

Arrival in Wales

Mirabelle

In a caravan made up of three carriages and eight groomsmen, I nally arrive in Wales with the Alpha of Silverhowl two weeks later. Since the Alpha has only one subject of conversation at every meal... his son... I have learned enough about my future husband to introduce him to the Royal College of Physicians myself. That is, if he hadn't already joined their ranks.

After the rst few days of incessant talking about Rhys, I banish the Alpha from my carriage, using the excuse that my condition, combined with the jouncing of the coach, makes me nauseated.

I then discover that lying at on the soft cushions is remarkably comfortable. And since I have an iron-clad stomach, I read happily through our journey, lying on my back and munching apples.

What I see of Wales through the carriage windows is green: a dark, alive green that seems drenched with water and wind. I have never smelled the sea before, but I know immediately what it is, deep in my bones. It is wild and shy and free, and it makes me dream about long sea voyages to islands I have never heard of.

When I'm not contemplating the sea, I think about the physician I am about to marry. According to his father, he has been unfairly labeled as a 'beast' because of his impatience with the hoary medical establishment.

"Doctors," Silverhowl tells me, "are old fools. Take fevers, for example. Rhys discovered that, by their combination of blood-letting and heating the internal temperature, doctors are actually killing their patients. Members of the Royal College fought him tooth and nail until he nally put his patient record against that of an eminent practitioner, Ketelaer. Ketelaer lost all but three of his patients, and from about the same number, Rhys lost only one."

So I am marrying a genius. It does sound as if he has a tendency to lose his temper when crossed, but I am condent that I can manage him.

On the morning of our arrival at the castle, I wind some linen cloth around my waist to give myself a slightly thicker prole and regard myself in the mirror. Apart from my waistline, I look precisely like a princess in any one of a hundred fairy tales: clear blue eyes, reddish-gold hair, beautiful skin. Plus the family smile.

I will give myself two weeks to ensure that my ancé... perhaps husband, by then... is desperately in love with me, and then I mean to confess that I'm not carrying a child.

The castle is set on the cliffs, and as the carriages start up the road, the sun rises hot and yellow to our left. "Enjoy this sunshine," the Alpha says. I've allowed him to join my carriage for the nal leg of our journey. "I'm afraid that Wales is infamous for its wet weather. I do wish that you could talk my son into moving to London, my dear. I know he could do so much good there. Not that I'm suggesting that he have a regular practice, of course. He will be an Alpha of the realm. But he could consult on the most interesting cases."

There's something about the Alpha's descriptions of his son that feels a little... odd. As if he doesn't know him very well, although that can't be the case.

I lean forward in anticipation as we near the castle. It is massive, built of light gray stone, and I can see four or ve turrets. "Is it very old?" I ask.

"Ancient," the Alpha replies, looking out as well. "Been in the family for generations. One of my ancestors won it in a game of piquet. Rhys had to make extensive repairs since no one had lived in it for ages."

The carriages draw up in an enclosed area outside a great arched door.

"Ah, there you are, Trulliard," the Alpha says, leaping out.

The butler seems quite young for his position, probably only in his thirties, and so thin as to be stork-like, with skin the color of milky tea. "My Alpha," he says, bowing.

His eyes move to me as I step from the carriage with the help of a groom. He doesn't have that butler's knack of keeping an impervious face; his eyes widen and one eyebrow ies up in an unexpectedly charming manner.

"This is Trulliard," the Alpha says. "Miss Mirabelle, my son's ancée. I'm sure Rhys informed you of our impending arrival."

Trulliard ushers us through the huge doors straight into a great, open room with a massive staircase going up either side. The door is as thick as my hand is wide, clearly built to withstand sieges.

"Where shall we nd my son?" the Alpha asks. There's something in his voice, some sort of barely suppressed joy, that makes me wonder.

I take off my bonnet and pelisse and hand them to a servant.

"Beta Rhys is in the west wing, and he has been informed, of course, of your arrival," Trulliard says. "I sent a servant there as soon as we caught sight of your carriages. I expect he will join you any moment. If Miss Mirabelle wishes to refresh herself, I can escort her and her maid to her chamber. Perhaps You, my Alpha, as well?"

"Nonsense," the Alpha says. "We left our inn only a matter of an hour or two ago. Patients are housed on the third oor, aren't they, Trulliard?"

"Yes, but..."

The Alpha strides off. Then he hesitates, turns around, and grabs me by the wrist. "I'll take you with me," he says, as if to himself. Before I even open my mouth to reply, we are halfway up the left-hand ight of stairs.

"My Alpha," I gasp, catching up my skirts.

"Come along, come along," he says over his shoulder. Now that we're nally at the castle, he seems to be possessed by a ferocious compulsion. He tows me down a corridor.

I concentrate on keeping up, though I can feel my heart beating faster and faster. At any moment, I will meet the paragon I am to marry. I've formed a picture of him in my mind: tall and willowy, with a limp that gives him a slight tilt to the side, a face lined by pain but imbued with the quite remarkable beauty that his father still possesses.

We round a corner. I can hear voices now. The Alpha walks even faster, pulling me along behind him. A door at the end of the corridor stands open, and the Alpha dives through.

We are in a room with six beds, most of them occupied. A group of young men is clustered around a bed to the left. The Alpha nally lets go of my arm and steps forward. "Rhys," he says, his voice suddenly hoarse.

None of the men look around at the interruption. Most of them are younger, probably students, and all are intently focused on the patient.

"A teaching session," the Alpha breathes.

My eyes dart over the men, immediately locating my ancé. He is speaking with an air of authority. "Lycan fever. Presents with rash, febrile state." His voice carries a condence that commands attention. "The eruption appeared on the third day, which is conclusive evidence." Rhys has a longer chin than I would have imagined, but the rest of him is perfect: sleekly blond hair, an air of wild intelligence, and a lean frame that conveys both strength and arrogance.

That arrogant demeanor is what earned him the nickname of Beast... an expression as if he were the most intelligent person in the room. Yet, beneath that exterior, I can see a kindness that belies the label.

His costume is exquisite. Honestly, I never expected to see a morning coat of such magnicence in Wales, or anywhere outside of London, for that matter. My father would have envied it, and that says a great deal.

A young man to the right of the bed speaks up hesitantly. "Huxham says the rash might appear on the seventh, ninth, or eleventh day."

"In my experience, eruption occurs on the third day," Rhys replies. His voice is soothing, the kind that would calm a fretful patient, I think, wondering why he has a French accent before remembering that he spent most of his life in that country with his mother.

"Your experience is worthless," a graceless student snarls from the other side of the bed. I can't see him since he is obscured by the other men. "And so is Huxham's. The man was ailing in the dark. Seventh, eleventh; he might as well say that the eruption comes with the new moon. It's all magic to him."

"This eruption was accompanied by oppression and sinking spirits," Rhys responds, his voice a quiet reproach. "Lobb explicitly mentions those symptoms in connection with Lycan fever eruptions."

"Wouldn't you have sinking spirits if you found yourself covered with a disgusting, crusty eruption?" the harsh voice retorts.

Beside me, the Alpha shifts to the side to see the speaker, and then smiles. My heart sinks as I grasp the meaning behind that smile.