

## Meeting George

Isobel had bathed before dinner and after six weeks at sea, it had been the most pleasant bath she'd ever had. It had been a relief to nally feel clean again but now she longed to get in another bath to scrub off the itching white paint on her face. Thankfully, dinner was the only meal that she and Charles were expected to share with their father, so she was planning on only needing to wear the cosmetics for no more than an hour or two at night. She would just have to nd ways to avoid the man during the other hours of the day.

"I see you no longer look like a servant," her father said rudely as she took her seat across from Charles.

Katherine had carefully pinned up Isobel's dark hair, and the dress she had selected was made from a light pink silk and had white lace decorating the sleeves and the neckline. Isobel detested the dress but had trusted Katherine's judgment in choosing it. Edward thankfully approved where Isobel did not.

"I will be hosting a ball next week in your honor," Edward informed his children while three well-dressed male servants silently placed bowls of aromatic soup in front of the Lycans.

Edward was sitting at the head of the unnecessarily large table while Charles and Isobel had been placed at the other end of the table. It was as if Edwards wanted to be as far from his children as possible.

"Are there many Lycans in Boston?" Isobel asked curiously. A ball usually had dozens or hundreds of guests and she knew her father well enough to know that only Lycans would be in attendance at this ball.

Edward pursed his lips in annoyance. "A significant number of Lycans have moved here in the last few years. But as the rest, they look to me for leadership. I am their king."

Isobel refrained from rolling her eyes. She and Charles and probably every Lycan in Boston knew that Edward had seen his only chance to become a Lycan King was in the colonies. Edward had always lusted for power but he was a prince among many in London. There could only be one king in a city, so after the Boston res in 1711, Edward had moved to the New England colony and had erected a mansion while the town rebuilt itself in brick. He declared himself King and any Lycans who moved to Boston after that were left with no choice but to treat him as such. Whether he actually led them or not, or whether he did it well, was another matter.

"I will expect you to present yourself in a manner befitting the daughter of a king," Edward told Isobel sharply when neither she nor Charles responded to his statement. "Every powerful Lycan in the New England colony will be at the ball and you need to make a good impression."

"Of course," Isobel replied with a smile that was as fake as Edward's power.

"And since you're here Charles, you may as well make yourself useful to me. Isobel's marriage will be of political gain to me and your marriage could do the same."

Charles's wide eyes ew up to meet Isobel's. "You want me to nd a wife?" he asked Edward.

"One that I approve of," the king said in answer. "The werewolf Council in England has sent a group of werewolves here to ensure that our shared secret remains hidden. Ten Masters rule them but those Masters have started to push their boundaries. We need to remind them that their place is with the rest of their kind—they are servants to us and no more."

Isobel's eyebrows lifted in surprise. The werewolf Council in England was a group that in some ways held more power than Lycan Kings. If a Lycan or werewolf endangered the two races by revealing themselves to humans, the Council had the power to execute them regardless of their rank or station. A trial where evidence was presented was required of course but they were known to be a ruthless group. Uncle Fred had once explained to Isobel that the Council had started as a single werewolf family who had taken it upon themselves to protect the supernatural from humans but that their ranks grew and grew and their wealth had grown with them until it even rivaled that of the Lycans. While other werewolves worked for the Lycan royalty and relied on measly wages, werewolves in the Council had wealth and power.

"The Council should not be underestimated," Charles reminded their father.

"Damn the Council," Edward roared, his st crashing down onto the polished wood of the table and sending his soup spilling onto the table. "I will not have my power questioned by a group of men barely out of their childhood! Both of you will marry Lycans with wealth and numbers and if the Council dare intervene with my affairs, we will crush them."

Isobel and Charles remained quiet while their father stormed out of the room and one of the male servants cleaned up the mess he'd left behind.

"He behaves as a child would," Charles muttered into the tense silence, and Isobel saw one of the servant's lips twitch as if he wanted to smile.

"Except that he has been given the power of a king," Isobel said with a heavy sigh. He could doom them all if he wasn't careful.

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The next morning Isobel was awake before the sun had even risen. She lit the candle next to her bed—the one that a maid had explained was made from something called bayberries which was the reason that it smelled so pleasant—and, with nothing better to do, Isobel spent an hour reading a rather scandalous book by Daniel Defoe called *Moll Flanders*. Charles didn't know that she'd snuck it out of his chambers the previous night and after she'd nished the rst few chapters she could understand why he'd refused to lend it to her when she'd asked on the ship.

The character of the book had already had relations with a man out of wedlock, married said man's brother, and had become a widow at the point that Isobel decided to put the book down. Her cheeks felt hot and ushed as she pushed her bed covers back— Charles and her Uncle Fred had never broached the subject of what happened in a bed between a man and a woman with her but Katherine had explained it all to her two years earlier. That Moll Flanders had done such a personal act with a man she was not married to was something that Isobel could not comprehend.

But she shook off thoughts about Miss Flanders and her shocking behavior and replaced them with thoughts of going riding as she busied herself with getting dressed. Katherine must have still been sleeping, otherwise she would have come through to Isobel's room already, so Isobel dressed without her lady's maid's assistance. There was a bell in Isobel's room that she was meant to use when she needed Katherine to attend to her but Isobel would never ring it. If she needed something, she could either do it herself or simply leave her chambers to go nd Katherine or another servant.

Wanting to go riding before breakfast, Isobel found her dark blue riding habit jacket, the matching skirt, and a white shirt to wear underneath. She carried the candle over to her dressing table and styled her hair into a simple braid before coiling and pinning it. Her hair had some natural curl in it but the two loose strands of hair that framed her face were not as curled as fashion demanded but Isobel didn't fuss over it, impatient to get downstairs. Low-heeled boots, a pair of gloves, and a tricorn hat completed the look, though Isobel only wore the hat because Katherine had scolded her for riding without any protection from the sun.

Had she needed to wear a more formal dress, she would have struggled without Katherine's help but the riding habits were easy enough to change into without her lady's maid. The sun was only just beginning to rise when Isobel blew the candle out and opened the door to her chambers. She was debating about knocking on the door to Katherine's room, which was conveniently located right next to hers in case Isobel needed her for anything during the night, when the door opened and Katherine walked out.

"I see you're already ready for the day," the werewolf noted with a grin. "I assume we'll be heading to the stables?" she asked, taking note of what Isobel was wearing.

"I thought we could go for a ride before breakfast," Isobel said.

"Do you want to wait for Charles?" Katherine asked.

Isobel shook her head. "You know him. He'll probably be sleeping until noon." Charles had a tendency to read for hours at night so, unlike Isobel, he wasn't an early riser.

"Alright, Alex can accompany us instead." As two women, it was expected that they have at least one guard with them so Isobel nodded her agreement.

The two of them walked downstairs together, the mansion eerily silent apart from the sound of their footsteps. Like Charles, Edward was probably still sleeping, but Isobel could hear the faint sounds of pots clanging and frantic chatter as she and Katherine passed the kitchens.

"We never got the chance to talk about last night," Isobel said, referring to how Katherine and Alexander had met and eaten dinner with the other werewolves on the estate while she and Charles had eaten with their father. "How was it carved the others?" she asked her friend as they walked out of the large and ornately meeting door at the back of the house.

Grand steps led down to the garden, and a long path led out toward the stables. Katherine had told her that Alexander's quarters were in a building behind the stables which is where all the guards and those working in the stables slept. Once Katherine and Alexander were married and had gone through the bonding ceremony though, they would be allowed to share a room.

"It went well," Katherine replied. "Though everyone had a lot of questions about you and Charles. They didn't seem to quite believe us when we said you were kind."

"I don't blame them after the way my father must treat them," Isobel murmured. "Was...was James there?" she asked nervously.

"He was," Katherine admitted hesitantly.

"Did he say anything?"

"He and the other guards who brought us here didn't say much but the four guards who left with Edward did speak up about what happened on the ship. It seems they admired the manner in which you stood up to your father. The other servants were rather quiet after they explained how you'd defended me against the king."

"I see," Isobel replied in a murmur. She didn't know what to make of James and the others' speech— Isobel should she be upset that he hadn't defended her, or happy that he hadn't been spreading gossip about her behind her back?

They remained silent as they walked the last few steps to the stables, the summer air a bit hotter than what Isobel was used to. She was relieved to have a reprieve from the warmth of the sun when she and Katherine walked into the wooden stable, and the smell of hay was a familiar and welcome one.

"It doesn't look like anyone is here," Katherine noted. Horses lled at least a dozen stalls but aside from them, the stables were indeed empty. "I'll go nd Alexander and maybe we can nd one of the stablemen."

"Alright. I'm going to get acquainted with the horses," Isobel replied with a smile, walking further into the wooden building and running her eyes over the horses.

"I'll just be a moment," Katherine called out over her shoulder as she walked off in search of her mate.

A beautiful black mare with a white stripe that ran down her face all the way to her nose caught Isobel's eye. When Isobel approached her, the mare stepped closer to the stall door, making the princess smile. Most horses were nervous around werewolves and Lycans but if they had been raised as a foal among werewolf stablemen and in the presence of Lycans, their fear and suspicion could be slowly unlearned. Still, Isobel knew that she needed to be careful around the horses because she was new and unfamiliar to them.

She ever so slowly reached her hand out to the mare and only when the horse didn't move, did Isobel lower her hand onto the horse's neck. "You're beautiful," she whispered to the horse as she rubbed the mare's neck, and as if she understood, the mare stepped further forward and nudged Isobel's chest with her nose in a sign of affection.

A sound from outside of the stables had Isobel turning towards the open front of the building to see a young boy kicking stones as he walked towards the structure. He was humming as he stepped into the stables, and when he looked up and spotted Isobel, his eyes widened and he froze. She smiled at him and waved, trying to show that she meant him no harm but his eyes only grew larger in reaction.

"My name is Isobel," she said.

"You're the princess," he whispered, looking either terried or impressed— Isobel couldn't tell which.

"I am. What's your name?" she asked.

"George," he replied nervously.

"It's very nice to meet you, George," Isobel told him. "Does your family work here?" she asked.

"My brother is a guard," the boy explained. "But I started helping Simon in the stables this year," he added proudly, making Isobel grin.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

He was so young. "Do you enjoy working with the horses?" Isobel asked him.

"I do," George said with a gap-toothed smile, and Isobel could tell he was being honest. "I had to beg my brother to let me work with them but he nally agreed last year."

"Can you tell me the name of that horse there?" she asked him, pointing to the black mare.

"That's Midnight Star," George explained. "She's one of my favorites."

"I like her too," Isobel replied with a small laugh. "Which other horses are your favorites?"

"I really like Dasher and Chestnut," he said after biting his lip in thought. He pointed to a white horse and chestnut one with a small white star on its forehead. "But you should stay away from Willow. He bites," George told her, frowning at a dark brown horse whose tail was swishing angrily.

"Oh dear. Thank you for telling m—"

"George?" a deep voice called from outside, and Isobel looked up to nd James walking towards them. His attention was xed on the leather baldric that he was placing over his shoulder so he didn't see Isobel immediately. He wore breeches and boots, and over his white shirt, he wore a long brown jacket that she recognized as the same one that all the guards wore.

"James! Look who I met," George told him happily, running up to Isobel's mate and tugging on his jacket impatiently. "It's Princess Isobel."

James's dark blue eyes ew from his brother toward Isobel, surprise registering on his face as he took her in.

"This is my brother, James. He and his friends told me you wouldn't even talk to the servants and you would think you're better than us. They said you would walk with your nose in the air," George explained to Isobel innocently.

"Is that so?" Isobel asked an embarrassed-looking James with narrowed eyes. "I didn't realize I was so positively dreadful."

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'And therefore is love said to be a child, Because in choice he is so oft beguil'd'