

## Accidental Surrogate For Alpha By Caroline Above

### Chapter 41 – Parenting Class

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Ella

“Parenting classes? Already?” I ask in surprise. “I’m only a few weeks along.”

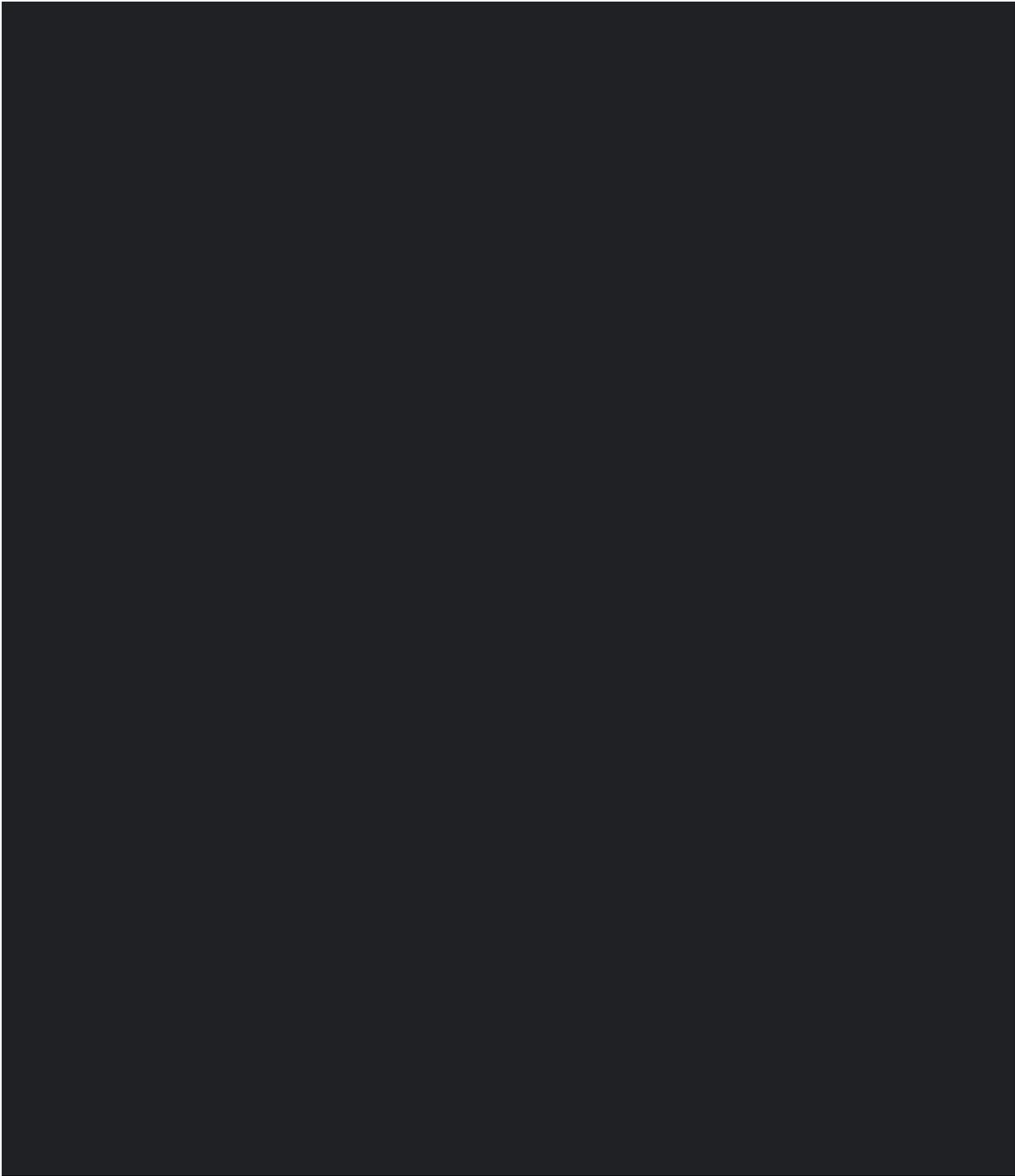
“Yes, but we only have five months to prepare, and you don’t know anything about shifter children.” Sinclair replies easily.

I’m sitting up in bed with a breakfast tray in my lap, while Sinclair sits in a bedside armchair watching me like a hawk. It’s the morning after the attack and I haven’t been allowed to move a muscle, not even to vomit on my own. I attempted to free my body from Sinclair’s strong arms when we woke so that I could make a mad dash to the bathroom, but he ended up carrying me instead holding my hair up and rubbing my back until I was finished. In fact he’s been so attentive that he took the day off of work to stay with me, and now he’s talking about going to our first birthing and parenting courses.

“Are shifter children all that different from human ones?” I ask, feeling a wave of anxiety.

“Well they gestate so much faster that I’d expect unique developmental milestones both during pregnancy and infancy, and then there are certainly differences in ability and personality. All their senses are heightened from day one, and they’ll need to learn about our ways and society which means you do too.” Sinclair reasons.

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I frown. Suddenly I feel as though I'm way out of my depth. My child is going to be a little superhuman miracle running circles around me, will I even be able to keep up? Be-

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fore I realize what he intends, Sinclair has reached out and smoothed my wrinkled brow with the pad of his thumb, a kind smile on his face. “Don’t worry, sweet Ella. This is why I want us to go to class, and we’re a team remember? I’ll always be there to teach our pup the shifter side of things, all you have to worry about is loving him.”

I can’t help but smile at Sinclair’s tender assurances, and it takes me a moment for his last word to click in my brain. “You said “him”, you did the same thing the night I was spotting – I forgot until just now.” I share, eyeing him curiously. “Is that just hopeful thinking because you need an heir... or do you know something I don’t?”

Sinclair smirks, grazing his knuckles over my cheeks. “I expect there are a few things I know that you don’t.” He teases. “But yes, it’s a boy. I knew the moment I felt the mental link.”

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“Really?” I gape, my hands naturally gravitating to my flat tummy. Sometimes it still feels terribly surreal that there’s actually a life growing within me, and now to think I have a son, it’s almost too much to take in. I feel tears in my eyes, and Sinclair grins, brushing them away with the pad of his thumb.

“Really.” He confirms. “We’re going to have a little boy.”

Before I can stop myself, I push the breakfast tray aside and launch myself at Sinclair, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and hugging him tightly. He catches me with a chuckle, squeezing me tightly and burying his face in my neck. He inhales deeply, his warm lips flush to my skin. “Are you smelling me?” I ask, amusement clear in my voice.

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“So?” He laughs, “you smell me all the time.”

“Yeah but that’s the baby.” I remind him, repeating the

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same explanation he’s given me a hundred times.

“Well I like the way you smell.” Sinclair shrugs, nuzzling my hair. I wait for him to tell me this is also because of the pup, but he doesn’t. Instead he emits a soft purr. “The baby likes it when we’re close this way.” He tells me, and I realize our bodies are so tightly pressed together that he’s undoubtedly able to connect to the child’s consciousness. “He can feel us both, and our happiness.”

“I wish I had a link to him like you do.” I admit, pulling away at long last.

“Don’t worry.” Sinclair murmurs, “I’ll always be here to tell you what he’s thinking and feeling.” His hands slide from my body, and suddenly I feel a rush of cold air. I almost want to wrap myself back around him, just to get that luscious warmth back, but Sinclair is already standing. “Now hop to it, cuddlebug. Class is in an hour.”

“Hey you’re good at that!” I exclaim, looking over at Sinclair’s station. Our first assignment in parenting class is properly diapering an infant (using a doll to stand in of course). There are eight other couples joining us, all at varying stages of their own pregnancies. Having diapered many children through my nannying days, I was confident that I could ace this part of the course, but I wasn’t prepared for Sinclair to complete the task faster and equally as competently as I had.

He shrugs, the very picture of humility. “In my line of work you have to kiss a lot of babies.”

I roll my eyes – I highly doubt many politicians go as far as diapering the babies they kiss. In fact I expect most of them

probably pawn off the less pleasant duties of parenthood

onto their wives

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if they ever lift a finger at all. “Maybe, but it’s more than that isn’t it? I remember how great you were with Millie and Jake.”

For whatever reason, Sinclair doesn’t seem to want to take credit for this. Instead a mischievous glint appears in his eye. “Hey, how about we race?”

“That hardly seems fair, you have supernatural speed.” I whisper, careful not to be overheard. Everyone here thinks I’m a wolf, and I’m doing my best not to give away my secret.

“Scared?” He challenges, waggling his eyebrows.

Perhaps another woman might laugh off this silly taunt, but I’ve never been one to back down from a dare. “Fine.” I answer, narrowing my eyes.

“You’re on.”

Sinclair flashes me a wolfish grin. “Ready, set, go!”

At once I get to work, simulating a diaper change complete with wiping and powdering, before sliding the baby doll over a clear diaper and doing up the tabs. Naturally Sinclair finishes about ten seconds ahead of me, “ha! I win!”

Before I can reply, the instructor comes over to us with her arms crossed over her chest, “Parenting is not a game, you two. Honestly Alpha, I should think you’d take this more seriously.”

We both straighten up, feeling chastised. I’m about to apologize when Sinclair points at me and says, “She started it!”

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I gape at him, and before I realize what’s happening a tiny

growl vibrates in my chest. I have no idea where the impulse came from – it’s just like that night at the campaign dinner. Before meeting Sinclair I’d never growled a day in my life. It occurs to me that this is probably foolish – wolves don’t growl at their Alpha’s unless they want a beating. Still, Sinclair can only smile. He drags me close and ducks his head to my ear. “You’re lucky that was cutest little growl I’ve ever heard in my life.” He teases.

“Why, what would you have done if it wasn’t?” I challenge.

“Keep it up and you’ll find out.” He promises ominously.

I shrug, “You deserved it, you threw me under the bus and you know it.” I try to keep my tone stern, but inside my insides are veritable mush. I love

seeing Sinclair's playful side, and it seems the more time we spend together the more it comes out. It's nice to know he's not strong, tough and terrifying 100% of the time

a strong protector is a wonderful thing, but I want my baby to have a father who will play and have fun with it too.

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The instructor, having given up on us, moves on to the next couple. Still our amusement only lasts a while. After dia- pers and cpr we move on to the birthing portion of the course, which is the last thing I want to think about. Like most expectant mothers, I'm excited for the miracle and eager to meet my baby, but I am absolutely dreading the pain of labor. I know it will be worth it in the end, but I'd rather not think about it overly much.

The instructor seems to have no such sympathy, clearly believing that the best preparation is to know every gorey de- tail ahead of time. Sinclair and I are seated on a yoga mat and my body is settled between his legs, my back resting on his

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chest. At first I was supporting my own weight, but with a lit- tle bit of encouragement I gradually leaned back against Sin- clair, letting him support me completely.

The instructor is in front of the room, standing in front of a chart displaying a baby curled in the womb. "The average werewolf baby is 9-12 pounds and 21-22 inches in length-

I stop listening at this point, trying to wrap my brain around this information. "Did she say 9-12 pounds?" I squeak.

Sinclair strokes my belly, "Shifters are bigger than hu- mans, remember?"

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I'm shaking my head, "No no, I can't do this!" I whisper frantically. "I can't have a 12 pound baby! Delivering a small baby is terrifying enough now you're telling me it's going to be the size of a butterball turkey! Nope, uh-uh,

not happen- ing!” I’m well on my way to genuine panic, and my voice is getting louder by the minute. Other couples are turning to look at us, and if I don’t get it together quickly, I might not. only have a very public breakdown, but expose myself as a human too.

## Chapter 47 – Late Night Snack

Sinclair

I can hear Ella’s heart racing at a mile a minute, and the baby is starting to become stressed in accordance to his mother. I’m worried too, Ella is small even for a human, and I’m big even for a werewolf, but I don’t believe the Goddess would have chosen her to carry my heir if she couldn’t handle the toll. I need to calm her down quickly.

I begin to purr, petting her sides in long, soothing strokes. “Easy, little one. It will be alright.”

I can feel her nerves begin to settle, but it seems Ella’s mind is still in full revolt. “Stop that!” She whimpers, “I don’t want you to just soothe this away, I’m right to be afraid!”

“Of course you are.” I croon, not letting up on the purrs. “Childbirth is always scary, and it always seems impossible – that’s why it’s a miracle. You’re going to have the best doctors in the country, Ella. I promise you’ll get through it in flying colors.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” She grumbles. “You don’t have to push a watermelon out of your privates in five months! Oh g\*d, what have you put inside me?”

“Well technically, I didn’t put it there.” I remind her, trying to lighten. the mood.

## Chapter 42 Late Night Snack

“Sinclair, I’m serious!” She snaps, “I don’t think I can do this!”

“Ella look at me,” I instruct gently. She shakes her head, refusing point blank, so I stop caressing her long enough to catch her chin and turn her beautiful face up to mine. “I’m going to take care of you.” I promise. “If that means we have to induce the baby to come a couple of weeks early or do a cesarean, we will. We’re not going to put your body through anything it can’t handle.”

Ella is gradually submitting to my purrs, though I can tell she still wants to fight. I can see that keeping my little human calm and relaxed through this pregnancy is going to be even more difficult than I anticipated, but I’m not the least bit disappointed if that means we have to spend more time snuggling and talking this way. I like taking care of Ella – It’s in my nature as an Alpha to care for others, and I need to give this comfort every bit as

much as Ella needs to receive it – whether she realizes it or not. Ella sniffs sullenly, nestling into my warmth. “It really isn’t fair that you can influence my emotions this way.”

“I know.” I commiserate, glad she can’t see my smile. The stubborn little thing clearly isn’t used to having help solving her problems, and I’m sure she doesn’t feel comfortable giving anyone else that power. I don’t tell her how much influence she has over my own feelings, however. The more time that passes, the more I realize how much my own mood depends on whether Ella is content – something I haven’t experienced with anyone but my mate.

With Lydia it was very different, my wolf was never settled unless hers was- and she fully expected me to manage her emotions for her, making every complaint in her life loudly and dramatically known. Ella is a very different creature, hiding her upsets most of the time and never expecting or even want me to fix them for her, but my wolf seems even more unhappy when she’s unsettled, than he was with

Lydia

My mind swirls with the implications of this, and I reason that it must be the baby once more. I’m so attuned and concerned about Ella because she’s carrying my heir, it makes perfect sense that my wolf is in this heightened state given our situation. I’m sure this connection is also why Ella seems only to be soothed by my purrs, and no one else’s. The instructor has gone silent clearly an old hat at talking couples. through the trials of childbirth and expecting panic attacks like Ella’s.

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My sweet human is not the only first time mother in the room insisting the task ahead of them is impossible, and I’m not the only mate purring. Still, when I stop for a moment to test whether the other men’s purrs soothe Ella, her heart rate begins to increase again, and I know she only responds to mine.

It’s the pup.” I tell my wolf, who’s strutting around with masculine pride in my head. “It has to be the pup.”

That night I wake alone in bed.

At first I’m not sure what woke me, it’s not until I realize my arms are empty and I reach for Ella that I understand she’s missing. I sit up, instantly alert. She’s not in the room, and the bathroom is dark and empty. I surge out of bed. scenting the air. I don’t smell an intruder or sense anything off not that I would. If anyone got close enough to sn\*\*tch her from my arms they certainly wouldn’t have left me alive.

I follow Ella’s intoxicating fragrance out the door and down the stairs. my

wolf gradually calming as we near the kitchen and I piece together the puzzle in my mind. She must have woken with a craving and decided to sneak a late night snack.

I pause to listen at the door just in case, the familiar aroma of bacon filling my senses. A moment later I push inside, finding Ella stationed over the stovetop in the dim light. I flip the light on and she leaps half a foot in the air, yelping in surprise.

"It's alright sweetheart, it's only me." I promise, coming forward to wrap my arm around her.

She backs away from me instinctively, clearly not realizing I only want to feel her body against mine, but I catch her hand before she can escape my reach and gather her close. "Did you get hungry?"

Ella nods, flushing, "I didn't want to wake you."

I offer her a stern expression. "I want you to wake me when you get up in the middle of this night." I tell her, "whether it's to satisfy a craving, or to feed the baby when it comes.

Ella blinks, and I wonder if she expected us to sleep apart after she delivers. "But you can't help me nurse. Why would you get up too?"

I roll my eyes, "because we're in this together. If you have to wake up ten times a night, then I should have to, too."

"You say that now." Ella snorts, "We'll see if you're still singing that tune in a few months."

"I'm serious Ella, I don't want to miss a moment of this experience. I've waited for it for a very long time. Besides I might not be able to give the baby milk, but I can support you while you do." I reason, not giving her an inch literally or metaphorically.

Ella narrows her eyes. "Are all shifter men like you? Or all Alpha's? I guarantee you human men aren't."

I furrow my brow, thinking for a moment. "I don't know – honestly. And I really don't care what anyone else does. This is how we're going to do it."

"And what if I don't want you to get up with me?" Ella poses, a devious glint in her eye. "What if I want to let you sleep, or to steal alone time with the baby."

I chuckle, pleased to see she's comfortable enough with me to indulge her mischief. "Just try it and see what happens." I tease back. "Now," I continue, looking over her head to the frying bacon. "What's on the menu tonight?"

"Bacon." She answers, not meeting my gaze.

"And?" I press, knowing her cravings are never so one note.

"Covered in chocolate." She murmurs, flushing. I wait, sensing there's more

to the story. Ella does not disappoint. “Dipped in guacamole and hot sauce.”

I can't withhold my chuckle, and Ella looks up at me with wide eyes. “You think I'm gross don't you.”

Oh if only she knew how far the opposite my feelings were. “Of course not – I think you're pregnant.” I answer, nudging her towards one of the high bar stools. “Now you sit here and relax, beautiful. I'll take care of the food.” I'm pleased to see Ella no longer flinches when I mention her beauty. She obviously still doesn't like it when others do, but now instead of seeming uncomfortable or annoyed, she blushes when I compliment her.

I finish preparing her snack with ease. The bacon was almost finished cooking already, and the chocolate is already melted. I pat the bacon dry and let it cool a bit, before cutting the strips in half and dipping them in the rich ganache. I lay them out on a plate and pull out a carton of guacamole from the fridge, placing a heaping spoonful at the center of the plate and drizzling it in hot sauce. I place the plate in front of Ella, who gazes at it in amazement.” I was just going to eat it out of the tub like a heathen.”

I throw my head back and laugh, “I would probably have done the same.” I watch her take the first bite, moaning with pleasure as her lashes fall shut in epicurean delight. However odd it may seem to me, it's what the baby wants, and Ella loves it.

I get a head start on the dishes while Ella indulges, only pausing to try a bite myself. It's not as gross as I thought it might be – but it definitely doesn't delight me the way it does my little human. When I place the last dish in the drying rack I turn back to Ella, only to find her sniffing pitifully.

“Ella, what's wrong?” I exclaim, shocked by her heightened emotion.

She shakes her head, “It's nothing, I'm being silly.”

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#Chapter 43 – Hoge Comes. For in Viet  
Sinclair

Her lower lip quivers dangerously, tears sliding down her cheeks.

Eventually the truth spills from her lips. “I ate all my bacon!” My heart cases immediately My wolf hates the sounds of Ella’s tears, but I’m relieved to know this is just a mood swing.

Chuckling, I pull her into my arms. “It’s okay baby, we can get more bacon.”

The next morning I wake up bright and early, though not intentionally.

Instead I was jarred from sleep when Ella wriggled out of my arms to race for the bathroom. This is quickly becoming our morning ritual. and I’m far less concerned with my little human’s unhealthy snacking than I was a week ago, as I’m simply pleased she’s able to keep some food down.

When Ella is finally done being sick, I coax her back to bed and wrap her up in my arms. My wolf is urging me to scent mark her again, but I want to give her a few minutes to regain her strength before I begin rubbing my body all over hers. Of our daily rituals, marking Ella has quickly become my favorite. It’s a unique sort of ecstasy and torment: satisfying my wolf and claiming the mother of my pup, then denying both of our lusts when they inevitably spark.

I know exactly how powerfully the intimate contact affects the little human, and the scent of her arousal is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. It’s not as if I’m not equally turned on, but I also don’t have wild pregnancy hormones rushes through my body – I wonder how much longer Ella will be able to hold out before she asks for more. More importantly, I

wonder if I will have the strength to deny her when that time comes.

"You know the only good thing about this crazy six month pregnancy?" Ella asks.

"You get to be done with morning sickness faster?" I guess.

"Mhmm." She hums, pressing her nose to my chest and breathing deeply. I reach down to the hem of her night dress and deftly slip my hand inside, resting it on the soft, warm skin of her belly. I feel a steady heartbeat and waves of contentment through the mental link, "Well I know you're miserable, but if it helps the baby is happy as can be."

"Of course he is." She murmurs sleepily. "He's always happy when you're around."

"And what about you?" I ask, "Are you happy when I'm around?" I'm not sure why I press her this way. I know that at least some of the baby's emotions are feeding directly off of Ella's, which means she's probably content at a minimum around me. Still, I want to know.

"That depends." The cheeky creature replies, "on whether or not you're being all high handed and bossing me around."

I shake my head, shifting my hands to tickle her sides. Ella giggles and squeals, trying to wriggle away from me, but I hold her tight. Soon we're writhing around on the bed. Ella begging me for mercy as I continue tickling her, and me showing no mercy whatsoever. Before long the game turns to the intimate dance of scent marking, and as our bodies rub sensuously together I realize an unavoidable truth.

If Ella loses control and asks me to go further, there's no way in hell I'll be able to deny her now.

A little while later I head downstairs to go to work, but I stop dead in my tracks when I see my brother waiting in the foyer. "What are you doing here?" I question coldly.

Roger arches a brow. "It's amazing how alike you and your little mate already sound. That's precisely the way she greeted me the other day."

A rush of pride flows through me. "That's because she's a very clever she-wolf"

"Or because you've turned her against me." Roger suggests.

"I don't need to manipulate Ella for her to see through you, Roger." I remark, descending the last few steps in front of me. "And you didn't answer my question."

"I wanted to check on Ella." He answers easily. "I was worried after the other night."

"She's fine." I reply simply, not feeling he deserves any more

information than this. I know he saved Ella, but I still find the circumstances which allowed him to do so incredibly suspicious. I've already had a team of investigators out looking for the rogues since the night of the attack, and I was planning on assigning another team to look into my brother's potential involvement today. And now that he's turned up like this it's going to be my top priority.

"Can I see her?" Roger requests, having the decency to look uncertain of the question.

My wolf growls in my chest, and I have to forcibly restrain the impulse to lash out at my brother. "Ella was sick this morning, and besides, I need to speak with you myself. Walk me to work?" I suggest.

Roger frowns but agrees. "Is she alright?"

Something about his interest in my little human's wellbeing makes my hackles raise. It all sounds completely innocent and, indeed, compassionate, but I wouldn't put anything past Roger. He's the king of manipulation and gaslighting, and though I don't think he wants to harm Ella, I don't think his preoccupation with her is innocent either.

"Naturally I'm investigating the rogue attack." I tell him as we head out into the snow, my bodyguards framing us on either side. "But I wanted to see if you picked up on any particular details which might help us track down or identify the culprits."

He adopts a thoughtful expression, "You mean like distinguishing features or tattoos?"

"Sure, or anything they might have said really any hints about their identities or who hired them." I clarify.

"The only piece I overheard was them discussing having "fun" with her before they finished the job." He reports.

I emit a violent snarl, and Roger flinches before he can stop himself. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't pleased to have startled him this way. "Sorry," I lie. "You know how it is."

"Actually I don't you stole my mate, remember " Roger snaps back.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "That isn't what I meant and you know it." I answer. "Only that wolves take the front seat when it comes to the ones we care about most.

"Whatever." He grumbles. "I can tell you that three of them were gray and the leader was red once they transformed. Definitely not locals. Their accents sounded like they came from somewhere in the east, but that doesn't mean the person who hired them is also foreign."

I nod in agreement. "And remind me, how did you find her that night?"

"I told you, I didn't know Ella was their target. I simply smelled rogues and

took up the hunt.” Roger supplies.

“That was incredibly lucky.” I tell him. “If it wasn’t for you who knows what might have happened.”

“I was happy to help.” Roger answers easily, either not picking up on or not acknowledging – the inherent suspicion in my remark. “Ella is family now, and your pup will be the future of this pack. I’m actually glad you suggested we walk together. I wanted to see Ella, but I also wanted to talk to you. I think it’s high time we put the past behind us.

“Because of Ella and the pup?” I state, not believing my ears.

“In part.” He confirms. “It was one thing to be at odds when Lydia and the pack was still between us, but it’s been five years since Dad got hurt, and almost two since Lydia left.” He reminds me as if I could forget. “At a certain point it just seems petty to hold onto old grudges, especially when the future is so bright for our family. I want to be in my niece or nephew’s life, and soon you’ll be King. We should be united if you’re going to rule. The attack made me realize that loud and clear.”

“You know Roger, the bad blood between us has never been on my end. I’ve never held a grudge against you, so I don’t know why you’re bringing this to me as if our conflict is mutual. If you want to stop working against our family then stop.”

Roger’s skin flushes. “How typical of you not to take any responsibility for what happened.” He gripes. “I come to you with an olive branch and you foist all the blame on me.”

I stop in my tracks, turning toward him. “Do you have any idea how many years I spent in therapy to stop blaming myself for Mom’s death?” I demand. “I was a child I didn’t do anything wrong and she did what any good mother would which is protect her pup. I know

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you’ve never seen it that way but I’m done letting you make me feel guilty for taking her from you. I lost her too, you know!”

“If you hadn’t ” He begins, worked up into a true lather now. So much for putting the past behind us – he can’t be that resolved to mend bridges if that little push back sets him off.

“No. Roger!” I snap. “I’m done with this. If you want to move on, then move on and the family will welcome you back even and especially Ella because she doesn’t have a cruel bone in her body. But if you can’t stop blaming a pup for things out of his control then you better believe I’ll never let you set a foot near mine.”

Without another word Roger turns on his heel and storms away. On one

hand I'm proud of myself for finally standing up for the child I once was, and on the other I have to wonder if I just made a terrible mistake. Roger has always had a volatile personality, and he's dangerous even at the best of times. I hope I didn't just put Ella in even more danger than she was already in.

## #Chapter 44 – Bonfire Night

Ella

"Are you ready?" Sinclair asks, standing behind me in the mirror. I have to stop myself from staring at him. He's dressed down from his standard suit, but somehow he looks even more gorgeous and intimidating than usual. In sleek black slacks and a simple white dress shirt, rolled up to his elbows and unbuttoned to his sternum, he looks powerful and laid back at once.

"That depends, what do you think?" I reply, extending my arms to show him my dress and get his opinion. I'm wearing a sleek velvet dress in ink bottle green. When the dressmaker suggested velvet I was skeptical, but now that I see the finished product I can fully appreciate her vision. It's simple but sophisticated, not to mention incredibly cozy.

"Hmm." Sinclair replies, striding nearer. "I think you're missing something."

"Like what?" I ask, turning back to the mirror to study my reflection. My makeup and hair are done. I found matching heels despite the infinite challenges of matching uncommon dress colors, and I'll wrap myself in my new coat (courtesy of Sinclair) before we leave.

"Like this." He beams, pulling out a thin black jewelry box.

I look down at it in surprise. "For me?"

"And just who else do you think I would be buying jewelry for?" He teases.

"I don't know." I shrug. "For all I know you have a girlfriend on the side."

"Ella." Sinclair's impossibly deep voice sounds even richer than usual.

"There isn't anyone else."

For some reason, this statement makes me feel more uncertain. It's not like we're in a relationship or have discussed not dating during the pregnancy to avoid scrutiny. It makes sense that he wouldn't risk the campaign by seeing someone else when he's supposed to be happily mated, but he's expressly told me that everything will be different when he finds his second chance mate. It seems strange that he should make such a firm assurance in this intimate way, it feels as though he's blurring the line of our arrangement. The little voice in my head might not mind this, but my heart knows better, it isn't safe.

Too late I realize Sinclair is watching me work through all these feelings, and he narrows his eyes at me. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Nothing.” I reply simply, nodding towards the box. “Can I see it?”

“I shouldn’t.” Sinclair states circumspectly. “I should make you tell me what you’re thinking first – but we don’t have time.” He sighs, flipping open the smooth black lid. Inside the box is a stunning silver necklace, dotted with diamonds and boasting a matching pair of earrings.

My jaw drops, and I try to cover my gaping with my hand. “Sinclair, this is gorgeous. But it’s much too extravagant. I can’t possibly accept it.”

“Of course you can.” He insists, turning my body back towards the mirror. I don’t know why, but I’m holding my breath as he drapes the necklace over my collar and secures it at my nape. My fingers immediately flutter over the opulent jewels. I can guarantee that I’ve never worn anything so fine in my entire life. “You see,” Sinclair says, beaming at my reflection. “It was made for you.”

“It’s incredible.” I answer honestly. “But I feel like an imposter.”

He frowns, furrowing his brow. “Why do you say that?”

“Maybe because I am one.” I reply, trying to tone down the sarcasm at the last minute. He’s been so sweet and generous, I don’t mean to take out my pregnancy angst on him.

“Ella, look at me.” He instructs, his tone gentle but brooking no argument. I don’t really want to obey, I find Sinclair’s penetrating gaze far too observant at the best of times, and sometimes I want to be able to sulk without my thoughts becoming public. “Now, trouble.” He chuckles, seeing my reluctance.

I do as he says, lifting my gaze to meet Sinclair’s emerald irises in the mirror. I feel like I might become hypnotized in their depths, but his expression is warm and open. “You might not be a she-wolf, but you are carrying my heir, and you are my date for the festival.” He slides his strong arms around my waist from behind, still staring at me through the looking glass, “This is not a sham. This is right.”

I have to admit that side by side, we make a striking couple. Sinclair is so tall and dark, rugged yet classically handsome – as if all his features have been carved from stone. In my heels my head actually reaches his shoulder, and though I look very small and delicate beside him, the fine clothes and jewelry make me look like a woman deserving of all his strength and power, not just some pretty face in the crowd.

Again I feel as though Sinclair is reading my mind. “Will you be upset if I tell you how stunning you look?”

I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, “I don’t know, why don’t you try and find out.”

Sinclair grins, moving his lips to my ear and sending a shiver down my spine before he’s even said a word. He purrs a laugh at the feeling of my body trembling against him, obviously amused and pleased at once by my response. “You look stunning Ella, so stunning it’s very hard not to eat you right up.”

I shiver again, feeling heat pool between my legs and praying that his senses aren’t strong enough to pick up on such an intimate thing. I’m beginning to think he likes getting me all hot and bothered, though it seems terribly unfair of him to tease me this way. Of course, I know Sinclair isn’t completely immune to me either, and suddenly a devious idea sparks in my mind. I lean back into his embrace, squirming slightly as if I’m trying to get comfortable, and intentionally rubbing my round bottom against him.

Sinclair growls in response, but it’s not the dangerous kind he makes when he’s angry. This is low and sultry, and butterflies burst to life in my belly even before I feel him growing hard against my backside. “I suppose I deserved that.” Sinclair murmurs, grazing his lips over the place where my neck meets my shoulder. “Such a mischievous little human.”

“We’re going to be late.” I answer huskily, trying to stay upright as my knees turn to jelly.

“I’m the Alpha, I’m never late.” He jokes, though he releases me at last.

“What, everyone else is just early?” I prompt him, quoting one of my favorite romantic comedies.

He grins, retrieving a glossy white coat and wrapping it around my shoulders. “Exactly.”

The Solstice festival is more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. I know it’s only the first night, but it seems so magical already. I can’t believe that it’s going to get even more magnificent. We’re standing at the top of a snow covered hill, our bodies bathed in the glow of firelight. A huge bonfire is in front of us, but as I turn to gaze out at the sprawling city, I can see hundreds of smaller fires blazing through the pristine winter landscape. The shifter society has gone completely dark, cutting out all electric lights and replacing everything as far as the eye can see with lanterns and flame.

Music unlike any I’ve ever heard fills the air around us, a blend of familiar instruments and exotic ones, set to tunes that feel older than time itself. Suddenly it’s painfully obvious that these people aren’t human, that they’re connected to their deity and nature in ways that defy all logic and science. It truly feels as though I’ve stepped into another world one far too mystical for me to ever make sense of.

can actually feel the magic in the air, which is definitely not something I've ever encountered before.

Women and men wearing sheer panels of cloth and painted with blue ink whorls begin some sort of ceremonial dance around the fire. They're holding torches of their own, and dancing with the flames as if they were lovers. I'm completely transfixed, but soon the people gathered around the edges drinking mulled wine join in, as an air of unbridled revelry takes hold of the night. I assumed Sinclair and I would stay on the sidelines and watch the evening unfold, but the next thing I know he's pulling me into the crowd of dancers.

"Just let me lead." He teases, pulling me close.

For once I do as he says, letting him guide my body through the unfamiliar steps until I'm so warm between him and the fire that I have to strip off my coat. He does the same, and soon I can feel his hard body flush against every inch of my soft curves. For once I don't find it difficult to let go of my worries and anxiety, Sinclair banished the reporters who tried to follow us into the event, and though we're surrounded by people, I don't think anyone is paying attention to anything but their own partners. I barely even remember that Sinclair and I aren't alone. It certainly seems like we're the only two people on the planet right now.

I'm gazing up at Sinclair as I think all this, and I know I must be telegraphing my every emotion to him, because he ducks his head in the next moment, until our lips are mere inches apart.

He's going to kiss me!

## Chapter 45 – Fust Hear Koss

Ella

I don't have the chance to gasp. because the moment my lips part. Sinclair's mouth has claimed them his hand is firm on my nape. holding me in place so he can plunder my mouth at will. His tongue teases my lips before delving inside, coaxing my own out of hiding until they're dancing, tangling and massaging each other with ravenous hunger

My shock passes quickly, and soon I'm rising up on my toes to meet him. my insides turning to mush as I wrap my arms around his neck, moaning when he pulls his lips from mine and begins carving a ruthless path over my jaw and down the sensitive skin of my throat.

I'm out of breath already, completely invigorated and lost to the world around us As Sinclair's talented tongue snakes out to dip into my clavicle. I take the opportunity to nibble his ear lobe. He purrs and a delicious river of heat pours through me My body is flush against Sinclair's, and I've

completely forgotten about the other dancers I press my self as close to him as possible, trying not to squirm. I'm desperate to get relief for my suddenly aching breasts and the deep pulsing between my legs, but too shy to truly seek it

Luckily Sinclair doesn't need to be told, he seems to sense my need effortlessly, and he's not at all shy about seeking his own desires He grips my hips in his powerful hands, holding them firmly against his and letting me feel his hardness. He gently undulates our bodies through the dance, rubbing me in all the right places under the pretense of following the sensuous steps.

This isn't like our other kisses. There are no cameras around, no eager shifters looking on. I'm sure a few of the other wolves present are peeking our way, but everyone is so preoccupied with their own partners that I doubt we have a large audience. If I had the ability to think clearly right now I might wonder why Sinclair is being romantic when we don't have anyone for whom to put on a show, but that's all beside the point because I couldn't think clearly if my life depended on it.

I'm sure time stops, that the world stops spinning and everything in it ceases to matter except this singular moment between two people despite the fact that we could not be more different if we tried. Sinclair's lips are soft as silk, but his affection is rough and merciless, as if he's trying to sear the feel of his kiss into my bones so that I'll never forget the way it feels to be in his arms. to be his. I know he's setting me up for heartbreak in the future because I won't forget, I'm sure I'll never be able to kiss anyone again without remembering this and feeling infinitely disappointed that nothing can ever compare.

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It's also getting carried away very fast, but I can't seem to find the will to end it. Luckily Sinclair does, pulling back a moment later and looking down at me with a fiery gaze that leaves me tingling from my head all the way down to my toes. It's a good thing he has more restraint than I do, because I was about ready to rip off both of our clothes despite the cold. I swear I've never lost control that way in my entire life, and though part of me is worried about the power Sinclair obviously holds over me, it's also impossible for me to be too worried when I'm with him. He makes me feel so safe it's astonishing — and

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when I finally have the space to clear my head, frightening.

"Why did you do that?" I manage to gasp, still dazed with the

aftershocks of his touch.

“Why?” He offers me a wolfish grin that makes my heart do somersaults.

“Didn’t you like it?”

My cheeks flush with color, “Yes, but -”

“Then what’s the problem?” Sinclair inquires, completely missing the point.

Before I can think of answering he’s kissing me again, stealing the thoughts from my mind and making my insides flutter. This time I do find the will to back away from him, and I’m not even a little intimidated when he rumbles with displeasure... at least, that’s how I try to act. In reality his growl has my knees turning to jelly. Why, oh why do I suddenly want to throw myself at his feet and expose my soft underbelly to his mercy?

“Dominic, I don’t think this is a good idea.” I finally manage to say, even though the little voice in the back of my head is protesting at the top of her lungs..

“You don’t want me to kiss you?” Sinclair arches a skeptical brow, massaging my nape and studying my face so intently I wish I could run and hide.

“I didn’t say that.” I answer huskily. Lying when he’s looking at me this way is not even an option, the best I can do is skirt around the truth. and pray he’ll let me get away with it.

“So you do want me to kiss you?” He smirks, tucking my body closer against his.

With an exasperated huff, I glare up at the impossible Alpha. “Look, I’m simply not the casual type.”

The amusement drains from Sinclair’s features at once, as if he realizes I’m truly not playing his game. “And you think I am?”

I want to scoll, or laugh in his absurdly handsome face. I think he’s rich and good looking enough to have any woman he wants, and ever since he divorced the tabloids have never once reported him taking the same woman out twice. They haven’t named him a playboy exactly, and I know it isn’t fair to label him this way because he’s obviously a family man – but committing to one’s children is very different from committing to a woman. Plenty of men continue their roguish ways even after becoming fathers.

I don’t say any of this, instead I answer, “I think I’m human and your surrogate. You’ve told me a dozen times that your mate will come along eventually and I’ll step down as Luna. Ie we have no future, which makes ‘casual’ the only option available to us.” I remind him stiffly.

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“Would you want something more – a relationship if it was possible?” He

asks, the gears visibly turning in his head. I find myself reeling back. Why would he ask me such a thing doesn't he realize how cruel that is? Is he taunting me? Dangling the impossible over my head for sport? He doesn't look like he's being humorous or attempting a joke, he's also not wearing the playful expression he's donned when he flirts, but I can't fathom why else he would go down this path.

"It isn't possible, so why ask?" I inquire, feeling more and more annoyed by this line of questioning.

"Because I am." Sinclair replies, with just enough edge to make me rethink a sassy retort.

"No, I wouldn't." I snap, and despite my overexcited body – I mean it. I'm woman enough to admit that I couldn't handle a man like Sinclair. He would chew me up and spit me out... and I'd never survive it, no matter how attracted I might be to him. Rather, I wouldn't survive it because of how attracted I am to him. The problem is that the heat between us is so much more than physical. I'm getting more emotionally invested every day, and I can't take anymore. A relationship with Sinclair would be beyond self-destructive, especially given how raw I am after what happened with Mike.

"But you do want me to kiss you?" He presses, his cocky grin covering a countenance which suddenly seems dark and unreadable.

"I never said that." I remind him.

"Not verbally, maybe." Sinclair agrees. "Your body on the other hand..." He trails off, caressing one of his huge hands down my ribs, perilously close to the curve of my breast. I'm still plastered against him, on fire from his touch, and it takes all my willpower not to turn and press my aching nipple into his hand.

"You're impossible" I grumble, trying to stop myself from lashing out at him. The more he drags this flirtation out, the more I feel like some helpless rabbit his wolf is just toying with for sport. It isn't fair, or right.

Sinclair sighs then, relaxing his hold on me and dragging one hand through his hair, "Ella, there's probably something I should warn you about-"

I shake my head, drawing away from him. I don't want a warning or lesson right now. I just want to catch my breath and I'll never be able to do that if I stay with Sinclair. "I'm going to find a restroom." I announce, cutting him off.

"Ella -"

"The baby is pressing on my bladder." I declare stubbornly, knowing he'll do anything to accommodate the pup. Unsurprisingly, he lets me go, and I storm off into the crowd, hoping I'll be able to find some decent facilities.

## Chapter 46 Setting a Date

Sinclair

I'm watching Ella retreat, wishing I could read her complex mind as easily as I can read her body language. My wolf is angry with me for upsetting her, but I'm not sure what I did wrong. She liked kissing me, there's no doubt about that. I also don't know why she would ever think I'm the casual type – because I'm anything but. Still, she seemed to be telling the truth when she said she didn't want more. What am I supposed to do with that information?

Ella is clearly feeling off-kilter, and it's my responsibility to center her

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but if she won't tell me why she's feeling agitated, how am I

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supposed to help her? I know exactly what I would do if she was a she-wolf, but I don't know if a human would react the same way. My wolf wants me to try he's completely convinced that Ella is like any other out-of-sorts mate, who just needs a firm hand to remind her who's in charge so she'll share her worries with us. After all, she made me

shouldn't that go both ways? promise to communicate more

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I'm so caught up in my head I almost don't realize that the Prince is approaching me, a knowing smirk dominating his features. "I remember those days." He remarks. "When you first meet your mate

and you can't keep your hands off each other when you miss them

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even though they've only left the room for a moment. It's a wonder you haven't marked her yet."

My blood begins to boil so quickly that I've barely processed his words. before

my wolf is clawing at the surface of my skin. The only person

who knows that Ella hasn't been marked is Roger... if the Prince knows too, it's because my brother told him.

I'm not surprised by Roger's betrayal. He's had it out for me since day one, and his heroics with the rogues was always highly suspect. It was much too convenient that he happened to turn up just in the nick of time when Ella needed him that fateful night, and his overtures of friendship in the time since have been completely out of character. For a moment I wondered if he truly did have a soft spot for the human – if anyone is capable of thawing his frozen heart, it's my Ella, but now the truth is clear.

More importantly, the crown and the Kingdom are on the line. If people think something is off with Ella and I they'll lose confidence in my ability to lead. We have to appear strong and united to pull this off, and Goddess forbid if anyone begins to suspect we aren't truly mated, it could ruin everything. There's no doubt in my mind that the Prince will use this information as ammunition against me in the campaign unless I can convince him it would be a mistake to make it public. If he believes it will backfire on him, he won't share it, and the only way I know how to make him think this is by marking Ella and showing him the evidence, or selling the same lie I told my brother.

The former option is more tempting than I'd like to admit. My wolf is already urging me to mark Ella despite the fact that she's human and it's impossible for her to be my mate. He wants her, and he doesn't seem to care about any of the difficulties or details. Already, I hear his voice growling mine, every time I lay eyes on her. But it can't happen, I'd never be able to mark her without damaging her delicate flesh. For all I know the force of the bite could permanently injure her.

"You know I pride myself on self-control." I finally answer the Prince, shaking myself from my thoughts. "We're waiting until our mating ceremony."

The Prince scoffs, “Self control, or lack of passion? Not a good sign for an Alpha. If your mate isn’t taking the edge off, how stable will you be to govern?”

“One thing you don’t ever have to worry about with Ella and I, is passion.” I tell him, my voice imbued with abject honesty. I don’t need to have bedded Ella to know we aren’t lacking in that area. She overflows with both sweet submission and fiery passion, and I can’t imagine a more perfect fit for my own desires. Sometimes I feel guilty for comparing her to Lydia- but they’re so different I can’t help myself. Lydia was skilled but always distant in bed. She let me dominate her

physically, but never gave herself over emotionally creating a cavern of distance between us long before she left.

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Ella on the other hand... I already know that were she to give herself to me, she would give herself completely she wouldn’t be able to help herself. She throws herself, body and soul, into everything she does – leading with her heart. The challenge with her is convincing her to take the leap. I can see how skittish she is after Mike’s mistreatment, and who knows what other traumas she’s survived. It’s clear she doesn’t take the decision to jump into relationships lightly... I wonder if that’s why she’s behaving the way she is tonight? Does she truly not want anything from me romantically? Is it purely physical for her and she’s just not interested in being with someone without an emotional connection? Or does she feel as strongly as I do, but holds herself back out of fear or uncertainty?

“I presume you’ve already set a date for the mating ceremony, then?” The Prince prompts me, seeming more than a little peeved that he isn’t holding my full attention.

“Of course.” Now this time I am lying. We’ve made no such arrangements, making up the story solely for Roger’s sake.

“But not before the wild hunt. I take it?” He guesses, even cockier now, “You really think you can get through the night without marking her?”

“As I said, self control.” I repeat, though in truth I’m very worried about this. I’d started to warn Ella before she rushed away, but the Prince’s mocking makes me more determined than ever to hold out. “We’ll be mated exactly one month after our pup is due at the summer solstice.”

“An auspicious day.” The Prince nods, looking pissed. He knows as well as I do that royal mating ceremonies are not to be taken lightly, and are often planned around major holidays when the Goddess’s magic and our own – is strongest. The fact that I named this date implies that I’m already assuming I’ll win the campaign and that Ella and I will have no problems delivering the Kingdom its heir. Besides, the pack will eat up the idea of a Royal Wedding far more eagerly than they would a private ceremony for a contender. Some people might vote for me just for the occasion alone of course that’s not how I want to win, but this is life or death I can’t afford to be noble.

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“You must be sure of your victory.” The Prince continues, his tone much too smug for my liking. It’s obvious he’s just trying to push back at my own power play, but there’s something about his smirk that

makes me worry his confidence isn’t all a bluff.

“It will be an important day for my family whether I win the campaign or not.” I shrug. “Only the Goddess knows what the future will hold in that regard, but I know my mating day with Ella will be one for the ages. King or not.”

The Prince laughs humorlessly. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

“Do you have another?” I bite, before I can stop myself.

“In my opinion a true Alpha makes his own destiny.” The Prince answers ominously.

My spine stiffens as I think about my father. Is the Prince alluding to his attack? To his own father claiming the throne by eliminating the competition through any means possible? Is he confirming that he has plans to pull a similar act of aggression to keep me from winning? Taking credit for the

attack on Ella? Of course he's always been my number one suspect, but it's one thing to believe this without proof, and another entirely to have a confession rubbed in your face. Surely he's not so stupid to do such a thing.

"Well as an Alpha with actual experience leading a pack," I cut, leaving the rest of my sentence obvious but unsaid: rather than lazing around while my Daddy does all the hard work for me. "I can tell you that it's not that simple. You might be surprised at the unexpected

twists life throws at you.

"Spoken like a man who's prepared to lose." He snaps in an undertone.

I arch my brow. "Haven't you been paying attention? I can't lose- I lead the strongest pack on the continent, I have an incredible mate and my first pup on the way." I offer him a wide smile bound to infuriate him. "In my book that's a win – no matter what else happens."

It's both the truth, and a misdirect. I do feel as though I have everything I need personally but I'm not in this campaign for myself. I don't want the power for personal gain, I have to take it in order to protect shifter-kind and the human world from the Prince's tyranny. If he succeeds we'll likely be headed for a civil war and abuses unlike anything we've seen before. And I can't let that happen at any cost.

It's time I buy a ring. Ella and I can't keep pretending she's already marked by morning everyone in the Kingdom will know she isn't, which means we're going to have to go through with the mating ceremony even if the rest of our relationship is a sham. I might not be able to really mark her but I can sure as hell marry her.

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Chapter 47 – Ella Takes Matters into Her own Hand

Sinclair

I'm resolved to buy Ella a ring tomorrow, but we still have to get through tonight first.

She was distant on the ride home, sitting across from me in the back of the limo rather than tucked up against my side the way I prefer.

Moreover she didn't say a word until we got back to the house, and then her only message was that she wanted to sleep in her own rooms this evening

"Are you angry with me?" I ask, furrowing my brow in confusion.

"No. I just think a little space would be good for us." She answers, hugging herself in a clear defensive move.

Maybe she's right, I think, though it's not easy to hear my thoughts with my wolf snarling in protest. I still haven't gotten to the bottom of her reluctance to indulge our shared desires, and I don't want to press her if she really isn't interested. Even if she is, I think it would be a mistake to push her too hard or fast and risk spooking her. "Okay." I agree eventually. "I'll notify the guards."

My wolf is whining like a pup as I stride away from her, and I can't believe how attached I've become to the sweet human in so short a time. I don't like letting her out of my sight when I know she's under threat, but this is so much more than that. I've gotten so used to sleeping with her warm little body snuggled in my arms or sprawled

out on top of me, that I'm not sure I'll be able to rest without her.

As I prepare for bed, I try to make my wolf settle, but it's nearly impossible. In the end, I realize I didn't scent mark Ella tonight, and if anything will calm my wolf, I imagine that will. I pull on a t-shirt over my pajama bottoms and set off towards her rooms, knowing precisely how ridiculous I'm being and not giving a damn.

However when I arrive outside Ella's rooms I immediately pick up on a strange tension among the guards. I look around at them curiously, but their stiff postures are only compounded by their refusal to look me in the eye. A moment later a soft whimper emanates through Ella's door. and I understand. It's not a sound of worry, sadness or fear, but one absolutely dripping with sex. My ears sharpen towards her door and I hear more sounds: the slight rustle of the bed sheets; the gentle glide of deft fingers sliding over wet flesh; uneven and excited breathing. and pounding pulse.

It's obvious what Ella is up to in my absence, and I have to stop myself from groaning aloud.

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I silently order the guards away – knowing Ella would be mortified if she realized my men can overhear her touching herself. My own mind is divided over what to do I doubt she wants me to hear this either, though she probably wouldn't mind if she realized just how open shifters are about sex. Even my men weren't embarrassed, simply nervous over my reaction to them being near Ella at an intimate moment. She might not be my mate, but she is carrying my pup, and that's a claim every bit as powerful and sacred to our kind. They know how possessive I am of her, how protective. They probably thought I'd rip their ears off just for standing in hearing distance. Still it was their duty to guard her, and now it has to be mine until this private moment

has passed.

I'm confident that I'm the least objectionable audience to Ella, considering the intimacies we've already shared. Still, I have to keep telling myself this reminder as time passes. Every time I begin to wonder if I'm using her protection as an excuse to eavesdrop. I put myself in Ella's shoes and recall how humiliated she would feel about so many strangers hearing her in this state. Leaving her unguarded isn't an option, so this is the lesser of two evils.

Nonetheless, it's absolute torture to listen to Ella finding her pleasure this way, because every small pant and moan fills my head with a thousand explicit images. I can imagine exactly what she's doing, and the tiny sounds she emits every now and then egg my wolf on. He's in a near frenzy, demanding we go in and put a stop to this immediately. I should be the one pleasuring her, she shouldn't have to take matters

into her own hands. This is a mate's job. If she were mine I would march in right now, give her lush bottom a few swats for not making her needs known to me, then bury my face between her legs and feast until she's begging me to stop.

But she isn't mine. I remind myself furiously, trying not to get so carried away by the fantasy that I give in. Still, she's clearly worked up because of the kiss, my wolf reasons, she's probably thinking of us this

very moment.

We don't know that. I caution. She didn't want to get involved, remember? Her current need might be related or it might be the pregnancy, her hormones, or simply the fact that she's a living breathing woman with a healthy libido. Either way, we have no right.

Ella's quiet ministrations speed up, and I pray we're near the end of this – I've given up all thought of scent marking her. If I go in there now, I won't be able to restrain myself or my wolf. I'm hard as a rock on my slacks, and as soon as Ella's need for privacy is over, I'll let the guards return and trust her safety to them once more. Afterwards I'm going to have a nice cold shower and relieve me cock the only way I can in my current predicament.

Ella's delicious murmurs finally crescendo, and I wish I'd pressed her harder about her reluctance to start something romantic between us. This is only going to get harder as her pregnancy progresses, and my wolf is quickly running out of patience. I can't understand his behavior. I've had sex with plenty of she-wolves over the years, and he's only ever pushed me to claim Lydia, no matter how much I cared about the women who came before her.

It's like he doesn't believe Ella is human-like he refuses to accept that I couldn't mark Ella even if I wanted to. And I don't want to... right? It's just my wolf going overboard because of the pup.

If only we could mark her somewhere else, He suggests wistfully, completely ignoring my logic. And don't even pretend like that idea doesn't tempt you.

Unfortunately he's right, but it doesn't matter how tempting the idea is. Mating marks are so intimate because they require allowing another wolf to wrap their jaws around your most vulnerable spot. It would defeat the point to mark Ella somewhere safer.

But just think about how amazing it would feel. My wolf urges.

Again I have to stop myself from groaning out loud. The bastard is right. The last thing I want is to hurt Ella, but I'm very experienced when it comes to bringing a she-wolf to the peak of pleasure before sinking my teeth into her. I'm sure I could do the same for her- if only it wasn't her neck I had to bite.

Goddess, stop it! I internally shout at myself. You're losing it! This is crazy talk. It's your cock talking, not your brain or even your heart. You don't really want this, and neither does she.

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Right on cue, Ella climaxes, a soft keening escaping her lips. My hands close into fists and I grit my teeth against the intoxicating noise, and it's only as I drag in a few gasping breaths, suddenly worried I might actually burst through her door that I hear my name on her lips. It's a mere whisper as she comes down from her high, and I have no choice but to get out of there before it's too late. I storm past the guards, waving them back to their posts, and race for my shower.

A little while later I find myself lying awake in bed, my cock hard again despite the release I found in the shower. Ella is the only thing on my mind, and I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever be able to think of anything else. That might have been the most erotic thing I've ever heard, and I didn't even see it happening. Does she have any idea what she's doing to me? How irrational and crazed I've become about her? I barely recognize myself anymore.

I'm sure she has no clue. Unlike Lydia or some of the other she-wolves I've known, Ella doesn't have a manipulative bone in her body. When others would take pleasure in tormenting a powerful Alpha like myself, Ella would never believe she could. Not because she doesn't realize

how lovely she is or lack confidence, she just wouldn't want to and doesn't understand that her allure is strong enough to do so

unintentionally.

Even as I think this, a small knock sounds on my door, and as soon as I scent the air I know it's the object of my near... okay, not near, we're way past near at this point – the object of my total obsession.

Has she come to say she's changed her mind about us? Is she going to ask me to pleasure her the way she should have from the beginning? Does she know I overheard her? Will this be the beginning of something new? More importantly if I let her in, will I be able to control my wolf"? There's only one way to find out.

## Chapter 48. The Song

Ella

"Come in." Sinclair's voice sounds even deeper than usual, and I'm wondering if I'm imagining it. I waited as long as I could bear before coming to his rooms after finding some relief for all the pent up sexual tension he's created in me. Still, I don't feel nearly satisfied. My sex is still swollen and pulsing with need, and I'm terrified that he'll somehow be able to tell how erotically charged I am.

The larger problem, however, is that I'm exhausted. I'm desperate for some rest, especially after missing my usual afternoon nap amidst the preparations for the festival. As the pregnancy progresses I can't help but think how ironic it is that the closer I come to bringing a baby into the world, the more childlike I seem to become: overly sensitive, constantly exhausted, picky about food, sick half the time and struggling with bladder control. Last week I cried because I ate all of my snack and didn't have any left! And now this... I can't sleep by myself. I'm grumpy because I didn't get tucked in by Sinclair, and couldn't fall asleep without him next to me. So I've abandoned my pride and now I'm actually going to him so I can beg to crawl into his huge, comfy bed with him.

I poke my head inside, and fight back a whimper. His bedside lamp is on, and he's propped up on his elbows, looking expectantly in my direction with the same dark intensity he always reserves for me. He's shirtless, his chiseled abs glowing in the lamplight, and his dark hair is tousled effortlessly. There's a swath of scruff over his powerful jaw, and his green eyes are almost glowing in the dim light. It's not fair for

anyone to look that good, especially not when I'm already squeezing my legs together just to relieve the ache he planted with his kiss.

"Are you still up?" I ask inanely, apparently forgetting that he's clearly awake and staring right at me.

“I am.” The corner of Sinclair’s mouth curves up, and I’m reminded of how soft and firm his lips had been on mine. “Is everything okay?”

I slip the rest of the way inside, leaning back against the door until it clicks shut and staring at the ground. “I can’t sleep.” I confess, wrapping my arms protectively around my body.

Sinclair sits up a little straighter, frowning with apparent concern. “I can give you a supplement.” He offers. “The doctor left some herbal remedies in case you needed them.”

My heart sinks. “No, I don’t want to take something that’s going to leave me groggy all day tomorrow.” I reason, actually impressed with my ability to improvise an excuse so quickly.

“He assured me they wouldn’t have that effect.” Sinclair states simply, rising from the mattress and coming forward, moving with the lethal grace of his wolf.

“Still, I haven’t ever tried anything like that. I might have a bad reaction.” I suggest lamely

“Hmm, well we wouldn’t want that.” Sinclair murmurs, closing the final distance between us. “Why can’t you sleep? Are you stressed?”

You look a bit flushed.” He’s stroking my cheek now, and for the first time I have the sense that he might be wise to my arousal. Naturally this only makes me blush a deeper shade of red. “And your pulse is awfully fast.”

“No, I just couldn’t fall asleep.” I shrug, feeling more frustrated by the second. Why doesn’t he just scoop me up and take me to bed the way he usually does?

Maybe because you told him you wanted to sleep alone and that you weren’t interested in his affection. The little voice in my head snipes, sounding even more bitter than I feel. You wanted him to respect your wishes, didn’t you?

Oh put a sock in it. I think back – I swear my conscience has gotten more and more vocal since I became pregnant, and she’s really not all that helpful at times like this.

“How about a midnight snack, or some ambient sounds.” Sinclair muses, still petting me.

I lean my cheek into his hand before I can realize what I’m doing. I shake my head pitifully, realizing a few things at once. First, Sinclair knows exactly what I want. Second, he’s taking no small amount of pleasure in suggesting all the wrong solutions. Third, if I want to sleep with him, I’m going to have to come out and ask for it.

As if he’s reading my mind, Sinclair says, “Just tell me what I can do to help, Ella. And I will.”

I sigh, fighting the sudden urge to stomp on his big giant foot and only holding back because I remember how much it hurt the first time. My next thought is to turn my lips toward his palm and take a chomp out of him. It’s incredibly tempting, but I have no idea where the impulse comes from. I’ve never contemplated – let alone wanted to bite another person in my life.

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Sinclair narrows his eyes, then smirks, tightening his hold on my cheek. “Don’t even think about it.” He warns, his rich voice full of

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foreboding – but also amusement, as if he thinks my bloodthirsty thoughts were cute rather than bizarre and inappropriate.

My eyes widen. I’m both surprised that he sensed my intentions and annoyed that he forbade them. It honestly makes me want to bite him even more than ever, but I’m afraid that if I do he won’t let me sleep with him and I need rest more than I need revenge. “Can I sleep with

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you?” I finally mutter, keeping my voice very low.

“Of course.” He agrees easily, finally gathering me in his arms bridal style. I snuggle in and lean my cheek against the hard plane of his

chest.

I don't know why, but I feel compelled to make an excuse for myself as he transfers me to the king-sized bed. "Thank you, I think the pup has a hard time settling without you."

Sinclair hums softly, moving his big palm to my belly before I can even think about moving out of reach – not that running away would do me any good. His brow arches a moment later, and I suddenly feel very vulnerable with him standing over me this way. "The pup is sleeping,

Ella."

"Oh." I can't seem to figure out anything else to say, and slide beneath the plush covers, turning my back to the intimidating Alpha. I wait for him to pull me close when he takes his place beside me, but for once he lets me keep space between us. My frustration is quickly disintegrating into crankiness. I know he's doing this on purpose!

Rolling onto my other side, I find Sinclair watching me with one of those knowing looks of him. He's expectant, waiting for my next move. I glare at him, and he smiles back, extending an arm to me. The message is clear. I can have what I want, but I'm going to have to take it myself.

Grumbling under my breath, I sidle over the space until our bodies are flush together, and finally Sinclair wraps his strong arms around me fully. I sigh with relief, and a shiver-inducing growl sounds in my ear. "Would you like me to purr for you?"

"If you want to." I answer, noncommittal. At first I think he's going to make me ask for this too, but it seems I've paid my penance, a steady vibration takes up in his chest and I bury my face against his shoulder, breathing in his addictive scent. The next thing I know, darkness closes in, and I'm fast asleep.

The next night is day two of the Solstice Festival. Sinclair and I haven't talked about any of yesterday's events, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't painfully aware of the man every time he's near. I feel like I

have some sort of sixth sense for knowing when he's close by, and all the thoughts disappear from my head every time he gives me one of those hungry stares.

We're both dressed up again and preparing to leave the house, and though I know part of tonight's event involves delivering gifts around the city. I never dreamed that Sinclair would appear with another present for me when I've given him nothing in return. Still, before we set out, he pulls me to a stop and offers me another jewelry box.

"Don't tell me I'm not finished again." I joke, gesturing to my necklace. "I'm already wearing your last gift."

"I know." He grins, "this is just a little something extra. I thought it was time we made it official."

At his urging I lift the lid on the box, expecting to find another pair of earrings, however it isn't earrings at all. It's a ring one that steals the

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breath from my lungs. There's a stunning silver band, with a gleaming moonstone at its center, surrounded by tiny emeralds. It was

unmistakable – an engagement ring.

## Chapter 49 The Prince Interfam

Ella

"Is this...?" I trail off, unable to find the right words.

"I thought if we're going to pretend to be together, we ought to do it right." Sinclair smiles, his obvious pleasure at my reaction taking the sting out of his words. This isn't because he feels anything for me, he's happy that I like the gift – and that's worth something, right?

"It's beautiful," I sigh. "But I feel... I haven't gotten anything for you, Dominic."

but

His dark brow furrows, and the next thing I know, he's turning me towards the mirror at my back. His reflection towers over mine, so dark and sexy in his black dress shirt and trousers. His size and strength are so daunting,

and his skin vibrant bronze next to my porcelain complexion and slender limbs. I'm wearing deep purple tonight, and his hand finds my tummy with practiced ease. "How can you say that?" He demands, gentle but fierce, his lips moving against the shell of my ear as his eyes pierce me through the glass. "Ella, you're giving me everything."

My own hand slides to the place where our baby rests, stopping just above his. However a moment later his palm is over mine, pulling our hands just over my belly button. "I wish you could feel what I do." He tells me solemnly. "You'll understand when he quickens, when you can feel his movement and moods." For the first time, the mirror Sinclair pulls his gaze from mine, but only so the real man can turn his

head to look at me in reality. My heart stops beating as I turn my face to his, eager to hear what he has to share about our baby. "You're his whole world – he's never happier than when he hears your voice."

"Really?" I squeak, tears flooding my eyes.

"Really." Sinclair confirms, and I'm surprised and impressed to see there isn't even the smallest hint of jealousy in his expression. "Everything I care about, is right here." He continues, tugging me back against him a little, in a way that makes my delusional mind think that he might be talking about me as well as the baby. "You are making all my dreams come true."

I'm shaking my head, tears flowing freely now. "Don't you get it?" I ask hoarsely. "You gave me a miracle too." I remind him. "It doesn't seem fair that you should get me so many other gifts too."

"Then it's a good thing you aren't in charge." Sinclair chuckles, kissing my neck just where it connects with my shoulder and finally turning me back around. He wipes away my tears and slides the ring onto my finger. "Now everyone will know that we're taking vows before the Goddess."

Sniffling and trying to get myself back under control, I ask. "But I thought the mating ceremony was just an excuse for, Roger?"

Sinclair shakes his head. "As I said, it's time to make it official. Now come on, we're going to be late."

I'm in such a whirlwind of emotion as he guides me out the door that I

can barely think straight. Sometimes I feel like Sinclair are going around in emotional circles, getting carried away with excitement and joy about the baby and then pulling back when reality sets in. Still, I'll be damned if I know how to escape the maelstrom – let alone how I got in it in the first place. My brain is scrambling to figure out what this all means, what's changed and why this is coming up now. Part of me wonders if it was my rejection the other day, however I don't really have a chance to think it over, because the next thing I know we're heading into the oldest part of the city.

It's a glittering maze of frozen canals, and I can see hundreds of vendors set up on the ice. I'd love to go down and explore them, but ice skating has always been for rich people – not the likes of me.

"In another hour the canals will be full of people for the procession Sinclair tells me as we look down on the wintry scene. "The

processions will start here and weave through the old town until dawn, putting up greenery and decorations to transform the city for the

holiday and giving gifts to the residents."

"That's so lovely." I express genuinely. I've never known a holiday as magical as the solstice, and it's only just beginning. "But if it doesn't start for an hour, then why did we come so early? You said we were going to be late!"

"I padded the time a bit – I thought we could take advantage of the peace and quiet and skate a little." Sinclair suggests, keeping one arm protectively looped around my shoulders.

"But I don't know how to skate." I whisper nervously, "And what about the baby is it safe?"

Sinclair shakes his head, as if I should know better than to ask such a silly question. "I won't let you fall, sweetheart."

Strangely enough, I believe him. I believe he's fast and strong enough to keep this promise, and I know he means it with every fiber of his being. He's as good as his word too. Before long I'm zooming around the rink,

unable to stop smiling. Sinclair has stayed glued to my side all night long, never letting me out of arm's reach and holding my hand more often than not. Of course, the more confident I become, the less I want to be leashed to him, and I find myself taking every opportunity to get far enough away to test my wings.

Shifters are constantly approaching him, saying hello, congratulating us on the baby or commenting on the campaign. The media also starts to arrive after someone tips them off about our early arrival, and it's as Sinclair shakes hands with a constituent that I begin to skate away.

Naturally I don't make it five feet before he catches me. "Not so fast, you." He scolds warmly.

"I swear it's like you have eyes in the back of your head." I complain.

"My wolf has special Ella radar." He jokes. "So you just keep on trying to get away, trouble. I'll catch you every time."

I stick my tongue out at him, and flames burst to life in his vibrant eyes. "Are you sassing me, little mate?"

My heart pulses when he calls me his mate, even though I know it's only for our audience. "So what if I am?" I challenge.

"Is that really how you let your woman speak to you?" A new voice drawls behind us.

Sinclair's expression goes very hard, but he doesn't look the least bit surprised to see the Prince hovering over my shoulder. I instinctively lean closer to Sinclair, remembering what he told me about the other man's desperation to take the crown.

"A true Alpha isn't threatened by strong she-wolves." Sinclair growls, emphasizing the first part of his sentence in a way which makes me think they've debated what makes a "true" alpha before.

"There's strength and then there's insolence." The Prince replies snidely. "And everyone knows that a wolf who doesn't discipline his mate properly isn't fit to lead."

“You and I have very different ideas of discipline.” Sinclair rumbles. For the first time I realize that we’re drawing a crowd.

“If your mate thinks it’s appropriate to challenge you in public.” The Prince scoffs, “Then I don’t think you know the meaning of the word at all.”

“My mate feels safe enough to test her limits with me no matter where we are.” Sinclair bites back. “That’s a far better sign of a caring Alpha than one who’s Luna cowers away from him in fear.”

The Prince’s face scrunched up with obvious fury, but he glances at the reporters around us and clearly bites his tongue. “Then again, you aren’t true mates yet. You haven’t even claimed her yet.”

There’s a sudden rash of murmuring through the crowd. I look up at Sinclair in shock. How did the Prince know? And why doesn’t Sinclair look surprised? In fact, Sinclair looks positively triumphant, as if he’d been hoping this would happen when the argument began. “Well thank you for giving me the opportunity to announce the date of our mating ceremony, your Highness.”

The Prince blanches, and I feel my own confusion grow. What on earth is happening? I’m trying to keep my emotions off my face, even managing to smile up at Sinclair when he beams down at me. “Ella and I will be mated one month after we welcome our son. On the night of the Summer Solstice. We’re having an incredibly hard time waiting, but we figured the occasion should be fitting our incredible bond.”

The next thing I know, Sinclair is kissing me soundly for the cameras. A flurry of excitement explodes around us and reporters immediately begin shouting follow up questions as the prince fades into the background. Suddenly I realize that Sinclair has done it again, he’s left me out of key decisions in our arrangement and left me in the dark about too many things I don’t understand. Not only that, he clearly knew the Prince was aware I haven’t been marked and never warned

But worse than any of this... is that those blissful moments we shared before we came out tonight, were all just a part of some political ploy He didn’t want to give me this ring, or make it official – he was simply

trying to help the campaign – and he lied right to my face.

## Chapter 50 – Ella Demands. Answers

Ella

The rest of the evening passes without further drama, but as far as I'm concerned, the night has been a wash. The procession through the city's old quarter would have been magical at any other time- with the traditions, music and palpable gaiety of all those around us. If I'd been able to focus on anything other than my thoughts, I'm fairly certain I would have fallen in love with the occasion, but I wasn't able to give the events the attention they deserved.

I'm exhausted by the time we're finally free to leave, thinking that I'll certainly need an extra-long nap tomorrow even as I climb into the back of the limo. I'm distracted and grumpy, and when Sinclair slides into the car next to me, I vacate my seat, choosing the one facing him instead.

Sinclair arches a brow, but doesn't move to stop me. "You're angry with me." He assesses simply, eyeing my crossed arms and stiff shoulders.

"What was that all about, Dominic?" I inquire, trying not to get too carried away in my temper.

"What, with the Prince?" He clarifies, as if the answer isn't completely obvious.

"How did he know I haven't been marked?" I demand, "And how long have you been aware he knew?"

"You know it would be a lot easier to talk if you were over here." Sinclair coaxes, patting the seat beside him.

"I'm fine right here." I insist. I know how Sinclair works – he gets me within arms reach and the next thing I know I'm being soothed into complacency by his soothing caresses, cozy warmth and gentle purrs. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let him lull me into calming down. I have every right to be upset.

He sighs. "The prince came to speak with me last night at the bonfire. I

don't know how he found out you haven't been marked, but he made it clear he planned on using that information against us. So I told him the same story we told Roger."

"And you didn't tell me?" I clarify. "Why, because you didn't find the right time? Or because you didn't plan on filling me in at all?"

"Ella" Sinclair begins, giving me a beseeching look. I know then he wasn't ever going to tell me, though I shouldn't be surprised. He had every opportunity to share this information with me like when he gave me the ring.

"Don't," I interject, "just don't bother. I thought we agreed we would be a team from now on? I thought we were supposed to be in this together?"

"Sweetheart we are," He insists, looking as though it's taking great restraint not to reach for me. "I just didn't think this was something you needed to worry about,"

"You didn't think I should know that I might have to publicly defend our relationship?" I question sharply, "that I might be asked questions.

about this? What if a reporter had asked me about the mark already knowing your answer, our entire plan could have fallen to pieces because you didn't inform me, Dominic."

"It has all happened very quickly, Ella." Sinclair excuses, "I would have told you sooner or later, but I miscalculated. I really wasn't expecting the Prince to make an appearance tonight, let alone bring it up. I thought he was smarter than that."

"Do you know what I'm hearing here?" I bite. "You thought, you expected, you believed and you calculated. You are making all the calls, all the decisions and I am sitting on the sidelines looking like an idiot – Again!"

"I'm sorry." Sinclair admits. "I told you this wouldn't come easily for

1. I'm trying, but I'm not used to consulting anyone else on this sort of thing. Change doesn't happen overnight." He frowns. "That's not a

copout, it's just that my instincts are still to shield you rather than share the burden. I know that probably seems very patronizing -"

"It doesn't seem patronizing, it is patronizing." I correct him.

"No." He counters sternly. "Patronizing implies superiority. I don't think I'm better than you Ella."

"Of course you do!" I burst out. "You're supernatural – the bias is in the name! I'm just a human and next to shifters we're primitive, tiny, weak and slow. And on top of all that you're the wealthiest, most powerful man in the pack. How could you not feel superior?"

Sinclair's green eyes slice through me, and I have to work very hard to stay still. I feel as though I'm about to receive a lecture, "Because none of those things have any inherent value beyond staying alive and controlling the world around you. There's no integrity in being fast or rich, and our society didn't earn any of it. It was handed to us by the Goddess. Yes, we're more advanced, but not due to our own virtue." Sinclair continues, still pinning me with his intense stare. "But you, you had to earn everything all on your own. You started from nothing and used your brains and ingenuity to succeed, you had the mental strength to overcome all the trials you faced, and you came out of all that with the purest heart I've ever seen."

I don't think anyone has ever complimented me this way. Cora might, but she's as good as my sister she has to love me. But I'm certain no

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other man has ever praised me for such things or mentioned my positive attributes beyond my beauty. This isn't even the first time Sinclair has made this kind of speech, making me feel valued for the person I am rather than the good looks I lucked into. I feel as though he truly sees me and I'll be damned if that isn't terrifying.

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"I... I don't know how to respond to that." I admit shyly, my voice barely above a whisper.

He chuckles, the sound filling me with warmth. “You’re a far better person than I am, Ella – and you’re going to have to get used to compliments because I have no intention of letting you continue to undervalue yourself.”

“If you think these things, why do you keep trying to shield me then?” I inquire, much more docile now.

Sinclair’s dark brow furrows. “It’s because I think those things.” He explains intently. “I don’t want you to have to struggle and worry. You don’t deserve more hardship. And it’s in my nature besides. I’m

dominant as a man and an Alpha. What you perceive as condescending are the power dynamics that govern all shifters. Dominance is everything to wolves and it makes it my responsibility to protect those less powerful. That’s a distinction you’ll have to come to terms with if you’re going to live among us.”

His words remind me of the Prince’s other accusations – calling me insolent and saying I need discipline. A shiver works its way down my spine at the memory, and as curious as I am about that particular part of the conversation, we have more to discuss before I can bring it up. Despite Sinclair’s kind words, I’m still incredibly hurt. And I know it’s not the fact that Sinclair kept the information from me which stings. worst, it’s that he didn’t give me his ring because he wanted to he pretended like we were having some intimate moment when really it was just an act.

“Tell me about the mating ceremony.” I request. “As far as I

understood, we made up that excuse assuming it would be delayed indefinitely – but you just set a date. What do we do when that date arrives?”

Sinclair’s mouth forms a hard line, the vein in his jaw twitching dangerously. “We’ll go through with it. Though it will only be for show.”

“What about when your true mate arrives?” I counter. “This all seems very short sighted. How will you explain it when you leave me? Are third chance mates as common as seconds?”

“The endgame is about making it through the campaign. Once I’m king and I have an heir, the identity of my Luna is... redundant. It’s important that I have one, not who she is or how many I’ve had before.”

Well that’s a slap in the face. I think sadly. I’ve basically just been told that I’m a faceless symbol, and while this is undoubtedly the deal I agreed to when we struck this agreement, it doesn’t take away the ache of hearing I’m basically nothing to him.

“So everything you said to me when you gave me this ring was just bullshit?” I summarize, gesturing to my left hand. “You didn’t make the gesture because you felt it or wanted to, but because of political pressure?”

Sinclair’s eyes flash, and too late I realize I might have shown my hand. I don’t know why I’m so bothered that he didn’t truly want to make things official with me. I might be attracted to Sinclair, I don’t want anything more so why is it so upsetting? Why is my stomach tied in so many knots? Why is it so difficult to simply breathe?

Sinclair seems to be reading my mind, because in the next moment he inquires, “Why should that matter, you already told me you don’t have any interest in something real with me, so shouldn’t you be happy that it was fake?” His expression has gone truly deadly now, like a hunter closing in on the kill. “Why do you care so much, Ella?”

