

Accidental Surrogate For Alpha

#Chapter 166 – Kindred Spirits

3rd Person

When Cora walked into the palace's opulent dining room, she expected to find the table packed with people. Ever since they'd arrived in Vanara, Gabriel had been entertaining different statesmen and potential allies for the war, in addition to their own party. However this night the dining room was almost entirely empty. Not only were Gabriel and his coterie of powerful friends absent, but so were Ella, Sinclair and Henry. Only Roger sat at the long, shining table, a glass of amber liquid in his hand. "Where is everyone?" Cora asked, standing frozen in the doorway.

"The King had a prior engagement – some charity gala for the hospital." Roger answered, not looking the least bit surprised to see the lovely human. "Dad was exhausted and decided to take supper in his rooms, but I don't have any idea about Dom and Ella."

"Oh." Cora replied simply, relieved by the thought that her sister would probably arrive any moment. After he'd badgered her with personal questions on their excursion into the capital, the last thing Cora wanted was to be alone with Roger all evening long. She didn't like the way he looked at her, the way his eyes darkened and his attention lingered with unnerving focus. He made her feel as if she were a particularly scrumptious rabbit bound for his hungry wolf belly, but only after he'd chased and taunted her to exhaustion.

She gingerly crossed to the table, painfully aware of the way his eyes followed her every move. She sat down and made a show of spreading her napkin over her lap, refusing to look at the wolf seated across from her. "So, how was your day?" She asked, striving for some semblance of small talk to kill the time.

When Roger didn't respond, Cora finally dragged her eyes from her empty plate to look up at him. When her gaze finally reached his face, he offered her a knowing smirk. "Oh, so you can look at me." He teased, "I was beginning to worry."

She narrowed her eyes, not caring for being called out when she was only responding to his behavior. Still, not one for confrontations, she muttered a sulky, "sorry."

"Are you?" Roger inquired slyly, "because you look annoyed."

"I'm trying to be polite." Cora replied, forcing the words out through gritted teeth. She glanced to the door for the dozenth time, willing Ella and Sinclair to appear and rescue her.

"Why?" Roger asked, flashing his fangs. "I hope not for my sake – I'd much rather have your honesty than some fake nicety."

Cora wasn't sure what to do. Unlike her sister, she had never been the sort to offer up her opinions to people whose reactions she could not predict. She didn't mind sharing complaints or venting with Ella, who she knew would always love her unconditionally, but this man was another matter entirely. It wasn't that she was afraid of him per se, but she certainly couldn't foresee how he would respond to her criticism – and that was a dangerous thing, especially knowing how violent some men could be when challenged.

Roger watched the emotions flitting across Cora's face, listening to the way her heart pounded and raced. He recalled her words about Ella respressing her feelings and trying to do everything on her own, and it struck him that while their struggles might be different, Cora was far from unscathed by their difficult upbringing. He decided to give her a push. "Come on, what's the worst that could happen?" He purred, his wolf sitting up at attention, curious and eager for her response. Roger mentally shook his head, why was his inner animal so fascinated by the woman?

Cora's eyes widened, and her cinnamon skin blanched slightly. Belatedly Roger realized this might have been the wrong question to ask – knowing what the human orphanages were like, it wouldn't surprise him if honesty was sometimes met with terrible things. Luckily Cora recovered rather quickly. She crossed her arms over her chest, unintentionally pressing her breasts together, and notched her pert chin upward. "You know, I think you're trying to provoke me. Politeness is a perfectly normal default among people who don't know each other very well."

"We're hardly strangers, Cora." Roger replied easily, his wolf flashing in his eyes.

"We're practically family – in-laws for all intents and purposes. If you can't be honest with family, then who?"

"My family is Ella." Cora answered stubbornly, flipping her raven curls over her shoulder. She couldn't believe the gall of the man, he betrayed his father and brother but somehow he saw fit to lecture her about family?

Besides, she doubted he even believed his own words, the way he'd been looking at her lately was far from brotherly.

Roger arched his brow, "And she's all you've ever needed, hmm? You've never wanted more?"

Cora was beside herself. Why was it that everytime they were alone together, Roger seemed intent on interrogating her deep personal feelings? "Why do you keep asking me these things?" She exclaimed, staring at her lap. "I'm just trying to mind my own business here, so why won't you let me?"

"Because I want to know you." Roger shrugged, ducking his head to try and catch her eye, but failing. "Is that so wrong?"

"But why?" Cora repeated in exasperation, peering up at him at last. "What interest could you possibly have in me?"

Roger sat back in his chair, assessing the disgruntled human with cool detachment.

"Why shouldn't I? Because you're human, or because you don't think you have anything to offer?"

Cora flushed, "I didn't say that... and you didn't answer my question." Roger's lips unfurled into a lethal smile, and suddenly Cora realized that she might not actually want to hear his answer. "I find you fascinating, Cora." He confessed, noting the way her heart skipped a beat. "I see a kindred spirit in you. I see someone who landed in many of the same circumstances I did, but rather than letting them define you or pollute your heart, you found a way to turn them into strengths and make your own way in the world. I admire that... I want to know how you managed it." He paused, eyeing her "Not to mention you're beautiful and clever, and cute as a damn button." Cora fought the urge to scoff. "You don't know me as well as you think you do."

"So correct me." Roger invited, leaning forward in his seat. Now that he'd captured Cora's gaze, he was determined not to break it, hoping his wolf's power might compel

her to open up.

She shook her head, emitting a small huff of disbelief. “I didn’t make my own way in the world, and as much as I’d like to say otherwise, my relationship with my sister defined me every bit as much as yours did with Dominic. I got where I am in my career because Ella shielded me from things that would have destroyed me and gave me the space to find my own ambitions, the freedom to dedicate myself to my school work without any ghosts hanging over my head.” Cora’s mouth flattened into a hard line. “I stood on her shoulders my entire childhood and I show my gratitude by blaming her. She saved my life by bringing me here, but all I can think about is the fact that the life I built in Moon Valley has been taken away, probably forever.”

She looked away for a moment, but Roger waited patiently, sensing she wasn’t finished. “And if anything proves just how fucked in the head I am, it’s that I can’t even take a compliment. Because while you might tell me I’m clever and beautiful, all I can think is that I’ll never be as clever and beautiful as she is... plus now she’s an actual mythical creature – how the hell am I ever supposed to stack up?”

Roger didn’t smile this time, he didn’t tease or try to refute her logic. He simply said, “I know exactly how you feel.”

Cora blinked in surprise, feeling a strange sense of disappointment. “Well there you go. Mystery solved... nothing to admire here.” She tried to feign a laugh, but it came out sounding hollow.

“I didn’t say that.” Roger countered sharply. “The way I see it, there’s even more to admire than before. And you better believe I’m going to keep doing it.”

Cora’s eyes widened, “But... I thought...”

“I know what you thought.” Roger assures her, “you thought your honesty would dissuade me, in fact you hoped it would. Unfortunately for you, now I want you more than ever.”

Cora visibly bristled, “want me?”

Roger cocked his head to the side, “I’m sorry, didn’t I make that clear?” He rose to his feet, his dark gaze raking over Cora’s form, “I’m not interested you as a friend or confidant, and certainly not as a sister-in-law. I’m interested in you as a lover.”

“But I’m human.” Cora objected, so shocked her jaw actually dropped.

Roger rounded the table until he was standing over her. He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and gently closed her mouth, feeling a zing of electricity pulse through his fingertips. “And I’m still an Alpha, even if I don’t run a pack. It’s in my nature to go after what I want with every fiber of my being, whether it makes sense or not.”

“What exactly are you saying?” Cora gulped, butterflies exploding in her tummy. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so aware of another being, or so electrified by a single touch. She’d always found Roger handsome, but she hadn’t imagined he would be able to turn her into a puddle with so little effort.

“I’m saying that if you want to push me away you can go ahead and try, but one way or another, I’m going to win you in the end, Cora.” Roger declared huskily, “So what will it be? Do you want to surrender now? Or do you want to keep pretending like you don’t feel this thing between us?”

#Chapter 167 – Ella Broods

Ella

After leaving our rooms I sneak down to the kitchens, hoping the palace chef will take pity on me. My stomach is grumbling with a hunger so fierce I feel dizzy, but the last thing I want right now is to be social. I love my family and King Gabriel is growing on me by the day, but faking smiles and pretending I haven't just had the biggest fight in the history of my relationship with Sinclair sounds absolutely dreadful.

I'm not sure why this fight feels so much worse than the ones before. After all, we got through Lydia's attempted assault and fake pregnancy, as well as countless other small battles about Sinclair's overprotectiveness, my defiance, and shared communication failings. Still, this is the first time since we met that Sinclair has suggested we separate for any length of time, and maybe that's the real reason I'm so hurt.

I probe my own feelings for fears of abandonment or doubts about his devotion, and I'd be lying if I said I came up entirely empty. Part of me, a very small and irrational part, does fear that Sinclair might not return for me if he goes away. An even larger and more ridiculous part of me wonders if he's leaving me behind because the magic has faded now that we're officially mated.

You're right. That is ridiculous. Sinclair growls in my head, and I realize I accidentally projected my fears through our bond again. My mate sounds furious at the very notion, and apparently he was so affronted by this idea that he couldn't stay silent.

You know how crazy I am for you, trouble. You know I'll always come back. You put those doubts out of your gorgeous head this instant.

Get out of my thoughts! I order bitterly, trying to imagine a great granite wall shutting over our mental link. I'm not sure if it works entirely, but Sinclair doesn't speak again. I return my focus to my tangled emotions, and though I am a bit hurt that my mate can stand the idea of being away from me, I quickly confirm that my greatest upset is due to his lack of support. I believe I can handle the challenges of this journey and that it's important for my wolf to get experience in the real world – so why doesn't he? Does he really believe I'm so weak that I'll fall apart at the first sign of trouble?

Baby, I told you it isn't like that. Sinclair chimes in again, and I feel the full weight of his hatred for the idea of separating us, as well as his love and belief in my abilities. I just need you to be safe. If we can get through this we'll have a lifetime of opportunities for you to get out! I repeat angrily, imagining a giant lock on the granite wall, and mentally

slamming the bolt into the ground before wrapping it up in thick chains. I'm still not sure if it fixed the problem, so I decide to test my sneaky mate. Dominic, I want you to know you're a great big dummy. You smell terrible and your wolf has fleas.

Silence. Beautiful, utter tranquility. Finally. I think in exasperation. I know blocking the bond with Sinclair will get easier the more I practice, but now it takes almost all of my strength in order to keep him out. As I pass the dining room on my way to the kitchens, I hear Roger and Cora talking in tense voices. I slow down, feeling both guilty for eavesdropping but also impossibly curious about their conversation. I haven't had a chance to ask my sister about the tension between them yet, but it's so palpable that you'd have to be blind to miss it.

Roger's husky voice floats through the door, and I can hear one racing heartbeat and

another, much steadier one. “So what will it be, Cora? Do you want to surrender now? Or do you want to keep pretending like you don’t feel this thing between us?”

I press my hand over my mouth to smother my gasp. I can’t believe Cora hasn’t told me that Roger has been pursuing her this way. I thought it had just begun, but from the sounds of it this has been building for a while.” Just because you feel something, doesn’t mean I do,” Cora replies, her voice shaking. “And for the record, if you’re going to be chasing after humans you should know we don’t believe the word ‘surrender’ belongs in discussions of romance. It’s generally reserved for battlefields and arrest warrants.” She adds primly.

A few months ago I would have agreed with her, the word surrender used to evoke images of violence and animosity for me. Now it only evokes the blissful release of being at my mate’s mercy, of letting him take control of my body and trusting him to take care of me.

Roger chuckles darkly, his voice going soft and gravelly. “Haven’t you ever heard that love is a battlefield? I’m pretty sure your kind have written entire songs about it.”

“Who said anything about love?” Cora gasps, sounding even more shocked and alarmed than before.

“Maybe I’m getting ahead of myself.” Roger murmurs, and I can practically picture him brushing Cora’s hair back from her face. “Or maybe not.” He adds in a low purr, seeming amused by some reaction or expression of hers – perhaps a shiver?

I hear a chair push back from the table, and then Cora’s fleeting voice. “I have to go.”

“No.” Roger objects, sounding gentler now. “You stay, I’ll go.” His footsteps recede into the distance, then pause. In my mind’s eye, I see him turning back for one last look at my sister. “I’m sorry if this caught you off guard, but it’s not in my nature to pretend I don’t have feelings for someone when I do. I’m letting you off easy today because I know this wasn’t easy for you, but don’t expect the same lenience in the future, Cora. Pretend all you want, but I know you feel the same, and I’m not going to let you go without a fight.”

I hear one of the interior doors open and click shut, and once I’m sure Roger is gone I decide that I don’t need to avoid the dining room after all. They clearly weren’t having that conversation in front of a crowd, and I want to check on my sister.

When I enter I find Cora sitting with her face in her hands, and I can see her red cheeks through her parted fingers. Her breathing is ragged and shallow, and she jumps out of her seat when I rest my hand on her shoulder. “Hey, it’s okay, it’s only me.”

“Oh,” She exhales shakily, her dilated pupils slowly zeroing in on me. There’s a faint scent of arousal in the air, and I know it isn’t my own.

Interesting. I think, trying to mask my features so as not to mortify my sister with this information. As soon as Cora’s surprise passes, she swats my arm. “Where have you been?!”

“I’m sorry, Dominic and I had a fight.” I explain, “I was planning on skipping dinner entirely until I realized everyone else had the same idea. Are you okay?”

“No!” Cora moans, frowning deeply. “Roger is... he’s... well basically he just made a pass at me.”

“I heard.” I say with a wince, not wanting to lie to her. “I thought something might be up with you two but I didn’t want to assume.”

"You heard the whole thing?!" Cora exclaims, eyes wide. "Why didn't you do something?"

"Not the whole thing, just the very end." I assure her, wondering how long they'd been talking and what exactly 'the whole thing' comprised. "But what would you have had me do?" I inquire curiously, recalling the way she accused me of never letting her fight her own battles and finding it incredibly contrary that she should now hold it against me.

"Interrupt him, bite him, sic Dominic on him... I don't know." She sighs, winding down a bit as she works through the options and seems to realize how ironic the request was. "I'm sorry, I know that's not your job and I should be able to handle one nosey wolf on my own... I just, I think I'm in way over my head."

Her skin is still flushed, and I have to wonder if she would be anywhere near this agitated if she wasn't interested in Roger. "In over your head because you don't like him?" I begin hesitantly, wondering how to word this. "Or because you do?"

"Wha- I..." Cora trails off looking stunned. "Of course I don't." She exclaims, much too quickly and sharply to be believable.

"Cora." I say pointedly. "I know you. I've never seen anyone get you worked up this way." In fact, I've never known Cora to date anyone. She's been with men, but only ever in one night stands with no strings attached.

"Well I've never been hit on by a wolf." She counters indignantly. "I mean you should have seen him, all cocky and smug... like he knows everything and can read me so well."

"Can he?" I ask simply, for the first time wondering whether her detached romantic life hasn't merely been a healthy woman in her twenties sowing wild oats, but a way of avoiding a deeper connection.

"Absolutely not." She answers firmly, shaking her head.

"Okay. Do you want me to talk to him for you?" I offer, even though I don't really want to give her such an out. I love my sister and I don't want Roger to pressure her if she's truly uninterested, but my instincts are telling me it might be a good thing someone is finally pushing her out of her comfort zone.

"No." Cora replies after a moment, seeming to dislike the idea of me fixing her problems again rather than handling this herself. With an expression of resignation, she meets my gaze with renewed determination. "Leave Roger to me." 1

#Chapter 168 – Going to Bed Angry

Ella

After dinner with Cora, I visit the Palace library, searching for any excuse to avoid Sinclair as I continue to work through my feelings. My sister's troubles with Roger offered some distraction, but I'm not sure a distraction is what I needed. My anger and frustration with my mate hasn't lessened at all, and I haven't had the chance to think about our conversation in any depth.

I browse the bookshelves absentmindedly, more caught up in my head than actually paying attention to the available selection. Eventually I spy a Vanaran history book on the top shelf, and my curiosity is piqued. I'd love to learn more about this mysterious territory, but it's very high up and there's not a ladder anywhere in sight. If my mate were here he wouldn't have any problem reaching it for me, but he's not here.

And he's not going to be. My wolf pouts, He's leaving, and we're going to have to get used to doing things on our own again.

Part of me is ashamed I've become so reliant on a man when I spent my whole life taking care of myself and others, and suddenly it feels ridiculous that I should seek out another to solve this problem. Licking my lips, I take a quick visual measurement of the shelves, and look around the room for a chair to stand on.

Finding a plush armchair, I pull it over to the bookshelf and clamber up onto my knees on the cushioned seat. Making sure I'm steady, I slowly get my feet under me, but unfortunately this doesn't make me tall enough to reach the top shelf. Testing one foot on the arm of the chair, I determine that it won't topple under my weight. Stretching as far as I can, my fingertips only graze the spine of the book, and I huff in frustration. Keeping one foot on the arm of the chair, I balance the other on one of the shelves, pushing myself up to grasp the book. Just before my fingers close around the old leatherback, a thundering voice shatters the silence.

"What do you think you're doing!?" Dominic demands, his disapproval slamming into me full force.

Yelping in surprise, I lose my balance and begin to topple backwards. I try to hang on but my fingers slip, and I use my free arm to cradle my belly as I fall. I see a whirl of motion out of the corner of my eye, and suddenly strong arms surround me. Gasping for air, I look up at my mate with relief, quickly followed by outrage. "Why would you startle me that way!" I exclaim, swatting his chest.

Sinclair's foreboding gaze bores into me, and suddenly I'm squirming beneath the weight of his scalding temper. "Is that really what you want to say to me right now?" He inquires ominously, looking me over with concern even as he sends waves of Alpha authority through our bond to chastise me. "Goddess, Ella. Were you trying to break your neck?"

"I would have been fine if you hadn't snuck up on me!" I argue, trying to wriggle out of his arms. However as soon as I begin trying to escape he simply holds me tighter.

"You have no business climbing on anything, especially not when you're alone. That chair could have toppled or you could have simply lost your balance. You risked yourself and the pup." He lectures, carrying me back towards our room.

Guilt washes over me, not for my own sake, but for my baby's. The last thing I ever wanted was to risk Rafe. I rub my belly, trying to sense his mood. I feel pulses of uncertainty, but not due to any harm I've inflicted. He's simply responding to my guilt and Sinclair's anger. "I'm sorry." I answer hoarsely, not sure if I'm apologizing to my pup or my mate. "I wasn't thinking, I just wanted a book."

Sinclair rumbles wordlessly, a clear note of suspicion in his growl. "Are you sure about that? Are you sure you weren't trying to get back at me for leaving you behind."

"What, by injuring myself?" I scoff, finding the mere suggestion preposterous, even though I know he's not completely off base.

"No." Sinclair corrects sternly. "But you warned me your wolf wouldn't obey anyone but me, maybe this was your way of proving it – making me think you'll get up to too much mischief without me."

Now that's an interesting idea. My sly wolf ponders. Maybe it's not too late to change his mind. She has a point, but that wasn't what happened and Sinclair will know if I lie.

"I didn't even know you were there." I remind him sulkily, "And not everything is about

you, Dominic.” I add spitefully, trying to drown out the swell of tangled emotions rising up inside of me. I feel like I’m all over the place, my moods swinging back and forth between sadness, worry, anger and resentment, muddying my mental state.

As if trying to prove just how hormonal I am in this moment, my brain veers away from irritation, moving to regret and guilt from the knowledge Sinclair is displeased with my behavior. Is there a worse feeling than when one’s mate is angry and disappointed with you?

I didn’t realize I sent the question through our bond until Sinclair’s wolf replies. How do you think I feel? His arms tighten reflexively on my body. But there is a worse feeling, and it’s failing to protect them or help them when they need you.

My heart softens toward him, especially when he lets me feel how distressed he’s been by my own unhappiness. My guilt increases, and suddenly tears are burning in my eyes. I feel so overwhelmed and I’m not sure how to put my feelings into words. I also don’t want snatches of chaotic emotion to reach him through the bond in case they send the wrong message, so I pull the mental wall down between us, locking it tight.

Sinclair frowns, clearly disliking the fact that I’ve cut myself off from him. Still, he doesn’t complain and when we finally reach our rooms he asks. “If it wasn’t about me then what was it?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I snifle, wallowing in self-pity. “I just want to go to bed.”

Sinclair moves into the sitting area, settling on the couch and arranging me in his lap.

“We’re not going to bed angry, little wolf.” He informs me, firm but gentle.

“But I want to be angry with you.” I share petulantly, knowing how childish I sound and not caring. “It’s your fault that I’ve become so needy and dependent. I used to do everything for myself, and now I can’t even get a book without asking for help.”

“Mmm,” Sinclair purrs sympathetically. “And my departure has thrown that into perspective, has it?” He nods. “I hate to say it, but that still sounds like it’s about me, trouble.”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.” I repeat stubbornly, trying to get up so I can go crawl into my nest.

To my surprise, Sinclair lets me stand, but once I’m on my feet he traps me between his legs, keeping his hands on my hips as he looks up at me. “Ella, I’m leaving the day after tomorrow.”

My knees wobble, suddenly feeling weak. “So soon?”

“There isn’t any time to waste.” He confirms gravely. “And I don’t want to go without settling things between us. I know you want to prove to yourself that you can handle the challenges and risks of being a Luna, but that’s obviously not everything.” He assesses shrewdly, softening his tone as he strokes the hair back from my face, cradling my head in his large hand. “I can’t make it better if you don’t tell me what’s bothering you, baby.”

As I look into his deep green eyes, I feel at a loss. The capricious, contrary part of me doesn’t want him to make it better at all. If I ask him to fix this, I’ll just be relying on him to solve my problems for me – again.

I don’t know what to do, because there isn’t a right answer this time. If I stay behind then I’ll be on my own, but the only challenge I’ll face is getting through the day without my mate. If I go with him I might have a chance to prove myself, but I’ll also be

staying in the safe cocoon of his protection. So which is worse?
“This isn’t going to get better, Dominic.” I finally reply, wrapping my arms around myself. “I don’t want you to go without me. I’m no use to you or the pack if I’m here alone.” I take a shaky breath, my throat itching. “And it does scare me to realize how much I need you, but not only because it makes me feel vulnerable, but because you’re running off into possible danger and I’m terrified that if something happens and I’m not with you...” I trail off, not able to put my riotous emotions into words. Sinclair exhales deeply and stands, his thumb brushing back and forth along my cheek. “And that’s what I’m afraid of.” He admits. “If something happens to me, I want you as far away from that danger as possible.”
I gnaw on my lower lip, averting my eyes as tears well. “Then there’s really no way I can change your mind?” “No, Ella.” Sinclair confirms. “My mind is made up.” He towers over me, his wolf flashing in his eyes. “Now, about this climbing bookcases business...”

#Chapter 169 – Sinclair Prepares to Leave

Sinclair “She’s still mad at you, huh?” Gabriel remarks, glancing pointedly in the direction of my sullen mate.

Ella is curled up on the couch reading the Vanaran history book she risked her precious life to reach last night, and occasionally glancing up to shoot me vengeful glares.

“You can say that again.” I chuckle humorlessly, my wolf reaching out for her through our bond, only to hit a granite wall. The clever minx certainly learned how to shut me out quickly, and though part of me is proud, my wolf is not the least bit amused. Still, as much as I hate the idea, I’m trying to give her some space. I know how mixed up Ella’s emotions have been the last few days, and I realize that’s to be expected between the pregnancy, our exile and her wolf waking – she’s truly been through more than most people could bear lately.

At the same time, I can’t let my desire to spoil the sweet creature sway my judgment. Thus, Ella was beside herself when I refused to change my mind about embarking on my travels alone, and she was furious when she realized I wasn’t going to let her antics in the library go unpunished. Today I am definitely paying the price. The wiley she-wolf snuck out of bed before I woke this morning, and she hasn’t spoken to me all day.

“She’ll come around.” Gabriel assures me hopefully, patting me on the shoulder.

“Spoken like an Alpha without a mate.” I remark dryly. It would be one thing if Ella were merely angry, but the horrible part is knowing that her vexation is covering a deep well of pain.

“So how are you going to make it up to her?” Gabriel inquires, looking back and forth between us.

“Well, I’m leaving Philippe as her head guard, but I’ll take as many men as you can spare to watch over her.” I request, knowing I’m going to need most of my own men for the journey ahead. I don’t like the idea of leaving Ella in the care of men I don’t know, but Gabriel and I have been friends since we were boys, and I trust him implicitly. “I think it’s really important that she continue visiting the refugees. There’s no one better to oversee their relocation and she needs to maintain those

relationships herself. The people will take comfort in her presence, and they'll trust her with things they won't tell Vanarans, or even my own men."

Gabriel nods in agreement, "They really do adore her, you know? You would have thought she's been their Luna for years."

"That's Ella for you." I smile, unable to suppress my pride. "My little love magnet."

Gabriel laughs, "What else?"

"I've been thinking that it might be good to plan some sort of event at the end of my trip. That way I can go to the Alphas and make my case without demanding an immediate answer. I can invite them to the capital in two weeks for a summit or festival or something, and they can come with their decision after having time to consider the alliance fully." I muse aloud, sharing this thought for the first time.

"Are you sure you want to give them the time to think?" Gabriel inquires. "It'll be harder for them to say no if you're there in front of them."

I shrug. "I'll be in front of them anyway, and I don't want to form these alliances through fear or intimidation. If people are going to go to war for my cause, they need to be on board of their own volition."

"Alright." Gabriel concedes, though I can tell he thinks I'm being too noble. "And where does Ella fit into that?"

"She can plan the event – if she's up to it." I amend after a moment, recalling how tired she's been lately. The bigger the baby grows the more often she naps the afternoon away, and I want to give her responsibilities without exhausting her or piling on too much stress.

"You know she'll force herself to be up to it if you give her the chance." Gabriel warns, clearly having a good sense of my mate's determined personality.

"If it becomes a problem let me know and I'll set her straight." I decide, making mental notes for myself in anticipation of sharing all this with Ella. "Besides, I'm only going to be gone for a couple of weeks and she'll have plenty of help."

My gaze stays locked on the she-wolf in question as we speak and, as if she can feel my scrutiny, Ella looks up and finds me staring. She narrows her beautiful gold eyes and her grumpy voice sounds in my mind, Take a picture, it will last longer.

I know she means it as a barb, but I have to admit this isn't a bad idea. I think maybe I will. I'm going to miss seeing your stunning face and gorgeous curves while I'm gone.

How about I take you upstairs and strip you naked, and we have a photoshoot.

She flushes visibly, but she only bares her sharp little fangs in my direction. Not a chance. You don't get to be rewarded when you're abandoning me.

My wolf instinctively rises to the challenge. Oh really, and how are you going to stop me, trouble?

I'll bite you. She threatens sassily, her own wolf rising to the surface. Hard.

Is that a promise? I purr, watching as my mischievous mate shivers in response. My blood heats, and I'm sorely tempted to abandon my conversation with Gabriel and go scoop her up this instant.

"Whatever you two are talking about, I don't want to know." Gabriel observes, shaking his head.

I chuckle, breaking the connection with Ella and returning to the matter at hand.

"Sorry, I suppose I got carried away."

"You think?" He jibes, grinning at me.

Still laughing, I continue, “there is one more thing I could use your help with.” I explain, sharing the details of Ella’s mysterious past. “We were planning on investigating her parentage back home, and I think that’s mostly on hold for now. Still, there may be other ways we can try to find out what happened to her.”

“Like what?” Gabriel asks, sounding a bit confused.

“Well blood tests for starters, they were supposed to do genetic analysis in Moon Valley but we left before we could get the results. And how do you feel about hacking the government servers on the continent? If we can find a birth record to match Ella, we might be able to identify her parents.” I suggest.

#Chapter 170 – Ella Hides

Ella

“Ella, why are we doing this?” Cora inquires in exasperation, her legs treading the steaming water of the palace baths.

“Because I’m avoiding Dominic and water is the only way I know to hide my scent.” I answer primly, swimming around her in circles. I’m wearing a borrowed swimsuit, and I’d even showered with Cora’s soap and worn her clothes on the way here – anything to try and disguise my scent.

I then persuaded Gabriel to show me some of the hidden passages in the Royal residence so that Sinclair couldn’t track me through the halls, and as far as I know my mate doesn’t even know these baths exist. They’re a relic from a bygone era, when it had been in fashion to bathe socially rather than in private. I wouldn’t know about them if I hadn’t asked. Luckily the King seems so amused by my schemes that he hasn’t shown any reluctance to help me, regardless of his friendship with my mate.

“This is silly,” Cora complains, rolling her big brown eyes. “He can’t make you forgive him if you’re not ready.”

I snort with laughter, rubbing my belly and sharing my amusement with my unborn pup. “Try telling that to an Alpha.” I retort wryly. “As far as Dominic is concerned he can declare our fight over and sex me into complacency.”

“I still don’t see why you should have to hide. I mean he might think that but it’s not like it could actually work...” She trails off, studying me closely. “Right?”

“Well not the way you mean.” I admit flushing deep pink. “It’s not like it would change my feelings or make me forget why I’m upset, but I also won’t be able to resist him.” I confess, heat pooling in my belly at the very thought. “He has this power over me, Cora. Even though I want to stay angry because I feel in my bones that I’m right, part of me still wants him to find me, because he’s my mate and it’s right that he should.” She still looks confused, so I continue, “It’s a mark of his power, proof that I don’t ever have to worry about being lost because he’ll always find me. And it’s the same with sex... I respond to his dominance on an instinctual level, and when he employs it against me... I don’t stand a chance – which I hate but also secretly love.”

“So if he does figure out you’re here and drag you off like a caveman, you’ll cave?” Cora surmises, shaking her head. “My lionhearted sister? No, I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” I sigh mournfully. “Til be putty in his hands and afterwards I’ll be all sated and sleepy and he’ll start sweet talking me... and the next thing you know I’ll be cuddling up to him instead of kicking him out of bed to sleep on the couch where he belongs.”

"That sounds diabolical." Cora frowns, sharing my indignation with such ruthless tactics.

"Just you wait." I chuckle, "If you don't find a way to dissuade Roger you'll be in the same boat soon."

"No, actually I think he got the message." Cora denies, and an image flashes into my mind of an ostrich sticking its head in the sand. "He hasn't made a move or mentioned it again."

I can only scoff, "It was just yesterday, Cora." Briefly I wonder if I'm making things better or worse by warning her. The more I've considered it, the more I think a wolf like Roger might be good for my sister, and if she knows what's coming she'll be prepared. She'll also probably resist her feelings all the more, which will egg his wolf on like nothing else. "I guarantee he didn't give up that quickly. In fact, the more quiet things are the more worried I'd be. Knowing wolves he'll wait until the very moment you think you're safe before jumping out and snatching you up."

"Very well put, mate." Sinclair's rumbling voice sounds behind us, and Cora and I both jump a foot into the air. I don't know how he managed to sneak up on us, when I'm as attuned to his scent as I am, but damned if he didn't find a way. Cora and I swim to the other side of the pool, determined to make a break for it, but Sinclair is too fast. He's there waiting when I reach the water's edge, and before I can consider turning to race away in the opposite direction he plucks me out of the sunken bath.

"Dominic, let me go! This isn't fair." I object, wriggling and writhing in his arms.

"I disagree." He purrs with dark amusement. "These were your terms baby, you set the challenge and I rose to it. And before you try to pretend otherwise, you should know I can feel how satisfied your wolf is. She knows this is the way it's supposed to be." He's right, the tyrant. My wolf is all ready to roll over and show him her belly, to invite his own inner animal to ravish her as if she's not every bit as upset as I am that he's leaving – if not more so. I'm muttering mutinously under my breath now, but Sinclair doesn't seem to mind, he simply hitches me up into his arms and nods to Cora before carting me out of the room.

"You're dripping water everywhere, you know." I tell him bitterly, crossing my arms over my chest as we move through the halls.

"I am?" He inquires, sounding much too pleased with himself, the rat." From where I'm standing it looks like you're the one making a mess of the King's lovely parquet." He has a point. I am the one who's all wet, but I took a towel to the baths and he abandoned it in his determination to be an ogre.

At the same time, his wolf is growling in my head, making sultry declarations that have my own wolf squirming with anticipation and need. Such a naughty mate, hiding from me, disguising your delectable scent... wasting the precious time we have left together making me search for you ... fighting me when all I want is to take care of you. What am I going to do with such an unruly little she-wolf?

You could release me and apologize for being a big bully and not letting me do my job as your Luna. She sasses in reply. If I'm unruly it's only because you're being especially unreasonable.

Sinclair strides into our rooms, and sets me on the ground, closing the door behind him. He stands before me with his hands on his hips, looming so close that mere inches separate us. No, it means you're frightened and hurt and lashing out at me

when all I'm doing is trying to protect our family. He corrects me sternly. Sinclair prowls forward, and I back away, bracing myself for more admonitions. Instead my mate's features soften as he reaches for me. And that's okay, because I don't like it any more than you do and I know how important stability is to your sense of wellbeing – especially now that you're breeding. He shares, surprising me with this show of empathy. I also know that I represent stability and safety to your wolf, so while you may be expressing your frustration about your role as my Luna, the real issue here is separation anxiety. Sinclair concludes firmly. Am I wrong?

No, I squeak, so caught up in our conversation that I can't stop to think how strange and right it seems that this is all happening in our heads.

I thought not. Sinclair nods, never taking his eyes off me. I know it's frightening to feel so attached to me, when you've never relied on anyone this way before – but what you need to understand is that this is what being mated is for wolves. It's not a sign of weakness or unhealthiness, it's a tribute to the depth and strength of our connection. I feel the same dependance on you, Ella, but it doesn't scare me because I know it's right.

For a moment I'm truly startled by how well he seems to understand my feelings, but I quickly realize how foolish this is. Of course he knows, I've probably sent half of these things through our bond. Still, it's more reassuring than I could imagine to feel so seen by the man I love.

Sinclair is still going, still bearing down on me as I instinctively retreat. It's also why it's so important that we don't waste a single minute together.

Now that we've shared this love, life without it seems unimaginable and fucking unbearable – and there might come a day when that happens, as much as I despise that possibility.

Suddenly I feel absolutely wretched for avoiding my mate – for running and hiding when he's exactly right. I'm on the verge of tears for the dozenth time today, but this is the first time it's due to my own guilt, rather than my misplaced anger with Sinclair.

"I'm sorry." I hiccup, speaking aloud for the first time. I stop backing away, instead leaning forward and wrapping my arms around his middle. "You're right. I've been acting like a child."

Sinclair purrs and returns my embrace, squeezing me tightly. "You've been acting like a she-wolf who's afraid, and one whose mate isn't giving her what she needs... but I just can't this time, sweetheart."

"I know." I nod, sniffing. "But it was easier to blame you than face my feelings."

"I know." He croons, giving me the same acceptance and confirmation I've just offered. Of course, a moment later his tender tone goes dark and sultry, "But we still have tonight, plenty of time for me to give you that dominance you hate but secretly love..."

I gulp, my eyes going wide as I take in his wolfish features as I recall my conversation with Cora. "You heard that?" "Oh yes, trouble." He confirms, sensual promise in his deep voice. "I certainly did." i