

Her aunt

Mirabelle

The moment I return to the drawing room, my father groans aloud. "I turned down three marriage proposals for you last month, and I can tell you right now that I will never receive another one. Hell, I wouldn't believe you a maiden myself. You look four or ve months along."

I sit down rather heavily, my skirts oating up like a white cloud and then settling around me. "I'm not," I say. "I am not pregnant." I start to feel almost as if I truly am carrying a child.

"High ranked she-wolves don't use that word," my father says. "Didn't you learn anything from that governess of yours?" He waves his quizzing glass in the air to illustrate his point. "One might refer to a delicate condition, or perhaps to being enceinte. Never to pregnancy, a harsh word with harsh connotations. The pleasure, the joy of being of our rank, is that we may overlook the earthy, the fertile, the..."

I stop listening. My father is a vision in pale blue, his waistcoat fastened with silver buttons inset with ivory poppies, his Prussian collar a miracle of elegance. He is very good at overlooking anything earthy, but I have never been as successful.

At that moment a long banging sounds at the door. Despite myself, I look up hopefully when our butler enters to announce the visitor. Surely the Prince has rethought. How could he sit in his castle, knowing that I am being rejected by the high packs? He must have heard about the disastrous events of the ball, the way no one spoke to me after he left.

Of course, the prince took himself away while the news was still spreading through the ballroom. He walked out the door with his cronies without a backward glance at me... and after that every face in the ballroom turned away from me. Apparently they were only waiting to see what his reaction was to being told I was carrying a child.

Yet he, if anyone, knows it to be untrue. At least, he knows the child isn't his. Maybe that's why he threw me over so abruptly. Perhaps he too believes the stories and thinks I am pregnant by another man.

The cut direct from an entire ballroom. It has to be a rst.

The caller isn't the Prince, but my aunt, Luna Fangwoods, known to her intimates as Zenobia. She chose that name for herself, realizing as a young she-wolf that Hortense didn't suit her personality.

"I knew this would come to grief," she announces, stopping just inside the door and dropping her gloves to the oor rather than handing them to the servant to her right.

Zenobia relishes a good drama, and when inebriated, she is prone to informing a whole dinner table that she could have played Lady Macbeth better than anyone. "I told you once, if I told you a hundred times, Cornelius, that girl is too pretty for her own good. And I was right. Here she is, in unfortunate conditions, and all of London in on the news except for me."

"I'm not..." I say.

But I am drowned out by my father, who chooses to avoid the question at hand and go on the attack. "It's not my daughter's fault that she takes after her mother."

"My sister was as pure as the driven snow," Zenobia bellows back.

The battle is properly engaged now, and there will be no stopping it.

"My luna may have been snowy... and the Goddess knows I'm the one to speak to that... but she was certainly warm enough when she cared to be. We all know how fast the Ice Maiden could warm up, particularly when she was around royalty, now I think of it!"

"Rosalyn deserved a king," Zenobia screams. She strides into the room and plants herself as if she is about to shoot an arrow. I recognize the stance: it is just what the lead actress did last week on the Covent Garden stage, when her Desdemona repudiated Othello's cruel accusations of unfaithfulness.

Poor Papa is hardly a warrior like Othello, though. The fact is that my dearest mama was rampantly unfaithful to him, and he knows it. And so does Aunt Zenobia, though she is choosing to play ignorant.

"I really don't see that the question is relevant," I put in. "Mama died some years ago now, and her fondness for royalty is neither here nor there."

My aunt throws me a swooning look. "I will always defend your mother, though she lies in the cold, cold grave."

I slump back in my corner. True, my mother is in the grave. And frankly, I think I miss her more than Zenobia does, given that the sisters fought bitterly every time they met. Mostly over men, it has to be admitted. To her credit, Zenobia isn't nearly as trollopy as my mama had been.

"It's the beauty," my father is saying, his voice rising. "It's gone to Mirabelle's head, just as it went to Rosalyn's. My luna thought beauty gave her license to do whatever she liked..."

"Rosalyn never did anything untoward!" Zenobia interrupts, her voice sharp.

"She skirted respectability for years," my father continues, oblivious to her outburst. "And now her daughter has followed in her footsteps, and Mirabelle is ruined. Ruined!"

Zenobia opens her mouth... and then snaps it shut. There's a pause, and she nally says, "Rosalyn is hardly the question here. We must concentrate on dear Mirabelle now. Stand up, dear."

I stand up, my heart racing.

"Five months, I would say," Zenobia states, her gaze appraising. "How on earth you managed to hide that from me, I don't know. Why, I was as shocked as anyone last night. The Luna of Derby was quite sharp with me, thinking I had been concealing it. I had to admit that I knew nothing of it, and I'm not entirely sure she believed me."

"I am not carrying a child," I say, enunciating the words slowly, willing them to be true.

"She said the same last night," my father conrms, his voice heavy with despair. "And earlier this morning, she didn't look it." He peers at my waist. "Now she does."

I push down the cloth that billows out just under my breasts. "See, I'm not in a family way. There's nothing there but cloth."

"My dear, you will have to tell us sometime," Zenobia says, taking out a tiny mirror and peering at herself, utterly self-absorbed. "It's not as if it's going anywhere. At this rate, you will be bigger than a house in a matter of a few months. I myself retired to the country as soon as my waistline expanded even a trie."

"What are we going to do with her?" my father moans, collapsing into a chair as suddenly as a puppet with cut strings.

"Nothing you can do," Zenobia replies, powdering her nose with a ourish. "No one wants a cuckoo in the nest. You will have to send her abroad and see if she can catch someone there, after all this unpleasantness is over, of course. You have better double her dowry. Thankfully, she is an heiress. Someone will take her on."

She puts down her powder puff and shakes her nger at me. "Your mother would be very disappointed, my dear. Didn't she teach you anything?"

"I suppose you mean that Rosalyn should have trained her in the arts of being as dissipated as she herself was," my father retorts, but he's still drooping in his seat, obviously having lost his re.

"I did not sleep with the prince," I declare, as clearly and as loudly as I can. "I could have done so, obviously. Perhaps if I had, he would have felt constrained to marry me now. But I chose not to."

My father groans and drops his head onto the back of his chair, defeated.

"I didn't hear that," Zenobia says, narrowing her eyes at me. "At least royalty is some sort of excuse. If this child is the result of anything less than pure high Alpha blood, I don't want to hear a word about it."

"I didn't..." I try to interject.

Aunt Zenobia cuts me off with a sharp gesture. "I just realized, Cornelius, that this might be the saving of you." She turns to me. "Tell us who fathered the child, and your father will demand marriage. No one below a prince would dare to refuse him."

Without pausing for breath, she swings back to my father. "You might have to ght a duel, Cornelius. I suppose you have pistols somewhere in this house, don't you? Didn't you threaten to ght one with Alpha Billestail years ago?"

"After nding him in bed with Rosalyn," my father says, his tone matter-of-fact. There's no hint of sadness in his voice. "New bed; we had it only a week or two."

"My sister had many passions," Zenobia says fondly, as if that somehow mitigates everything.

"I thought you just said she was white as snow!" my father snaps back.

Zenobia smiles, "None of them touched her soul! She died in a state of grace."

No one is inclined to argue with her on that, so Zenobia continues. "At any rate, you have better pull out those pistols, Cornelius, and see if they still work. You might have to threaten to kill the man. Though in my experience, if you double the dowry, it'll all come around quickly enough."

"There's no man to shoot," I say, my voice rising in frustration.

Zenobia snorts. "Don't tell me you're going to try for a virgin birth, my love. I can't imagine that it worked very well back in Jerusalem. Every time the bishop talks about it at Christmastime, I can't help thinking that the poor girl must have had a miserable time trying to get people to believe her."

"I can't imagine why you're bringing scripture into this conversation," my father says, shaking his head. "We're talking about princes, not gods."

I groan, feeling the fabric of my dress cling unattractively to me. "This dress just makes me look plump."

Zenobia sinks into a chair, her expression one of disbelief. "Do you mean to tell me that you aren't carrying a child?"

"I have been saying that. I didn't sleep with the prince, or anyone else either."