

Provenance

XVII

I looked back at the circle and saw Jack standing proudly in the center of the circle. He had his arms raised and was howling at the moon as loudly as he could. His pack of misfits and loners were standing outside of the white ring, cheering their leader. Geneva's pack was still gathered around the pyre when I spotted one figure break away and head for the white pebble boundary of the circle. It was Thom. Even in the dark, I could see his shoulders slumping in misery as he shuffled away from his former pack mates.

I hurried after him, stumbling now and then on clumps of tall, weedy grass. When I caught up to him, I threw my arms out in front of me and shoved him as hard as I could. Thom's thin knees slammed against the hard, cold ground and the lanky coward went sprawling.

“What the hell do you think you're doing, you jackass?” I bellowed. A few of Geneva's pack members looked over at me disapprovingly, but I ignored them.

“Leaving. It's over,” Thom said as he picked himself up and dusted his jeans off.

“How could you! Thom, she's your mother!” I shrieked. Anger was fighting madly (heh heh) to get the upper hand on my fear, and I felt out of control. Thom was my last chance to get out of this mess, probably the only one who could take a shot at Jack, and he was going to run away again. I shoved him again out of purest frustration.

“She was,” he said coldly.

Thom just stood there, shoulders and face sagging with depression, and I just couldn't take it any more. I took a swing at him. My knobby little fist connected with his jaw and sent him reeling, surprising the hell out of both of us. Thom went down again and just sat there, staring blankly up at me. I crouched down in front of him, tucking my absurdly long silver trump card out of the way.

“Don't you feel anything? She was your mother. She raised you. She just died for you. Don't you think you owe her something other than turning tail and running away? Again?” I hissed in his face.

“Yes, I feel something! Get out of my face, Ada,” he snapped.

“So what are you going to do about this?”

“What can I do?”

I almost clocked him again at the whine in his voice. “What you should have done in the first

place, Thom. You're going to stand up to Jack and save you pack.”

“They're not my pack anymore,” Thom pointed out.

“They could be.” Come on, I thought, come on you cowardly little sack of monkey doo. Grow a pair and help me! I can't fight a werewolf by myself.

“But what if I can't do it?”

“Oh for fuck's sake,” I swore. “You're unbelievable.”

I spun on my heel and walked away disgustedly. I was almost back to where Ralph and Jeannie stood on the edges of Geneva's pack when I heard soft footfalls behind me. Thom.

“Ada.”

I whirled. “What?”

His face was a portrait of fear. If he held up his hands—and were bald—he would have looked like the creepy little man in “The Scream.” Okay, Ada, back away from the hysteria. You're pissed off and scared to death at the same time, but you need to be able to think clearly to get through this. Suck it up, I coaxed. You can do this.

“I—” he stopped.

I waited, arms crossed to keep myself from succumbing to the urge to throttle Thom.

“I'll do it.”

“You will?” I cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Isn't this what you wanted?” he snarled.

“It's exactly what I want,” I said. “Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight! Jesus!”

A flutter of hope went through me as I turned to face the ring again. Jack had paused the victory celebration and turned to address the newest addition to his pack. The entire lower half of his face was covered in bright blood. His belly showed deep gouges where Geneva had tried to gut him, but they were already clotting and healing. He didn't look bad for a man who had been fighting for his life only a minute or two ago.

Jack must have spotted me as he surveyed the crowd because he flashed me one of his chilling grins and bellowed, “Ada! How nice to see you here. We have some business, you and I. I hate to be cliché, but no one kills a member of my family—let alone my brother—and lives to tell about it. Trask! Cody!” Two men split off from Jack's gang. “Escort Ms. Wright over here.”

The men loped across the field and planted themselves at my elbows. Their strong hands clasped me above my elbows, and we marched away from the relative safety of Geneva's pack. I didn't

make it easy for them. I dug in my heels every step of the way and fought to get out of their tight grip. Not that it did much, but still, I made the effort. Gold stars for me. As soon as we crossed to Jack's side of the circle, the men let go and didn't touch me again, perhaps a little afraid of me. (I hoped so.) I knew better than to make a run for it. I didn't think my back could take more tackling. If I got out of this alive, I was definitely going to find a massage therapist. Assuming I didn't actually need a chiropractor, that is. Did my insurance contain coverage for werewolf attacks?

Thom rigidly waited for Jack to stop speaking, then loudly called out, "Jack Wolfram, I challenge you for the right to lead your pack!" At least his voice didn't quaver, I thought nastily.

I heard Jack say a quick "What the fuck is this?" before he whirled to see who had issued the challenge. When he saw Thom standing at the edge of the ring, he just started to laugh. When Thom called out to him again, Jack whipped away the tears of laughter and replied with the ritual response.

"I hear you, Thomas Vilkas. And I answer your challenge. I'm surprised to see that you're still here. I thought you would have high-tailed it out of before now."

"I challenge you," Thom repeated.

"I heard you. Jeez, no sense of humor whatsoever. As the challenger, you have the right to chose the form we take. Wolves, again?"

Thom shook his head. "We fight as men."

Jack whistled in surprise and nodded, then took up his position at the southern edge of the circle. He had a cheerfully evil grin on his face. Sure, he was sweaty and naked and had just come out of a fight to the death, but Jack looked like he was sure he would come out on top again. Thom stripped and stepped into the ring, taking care not to knock the pebbles out of alignment. Between the moonlight and Geneva's pyre, I could clearly see the expression on his face. He was terrified out of his wits. But Thom was also determined. Sure, it was a little eleventh hour, but Thom was finally starting to act like a leader. I'd take what I could get. Maybe if they fought as men, it would be over when one knocked the other out. Fingers crossed, people. I sincerely hoped there would be no more deaths tonight.

Again, there was no warning before the contest started. The two men launched themselves at each other, teeth bared and snarling just like wolves. Thom got in the first punch, and I think he was so surprised at landing a blow that Jack got the chance to pop him smartly on the jaw. I had a sick feeling that this was going to be over before it started. Thom clearly had no idea what he was doing. Shit shit shit.

I glanced at the two men who were keeping me here. I recognized Cody as the man with the rufies. He was a fat man, but solid. No luck there. On my other side, was the man called Trask. He was

scary enough to give Ralph a run for his money. Tattoos of eagles and wolves and naked women everywhere. He was wearing jeans stained with dirt and grease and God knew what and a black leather vest that showed off his ink. Trask had his stringy black and gray hair pulled back into a thin ponytail. And they were watching me as much as they were watching Thom get pummeled out in the circle.

Thom was looking bad. Blood was pouring out of his nose and he was starting to stagger a little bit. Jack was following him, not letting the younger man catch a breath or a break. Jack landed another punch, rocking Thom's head back and making him collapse into the dirt. Jack let out a bark of laughter and took a step back.

“Had enough yet, boy?” Jack said playfully. “Damn, I thought this would last longer! Even your mother lasted longer than this.”

Thom picked himself up a little, weaving slightly on his hands and knees. His head was down. I heard a roar from both side of the circle as black fur erupted all over Thom's body. His nose and mouth lengthened, becoming a snout. His hands turned into paws and a thick black tail grew from his lower back. Even I knew that Thom had cheated. I must have take an step forward, because two pairs of hands clamped onto my arms and jerked me to an abrupt halt. Think, Ada, you can get out of this. They haven't found Jasper's knife; they didn't even check you for weapons. Just wait for your moment, I told myself. Keep your head and wait for your moment.

Jack had thrown himself over to the far side of the ring from the black wolf and hurried to make his own transformation. His own red fur was starting to sprout when Thom lunged for him, long, white fangs snapping. Jack was stuck in his wolf man form, using all his speed to stay out of the way. Jack used his paws to scoop up some of the pebbles and started throwing them like baseballs at Thom, trying desperately to get some space, a little room to maneuver. Thom yipped when a few of the missiles connected and backed off. Jack hurried to finish his shift. His features blurred as he went from wolf man to full wolf. As soon as he was finished, Jack made his counterstrike.

This time, the two men were more evenly matched. No one had an advantage when it came to weight or speed or size. They went at it fang and claw, each wolf trying to tear the other apart. Nothing I had seen in those nature programs with the cultured and gentle voice of David Attenborough had ever prepared me for the ruthless ferocity I witnessed. The two wolves were growling and snarling at each other, biting at any bit of their enemy they could reach. Before long, both the red and the black wolf were limping, covered in claw marks and bites, bleeding from dozens of wounds. There was no cheering from either side of the circle, just silence. Once Thom had cheated and changed form, all bets were off. Even if he managed to win, I don't think the pack would have accepted the lanky man as their

leader. He had let them down too many times. He was unpredictable. He was the reason they were in this meadow in the first place.

Jack and Thom were locked together, fighting madly to land a killing bite. Thom had managed to take a few nips out of Jack's ruff but couldn't hold on. Jack was wriggling like an eel but not getting anywhere either. Neither of the wolves gave the other space to regroup, to make a plan, to strategize. They were both getting winded. I could hear them gasping for air and see their sides heaving from where I stood, pinned in place by Jack's guys.

The red wolf made a lucky move and managed to latch on to Thom's ruff. No one else was going to challenge Jack tonight, not after he killed two people. Thom held on as long as he could, but he didn't last long. The bloody black wolf sank to the ground, Jack's teeth firmly around his throat. Thom lost his hold on his wolf form and slowly changed back into a tall, thin man with shaggy black hair. Jack held his grip until he was sure the other man wouldn't get up before he backed off and shook off his own wolf shape. This time, Jack looked awful. There were scratches and bite marks all over his body and he limped heavily, keeping as much weight as possible off of his left leg.

Jack staggered away from Thom's body and made his way to the southern side of the circle. Someone I didn't recognize rushed forward with what I guessed was a first aid kit. Before long, Jack was wrapped up in white gauze—foot, legs, all over his torso and arms, his neck. Trask and Cody started to march me over to their side of the ring.

I risked a glance back towards Thom's body and saw that no one had come to collect the cheater. I had no idea what tradition called for at this point, but I felt bad that Thom had been rejected by his erstwhile pack. He had tried, after all. He had wanted to be a real leader, not an embarrassment. But there he lay, naked and bloody under the moon. I had no idea what the police would say when they found the body. Wait, had I just seen Thom's leg twitch? Focus, Ada! Thom is out of it. I'm on my own.

Jack was sitting on an upturned log. He had managed to pull on his khakis, I was relieved to see. I didn't think I could bear to deal with him while he was naked. Jack was frightening enough with his clothes on. Trask and Cody stopped me a few yards away from the new pack leader and let go. I could hear Jack's men close in around me, cutting off my escape routes. I resisted the urge to check my belt for the silver knife hidden under my suede jacket.

You can do this, Ada, I told myself. I was on my own. Geneva was gone. Thom was gone. I was just going to have to save myself. Theoretically, I knew what I had to do. But in practicality, could I stab a man—a werewolf, I corrected myself—to death? I looked at Jack. The new leader did not look as cheery as he had when the night had begun. His cocky grin was gone and he just looked exhausted and

battered. This was not helping. I couldn't afford to pity him. Where was the tough-as-nails interrogator I had discovered lurking inside of my psyche earlier today? Come on, Ada. If Buffy could do it, so can you.

"I don't even know what to say to you, Ada," Jack began. "You pop out of nowhere, led Thom right to me in Seattle, caused the fight in *my* bar."

"You're the one who kidnapped me," I pointed out.

"Shut up," he said bluntly. He hissed when his pet medic daubed disinfectant on a wound on his back. "Hey, take it easy back there!" Then he turned his attention back to me. "Oh, and let's not forget what you did to my brother."

"I heard it was he was your half-brother," I said.

What was the matter with me? I knew I was making things worse for myself, but I could not stop my pedantic little corrections.

"Do you think I would care about him any less because he was my half-brother?"

I shrugged.

"What I want to know is, how did you manage it? Rich was a werewolf. You're just a human, as far as I know." Jack eyed me sharply, as if trying to make sure that I really was just an ordinary human.

Well, what else would I be? I wondered. Then I remembered Neeson and all the other ghoulies and ghosties and three-legged beasts listed in his book. What did Jack think I was?

"I am just a human," I said. "It was self-defense!"

"Do I think I give a shit about human law? You admit that you killed him. How did you do it?"

Jack pushed the medic away and slowly got to his feet, sucking in a sharp breath when he put his weight down on his left foot. He limped towards me, still doing a fine job of intimidating me in spite of his injuries.

"I just got lucky, I swear!" I tried to back away from him, but I bumped right into one of Jack's merry men and stopped as if I had backed into a brick wall.

"He should have been able to heal whatever anyone threw at him," Jack snarled. "Unless you did something to him, witch!"

So that was it, I realized. Jack was afraid of witches. I didn't know what a witch could do to a werewolf, but it must be very serious for Jack to be acting like this.

"It's the truth. I'm not a witch and I didn't do anything to him, I swear!" I said.

I'll admit it. I was terrified at the look in Jack's eyes as he narrowed the distance between us. I didn't see how I was going to get out of this. Jasper's knife might as well have been a thousand miles

away. I knew I wouldn't be able to reach it before Jack tore my throat out. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. The tart little obscenity was on a loop in my head and I couldn't make myself think.

“Jack!” A hoarse, wet shout startled me. It startled Jack, too, and he started looking around for the source of the noise. “Jack!” Holy shit, was that Thom? No time to think about that now. I was going to have one shot at this and I had better make it count. While Jack was distracted by Thom's cries, my hand darted under my coat and pulled the foot long silver knife from my belt. Before anyone could stop me, I lunged forward with as much speed and strength as I could muster and shoved the knife up under Jack's ribs. The knife slide in, catching a little on his tough skin. Thanks be to whatever deities were watching, I didn't hit any bones. Jack grunted in surprise and looked down at the knife sticking out of his chest. Had I gotten the heart? Oh please, let me have gotten his heart.

The men of Jack's pack were as surprised as Jack was, because no one made a move for me. Then Trask got his hands on me and wrenched my injured arm behind my back, making me sink to the ground, eyes watering in pain. I cried out, but no one who cared heard me. Jack fell to his knees, and tried to pull out the knife. His hands wrapped around the handle, but he let go with a yelp as the silver burned his palms.

“Witch! What did you do to me?” Jack whispered. “Get this thing out of me! It burns! Fuck, it burns!”

The medic who had been cleaning him up before pushed his way through the crowd and tried to pull out the knife, with the same results. He hissed in pain as he jerked his hands away, cradling them to his chest.

“It's silver,” he said. “I can't touch it.”

Trask shook my arm, making me howl in pain. “Pull it out, bitch!”

“No!” I spat, wriggling to ease the pressure on my arm.

“Jack!” I heard Thom's bellow again. Too late, Thom, I thought. You're too late. I did what you couldn't do.

“Pull it out!” Trask shouted again. I shook my head fiercely.

The medic pulled off his Bite of Seattle t-shirt and tore it into wide strips. Wrapping his hands in the cotton, he dislodged the knife. Bright, arterial blood poured out of the hole and the medic immediately pressed his hands against the wound. Jack was already fading. He'd lost too much blood. I could feel that fierce grin spread across my face, the same grin I had had when I had hurt the Tackler, Richard, and when I had tormented Mike. So now my inner Buffy shows up. I would have laughed in other circumstances. Jack bled out and the medic reluctantly dropped his hands.

“It's over,” the medic said curtly and rose to his feet.

“What do we do with her?” Trask said, giving me another painful shake.

“It's over. Let her go.” At last, a voice of reason.

Wait, that had been a woman's voice. I looked up and swiveled my head around to look at her. I still couldn't move. Jeannie had pushed her way through the crowd, Ralph lumbering along behind her. Oh, this could get ugly, I thought. Then Trask let go, giving me one last sullen shake. The rest of the merry men looked as though all the fight had gone out of them, too. I suddenly noticed that, with a couple of exceptions, most of the men in the gang were not fighters. Some of them even looked like computer programmers, pale and weedy and overweight from Mountain Dew and pop tarts. No, once Jack was gone, no one was going to take up his vision. It really was over.

I staggered to my feet and edged my way over to pick up my knife. I dragged it back and forth in the thin grass, trying to get most of the blood off of it. Then I tucked it in my belt and walked towards Jeannie and her husband. Ralph smiled quickly at me, then put his war face back on. Trask stepped forward and Ralph moved to block him, Jeannie popped up next to her husband.

“Get out of here,” Jeannie said fiercely. The dark purple spikes in her hair were quivering with anger as she glared at the remains of Jack's pack.

“You gonna make us?” Trask spat.

“Yes,” Jeannie said. Behind her, a round dozen of the most intimidating members of Geneva's pushed their way through the crowd.

Trask growled loudly and tensed his muscles. Ralph's fist slammed into his face before the tattooed man had a chance to defend himself. He went down in a heap. A few of the braver elements of the pack grumbled amongst themselves.

“Anyone else?” Jeannie asked.

Thankfully, no one else disputed. A few of Jack's men looked like they would have liked to, but that's what Ralph was there for. Within a few minutes, the intruders were all shuffling their way back to their vehicles. Ralph picked up Jack's body and, with no real care, pitched it on to the southern pyre. I followed the pair back to Geneva's side of the meadow.

Thom had gotten dressed again, but he looked terrible. A couple of sympathetic werewolves were holding him up and drifting towards the parked cars. Off to the hospital, I expected. The bite on Thom's neck looked absolutely awful. I was surprised that he hadn't died from it. Chalk it up to supernatural healing.

Me, I had survived. It was enough.

More than enough.