What are you doing creeping around my house?” I asked, trying to sound like I was some one to reckon with.

The man gasped something, but I couldn't make it out.

“Thom, ease up a bit,” I said, putting a hand on the green-eyed man's shoulder.

Surprisingly, Thom snapped at me and growled again. There was no recognition in his eyes when he looked at me.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I hollered and punched him in the arm, as hard as I could manage.

With the knife in my right hand, I had a bit more oomph than I realized and it rocked Thom a little. But at least it brought him back to his senses. Thom shook his head a few times, then muttered a fast “sorry” before he turned his attention back to the captive. The man was turning a deep shade of red, and his hands were clawing at Thom's arm, trying to get him to loosen up. He was an older man, his greasy hair was receding at the temples. He was wearing a battered leather jacket and a beer stained t-shirt. His jeans were stained with motor oil and dirt, and his steel-toed boots had obviously seen better days. I could see panic blossoming in his watery blue eyes. There was something very familiar about him, but I couldn't quite place him. Not from the library. Pretty sure I hadn't seen him in Canaan. Then it all clicked in to place.

“I know you,” I said slowly.

“I've never seen you before in my life, lady,” the man croaked nervously. Thom had eased up on the pressure, but the man wasn't going anywhere any time soon.

“You were there, with Nikki, in that room,” I said, advancing slowly.

Thom was trembling even more. His muscles were flexing under the skin, and I could see the tendons in his forearms showing in stark relief.

“What the hell's the matter with you?” I asked, staring at him. Thom didn't answer. He just

stared at the man with so much hatred, I was surprised that the intruder didn't burst into flames from the intensity.

“Too close to the full moon,” the intruder croaked. “He's losing it.”

“Losing what?”

“His control,” the man said, looking increasingly worried. “Call your wolf off.”

“Why should I? You're one of Jack's people, aren't you?”

“What if I told you I was defecting? That I wanted to come over to the side of the angels?” the balding man offered.

“I'd know you were lying,” I countered. “Stop wasting my time. Why are you here?”

“I—” the man began.

“Could we hurry this up?” Thom lisped. His fangs had been growing when I wasn't looking.

“Getting tired already?” I asked.

“This is harder than it looks,” Thom admitted.

“God, you people are new at this whole 'torturing people for information' thing, aren't you?” The balding man rolled his eyes in disgust.

“Shut up!” I hissed. Thom did me one better and knocked the man squarely in the jaw with his free hand. The man's teeth clacked shut loudly and he moaned.

“Everything okay down there?” I heard a concerned female voice. Shit. Nancy from upstairs was home on Fridays. Crap.

“Fine, Nancy. Sorry to wake you!” I called. Then I whispered to Thom, “Let's take him down to the basement. I don't want to attract any more attention.”

Thom grunted and wrapped his fist around the intruder's collar, jerking him along. I opened the thin door to the basement and Thom aimed the man towards the stairs.

“Walk or I'll shove you down,” Thom said.

The man hurried nimbly down the stairs. “Do you want to tie me up in one of these chairs? It's traditional, you know.” He smiled broadly at me, baring his yellowing smoker's teeth. Ick.

“Sit. I won't tie you up as long as you promise not to make a run for it,” I said.

Thom helpfully kicked one of the blue plastic chairs over towards the man. The balding man sank gratefully into it.

“Oh, I promise, ma'am. Scouts honor and everything,” he said, still grinning widely.

I couldn't stop myself. I smacked the smirking bastard across the back of the head, then had to wipe my hands on my jeans to try and get the pomade off my palm. Double ick. Where did Jack find

these guys?

“Who are you?” Thom asked.

“Mike,” the man said.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Oh, to spy, obviously,” Mike said cheerily.

“For Jack?” I pressed.

“Of course. Who else? How many other werewolves have you pissed off lately? Did you lose track?”

“And you were only sent to watch me? Nothing else?”

“Jack wants to know who and what you are,” Mike admitted.

“Why?”

“You managed to kill a member of his family! You keep messing up his plans!” Mike said. “You lead Thom right to us near Pioneer square. Then Thom sends his best people to protect you at the motel. Why would he do that unless it you were important, hmm?” he asked, sneering a little.

“Is that all?” I asked, trying to ignore the hollow feeling I was having.

“And *then*, Thom and his whole merry band show up at Jack's bar to rescue you. You're like, a secret weapon or something. I mean, Jesus, lady. How many ordinary humans can take out a werewolf?” Mike said. “And when I show up here, Geneva's little disappointment,” he jerked his head at Thom, “jumps me and throws me up against the wall. Jack wants to know what it is you can do. And he's prepared to do what it takes to find out whatever kooky magic you can do.” Then he added, “Before he kills you, that is.”

“And what about Dr. Jasper?” I asked, looking coldly at Thom. “What did he ever do to you?”

Mike shrugged. “Same deal, pretty much. You librarians know more than you should. Thom gave you special protection. Jack wants to know why.”

“He couldn't just ask?” I was starting to feel incredulous at these revelations. Something didn't feel right about this.

“You don't know Jack,” Mike said. “Obviously.” Mike chuckled weakly at his own joke. “Can I go home now?”

I glanced at Thom. “You believe this?” I asked him.

“No.” Thom's mouth clamped shut on the word and started prowling around behind Mike, putting on his best menacing act.

“Okay, there's a mystical ancient prophecy—” Mike started.

Thom's fist crashed into his jaw for the second time, and Mike bowled right over in the chair. He landed on the cracked concrete floor in a tangle of limbs and plastic. Shaking his head, Mike spat blood on to the floor and looked up at Thom.

"Now you're getting the hang of it. Couple more like those and you can start wearing the big boy pants," Mike said. His teeth were red now, coated in his own blood.

"Stop wasting our time, Mike," I hissed.

"Ooo, you're catching on quick, too, missy! I'm impressed." Mike was having a good laugh at us now.

I lost my temper. I held Jasper's knife out and walked slowly towards where Mike was crouched in the floor. Before he had a chance to move, my hand whipped out, cutting a thin line on his stubbly cheek. Mike howled in pain and rocked back. He slapped a hand to his cheek, scuttling away a little more.

"What the fuck was that?" he cried, looking at the shining, pale knife.

"Want to feel it again?" I offered.

"Christ!" Mike breathed.

I lunged for his face again, but Mike ducked out of the way. He scooted back until his back hit one of the wooden support columns, forcing him to stop. He took his hand away from his cheek and looked at the blood. The cut was a lot worse than I had been expected. It looked a little burnt around the edges, to be honest. Neeson hadn't been kidding about the weaponized silver. I crouched down in front of him, holding Jasper's knife loosely in my gloved right hand.

"What is that?" Mike asked again. He was hypnotized by the knife; he couldn't take his eyes off of it.

"It's silver, Mike. Does it burn?" I asked. I wasn't sure what had come over me. All I cared about at that moment was that I was getting results. I guess I had hidden depths.

"God, yes," Mike whispered.

"Hey, Ada, take it easy," Thom said. He had walked up behind me and I hadn't even noticed.

"Jack wants to kill me," I said slowly.

"Yes."

"And he wants to know my trick before I go?" I asked.

"Pretty much.

"Is that all? He just wants to find out what I can do?" I asked softly. "No torture?"

"That's all he told me. He just said, get over there. Try and break in. Do whatever you need to

do to find out what she can do.”

“Why does it matter so much?” At last, the real question.

“I think Jack might be afraid of you. He can't predict you. You mess up his equations.”

“I messed up the plans.”

Mike nodded. “He doesn't deal well with things that mess up his plans. I've never seen him like this before. Before he started trying to take things over, it was cool. We all hung out. Jack watched out for us, you know?”

I grunted. “Go on.”

“Not much to tell. We just wanted a place to call home. The Seattle pack was starting to breathe down our necks. We heard about this pack up north, with a weak leader. So Jack made up a plan to take over. That's it.” Mike shrugged. “Except for you. You're more trouble than you're worth, I think,” Mike said. “I don't even understand it. Jack's just got this grand vision. King of the Northwest, something like that. And now there's you, running around killing werewolves without a weapon.”

“Is that all? He doesn't want to kill me for killing his cousin?”

“Who told you that you killed his cousin?”

I glanced at Thom before I could stop myself.

“That wasn't his cousin,” Mike said.

I waggled the knife at Mike. “Are you lying to me, Mike?”

“God, no. Would you put that thing away?”

“Please, Ada,” Thom echoed.

“Not quite yet, I think. Who was that guy, then?”

“Richard Hailey. Jack's brother. Well, half-brother,” Mike said, curiously. “They weren't close.”

Oh *that* made me feel better. Not only had I managed to dispatch a member of Jack's family, but I had accidentally killed his freaking brother. Shit.

“Tell me more about Jack's *vision*.”

Mike was looking a little sick, but he started talking anyway. “Jack got kicked out of the Seattle pack a couple of years ago. Found us. Me, Cody, couple of other guys. Pulled in some family members who also had the germ. We started our own pack, you know? It was good, for a while. But, Jack. I guess he wanted more. We were fine, but he started talking about getting his own territory.”

I glanced over at Thom. He was kneeling on the floor next to me.

“Does this make sense to you?” I asked.

Thom swiveled his green eyes over at me and nodded. “Tradition,” he grunted.

God damn werewolf tradition. It kept getting me into dangerous situations.

Mike continued. "He knew there was no way that he could take on the Seattle pack. Those guys are fucking *ruthless*. But the little Canaan pack, they were a different matter. We heard about you, Thom."

"You heard what, *gyvate*?" Thom asked. I had a feeling that I knew the answer already.

"That you were weak, O pack master," Mike sneered. "We knew you wouldn't fight. Jack thought that if we took enough of your women, you'd finally have to act. But I guess Mommy got fed up with you, huh?"

Thom cocked his fist, but I pointed Jasper's knife at him. "Stop. He's talking already. We don't have to hit him any more," I said, annoyed.

"Yeah!" Mike said.

"Shut up. I wasn't talking to you," I said. "Get on with it.

"Not much more to tell. Jack's challenge has been answered. He'll win. We'll have a territory and new pack mates," Mike said.

"But people have to die first," Thom said. He was starting to tense up again, but I didn't bother to calm him down.

"It's the way of things," Mike said. "Hey, man, you might have won, for all you know."

Thom flinched at that.

"I guess I'm just a loose end," I said.

"Jack doesn't like loose ends," Mike replied sadly, wagging his greasy head back and forth.

"Tell us where he is," Thom said. He tried his best to look menacing, but Mike ignored him.

"Where's Jack, Mike?" I asked.

"If I tell you, what are you going to do?"

"Kill him," Thom growled.

"Ah ah ah." Mike waggled a thin finger at Thom. "You know better than that. That's not how it works, Tommy boy. You can't touch him now, not when there's a challenge. Besides, better men than me are with him. You wouldn't be able to get near him. I'm expendable."

Thom's knees cracked loudly as he stood up. "Fuck," he said succinctly, and started pacing up and down the concrete floor.

"Tell me where he is, Mike. Or I'll have to use this again." I lifted the knife and Mike's eyes locked on to it once more.

"Are you really going to try and kill him?"

“Who's interrogating who here? Where is Jack.”

“Traveling. He headed out this morning with the rest of the guys.”

“What's he up to? Why is he leaving so early? Thom, when does this thing start?”

“Moon rise,” Thom answered.

Of course, I thought.

“He just wants to check out the lay of the land. That's all, I swear. He wants this to go down according to tradition. Otherwise it doesn't count,” Mike said.

Ole Mike was sweating rather badly now. He wanted to leave. He was going to be in serious trouble when Jack found all that he had given up to us. And with hardly a fight, too.

“Look, can I go now? Are we done?”

“I bet you're going to scuttle off to Jack now, huh?” I asked.

“What else can I do? He protects me.”

“He isn't doing much of a job of it right now, is he?” I said. I could feel a cold little smile on my face. Hell, I was starting to scare myself now.

Then Mike grinned at him, teeth still bloody. “I'll settle for revenge.”

With that parting shot, Mike bolted for the stairs. Thom and I were so startled that we didn't move to stop him until it was too late. The skinny little bastard was up the stairs and out the door before we could catch him. Thom and I charged up the stairs just in time to see Mike tear off down the street, heading towards wherever he had parked his car.

I guess we were going to have to do it the old fashioned way.

We were going to have to fight it out at moon rise.

Crap.