

## *Provenance*

### VIII

About an hour and a half after I had been nabbed, the Tackler pulled into a gravel parking lot that I recognized from holding the scrap of T-shirt Jeannie had found. I was at Steppenwolf's. The red neon sign hung over the door, glaring brightly out over the assorted cars in the parking lot. Cars in the lot meant that I might be able to get someone to help me or to at least call the police for me, if I could get away for a few minutes. Jack's werewolves pulled me out of the car, took an arm each, and marched me towards the employees' entrance. They pushed their way through the gray metal door like they owned the place. For all I know, Jack *did* own this bar. If so, I might be in even deeper kimchee than I had thought.

We walked down a dim, bare hallway until we came to cheap wooden door. The Tackler opened it and I was shoved through. They plunked me down in a little black office chair and left. I knew without checking that they were standing guard outside, just in case I bolted. I looked around, trying to spot a way out. No windows. Painted white walls. No other doors. Papers pinned to a bulletin board on the wall—bills and receipts. Gray metal desk and another small office chair across from my own. I checked the drawers of the desk but only found papers and pens. Office supplies. Nothing useful. Not even a letter opener.

I heard someone rattling on the doorknob and hurried to sit back down in my assigned chair. Jack walked in with a swagger, a real honest-to-god swagger. The last time I saw a swagger like that had been on Yosemite Sam. Jack's curly red hair was neat and swept back from his face, and his blue eyes were as serene as ever. He was neatly dressed in a suit as if he had just come from a meeting, and I fleetingly wondered what he did for a living.

Jack leaned against the desk and asked, without preamble, "What is Thom up to?"

"I don't know," I answered promptly. Too promptly.

"We lost track of him after he dropped you and his wolves off at the motel." Jack paused for a moment. "You know, that's strange, too," he mused. "You're not pack. Why does he care so much about what happens to you? Do you think he *likes* you?" He asked with a smirk, looking me up and down.

This time I tried to look like I was thinking about what to say before I answered, "I don't know." I rubbed my thumb over the leather covered knuckles that Thom had kissed, then forced myself

to stop before Jack noticed.

“You're not making this easy,” he said, clucking his tongue at me.

“I'm not trying to,” I said before I could stop myself.

Jack's mouth quirked in a smile. “I don't want to hurt you—”

“Is that what you said to Becca?” God damn my big mouth.

Jack pushed off the desk and crouched in front of me. His cologne rolled up my nose, spicy and masculine. It almost covered that doggish smell I had picked up from Thom. They both smelled like fur and sweat. But Jack's sweat made me feel wary, as though I was in the same room as a dog that might bite me at any second. With a start, I realized that that was probably true.

“One of many things I said to Becca. Look, you can tell me what you know or I'll do to you what I did to that old man, the librarian. Are you prepared to die for Thom, little librarian?” he asked, looking at me with those calm, calm blue eyes.

I shivered and looked away. “I really don't know where Thom is, and I don't know what he's doing,” I said.

“And you'd tell me if you did know?” Jack asked.

“Yes.” I stared at the bulletin board, the ceiling, anywhere but at Jack's face and those freakish eyes of his.

Jack stood up and I heard his knees pop with cracks like gunshots. He walked around me, trying to get me to look at him. Without warning, his hand wrapped itself around my neck and squeezed, forcing my head around to face him. My muscles and tendons knotted up instantly at his touch. Jack leaned in, tucking my hair behind an ear with his other long-fingered hand. The air crackled with energy. His hair was growing, visibly growing, as I looked at him. His skin started to stretch, and his bones were reshaping themselves in a deeply sickening way. All the while, his hand (paw?) stayed locked on my neck. I could feel his fingers thickening and shrinking. Sharp canine claws suddenly pricked my neck. My God, it was really true! I had seen Thom's hand change, but this was something else entirely. The man was turning into a wolf as I watched. This was wrong, so very, very wrong.

Jack's skin and bones stopped changing, leaving him looking just like a movie wolf man. He was terrifying, even if he was still wearing his dapper suit. If anything, the suit made him scarier. It transformed him into a combination of two species that I had learned to fear: werewolves and IRS agents.

“What scares you, Ada?” he asked. His snout was inches from my nose and those blue eyes were peering down at me, examining me like a tasty snack. Or someone who had cheated on her

taxed and was about to be nailed for fraud. Either way, it wasn't good. "I know what scared Becca. Would you like me to tell you what it was?"

I shook my head as much as I could with his paw wrapped around it. Jack laughed. He sounded like a wheezing dog.

"Everyone is afraid of something. Everyone is afraid of something so much that they'll do anything to avoid it." Jack let go of my neck and paced around me again, looking at me from all angles. I couldn't decide if it was worse when he spoke, or when he stayed quiet.

"Werewolves don't scare you, do they?" he asked. Then, a few minutes later, he started making guesses. "Pain? Everyone fears pain. Rape? Death? Dismemberment?"

I must have flinched at that last suggestion, because he smiled a toothy grin and leaned close to me. For a moment, I thought of Little Red Riding Hood, facing down the Big Bad Wolf and I almost started laughing hysterically. Maybe Jack was trying to drive me crazy?

Jack's breath tickled my ear as he said, "What would a librarian hate to lose?" With his free hand, he picked up my right hand. I flinched again at the touch of his paw through, trying to pull away. "Would she dread losing her hands? Losing the ability to write and hold books? Does she wear gloves because she wants to take special care of her digits? No, that's not it. I think it's the eyes. Imagine, not being able to read anymore. Not being able to *see* anymore." My eyes slammed shut as tight as I could manage. Jack traced my eyes with his index finger, letting his claw dig in slightly. "Such delicate things, eyes." He pressed on my eyelids. "So easy to damage."

That did it. I could feel my will start to crumble. I kept trying to think of a way out, something that I could do to escape. But my mind kept running around in panicky little circles, going nowhere. I was rooted to the chair, unable to do anything other than stare with horror at the dog-faced man in front of me. I shut my eyes again.

"I figured it out, didn't I?" Jack said. I could hear the delight in his voice and forced myself to open my eyes. "That's the tricky part, you know. Finding out what scares the shit right out of people, finding something that scares you enough that you'd rather betray someone than face it. Ada Wright." Jack mimed taking notes, stubby fingers grasping an imaginary pencil and pad of paper. "Fears losing her sight more than she wants to protect Thom and his little pack. Smart little librarian. Make a choice. You have to chose between your sight or selling Thom out."

Jack looked at his watch meaningfully. Oh, that was creepy. A werewolf with an expensive watch strapped around his furry wrist. His blue striped tie still brought out his hooded blue eyes. God, I thought. What had I gotten myself into here? It was all out of control. People were dead. Creatures

from folktales were walking around as if their existence weren't actually impossible. And I had been kidnapped by a psychopath, wolf dressed like an IRS agent. The final audit. Hardie har har.

Oh God, how was I going to get out of this? Thom, Ralph, and Jeannie had no idea where I was. I was on my own. I was so tempted to give in, to tell Jack what he wanted to know. The only thing that stopped me was the thought that even if I did give up the information, I couldn't be sure if he really would let me go. My mother hadn't told me this when I was young, but she probably should have told me never to trust men with crazy eyes

One thing was for certain, panicking wasn't going to help. I told myself firmly to calm down. I took a few long, deep breathes, sucking in the lingering odor of Jack's cologne. After a minute, I peeled my fingers off of the chair and looked up at Jack's furry face. Another quick look around the room didn't reveal anything useful. I could feel the rising tide of anxiety coming to wash away my senses again when I heard crashes from outside. There were yells and howls of pain. Furniture and glass were breaking somewhere in the bar. Jack abruptly stood and headed for the door.

"I'll be right back. You better have something to tell me," he said, then closed the door loudly. I could hear him bellowing and swearing at his werewolves, asking for information, a status report, something. Voices answered and faded. They were all going towards the front of the bar. All I cared about was the fact that they were leaving me in this room by myself. I almost passed out in relief. I stuck my ear against the door. No voices out there I recognized, but who else would it be? Against all odds, Thom and his pack had found me.

I couldn't hear anyone right outside my door, so I cautiously pushed it open. I felt another wave of relief that it wasn't locked. Pride before the fall, I guess. Either Jack was very cocky about his chances or they had forgotten to lock the door. The hall was empty. My guards must have run off to the fight. No sign of Jack. I ran for the door that I thought led outside and pushed on the crash bar. Nothing. Locked. All right, couldn't go out that way. I backtracked down the hall, staying pressed against the wall, hoping that I wouldn't be seen. Not too far down the hall from the main office, I found an open doorway that led to the bar. I stuck my head around the corner.

The place was in pandemonium. Men and women were fighting each other tooth and nail. And, in Jack's case, fang and claw. I spotted him in the thick of the fight, taking on three men. I scanned the room, but I couldn't spot Thom or anyone I recognized. But I did see the front door, tantalizingly close. I sidled into the room, keeping to the edges of the fight. With a bit of luck, I could sneak out and no one would be the wiser in all this chaos.

I made it to within spitting distance of the door before I was spotted. The Tackler turned just as

I made my break for it and hollered at me to stop. He ran towards me and I rushed for the door. I was out and running when I felt, for the third time that day, the weight of an angry man colliding with the small of my back. We crashed into the gravel. This time, though, there was no talking. The Tackler bared his elongated teeth at me and clamped down on my right shoulder. He tore right through the thin white oxford shirt and into my flesh, making me scream. His teeth sank into my muscle, growling and gnawing as his hands tried to grab my flailing arms. I couldn't get my feet under me. I threw an elbow at him and hit him in the ribs. He grunted but didn't let go. His hands clamped down on to my upper arms. I was pinned. I writhed on the ground, trying to get free.

The Tackler stopped gnawing on my neck and slithered up so that he could whisper in my ear. "You taste delicious," he said. "Absolutely delicious."

I threw my head back as hard as I could and connected with his nose. Judging by his bellow, I broke it. His hands loosened, giving me the space I needed. I locked my fists and threw my elbow towards his neck as hard as I could. If he couldn't breathe, he couldn't chase me. I heard a nasty crunching noise, but I didn't bother to find out if I had broken any other bones. I dug my toes into the gravel and bolted, running as fast as I could. I turned back once to see if anyone was following me. All I saw was the Tackler, sitting in the parking lot, blood pouring out of his nose. His hands were locked around his throat, and I fancied that I could hear him wheezing across the distance. I could feel myself smiling fiercely at the sight of him bleeding all over his shirt and trying not to whimper in pain. Then my senses came back and I ran for it again. Serves me right if I get caught again.

I ran for blocks before I stopped, utterly winded. I didn't have a phone. I had no money. I didn't know how to get in touch with Thom. I was stranded in Seattle. Oh, and I had blood soaking into my shirt and a great big hole in my shoulder. Between my blood and the blood from the Tackler's nose, I probably looked like I had just escaped from an ax murderer. There was a convenience store up ahead and I headed for it. Some one would call the police for me or take me to the hospital. I had a plan again.