

## Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Chapter 194

Sinclair

"I'm worried about Ella." I confess, pushing away my dinner.

"You still haven't been able to connect?" Hugo inquires, looking up from his own meal. We're on the road today, in between territories and enjoying a rare night free of politics – though not free of stress. This is the first time I've been able to stop moving all day, and I know I have a long night of research and preparations for our next destination ahead.

"Not the way I want." I confirm. "We talk on the phone but something feels off. It would be different if I could actually see her, hold her and feel her emotions for myself. I can't stand this distance."

"Maybe that's all this is then," Hugo guesses. "You feel anxious because you're so far away and don't have the bond to rely on, and the absence of the connection is driving your wolf to distraction"

"But it's not just her." I admit, "Every time I ask Dad or Gabriel about Ella, it feels like they're holding something back, and it concerns me that she's not coming to our dreams. Every time I reach out for her... it's like she's not even there."

"That's not unheard of. Dream meetings take more energy than regular sleep -more brain power."

Hugo reasons, "Few couples meet that way every night, or even weekly – especially under such stressful conditions."

"My worry is that she's too stressed. I can hardly get her to turn on the video function on calls lately and when I do she's got great big circles under her eyes." I grumble, "And if I could get her into a dream then I could force her to tell me what's going on, but my voice alone can only do so much."

Not to mention the naughty thing finds an excuse to get off the phone as soon as we get stern with her. My wolf adds crankily.

"You knew that was a risk." Hugo replies with a sigh, "And if you ask me, she's not the only one working herself into the ground to distract herself from missing her mate."

"That's not why I'm doing it." I counter grumpily, and he shoots me a disbelieving glance. "At least, it's not the only reason. There's too much to do. I feel guilty every time I take even the smallest break."

"You and Ella are two sides of the same coin."

Hugo laughs, "I think you both need to take a day off."

"A day off to do what?" I scowl, feeling irrationally annoyed with my Beta even though I know he's only trying to help. "Sightsee? Read a novel? While my people are dying?"

"So Ella shouldn't get one either?" Hugo inquires slyly, finishing his plate. "She should keep working herself into the ground, until she's completely burnt out?"

"That's different." I bite, baring my fangs at him.

"Why?" Hugo demands. "Why is it okay for her to take care of herself, but not you?"

"Because I don't have the luxury of burning out! If I do, then I compromise the entire fucking war." I burst out angrily.

"And that's exactly why you should set some damned boundaries for yourself, Dom." Hugo growls. "Because if you keep this up, you will render yourself useless to us whether you approve of it or not. So for the love of the Goddess man, take the night off. Go call your mate and talk it out, take the edge off, do whatever you need. And come back tomorrow recharged."

I narrow my eyes at him, annoyance surging through my veins, "You know you can be a bloody prick sometimes."

"Yeah, but I'm right." Hugo snorts, not the least bit bothered by the insult.

"Of course you are, that's why it's so damn irritating." I chuckle, standing and clapping him on the shoulder. "Thank you, brother."

I leave the hotel dining room and retreat to my room, pulling out my phone. It's about 8 o'clock, and though Ella and I normally talk much later than this, I think our brief bedtime calls might be part of the problem – they don't leave us enough time to speak in depth. I dial her number and wait for the line to pick up, my wolf sighing with satisfaction when her silky voice fills my ear, "Dominic?"

"Hello trouble." I greet her, "What are you up to?"

"Just trying to catch up on the summit plans." She explains. "Is everything okay? You're early."

"Everything is just fine. I decided to take the night off, so you should too." I order warmly.

"But I have so much left to do." Ella objects, sounding uncertain.

"It wasn't a suggestion, little wolf." I chuckle darkly, "I'm making an executive decision that we both need a break."

"But –"

"No buts, this is happening." I command, leaving no room for argument. "Have you eaten dinner?"

"Yes." Ella answers, sounding only slightly sullen.

"Did you have dessert?" I follow up, wishing she would turn on her damn camera so I can see her.

"No... though the chef did make an especially delicious looking cake today." She reveals, obvious longing in her voice.

"Okay, then you call down to the kitchens and have someone bring you an extra large slice. Then draw yourself a bath, turn on your video, and you and I are going to talk about absolutely anything but work. Sound like a plan?" I inquire.

"That depends," Ella replies slyly. "Are you actually asking or is this another order?"

"What do you think?" I laugh, missing her so much my chest hurts.

"I think you're a bossy tyrant." She answers tartly.

But I miss you, so I'll be good just this once."

Fifteen minutes later her camera clicks on, and I'm granted with the sight of my glorious, naked mate in a steaming bubble bath, a huge slab of chocolate cake resting on the edge of the tub. I scour her beautiful face, frowning at the dark circles looming against her pale skin. Ella looks as though she's running herself ragged – worse, she looks drawn and anxious. In that instant, I know that this is more than stress or exhaustion and I'm furious with myself for not doing this sooner.

"Alright, baby. Time to come clean." My wolf's instincts are screaming that something is very wrong here. "What's really going on with you?"

Ella flushes and averts her eyes, a clear sign of deceit. "This is all just harder than I expected." She says quietly. "Not that I expected any of it really. I just miss you, and working with the refugees is so wonderful – it feels so right, but it's hard. It's really hard."

I tsk gently, hating the fact that she's on a screen and not in front of me. "I believe it. But we both know that's not all." I press, and part of me imagines I can feel her tension even at this great distance. Ella sets her jaw, and I can tell she's determined to stay silent. "Come on, talk to me, mate. Let me help."

She shakes her head. "I'm fine. Just tired and wishing you were here." I let a heavy silence hang between us, and when I don't say anything, she peeks up at me from beneath her lashes. "Why?"

Did someone say something?"

My wolf sits up at attention. "Why? What would they have said?" I growl forebodingly.

Ella squirms beneath the bubbles, and I increase the force of my growl, trying to send all my power and dominance through the phone. I wasn't sure it would work, but Ella shudders instinctively. She's still fighting me, but I don't let up, and eventually she breaks. "I lied to you!" She finally bursts, tears flooding her eyes.

"What about?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even.

"I haven't been missing our dream dates because I'm tired." She sniffles. "I've been having really bad nightmares ever since I remembered my wolf being bound. I don't even have a chance to try to go to you because the moment I close my eyes the bad dreams come and then I spend half the night trying to avoid going back to sleep but I never succeed and then it just happens all over again."

Her voice is shaky and her lips quiver dangerously. "And I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry and I made Philippe promise not to tell either – so of course he's pissed at me.

And your recording helps but it's not the same as having you here...and the worst part of all is that every time it happens it upsets the baby and I don't know how to make it stop!"

As usual, my wolf goes to pieces at the sound of her tears, and I can't even bring myself to be angry for the secret. "Sweetheart, it's okay." I croon, and my arms reach for her even though I know she's not really here. A purr takes up in my chest, as she buries her face in her hands and begins to sob.

Ella, I'm not mad. Please don't cry." I beg. "We'll figure this out. We'll make it stop. If I have to follow you into your dreams and drag you back to safety, I will."

She lifts her head meekly, "Is that even possible?"

"Nothing is impossible when it comes to us, baby."

I promise, "Not even the goddess will keep me from you now that I know – mark my words. When you go to bed tonight I'll be waiting, and wherever your dreams take you, I'll come. I promise I'll find you – no matter what"