

## How to catch a mate

"Mirabelle"

There's a moment's silence while my two closest relatives examine me closely, as if I'm a rare species of beetle they have found under the carpet.

"That's for you to explain," my father says, turning to Zenobia.

"Not in front of you," Zenobia replies.

I just wait.

"All you need to know at the moment is that he can't father a child," my aunt adds. "That's the crucial point."

I put that fact together with various comments my mother has made over the years and find I have absolutely no inclination to inquire further. "How is that better than simpleminded?" I ask. "In a mate, I mean."

"Simpleminded could mean drool at the dinner table and the Goddess knows what," my aunt explains.

"You are talking about the Beast!" my father suddenly exclaims. "I have heard all about him. Just didn't put it together at first."

"Rhys Silverhowl is no beast," Zenobia scoffs. "That's horrible gossip, Cornelius, and I would think it beneath you."

"Everyone calls him that," my father points out. "The man's got a terrible temper. Brilliant doctor... or so everyone says... but the temper of a beast."

"A tantrum here or there is part of marriage," Zenobia says, shrugging. "Wait until he sees how beautiful you are, Mirabelle. He will be shocked and delighted that fate blessed him with such a lovely bride."

"Must I really choose between simpleminded and beastly?" I inquire.

"No, between simpleminded and incapable," my aunt says impatiently. "Your new husband will be grateful for that child you are supposedly carrying, and I can tell you that your new father-in-law will be ecstatic."

"He will?" my father asks.

"Don't you understand yet?" Zenobia says, jumping to her feet. She walks a few steps and then twirls around in a neat gesture. "On the one side, we have a lonely Alpha, with one son. Just one. And that Alpha is obsessed with royalty, mind you. He considers himself a bosom friend of the lycan king, or at least he did before the king turned batty as a... as a bat."

"Got that," my father says.

"Hush," Zenobia says impatiently. She hates being interrupted. "On the one side, the lonely, desperate Alpha. On the other, the wounded, incapable son. In the balance... a kingdom."

"A kingdom?" my father repeats, his eyes bulging.

"She means it metaphorically," I say, taking another crumpet. I have seen rather more of my aunt than my father has, and I'm familiar with her love of rhetorical flourishes.

"A kingdom without a future, because there is no child to carry on the pack name," Zenobia says, opening her eyes wide.

"Is the Alpha..." my father begins.

"Hush," she snaps. "I ask you, what does this desperately unhappy pack need?"

Neither my father nor I dare to answer.

Which is fine, because she has only paused for effect. "I ask you again, what does this desperately unhappy pack need? They need... an heir!"

"Don't we all," my father says, sighing.

I reach out and pat my father's hand. It's one of the rather unkind facts of life that my mama has been extremely free with her favors, and yet she has given her mate only one child, a daughter, who cannot inherit the major part of her father's pack.

"They need," Zenobia says, raising her voice so as to regain her audience, "they need a prince!"

After a minute or so, I venture to say, "A prince, Aunt Zenobia?"

That gains me the beatific smile of an actress receiving accolades, if not armfuls of roses, from her audience. "A prince, my dear. And you, lucky girl, have exactly what he needs. He is looking for an heir, and you have that heir, and what's more, you're offering royal bloodlines."

"I see what you mean," my father says slowly. "It's not a terrible idea, Zenobia."

She gets a little pink in the face. "None of my ideas are terrible. Ever."

"But I don't have a prince," I say. "If I understand you correctly, the Alpha of Silverhowl is looking for a pregnant she-wolf..."

My father growls, and I quickly amend my statement. "That is, the Alpha would perhaps acquiesce to a she-wolf in my unfortunate situation because that way his son would have a son..."

"Not just a son," Zenobia says, her voice still triumphant. "A prince. Silverhowl isn't going to take just any lightskirt into his family. He's frightfully haughty, you know. He would rather die. But a prince's son? He will fall for that."

"But..."

"You're right about that, Zenobia. By the Goddess, you're a canny old she-wolf!" my father roars.

Zenobia's back snaps straight. "What did you say to me, Cornelius?"

He waves his hand. "Didn't mean it that way, didn't mean it that way. Pure admiration. Pure unmitigated admiration. Pure..."

"I agree," she says in a conciliatory tone, patting my hair. "It's a perfect plan. You'd better go to him this afternoon, though. You have to get her all the way to Wales for the marriage. Rhys lives up there."

"Marriage," I say. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

They both look at me and say simultaneously, "What?"

"I'm not carrying a prince!" I shout. "I never slept with the prince. Inside my belly I have nothing but a chewed-up crumpet."

"That is a disgusting comment," my aunt says with a shudder.

"I agree," my father chimes in. "Quite distasteful. You sound like a hoyden, talking of food in that manner."

I glare at them, "Distasteful is the fact that you are planning to sell off my unborn child to an Alpha with a penchant for royalty... when I don't even have an unborn child!"

"I said this would all have to happen quite quickly," my aunt says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, let's say that your father goes to Silverhowl's house this very afternoon, and let's say that Silverhowl takes the bait, because he will. As I said, the man is desperate, and besides, he would love to meld his line with royal blood."

"That doesn't solve the problem," I say.

"Well, of course not," Zenobia replies, giving me a kindly smile. "We can't do everything for you. The next part is up to you."

I sigh, "What do you mean?"

My father gets up, obviously not listening. "I will put on my best coat and Hessians," he says to himself.

"Not that coat," Zenobia calls after him.

He pauses at the door. "Why not?"

"The shoulders are a trifle anxious. You mustn't seem anxious. You're offering to save the man's line, after all." She says.

"Sage-green court coat with a scalloped edge," my father says, nodding, and disappears through the door.

"Aunt Zenobia," I say, showing infinite patience, to my mind. "Just how am I supposed to get a child of royal blood to offer to the mate I have never met?"

Zenobia smiles. "My dear, you aren't a she-wolf of my family if you have to ask that."

My mouth falls open. "You don't mean..."

"Of course, darling. As soon as your father signs those papers, you have... oh... twelve hours before you really should leave for Wales."

"Twelve hours," I echo, hoping I'm mistaken in what I'm thinking. "You can't possibly mean..."

"The prince has been following you around like a child with a string toy," my aunt says. "Shouldn't take more than a come-hither glance and a cheerful smile. Goodness' sake, dear, didn't you learn anything from your mother?"

"No," I say at last.

"Actually, with your bosom you don't even need to smile," Zenobia adds.

"So you really mean..." I stop. "... I..."

"You. The prince. Seduction. Bed," my aunt says helpfully. "Twelve hours and only one prince... should be quite easy."

I feel astounded, "..."

"You are Rosalyn's daughter," my aunt says. "And my niece. Seduction, especially when it comes to royalty, is bred in your bones. In your very bloodline."

"I don't know how," I say at last. "I may look naughty, but I'm not."

"Yes, you are," my aunt says brightly. She rises. "Just get yourself a child, Mirabelle. Think how many young she-wolves manage to do it, and they haven't nearly your advantages... your body, your face, your smile."

"My entire education has been directed at chastity," I point out. "I had a governess a good few years longer than other she-wolves, just so I wouldn't learn such things."

"Your father's fault. He was frightened by Rosalyn's indiscretions."

There must be something about my face, because Zenobia sighs with the air of a she-wolf supporting the weight of the world. "I suppose I could find you a willing man if you really can't bring yourself to approach the prince. It's not unusual, but of course one knows, one cannot help but know of establishments that might help."

"What sort of establishments?" I ask.

"Brothels catering to she-wolves, of course," Zenobia says. "I do believe there is one near Covent Garden that I was just told about... men of substance, that's what I heard. They come for the sport of it, I suppose."

I gasp, "Aunt, you can't possibly mean..."

"If you can't seduce the prince, we will have to approach the problem from another angle," she says, coming over and patting my arm. "I will take you to the brothel. As I understand it, a she-wolf can stand behind a curtain and pick out the man she wants. We have better choice one with a resemblance to the prince. I wonder if we could just send a message to that effect and have the man delivered in a carriage?"

I groan.

"I don't want you to think that I would ever desert you in your hour of need," my aunt says. "I feel all the burden of a mother's love, now that darling Rosalyn is gone."

It's amazing how my aunt has managed to ignore that burden during the mating season and indeed for years before that, but I can't bring myself to point it out. "I am not going to a brothel," I state.

"In that case," Zenobia says cheerily, "I suggest you sit down and write that naughty prince a little note. You are wise to choose him over the brothel, truly. One hates to start a marriage with a bit involving babies. Marriage leads one into bits by the very nature of it: all those temptations. One always orders too many gowns and overspends one's allowance. Not to mention men." She kisses the tips of her fingers.

"But I wanted..."

"I am so pleased not to be married at the moment," Zenobia says. "Not that I'm happy my mate died, of course. Ah well..."

And just like that, Zenobia is gone.

What I want from marriage is clearly no longer a question worth discussion.