

Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 243 – Cora’s Determination

Ella

As per usual the news about my latest hypnosis session is all over the palace by the time Sinclair and I surface from our rooms. Thankfully not the details about my teenaged despair, rather the premonition of our potential victory. I’ve realized how important it is to give people hope in this conflict ever since my early days visiting the refugees, but it really is remarkable the difference it can make in morale. In fact, the increase in public and political optimism is palpable as we attend the days’ scheduled summit events, the Alphas have even agreed to fly to the coast to witness the continental front of the refugee crisis first hand.

Unfortunately, there’s at least one person who isn’t thrilled by these revelations: my sister. I’m dressing for dinner when Cora ambles into my dressing room, her feet dragging with exhaustion. She slumps onto the chaise as I try on gowns, watching me with begrudging amusement. “You know, just once I’d like to come home after a long day of surgeries and not discover that my little sister has accomplished some impossible feat yet again. What’s next, Ella? Are you going to grow a tail?”

“I think you’ll find I’ve already done that.” I joke as my wolf wags her tail in my mind’s eye, eager to show off the beautiful rose-gold appendage.

“Har har,” Cora quips, rubbing her sore neck. “Come on then, tell me all about it.”

Sighing, I slip out of the red dress I was attempting to stretch over my belly and exchange it for a green number that will match Sinclair’s eyes. I’m not particularly eager to linger on this particular subject, but if she’s going to hear the story from anyone, it ought to be me. I gradually share the details, stopping and starting as the emotions catch up to me, using my wardrobe dilemmas as an excuse to delay the inevitable. It’s a relief when the tale is finally complete. “So it turns out those priests weren’t all bad,” I conclude, “for everything they put me through, they also kept me going when I was ready to give up.”

I peek at Cora for the first time since I started talking and discover her cheeks streaked with tears. “You never told me.” She states hoarsely, and I feel as though I’ve been punched in the gut. I guiltily search my sister’s lovely face, hating the pain in her deep brown eyes. There’s a flash of betrayal, but also a deep hurt I understand all too well.

“I didn’t even remember myself.” I answer, my voice barely louder than a whisper. “I never wanted to leave you Cora, you and the other kids were the one thing that kept me hanging on.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” She asks, a bitter note in her melodic voice. “You only got that low because you were bearing the brunt of the hardship for all of us, and now you say we’re also the reason you couldn’t find peace.”

“Because of how much I loved you.” I beseech her, taking a seat near her hip. “And it wouldn’t have been true peace, because I’d known I would be leaving so much pain behind for the people I cared about most. I would have missed out on my future – on seeing you become a doctor, on finding my own passion and meeting Sinclair... having this baby, waking my wolf.”

“I understand that.” Cora replies stiffly, “and I understand why you felt like you couldn’t confide in me then when you were in the thick of it, but I never knew you got depressed at all. You always seemed to have it all together.”

Wincing, I rest my hand on her arm, gently stroking her soft skin with the pad of my thumb. “I think you’re rewriting history a bit there... you’re the one who was always cautioning me not to bottle things up, to deal with our past.”

“Yes, once we were adults and I realized that the only way you could have stayed so composed was to repress everything.” Cora explains with obvious frustration. “It took a lot of therapy for me to reach that point – when we were children I truly thought you weren’t fazed by any of it. It made me feel even weaker than I already did.”

“I’m sorry.” I profess earnestly. “I never wanted you to feel that way, and I hope you know that I was the weak one for avoiding my pain rather than facing it.”

“Oh don’t say that.” Cora grumbles in typical contrary fashion. “You were in survival mode. It’s not your fault you never felt safe enough to come out of it.” An unidentified emotion flashes across her features, “besides, you’ve been the emotionally brave one lately.”

“Oh?” I inquire, wagging my brows. “I don’t suppose you’re referring to a certain wolf with a sly smile and bedroom eyes?”

Cora glowers at me, “You know smug really isn’t a good color on you.”

“I’m not trying to be smug.” I reply apologetically, leaning my shoulder against hers. “I’ve just never seen you like this.”

“Like what? Annoyed?” Cora bites back, and I wonder if she’s being intentionally contrary or if her emotions are simply so tangled and confused that she doesn’t realize she’s contradicting herself from one sentence to the next. “At my wits end over how to shake him off?”

“Cora you obviously like him.” I reply in exasperations. “Scowl at me all you like, I’d have to be blind not to notice. The reason you can’t shake him is because you don’t really want to, and you can’t lie to a wolf about your feelings. He’s not going to give up when you’re obviously denying yourself something you need.”

“I’m so tired of that nonsense.” Cora lashes out, surging up from the chaise. “So I find him attractive – maybe I even care about his well being. That doesn’t mean I want to be in a relationship. It doesn’t give him the right to overrule my decision.”

I observe her for a long moment, trying to decide on the right response. It hasn’t escaped my notice that the women in my life seem to be uniquely scarred when it comes to love, and it breaks my heart to see brilliant figures like Cora and Isabel so skittish of being hurt. “How do you know you don’t want a relationship when you’ve never been in one – never even attempted to form that kind of connection with a lover?”

“It’s not brussel sprouts, I don’t need to try it to know I won’t like it.” Cora snaps, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m not like you, Ella. I don’t need a partner to feel complete, I love myself exactly as I am.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” I say, ignoring her barbed comment. “But I’m curious, if you don’t want anything more, why did you say you haven’t been brave lately?” Cora freezes like a deer in headlights, and I press, “Did all that therapy you did ever address why you don’t let anyone get close to you?”

“It addressed the fact that I have legitimate reasons to fear intimacy.” Cora replies stiffly, neatly sidestepping my first question. “And I also have legitimate reasons to distrust Roger, in case you’ve forgotten.”

I shake my head as my patience with this game runs thin. “You should have been a lawyer.” I remark dryly, pinning her in my crosshairs. “You started this conversation, big sister, not me. You obviously want to talk about it and it’s frankly annoying that you’re being so stubborn and evasive. You say you aren’t brave, you say you have reasons to be afraid... so at least do us both the courtesy of being honest about what you want.”

Cora’s lower lip quivers. “I want to know what it feels like to love and be loved in return.” She answers, staring at her feet. “But I don’t want to risk having my heart broken.”

“Then you will never know.” I inform her, as gently as I can. “You can’t experience real love if you don’t ever let yourself fall, Cora. There is no reward without first taking a risk.”

“Well that’s just stupid!” Cora exclaims indignantly, beginning to pace. “Why should I have to expose myself to harm in order to be happy?” She doesn’t give me time to respond, nor does she acknowledge that she essentially just admitted to being unhappy despite her earlier words. Instead she carries on as if she’s having a conversation with herself.

“This entire thing is messing with my head, maybe I don’t even like him and I’m just confused because of everything else that’s going on.” She muses, working herself up further. “In fact, now that I say it, I know that’s right.” She nods, turning back to me. “This trip is going to be a good thing – I need some time away to clear my head, to get Roger out of my system.”

My eyes roll into the back of my head, but a knock sounds at the door before I can tell her what a blockhead she’s being. “Come in!” I call, scenting my father-in-law.

Henry wheels inside and offers me a broad grin, looking so much like Sinclair that my heart pangs. “I think I’ve found your mother.”