

Provenance

XVI

Thom and I stood at the door to laundry room looking stupidly at one another for a moment after Mike scampered across the lawn. Then I shrugged, and headed back inside. Thom trotted along behind me. Whatever had come over me in the laundry room was starting to fade away, my tough act starting to melt. I could feel sweat trickling across my palms inside my leather gloves. I could also feel a distinct urge to curl up in a corner and jibber. Get a hold of yourself, Ada. Just keep it together.

“Well, we can't stay here,” I said weakly. “We should head up to Canaan early, before Mike calls in reinforcements.”

Thom grunted and started gathering up his things. I headed to my bedroom to look for a belt or something I could use to carry Jasper's knife around more discretely. Several minutes later, I found an old black belt. I threaded it through the loops on my jeans and stuck the knife through at my left hip. I looked like an idiot, but I felt better. I knew that I had only gotten lucky in the parking lot when I hit Richard. Pang of guilt there. Again. It had been a fluke. It would be different this time. I didn't want to put down any odds on my survival, no matter how dangerous Jack thought I was.

After a little more digging in the closet, I found a long, light black suede jacket that I had forgotten I had. When I shrugged it on, I checked to make sure that I covered the shine of the silver. Yup. I was good to go. I headed back to the living room to check on Thom's progress. All packed. He was sitting on the couch with his bags between his feet. Without a word, he lurched to his feet and swung one onto each shoulder. Not long after I locked up, we were rolling out of Augusta in Thom's black sedan. Every time I looked at something familiar—my favorite bookshop, the place where I got my morning chai, the park where I had met my last boyfriend—I tried not to imagine that it was the last time I would be seeing it. Focus, Ada. I also had to fight the urge to wrap my gloved hands around the handle of my weapon. If I survived, I was definitely going to have to learn how to use it properly. Thom bumped his way onto the highway and we headed west for a while before we could merge onto I-5 and start heading north. It was the middle of the afternoon, and there was little traffic to slow us down. Not that I was in any rush, mind. We cruised north, with dense forests of pine lining the concrete lanes. I don't think Thom was in a rush either. In fact, he was going below the speed limit.

“There's no problem if we show up early, is there?” I asked.

“No. I'm not in any hurry to see my mother killed, thank you,” Thom said bitterly. But his foot

pushed down harder on the gas.

Maybe it was the quiet in the car, with just the faint roar of the tires on the pavement to keep me from feeling like I was in an isolation chamber, but I was having a hard time dealing with the silence. I punched the on button on the stereo and Bob Marley started trying to sooth me and improve my outlook on things. You've got your work cut out for you, Bob, I thought. But thanks for trying. Ole Bob stayed on a loop until we hit the exit for Canaan and points east.

I did not feel soothed.

To tell the truth, I started feeling more antsy as the miles ticked past. What could I do? Geneva had no chance. Jack was strong and ruthless. Thom was untested and unwilling. I had a weapon, but I had no clue how to really use it. And my little gift wasn't going to be of any use at all. I tried to tell myself that it would all be over and done with tonight, but that didn't help at all. Probably made my anxiety worse. At least I wasn't the only one who wanted to run and hide. I could tell that Thom was having a hard time, too. His eyes would flick to every exit and I knew that he was thinking about turning around.

Did two cowards equal one brave person?

The sun was down when the sign for Canaan flashed by and we drifted onto the exit. We rolled slowly through the small town. This time, though, the town was deserted. The light were off on all the shops and restaurants and there were no cars parked along the sides of the streets. Canaan was buttoned up tight. Even the bar was dark, something I had never seen after sunset before. I guess this really was a werewolf town. Everyone was where the pack had decided the challenge was going to happen. Thom drove us through town. When the buildings petered out, he started taking side roads. We drove further and further into the woods, hundred year old trees towered around us as we bumped down the road. It was pitch dark, and all I could see was the narrow track of asphalt by the light of the headlights. I didn't bother to ask where we were going. I figured we be there soon enough. My heart knew it too, and I had to make myself take deep breaths and calm down.

I wasn't prepared when the asphalt abruptly stopped. I had been so focused on trying to calm myself and think that I hadn't been paying attention. The tall pines had opened up, leaving a wide meadow. It must have been more than a mile across. In the middle, the grass had been cleared away to leave a broad dirt circle. Small white stones marked its edges. Cars and trucks and motorcycles were parked near the tree line and there were dozens of people milling around in two distinct camps. Geneva's pack. Jack's pack.

And no one except Jack was happy to be here, I bet. I couldn't see him yet, but I could see some

of the guys who had taken Nikki. Thom turned left and parked far to one side, near familiar cars, I guessed. I pushed the door open as soon as the sedan rolled to a stop and hopped to the ground. Twigs and fallen pine needles crackled and crunched under my sneakers. I scanned the scene to see if I could figure out which group was Geneva's. I definitely didn't want to blunder into the wrong crowd in the dark. Eerily enough, I thought I could see the werewolves eyes glowing the dark. No, I wasn't imagining things. I could definitely see eyes glowing a soft neon green in the night. No wonder Thom and Ralph and the rest could see so well in the dark. They had predator's eyes, just like a cat's. No, like a wolf's.

When I noticed that everyone was still walking around on two legs, I leaned over to Thom and said, "I thought you all had to change when the moon was full."

"We don't have to yet," he said shortly. I could see him craning his head around, looking for his mother.

"Another myth?" I pressed.

"All right, we get a really strong urge to slip our skins, but we can fight it for a while. We'll all change before dawn, though."

Thom walked slowly towards the clump of werewolves on the northern side of the meadow, and I trotted to catch up with him. Even if I didn't trust him, I trusted his eyes. When we got closer, I started recognizing faces. Ralph stood out, towering over the rest of the pack. I couldn't see Jeannie's spiky, purple hair, but I knew she was close by. I spotted the muscular werewolf and the Latino that had ridden north with us the first time I visited Canaan. The rest of the faces looked vaguely familiar, but I didn't have any names for them. There was a tight knot of people, clustered around Geneva, I guess. Geneva's pack was quiet. No one was planning or strategizing. Families were huddled together, talking softly to each other, giving each other comfort. The moon was climbing slowly across the sky. When the moon was at its peak, the challenge would begin. I looked across the meadow and saw men on the other side, pacing back and forth, talking loudly to one another. I couldn't see Jack yet. I breathed a little sigh of relief and the short reprieve. Then I saw a flash of red hair in the moonlight. Jack. I sucked down a long breath and gripped the silver knife under my coat.

The moon was almost in place, and Geneva walked stiffly out of her protective group of werewolves. I looked back across the meadow and saw Jack's bright head emerge from his pack. Without speaking, they took up their positions at the edges of the pebble-lined circle. The packs formed silent half-circles around their pack leaders. No one spoke. I don't know what I was imagining. Cat-calling, maybe. Or taunting. Trash-talking. But there was no anger here. On Geneva's side, there was

just worry and sadness. On Jack's side, a desperate sort of eagerness.

Jack's chipper voice rang out in the darkness, making me jump. "Geneva Vilkas, I challenge you for the right to lead your pack."

"I hear you, Jack Wolfram. And I answer your challenge," Geneva answered in her own cold voice. "As the challenger, you have the right to chose the form we take."

"Wolves," Jack said. "We will fight as wolves.

Who scripted these rituals? I wondered inanely.

There was a *whump* as a pair of bonfires suddenly ignited behind the two leaders. The wood must have been soaked in gasoline or something, because the fire blazed right up, hot and orange. It was so bright that I was temporarily blinded. I shook my head and looked towards the circle again. Geneva was dressed in old jeans and a worn old blue t-shirt. Jack was in khakis and a white button-down shirt. He looked like a banker trying to dress down and failing. Without another word, they both started to strip. I tried not to look, but I noticed that no one else was bothered or surprised. Tradition, again. Well, I was a bit bothered. I stared up at the sky, around at the other werewolves. Ada, you're an idiot, I told myself. Suck it up.

I glanced back towards the circle and saw that Jack and Geneva had gotten down on to all fours. As I watched, Geneva's skin sprouted thick white fur. Black guard hairs popped out around her neck in a beautiful salt and paper ruff. Her hands shortened and the fingers thickened. In an instant, they were paws. When she changed, Geneva was a powerful looking she-wolf. White and gray and black, with glowing green eyes and an elegant tail. She stepped delicately into the circle and sat back on her haunches. Then she waited for Jack to make his move.

On the other side of the circle, Jack had changed into a gigantic, rufous colored wolf. He stood a couple of hands taller than Geneva. My heart sank as I compared them. Jack must outweigh the matriarch by over a hundred pounds. The man (or should I say wolf?) was all muscle and fur and teeth and claws. Geneva was going to have to use every dirty trick she knew just to keep from being killed when the challenger made his move. Jack stepped into the circle, tail wagging jauntily. I could have sworn the wolf was smiling. I could see all his teeth, and his tongue was lolling out.

I thought I saw Jack's muscles tense for a jump and then he was on Geneva. The quiet night was suddenly loud with snarling and yipping. Jack lunged for Geneva's ruff, but she danced out of the way and Jack's teeth clacked shut loudly on empty air. He barked in frustration and chased after her again. My heart was in my mouth the whole time. Geneva's strategy seemed to be to stay just out of reach and let Jack wear himself down. A classic, sure, but probably still good a good plan. The white wolf lead

Jack a merry chase around the circle, and I could tell that some of her pack were starting to feel hopeful as the minutes went past and Jack hadn't even managed to draw blood on their leader. But when I looked around, the older faces didn't look at all encouraged.

Geneva scored a quick hit on one of Jack's hind legs as he rocketed forward in another miss. His pack jeered at the older wolf. I could only imagine what Jack had told them, but they were probably hoping for a quick kill and a quicker consolidation of the two packs. Ten minutes had probably rolled past since the challenge had started, and no real progress had been made. And, Jack had started to figure out what Geneva was up to. He started to plan his strikes to wear *her* down. The strain was starting to show, too. Geneva was struggling to stay ahead of Jack's long, white fangs. She was starting to lose her edge.

The older men and women in the pack knew it, too. There was no cheering from the northern side of the clearing. The southern side, though, was beginning to sound like a rowdy party. I could even hear the *clinking* of beer bottles hitting other bottles as Jack's men started to toast their fearless leader.

Jack had scored a hit at last. I looked back at the circle at Geneva's sharp yip. There was blood on her side and one of her hind legs. She was limping slightly, but still trying to stay out of Jack's reach. Jack had the upper hand, and it was clear that he was running her around the circle and not the other way around. I was surprised when Geneva turned on Jack and got her teeth around his dull red ruff. Her hind feet kicked out, trying to rip at Jack's underbelly. He let out his own yip and started squirming around, trying to get free of her grip. The white wolf hung on like a leech, and her kicks started to land. With a huge effort, Jack managed to shake her free. Geneva was panting heavily now and couldn't evade Jack's next attack. The red wolf launched himself at her and bowled her over. They went tumbling, Jack's mouth locked around her throat, all the way to the edge of the circle. Geneva's paws were frantically scrabbling at the dirt, trying to get some purchase.

It was over. Geneva just didn't know it yet. There was some mumbling from this side of the circle, but the hope was gone. I thought I heard Jeannie call to Geneva, telling her to roll over and start kicking at Jack's belly again. But the white wolf's paws weren't struggling so hard any more. She had spent her last bit of energy already, and didn't have much left in her reserves. Some of the kicks landed, but Jack just growled and bit down harder.

After a few minutes, the kicks ceased. Jack let go reluctantly. When she died, Geneva's body slowly returned to its human form. A middle-aged naked woman with a torn out throat. Jack shifted back, too, and let out a roar of happiness and triumph. His pack cheered and whooped and hooted along with him. On Geneva's side, there were a few howls of mourning. Most of the pack held on to their

grim silence, waiting for whatever came next. I was just feeling tense, waiting for the blow to come when Jack noticed me standing in the crowd.

Ralph stepped delicately into the circle and scooped up Geneva's body, cradling it gently. The pack gathered around the bonfire and I realized suddenly that it wasn't really meant to be a bonfire or just a source of light. It was a pyre, pre-lit for whoever lost the challenge for leadership. It looked a little callous when they consigned her to the fire, but I knew without anyone telling me that it was the way they did things. Tradition, again. Not for the first time, I hoped that Jack's brother hadn't infected me. I did not want to be a part of this barbaric world.