

Provenance

IX

After I got stitched up at Northwest Hospital, I called Julia to see if she would give me a ride home to Augusta. If I could have called anyone else, I would have. I knew that before long, Julia would tell the whole library that she had picked me up at a hospital in Seattle with dozens of stitches in my shoulder and blood all over my shirt. I was going to have to think of something to tell her, or she would think up an explanation on her own. In the meantime, I was going to have to find a place here to lay low until she got here. I had no idea who had won the fight, or if there was anyone out there looking for me.

I found a spot in a family waiting area and claimed a stiff, pink vinyl chair for myself. Everywhere I looked, there were doctors and nurses and technicians and patients and friends and family of patients. People everywhere, all busy and going about their business. No one would start anything here with so many witnesses. I had a pretty good view of the front entrance from here, too. Good spot. I curled up in the chair and settle down for a wait.

Before long I felt myself starting to doze, as the exhaustion and fear of the last few hours caught up with me. As I fought to keep my eyes open, I saw the front doors slide open and Ralph roll in on a gurney. Thom, Jeannie, and couple other people were with him, crowding the EMTs as the medics fussed around trying to bandage on Ralph's wounds. Scratches and cuts covered his face, and his denim jacket was almost black with blood. Dark, drying blood was clotting in his massive beard, tangling the grizzled brown hair. I was out of my chair before I knew it, hurrying towards them.

The EMTs wheeled Ralph towards the emergency rooms. One of them, a pudgy guy with a brown buzz cut firmly told Thom and his group to stay put. I saw him gesture towards the waiting area before he chased after the departing gurney. Thom folded Jeannie into his arms, but it looked less like a hug than an effort to keep her from going after her husband. She was rigid in his arms, staring down the hall where they had taken the big man. Thom spotted me and handed Jeannie off to a tall, thin man who must have been tougher than he looked or else it would surely have been him on that gurney. The thin werewolf was covered in blood, too. But remarkably, none of it appeared to be his.

Thom put his arm around me as soon as I reached him. I wrapped myself around him, feeling safe at last. I pulled him close for a moment before pain made me pull away. I hissed at the feeling of my stitches pulling on my bite.

“Are you all right?” Thom asked, looking me over. The blood that still coated my white shirt finally registered. “Oh, my God. What happened to you?”

“One of them bit me. I got away.”

“How did you manage that?” His eyes were still glued to my shoulder. At times like these, you're supposed to say that it looks worse than it really is. But in my case, it really was as bad as it looked.

“Broke the guy's nose. With my head.”

Thom gently put his arm around my uninjured shoulder and led me towards the others.

“What happened to Ralph?” I asked.

“Jack almost tore his throat out,” Thom answered shortly. “One more minute, and I think we would have lost him.”

“What happened? At the bar? Did you get...?”

“Jack? No, the fucker got away. Fucking *gyvate*, I don't know how he managed it. One second he was there. The next he was just gone. Left almost a dozen of his own people behind.” His arm tightened on me and I had to push him away when the stitches started to pull again.

I told Jeannie that I was sorry for what happened, but she looked at me with such venom that it shut my mouth almost before I got the words out. She turned her back on me to stare down the hallway, arms folded. A punk sentinel.

“She's never going to forgive me,” I breathed.

“Yes, she will. Just give her time.”

We waited for more than three hours before we got word about Ralph's condition. A young African-American doctor found our group and told us that Ralph was going to be okay, but it had been a very close thing. One more minute here, a slight delay there, and it would have been all over for the big werewolf. As soon as she heard that she could go see him, Jeannie was off. The rest of the wolves followed her. Thom stayed. Thom hadn't said a word the entire time. He just sat in his vinyl chair, fuming and worrying and plotting. I knew without anyone saying it that this was my fault. If I had just stayed put, Jack's werewolves wouldn't have found me. None of this would have happened.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked, turning to face him.

“There you are!” Julia's voice rang out, startling me badly. “What happened to *you*?” she asked when she saw me.

“Dog bit me,” I said, making Thom laugh in spite of the situation.

Julia looked at him curiously. “Ready to go?”

Thom leaned in to whisper, “We need to talk. Don't go yet.”

“Who are you?” Julia was looking back and forth between us, one neat blond eyebrow arched in speculation.

“Thank you for coming all the way down, Julia,” I said. “But I'm going to get a ride with my friend here.”

Julia made a disgusted noise at me. “I can't believe you, Ada. You called me and I drove all the way down to Seattle to get you. And now you tell me that you're getting a ride from someone else? God, Ada, I am *really not happy* with you.” Julia scowled at me. “Why couldn't you have called me before I got here?”

“No change,” I said weakly.

“Jesus, Ada. Are you going to come with me or not?”

“Sorry, Julia,” I said. “I'm going with my friend.”

Julia wheeled on the heels of her comfortable shoes and walked away. Her blond ringlets bounced furiously up and down on her shoulders, as if even her *hair* was mad at me. I was going to have a lot of explaining to do when I saw her again. And I was probably going to have to buy her her weight in chocolate to get her to forgive me. Thom took my hand and made me look at him.

“We're going to Canaan. And I want you to come with us,” he said.

“Where is Canaan?” I asked. I had never heard of it before.

“It's a ways northwest of Bellingham.”

“And what's in Canaan? I haven't been safe anywhere since I met you, Thom.”

“The rest of the pack is in Canaan. We'll watch out for you. You'll be safe there.”

“I wasn't safe in Arlington and I had Ralph and Jeannie with me,” I pointed out.

“You left the motel,” he said with an edge in his voice. “I asked you to stay put. Why did you leave?”

“I thought it was safe. I didn't think they had followed us.” I didn't dare tell him the real reasons, my stupid reasons for leaving: hunger and boredom. “You said it was safe.”

Thom's face went white with anger. “This is not *my* fault and you know it, Ada.”

“I know.”

“And you got bit because you left the motel.”

“Yes,” I said, warily.

“You have no idea what that means do you? Christ.” Thom scrubbed his hands through his hair, making it stick up wildly. He looked ten years older all of a sudden, between the stress and the thick

growth of black stubble on his chin and jaw. “You’re coming to Canaan with us. We’ll finish this up there.” His tone let me know that there would be no arguing.

Thom levered himself out of his pink vinyl chair with a groan. I walked with him to Ralph’s room. It was crowded with werewolves and medical equipment. There wasn’t a doctor or a nurse in sight. Ralph was sitting up, bandaged in white gauze nearly to his eyeballs. They had taken away his patched denim jacket and Grateful Dead t-shirt and left him in a pale blue hospital gown. It looked a little incongruous with the tattoo sleeves he sported. It didn’t take much imagination to picture the hairy man changing into a werewolf. Ralph still looked like he was capable of mayhem.

“Hello, Ada,” Ralph said.

Ralph sounded surprisingly cheery for a man who had come close to death. Werewolves must heal faster than the rest of us. There was no other explanation. Jeannie scowled at me from Ralph’s bedside. None of the other pack members looked very happy to see me either. I resisted the urge to hide behind Thom.

One of the wolves—the tall, thin, weedy guy with other people’s blood on his Weyerhaeuser shirt—looked me over and said, “So you’re Ada?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“I hope you were worth it,” he said nastily. “You must be dynamite in bed or something.”

Thom moved abruptly, putting his nose right into the smirking werewolf’s face. His mouth opened to say something, but he closed it with a clatter of teeth. Blood poured out of the man’s nose as if appearing by magic. The thin man howled in sudden pain and sank to his knees. I hadn’t even seen Thom throw the punch, but he stood over the bleeding man with his fist cocked for another shot.

“Get out! All of you, out now!” cried Jeannie. “Thom, how can you defend her?”

The rest of the pack slunk out of the room. I left, too, as quick as my feet could carry me. I missed whatever Thom had to say, but I couldn’t bear to stay in the room with Jeannie and Ralph. I was beyond relieved to learn that Ralph was going to be okay. I hoped that no one else had gotten seriously hurt at Steppenwolf’s. God, what if someone had died trying to get me out of there? Thom’s werewolves were standing around, giving me angry looks. The tall weed of a werewolf still had blood seeping out of his nose, but he still managed to leer rudely at me. A muscular wolf popped him roughly on the shoulder and got him to stop.

Thankfully, no one talked to me.

When Thom walked out of the exam room a few minutes later, the muscular wolf stopped him and leaned in to whisper something into his ear. I hadn’t thought it was possible for him to look any less

happy than he already did, but his face became distinctly grimmer. He looked piercingly me, as if wondering what crazy thing I was going to do next. Thom asked for volunteers to stay behind with Jeannie until Ralph was ready to travel. Most of the group elected to stay. Thom gripped my arm and we headed out. Only the muscle-bound guy and a short, Hispanic-looking wolf followed us. The rest posted themselves at the door like an honor guard. I suppose that's what they thought they were. Staying behind to honor their fallen comrade. I snorted at the thought.

“Something on your mind, Ada?” Thom asked angrily.

“No.”

“You're coming to Canaan with us and I don't want any arguing about it.”

“Fine,” I agreed.

“We need to talk once we're in the car,” he said.

“Fine.”

When we got to the parking lot, there was no sign of Jack or his people and I let out the breath I had been holding. I really didn't want to get tackled again. Three times in one day was more than enough. Once was more than enough. My back and ribs were sore from being hit so many times, and both my knees were skinned. I could see them through the ripped knees of my jeans. The painkiller the doctor had given me was starting to wear off already and my shoulder—among other abused bits of my anatomy—was starting to sting and burn and ache. Thom put me in the passenger side of his car and the two werewolves climbed into the back. Before long, we were making our way to I-5 and Thom's hometown. There was no Bob Marley this time either. Thom had turned the stereo off before the reggae master had been able to get out a note.

Within twenty minutes, the silence started to drive me nuts. “What are we going to do after we get to Canaan? You don't need me anymore. You know where Jack hangs out.”

“You're a target. And he's going to keep coming after you unless I can stop him.”

“But I'm not important to you anymore,” I said. “I've done my bit.”

Thom gave me a level look. “That's not why you're being targeted.”

“All right, I give up. I really appreciate what you and your people did for me, but why the hell is Jack after me?” As if a psychopathic killer needs a reason, I thought before I could stop myself.

The Latino werewolf spoke up in a gravelly voice, “Is that all the thanks we get?”

I turned in the seat, trying not to hiss in pain as the movement twisted my shoulder. “I can't say thank you enough for what you guys did. I'm incredibly grateful. I wouldn't have made it out without you,” I said.

Everyone seemed to take a collective breath and calmed down. The only werewolf I trusted was Thom, and I didn't trust him all that much right now. And here I was in a small car with *three* unhappy specimens of the breed.

Thom brushed my cheek softly with his hand and tucked my wavy hair back behind my ear. “Jack is very, very angry at you right now.”

“Why? I haven't messed up his plans that much, surely.” Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would have said.

“Let's back up a minute,” Thom said. “You told me that, quote, 'a dog bit you.' Do you know who bit you?”

“I don't know his name. Just one of the guys who grabbed me outside of that fast food place. The redheaded guy.”

“The redheaded guy,” Thom repeated.

“That's what I said. God, Thom, just spit out already,” I said.

“He's dead. Something crushed his windpipe.”

Oh God. Horror washed over me like icy water and I felt like I was going to throw up. Oh God oh God oh God. Then I realized, my elbow. It must have happened when I threw my elbow. I had hit him with all my strength and it had been enough to crush a man's—a werewolf's, I corrected myself—throat. God.

“Who was he?” I croaked through my tight, suddenly dry throat.

“Jack's cousin,” Thom answered. He wouldn't look at me. He just stared out through the windshield, watching the road.

“It was self-defense,” I said.

“I know. I believe you,” Thom replied.

“What's going to happen to me?”

“We'll protect you. You've helped us, we'll keep helping you.”

I nodded slowly. “But you don't need me anymore. I'm just a target now.”

“Did it occur to you that Jack might move on and we'll have to track him down all over again? Besides, we have to think about what that bite did to you.”

“Am I going to be a werewolf?” I asked, stunned. The thought had honestly not occurred to me before. God, what if I was a werewolf? This could not get worse, I thought, then brushed my knuckles quickly over the veneer on the inside of the car door. It wasn't real wood, but it was the thought that counted, right? Fingers crossed, people.

“It's possible. It doesn't always happen after just one bite,” Thom said.

I fell silent, trying to process that little gem of information. Not only would I be a freak (and a murderer, some part of me amended) who couldn't touch things without getting flashes of where they've been, but I would be furry once a month, too. Keen, just peachy frigging keen.