

A beastly doctor

"Rhys"

I am in a considerable amount of pain. I learned long ago that to think about discomfort... a blasted, silly word for this sort of agony... is to give it a power that I don't care to acknowledge. So I pretend not to notice, and lean a bit more heavily on my cane, relieving the pressure on my right leg.

The pain makes me irritable. But maybe it isn't the pain. Maybe it's the fact that I have to stand around wasting my time with a roaring i**t.

"My son is suffering from acute diarrhea and abdominal pain," Alpha Silverclaw says, pulling me closer to the bed.

Silverclaw's son lies in bed looking gaunt and yellow, like tea-stained linen. He looks to be in his thirties, with a long face and an unbearably pious air. Though that might have been due to the prayer book he is clutching.

"We are desperate," Silverclaw says, looking indeed quite desperate. "I have paraded ve London physicians past his bed, and bringing him here to Wales is our last resort. So far he has been bled, treated with leeches, given tinctures of nettles. He drinks nothing but asses' milk, never cows' milk. Oh, and we have given him several doses of sulfur, but to no effect."

That is mildly interesting. "One of those fools you saw must have been Westroar," I say. "He's obsessed with sulfur auratum antimonii. Gives it out for stubbed toes. Along with opium, of course."

Silverclaw nods. "Dr. Westroar was hopeful that the sulfur would relieve my son's symptoms, but it didn't help."

"It wouldn't. The man was enough of a fool to be admitted to the Royal College of wolf Physicians, and that should have told you something."

"But you are..."

"I joined purely as a kindness to them." I peer down at Silverclaw's son. He is certainly looking the worse for wear. "It likely didn't make you feel any better to trudge all the way to Wales to see me."

The man blinks at me. Then he says, slowly, "We were in a carriage."

"Inamed eyes," I say. "Signs of a recent nosebleed."

"What do you gather from that? What does he need?" Silverclaw asks.

I shrug, "Better bathing. Is he always that color?"

"His skin is a bit yellow," Silverclaw acknowledges. "It doesn't come from my side of the family." That is an understatement, given that Silverclaw's nose is the color of a cherry.

"Did you eat a surfeit of lampreys?" I ask the patient.

The man looks up at me as if I have sprouted horns. "Larkspy? What's a larkspy? I haven't eaten any of it."

I straighten up. "He doesn't know the history of England. He's better off dead."

"Did you ask if he has eaten any lampreys?" Silverclaw says. "He hates seafood. Can't abide eels."

More to the point, he is deaf as a post. The rst lycan King ate lampreys, one of the many mad kings we have had in this country, though not as cracked as the current one. Still, he was thickheaded enough to have eaten a surfeit of eels and died of it." I mumble.

"I am not deaf!" the patient says. "I can hear as well as the next, if people would just stop mumbling at me. My joints hurt. They're the problem."

"You're dying, that's the problem," I point out.

Silverclaw grabs me by the arm and pulls me away. "Don't say such a thing in front of my son. He is no more than thirty-two."

"He has got the body of an eighty-year-old. Has he spent much time consorting with actresses?" I ask.

Silverclaw snorts. "Certainly not! Our family goes back to..."

"Nightwalkers? Hussies? Mollishers, mopsies, or mackerels? Though mackerels brings sh back into this conversation and you already told me that the man can't abide seafood. But what about sh of the female variety?" I inquire.

"My son is a member of the Moon Church!" Silverclaw blusters.

"That settles it," I say. "Everyone lies, but churchmen make an art of it. He has got syphilis. Churchmen are riddled with it, and the more pious they are, the more symptoms they have. I should have known the moment I saw that prayer book."

"Not my son," Silverclaw says, sounding as if he actually believes it. "He's a man of the Goddess. Always has been."

"As I was saying..."

"Seriously." He scoffs.

"Hmm. Well, if not a mopsy..."

"No one," Silverclaw says, shaking his head. "He has never... he is not interested. He's like a saint, that boy is. When he was sixteen, I took him to Venus's Rose, in the Whitefriars, but he didn't take the slightest interest in any of the girls. Just started praying and asked them to join him, which they didn't care for. He is a candidate for sainthood."

I shrug, "His sainthood is about to become a question for a higher authority. There's nothing I can do."

Silverclaw grabs my arm. "You must!"

"I can't."

"But the other doctors, all of them, they gave him medicines, they said..."

I Cut him off, "They were fools, who didn't tell you the truth."

Silverclaw swallows. "He was ne until he was twenty. Just a ne, healthy boy, and then..."

"Take your son home and let him die in peace. Because die he will, whether I give you a solution of sulfur or not." I tell him.

"Why?" Silverclaw whispers.

I sigh again, "He has syphilis. He's deaf, he's diarrhetic, he's jaundiced, he's got eye and joint inammation and nosebleeds. He likely gets headaches."

"He has never been with a she-wolf. Ever. I swear it. He hasn't any sores on his private parts or he would have mentioned it."

"He didn't have to be with a she-wolf," I say, nipping my coat out of Silverclaw's hand and shaking my sleeve straight again.

The Alpha looks confused, "How can he have syphilis without..."

"It could have been a man."

Silverclaw looks so shocked that I relent. "Or it could have been you, which is far more likely. The rosy she-wolves you visited as a youth infected the boy before he was even born."

"I was treated with mercury," Silverclaw protests.

"To no avail. You still have it. Now, if you will excuse me, I have important things to do. Like treat a patient who might live for another year." I tell him.

I stroll out, nding my butler Trulliad in the hallway. "I wonder how you ever get anything done," I say to him. "It must be hard to run a household when you have to conduct all your business in the corridors so you can hear every golden word that falls from my lips."

"I do not nd it a particular problem," Trulliad says, falling in beside me. "But then I have lots of practice. You don't think that you were a trie hard on Alpha Silverclaw?"

"Hard? Was I hard? Surely not. I told him exactly what was wrong with his son and what to do next... in short, go home and wait for choirs of angels, because there are no miracles on this side of the divide."

Trulliad looks at me, "It's his son that's dying. And if I got you right, he gave the poor lad the illness. That's a blow, that is."

"My father wouldn't have minded a bit," I assure him. "If he had another heir, that is. But Silverclaw has a whole passel of children. An heir and more to spare."

"How do you know that?" He asks.

"The Church, you fool. He put this boy into the Church and seems to have trained him up to it from an early age, too. The heir must be roosting about in brothels just like good old Pa. Silverclaw would never have allowed the spare near a Bible if he were, in fact, the heir. This one is expendable, which is a bloody good thing, under the circumstances."

"Your father the Alpha would be greatly disturbed at the very idea that he had passed on a disease of this nature," Trulliad says.

"Perhaps," I say, pretending to consider it. "And perhaps not. I'm amazed my father hasn't married a fresh young thing of twenty. Or sixteen. Time's a-wasting, and at this rate he will never have the spare he needs."

"The Alpha was devoted to his Luna and wounded by the terrible events of the past," Trulliad says with a palpable lack of attention to the truth.

I don't bother answering that. My leg hurts as if someone has stuck a hot poker into my thigh. "I need a drink, so why don't you rush ahead like a good butler and meet me at the door of the library with a strong brandy?"

"I will keep walking next to you in case you keel over," Trulliad says.

"I suppose you have visions of breaking my fall," I say, giving my scrawny butler a sidelong glance.

"Actually, no. But I would call for a servant, who could drag you along the corridor. It's marble, so you might get a concussion, and that might make you a bit kinder to your patients, not to mention your staff. You had Betsy in tears again this morning. You seem to think scullery maids grow on trees."

Thank the Goddess, we're getting close to the library. I pause for a moment, the idea of amputation itting through my mind, and not for the rst time. I could get one of those Egyptian bed-things that Cleopatra had been carried about on. Walking would be a damned sight more dicult, but at least I would be free of this infernal pain.

"Your father has written," Trulliad tells me. "I took the liberty of putting the letter on your desk."

"Took the liberty of steaming it open, more like," I say. "What does he have to say?"

"He expresses some interest in your marital future," Trulliad says cheerfully. "It seems that last missive you sent him, the one listing all your demands for a spouse, did not dissuade him. Rather surprising, I must say."

"The one that called him an i**t?" I ask. "Did you read that one too, you pestilent polecat?"

"You are quite poetical today," Trulliad observes. "All that alliteration in the service of mopsies and mollishers, and now for your lowly butler. I'm honored, I assure you."

"What is the Alpha writing about now?" I say. I can see the library door. I can almost feel the brandy going down my throat. "I told him that I wouldn't accept a mate unless she was as beautiful as the sun and the moon. Which is a quote from literature, in case you don't know. And I added quite a lot of other provisions as well, ones guaranteed to send him into a frothing t of despair."

"He is looking for a mate," Trulliad says.

"For himself, I would hope. Although he has waited a bit long," I say, failing to summon any particular interest in this news. "Men of his age don't have the balls they once had, if you will excuse the vulgar truth of it, Trulliad. The Goddess knows you have more delicate sensibilities than I do."

"I used to, before I began working for you," Trulliad says, pushing open the library door with a ourish.

I have one thing in mind. It's golden, tastes like re, and will cut the pain in my leg.

"So he is looking for a mate," I repeat without paying any attention to the words, but heading straight for the brandy decanter. I pour out a hefty dose. "It's been a rotten day. Not that it matters to me, or you, for that matter, but there's nothing I can do for that young she-wolf who showed up at the back door this morning."

"The one who was all swollen in the belly?" He asks.

"It's not the usual swelling, and if I cut her open, I willkill her. If I don't cut her open, the disease will kill her. So I took the easier of the two options." I throw back the brandy.

He looks at me, "You sent her away?"

"She had nowhere to go. I turned her over to Nurse Matilda, with instructions to bed her down in the west wing with enough opium to keep her mind off what's happening next. Thank the Goddess this castle is big enough to house half the dying people in England."

"Your father," Trulliad says, "and the question of marriage."

He is trying to distract me.

I pour another glass, smaller this time. I have no wish to stick my head in a bottle of brandy and never come out again, if only because I have learned from my patients that overindulgence means that brandy won't blunt the pain anymore. "Ah, marriage," I say obediently. "About time. My mother's been gone these twenty years. Well, gone isn't quite the word, is it? At any rate, darling Maman is over on the Continent living the good life, so the Alpha might as well remarry. It wasn't easy to get that divorce, you know. Probably cost him as much as a small estate. He should make hay while the sun shines, or in short, while he is still able to get a rise every other day."

"Your father's not getting married," Trulliad says. Something in his tone makes me glance up.

"You weren't joking." I say.

The butler nods. "It is my impression that the Alpha sees you... or your marriage... as a challenge. It could be that you shouldn't have listed quite so many requirements. One might say that it red up the Alpha's resolve. Got him interested in the project, so to speak."

"The devil you say. He will never manage to nd anyone. I have a reputation, you know."

"Your title is weightier than your reputation," Trulliad replies. "Additionally, there is the small matter of your father's estate."

"You are probably right, damn you," I decide I can manage another small glass. "But what about my injury, hmm? You think a she-wolf would agree to marry a man... what am I saying? Of course a she-wolf would agree to that."

"I doubt many young she-wolf would see that as an insurmountable problem," Trulliad says. "Now, your personality..."

"Damn you," I say, but without heat.