

A pussycat beast

Mirabelle

"Here, you in the bed, aren't you nding your condition sinking, if not oppressive? That eruption means someone might as well start carving your gravestone, so why not be depressed?"

"Yweth," comes from the bed.

"Now this is fun," the man says. "Someone ask him what color the sky is, why don't you?"

No one says anything.

"Bwuu," the patient offers.

There's a c**k of laughter.

"You're an ass," the blond doctor states. I agree. How can that lout make fun of a dying man?

Just then the group of young doctors parts, and I can see who is spouting all this incivility. "The ass in this room is the person who diagnosed a patient without asking him a single question. Now this man has a thick tongue, leading to that amusing lisp. Could be dry, could be swollen. Either way, not a good sign. If it's dry, it could mean the fever. But if swollen, what would that indicate?"

My rst impression of the rude man is that he is big... huge, in fact. The blond doctor is tall and lean, but this man is even taller, and much bigger. His shoulders seem twice as wide as those of the other men. He is all muscle, with a kind of predatory force that looks out of place next to a sickbed. In fact, he looks as if he should be out leading hordes of Vikings... berserking, or whatever it is those men do for a living.

He's been pointing out something on the patient's chest, but he looks up and our eyes meet. Instantly his face goes stony.

What is beautiful in his father is harsh in him; his dark eyes are frosty, like bitter winter. He doesn't look civilized. No one would put that face on a coin, Roman or otherwise. He looks too tough... too... too beast-like, I suddenly realize.

My heart skips a beat, but his eyes move over my face and then down my body, as if I too were a patient he is diagnosing. Quite carelessly, without looking away from me, he says, "It's petechial fever, numbskull. He should have been put in the east wing, not the west, though he's likely no longer infectious. You should stick to sawing off legs; you're an ass when it comes to diagnostics."

And then, "Look who's here! My father actually managed to nd a she-wolf more beautiful than the sun and the moon." There's a faint ring of contempt in his voice that makes my backbone stiffen.

"Rhys," the Alpha says.

His son's implacable eyes move from me to the Alpha, standing next to me. "And accompanied by Dear Old Dad, no less. Well, this will be a jolly party. Guess what, fellows?"

The other doctors are frankly gaping. Unlike the beta, they each have a quite normal reaction to me; I see that in one lightning glance.

"I'm getting married," he says. "To a she-wolf who apparently has a remarkable wish to be a Luna. Aren't I the lucky one?" He walks forward, around the end of the bed.

I just stop myself from stepping backward. I realize with a jolt of nerves that I can either stand up to him, starting now, or I will spend the rest of my life being bullied.

Because he is a bully, no question about it. He walks over until he is standing too close to me, using the fact he is so much bigger to intimidate me.

"My father did inform you that I'm planning to live a normal life span, didn't he?" Rhys says, his voice liquid with distaste.

"He didn't mention it," I manage, grateful to hear my voice unshaken. The contempt in his eyes is so thinly veiled that my back goes rigid. "Sometimes plans change," I add. "One can only hope."

He raises a brow, "My plans rarely do. I wouldn't want you to have scampered all the way to Wales just because you thought I was lining up pallbearers."

"The Alpha told me everything essential about you, and your reputation provided the rest," I say.

His eyes drift slowly down my body again. "Interesting. There are a few things he seems to have forgotten to tell me."

I turn to the Alpha. Surely he had mentioned the baby in his letter... that is, the baby I am supposed to have? Rhys's eyes pause at my thickened waist.

But the Alpha stares at his son like a greedy man in front of a French custard. There is a great deal more going on here than I realize.

"And you must be my father," Rhys continues. His voice is not in the least welcoming.

"I am," the Alpha says, his voice halting. "I am he."

There is a painful silence. It is clear that Rhys isn't going to say anything else, and the Alpha doesn't seem to have the nerve.

"Now we all know who each other is," I say brightly, "perhaps we should go downstairs and leave this poor patient to himself."

The man in bed has propped himself up on his elbows and is staring in fascination. "Not on my account," he says, his swollen tongue making a mangle of the sentence.

Rhys looks from the patient to me. "Beautiful and cheerful. My, my, this really is my lucky day, isn't it?"

"A delightful family reunion of this nature brings out the best in everyone, don't you think?" I turn and walk to the doorway, where I pause and turn around. Just as I expect, the men are staring after me, including... much to my pleasure... my own ancé, not to mention the patient. "Doctor?"

"I believe that's my cue," Rhys says. For the rst time I realize that he is leaning on a cane clutched in his right hand. I watch as he makes his way toward me. Oddly enough, his huge body gives the opposite effect to the gentle list to the side that I had expected.

He lurks as he walks, moving like a wounded but still ferocious lion, all the more dangerous for his injury.

"Don't tell me that the Alpha forgot to inform you that your future husband is a cripple," he says, reaching the door. He has walked straight past his father without seeming to notice the way the Alpha's hand starts toward him and then falls to his side.

I decide to hold the family smile back for a better moment. "He mentioned it," I say. "Perhaps I shouldn't take your arm, in case I topple you?" I ignore the fact that he hasn't offered his arm.

He narrows his eyes. We both know that he is built like a brick house, and my hand on his arm wouldn't shake him.

"You're playing a deep game," he says.

"So, are the three younger men your students?" I ask. We walk down the corridor. Behind us, I can hear the Alpha introducing himself to the remaining doctors.

"You can count to three," he says approvingly. "That bodes well for our offspring."

"And here I thought we weren't having offspring," I say.

"It is true that the responsibility for the business rests on your shoulders," he says, walking with a sort of rolling gait that sends him stalking just before me. "Though I must say that my father's letter seemed to imply you were more precipitate in that regard than you appear to be."

The worst thing I can do is skip to catch up with him. He is obviously far too accustomed to young doctors tagging along at his heels.

He turns his head. "Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Unluckily for me," I say sweetly, "I don't know what the word precipitate means, so I missed the compliment you were giving me."

"I was talking about that scrap of royal blood you're supposedly carrying in your womb," he growls.

I glance over my shoulder. There is still no sign of the Alpha or the medical students.

"What of it?"

He stops again. "There's no baby in that belly, Miss Mirabelle. The fact that you have tied a cushion around your waist may be sicient to confuse my father, but not me." He starts walking again.

I look at his shoulders and realize that I have to curb this habit of his, or I will spend the rest of my life scrambling after him. "Is it your limp that makes you walk like this?" I ask, raising my voice.

"What do you think?" he says, halting again. "Do you suppose that I stagger like a drunken sailor for the pure pleasure of it?"

"I don't mean the stagger," I say. "I mean the way you are scurrying along the corridor like a kitchen maid afraid of the cook."

He freezes for a moment and then, rather to my surprise, gives a bark of laughter. It sounds rusty, as if from disuse. "I'm bored by corridors," he says.

"I'm bored by people's shoulders." I shoot back.

His eyes are remarkably lustrous in the dim light of the corridor. He doesn't have his father's beauty, but I begin to see that he has his own. It's a more brutal, stronger kind, a sort of beauty that burns from his eyes.

"Bloody hell. You're not what I expected." He mumbles.

"I must not be quite as famous as you are," I say, catching up to him. He doesn't offer, but I put my ngertips on his right arm, thinking that will at least keep him at my side.

He looks at me, "With that face, I would imagine that polite pack society knows all about you."

"And what do you know of polite pack society?" I ask.

"Not a thing," he says, starting to walk. He doesn't mention my touch, but he does slow down to keep beside me.

"At the moment, I'm more notorious than famous," I say, taking the bull by the horns.

"Because of that baby you don't actually have," he says. "Odd, that. I thought the High packs were more outraged by babies than the lack thereof. Did you start wearing the cushion as some sort of joke?"

"I put it on this morning just for you," I say.

"How did you gure out that my father would be unable to resist you, under the circumstances? It was a remarkably clever ploy, given his obsession with the family name." For the rst time, there's a germ of admiration in his voice.

"Thank you," I say.

"Not that it's going to work." He points out.

I'm thinking precisely along those lines, though I see no reason to let him know. "Oh, but I think we are perfectly suited," I say, just to needle him.

"A barking-mad doctor... that's me... and a wickedly conniving beauty... that's you... limping along together in a lifetime of happiness? I hardly think so. You've been reading too many fairy stories."

"Who says I can read? I can barely count, remember?" I say charmingly.

He glances at me, and I decide, once again, to withhold the family smile. "I'm starting to think I may have been wrong about your abilities. You can probably count all the way to ten and back."

"That just warms my heart," I coo. "Since it comes from the great doctor and all."

The corner of his mouth curls up. "So just when did you think you would inform your husband about the royal baby that doesn't exist?"

"I could have lost the babe." I point out.

"I'm a physician, remember?" He says.

I look at him, "I thought you were a surgeon."

"I do it all," he says, starting to speed up again.

I tighten my ngers on his arm, feeling the muscles ex as his arm takes the weight of his body, leaning on his cane.

He looks sideways, slows down, but doesn't say anything.

"So you're a surgeon," I prompt, and ask once more, "Are those men all your students?"

"I don't have students," he says in a disgusted tone. "I leave that for the fools in London. What you saw are hopeless idiots who found their way here to make my life hell. You may have noticed the driveling i***t in the front, the blond one. He's the worst."

"He looks old to be a student," I say.

He sighs, "Lüminen. My cousin. He's actually not a bad surgeon. Claims to be writing a book on the subject, but actually he's just got the wind up, so he's hiding here."

"Hiding from what?" I ask.

"He seems to be convinced that Napoleon is losing his mind. It wouldn't surprise me. He is Alpha Latour de l'Atte, by the way, so it's a miracle he made it through the last ten years with his pretty head intact."

We reach the stairs leading down to the main oor. "If you want to keep holding onto me, you will have to move to my left side," Rhys says. "Though, of course, there's always the possibility that you could descend the stairs all by yourself."

I move to his left side, just to irritate him. I curl my ngers under his arm this time. I rather like all that muscle under my hand. It feels as if I'm taming a wild beast.

"I suppose you think I will fall in love with you," he says.

I nod, "Quite likely."

"How long do you give yourself?" He sounds genuinely curious.

"Two weeks at the outside." And then I give him the smile... dimples, charm, sensuality and all.

He doesn't even blink. "Was that the best you have got?"

Despite myself, a giggle escapes, and then another. "Generally, that's more than enough."

"I suppose I should say something reassuring at this point." He pitches his voice to a groveling apology. "It's not me, it's you." Then: "Oops! Got that backwards. It's not you, it's me."

"I suppose your injury gives you immunity," I say, having already gured that out. I have miscalculated when I counted his incapability as a plus. It makes him uninterested in my charms, which means our marriage will never work.

The Alpha is simply going to have to reconcile himself to the lack of an heir.

Rhys's frosty dark eyes icker over to me and then away. "Something like that."

"I didn't mean to mention it, if it's a sore subject," I say, making up my mind to irritate him all I can. "I'm sure it must be dicult to feel that you're... what is the phrase? A pussycat. A powder puff."

"Pussycat?" To my disappointment, he doesn't sound irritated, just wryly amused. "I think of myself more as a..."

I look at him, "Yes?"

"I will have to think about it. To nd the perfect phrase, you understand."

"Don't fret," I counsel him. "I'm sure I can solve our little problem once we're married. Wales is likely full of strapping lads, ready to do their future Alpha a favor."

"We don't have a problem," he snaps.