

A visitor

Mirabelle

That night at supper, my father reports that the Alpha of Silverhowl leaped on his proposal with undignied speed. "He apparently knows all about you. And Zenobia, it's clear you were right. He is unshaken... if not privately delighted... at the sound of my little scandal."

"I was the talk of London," Zenobia says, "long before last evening's unfortunate events."

"He isn't nearly as interested in your beauty as in your education, if you can believe it. I told him you had about as much education as any female should, and that you are the cleverest she-wolf I know, and that shut him up. I can't think why he never married again. His luna took off for France years ago, didn't she? Took the lad with her as well."

"She was French, of course. He got a divorce," Zenobia says. "The rumors were that it cost him twenty thousand pounds sterling to buy his freedom. And then he never did a thing with it." She shakes her head. "He could have had any number of possible heirs by this time."

"What I don't like is all this royalty-mongering," my father says. "Absolutely cracked on the subject of monarchy, if you ask me. He told me that a great-great-great aunt on his father's side was intimate with Henry the great."

"Wasn't he the lycan king who had six wives?" I ask.

"Had 'em and ate them," Zenobia says with relish, waving her fork. "Just like the story of Bluefur, except it was all true."

"At any rate, Silverhowl is happy because he has got the blood of the Old lycans in his veins, and now he's getting the blood of the new ones as well, through our Mirabelle."

My father is looking a good deal happier than he had this morning. "All's well that ends well," he says, nishing his glass of wine. "Someday we'll look back on this whole episode and laugh."

I can't quite imagine that.

"I suppose you sent the prince a note," Zenobia says to me.

I nod, though I have done nothing of the sort. "I'm meeting him in Vauxhall tonight." In reality, I plan to have a nice nap in the carriage while it tools around London.

"Vauxhall?" Zenobia asks dubiously. "Luckily it's a warm night, but it seems an odd place for an assignation. One would think that he could whisk you away to some sort of royal lodge."

"He probably will," my father says. "Just be sure you're back here in the morning. Silverhowl wants to meet you. I told him we want to send you off to Wales as soon as possible. No point in hanging around London."

In our household, my mother has drawn all the re for her improprieties. But sometimes I think my father is just as improper, in a different way. A shabbier way, if the truth be told.

"I think this will all work out better than it might have otherwise," my father goes on. "After all, the prince could never have married you. And there isn't a single Alpha on the market this year. Someday the Rhys will be an Alpha."

"She could have done better than a limp lily," Zenobia points out. "I assume the Alpha is obtaining a special license?"

My father nods. "Of course. He's bringing it with him tomorrow. And he sent a messenger to Wales this very afternoon, so his son will have some warning. It isn't in the normal course of things to acquire a mate and a child without notice, you know."

"You will have to make sure the marriage takes place quickly," Zenobia says, "just in case your visit to Vauxhall tonight doesn't have the desired effect."

"Well, as to that..." my father says.

At the note in my father's voice, I stiffen. I know it; I've heard it a million times. "Papa, you can't simply send me to Wales without a chaperone!" I say ercely.

"Hate to bring up a painful truth, but you have got no further use for a chaperone," he says evasively. "Though we might be able to persuade Mrs. Hutchins to accompany you if you insist."

Zenobia narrows her eyes. "Do you mean to tell me, Cornelius, that you are thinking of sending your only daughter into the wilds of Wales without your escort?"

"It's not a good time for me to leave London," my father starts to bluster.

"I do not feel comfortable taking a journey of that length by myself, especially when I am going to meet a Beast," I say. I keep my voice light but rm, precisely as my mother would have done. And just to make absolutely sure that he understands me, I x him with a glare that I have learned from my aunt.

"The beta of Silverhowl has been unfairly judged," my father says. "Heard all about it from his father. He's a brilliant physician, don't you know. You remember his mother stole him away to France; well, he got a university degree over there. Then he returned here and did the same at Oxford, and then he was admitted to the Royal College of Physicians at the age of twenty-three, which is practically unheard of, and then he went off to Edinburgh and did something or other there, or maybe he did that before the Royal..."

"Cornelius," Zenobia cuts through his bluster, "you are a precious coward."

He shakes his head, "I'm not a coward!" my father protests. "I have important things to do here in the city. The House of Alphas is meeting, I'll have you know, and I'm very important... very important indeed. My voice is required, essential."

"You're a cringing coward," Zenobia says. "You don't want to go up there and face the Beast yourself, even though you are sending your daughter... your pregnant daughter... into the countryside to marry him."

Now that Zenobia has got hold of the story, I begin to feel like one of those maidens who hung around King Arthurius's court and invariably found herself in the coils of a great serpent. My aunt instinctively turns any event into a melodrama, though one has to admit that this is worthy of a little drama. "You are throwing your daughter onto the mercies of a wild man," Zenobia says, her voice rising.

Rather surprisingly, my father does not back down. "I've already made up my mind. I shall not go to Wales."

I know that sulky tone of voice; he won't go. "Why not?" I ask, before Zenobia can jump in.

"I am no pander for my daughter," my father thunders. "I may have been a cuckold to my mate, but I will not double my shame by pandering my only child."

"You already have," I snap back. "You bartered me off this very afternoon, by lying about the child that we all know I'm not carrying."

My father's jaw is rigid. "Your mother never would have spoken to me in such a fashion."

That is true. I cannot remember a single occasion on which Rosalyn's voice lost its sweet, musical tone. Whereas my voice grates with the anger I can't keep inside. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but the tone of my voice doesn't change the truth."

"The truth is that every she-wolf is bartered off in some fashion or other," Zenobia says. "But I really think that you should accompany poor Mirabelle, Cornelius. What if the Beast takes one look at her and refuses to marry her?"

"He won't," my father says atly. "We all know that..."

At that moment, the door opens and Tinkle enters. "His Grace the Alpha of Silverhowl begs your indulgence."

"At this hour?" my father asks.

"Is he outside?" Zenobia demands.

It appears that the Alpha is indeed in his coach, waiting to see if my father can spare him a moment.

"Bring him in," my father says. Then, turning to me. "I suppose he couldn't wait until tomorrow to meet you."

"He can't see me," I say, alarmed. I look down at my slim prole. "In this dress, I don't have any evidence of royal progeny."

"I told him you were barely showing," Papa says. "Just sit down quickly. We'd better see him in the rose drawing room."

The Alpha of Silverhowl must be sixty, but he looks younger and very handsome. He has a regal prole, worthy of a coin, which seems tting for his rank. A Roman coin, I decide.

"Miss Mirabelle," he says, bowing. "You are as beautiful as the world has described."

I drop a curtsy, judging it to the precise inch to indicate respect for an Alpha. "I am honored to meet you, my Alpha."

"Now," he says, turning back to my father and aunt. "I took it upon myself to interrupt you at this hour because I decided that I should personally escort Miss Mirabelle to Wales. My son is a brilliant man, absolutely brilliant."

He pauses.

"But he does have a reputation for irascibility," Aunt Zenobia says, giving him her version of the family smile. "Please do be seated, my Alpha."

Despite his youthful aspect, the Alpha creaks when he sits down, like a chair left out in the rain. His eyes are suddenly wary. "My son has been much maligned."

"I suggest we dispense with the pleasantries," Zenobia says, rearranging the drape of her garments. "After all, we are soon to be family. You son may be rather surprised, if not shocked, at the arrival of his bride, and it's only natural that you wish to accompany dear Mirabelle, my Alpha."

"Well, that's settled," my father says, dispensing with any pretense of reluctance.

The Alpha looks from Papa to Zenobia. "Will Miss Mirabella travel with a chaperone? Yourself, perhaps, my Luna?"

"No need for that," Zenobia replies cheerfully. "She's ruined. No point in guarding an empty stable, so to speak. Would you like to bring Mrs. Hutchins with you, my dear?" she asks me.

I look from my father to my aunt and something familiar pangs in the general region of my heart. But it's an old pain, a familiar pain, and easily shrugged off. "I think not," I say. "If you don't mind, My Alpha, I shall just come by myself, with my maid, of course. As my aunt says, the circumstances certainly suggest that a chaperone is not necessary."

The Alpha nods.

"If you'll excuse me," I say, rising, "I have an appointment at Vauxhall."

The gentlemen scramble to their feet, and Zenobia follows, after accepting... in a most theatrical fashion... the Alpha's help in rising.

After which I climb into a carriage, instructing the family coachman, Stubbins, to drive around London wherever he wishes, leaving my relatives with the happy, if quite mistaken, impression that the Prince is vigorously debauching me.

It could be that I will never return to London, I realize, staring out the window. The city passes before the carriage in a long, dreary string of gray houses, made even dingier by a thick layer of coal dust.

That would mean I might not see my father again, as he never leaves the city. Or Aunt Zenobia, who leaves only for the most raucous of house parties.

At the moment, that idea is entirely untroubling.