

A dress baby

Mirabelle

"I simply don't believe this has come out of nothing!" My father says now, from somewhere behind me.

"I got kissed by a prince," I say dryly. "Which might count as nothing if Luna Bigtail hadn't seen us."

"Kissing... pah! Kisses are nothing. What I want to know is why it's being reliably reported that you are carrying a child. His child!" My father comes, stands at my shoulder, and looks with me at the empty street.

I sigh, "Two reasons. Neither of which involves a baby, you will be happy to learn."

"Well?" He asks.

"I ate a bad prawn at Luna Brimmer's morning musicale last Thursday." I tell him.

"So?" my father asks.

"It made me ill," I tell him. "I couldn't even make it to the ladies room. I threw up in a potted orange tree." I shudder a little at the mere memory.

"Uncontrolled of you," my father comments. He hates bodily processes. "I gather that was taken as a sign of childbirth?"

I look at him, "Not childbirth, Papa, the condition that precedes it."

"Of course. But do you remember when Luna Underfoot spewed in the throne room, narrowly missing His Majesty, the lycan King of Snow mountain? That was no prawn, nor a baby either. Everyone knew the Luna had drunk herself into a standstill. We could put it about that you are an inebriate."

"Would that solve my problem? I doubt many Alphas wish to marry a drunk. At any rate, it wasn't just the prawn. It was my gown." I explain.

He looks at me, "What about your gown?"

"I wore a new ball dress last night, and apparently my prole gave people cause to think that I'm carrying a child." I sigh.

My father swings me around and peers at my middle. "You don't look any different to me. A bit chilly around the shoulders, perhaps. Need you show quite so much bosom?"

"Unless I want to look like a buttons up matron," I say with some asperity, "then yes, I do need to show this much bosom."

"Well, that is the problem," my father says. "You look like available. Damn it, I specially told your chaperone that you had to look more prudish than anyone else in the room. Do I have to do everything myself? Can no one follow simple instructions?"

"My ball gown is not revealing," I protest, but my father isn't listening.

He shakes his head, "I have tried, the Goddess knows how I have tried! I postponed your debut, in the hopes that maturity would give you poise in the face of the high packs undoubted scrutiny, given your mother's reputation. But what's the good of poise if your neckline signals you are a wanton?"

I take a deep breath. "The affair has nothing to do with necklines. The gown I wore last night has..."

"Affaire!" my father says, his voice rising. "I raised you with the strictest of principles..."

"Not affaire in the French sense," I interrupt. "I mean that the disaster was provoked by my gown. It has two petticoats, you see, and..."

"I want to see it," my father announces, interrupting in his turn. "Go and put it on."

I almost roll my eyes, "I can't put on a ball gown at this hour in the morning!"

"Now. And get that chaperone of yours down here as well. I want to hear what Mrs. Hutchins has to say for herself. I hire her specially to prevent this sort of thing. She puts on such a priggish, puritanical air that I trusted her!" He growls.

So I put on the ball gown.

It's designed to t tightly over my breasts. Just below, the skirts pull back to reveal an under-dress of charming Belgium lace. Then that skirt pulls back, showing a third layer, made from white silk. The design looks exquisite in the sketchbook at Madame Desloup's shop. And when I put it on last night, I think the effect was lovely.

But now, as my maid adjusts all those skirts while Mrs. Hutchins looks on, my eyes go straight to where my waist ought to be... but isn't. "My word," I say, a bit faintly. "I really do look as if I'm with child." I turn to the side. "Just look how it billows out. It's all the pleating, right here at the top, under my breasts. I could hide two babies under all that cloth."

My maid, Eliza, doesn't venture an opinion, but my chaperone shows no such reticence. "In my opinion, it's not the petticoats so much as your bosom," Mrs. Hutchins states. Her voice is faintly accusing, as if I'm responsible for my cleavage.

Truth is that my chaperone has the face of a gargoyle. To me, she makes one think of the medieval church in all its stony religious fervor. Which is why my father has hired her, of course.

I turn back to the mirror. The gown does have a low neckline, which frankly I had considered to be a good thing, given how many young men seem unable to drag their eyes above my chin. It keeps them occupied and gives me license to daydream about being somewhere other than a ballroom.

"You are overly endowed," Mrs. Hutchins goes on. "Too much on top. Put that together with the way the dress billows out, and you look as if you're expecting a happy event."

"It wouldn't have been happy," I point out.

"Not in your circumstances." Mrs. Hutchins clears her throat. She has the most irritating way of clearing her throat that I have ever heard. It means, I have learned over the last few months, that she is about to say something unpleasant.

"Why on earth didn't we see it?" I cry with frustration, cutting her off before she can launch her criticism. "It seems so unfair, to lose my reputation and perhaps even my chance at marriage, just because this gown has too many pleats and petticoats."

"Your manners are at fault," Mrs. Hutchins says. "You should have learned from your mother's example that if you act like a hussy, people will take you for one. I tried to give you tips about propriety as best I could over the last months, but you paid me no mind. Now you must reap what you have sown."

"My manners have nothing to do with this dress and its effect on my gure," I state. I rarely bother to examine myself closely in the glass. If I had just looked carefully, if I had turned to the side...

"It's the neckline," Mrs. Hutchins says stubbornly. "You look like a milking cow, if you will excuse the comparison."

I don't care to excuse it, so I ignore her. People should warn one of the danger. A she-wolf should always look at herself from the side while dressing, or she might discover that all of London suddenly believes her to be carrying a child.

"I know that you are not in the family way," Mrs. Hutchins continues, sounding as if she is reluctant to admit it. "But I would never believe it, looking at you now." She clears her throat again. "If you will take a word of advice, I would cover that chest of yours a bit more. It's not seemly. I did try to tell you that several times over the last two months and twenty-three days that I have been living in this household."

I count to ve and then say, stonily, "It's the only chest I have, Mrs. Hutchins, and everyone's gowns are designed like this. There's nothing special about my neckline."

"It makes you look like a light frigate," she observes.

"What?" I ask.

She gives a small huff, "A light frigate. A light woman!"

"Isn't a frigate a boat?" I inquire.

"Exactly, the type that docks in many harbors." She says.

"I do believe that it is the rst jest you have ever told me," I say. "And to think I was worried that you might not have a sense of humor."

After that, the corners of Mrs. Hutchins's mouth turn down and she refuses to say anything more. And she refuses to accompany me back to the drawing room. "I have naught to do with what's come upon you," she says. "It's the will of the Goddess, and you can tell your father I said so. I did my best to instill principles in you, but it was too late."

"That seems rather unfair," I say. "Even a very young light frigate should have the chance to dock at one harbor before she is scuppered."

Mrs. Hutchins gasps. "You dare to jest. You have no idea of propriety... none! I think we all know where to put the blame for that."

"Actually, I think I have more understanding of propriety and its opposite than most. After all, Mrs. Hutchins, I, not you, grew up around my mother." I mumble.

"And there's the root of your problem," she says, with a grim smile. "It's not as if the Luna were a felt-maker's daughter who ran away with a tinker. No one cares about that sort. Your mother danced like a thief in the mist while everyone was watching her. She was no private strumpet; she let the world see her iniquity!"

"A thief in the mist," I repeat. "Is that poetry, Mrs. Hutchins?"

But Mrs. Hutchins presses her lips together and leaves the room.