

Walking home without a head

Rhys

"You must be joking," I say to Trulliad. "I send my father a list of requirements for a mate that was a page long."

"It made fascinating reading," Trulliad says. "I especially appreciated the part where you admitted your incapability in bed. And the tear stain just there on the page..."

"It wasn't a tear," I say irritably. "It was brandy, you fool."

"Oh good," Trulliad says. "Because I hate to think that you were weeping all over the letter. Not when you could be wailing in your lonely bed."

"Why wouldn't I wail?" I say, wondering whether to have another glass. Better not. "You show me the man with an injury like mine who isn't brokenhearted over the dark future that lies before him."

"Dark and dire future," Trulliad amends. "Don't lose your alliterative touch now, right at the climactic moment."

"The despair of never having a good she-wolf at my side, the bitterness of knowing a sticky little hand will never curl around my thumb, the..."

"Or to get to what really matters, years without shagging," Trulliad says.

"Is that an attempt to make me feel better?" I ask.

"It's not all it's cracked up to be," he says, with an unmistakable lack of conviction.

"Where did you go to school?" I inquire. "You are altogether too literate for a butler. Most butlers I know say things like 'As you wish, my beta,' and leave it at that. Our conversation should be along these lines: Trulliad, bring me a wench. And then you would say, 'As you wish.'"

"What would be the good of that?" Trulliad inquires. "Under the circumstances?"

"Good point," I mutter. "Well, I think I will go for a swim. Tide's in."

I leave the castle by the west door, still puzzling over my butler. As I have thought since I hired Trulliad a year ago, the man must be in service to my father, to wit: a spy. That goes without saying.

But where on earth has the old man managed to find a butler like that, a Trulliad-like butler, with a sense of humor and a sharper tongue than I have? In short, probably the only butler in the world whom I would keep in the castle even knowing that he is a bloody spy?

The only possibility is that my father actually knows or understands something about me, and since that is impossible, I dismiss the thought.

The bathing pool is carved straight out of rock on the edge of the sea and is lled by the high tide but protected from the worst of the waves. It is a magnificent sight, a rock basin gleaming sapphire blue as the light begins to fade. The sea has calmed the way it often does just at twilight, and I stand for a moment looking past the pool at the way the sea ripples on and on, following a dim gold trail of light.

Then I shake myself and pull off my clothes. If I have learned anything about my leg in the past years, it is that if I don't exercise every day it hurts like the devil. I skipped the swim yesterday, and I am suffering the consequences today. Not that it doesn't ache as a matter of course, but without swimming, I find myself in the kind of pain that I can't bear without thinking about opiates.

Not good, those moments, nor opiates either.

I dive off a rock, deep into the water, feeling my hair pull free... damn, forgot to take out the ribbon again... and my body rejoices as my leg kicks free without carrying the weight of my body. Without thinking, I begin to propel myself forward, shooting through the water in the way I can't on land.

Hand over hand I go, ten lengths, twenty... at fifty I am tired, but I force myself through another ten, and then pull myself onto the rocks in one smooth gesture, water sluicing off my shoulders and arms. Before the injury, I never paid much attention to my body. Now I find myself pleased with the strength in my shoulders and chest. Though the doctor in me knows that is nothing but rubbish vanity.

"My beta," a young servant says, stepping forward and handing me a large piece of toweling.

I look up at him. "You're new. What's your name?"

"Chipsden, my beta."

"Sounds like a terrible illness. No, more like a bowel problem. I'm sorry, Alpha Silverclaw, your son has contracted Chipsden and won't live a month. No, no, there's nothing I can do. Silverclaw would have preferred hearing that to syphilis."

Chipsden looks perplexed. "My mum always said I'm named after a wolf saint, not an illness."

"Which one?" I ask.

"Well, he had his head chopped off, see? And then he picked it up and carried it down the road for a time. All the way back home, I think."

"Messy," I say. "Not to mention unlikely, though one has to think of chickens and their post-mortal abilities. Did she think that you would inherit the same gift?"

Chipsden blinks. "No, my beta."

"Perhaps she was just hopeful. It behooves mothers to look ahead to this sort of possibility, after all. I'm tempted to behead you just to see if she was right. Sometimes the most unlikely superstitions turn out to have a basis in fact." I ponder.

The servant steps back.

"Dear Goddess, you are young, aren't you? Now why did Trulliad send you down here? Not that I don't appreciate the towel."

"Mr. Trulliad told me to tell you, my beta, that there's a patient waiting."

"There's always a patient or two around the place," I say, drying my hair. "I need to have a bath first. I'm covered with salt."

"The sign isn't up, so Mr. Trulliad said to inform you."

I shake my head. "No, bath before patient. My life is enough of a shambles without my butler telling me what to do."

"This one's came all the way from London," Chipsden says. "And he is a big Alpha."

"Big, is he? Probably too fat for his heart. Pick up my cane and give it to me, if you would." I tell him.

Chipsden does so. "He's not fat," he says. "I saw him coming in. I mean that he is important-looking. He is dressed all in velvet and in great shape. And he is wearing a wig."

"Another dying man," I say, starting up the path. "Just what we need around here. Pretty soon we're going to have to put in our own cemetery out back."

Chipsden doesn't seem to have anything to say to this.

"Course you won't be there," I assure him, "since you can carry your head back home and be buried in your own village churchyard. But I'm starting to feel like a dark version of the Pied Piper. They come to Wales to find me, they die. The next day, more of the same arrive."

"You cure some of them, don't you?" Chipsden asks.

"A few," I say. "Mostly not. For one thing, I'm an anatomical pathologist, which means that I'm really better with dead bodies. They don't twitch, and they don't get infections. As for the live ones, all I can do is observe them. Sometimes I don't know anything until after they are dead, and then it's too late. Sometimes I cut the cadavers open and I still don't have the faintest idea what went wrong."

Chipsden shudders.

"You are doing the right thing to become a servant and not a physician," I tell him, making my way up the rocky path to the castle. "We surgeons are always cutting up people, dead or alive. It's the only way to learn what's inside, you know."

"That's revolting!" He mumbles.

"Don't worry," I say. "If you manage to walk your decapitated body home, then I can't cut it open and find out what happened to you, can I?"

Chipsden keeps quiet.

"Don't even think of quitting," I add, pushing myself over the last rock and onto the path. "Trulliad will have my head if more of his staff leaves because of my ill-considered remarks."

Chipsden's silence seems to indicate that he isn't quitting yet.

I reach the house. "I suppose I will have a look at that patient before I bathe."

"Like that, my beta?" Chipsden asks.

I look down at myself. I have wrapped the towel around my waist. "You said there's a patient waiting, didn't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"There's nothing I like more than meeting velvet-clad peers while wrapped in a towel," I say. "They are going to lie to me anyway, but it keeps them alert."

"Lie?" Chipsden asks.

I nod. "It comes with the title I think. Really. It's only the poor who bother with honesty, these days."